

TONI MORRISON AND HER EARLY WORKS: IN SEARCH OF AFRICA*

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INTRODUCTION

The Nobel Prize for literature awarded to Toni Morrison in 1993 was, without any doubt, the recognition of her talents in the art of addressing universal issues, thus making the stories in her novels appeal to Blacks and Whites alike. In that respect, Toni Morrison's writings engage a wide variety of readers in compelling themes that turn around love, equality, community survival, racial and sexual politics, to name but a few. In fact, it is through those 'universals' that she deals with re-writing history, re-assessing cultures, investigating and confronting stereotypes of what it means to be Black or White as well as what it means to be a man or a woman in the United States of America. In view of her literary production, nobody can object to having her on the list of American contemporary mainstream writers even though she claims that her main concern when writing is to bring to surface what has been hidden or omitted in the conventional history books of America with regard to her people, the African American group specifically. In fact, her fiction has emerged from the rich cultural background of her childhood, expanded by a formal education in English and the classics at Howard and Cornell universities, and forged by her experiences as an African American woman, hence an advocate of a dual cause in a polarized American society. This explains why her novels are equally structured in perfect accordance with Western aesthetic and canon traditions drawing on her perfect mastery of metaphors and images that are found in the most celebrated works of art in the Western World. As a

matter of consequence, Toni Morrison's writings are a fine blend of various sources that incorporate both rational and magical tonalities. There is no doubt that the American South, known for being the meeting place of many cultures, has largely contributed to nurturing Toni Morrison's mind as it did with that of William Faulkner, another leading figure in American canonical literature. In contemporary America, Toni Morrison and William Faulkner could be seen as two of the most prominent writers who popularized regional literature in the US. To account for the outlet regional literature offers in bringing an author to the heights of "universality", William Faulkner is a good example of an author whose writings reached the whole world through the description of specificities. In an interview of Toni Morrison by Thomas LeClair in *Conversations with Toni Morrison*, Toni Morrison makes the following statement:

*"It is that business of being universal, a word hopelessly stripped of meaning for me. Faulkner wrote what I suppose could be called regional literature and had it published all over the world. It is good- and universal- because it is specifically about a particular world. That's what I wish to do."*¹

That regional anchorage reaching out to the world

* This is a revised version of a paper presented on the occasion of the celebration of the Nobel Prize in Literature awarded to Toni Morrison. A panel discussion was organized by the West African Research Center in Dakar, Senegal. Panelists included professors Eileen Julien, Janis Mayes, Marième Sy, Ousmane Sène and Oumar Ndongo.

in fact had brought closer to one another Toni Morrison and William Faulkner. It began very early in Toni Morrison's career as her M.A. thesis was on that author of the South. One can therefore understand the meaning of the parallel made above on the likely connections between the 'local' and the 'global' in Toni Morrison's approach to writing, especially her views about self and place in literature, her literature in particular.

However, Toni Morrison's fiction appears to be the accommodation of two often competing literary selves, a divided self, so to speak, that is the result of her unresolved double-consciousness. Parallel to a noticeable European influence in her writing runs another type of style based on a powerful vision of lives and thoughts of people, the African Americans more specifically, at different moments of their experiences. Some critics who ventured a closer look at her writings posit that her ambivalence is indicative of an ongoing concern for 'self' and 'place' that she scrutinizes constantly. Thus, the interest in 'geography' and 'identity' has been one of the most explored themes in American history, especially during the puritan period, themes addressed by writers such as Perry Miller or other investigators of the American mind. Yet, Toni Morrison's novels demonstrate a slightly different kind of search from the one found in other writers' works. The reason can be found in the fact that she gives little credit to the individual in isolation. As indicated in the preface to Patrick Bryce Bjork's book *The Novels of Toni Morrison: the Search for Self and Place Within the Community*, Toni Morrison's novels show that «*place and identity are found in the community and in the communal experience, and not in the transcendence of society or in the search for a single private self*»². As a matter of fact, one can see in her works a conscious choice to write both from and about a zone that is, so to speak, «*outside*» of her inspiring physical self. Therefore, we are tempted to believe that Toni Morrison's very success as a writer may be a testimony to her power to examine themes from various angles and to accept unresolved situations as they are. Patrick Bryce Bjork in his conclusion observes that: "*Her[Toni Morrison] characters waver within the contradictions and ambiguities of*

desire and repression, control and chaos, attraction and chaos, attraction and repulsion, connection and withdrawal"³. Some scholars have even come to the conclusion that what Toni Morrison talks about in her novels is almost entirely foreign, different from the notion of the "rugged individualist" that characterizes the works of the Transcendentalists, even distasteful to many Americans given their disapproval of her contention that identity is found within the group, the clan, the neighborhood. In an interview with Thomas Leclair, published in *The New Republic* n°184 in 1981, Toni Morrison gives the following reply to this question: How do you conceive of your function as a writer? :

