## Race, History and Sexuality: Negotiating the Third Space in Toni Morrison's Trilogy

## Introduction

Toni Morrison, a champion of black racism, notwithstanding her assertion that she had never experienced racial divisions until she was in her teens, "When I was in first grade, nobody thought I was inferior. I was the only black in the class and the only child who could read": her works bear witness to the impact of racial discrimination in moulding her authorship. Besides having an intensive cultural family tradition, Morrison had a healthy academic environment in her professional assignments that ushered in her personality a strong urge for literary creations; besides, she gathered numerous experiences and informations of racial existence in her social surroundings and she translated all these experiences into the formation and development of her literary faculty. She joined Random House, a well-known publishing house where she edited works by Toni Cade Bambara and Gayl Jones, renowned fiction writers, as well as luminaries like Angela Davis and Muhammad Ali. In fact the indulgence in various academic professions became instrumental in shaping the literary practices of Toni Morrison. As a creative writer, Morrison began to write the draft of her debut novel *The Bluest Eye* with the initial plan of writing a short story on the question of racial discrimination and ended up it as a very interesting novel on a very crucial issue, making it a racial discourse.

Once she started with her creative vigour in writing fiction, Morrison had never to go for a look back; and one after the other novel of rich literary quality began to come out of her pen. Now she is a representative author of the literary genre called African-American Literature. She is at a time a prolific author, editor and a professor who won the prestigious Nobel Prize for literature in 1993 for being an author "who in novels characterized by visionary force and poetic import, gives life to an essential aspect of American reality." This note of the Swedish academy with reference to her Nobel Prize for literature, reminds us about her worth not only as a representative writer of her race but also a worthy figure of greater American literature of whom the whole of the nation irrespective of colour and creed can take pride.

Being a leading author of African American literature, Morrison has contributed creatively to all branches of the genre. She is considered a feminist author because of her acute revolutionary voice for the freedom and uplift of the black women that she deliberately reveals throughout her novels. Because of her inherent interest in African American cultural representation exposed through her racial consciousness, Toni Morrison has been regarded as a major voice in African-American literature, especially in American Black Feminism. Her novels are the living documents of the identity of the African American community where she has explored many untold stories of the African exploitation in America. The trilogy of her novels—Beloved (1987), Jazz (1992) and Paradise (1998)—as the author herself used the term, deals with the identity of the African Americans. The novels describe a hundred years of the black experience in the United States, corresponding to the rural South, the urban North and the small town Mid-West. Although there is very little inter-textual relationship in the thematic concern of these three novels, they can be read as a series, where she has depicted or rather has rewritten the history of the African slave tradition in America. The striking links among the three novels concern the relationship between the temporal and spatial locus of each of these novels. The first novel of the trilogy, Beloved is set during the 1870s in the rural area outside of Cincinnati, Ohio; and the plot of the novel concerns the memory of plantations in Kentucky, with the demonstration of master/slave relationship during slavery. The emphasis on the rural life situations is exchanged for the urban beat of the city in the 1920s in Jazz, which can be said to be the re-memory of the era of the 1870s and the author recreates the history of African culture while depicting the lives of the American Blacks after coming into freedom; and the impact of the desired freedom upon the black population is realistically depicted in this novel. *Paradise*, on the other hand, moves the focus towards a small town setting in Ruby, where the memories concern the 'founding fathers' of Haven in the 1870s, its failure as an all-Black town, and its reconstruction in the 1950s as 'New Haven' or 'Ruby'; the novel in the form of rememory brings back the historical events of racial discrimination called Disallowing. Although all of the novels of Toni Morrison deal with the theme of identity of the coloured people in America, these three novels in particular make a coherent whole of the racial representation of an African-American reality; and they can be studied from the perspective of a cultural hybridity.

As a creative writer, Morrison is noted for her examination of black experience, more specifically the black female experience, within the black community living in America; and her works delve into different parts of American history in terms of black cultural

development from barbarism to modernity. As has been stated earlier in this chapter, she grew up in the American Midwest in a family that possessed an intense love of and appreciation for black culture. Storytelling, songs, and folktales were deeply intruded into the most formative part of her childhood; and these folk resources that she gathered during her childhood from her domestic environment worked as great treasure for her literary practices. The fresh memory of the folk tales that she heard in her younghood and the myths about her ancestry works out to be important tools and resources for her novels and other writings. That is why story-telling and use of myth and memory make prominent narrative strategy for the most part of her fictional work.

