



Black Women's Quest for Subjectivity: Identity Politics in Toni Morrison's Novels': Song of Solomon & Beloved

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Abstract

Identity politics is a dominant theme in Black feminist fiction. Black Woman's quest for cultivating a positive identity is often being complicated by the intersecting oppression of race, class and gender. Morrison's novels describe the secret stories of violence and aggression and capture the lives of abuse survivors and ex-slaves who are trying their best to render their lives normal. In her novels, Morrison presents her female characters as subjects not as marginalized others. Morrison's women emerge as powerful characters, brave abuse-survivors who try to live under the shadow of oppression but do not lose their identity as human beings. They learn how to heal their emotional and psychological wounds and celebrate their womanhood. Thus through her novels Morrison tries to record the histories of those countless 'Subaltern' subjects whose voices and stories have been missing in history. Her novels record the lives of all those female subjects who are left out of the colourful discussion of life.

Key Words: Black Women, oppression, Black Feminism, Identity Politics, Gender Politics, Race, Subaltern

1. Introduction

Throughout the history of western culture and thought, certain people, concepts, and ideas have been defined in terms of other. These others pose a threat to the social norms of a civilized society. Stephen Morton says such "others have included death, the unconscious and madness, as well as the oriental, non-western other, the foreigner, the homosexual, and the feminine" (Morton 2003, p.59). Black women are doubly marginalized; they can be called the other among others. Being a black writer, Morrison gives us deep insight into black women's psychology. Patricia Hill Collins (2004) in *Black Feminist Thought* argues that black women are always treated as others in white patriarchal society. No system of oppression can work without ideological justifications. The dominant groups always present black women in detrimental light. The portrayal of black women as ugly unfeminine breeders gives white women an edge to be defined as a delicate and civilized feminine beauty (p.80). Morrison challenges the traditional approach of dividing everything in watertight compartments like white/black, masculine/feminine, virgin/whore in her novels. The first one is privileged at the expense of the other. And this is what Morrison challenges as the negative representation of black women in literature. Black women are presented as mummies, whores, matriarchs, breeders, superwomen and the beasts. These negative images of black women are promoted to hide their political, social and economic exploitation. Morrison tries to create a "black aesthetic" that would capture the experiences of coloured women who are "left out of literature". These stereotypical images of black women are sabotaged by Morrison who writes "of the silence behind the stereotype" and gives voice to black female identity (William 2001, p.4).

2. Morrison's Black Women and their Quest for Subjectivity

That anybody white could take your whole self for anything that came to mind. Not just work, kill, or maim you, but dirty you. Dirty you so bad you couldn't like yourself anymore. Dirty you so bad you forgot who you were and couldn't think it up (Morrison 1998, p.251).

These lines from Morrison's novel *Beloved* depict many dimensions of intersecting oppression of race, class and gender and the way the 'matrix of oppression' cripples black women's ability to love. Morrison's black female characters learn to craft significant identities by challenging all racial stereotypes. Collins in *Black Feminist Thought* discusses black feminist consciousness, she believes that "a distinctive, collective, black women's consciousness exists." Black women have always resisted every sort of oppression; apparently they learn to wear



the mask of conformity but this mask does not destroy their inner strength and power to resist. They have always pulled together their power of resistance, sometime by denying the so-called established tradition and cultural norms and sometimes by daring to do something which is forbidden in white patriarchal society. She further elaborates her idea that this resistance “could not have occurred without black women’s long standing rejection of mummies, matriarchs, and other controlling images”. Many black writers have tried to explore “private hidden space of black women’s consciousness” that give them energy and power to resist oppression. She says that the “voices of resistance” has always been there and these voice are not of “victims but of survivors” (Collins 2004, p.98).

These spaces formulate prime locations for resisting oppression. As O’Neil says,

Black women observe the feminine images of the larger culture, realize that these models are at best unsuitable and at worst destructive to them, and go about the business of fashioning themselves after the prevalent, historical black female role models in their own community (qtd. in Collins, 2004, p.101).

