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## Theorizing Black Power Movement in African American Literature: An Analysis of Morrison's Fiction

### Abstract:

*This paper analyzes the influence of the Black Power movement on the African-American literary productions; especially in the fictional works of Toni Morrison. As an African-American author, Toni Morrison presents the idea of 'Africanness' in her novels. Morrison's fiction comments on the fluid bond amongst the African-American community, the Black Power and Black Aesthetics. The works of Morrison focus on various critical points in the history of African-Americans, her fiction recalls not only the memory of Africa but also contemplates the contemporary issues. Morrison situates the power politics within the framework of literature by presenting the history of the African-American cultures.*

### Key Words:

Trauma, Fiction, History, Memory, Community

### Introduction

American Revolution was the paramount movement that struggled to achieve certain 'Unalienable Rights', i.e. popular sovereignty, the rule of law and constitutional rights. This radical rhetoric challenged the British Monarchy's orthodox standards, which separated human beings because of creed and class. The fundamental document of this Revolution, The Declaration of Independence contends, "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness". (Arnitage, 2007). So the American social and political fabric was woven around the ideals of democracy, equality and individualism.

American Declaration of Independence is famous for its egalitarian ethos as it states that liberty and equality are every person's birthright. It contends that God, who bestowed human beings' life, gave them liberty as well. Though Americans intensely rely on in the civil principles of their founding fathers, however, with time, people started questioning this supposedly sacred document. Critics started finding contradictions in the text and voiced their disagreements publically. Denunciation of the creedal ideals basically came from the marginalized and disenfranchised

groups of the society. One such group is the African-Americans, who declared that although the declaration emphasizes the importance of freedom, it does not comment on slavery or slave trade. Since African-Americans have always been considered the most underprivileged group of American society, so they reconstructed the already available social and political narratives and used them for their own benefit. African-Americans used the same discourse of universal human rights during the Civil Rights Movement. After centuries of brutal and callous treatment, the African-Americans finally stood up for a right that defined the foundational narrative of The United States—Equality.

African-Americans opposed the discriminatory social structures and customs by means of diverse modes, and resistance literature is one such approach. Literature at times mirrors truth; especially resistance literature does tell not only fictional tales but also endeavors to relate sociological, cultural and historical characteristics in writing. African-American authors utilized fiction and non-fiction to voice their concerns. Although,

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African-Americans used all forms of art to protest and make their voice heard, however, fiction is perhaps the most frequently used genre through which the 'Negro Problem' was voiced.

Out of all the genres of Black Literature that could have been chosen as the focus of this study, the Black novel is selected because it is easily understandable and accessible for all members of not only the Black community (regardless of education, economic background, etc.) but also easily available across communities; it is the genre Black writers have spent the most time and energy cultivating throughout Black history. Amongst all the genres of Black art novel is perhaps the most influential form of art, as it has not only had an impact on the Black community but also on the society in general. African-American novelists narrate sagas of revolt that thwart the stereotypes entrenched in the American sensibilities. This paper focuses on the representation of the Black Problem by a Black female author using the prism of literature and history.

Black literature cannot probably be comprehended without the analysis of Black history because the political narratives helped the African-Americans construct their unique voice in arts, which helped them to not only forge but also boast their distinct cultural identity using the medium of creative arts. The Black Arts and Black Power movements that arose in the 1960s and 1970s are considered sister movements. These movements influenced the artists to construct ethnic nationalism using the medium of arts. Through both, the movements, i.e. Black Arts and Black Power movement, African-Americans were responding to the discrimination and marginalization of the White American cultural and social hegemony. Black literary artists used creative art as an instrument to not only emphasize their own peculiar identity, history and culture but also to liberate the African-American conscience from the White social and cultural oppression.

