Journal of the College of Education for Humanities
University of Thi-Qar \ ISSN:2707-5672

مجلة كلية التربيـة للعلـوم الانسـانيـة
جامعة ذي قار / الرقم المعياري 2707-5672

https://doi.org/10.32792/utq/jedh/v15i1

توني موريسون وديناميات العلاقات العرقية

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الملخص

تتناول مقالتنا مفهوم "العرق" باعتباره مرتبطًا بشكل متكرر بالصفات الوراثية التي تتجلى في التمييزيات الجسدية المرئية وتستكشف آثاره داخل التقاليد الأدبية الأمريكية الأفريقية. نعلق على التركيز التاريخي والاجتماعي الذي يميز هذا القانون الأدبي، وخاصة في أعمال توني موريسون، التي تهدف رواياتها إلى تأكيد وحماية الكرامة الإنسانية. مستوحى من التاريخ، يسعى مشروع موريسون السردي إلى إعادة كتابة الماضي، ليس لإثارة الاستياء، ولكن لتعزيز الوحدة بين الأجناس والمجموعات العرقية. يركز تحليلنا على روايات مثل أغنية سليمان، والحبيبة، والجنة، والرحمة، والتي تصور نزع الصفة الإنسانية عن الأفراد السود من قبل البيض، بدافع من السعي لتحقيق الربح مما أدى إلى صراع طبقي. نسلط الضوء على كيفية تسليط موريسون الضوء على السرديات السوداء الصامتة داخل التاريخ الذي يهيمن عليه البيض. يتميز عملها بنسيج سردي فريد وكثافة غنائية وتمثيل مقصود للتجربة الأمريكية الأفريقية كعدسة لاستكشاف الموضوعات الإنسانية العالمية. نحن نؤكد أن اختيارات موريسون الشكلية والموضوعية متجذرة في تقاليد أميركية أفريقية تهدف إلى الحفاظ على التراث الثقافي مع تجاوز إرث القمع من خلال الأساطير والظواهر الخارقة للطبيعة. وفي النهاية، نثبت أن عملها هو تتويج للثراء العامي وبيان عميق عن الإنسانية.

الكلمات المفتاحية : الهوية، التهميش، العرق، العنصرية، العبودية، توني موريسون

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https://doi.org/10.32792/utq/jedh/v15i1

Tony Morrison and the Dynamics of Racial Relations

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Abstract:

Our article examines the concept of "race" as frequently linked to hereditary qualities manifested in visible physical distinctions and explore its implications within African American literary traditions. We comment upon the historical and social focus that characterizes this literary canon, particularly in the works of Toni Morrison, whose novels aim to reaffirm and protect human dignity. Inspired by history, Morrison's narrative project seeks to rewrite the past, not to stir resentment, but to foster unity among races and ethnic groups. Our analysis focuses on such novels as *Song of Solomon*, *Beloved*, *Paradise*, and *A Mercy*, which depict the dehumanization of Black individuals by whites, driven by the quest for profit and resulting in class struggle. We highlight how Morrison brings to light the silenced Black narratives within white-dominated histories. Her work is marked by a unique narrative texture, lyrical density, and an intentional representation of the African-American experience as a lens to explore universal human themes. We argue that Morrison's formal and thematic choices are rooted in an African-American tradition aimed at preserving cultural heritage while transcending the legacy of oppression through myth and the supernatural. Ultimately, we demonstrate that her work is a culmination of vernacular richness and a profound statement on humanity.

Keywords: identity, marginalization, race, racism, slavery, Toni Morrison

1. Introduction: Race and racism

In a world marked by inter-racial and inter-ethnic conflicts, the study of the different manifestations of these relations has become a major preoccupation in the last decades of the 20th century and the first decades of the 21st century. The declared aim of these studies is to make the public aware of the complexity and possible effects of these relations. There are some race theorists who see multiracialism as having a positive side and others see only its negative effects. Thus, there is the view that if society is considered racially unequal, being white does not have the same meaning as being black, Latino, Native American, Asian, etc. Although there is no objective method of categorizing people, categories are needed to eliminate inequality from a social point of view. Differences must be maintained in order to avoid globalization and to see and recognize others who would otherwise be ignored. It is the problematic of the process of seeing and being seen, as Homi Bhabha observes in his essay "The Other Question":

> "Colonial power produces the colonized as a fixed reality which is at once an "other" and yet entirely knowable and visible. It resembles a form of narrative in which the productivity and circulation of subjects and signs are bound in a reformed and recognizable totality. It employs a system of representation, a regime of truth, that is structurally similar to realism." (Bhabha, 1996, p. 76).