Collins (2004) says that the way Sojourner Truth has “deconstructed the term woman by using her own lived experience” (p.99) Similarly Morrison captures all lost voices in her novels. As she further argues that “Black women’s struggle to formulate individual and collective voices have occurred in at least three safe spaces.” The mother and daughter relationship is a fundamental relationship among black community. Many black writers acknowledge the profound influence that their mothers have had upon their lives. Alice Walker in ‘My Mothers Garden’ greatly values her relationship with her mother. Friendship is second important relationship, African-American women as friends affirm “one another’s humanity, specialness, and right to exist” (qtd. in Collins 2004, p.101-102).

Morrison places the experiences of black women at the center of her novels. In her novels, the grandmothers, mothers, sisters and friends help the young black girls to grow and develop strong personalities. Many black female writers have explored the above-mentioned theme in their works. They write about the problems that black women face “in affirming one another in a society that derogates black women as a group, it provides a context for crafting alternatives to prevailing images of black womanhood” (Collins 2004, p.104-111).

Tate (1983) points out in the introduction of her book, *Black Women Writers at Work* that most of black women’s writer’s works including that of Morrison deal with the female characters who are engaged “in perplexing struggle to maintain their human dignity” and “emotional sensitivity in an impersonal and a frequently threatening world”. Most of black female writers extend their vision to us through these black female characters. Black women’s identity quest is different from white women. Tate argues that identify quest is very important theme in African American literature, the quest theme occupies a unique and significant place in black women’s work, how they register their struggle in the midst of “growing isolation, meaninglessness and moral decay”(ix). Black women’s identity quest is also favored and hampered by their circumstances. She says that black women usually do not play the role of an “alienated outsider or an adventurer in their quest for self affirmation” but “self discovery has different priorities and takes place in a different landscape”. In fact they have very strong wed to their community and always “dependent on friends and realities for strength during times of hardship.” Tate points out the restraint which is usually imposed by the society upon black women’s “physical movements. They must conduct their quest within close boundaries”, black women’s quest is more of an internal than an external one. All these physical limitations hamper and restrict their quest. They have to channel it within a limited and restricted area and their “strong inclination for forming complex personal relationship adds depth to their identity quest” (Tate 1983, pp. ix-xxii).

In her novel, *Song of Solomon* Morrison mainly deals with the quest theme. She emphasizes that authentic existence always emerges from self-love and self-affirmation.

Every individual should affirm his/her existence by making his/her own decisions in life. Authentic existence also surfaces from self-ownership. Wilfred D. Samuel argues in ‘Liminality and the Search for Self in Song of Solomon’ that the most significant example of inauthentic is offered by Milkman’s mother Ruth Foster Dead. Her surname ‘Dead’ signifies empty life and inauthentic experience. (Bloom 2007, p.6). Unlike Ruth Aunt Pilate’s provides:

The ultimate example of authentic existence. From birth, her life has been a continuum of self-actualization...unlike her brother Macon, and her wife, Ruth, who are driven by external motivations and materialism, Pilate lives a life epitomizing ethereality. She is a strong and independent woman who makes her own ways in life. She is an extraordinary woman who makes living in itself an art. She becomes both the creator and the creation of her art. (Bloom 2007, p.11-12).



Pilate is without a navel, phenomena that gives her unique identity. Morrison depicts this physical characteristic as a symbol which stands for her independent mind, unconquerable spirit and indomitable will. She is not depended upon anyone. Pilate is a mysterious character, an enigma and also a wild woman who knows the art of living. She looks like a tall black tree. Her life is full of strange events, as she says,

I was cut off from my people early...I walked for seven days before I found a place with a preacher's family...But then the preacher started patting on me. I was so dumb I didn't know enough to stop him. But his wife caught him at it, thumbing my breast, and put me out (Morrison 1977, p.141).

