

AFRICAN-AMERICAN RELIGION AND THE WHITE CHRISTIANITY

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ABSTRACT

There is a bond between the African-American Religion and the white Christianity in USA. The blacks prefer to follow the white Christianity, and in ignorance, afflict their sons and daughters; this inclines the kids specially girls of the same community to become blonde with white skin and blue eyes. This diversion of the blacks to forget their own historical past which has details of their Gods and Goddesses, who look like humble human beings, is noteworthy to make them aware in the 21st century about their flaw.

KEYWORDS: Toni Morrison, Religion, the Bluest Eye (1970), Toni Morrison, Jesus Christ

INTRODUCTION

It is dribbling with the hidden details of African-Americans religion; they commit petty sins like disparaging their own kinds because they are not fair in color or relegate them because they don't have blue eyes like white American god Jesus Christ.

It is very arduous work to cull all allusions of religion in the novels of Toni Morrison, but it is a new perspective to read her selected novels like *Bluest Eye* (1970), *Sula* (1973), *Song of Solomon* (1977), *Tar Baby* (1981) and *Paradise* (1998).

Many issues will come out if we scrutinize the idea of white Christianity and the black Gods. The blacks try to adopt the white Christianity with the details of the Old and New Testaments to find the correct path of life. These people are befooled by their self-consciousness and fascination for it. They urge themselves to love Americans' white figure of God to prove acclimatized migrated Africans in the new world of America. They never try to think about their own ancestral past. Though they are aware of the folk tales of their own country (Africa) in which many references of the black Gods are given but they have forgotten their glorious past under the pressure of poverty and unfortunate period of slavery in the southern America. The migrants, who are rootless on the ground of religion in America because of their misinterpreted histories is a big issue to be discussed.

The Bluest Eye (1970) explores the secular life of the Africans in America. The novel characters follow white Christianity and believe in the myths of the American God. Jesus Christ was a martyr because ruthlessly killed by the people who were against Jews; he was punished to bear a heavy cross on his neck to lift it. His death sets example of humanity for rest of world. Mrs. Breedlove is a spruce and steadfast follower of church. She dislikes her husband; she thinks that her husband is just like a cross which she is laden on her whole life. The philosophy of living an austere life is very popular idea among the rich and advance blacks in America. They try to live life shunned of pleasures.

It is strange to see that opposite characters living together in house. It is deliberately projected to show the internal mental status of blacks. They are externally simulating extreme religion but allow even Miss Maria (a prostitute) to live in their own house; either they are imposters or they do it due to utter poverty.

Geraldine is another austere woman who avoids funkiness, and her love for cats is bizarre. She often calls her daughter a black bitch though posing herself being full of magnanimity and compassionate. Thus, People are presented with their religiousness, but the same characters are wrongdoers. They abuse, hate mankind, molest kids. Soaphead Church, a misogynist, is a pretender and sarcastically called spiritualist in the same novel. He blatantly lures girls by offering candies to make them prey of his lust. He is the same, who makes Pecola believe that she can grow blue color in her eyes. Toni Morrison dismantles the dichotomy of black and white by emphasizing the slogan 'Black is beautiful' of the Black Power Movement in the 1960s in America and the Black Consciousness Movement in South Africa.

When Morrison's references to God are taken in totality, it becomes quite clear that her depiction of the deity is an attempt to humanize God. God for the characters of the novel is not the characteristically ethereal God of traditional Western religion but a God, who retains certain Western characteristics but has much in common with the deities of traditional African religion.

Morrison's model of God owes much to the African tradition; a major part of her portrait is dedicated to exposing how traditional Western notions about God affect her characters.

Pecola Breedlove, who falls in the notions of white superiority espoused not only by the white community but also by her mother and Soaphead Church, confronts situations based on the myth of white superiority reinforcing her tendency of self-hatred. She also encounters Mr. Yacobowski, a white man whose religious sensibility 'honed on the doe-eyed Virgin Mary' is alien to the world in which she inhabits. She is stuck in, 'the total absence of human recognition' on his face (The Bluest Eye, 42).

The issue of racial inequality is not limited only to the blacks and whites. Pecola is thrown out of Geraldine's house, she looks at a portrait of God who seems either incapable of helping her or complicit in her suffering. Expulsion of Pecola from her house makes us feel intra-racial differences in the black community. Morrison distinctly shows how God allows the sufferings of Pecola.

Morrison reintroduces this model of an inadequate God at a church picnic when Cholly watches a father of a family with a watermelon over his head to smash it on the ground, and she is impressed with the man's god-like stance against the opposite and unimpressive white image of God:

'little blue eyes that looked sad when people died
and mean when they were bad' (The Bluest Eye, 106).

