

Local and Global Antiracism in the Works of Toni Morrison

Dr. Sura Sami Noaman

English Instructor, Al Mamoun University College

مناهضة العنصرية محليا وعالميا في أعمال توني موريسون

د. سري سامي نعمان

مدرس اللغة والادب، كلية المأمون الجامعة

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Abstract

This paper provides a critical analysis of the concept of antiracism in the works of Toni Morrison, a prominent African American novelist, and Nobel laureate. Morrison's works are renowned for their exploration of themes related to race, identity, and oppression. This paper examines how Morrison deals explicitly with the historical roots of racism and trauma offering a powerful critique of racism in American society and how they promote antiracist ideals. Since Morrison's novels often explore the psychological, social, and historical impact of racism on African American communities, this paper argues that Morrison's novels provide a global perspective of antiracism that challenges readers to confront their attitudes and beliefs about race. By portraying the complexity and humanity of African American characters, Morrison's activist endeavor undermines the stereotypes and prejudices used to justify oppression and marginalization worldwide. **Key Words: Toni Morrison, identity, antiracism, marginalization**

المخلص

يقدم هذا البحث تحليلاً نقدياً لمفهوم "مناهضة العنصرية" في أعمال توني موريسون، وهي روائية أمريكية بارزة من أصول أفريقية وحائزة على جائزة نوبل. إن أعمال موريسون مشهورة باستكشافها للمواضيع المتعلقة بالهوية والاضطهاد. ويستعرض هذا البحث الكيفية التي تتعامل بها موريسون صراحة مع الجذور التاريخية للعنصرية والصدمات النفسية التي تعرض انتقاداً قوياً للعنصرية في المجتمع الأمريكي، وكيفية ترويجها للمثل المناهضة للعنصرية. وبما أن روايات موريسون كثيراً ما تستكشف الأثر النفسي والاجتماعي والتاريخي للعنصرية على المجتمعات الأمريكية الأفريقية، يرى البحث أن روايات موريسون توفر منظوراً عالمياً لمناهضة العنصرية التي تتحدى القراء لمواجهة مواقفهم ومعتقداتهم بشأن العرق. فمن خلال تصوير التراكم والبعد الإنساني للشخصيات الأمريكية الأفريقية، يقوض مسعى موريسون الناشط كل القوالب النمطية والتحيزات المستخدمة لتبرير القمع والتهميش في جميع أنحاء العالم. **الكلمات الرئيسية: توني موريسون، الهوية، مناهضة العنصرية، التهيميش**

Research Statement

Toni Morrison's novels commemorate shared Black experiences of trauma, oppression, struggle, spirituality, and community. They provide a vision based on humanism, inclusiveness, and antiracism that creates a transcendent space for healing and reconciliation, both locally and globally.

Research Methodology

This paper applies a critical and analytical approach to underline Morrison's powerful portrayal of the African American experience. Highlighting themes such as slavery, racism, and the struggle for equality, this paper redefines Morrison's antiracist philosophy as a global antiracist philosophy.

Research Questions

This paper attempts to answer the following questions:

1. What is the impact of Morrison's work on the struggle against racism?
2. What are the underlying assumptions of racism?

3. How is racism embedded in society and culture?
4. How does Morrison's activism provide a global perspective?

Introduction

Morrison was born in 1931 in Lorain, Ohio, and grew up in a racially segregated community (Kramer 30). Her experiences as an African American in the mid-20th century profoundly influenced her writing. Morrison's works have been widely acclaimed for their vivid, powerful portrayal of the African American experience. Her unique approach to storytelling has earned her numerous awards, including the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1993. Toni Morrison's literary career spans over five decades, during which she has established herself as one of the most important voices of contemporary American literature (Middleton ix). Her novels have been praised for their poetic language and complex characters (Furman 32). Throughout her novels, Morrison challenges the dominant narratives of racism in American society and promotes a vision of a more just and equitable world.