Pilate first experience of sexual harassment has lost her faith in social values. This experience has taught her the very first lesson of her life as she says, "I figured I ought to make tracks." Then she joins a group of pickers and spends three years with them but they leave her when they come to know about her smooth stomach. Thus she comes to know that she possesses something extraordinary which intimidates other people. She refuses to get married, as the text tells, "Pilate was afraid that she wouldn't be able to hide her stomach from a husband forever. And once he saw that uninterrupted flesh, he would respond the same way everybody else had." She experiences hardships and learns to deal with life.

She threw away every assumption she had learned and began at zero. First off, she cut her hair. That was one thing she didn't want to think about anymore. Then she tackled the problem of trying to decide how she wanted to live and what was valuable to her. Her mind traveled crooked streets and aimless goat paths, arriving sometime at profundity, other times at the revelation of three year (Morrison 1977, p.141).

Her life has taught her there is nothing to be afraid of and death is the ultimate reality of life. "Her alien compassion for troubled people ripened her" and the knowledge she has acquired "kept her just barely within the boundaries of the elaborately socialized world of black people" (p.111). Her experiences in life have completely transformed her, "she gave up, apparently, all interest in table manners, hygiene...but acquired a deep concern for and about human relationships." (Morrison 1977, p.149-150). She is known as a natural healer.

Samuel argues 'In Liminality and the Search for Self in Song of Solomon' that Pilate lives a very different life, her life is not directed by materialistic desires. She is not interested in material things and refuses to run after them. Basically she is a traveler and a wanderer. She decides to live without the modern inventions like gas, electricity and telephone. Pilate's house "provides an avenue through which to live deliberately". Her house is completely different from her brother's great palace, whose emptiness makes it less like a house and more like a home. Pilate lives a very spontaneous and natural life which is "firmly grounded in her organic relationship with nature". Pilate and her family never plan any meal for themselves. They just follow their hearts. Samuel says, "It is the economy of life rather than the economics of life that interests Pilate, No meal was ever planned or balanced or served. Nor was there any gathering at the table" (Bloom 2007, p.13).

Morrison compares Pilate to a huge tree. She is not a seed. Her personality develops like a giant tree. Milkman also compares her to a great black beautiful tree. Samuel analyses Ruth's character, he compares her to the other female characters and declares her "the daughter of nature." She has strong and close ties with nature. She is a motherless child and the forest has brought her up by providing her its shadow and sunshine. The forest has performed the role of mother in Pilate's life. (Bloom 2007, p. 14). Milkman says that Pilate has a very natural smell. She smells like trees and can be called the daughter of Mother Nature. Like Milkman, her traumatic past experiences have not increased her bitterness. She has also witnessed the ruthless killing of her father but still clings to good values that her father has given her. Her life is not guided by hate and bitterness. She nourishes her positive side and is able to love others and feels sympathy and compassion for them. She is not poisoned by her own hate like her brother Macon's Dead. Pilate can be called a spiritual healer who has deep love and respect for human relationships. Her name has symbolic significance. Pilate's father is an illiterate man who opens up the Bible and tries to find words and what he finds is a beautiful group of letters that look like trees. He sees, "a large figure that looked like a tree hanging in some princely but protective way over a row of smaller trees"(qtd.in Bloom,p.14).Pilate is the name of Christ's killer but this does not discourage the old man to name her daughter after him. He sees in Pilate an individual with tremendous power and self-confidence. Samuel argues "whose sensitivity and strength would lead her to tower above others". Pilate's character depicts the truth in her father's prophecy "A tree grounded in her own principals, she thus protectively towers over those above her, not only by her six foot height but by the ascendancy of her love" (Bloom 2007.p 27-28).