Toni Morrison, as an African-American novelist explores the past of her community through her creative works, i.e. *Beloved*, *Sula*, and *The Bluest Eye*. These novels portray African-American history from the viewpoint of a Black woman. Morrison tries to make sense of her characters' cultural heritage and social status in her novels. *Beloved* (1987) is the story of a mother and daughter who manage to escape slavery. The story is set in 1973 in Cincinnati. However, the family manages to flee slavery; however, the past follows them in the form of the ghost of beloved who never leaves their side. The narrative reveals how Sethe killed her own daughter to put her at a place where she would be 'safe.' When a young woman shows up at Sethe's door proclaiming to be Beloved, Sethe becomes convinced that it is her own daughter that she killed. The major themes of the novel go beyond a simple mother-daughter relationship; the author delves into the psychological impacts of slavery. The novel *The Bluest Eye* (1970) is set in the year 1941. The narrative tells the story of Pecola, a young African-American girl, who grows up in Lorain, Ohio, following the Great Depression. Pecola develops inferiority complex because she is humiliated because of the colour of her skin. Her inferiority complex gives her a strong desire for blue eyes, which for her is synonymous to Whiteness. The novel portrays the struggles of a Black family to survive in a White Anglo-Saxon Protestant (WASP) society. The author tries to portray the Black self-hatred through the character of Pecola. The novel is based on the personal experience of the author, where her schoolmate once confessed in front of Morrison that she wanted to have blue eyes. The author has tried to give vent to her feelings of frustration through the character of Pecola by portraying the 'racial self-loathing'. The story of the novel *Sula* is set in the early part of the 1900s. The novel describes the lives of two young girls Nel and Sula. Morrison presents a contrast between two female characters by portraying Nel as a conventional daughter and wife, whereas, the character of Sula is entirely the opposite of Nel. She is a rebel who is treated as an outcast by her community. The novel creates strong female characters in the conservative patriarchal Southern society. This fictional work of Morrison can be read as a social satire that characterizes everything that was wrong with the Southern American society.

This paper analyzes works of Morrison as the perspective of a contemporary Black female author, who lived during the time period when the African-Americans were not experiencing political slavery; however, they were the outcast of the White American society facing social slavery. Morrison has seen her community going through various critical historical periods, i.e. the decades of the 1960s and 1970s are very crucial in

American history. These decades are significant in American history and continue to have an intense impact on the current politics, social dynamics and arts. (Collins, 2006)

This study intends to identify the qualities of Black Arts and literature, which represents the resurgence and oppression of the African- American arts. The selected novels are not only artistic in language but also propagate the political ideology of the author. Black Arts or Black Aesthetic Movement addresses the issues concerning the political struggle of African-American through the 1960s and 1970s, but perhaps this struggle has still not ended. Black Arts or Aesthetics Movement calls for a literary expression, which purely presents the African-American point of view. The authors who wrote under the influence of the movement tried to use the language that was politically correct. Toni Morrison's works are a significant part of the Black canon because of their political concerns. She presents the oppressed Black community through her fictional works. She articulates the fact that the dominant White culture does not allow the healthy growth of the African-American self-image since she belongs to the same race, so she voices her ethnic experience through her works of art. Although, she articulates the concerns of a Black author who can sense that the identity and individuality of her race are under threat because of the overwhelming presence of a predominant White culture, yet her works are not propaganda. She only tries to bring forth the everyday experiences of her race through the fictional characters of her novels that are mostly Black. Morrison's works are thematically and stylistically consistent, as she concentrates only on the representation of African-American culture.

### **Statement of the Problem**

The major problem presented in this study deals with the impact of the Black Power Movement on the Black Arts or Aesthetic Movement. The overlapping ideas and objectives of the Black Power and the Black Aesthetic movement influenced each movement separately. This study analyzes Morrison's fiction in the light of the sociopolitical and biographical contexts of the author with special reference to the Black Power Movement.

### **Research Questions**

1. What are the overlapping ideas and objectives of Black Power and Black Aesthetic Movements?
2. How has African-American history been fictionalized by Toni Morrison?
3. How did the ideology of African-American Aesthetic Movement influence Toni Morrison?
4. How does Morrison politicize her fictional works by propagating her political ideology through her novels?