History has shown that recognizing inequality fuels racial conflict and, at the same time, hinders the integration of certain groups at all levels of society. This is the main reason why South Africans, for example, placed under the categories "colored" or "mixed race", would not necessarily accept this separation into races, as it is rather legislative and administrative. But the importance of race cannot be underestimated. Luke and Carrington argue that race matters in ways that go beyond traditional theorizations of identity: "color", "race", and cultural differences, center/periphery, or inside/outside categories. The formation of interracial relations and "lived experience" subjects individuals to more critical shifts and through complex and unpredictable places and moments of otherness of the "third space" (Carrington, 2000: 5).

2. Race and racial identity

Anthony Kwame Appiah believes that eliminating racial categories would probably not eliminate the problems of racism. On the contrary, the fact that people are aware of and openly acknowledge racial differences could lead to a rejection of racial stereotyping, and in order to counter racial stereotyping, "conscious remedial policies" should be pursued. Race is defined as

> "the ascription of racial identities – the process of applying the label to people, including ourselves […] based on more than intentional identification that there can be a gap between what a person ascriptively is and the racial identity they perform: it is this gap that makes passing possible." (Appiah, 1996, p, 68).

Different theorists argue that racism exists in different forms. One example is Laura Jaime who distinguishes between three kinds of racism: (1) *active racism* is "behavior that would

be deemed racist such as violence and overt discrimination"; (2) *anti-racism* is the opposite to active racism. Anti-racists are "the ones who are AWARE of their privilege and who do whatever they can to dismantle systematic racism"; (3) passive racism: "if you aren't a racist who is happy for the oppression of minorities but you also aren't doing anything to support them in escaping their oppression then you exhibit passive racism." (Jaime, *Living in White America*, 2016)

According to the view expressed by Sophie Body-Gendrot, there is an external and an internal racism: internal racism arises when the minority population is perceived as producing a third world within the national space and at the same time a pollution of the culture due to the introduced influences. Intrusion is considered to be avoided only through spatial segregation. External racism is inherited from the colonial situation and is not seen as an imminent threat:

> "The present configuration of immigration calls for different forms of racism: an 'interior' racism against minority populations perceived as producing a 'third-worldization' of the national space as well as a pollution of culture which only spatial segregation can avoid; and an 'exterior' racism inherited from the colonial situation". (Body-Gendrot, 1993, p. 82).

In the context of multicultural America, in the heat of which so many nations melt together to eventually constitute the American identity, the experience of African Americans is completely different from that of members of other ethnic groups – Irish, Greek, Italian, Jewish, Chinese. They have faced the refusal of the white majority to legally recognize their status as human beings. The denial of access to mainstream culture went so far that slave owners were forbidden to teach slaves to read and write, and the enslaved Africans reacted to the new conditions by preserving their own spirituality and cultural traditions which they grafted onto dominant Christian morals and practices.

The results were seen in early imitation of Christian religious ceremonies, when black slaves pretended to faithfully participate while continuing ancestral rites. Nowadays, as an extension and echo of the black nationalist movement of the 1960s, the seven days of the newly established Kwanzaa holiday (Dec. 26 – Jan. 1) represent a successful expression of African traditions grafted onto the traditions of dominant white American culture - in this particular case, an extension of the Christmas holiday.