She is not only the tower of power but also guides others and shows them the path towards self actualization. Morrison has created a wonderful character that is larger than life, Pilate never forgets her past and her father's preaching and remains in touch with them. Samuel argues that Pilate carries her past within herself and protects her



family's history. Her song stands for happiness. She celebrates her ancestor's conquest, the Solomon's quest who escaped slavery by taking flight. "She alone can carry her identity sealed in her person" Thus Pilate's character reveals that the quest for subjectivity is very complex and complicated process. "The quests for authentic self inevitably involves the quest for truth, love survival, and even power and forgiveness". Morrison believes that an authentic self needs a balance and some equilibrium to exist. One cannot find completeness by just getting material benefits. The quest for external fulfillment often proves "unrewarding" (Morrison 1998, p.23).

Morrison's women dare to be subject in a world that denies them subjectivity. Her novel *Beloved* is set in post-slave period and deals with the distant past of slavery. Morrison has created two powerful characters in her novels such as Baby Suggs and Sethe, they try to live under the shadow of oppression and successfully create significant identities. These female characters are haunted by the painful memories of 'Sweet Home', a slave holding plantation. *Beloved* is all about slavery and mainly deals with the painful experiences of slave women. Baby Suggs and Sethe depict human courage to fight. Baby Suggs is an old slave woman, a victim whose freedom is purchased by her son. Baby Suggs has a long painful history, has an intolerable past full of lost dreams and unfulfilled desires. She had been treated as a subhuman creature and not valued more than a breeder. At the age of sixty, first time she tasted freedom when she was hardly aware of its meaning. Baby Suggs is an unfortunate mother who has lost almost all of her children except her son Halle. She considers Sethe lucky because she has almost three kids to love. "Be thankful why you don't? I had eight every one of them gone away from. Four taken four purchased... Eight children and that's all I remember" (Morrison 1998, p.23). When Paul D asks about Baby Suggs's death, whether it was painful or not? Sethe replies that for her being alive was the hardest part. Her life did not allow her to love. She could not love anyone for a longtime. There was not even a single man whom Baby Suggs dared to love,

Had not run off or been hanged, got rented out, loaned out, brought up and brought back, stored up, mortgaged, won, stolen or seized. So Baby's eight children have six fathers. What she called the nastiness of life was the shock she received upon learning that nobody stopped playing checkers just because the pieces included her children (Morrison 1998, p.23).

Like Pilate, Baby Suggs is also a healer and a symbol of power, Morrison uses natural images to describe her personality as the text tells, "she smelled like bark in the day and leaves at night" (Morrison 1998, p.19). Her experiences has taught her that there is no self to rely on and all men are alike; they just provide love and protection for the time being.

They encouraged you to put some of your weight in their hands and soon as you feel how light and lovely that was", they leave the women in the middle and demand complete independence. She often used to say these words that "a man ain't nothing but a man, but a son is somebody (Morrison 1998, p.22-23).

Baby Suggs gave birth to eight children who had six different fathers, Halle, was her only son who remained with her for twenty years. She could recall her two daughters who were being sold by their masters and she could not even wave good bye to them. She tried her best to save her children. She had sex with "a strawboards for four months continuously" in order to keep her son but her boy was "traded for lumber" and again she found herself "pregnant by the man who promised" her that he would not sell her son but did. As the text tells, "That child she could not love and the rest she would not." Once she said that God had taken whatever she had loved in life and then "gave her Halle who gave her freedom when it didn't mean a thing" (qtd . in Bloom 2007, p.12).

Beloved deals with the lives of slaves as Margaret Atwood analyses in her article 'Haunted by their Nightmares' that it depicts the terrible lives of slaves who are surviving without relationships. They are motherless; do not have the right to keep their husband and children with them. She argues that it is something very common in the world of slavery; slaves often lose their loved ones and people usually became invisible, "not just through accident or covert operation or terrorism, but as a matter of every day legal policy" (Bloom 2007, p.12).