Toni Morrison, being one of the most prominent figures of African American literature, has not only contributed eleven scholarly and popular novels to the bulk of this branch of American literature but also given a worldwide recognition to the genre of African-American literature as an established literary genre belonging to an enlightened race after centuries of oppression. Her novels are known for their epic themes, vivid dialogue, and richly detailed African-American characters. Toni Morrison, a prolific writer that she was, published eleven novels with acute realistic picture of the African American socio-cultural life—*The Bluest Eye* (1970), *Sula* (1973), *Song of Solomon* (1977), *Tar Baby* (1981), *Beloved* (1987), *Jazz* (1992), *Paradise* (1997), *Love* (2003), *A Mercy* (2008), *Home* (2012) and the latest one *God Help the Child* (2015). Her novels and in fact the whole body of literature that Morrison has produced make powerful discourses on racism and black feminism.

Right from the beginning to her last novel, and in fact all through her literary creations and speeches, Morrison has revealed the unexplored territories of racism in America that makes her a true champion of black racism and black feminism. We get the answers to various questions about the identity crisis of the black Americans in the pages of her novels. Morrison's debut novel, *The Bluest Eye*, is the story of an adolescent black girl whose obsessive longing for blue eyes as white standards of beauty brings about her doom; and the novel reveals the black approach to racial discrimination in America. In the story of the novel, Pecola Breedlove, an African American girl believes that her difficulties of life would be settled, if only she could have blue eyes. Through this character and the happenings around her, Morrison has made vivid presentation of racial and sexual abuse in the black community. The 'bluest eye' in this novel is used as the central metaphor to denote the racial inferiority of the African Americans that they developed in their mindset. Her next novel, *Sula* narrates a story of motherhood, friendship, and love presented through two girls,

Nel and Sula, from childhood to adulthood with the intent of having freedom in terms of sexuality; and describes the way their deep bond is tested by societal norms. Set in a mostly black town in Ohio, the story explores the relationship between women in the segregated and patriarchal South. Nevertheless, the novel champions the cause of black women suffering in both domestic and in social environment through depiction of many strong female characters featured as leaders, mothers, and property owners. *Song of Solomon*, dealing with the African-American myth of flight is a beautiful novel of black memory. In this novel Morrison makes a beautiful fusion of various elements of the African American cultural root that she collected from the African folklore, myth and other cultural heritage. Here Morrison makes a beautiful fusion of memory with her imaginative faculty for presentation of the identity crisis of the race depicted through the central character Milkman Dead. Morrison also uses the myth of flight as a device to connect to the ancestral roots of the black people living in America, which is reminded to them by the humiliations and the deprivations they are suffering because of their cultural dislocations.

The next three novels of Morrison can be read as a series of fiction dealing with some of the vital issues of Black identity. Toni Morrison has displayed the spirit of resistance in the African-American people under slavery, which she has focused in *Beloved*, the first novel of her trilogy that she continues through Jazz with the realistic observation and commentary upon freed black life during and after the migration; and completes with *Paradise* narrating the experiences of black segregation thereby making the three novels a chronology of racial exploitation of the Blacks in America from the state of slavery to freedom. Using the fresh memory of a hateful Black experience of slavery in Beloved, Morrison reveals an aversion to the White dominance over the Black community and her despise against the racial exploitation is intricately woven in the novel. Although Morrison does not specify the time when the novel was set, except Sethe's infanticide in 1855, the novel can be traced back to 1850, when the Fugitive Slave Act was enforced<sup>3</sup>, which led to numerous insurrections, as Aoi Mori points out that "46 slaves were executed on a charge of murdering slave masters and overseers in the 1950s" (Mori, 2001). Morrison, who is mostly haunted by her racial background finds it problematic to forget the past, decides to raise the issues about slavery in Beloved. The novel is based on a newspaper article about a fugitive slave, Margaret Garner, which Morrison found in the American Baptist when she was working as an editor at Random House. Margaret Garner killed her own child when she was to be captured by slave catchers. Being a victim of enforced slavery, the ex-slave mother was so terrified by the experience of slave catching that she considered infanticide to be better than slavery; and gave salvation to her beloved daughter rather than handing over her to the slave catchers. Inspired by this particular incident, Morrison decides to write a novel to recover the voice and the subjectivity of the slave woman, which was totally ignored in the newspaper article.