### **Delimitation of the Study**

Morrison has written eight novels and a selection of essays entitled *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, however, this research has been delimited to Toni Morrison's novels *Beloved*, and *The Bluest Eye*. These texts will be analyzed using the lens of New Historicism. The researcher will see how the ideologies of Black Power and Aesthetic Movements not only influenced each other but are also voiced in the fictional works of Morrison.

### **Objectives of the Study**

- To discuss the influence of the Black Power Movement on the emergence of Black Arts or Aesthetic Movement.
- To highlight the significance of literature for the disenfranchised and marginalized community of African-Americans to voice their concerns against the White cultural and social oppression.
- To examine Toni Morrison as a Black author who articulates the experiences of the oppressed Black community through her fictional works.

## Significance

In present-day, the United States of America is not only facing the issue of dispute between two races, i.e. white and black, but the problems are more complex and of greater concern. Today's America is indeed divided on the basis of race but also on the basis of ethnicity, religion and culture. These current issues certainly need to be comprehended for the people of United States of America but also for the greater good of the people across the world as in today's time of world wide web the problems of the superpower admittedly not only influence the people at home but also across the globe. The internal issues of the U.S need to be analyzed in the historical perspective particularly to propose a solution to the current internal problems of the country but also for the international community as a guide to further interact with America.

Though Toni Morrison is a commonly researched novelist, however, this study intends to give new dimensions to Morrison scholars by analyzing the ideological influences upon her fictional creations. This study develops new horizons for researchers of literature and history to comprehend the influence of one discipline on the other. The issue of race that is the cornerstone of this study continues to be fundamental to America since the country's beginning, but most importantly the recent change in the political and social fabric of the country demands the academics relevant to the field of American Studies to analyze and comprehend the concurrent race issues of the contemporary liberal American society.

## Literature Review

The works of Morrison can be analyzed in the light of both Black Aesthetic and Power Movements because her novels use the artistic language to voice political concerns of the Blacks. The disenfranchisement of the whole race has resulted in a constant struggle of the Blacks on political, social and cultural fronts. The marginalization and discrimination faced by the African-Americans never allowed them to fully participate in the U.S society as American citizens, rather it forced them to look for their identity outside the main stream American society. To cope with societal racism, the Black Nationalism became famous in the Black community in which the Negroes tried to trace back their shared heritage and common concerns. As Moses suggests, "...they began to seek a historical explanation for the relative status of white and black peoples, and, more importantly, to search for a means of altering the balance of power. Thus black nationalism may be seen as a byproduct of the experience of slavery. Like much other nationalism, it was the reaction of a formerly disunited group to a sense of mutual oppression and humiliation. ....Slavery was, in a sense, the cause of black nationalism. It destroyed the ethnic loyalties of those whom it enslaved; it disastrously eroded traditional culture within a generation or two. But while it tended to strip slaves of their local traditional cultures, it endowed them with a sense of common experience and identity." ([Moses, 1978](#)) To forge this common experience and identity, the Black people at times left the lands they were residing because of the nationalism on the basis of colour. Especially, in the United States of America, Black people have historically been marginalized, and the emigration of Blacks to Latin American and African countries is one such example. John McCartney, in his book *Black Power Ideologies: An Essay in African American Political Thought* comments that one major reason for this emigration was to gain political autonomy. ([McCartney, 1992](#))

But all Blacks were not in favor of emigration; some propagated the ideology of integration. However, the Nationalist enthusiasts opposed the integrationist. Especially the leader of the Abolitionist Movement disregarded this approach. Frontrunners like Frederick Douglass assumed that Black people were an integral part of the US and had an equal right to freedom in the county. Famous Black historians John Hope Franklin and Alfred Moss noted that the pro-slavery Southerners were also in favour of Black emigration. These historians contend that this was a tactic of the pro-slavery segment of society to get rid of the free Blacks. However, the anti-slavery enthusiasts were in favour of integration of Blacks in the mainstream American society. The Black Nationalism, nonetheless, served as an alternative to integration politics, it favoured alternative political and social ideologies to forge a distinct Black identity. Especially leaders like Malcom X and Marcus were great proponents of traditional Black Nationalism. Their ideology was influential that did