The teaching of the white masters manipulates biblical passages to relegate the blacks. Pauline has also adopted the Western theological tradition of either thinking or believing the differences between good and evil. In African folklore, God is often depicted as having human qualities in his personality. The Western traditional picture of God as a stoical figure who demands perfection from his creation because of his own perfection is found untrustworthy.

African storytellers have given their God human characteristics. Julius Lester in his *Renditions of Traditional African folk Tales* also features God who definitely wants to make this world beautiful, but sometimes He is found helpless.

God is infect an ancestor of humanity and who consequently possesses many of the characteristics of his imperfect creation is a far from the West's omnipotent, infallible God who despises human frailty.

John Grimes and Pauline suffer from their church associations. John comes to regard the church as a source of darkness and oppression and think about God as a, 'monstrous heart' (217) that consume his joy.

Pauline divorces herself from her African American heritage and in the process loses her own traditions as well as her family.

Edward Said terms 'Orientalism' a process whereby powerful Western nations for centuries defined the terms of interaction with their African and Asian colonies, and even with other non-Western nations, as a Manichean struggle between light and dark, good and bad, enlightened self and irreconcilable, 'other'.

A white slaveholder working as a schoolteacher instructs his nephews to study about the black slaves under the ironically title named Sweet Home plantation in order to catalog 'animal' and 'human' characteristics; this all is in the Morrison's *Beloved* (1987). The maltreatment of Sixo resulting in death looks against the human nature.

Baby Suggs stops preaching in the same novel because there is no word which can free her from the evil of racism. God puzzled her and she was too ashamed to say so. Guitar Bains in the *Song of Solomon* (1981) often seem ridiculously ignorant of his own heritage (Guitar does not know the reasoning behind Malcolm X's choice of last name (160)).

The following chosen lines show the health of religion in America:

'Oh Lord, Sula', she cried, 'girl, girl,
girlgirlgirl'. It was a fine cry – loud and long – but
it had no bottom and it had no top, just circles ...
of.... sorrow.'(Sula, 174)

Toni Morrison ends her novel *Sula* (1977) with the above given lines. We see the life of Sula Peace from her childhood in the twenties until her death in 1941. The novel's setting depicts the black community in Medallion, especially, 'the Bottom'.

After reading the story of Sula's life, and the life of the people in the Bottom, Morrison shows us many different and substantial ways in which families and communities can guide children.

Sula not only guides the way children should be guided, but also the manner in which a community accepts an adult who challenges the orthodoxies. Morrison guides the readers of the late twentieth-century to a new mental picture which in particular focuses on African American contribution to that history. She also delicately inserts several passages of the bible or references to this Christian reading.

Sula (1977) has many references from the Old Testament Genesis, the New Testament Revelation and the Holy

Trinity. The central characters in the novel are Sula, Nel, Eve and Shadrack. Sula's characterization has more biblical typologies than any other character in the novel.

We can see the Biblical connection even in the name, 'Sula'. Sula is an anagram of Saul; Sula Mae is almost an anagram for Samuel. Her surname, 'Peace' repeats the label for Jesus, Prince of Peace. In this respect, Sula Peace can be seen like the Princess of Peace.

Pilate in the *Song of Solomon (1981)* is portrayed in the role of a mentor. She plays a role of a spiritual leader as well as a spiritual teacher for Milkman and the rest of the society.

It can be argued that she is a major cause behind Milkman's liberation. She gives Milkman maternal love and imparts the spiritual education which is needed by Milkman. She teaches Milkman the necessities of life not with severity but rather by means of being her own self. She is being connected to her heritage and traditions changes Milkman into a hero.

Pilate is not a rigid teacher. Pilate is very mother like and caring towards Milkman. She gives care and affection to Milkman which he can't get at his own home. Milkman finds comfort at Pilate's house and feels comfortable being among the simple people in the community. Pilate plays the role of a mother for Milkman. She maintains perfect family atmosphere at her house unlike Milkman's family.

Joseph Skerrett points out that Pilate teaches Milkman since their very first meeting. Her truthful lesson like how the word 'hi' sounds like the 'dumbest' word; if someone was to be greeted with a hi!, they should, 'get up and knock you down', seems to get Milkman notice her. Her role as a parental guide changes to one of the teacher who tries to teach him right and wrong in this world. She shows him how goals in life should be aimed for and how they should be accomplished. She even lessons him on how to make the perfect egg. It shows how even something as little as frying an egg requires perfection. Milkman learns that even little things have a purpose in this world and they are equally important. She also quotes herself by telling about selling wine without getting in the habit of drinking. She has to do this business to feed her daughter. Thus, she has accomplished her goals without getting affected by the criticism of the others for her business. Pilate's way of teaching helps Milkman to comprehend many complexities of life. She acts in a way that makes him learn what he needs to know.