*"I write what I have recently begun to call village literature, fiction that is really for the village, for the tribe. Peasant literature for my people, which is necessary and legitimate but which also, allows me to get in touch with all sorts of people. I think long and carefully about what my novels ought to do. They should clarify the roles that have become obscured; they ought to identify those things in the past that are useful and those things that are not; and they ought to give nourishment"*⁴.

What Toni Morrison calls here a «*village*» could well be a synecdoche for Africa, being also understood the metonymic presence of that continent and the myth of origins it represents every time the South or slavery is alluded to in her books. Far from undermining the importance of this study which strives to point to Africa as the land which fed and framed Toni Morrison's imagination, the South as a locus of heterogeneous cultures remains meaningfully connected to the 'place' in Morrison's fictitious world. One can posit here that the South, as it appears in American history and in linguistic decorum, is fundamentally although not exclusively African in most of its cultural manifestations, especially as referenced in Toni Morrison's literary works.

This paper seeks to examine a few aspects of Toni Morrison's fiction which connect her to the continent of her origins. Based on an overview of her earlier novels, the study will draw on themes and literary devices found in her work that pertinently track down or highlight the presence of

the African continent. We are aware of the fact that none of her novels took actually place in Africa. In fact, in her early fiction, only *Tar Baby* is set out of the United States physical territory. It is set on the tropical Caribbean Isle des Chevaliers. However, even though the presence of Africa is not a physical one, oblique or even direct references to it are many in most of Toni Morrison's literary production, especially in the early works that brought her to public notice. We are also aware of the attention she pays to gender as not separate or separable from racial identity. While she argues for liberation from racial and gender oppression, she also finds that both gender and race are liberating points from which to construct a language or create a literature that is «*political in form as well as in subject matter*»⁵. By the same token, in Toni Morrison's texts, to be «*other*» i.e. black and female, is to have privileged insights, to have access to a special knowledge. This is certainly what the critics of her works term her «*artistic tribalism*» or «*the cult of otherness*»⁶ to help construe a social divide in American society. In fact, this is an indication that the marginality noted in her "village literature" does not prevent her from occupying a central position in canonical literature. In that respect, the presence of Africa, being predominantly felt in the part the past plays in her stories, is implied in situations where 'place' is examined through a few myths which to a certain extent, reflect Toni Morrison's attempt to reconnect with the experience of her people, the African American community at large. In talking about the life and experience of her community, she is undoubtedly contributing greatly to educating her group as well as the 'other', the 'white community' to be more precise against stereotypes and biases readily available to ignorant people.

In the four novels chosen for this overview: *The Bluest Eye*, *Sula*, *Song of Solomon*, and *Beloved*, Toni Morrison demonstrates that 'self' is always and forever inextricably linked to the community. The characters portrayed are examined within the context of their families, their communities. Their shortcomings or stigma rarely stem from their biological nature. They are the product of a society, a culture and they are shaped by various forces that come to surface as a result of the social dynamics. To use a literary history terminology, the four novels

bear a heavy load of naturalistic signs that show environmental locations and heredity, the African American experience as central features in the shaping of characters' backgrounds.

The Bluest Eye, Toni Morrison's first novel published in 1970, recounts the adventures of three young girls: Pecola Breedlove, Claudia, and Frieda Mc Teer. It examines racism, sexuality, and what it means to grow up in a hostile world. Although the past is not openly addressed as it will be in the following novels, Claudia's retrospective narrative of her childhood describes a world where «*adults do not talk to us- they give us directions. They issue orders without providing information*». Claudia's narrative in the first chapter of *The Bluest Eye* conveys her reminiscences, as a child, of her social environment. We are likely to be here in an African context, if not one which Africa has tremendously influenced. The importance attached to age as an agency for privileges is here an indication that Claudia Mc Teer's upbringing followed African rules. In fact, what appears clearly here is the split between the adult world and that of the children resulting in a lack of love that is going to affect Claudia in the course of her emotional development.