not only inspire their contemporary society but many subsequent Black generations. The organizations that were formed from these influences are student's Non-violent Coordinating Committee, run by Stokely Carmichael and The Nation of Islam, organized by Elijah Muhammad and Malcon X, propagated and implemented this ideology practically. These associations, alongside other grass-root organizations like The Black Panther Party (led by Bobby Seale and Huey P. Newton), used this argument to address the problems of common Blacks. The issues of inadequate accommodation and police inhumaneness were the collective social issues of Blacks during the 1960s, and these movements tried to address all these issues. Amongst these indigenously Black movements, the Civil Rights movement of the twentieth century was perhaps the most significant movement, which traced its roots from the entire Black history. American Civil War (1861-1865) has its long-lasting impact, which was evident in the subsequent decades. The struggle did not end for the Blacks even after the end of the war, and during the Reconstruction era, African-Americans continued to claim their equal rights. They protested for equality in public and political spheres; rights to vote, desegregation in social arena, especially in public transport and education. The National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People (NAACP), was also among the organizations that were created to demand the civil rights of Black people. These organizations demanded enfranchisement of the blacks as equal US citizens. These organizations expected to mold the public opinion in favor of Africa-Americans that will result in the hope of attaining equal opportunities for Blacks in both social and political spheres. Especially NAAP fought for the rights of the Blacks even through court cases; though they were able to gain few victories, however, segregation was a constant feature of US society throughout the first four decades of the twentieth century. Black Power can be defined as; "mobilizing African Americans to use their newfound political voice—as a result of the passage of the 1965 Voting Rights Act—to create semiautonomous communities in which black police officers patrolled black people, black businesses provided jobs, black elected officials and black-controlled political parties articulated the aspirations of African Americans, and African Americans used armed self-defence to protect their lives." (Hamilton, 1967)

Black nationalism was not only voiced on the political front, but the artists of Black decent also helped forge the unique African-American identity through their works. Political engagement was a key feature of the Black Arts Movement that was influential from 1965 to 1976. These cultural productions of the African-Americans were highly influenced by the political rhetoric of the time. The movement also declared that the only effective political end of Black artists' struggles was emancipation from White social and political power structures; which will eventually result in the liberation of arts. This ideology did not only restrict the Whites supremacist culture from defining Black identity; it also accommodated the indigenous creative standards.

Larry Leal is considered the founder and the most influential personality of the movement; in his essay 'The Black Arts Movement' he notes that the itinerary of this movement was similar to the Black Power Movement. These two movements have historically been considered sister movements as both have similar ideologies. Both the movements had roots in the primitive African-American culture and self and emerged as a reaction to the integrationist philosophy. These movements heavily influenced black writers, musicians, and visual artists. These movements played a significant role in developing a distinctly Black form of arts in which the artists forged their distinct identity independent of White influence. Toni Morrison, as an African-American female author, also asserts her Black identity through her works of art. She highlights the problems of her community through her fictional works and points out how the dominant White culture discriminated and marginalized her community, which resulted in the inferiority complex of her kinsmen. Her novel *Bluest Eyes* narrates the story of an African-American girl who has accepted the White standards of beauty as true and tries to look like a White. This novel is a critique of the US society in which the dominant White culture robbed the African-Americans of their positive self-image. Through this novel, Morrison also highlights the vicious effects of standards of beauty set by the society that considered everything related to Whites as perfect and standard, whereas Black as filthy and ugly.