Morrison's intent to raise the issue of the black experience is found in her dedicatory words tagged at the beginning of her novel Beloved, which is dedicated to "Sixty Million or more" people and it immediately follows her allusion to Paul's letter to the Romans, "I will call them my people/which were not my people; and her beloved/which were not beloved". It shows Morrison's commitment to the sixty million or more victims of slavery and the colonial process of slave hunting, by presenting a realistic picture of their suffering through her novels; and it forms the background to all her fictional creations. Hence, Morrison creates Beloved to remember those who have been forgotten in American history, thereby dedicating the story to the innumerable nameless slaves, including Margaret Garner. Thus in Beloved, Morrison expresses the history of the Blacks with the reminiscence of her past. As the dedication to the anonymous slaves implies, Morrison's Beloved serves as a counter textual document to the officially recorded and manipulated history of the whites, such as the newspaper article about Margaret Garner, which neglects the identity of the black woman. Morrison places Sethe, who represents Margaret Garner, in the centre of the novel, in order to delineate through her a realistic picture of the oppressed society. Sethe and her family have been ostracized by the community for 18 years because of her hateful act of infanticide that she committed with a view to protecting her child from being caught by the slave hunters. Beloved rewrites the history of the troubled life and the redemption of a black woman and a courageous community of women who fight against the evils of slavery, which has not been mentioned in mainstream history. It is a record of the feelings of hybridity and an aloofness that the African American community suffers, despite their efforts to mix up with the mainstream Americans, who always try to keep them at a safe distance by creating an imaginary line of racial prejudice.

Jazz (1992) is a story of violence and passion set in Harlem, the black socio-cultural movement of the 1920s. This novel that makes a part of Morrison's trilogy shows the author's attempt to incorporate the black lives into the mainstream of American history. The story of the novel begins with the description of the funeral of a teenager named Dorcas who falls prey to love-hatred and malice in a triangular love affair. Morrison remarks that she received the inspiration for writing this novel when she saw a collection of funeral pictures of

the 1920s taken by a famous African American photographer James Van der Zee. The setting of *Jazz* coincides with the Harlem Renaissance, the black cultural movement in the 1920s, an important period of Black cultural history. Morrison, however, does not refer to the prominent cultural movement in *Jazz*, as Aoi Mori points out, "perhaps because she finds it problematic that most of those intellectuals were affiliated with white patronage and did not reach out to ordinary black people" (Mori, 2001).

This novel develops around the stories concerning Joe and Violet, a married black couple who migrated from the country of Virginia to the City; and how the peaceful conjugal life of the couple is affected by Joe's transgression in terms of his illicit teen-aged girl-friend Dorcas, and the consequent wrath of Violet over her husband's adultery. Through their recollections and the mysterious third person omnipotent narrator's comments, their complex past along with the continuation of a legacy of suffering since the ancestors is gradually revealed. In the process of narrating their accounts, the characters string together the forgotten fragments of their past, which relate to some events of black socio-cultural history. Together with the story of Joe and Violet, the novel focuses on the character of Dorcas, an orphan whose father was brutally killed in the riot which occurred in East St. Louis, Illinois, in 1917, while her mother was killed in the fire following the riot. It records the counter attack of the White against the black racial feelings and black cultural development. Although Morrison does not provide the readers with any specific information about the riot, the reference to it which broke out at a government-owned munitions factory in East St. Louis, Illinois can be clearly traced out from different events narrated in the novel. It reminds us the riot involving the white factory workers who were fired after a strike and the resulting attack upon the black workers. In Jazz Alice Manfred, Dorcas's aunt, witnesses a voiceless parade accompanied only by the sounds of drums; and the power of music is set as a vital force to raise the spirit of revolution. It is this historic parade of protest and resistance against social and political injustice and racism that Morrison subtly employs in the background of her novel.