Even though the first part of *The Bluest Eye* focuses on language with a primer that is getting more and more difficult to understand, thus reflecting young Pecola's warped sense of herself and of her community, we however discover that Ohio is the locality where the story develops. There is obviously no surprise as Toni Morrison portrays people she has lived with in an environment that she knows very well:

*Here is the house. It is green and white .It has a red door. It is very pretty. Here is the family. Mother, Father, Dick, Jane live in the -green-and-white house. They are very happy. See Jane. She has a red dress.*⁷

What catches the eye in this environment is about colors. Green, white, and red even though they may have significance in Pecola's mind, they don't seem to match and obviously contrast with the sense of beauty expressed in the fourth sentence. What appears in the description of this site is the negative image it conveys. The young girl who is growing in

That perception draws on the Yoruba cosmogony, especially the «*egungun*»¹ which makes the worlds of the living and the dead interfere constantly. The belief that the dead protect the community is explicitly shown in Morrison's works. This explains why she is sympathetic to certain characters, Pilate for example in *Song of Solomon*, a woman of knowledge because she can read the past and believes in those values. Pilate is the depository of traditions. Sethe is also another character recounting her «rememorizes» in the form of songs, made-up ballads for her children. Those songs, in fact, constitute a transmission of history and of culture. In Pilate's conversation, even her thoughts, everything comes out with a certain musicality. However, Sethe embodies another myth one can connect to the Yoruba cosmogony: the *Abiku* Child Myth. The best illustration of that myth can be found in the novel of a young Nigerian novelist: Ben Okri. In his novel, *The Famished Road*,² published in 1991, the main character AZARO is an *Abiku*³, a Child torn between the spiritual and the natural worlds. There is a belief that spirits compete with human beings for babies. A death at an early age is the sign that the spirit took advantage of a mother's carelessness to take away her baby. Paradoxically, to ensure life to the baby, a sort of game is played against the spirit through the name given at the birth of the child. Names used in that context, in the Senegalese one in particular, could have special meaning such as "rags", "Nobody loves" etc... Those names will result in the spirit's loss of interest in the dispute over the child. Consequently the baby is expected to survive. In *Beloved*, Sethe feels that some fragments of repression are connected to the presence of her child who died before she was 2 years old. That death is seen as the punishment of her forgetfulness. Hence, she actively denies life and memory in the hope that death will not intrude again. There is no doubt that Sethe finds herself in a context that has been influenced by African beliefs.

The presence of Africa is fully justified by the strong ties Toni Morrison has with her community. Her works seem to address the lives of African American people in different historical

periods. Toni Morrison sees herself as an agent in the empowerment of her people through the rediscovery of their history. Therefore, no doubt, that her focus be historic and her goal the rediscovery of her African past, lost through slavery and perhaps irretrievable except as she does, through myths, and then only at the risk of life and sanity. However, in examining her legacy, she expects to reach a higher level in the understanding of herself. Her themes, in that regard, are no longer specific to herself or to her group, but they have become universal ones. In fact, they address disruptive families and challenge modern times, the more so because of the growing interest in social mobility and family ties which does not imply love and forgiveness as cornerstones of communal life.

Her interest in Africa is also her commitment to the feminine cause. Women must have a better understanding of the new challenges and work toward their participation in social dynamic processes. Toni Morrison works for freedom and it is important to note that the story of an ancestor who could fly, who would be beyond social impediment and limitations reflects her own impulses as she sees herself moving away from restrictive spaces and ready to act on circumstances.

Her link with Africa, as revealed by the connections we have already mentioned, results from her early exposure to the literature from that continent. She read Camara Laye, Chicaya U. Tamsi. She dreamed of the day Leopold Sedar Senghor would read her books which was likely to have come true given the interest Senghor had in the African American experience. She is impressed by Chinua Achebe with whom she shares similar approaches when revisiting the African past, the disruptive forces of domination and identity transformation. Yet, Toni Morrison has never tried to visit the continent of her origins. It is not a question of means or opportunities. At a conference she attended in 1956 in France at the Sorbonne about black culture

¹ «*egungun*» in Yoruba cosmogony means the cult to the ancestors.

² Ben Okri, *The Famished Road*, New York: Anchor Books (A Division of Random House, inc.), 1993 (first date of publication in 1991).