He becomes interested in finding out the truth behind the green bag of the robbery. Pilate goes to police station to ask police to set the two robbers go free. She captures Milkman's attention by her story. Pilate doesn't actually give all of the details of the green bag. It becomes the cause for Milkman to begin his journey of self-discovery. Pilate is the cause of Milkman's initiation all the way to his liberation in the Monmouth process. She seems to be Milkman's guide all his way.

Pilate's role of a teacher and guide often comes into play in the novel. Pilate is an incarnation of God in the novel. She has managed to show Milkman the correct path of life.

It is written in an essay that, 'She is there with him when he goes through the important parts of life and helps him learn how to see his own life. It's because of her that he went in search of the gold and found something as priceless as his heritage. Even at the end when Pilate dies, she teaches him to live out of courage and face up to reality. It could be said that it's because of her that he faces Guitar and sacrifices himself for Guitar's sake. She became the benevolent guide for Milkman, helping him conquer his own life and move on to liberation.'¹

Toni Morrison suggests the biblical allusions in her novel *Song of Solomon (1981)*. Its title also symbolizes Christian faith. Solomon was David's son who ruled after him in Jerusalem for forty years' long time period. His rule was peaceful and full of justice. He was rich and full of wealth. He built many palaces for himself and his 300 wives. Solomon's biggest achievement was the temple in Jerusalem. Solomon was adored for his wisdom, and some of his sayings are incorporated in the books of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes. It is said that '*Song of Solomon (1981)* is a collection of Hebrew love songs composed by Solomon.'²

When the black Africans arrived at the shore of the new land which is called America, they found that the American religion resembles their own African religion which urges a love for humanity, a belief in justice and a supreme power that will manifest on earth. Christianity gives them a message that biblical heroes like Daniel, Joshua and Moses are all good spirits and the religion says they will come back for humanity in the world. Africans think themselves equal to those people in the Christianity who are expelled from the communities and afflicted. Their names are ultimately going to be immortal and unforgettable in the history of religion by achieving freedom from the supremacy of the unethical people.

Africans receive the hidden message of becoming immortal by struggle. Thus, the blacks find their own world in the foreign religion. They find the hope of justice during the brutal period of slavery in the colonizing world, where the Americans look as invincible giants.

Many folk stories were popular among them in the southern part of America where the dark Africans worked in the plantation fields. They make many stories on the rabbits, lions and foxes. All the stories carry message of meek over cunning or slave over master. A rabbit always signifies who is above any regional bonding. These stories are a form of powerful protest against slavery. *Tar Baby (1981)* is a title which is based on all such type of stories of rabbit and in the tar baby stories the tar baby is used to catch rabbits. These stories carry a religious message of rejecting suppression for living a free life.

Paradise (1998) is a novel which shows the obsession for Christianity or for God. The novel uses the Afro-Brazilian religion, Candomble and Gnosticism as a way to counteract the exclusionary notion of paradise in the white Christianity discourse. The reference to the Christianity in the novel is taken from the story of the Exodus. Africans find refuse in this story which contradicts the claim made by white Christians by saying that God intended Africans to slave. Candomble and Gnosticism introduce a new belief system in the novel, which opposes the stereotypical binary thinking of self/other, moral/immoral, and male/ female.

Paradise (1998) is about,

'The love of God....the passionate, even

excessive devotion to God as is manifested in how we construct paradise.'³

Morrison's investigation of the religious beliefs takes the form of an examination of two communities; the Black Patriarchal of Haven and the strict Christian community of Ruby. Women community is accused of practicing magic and witchcraft, which threatens the moral values of the town in the novel. So, the men of Ruby ride out to the Convent and massacre the Convent's female residents in order to keep the town's Christian morality intact. The patriarchal community of Ruby grows to adopt the same concept of exclusion:

‘African-Americans, Exodus, and the American Israel’ that No single symbol capture more clearly the distinctiveness of Afro-American Christianity than the symbol of Exodus.’⁴

In the story of the Exodus, God warned the Israelites who crossed over into Canaan not to mix with the indigenous people. They had given them the right to cleanse the land through spilling of blood. The same story is echoed throughout *Paradise(1998)*. In Ruby, nearly a full century after its establishment, the founders’ descendents participated in the massacre of the Covent women.

The Afro-Americans think themselves as the Israelites and America as Canaan. The white Christians had represented their journey across the Atlantic to America as the exodus of a New Israel from the bondage of Egypt into the Promised Land of milk and honey.