It depicts destructive consequences of absolute power. As Roger scale says in 'Morrison's *Beloved*' that it's a "holocaust novel". He says that horrible things happen in the world where people are treated like animals, and "burned alive after being caught trying to escape" (Bloom 2007, p.14). Baby Suggs is a healer and a preacher who dares to live in this nightmarish world. She guides and consoles the disturbed souls and teaches the ex-slave women to love and admire their bodies. "Baby Suggs became a preacher, one who visited pulpits and opened her great heart to those who could use it". Slavery had engulfed her whole life; it had "busted her legs, back, head, eyes, hands, kidneys, womb and tongue". She used to sit on a huge rock and after praying silently, she calls the young mothers, children and men to come and dance. She teaches them to heal by laughing, singing and dancing then she asked them to cry, "For the living and the dead just cry?" (Bloom 2007, p.87-88).



Slavery and its horrible memories have destroyed their ability to love. Baby Suggs teaches them how to love and claim their bodies. She draws their attention to their sub-human status and tells them that they have been treated as a flesh. She forces them to love their eyes, mouth, lips, hands, and glorify their bodies which had been disliked by the white folk. "Love it hard, yonder theylove your flesh". She makes them love their heart, "more than eyes or feet, more than lungs that have yet to draw free air. More than your life holding womb and your life giving private parts.....love your heart" (Morrison 1998, p.88).

Slavery has challenged womanhood of every black women and *Beloved* records their resistance to oppression. As Marilyn Sanders Mobley argues in 'Memory, History and Meaning in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*' that Morrison depicts the material, physical and psychological impact of slavery upon the minds of the oppressed. Morrison particularly explores the "psychic consequence of slavery for women" that are "both the means and source of production" (qtd. in Bloom 2007, p.20). Slave woman is valued highly as Paul D thinks, "her price was greater than his; properly that reproduced itself without cost" (Morrison 1998, p.228).

Baby Suggs is not being treated as a woman but just as a private property. After getting freedom, Sethe thinks that freedom is one thing and claiming one's body or self-ownership is another. Baby Suggs teaches all the community how to claim their bodies. As David Lawrence in 'Fleshly Ghosts and Ghostly Flesh: the Word and Body in *Beloved*' argues what is important in the "pursuit of self-ownership is the articulation of a self-defining language that spring from the flesh and blood of physical experience" (Morrison 2007, p.47). That language gives life to the desires suppressed under slavery.

After tasting freedom, Baby Suggs enjoys the sense of self-ownership and explores a positive self-definition. Her joys know no bound when she first time listens her heartbeat and teaches herself the art of living by "giving advice; passing messages, healing the sick, hiding fugitives, loving, cooking, ...preaching, singing and dancing and loving everybody like it was her job and hers alone" (Morrison 1998, p.137).

The first step she takes to empower herself is by giving her a new name. She refuses to be called Jenny Whitlow which was her legal name. Jenny Whitlow was written on the bill of her sale. She calls herself Suggs but could not get rid of her sadness. As the text (*Beloved*) tells, "The desolated center where the self that was no self made its home:" She is sad because she does not know where her children are, whether they are burned or alive. In the very beginning, after getting freedom, she was even uncertain about herself she knew more about her missing children than herself. She does not have "a map to discover what she was like ...Could she sing? Was she pretty... Could she have been a loving mother" Baby Suggs used to speak very little because she knows "what was there to say that the roots of her tongue could manage?" (Morrison 1998, p.140-141) When Halle brought her freedom, she was shocked to know because she considered it useless for herself. She thinks about her life and laughs at the idea of purchasing freedom for a sixty year old woman who walks like a "three legged dog" (Morrison 1998, p.141). But her first step on the ground makes her realize that freedom is the most valuable thing in the world. The very idea of being free scared her and she finds it hard to move like a free person in the world. When she looks at her hand, she thinks as if she is looking at it for the first time and says "there hands belong to me there my hands ...then she tries to listen to her heartbeat, Had it been there all along? This pounding thing"? Then she laughs aloud and says. "My heart is beating". Heart beating is symbolic and shows her new birth. This sixty years old woman questions that why they call her Jenny? Then Mr. Graves replies because it is written on her sale ticket. Mr. Graves asks her real name and what she calls herself. "Nothing" "I don't call myself nothing" (Morrison 1998, p.142). Then she recalls her first husband's name, a very serious man who had taught her the art of making shoes. Not only Baby Suggs learns to love herself but helps her community to heal and forget the past. She tells them that self love is the greatest power of the world and teaches them how to claim themselves bit by bit.