The third novel of the trilogy, *Paradise* (1998), which focuses on a fictitious African-American town called Ruby, is set in Oklahoma in the 1970s. The background of the novel, however, goes back to 1889, the historical events of Reconstruction, <sup>4</sup> as Morrison presents the community of Ruby, a fictitious all-black town and its 60-year old history. The novel starts with a violent assault upon a Convent—initially established as a school for native

Indian girls and later on used by some distressed women—conducted by nine men who live in Ruby, inhabited by the black community. Those chauvinistic men blamed the failure of their lives to the women, who live in the convent free from any male influence, and made an attempt to kill them as scapegoat, in a disgraceful way. Then the novel traces back the past of the ancestors of the attackers who founded Ruby as a reconstruction of the former black town called Haven established for the desegregated people. Before they moved to Ruby, the ancestors of these people, who experienced discrimination from white people as well as affluent light-skinned black people in the form of a social malice called Disallowing, which encouraged the establishment of an all-black town, Haven, to keep them away from the racial discrimination they had been long suffering for a long time in the nation's racial history. Its founding fathers' pain and effort have been passed down as a heroic legend through memories to the future generations.

Throughout her novels, Morrison has displayed the work of a thorough research in the history of the black communities in the US, so as to explain how they functioned and whether they were successful. If Haven was a big failure, in ensuring black freedom, so also was Ruby. It was founded in 1949 by the grandsons of the founders of Haven, a former black town in Oklahoma established by a group of former slaves; as Peter Widdowson points out, "the suspicion of outsiders revealed by the inhabitants of Ruby is a legacy from the founding fathers of that first town. The identity of the inhabitants of Ruby is historically constructed, based on the story of the founding of Haven, then Disallowing and the eventual foundation of Ruby."<sup>5</sup> The grandfathers, who in their quest for a place to live in the West were rejected by the inhabitants of Fairly, "being perceived as too black and too poor to settle there, felt greatly wounded by the shame and hatred they had experienced; and carried over the wound through storytelling to their descendants to become even more exclusive and intolerant than their persecutors" (Romero, 2005). Hence, the citizens of Ruby develop a dislike for any person with less than 'blue black' skin colour, and it contributes to the ongoing practices of forming racial hegemony even among the racialized people. Thus in each novel of the trilogy, Morrison raises the issues concerning the Black identity, which she has presented as a rather hybrid community living in a white ruled society; and the condition of the African American cultural hybridity is negotiated all through these novels.

Thus the novels of Toni Morrison can be read as important discourses articulating the cultural position of the American Blacks in different parts of the nation's history mostly ignored in the mainstream history and the White discourses. The three novels designated as

Morrison's 'Beloved trilogy' give us a fragmented history of the race from slavery through the time of Reconstruction to the post World War II free Black society. The present research work aims at making a cultural study of the trilogy of Morrison attempting to locate the dislocated cultural identity of the African Americans on the basis of Homi K. Bhabha's Third Space theory.

## The Third Space: Perspectives in Race, History and Sexuality

It will be worthwhile to mention that the primary objective of this study is to make an analytical and interpretative study of the fiction of Toni Morrison, especially in the trilogy of her novels—*Beloved*, *Jazz* and *Paradise*—under the light of the postcolonial theory of Third Space propounded by Homi K. Bhabha; and the study intends to be carried out in the perspectives of race, history and sexuality. In these three novels Morrison has projected a history of racism in America, a recreation of the history of black racial exploitation, with deliberate intent of focusing on the issues of sexual discrimination and racial hegemony in the African American socio-cultural tradition.

Race as a crucial term of identity is so strong in the socio-political life of America that even today it emerges as the prime issue in every sphere of the American national life; for instance, in the US general election 2020, the aspirant leaders were found to be using racial slogans to win the hearts of the black voters during their election campaigns. We can refer to the speech of Mr. Joseph R. Biden Jr., who in his election campaign announced, "I promise you, win or lose, I'm going to go down fighting for racial equality, equity across the board." It shows the growing importance of the Blacks in the contemporary politics of America; the race that had been deprived of all political and civic rights has now become a decisive factor in the national politics of the United States.

