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CULTURAL AND RACIAL CONFLICT IN THE NOVELS OF TONI MORRISON

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Abstract:

Cultural identity is something that one recognizes oneself with and echoes with. Every human being wants to establish his/her own cultural identity in the world which is full of varied cultures. A cultural identity is nothing but the perception that is based upon one's nationality, culture, religion, language, skin colour, social group etc. Even though, it is emphasized that all human beings are same, the fact remains somehow different. Despite, all the claims of equality, it is obvious that everyone likes to be associated with a particular group or class on the basis of certain common features. It is the human tendency to value one's own cultural identity while disrespect the others. It is this conflict which has been reflected through the literature worldwide. This cultural conflict is obvious in the writings of African American authors including Toni Morrison. The writings of the African American authors are focused on reinstating the past glory of Black-culture. Toni Morrison is one such outstanding author whose novels deal with black culture. Her novels show the devastating effect of the slavery and discrimination which is an attempt to erase one's cultural identity. The

present paper is an attempt to find out horrifying effect of discrimination on the basis of caste, religion, colour etc. which makes a human being to behave in an inhumanly manner. The main focus of the paper is Toni Morrison's three novels *The Bluest Eye (1970)*, *Beloved (1987)*, and *Paradise (1998)* which deal with the cultural conflict faced by the black people in a white dominated society.

Keywords: culture, racism, identity, discrimination, conflict, slavery, black, isolation, colour, black, white

African American authors have created their own separate identity through their literature which is predominated with the notion of black as marginalized. They have raised their voices through their literature which echoes that marginalization through their content as well as form. It is obvious that their literature mainly deals with cultural and racial conflict. Their literature shows the attempt to redefine their

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own race and culture through their literary works. The sense of isolation due to their separate racial identity is visible in their literature. In fact the mainstream hegemonic discourse always disregarded the existence of the blacks in creating the American literature and subsequently American culture as well.

The writing of African Americans reveals the fact that it is not meant for the aesthetic purpose but it is related to their own culture which suffered the pangs of discrimination for a long time due to the white domination. From the writing of these authors, it is obvious that they are in search of some kind of recognition which had been denied to them for a long time. The writing of the African Americans is for the sake of their rights and liberty and to be recognized as a normal human being. Their writing shows the indefinite struggle in search of identity in the surrounding atmosphere which is dominated by white culture.

The black authors made a sincere effort to prove their worth as an author and at the same time fight against the racial, economic and political discrimination. The mainstream discourse always neglected the African American existence. The African American writers restricted themselves to their own culture, but created the qualitative work establishing their own separate identity. They presented the black lives with all its aspects. A sincere effort was being

made to deal with the struggle of the black people for freedom, racial violence, and oppressions. These writers tried to adore the African culture and traditions. These writers presented the suppressed sentiments of the black people by writing about their predicament and their struggle for self-assertion in the world dominated by the whites. Toni Morrison and other writers' made sincere efforts to acknowledge the black people's identity as an equal human being.

Most of the African American writers have focused upon the slavery and its reminiscence. Suppression and slavery have been focused in the writings of African American writers. The quest for self-recognition echoes through their literature. Nearly, all African American Writers are worth mentioning who have presented the lives of blacks but above all Toni Morrison is the name uttered respectfully in this when it comes to the presentation of the theme of cultural and racial conflict.

Toni Morrison (b.1931) is the most acclaimed novelist in the history of African-American literature. She, the recipient of the Nobel Prize (1993) is a creative writer. Her works are amazingly high which deal with various aspects of the blacks' lives. Her novels are concerned with black Americans, however, they excel the narrowly prescribed concepts of ethnic literature unveiling the universal appeal.

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Morrison's works mainly deal with American's history of racial oppression and slavery and deal with the human issues. Her focus is the plight of the Africans due to the racial discrimination. Her characters are representatives of a larger perception of human sufferings due to the racial and cultural discrimination which could be seen in every society worldwide. Almost all her novels focus on the cultural conflict as the recurrent theme in them.

Morrison in her recent book '*The Origin of Others*' deals with her own ideas about race and racism and the treatment to it through the writing of several American authors including herself. She speaks about the themes that dominated the world Politics and literature: race, fear, borders, mass movements and the desire of belonging. It is an exposure to the innermost feelings which are essential to understand while reading the writing of Toni Morrison. In fact the author ponders over the question of cultural identity and makes an attempt to go into the origin of race and racism. Morrison here speaks not only about enslaved but also about the enslavers.

Toni Morrison's fiction mainly deals with the issues concerned to the black people. She reveals the sufferings of her characters as tormented by racial and economic discrimination. She searches into the history to reinvent glory of black tradition. Morrison intentionally escorts her

narratives with a sound track of black music. Her characters truly represent the culture to which they belong to.

The overpowering themes of her novels are the sense of identity of a black person trying to search for his history and culture which had been suppressed by the white domination. Her novels raise several questions about the identity of a person for whom reading and writing were prohibited. Morrison's works echoes the African-Americans experiences during their migration, how they lost their sense of community, their past and their culture. This feeling of loss of their legacy is immensely expressed in almost all the novels of Toni Morrison. Here, Morrison's three novels- *The Bluest Eye*, *Beloved* and *Paradise* have been focused.