Robert M. Sellers, in his essay "Multidimensional Model of Racial Identity: A Reconceptualization of African American Racial Identity" (1998), refers to the "Multidimensional Model of Racial Identity (MMRI)" and underscores African and African racial identity and the importance and meaning of belonging to the black racial group.. African Americans are aware of varying degrees of "traditional African culture" that "has had to be grafted onto the cultural practices of the European/American society to form an original cultural expression." (Sellers, 1998, p. 18). Some individuals are downplaying it, and "place little significance on race in defining who they are, while others may see their racial membership as the defining characteristic of their self-concept" (Idem). In the latter case, the terms "black" or "African American" may differ substantially, and a distinction is drawn between the two:

"black" refers to "individuals' phenomenological view of the composition of their reference group"; "African American" refers to individuals of African descent who "received a significant portion of their socialization in the United States", the term being "culturally linked to a group of people within the context of American society" (Sellers et al., 1998: 19).

The focus on historical and social issues is a characteristic of the African American literary tradition, which is reflected in the overarching themes and invites readers to examine the texts closely. Critics, Lois Tyson points out, have agreed on recurring themes in the African American novel, such as:

> "reclaiming the African past; surviving the horrors of the Middle Passage; surviving the ordeal of slavery; the quest for freedom from slavery and from other forms of oppression; the quest for literacy; the experience of African Americans during the Civil War and Reconstruction; surviving life in the South under segregation; the problems and conflicts of mulattoes in a racist society; the difficulties of economic survival; the migration North and the related themes of urbanization, alienation, and the quest to reconcile double consciousness; the role of religion in personal and collective survival; the importance of cultural heritage; and the importance of family and community." (Tyson, 2014: 385).

To understand the above issues, a critical race theory and the reader's own perspective must be considered. This was initiated by the work of Derrick A. Bell Jr. and others in the 1970s, when the Civil Rights Movement ceased to be a political or social force. In his guide to critical theory, Lois Tyson argues that it began as a critique of constitutional law and spread to many disciplines, including the humanities. He says it deals with all topics that are relevant to race and examines how everyday life is influenced by the racial issues that continue to exist - even covertly. Tyson further emphasizes that critical race theory is a "new approach to civil rights" and "has spread to almost every discipline, including the humanities" (idem, 368).

Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic in *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction* (2012), identify six "basic tenets" of critical race theory which Tyson considers to be are revealing and even necessary for understanding present and past reality in America: (1) "everyday racism"; (2) "the convergence of interests"; (3) "race as part of a socially constructed categorization"; (4) "differential racialization"; (5) "intersectionality; and (6) "the voice of color" (idem, 369).

The last two aspects (intersectionality and voice of color) can also be used to explain the relevance and importance of gender issues in the study of African American novels because, as literary critics have proven, racial oppression and gender oppression must be analyzed together to ultimately achieve the full picture of the African American experience. Thus, a gendered reading of the selected novels is an indispensable part of our understanding of twentieth-century America.

3. Protecting human dignity

The presence of black people in America has long been at the center of attention by white historians and writers as a way of sustaining the prejudice that they are, if not invisible, less valuable than the Chinese, Italian, or Irish, for example. This policy directed against the black community had an entirely unfavorable effect, leading black intellectuals to take a position in support of their own people's cause. What concerned a writer like Toni Morrison most was to defend the interests of human dignity, especially for African Americans who constitute a minority often prejudiced in the United States because of their background.

What Morrison aims in her novels is to reaffirm and protect the human dignity of African Americans. Inspired by historically-proven realities, her goals are very well-defined. More than other African American writers, she had no intention of stirring up racial strife and dissension among the ethnic groups with which African Americans coexisted in predominantly white America. Morrison set out from the outset to give the reading public a new understanding of history as her ancestors experienced it, ultimately leading to a coming together of all people regardless of their racial and ethnic affiliation.

Since her strength lies in writing, which she uses as a political means, Morrison wants to edit new historical pages with the participation of all. In this new vision, she begins by rewriting the history of America and including that of her community before moving towards the universal. Many social facts support her project of rewriting history. By creating, for example, *Paradise*, the city of Ruby, as a black city, she wants to revalue the history of African Americans to insert it into the national archives. Also, the name "Not Doctor Street," given to a street in *Song of Solomon*, commemorates and inserts the history of Blacks into that of America. Still, in the same state of mind, Morrison highlights slavery in *Beloved* and *A Mercy* to make visible the economic contribution that Blacks made to the development of American capitalism despite the many misadventures they encountered on the plantations.