³ An *Abiku* is a child born that dies and the mother becomes pregnant again. It is believed that it is the same child that comes over and over again to torture a woman.

she disclosed her lack of interest in visiting Africa. Expressing her views through her works, one can see the point she is trying to make. The most vivid link with Africa is Jazz, that music which today knows no boundaries, that music which speaks to the heart of every one and yet is so authentically black, that music which narratizes 300 years of sufferings with notes which know how to restore hope to the dispossessed or the social outcast, how to arrange words to make them look beautiful, feel beautiful and poetic. This is certainly the message Toni Morrison wanted to find in Africa, values which are like Jazz, universal and yet so authentic and race-specific, formerly scorned, once seen as low culture, landmark in Black heritage but today valued, reclaimed by so many social categories, ethnicities, and raised to the status of an academic subject in most American universities and sign of refinement for many circles of intellectuals and artists.

It can be inferred that Toni Morrison begins the search for her heritage by addressing what is most intimate and meaningful to her- the black family- and broadens her scope to embrace the black community at large, then regions of the United States, foreign lands and alien cultures, history and reality. Each novel moves forward to a new concern, but without having completely left behind previous ones. Her strong stands against light-skinned characters and culturally alienated ones seem to have softened. She has gone from, as it appears in her first novels, such invectives as the origins of a mule and a mulatto are the same to the treatment of interracial skin color in *Jazz* where she avoids the earlier tendencies just valorizing the black-black woman over the light-skinned one. The novel *Jazz* is illustrative of that subtle change in Toni Morrison's views on cultural alienation in the African American society. Though Dorcas' light skin is not to blame for Joe Trace's infidelity, Violet's own obsession with whiteness becomes a barrier to understanding her husband's more complex need for renewal, for remembering « *the way it was when he and Violet were young* »⁴, and for self-determination. The ambiguity of Toni Morrison's positions concerning race and identity incorporates the place she gives to the family. The concern of Toni Morrison is to show the need for family and

community to nurture and sustain the individual. Yet, a look at her novels reveals that the families she portrays, most of which being nuclear families, are in complete disintegration. From *The Bluest Eye* to *Song of Solomon*, family structures are totally disrupted: the Mac Teers are impoverished, the Wrights are sterile, the Streets are decadent, the Deads are just as their name suggests, therefore dead. Even though Morrison does not see men who abandon their families as villainous, she, however, strives to show how their absence causes chaos and confusion to women and children. The context of the family she describes results from a historical situation where men are denied access to jobs, therefore denied to be as they used to be in Africa, providers and breadwinners. This explains why the African American men can't any longer claim to be heads of their households. In *Beloved* and in *Jazz*, the families are so dysfunctional that they literally cease to exist. This does not mean that Morrison does not believe in the power of regeneration of the Black family.

When African Americans realize that the dominant society will do little to better their conditions, they turn their energies to the development of their own communities. However, this effort to build new communities is imitative of white society. As Margaret Butcher observes below:

*In basic attitude and alliance with over-all American concepts and ideals, the Negro is a conformist. He believes implicitly in the promise and heritage of basic American documents, and he had applied the principles of self-reliance, personal dignity, and individual human worth to the long, rewarding fight to achieve full and unequivocal first-class citizenship.*⁵

It appears that Morrison's interest in Africa is an oblique way to confront Western Culture, the culture she charges with alienating her people and being the cause of the chaotic worlds we see in all her novels. However, she wants to move her readers beyond sympathy or empathy, and even understanding of what it means to be black in a white

⁴ Toni Morrison, *Jazz*, New York: A Plume Book, 1993, p. 19

⁵ Quoted in Kinfe Abraham, *Politics of Black Nationalism: From Harlem to Soweto*, Trenton, New Jersey: Africa World Press, 1991, p.265

America. As it will later appear in her production, love, the subject matter of her books in *Paradise* and *Love*, is the transfiguring tool to restore peace and happiness in America. Africa appears hence to explain her heritage and all the values that nurtured her community. As an advocate of integration in the American society, Africa is a central relic she uses to reclaim the validity of her origins without compromising her will to be like most American citizens, a person turned towards the future. However, Morrison has a clear understanding that her future is in control once she has a firm grip on her past, in other words, once she can make adequate use of her African heritage to bring to the global American culture.

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