Morrison's work has helped in creating a more diverse and inclusive literary landscape. It creates a metaphorical "clearing" or a space that allows marginalized voices to be heard. The protagonists' narratives in her novels help "clear the ground" for reimagining black womanhood (Gillespie 49). By giving voice to the African American experience, Morrison challenged the idea that there is a single, dominant narrative in literature which inspired a generation of African American writers and artists to tell their own stories and to struggle against forms of hegemony and exclusion (Harris 190). Morrison's work has also challenged the idea that African American literature is a separate and distinct category. She highlighted how African American literature is an integral part of the American literary tradition.

In her essay *Playing in the Dark*, Morrison argues that American literature has been shaped by the exclusion of African Americans and that the presence of Blackness in literature has often been limited to negative stereotypes and caricatures. For Morrison, the traditional literary canon is too narrow and exclusionary. In her essay *Black Matter(s)* (1992), she argues that "the contemplation of Blackness as a primary literary subject is almost nonexistent in the Western canon" (304). She criticizes how the canon excludes most minority authors and focuses primarily on dead white male authors. In *Unspeakable Things Unspoken* (1989), she calls for "a form that is more open, flexible, and democratic . . . Canon formation is always going to be hierarchical but need not be elitist or racist" (34).

As a postmodernist writer, Morrison challenges dominant narratives and linear structures of time. Her novels make use of magical realism with fragmented and nonlinear structures. They highlight the constructed nature of truth and narrative (Fultz 30). Morrison's works also share a suspicion of grand narratives and institutions of power with other postmodern literature. Her books critique racism, oppression, and the imposition of ideological or aesthetic standards by those in power. However, Morrison draws more on African American vernacular traditions than on Western postmodern theory or aesthetics (Wyatt 221). Her style is deeply rooted in Black cultural traditions like spirituals, blues, sermons, and folklore. In addition, Morrison's works are more directly political and deal with issues of race and social justice in a way most postmodern literature does not (Roynon 90).

Morrison's writings give voice to marginalized groups and call for change in a way that is quite different from the playfulness and detached irony of most postmodern fiction (Baillie 39). Similarly, Morrison's nonfiction also explores topics of race, gender, history, memory, language, and literature. It seeks to dismantle structures of power that marginalize people based on race, gender, and class. It also discusses the role of the writer and the power of literature to transform and humanize. Morrison argues that fiction allows us to confront moral issues in ways that factual narratives cannot (Denard 63).

In short, Morrison's work has had a profound influence on the representation of African Americans in literature. Her novels challenged traditional representations of African Americans and created space for new voices to emerge in a more diverse and inclusive literary landscape. Her critique of the literary canon shows how it has traditionally marginalized the works of minority authors which has inspired a generation of scholars and writers from all communities to challenge how race and racism are represented in literature and popular culture. While Morrison's works share some broad similarities in style and ideology with postmodernism, her writings remain uniquely grounded in African American traditions, experiences, and quests for justice. Her postmodernist style is rooted in redefining concepts of identity, community, and the search for meaning more than an obsession with fragmentation or absence of meaning.

Antiracism in Morrison's Works

Morrison's works are deeply antiracist. By focusing her stories on Black characters and communities, Morrison gives voice to Black experiences that have often been marginalized or silenced. Her novels explore the realities, and struggles of Black lives, and celebrate Blackness, history, and culture. This helps counter racist narratives that have erased or diminished Black experiences. For example, her novel, *Beloved* (1987), tells the story of Sethe, an African American woman who escapes from slavery and settles in Ohio, where she is haunted by the ghost of her daughter, whom she killed to keep her from being captured by slave catchers. This novel explores the psychological impact of slavery on Sethe and her family, as well as the broader social and historical context of slavery in the United States (McDonald 93). It also promotes antiracism by highlighting the humanity and dignity of African American characters. Despite the dehumanizing effects of slavery, Sethe and her family are portrayed as complex, multifaceted individuals with rich inner lives. Morrison's portrayal of African American characters as fully realized human beings challenges the stereotype of African Americans as inferior or one-dimensional (Conner 50).