In an interview, speaking about her novel *Beloved*, Toni Morrison said: "I thought this has got to be the least read of all the books I'd written because it is about something that *the characters don't want to remember, I don't want to remember, black people don't want to remember, white people don't want to remember*. I mean, it's national amnesia" (Morrison, *Time*, 1989, emphasis added). Considering this most unfavorable context – this collective, "national amnesia" – the writer did her best to reveal the importance of the presence of blacks and their significant contribution to the development of the American nation, from their capture in Africa, followed by the infamous Middle Passage and the enslavement on the plantations of their white owners. According to Morrison, no American history can exist without blacks.

She places a stress on the dehumanized condition of black families who were mercilessly broken at auctions, where the slaves were regarded like the animals brought for sale, and men were separated from their wives and children forever. This is the reason why, "since the turn of the century, social theorists have argued that slavery resulted in disorganization and instability in

black families" (Ruggles, 1994, p. 136). The overall results were painful. Separation was followed by cruel exploitation, which continued throughout the period of slavery.

As a result of forced separation, few children of slaves were fortunate enough to know or live with both parents. This is one of the reasons why Morrison uses female characters who will try to control the destinies of their own families, thus rewriting the past of the African-American community. As a result of forced separation, few children of slaves were fortunate enough to know or live with both parents. This is one of the reasons why Morrison uses female characters who will try to control the destinies of their own families, thus rewriting the past of the African-American community. Slavery, which is primarily motivated by financial reasons, is today considered a crime against humanity for the reason that it produced a real crisis among black families, who were torn apart while being subjected to the most atrocious treatment. Like war, which has economic foundations, slavery has nothing in common with ethical principles. According to W. M. Lloyd Garrison,

> "So profoundly ignorant of the nature of slavery are many persons, that they are stubbornly incredulous whenever they read or listen to any recital of the cruelties which are daily inflicted on its victims. They do not deny that the slaves are held as property; but that terrible fact seems to convey to their minds no idea of injustice, exposure to outrage, or savage barbarity. Tell them of cruel scourgings, of mutilations and brandings, of scenes of pollution and blood, of the banishment of all light and knowledge, and they affect to be greatly indignant at such enormous exaggerations, such wholesale misstatements, such abominable libels on the character of the southern planters!" (Garrison, 1845, xii)

Not all the novels written by Toni Morrison address this issue directly, as in *Beloved* and *A Mercy*. However, we can identify some events that are the result of slavery or are reminiscent of that period. In the novel *Home*, for example, the separation of Frank Money from his family is a direct allusion to the dispersion of black families in the period of slavery. Likewise, in *The Bluest Eye*, Pecola Breedlove's homelessness recalls the plight of blacks forced to leave their homes with no specific destination.

Morrison's work is mainly based on slavery and then the segregation that millions of African Americans had to endure on plantations and even after their liberation from the hands of their masters. All his novels are directly or indirectly linked to slavery, which rhymes with injustices and humiliations inflicted on the many African Americans living as a minority in a predominantly white America. Morrison's characters always live on the fringes of society. They seek to create their own story to continue to exist. Despite the many difficulties they encounter in their journey, they want to find or get closer to a family that they have already lost.

For example, in *Song of Solomon*, the black family encounters all kinds of difficulties that have been passed down from generation to generation. Their challenges are often linked to the racism that is rampant in the Southern part of the United States and which makes its members

victims of cruel and tragic acts. The death that is trivialized in this novel also refers to a period of slavery where the white master allows himself the power to kill for any reason.

In *Beloved* and *A Mercy*, Morrison shows the profound family crisis black families experienced on American plantations as slaves. She shares the story of a woman (Sethe in Beloved) who kills her eldest daughter to save her from slavery with the atrocities and humiliations inflicted by the white masters or another (Florens' mother in *A Mercy*) who involuntarily chooses to separate from her daughter, Florens, to prevent the separation from her young boy.