In terms of sexuality, the discussion takes into account the theoretical concerns of some of the western critics like Michel Foucault, Gayle Rubin and some of the feminist critics like Simone de Beauvoir and Gayatry Spivak. In his famous book *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault makes a very important assumption on the politics of sexuality that the notion of sexuality is constituted in society and history, not biologically ordained. Gayle Rubin on the other hand, in her critical discussions on 'Sexual Thoughts' points out that a radical theory of sex must identify, describe, explain, and denounce erotic injustice and sexual oppression. In her opinion of the history of sexuality, Rubin formulates the idea of

'sexual essentialism', according to which, "sex is a natural force that exists prior to social life and shapes institutions." Moreover, she also talks about some other formations of sexual ideology, such as 'sex negativity', 'sexual hierarchy' and 'sexual variety'. In the hierarchy of sexual value—religious, psychiatric and popular—Rubin draws a sexual value system. According to this value system, "sexuality that is designated as "good", "normal", and "natural" should be heterosexual, marital, monogamous, reproductive, and non-commercial; and it should be coupled, rational, within the same generation and occur at home." These sexual ideologies, even if we call it societal, formative and restrictive, they do not allow the breach of these codes of sexual civility. Therefore, any sexual practice that violates these rules is "bad", "abnormal" and "unnatural"; hence it is socially unacceptable. The issues in sexuality take special importance in the cultural identity of the African Americans, a society that Morrison calls a "racialised and genderised society." In her novels Morrison shows the sexual behaviour of the Blacks, which may appear savage, uncivil and unsocial to the white standard, they appear natural in the Black society. We see such instances of the changes in the sexual behaviour of the Blacks as depicted by Morrison in her novels.

Bhabha's theory of Third Space bears great significance in the critical discussions about the novels of Toni Morrison as part of a cultural study; because Bhabha describes the identity of the postcolonial society as a hybrid. We see the cultural hybridity of the African American cultural identity in different parts of the nation's racial history. On the matter of the subjects of 'margins and minorities' in the cultural discourses, Bhabha asserts that the difficulty of the people as the insurmountable agonism of the living, the incommensurable experiences of struggle and survival in the construction of a national culture, is seen most appropriately in Fanon's path breaking work 'On National Culture'. According to Bhabha, "Fanon writes against that form of nationalist historicism that assumes that there is a moment when the differential temporalities of cultural histories coalesce in an immediately readable present" (*The Location of Culture*). The trilogy of Morrison narrates the tales of racial differentiation in the nation's cultural behaviour, and deals with those temporalities in the cultural history of America where the Blacks are treated as the "Others" in the context of their nationality.

While the world of theory and criticism is dominated by the Eurocentric thoughts and ideas, Bhabha's theory brings forth a new dimension to the theoretical practice that can at the same time, be regarded as a challenge to the European hegemony in critical theory. In Propounding the theory of Third Space, Bhabha deviates himself from the established schools

of Eurocentric criticism; and his ideas of theory may be treated in his own words, "as the most severe exception to 'Eurocentric theoreticism, such as Derridianism, Lacanianism, Poststructuralism etc." The literary theories mostly come from the West, and therefore, a common tendency is found in all the theories either to underestimate or look down upon the rest of the world as inferior on the matter of any social and cultural study; and they use the derogatory term "Other" to refer to them, which create a separating line between the west and the Nonwest. Bhabha questions the rightfulness of the Western outlook to treat the rest of the world as the "Other". In fact, Bhabha denies the hegemonic feelings of the western theoreticians in their attitude towards the interpretation and cultural representations of the 'Other' world; and in this way he denies the Eurocentric hegemony in the theoretical sphere, that they have been enjoying from the social hegemony in the geo-political sphere. Supporting the idea of Stuart Hall, who in connection with the British election of 1987, talks about the role of 'imagining' or representation in the practice of politics, Bhabha says that "the notion of hegemony implies a politics of identification of the imaginary" (Bhabha,1994, p,32). According to Bhabha, such an imaginary identification occupies a discursive space which is not exclusively delimited by the history of political binary oppositions of either the right or the left. It exists somewhere between those political polarities, and also between the familiar divisions of theory and political practice. Bhabha tries to explore an intermediate space for identification of culture for certain cases and this is where lies the notion of 'Space' that Bhabha formulates for his theory of the 'Third Space'. This Third Space, according to Bhabha has a 'colonial or postcolonial provenance' because in terms of hybridity in a multicultural society, the legacy of the colonial present that has been profoundly shaped by encounters between colonial discourses and cultures deemed 'Other' (Routledge Dictionary of Literary Terms p. 112). Bhabha locates a new place of cultural representation as he says,