Morrison's works actively challenge racist stereotypes and ideologies. Her stories feature complex, multidimensional Black characters that defy simplistic stereotypes. Her works also expose and critique racist beliefs and systems of oppression. For example, *The Bluest Eye* (1970) examines internalized racism and the impact of white beauty standards. It tells the story of Pecola Breedlove, a young African American girl who longs for blue eyes and believes that having them will make her beautiful and accepted by society. As Morrison writes, "She was never able, after her education in the movies, to look at a face and not assign it some category in the scale of absolute beauty, and the scale was one she absorbed in full from the silver screen" (39). In this way, the novel explores the devastating effects of racism and colorism on Pecola's self-esteem and mental health. Morrison challenges the dominant narrative of beauty standards in American society, which value white features and perpetuate the myth that white is superior (Simpson 96).

Through Pecola's character, Morrison shows how these beauty standards are deeply rooted in racism and contribute to the marginalization and devaluation of African Americans. Morrison's portrayal of Pecola as a sympathetic and complex character challenges the stereotype of African Americans as unattractive or undesirable. Moreover, Morrison promotes antiracism in this novel by exposing how African Americans internalize racism themselves. Through the character of Claudia, a young African American girl who resists the dominant beauty standards, Morrison shows how African Americans can resist the oppressive narratives of racism and colorism (Lister 133). Claudia's character challenges the stereotype of African American girls as passive or complicit in their oppression.

Morrison's works frequently center on Black female experiences and voices. Her stories subvert patriarchal authority and sexist views of women as subordinate or secondary. This challenges the intersection of racism and sexism that particularly disempowers Black women. For example, *Song of Solomon* (1977) celebrates female rebellion and freedom while featuring a quest for identity and freedom led by Black women. *Song of Solomon* tells the story of a young African American man who embarks on a journey of self-discovery and identity formation (Furman 274). The novel explores the themes of family, community, and cultural heritage, as well as the broader historical context of the African American experience. It promotes antiracism by challenging the dominant narrative of the American Dream, which suggests that anyone can achieve success and prosperity through hard work and determination (Sundman 79).

Through the character of Milkman, Morrison shows how structural racism and systemic oppression can prevent African Americans from achieving their full potential. Milkman's journey of self-discovery involves confronting the legacy of slavery and racism in his family's history, as well as his complicity in perpetuating oppressive systems. Morrison also promotes antiracism by celebrating the richness and diversity of African American culture and heritage. Through the character of Pilate, Milkman's aunt, Morrison displays the resilience and creativity of African Americans in the face of adversity. Pilate's character challenges the stereotype of African Americans as passive or victimized and instead portrays them as agents of their destiny (Nolen 66).

In conclusion, Morrison's works promote antiracism by challenging the dominant narratives of racism in American society and promoting a vision of a more just and equitable world. Through her portrayal of complex, multifaceted African American characters, Morrison challenges the stereotypes and prejudices

that have been used to justify oppression and marginalization. By exposing how African Americans internalize racism themselves, Morrison shows that antiracism is not just about challenging external systems of oppression, but also about confronting the internalized beliefs and attitudes that perpetuate those systems. Morrison's works offer a powerful critique of the racist structures and narratives that have shaped American society and provide a roadmap for how we can work towards a more inclusive and equitable future.

From Local to Global Antiracism

Toni Morrison's work has had a major influence on antiracism movements, both in the United States and around the world. Her novels and essays have challenged readers to confront the systemic racism that pervades society and to work towards a more just and equitable world. Although some critics argue that Morrison focuses on the experiences of Black Americans and does not give enough attention to other groups or forms of oppression, this amplifies not only Black voices but also other marginalized groups (Beaulieu 19). In her essay *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, Morrison highlights how white Americans have historically excluded and misrepresented Black Americans in literature. For Morrison, "These 'black' representations not only have a history but a rationale, neither of which is fixed or immutable. They are worked up, for whatever reason, in response to a need, a condition, an audience, and a historical moment" (13).