Women who are living in the convent are living a life which has no match with the Ruby lifestyle. Their doors are always open for the visitors unlike Rubians. When Mavis takes shelter in the Convent she asks to Consolata if they don’t have fear to live in the Convent. Connie makes fun out of this by saying that scary things are not outside but inside. These women are having a new definition of Christianity for themselves. They celebrate their femininity with the religion-rituals but the Ruby follows the tradition of celebrating the religion- rituals for suppressing the females.

Consolata resembles the divine female figure of the Gnostic poem. She leads the other women to take relief from their pain. She is presented as a goddess to dismantle the orthodoxy of Christian discourse in its suppression of the feminine element. She is full of the criticism of Ruby’s patriarchal community which uses religion to justify their patriarchal attitude. In this sense, Morrison uses Gnostic gospels to introduce a different interpretation to Christianity.

It is that ‘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 class difference, on the other. Ruby rises as a paradisiacal African-American town which gradually deteriorate due to its Manichean view of the world, the Convent is eventually presented as an alternative open community.

African Americans adopted the puritan foundational principles in America and they had two concepts one of African Americanism and other was of Americanism. American people were thinking themselves as the God’s chosen people and according to the Puritanism these chosen people have to follow the right path and in any case if these people are not able to maintain it than they will be condemned. Americans were afflicting the African Americans and this was straying from the path of Puritanism where they all will be condemned for their heinous act of making people slaves. The Africans feel to take their share in the American Dream after reaching at America.

Migration is done by the people for their prosperity but in America many Africans were brought as slaves and thus the rule of the independent America of supporting the oppressed people is violated. It was similar like the bondage of Israelites in Egypt. Earlier, the Americans were the God’s chosen people but their enslavement of the blacks is endangering their status of the chosen people. Now, the blacks in America have become the God’s chosen people and they are doing the messianic role of achieving their own freedom.

Ruby is a town where the third generation exists and the second generation is conferred by the power as their lineage in the novel. This town, named Ruby is in isolation and completely away from the other towns. Thus they are seeking redemption through utter isolation and exclusion.

In the time of upheaval that was the sixties, Moses points to Martin Luther King to illustrate how the myth of the chosen people and the representative from God who will help the chosen meet their destiny is manifested in King's dictum, 'Let my people go'.

King is also the focus for part of Cornel West's book *Prophesy Deliverance!: An Afro-American Revolutionary Christianity*. West asserts that writers and leaders like DuBois and King are part of what he calls the second stage of theological development in, 'Theology of Liberation as Critique of Institutional Racism'. (122)

The process Wilmore describes is portrayed in *Song of Solomon (1981)*, which is set in an earlier era, but nonetheless reflects its time. Macon Dead rejects his father's spiritual vision of life and seeks refuge and safety in the acquisition of property.

In her book *Let the Circle Be Unbroken*, Dona Marimba Richards proposes that, 'soul is the essence of the human in the African view' and this is a concept that, 'western metaphysics is not equipped to discuss.' (36)

Richards' definition of spirituality avoids the dualism of matter and spirit, heaven and earth, transient and eternal:

'spirituality in an African context does not mean distant or 'non-human' and it certainly does not mean 'saintly' or 'pristine.' Spirituality refers to spiritual being, to that which gives life...' (43)

Toni Morrison and Gloria Naylor draw upon these notions of spirituality—as an outcome of human relationships and commitment to one another and as the definition of the human experience in the physical world. From this perspective, the spiritual is fused with: 'a profound rootedness in the real world at the same time, without taking precedence over the other,' as Toni Morrison states in an interview.' (342)

Carlyle Stewart provides an example of this stoic approach to spirituality in an African American context in his book *Black Spirituality and Black Consciousness* when he states that:

'African-American spirituality has enabled [African Americans] to adapt, transcend, and transform the absurdities of racism, oppression, and adverse human conditions'. (8)

The term magical realism has been widely defined as fiction that includes elements that cannot be explained logically; however, as Foreman explains these are not merely manifestations of the uncanny or of a fantastic realm, because magical realism,

'presumes that the individual requires a bond with the traditions and the faith of the community, that s/he is historically constructed and connected'. (286)

I intend to examine *Song of Solomon (1981)* as a narrative which proposes ways humans gain an awareness of self, of purpose, and of their place in the overall human drama through their connection to one another and the world in which they live. At the same time, and in varying degrees, the text explores the obstacles to attaining such a spiritual awareness as well as our obligations that result from this spiritual awareness.

The novel has protagonists who come to accept that transcending self-centeredness and taking an active interest in the problems of those around them is a way for their sense of self to become meaningful, and for them to attain a sense of a spiritual link with others.

CONCLUSIONS

All the people are free to follow the religion which they want but here it is urged to make aware the blacks living in the America that they have their own incarnations of God and Goddesses in their historical details. Instead of blindly following any scripture or any supernatural power without any association is neither recommended nor worthy.

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