Morrison's first novel *The Bluest Eye* (1970) narrates the story of a black young girl who is self-loathed with the burden of the blue eyes which she thinks as a symbol of beauty that she is deprived of. The novel deals with the cultural and racial conflict focusing on the predominate theme of the socially adapted idea of beauty. Pecola, a young black girl is obsessed by the image of beauty which she equates with having blue eyes. Here the cultural dominance is obvious the way she associates beauty with being white and having blue eyes, like child icon Shirley Temple. She thinks of having the blue eyes like the white

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girls and thinks if she could have those blue eyes, she would become beautiful and no more a target of criticism for other girls in her school. Secondly, Pecola thinks that if her eyes were blue, she would be able to see the world the way that white children do and be a loving child. The novel shows the racial segregation of the blacks who considered themselves ugly due to their physical features.

The novel shows the demoralizing effect of the idea of beauty which demolished the self-image of the African women. According to her, the African's self-image is destroyed at an early age as a result of the ruling class's promotion of its own standard of beauty: long, stringy hair, preferably blond; keen nose, thin lips; and light eyes, preferably blue. The novel demonstrates the devastating effect of racial discrimination which affected the lives of millions of blacks in the past leaving a permanent mark in the history. Morrison is successful in drawing the attention towards the identity crisis faced by the African Americans due to the cultural conflicts.

Beloved (1987) is a story of Sethe and her daughter Denver who escaped the humiliation of slavery eighteen years ago. While working in a farm as a slave, the master of the farm allowed his nephew to brutalize Sethe. Sethe fled even though she was pregnant. However, she was backed down by her master. She killed her baby girl

to save her from the slavery. When the master found her no more fit to serve, he released her. However, the ghost of her dead baby began to haunt the house. The two sons Howard and Buglar had frightening encounters with the ghost.

Beloved is a poignant and dark novel full of gothic elements and acts of terrible violence. *Beloved* is the spirit of dead baby returned but she is also an embodiment of all sufferings under slavery. The novel effectively conveys the brutality and dehumanization that occurred under slavery. *Beloved* shows the effects of slavery on the black families, and on the black community. It documents slavery's shocking destruction and the survival of African people and culture. *Beloved* reveals that slavery was never gentle, no matter how good the master. Slavery removed Africans from their cultures. On slave ships and later on plantations, Europeans purposely separated slaves from the same geographic areas or tribal groups to make communication more difficult.

Toni Morrison's *Beloved* is an inquiry of the paths that the individual takes to reach self-affirmation. The individual searches for new self-recognition, an instinct traced back to the sufferings of past experience. Even though the effects of slavery were experienced primarily within the communal boundaries, the white oppression has also affected the individual. It seems that in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, it

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is the two female protagonists, Sethe and her daughter, Denver, that best represent successfully regained self-value, and recognition in the eyes of the community.

Paradise (1998) is based on the predicament of a small town in Oklahoma that was formed by ex-slaves who travelled from Louisiana following the civil war and turned away from another lighter skinned black community during their journey. *Paradise* is a poignant portrait of Ruby, an all-black town founded by a small group of families hoping to protect themselves from the hatred and sin that inundated their ancestors. Ruby is a monument to courage, strength and the will to overcome. Initially, the town appears to be Utopian and dreamlike. But there are cracks in the surface. Outsiders are unwelcome in Ruby. Adultery alcohol and rebellious behavior are explicitly rejected. Dark is the dominant complexion.

On the outskirts of Ruby is the Convent which was also found harbor to those in need. Its doors are not locked like Ruby. The Convent is dark mysterious, messy, filled with ghostlike sounds, The women of the Convent hail from all over country. The women gathered here are the women that are outcasts of society. They are the enemy of the society and must be eliminated. Inevitably, these are two different cultures within one society which collide against each other. The nine men

from Ruby carry out their deadly assault upon the Convent which is continuation of centuries of hate, oppression, suspicion and prejudice.

Paradise shows us how intolerance breeds intolerance. The black people who suffered the pangs of cultural discrimination at the hands of Whites now try to wrong their own people. *Paradise* is an exploration of how religion and how love of religion makes different people act. *Paradise* is a formation of the self-identity of African Americans. The two communities that Morrison contra poses in the novel may be seen as representative of two different trends in America's construction of national identity: assimilation and homogenization, on the one hand, or interactive difference, on the other.

Paradise deals with double burden of discrimination: both being black in a society dominated by whites, and being female in a male-dominated society. In *Paradise*, Morrison explores the destruction that follows from trying to separate well from evil, to create a paradise by limiting who can belong to the community. Once again, with *Paradise*, we come across with Morrison's primary concerns, among them women rebelling against the patriarchy, the dangers of intra racism, and people's desire to be free and safe. While the novel does not explore directly into issues of self-identity as previous novel do, *Paradise* does

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indeed illustrate the dangers of people trying to control other people by creating an identity and way of believing for the place in which they reside. As a result, Ruby becomes a place where the men in power decide who can live in the town and who cannot. Ultimately, in exploring how these men wreak havoc upon the women of the town and the Convent. The warning found in *Paradise* is that people cannot be divided on the basis of racial identity.

Thus, Toni Morrison has explored the experience and roles of black identity in a society dominated by whites. Her narrative is noticeable for its uniqueness for portraying the cultural legacy of African-Americans.

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