In her Nobel Prize acceptance speech, Morrison spoke about the need for empathy and understanding in a world that is too often divided by race and other forms of difference: "We die. That may be the meaning of life. But we do language. That may be the measure of our lives" (1993). Morrison emphasized the importance of storytelling as a means of breaking down barriers and fostering deeper connections between people of diverse backgrounds. By examining the cultural biases that have shaped our understanding of race, Morrison encourages readers to question their assumptions and to work towards a more inclusive society. Morrison's work has also influenced antiracism movements by highlighting the importance of acknowledging the legacy of slavery and its ongoing impact on American society.

As in her novel, *Beloved*, Morrison examines the psychological impacts of slavery on both individuals and communities (Beaulieu 29). Morrison suggests that we must confront and understand the legacy of slavery to move forward from it. As she writes, "It was not a story to pass on. So, they forgot her. Like an enemy. Like a memory of shame. And so, in the place where she had been, there was nothing but the blame" (8). This functions as a broader message about acknowledging and redressing racist histories. Morrison's work has also had a profound impact on the way that African Americans are represented in literature and popular culture. Although Morrison's works explore trauma, oppression, and loss; they also champion empowerment, community, and resistance. Her Black female characters in particular find power through the relationships and communities they build with each other (Mayberry 19). Morrison's works suggest that we must come together across divides to challenge racist systems of power and create spaces of refuge. This spirit of community empowerment serves as a source of hope. By giving voice to the African American experience, Morrison challenged the idea that African Americans are a monolithic group with no history or culture of their own. Her novels, such as *Song of Solomon*, have been credited with paving the way for a new generation of African American writers and artists to tell their own stories and to challenge the dominant narrative that has excluded African Americans from the American story (Bloom 60).

In addition, Morrison's work has inspired and informed the work of antiracism activists and organizations. Her commitment to social justice and her criticism of systemic racism have been echoed by several organizations and movements, such as Black Lives Matter and the antiracism movement more broadly. Her work has also been cited as an inspiration for initiatives such as diversity and inclusion training, which seek to address implicit bias and promote equality and justice in the workplace. Morrison's influence extends to other marginalized groups as well. Challenging dominant narratives and stereotypes have created space for new voices and perspectives to emerge (David 90).

One way in which Morrison's work has influenced the representation of other marginalized groups is by highlighting the intersections of race, gender, and class. Morrison often explores the experiences of African American women and challenges the idea that their experiences can be understood solely through the lens of race (Goulmari 49). By doing so, Morrison created space for a more complex and nuanced understanding of the experiences of African American women and paved the way for other writers to

explore the intersections of identity and experience. This is obvious in her novel, *Paradise*, in which Morrison explores the experiences of women who have been excluded from mainstream society, including Native American and Chinese American women. By giving voice to these women and their experiences, Morrison challenged the dominant narrative that excluded them from the American story, which influenced the representation of other marginalized groups (Fultz 50).

Morrison created her own unique literary aesthetic through her novels within the context of African American and African diasporic literature and tradition and of minority groups in general. Her works engage with and revise traditional Western literary tropes and genres subverting and redefining concepts of time, history, and memory. She confronts issues of race, gender, and identity in innovative ways through her use of language, narrative structure, and characterization. She experiments with metaphor, rhythm, and orality, drawing on Black vernacular and folk traditions. Therefore, her aesthetic prioritizes the communal over the individual. Her characters are deeply connected and shaped by their relationships and membership in a Black community (Baillie 63).

Conclusion

Morrison's body of work promotes antiracism and social justice by amplifying Black experiences, critiquing racist ideologies, centering Black women's voices, probing the legacy of slavery, and celebrating community empowerment. Her works offer a powerful literary intervention against racism through her exploration of themes of race, identity, and oppression. Morrison exposes how racism has affected the lives of African Americans and challenges readers to confront their own biases and prejudices. Her works promote antiracism by highlighting the importance of acknowledging the legacy of slavery, confronting internalized racism, and recognizing the richness and complexity of African American history and culture. By shining a light on how racism operates at both the individual and societal level, Morrison encourages readers to work towards a more just and equitable world.

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