"The borderline work of culture demands an encounter with 'newness' that is not part of the continuum of past and present. It creates a sense of the new as an insurgent act of cultural translation. Such art does not merely recall the past as social cause or aesthetic precedent; it renews the past, refiguring it as a contingent 'in-between' space, that innovates and interrupts the performance of the present. The 'past-present' becomes part of the necessary, not the nostalgia, of living." (Bhabha 1994:10)

And there is a most commonly found attitude of looking at a kind of Derridian deconstructive binarism in the location of any cultural identity reflected in the literary

representations everywhere. Can there be no other ways of looking into matters of identity excepting the formation of a binary pair of opposition, as is most commonly found in the critical discussions? If we talk about the issues of racism for an instance, we have at the most common and the ready way of following a stereotyped method of analyzing and measuring the identities using the deconstructive binary theories like black/white, master/slave etc.; but in certain cases like the light skinned Blacks, the Miscegenation and Mulattoes of the African American community, this type of stereotyping identity markers do not give answers to all questions, and there is at least a chance of having misinterpretation of a cultural text if we always follow such stereotyping methods of textual analysis. There has been a growing tendency that we look for the European theories for any kind of critical discussions and interpretations of a literary text. Such a tendency leads only to the assertion of European supremacy over the rest part of the world on the matter of theoretical and critical ideas for interpretation of literary text(s). Under such a restrictive environment of Eurocentric theoretical norms, Bhabha's theoretical ideas, however criticisms he may have confronted, become instrumental in bringing out new approaches to the interpretation of cultural representation in a literary text. Because we can say that the identity of a differentiated or dislocated race cannot be described in terms of a mere binary division like black/white, right/left etc.; because the members of such a society form in themselves some hybrid characters which cannot be located by applying any such cultural dichotomy. The Third Space, according to Bhabha "Is 'inter'—the cutting edge of translation and negotiation, the in-between space—that carries the burden of the meaning of culture. It makes it possible to begin envisaging national, anti-nationalist histories of the 'people'. And by exploring this Third Space, we may elude the politics of polarity and emerge as the others of ourselves" (Bhabha, 1994, p.56) Thus Bhabha's idea of the Third Space of cultural location can be used as the right path for a cultural study of the African American culture as reflected in the novels of Toni Morrison in terms of 'Race', 'History' and 'Sexuality' as three parameters for the location of the Black cultural identity in a 'raced' American social and political environment.

## **Notes:**

- 1. Sean Patrick, A conversation with Toni Morison, *The New York Times*, Nov. 28, 2008.
- 2. Besides being the Nobel laureate of 1993, Toni Morrison also won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction for her novel *Beloved* published in 1987 which was also adapted for a Hollywood movie.
- 3. The Fugitive Slave Act (1950) guaranteed federal enforcement of the constitutional provision for reclaiming runaway slaves or servants. It enabled the slave owners to get help from the US marshals and deputies to reclaim human property and it levied a fine of \$1000 if they refused. Cf. Raymond Gavins: *The Cambridge Guide To African American History*, p.112; will be abbreviated hereafter as *Cambridge Guide* for parenthetical and other references.
- 4. Reconstruction in the history of African American racial struggle is the period between 1865 and 1877. The blacks in order to enjoy the blessings of liberty, began to reclaim sold-away family members, formed protective associations, sent their children to Freedmen's Bureau Schools and began to work independently. See Raymond Gavins: *Cambridge Guide*, p.232
- 5. Disallowing was the historical event of being rejected by light-skin inhabitants of another black town Oklahoma.
- 6. Nicholas Bogel et al, "In Kenosha, Biden Vows to Fight Racial Injustice", New York Times, Vol. CLXIX... No.58806, Friday, September 4, 2020. Mr. Biden as the Presidential Candidate for the Democratic Party for the US general election has been elected to the White House.
- 7. Gayle Rubin, "Sexual Thoughts", from *Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical theory of the Politics of Sexuality*; Vincent B. Leitch et al. (eds) *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, second edition. Pp.2377-93. Will be abbreviated hereafter as *Norton Anthology*.

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