Linda Krumholz argues in 'The Ghosts of Slaver: Historical Recovery in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*' that Baby Suggs performs the healing ritual which can be divided into three stages, the first stage is the 'repression of memory', while the second stage is "painful reconciliation with the memories" and the third one is "cleaning process, a symbolic rebirth of the Sufferer" (qtd. in Bloom 2007, p.82). Baby Suggs provides moral support to her community and compels them to confront the shameful and painful experiences of their past. Baby Suggs spiritual power and her philanthropist nature earned her the title of 'Holy' among her people. Most of the rituals are conducted outside. As Krumholz analyses the outdoor place signifies the need of a "psychological cleaning from the past" and "a space to encounter painful memories safely." According to Krumholz Baby Suggs has created a special ritual to help the former slaves that how to reconcile with their emotional and psychological scares. In *Beloved*, Morrison depicts "how the reconstruction of the past makes possible a reconceptualization of the future, which is the power of history making" (Bloom 2007, p.81-85).



Baby Suggs teachings are different from the other strict religious preachers. She does it from her heart and is not fond of rules and prohibitions. She believes that morality cannot be defined through rules. “She did not feel them to clean up their lives or to go and sin no more”. She tells them that they are “blessed of the earth” “inheriting meek” and “glory bound pure”. She informs them that “the only grace they could have was the grace they could imagine.” (Morrison 1998, p.88). As Krumholz argues that Baby Suggs presents “epistemological and discursive philosophy” and according to it, “morality is not present in black and white categories of good and evil” (Bloom 2007, p 84-86).

These two concepts get their life from the method of judgments. The school teacher in *Beloved* represents “a moral absolute of evil.” He keeps the record of everything; his methods are scientific and objective. Krumholz analyses that through school teacher, Morrison depicts that “discourse, definitions, and historical methods are neither arbitrary nor objective; they are tools in the system of power relations” (Bloom 2007, p. 84-86). Sixo, one of the ‘Sweet Home’ servants steals something and eats it but when the school teacher questions him, he replies that this will improve his property because by eating it he would be able to do more work. But school master still beats him to show that “definitions belonged to the definers... not the defined” (Morrison 1998, p.190).

As Linda Krumholz analyses Baby Suggs believes that morality is relative and subjective not based on accurate and absolute standards but the “part of a situational ethics”. She preaches that “everything depends on knowing how much, Good is knowing when to stop” (Bloom 2007, p. 8). Her experiences have made her realize that the white people are the greatest bad luck in the world because they do not know how and when to stop. She knows that the absence of any limitations can cause the worst kind of evil. Baby Suggs learns that how to come out of the secretive world of torture and pain. Morrison’s black female characters like Baby Suggs and Pilate live with hope and courage even under the worst circumstances and remain successful in cultivating an independent and successful identity.

3. Conclusion

Mostly black female characters in fiction experience humiliation and suffer an acute isolation in a white racist society that has marginalized them. They are considered outcasts who do not enjoy any class and racial privilege and are often silenced by the hostile gaze of others. Morrison defines female self as one in process that is not restricted and imprisoned by rigid social and cultural boundaries but constantly becoming. Morrison critiques the ways language has been used to justify violence against black women. She destroys different stereotypes and creates various black female characters that reject conventional and self-hating ways of being. Similarly she rewrites and explores the hidden stories of pain and degradation. She creates the strong black female characters that reject the dominant racist standards of being.

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