## Theoretical Framework

New Historical lens is useful for the analysis of the fictional works of Toni Morrison. This term was coined by Stephen Greenblatt. Explaining the term, he contends that New Historicism reads the texts of the past and pays rudimentary consideration to fictional works. For the practitioners of New Historicism, history is an entirely subjective arena of scholarship that is exposed to interpretations of those who create it. "...there is no such thing as a presentation of facts; there is only interpretation." (Tyson, 2006) Similarly, this study seeks to investigate how Toni Morrison perceives the historical realities and presents them in her fictional works. The New historicists believe that the manner in which an author constructs his or her work of art is influenced by "particular time and place, and their views of both current and past events are influenced in innumerable conscious and unconscious ways by their own experience within their own culture". (Jurgen, 2001)

For the New Historicists each historical detail in the work of art has significance, as "Stephan Greenblatt thinks that not obvious matters but less noticeable ones (marginals) should be handled, that is to say, besides what is known and apparent to anyone, what is alien (the other) should also be reviewed". (Brannigan, 1998) Foucaultian notion of a panoptic (all-seeing) state that sustains its power not through power but through ideology or in Foucault's terms "discursive practices" plays a significant role in Greenblatt's works. For New Historicists "discourse is not just a way of speaking or writing, but the whole 'mental set' and ideology which encloses the thinking of all members of a given society. It is not singular and monolithic -there is always a multiplicity of discourses - so that the operation of power structures is as significant a factor in (say) the family as in layers of government." (Wang, 2013)

Foucault scrutinizes the institutions that proclaim the uniform structure of the state institutions such as reformatories, state punishments and medical institutes. He assumes that the "so-called objective historical accounts" are the creation of institutes that proclaim control over the fragile. Similarly, Greenblatt offered the notion of subversion and repression in his essay, *Invisible Bullets* (1988). Subversion is an endeavor to revolt against the conventional authoritative systems that rule a culture and containment is the counter-subversive strategies that labor at overwhelming the subversive practices of the alien "Other". Brannigan says, "Power can only define itself in relation to subversion, to what is alien or other, and at the heart of power is, therefore, the production and subsequent containment of subversion." (1998) Greenblatt asserts that a literary work is a creation of "the author's bias and social practices and institutes." This is also accurate for Morrison, whose main goal is to exemplify an unadulterated African- American experience straddling the span of a century. The bias against the White discriminatory cultural practices is manifested in all her fictional works.

Greenblatt also introduced the term "self-fashioning" in his work *Renaissance: Self Fashioning* (1980). Self-fashioning can be defined as building up a personality that is acceptable to the social norms of society (Greenblatt). If we take this in the African- American context, many free men would dress in the white man's attire and adopt their manners and etiquettes in order to fit in the mainstream society. Self-fashioning means entire surrender to the authority outside the self (Greenblatt). The protagonist of the novel *The Bluest Eye* is an apt example of 'self-fashioning'. She wants to have blue eyes to become acceptable in a society that only considered White skin and blue eyes as beautiful. Not molding yourself to the norms of society can often threaten the sense of self that is why most people would succumb to it (especially middle-class people). Morrison presents this side of the African-American psyche in detail, although with remorse

## Methodology

This study is reflective and exploratory in nature. The research uses qualitative approaches for data analysis. It is a hermeneutic study in line with George Gadner's textual interpretation theory presented by Terry Eagleton in which he simply states certain questions, e.g. "What is the meaning of a literary text? How relevant to this meaning is the author's intention? Is 'objective' understanding possible, or is all understanding relative to our historical understanding?" At this point, the theory of New Historicism can be extremely useful. The research is focused on analyzing the ideology of American freedom and the plight of African-Americans as

presented in the novels of Toni Morrison in the light of New Historicism as deliberated by Stephen Greenblatt. It is qualitative research with non-numerical data collection. The close reading method has been adopted to do the textual analysis of the literary works of Toni Morrison. The works of Morrison have been analyzed for their purely African-American contents. This analysis has kept in view the fictional historical era of each work to see how the Black consciousness of the author helps her document the realities of her community.

## Analysis

Toni Morrison is perhaps amongst the most prominent Black authors of the contemporary era. Her works of art assert her African-American identity, and she protests against the social and political marginalization of her community. Her works do not only remember the history of her race but also highlight the misrepresentations her community faced throughout the course of history. In both the selected novel, i.e. *Beloved* and *Bluest Eye*, her characters struggle to alter their condition. They try to change their immediate situation either by denying their own racial and communal identity or by embracing the ideals imposed upon them by the White supremacist society. The fundamental question that has been plaguing the African-American psyche since ages and to which they have been trying to answer through various movements and organizations are still visible in the works of Morrison. She documents the agonies of her community by focusing on issues of slavery, racism, sexism etc. Her characters are in a state of confusion, whether to embrace the dominant White cultural ideals or to deny them because adopting the White ideals would mean betraying their own racial and cultural identity. Especially the novel *The Bluest Eye* emphasizes this cultural identity and beauty standards.

Morrison's first novel, *The Bluest Eye* (1970), is set in the 1940s Lorain, Ohio (Authors Hometown), but it is also ideologically grounded in the concept of "Black is Beautiful". This slogan of racial pride is significant in the history of African American Arts. Through her novel, Morrison does not only challenge the dominant prejudiced white culture but also reiterates the pride of her community. Through the story of Pecola Breedlove, the protagonist of the novel, Morrison documents the traumas and difficulties of African Americans. The historical disenfranchisement of the Blacks has been voiced in the text where the author documents the unequal status of her community in mainstream American society. Through her character, Morrison puts forward the idea of otherness in the White-dominated society. She challenges the foundations of the White supremacist culture by questioning the long-prevailing ideals of beauty. Pecola's character demonstrates how the self-esteem of the young girl is disintegrated because of racism and marginalization and results in the form of self-loathing. Morrison depicts that in the racially segregated American society, the value of a person depends on the color of his or her skin. Reading Pecola's story, one is constantly reminded of Martin Luther Kings' *Dream* where he hoped that his "children would one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but the content of their character". Morrison explains the concept of beauty embedded in the psyche of the Americans that does not only explain the dominance of White standards and marginalization of the Blacks but also hints towards the previous master-slave relationship of the two races. In the text, while explaining the appearance of the Breedloves, Morrison writes:

"You looked at them and wondered why they were so ugly; you looked closely and could not find the source. Then you realized it came from conviction, their conviction. It was as though some mysterious all-knowing master had given each one a cloak of ugliness to wear, and they had each accepted it without question" (Morrison, 1970, 54).

These words of the author do indicate not only the communal relationship between Whites and Blacks but also suggests the history of slavery that gave the position of masters to the Whites. Other than *The Bluest Eye* Morrison's most important and acclaimed work articulating the traumas of slavery is *Beloved*.

*Beloved* (1987) is considered the most important work of Morrison because it reflects the author's mastery. The novel is set in 1873 Cincinnati, Ohio. The time period is especially important in the history of African Americans because it was the time of Civil war and Reconstruction. Morrison presents the traumatic

history of slavery through Sethe's story. In the novel *Beloved* her central character Sethe leaves the sweet home to forge her individual identity and to run away from her past. It seems as if her living space and surroundings impact her persona, and she wants to escape the overpowering White influences to forge her new identity. This assertion of Black identity helps the characters to move from the periphery to the centre. Sethe's story is representative of all the slave women like her who were victimized, raped and mistreated by their owners. Sethe's words explain her condition as she says:

“After I left you, those boys came in there and took my milk. That's what they came in there for. Held me down and took it. I told Mrs. Garner on em. She had that lump and couldn't speak, but her eyes rolled out teras. Them boys found out I told on em. Schoolteacher made one open up my back, and when it closed, it made a tree. It grows there still” (Morrison, 2010: 16).

Morrison's literary works are an emancipating tool not just for her fictional characters but also for her community. In her work, she analyzes how the influences of the predominant issues of race, class and gender shape the lives of African-Americans. She explores how the dominant White cultural and artistic influence reconstructs and dominates the Black consciousness. Her works expose the Black reality and how it is heavily influenced by the predominant white culture. This dominance of the White culture pushes the Black identity and culture to the periphery; however, through her works, Morrison tries to bring her community to the centre.

## Conclusion

Toni Morrison presents the traumatic experience of her race in her fictional works by incorporating the political aspects of her literary productions. The influence of Black Power Movement over the Black Aesthetics Movement can be easily analyzed through the analysis of fictional works of Morrison because one movement presents the political aspect of the racial experience, whereas the other inscribes the same experiences.

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