The same problem of family crisis is also observed in *Paradise*, where the dispersion of families the problem of identity, in addition to the assassinations suffered by the African American community and, which are often linked to racism, arise at the same time. In *Home*, the family fabric is also torn to the extent that the black family, particularly that of Frank Money, without a home, lives dispersed like homeless people, as we see during slavery.

4. The Force of Human Nature

Toni Morrison's life story is the adventure of a writer who, starting from the marginal position of a black woman, became a leading figure in the panorama of contemporary American literature. Her work has significantly impacted the literary canon, transforming a restricted universe into a varied multicultural mosaic. She acquired an aura of uniqueness, of a larger-than-life icon, not only for the tremendous evocative power of her works but also, above all, for the subversive charge of her narrative project: to bring to light the black reverse side of white history, to rewrite the history of a people who were denied the right to speak, transforming those defined into those who define, those who are spoken about into those who speak, in order to affirm a point of view that historiography has forgotten, thus recovering a cultural memory, individual and collective, that had been lost. Moreover, she succeeded masterfully in her intention, without moving to the center of the canon of American literature but contributing, with her novels, to the "movement" of the canon itself. The system of communicating vessels between creative storytelling, intellectual commitment, and political activism multiplied her fame, thus crossing the borders of America: the Nobel Prize for Literature award in 1993 made her the first black writer to be situated in an international context.

If Morrison writes about history, she was, in every sense, a historical figure: born in 1932, raised in pre-civil rights America, became a writer in post-civil rights America, and throughout her life was gradually described – through legal documents and social conventions – as Negro, person of color, black, Afro-American, and finally African-American or (without the hyphen) African American. Moreover, the fact that, in each of the decades in which she wrote, the public identity of black people was continually shaped and reshaped is also reflected in the laborious construction of a personal and cultural identity. In her well-known essay "Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation" (1984), Morrison lucidly analyzes the troubling relationship between James Baldwin and his master, Richard Wright. She also examines the different positions of Ralph Ellison, who acknowledges his complex genealogy of "black relatives," such

as Richard Wright and Langston Hughes, but also of white predecessors and masters, such as Hemingway and Faulkner. Her roots lie exclusively in African-American literature. “I am not like Faulkner,” she proudly declares, not because she does not see crucial models in his work, but because she places him, like her other predecessors, white or black, in a “timelessness” from which to extract “wisdom” and nothing else (Morrison, 1984, pp. 333-335).

Moreover, in her ostentatious denial of any rivalry with past masters and teachers, her grand narrative project endures. If she has struggled with her precursors – from Zora Neale Hurston to Ellison and Baldwin, from Hawthorne to Faulkner – Morrison chooses to remain silent, even if her texts speak for themselves, where the varied lights of studies and readings can be guessed. She does not intend to live the rivalry because she proposes an overthrow of every canon and paradigm that, impossible without the work of those who preceded her, feels possible for herself only in her historical moment, placed between modern and postmodern, between tradition and revision. Morrison clearly illustrates the coordinates of her aesthetic model:

> “There are things that I try to incorporate into my fiction that are directly and deliberately related to what I regard as the major characteristics of Black art, wherever it is. One of which is the ability to be both print and oral literature: to combine those two aspects so that the stories can be read in silence, of course, but one should be able to hear them as well. It should try deliberately to make you stand up and make you feel something profoundly in the same way that a Black preacher requires his congregation to speak, to join him in the sermon, to behave in a certain way, to stand up and to weep and to cry and to accede or to change and to modify – to expand on the sermon that is being delivered.” (Morrison, 1984, p. 341)

Therefore, the intention is to provoke a fusion between the written, private, individualistic modality of African-American literature and its oral, public, and communal modality. The dense polyphonic network and open ending of the novels follow the ritual forms of black culture: the call-and-response scheme, the call-and-response of the preacher and the faithful, the storyteller and the listeners. While the preacher asks his community to expand and modify his sermon, Morrison invites his readers to actively participate in the book's construction, thereby engaging them in the narrative.

On the other hand, Morrison’s innovative approach, driven by a desire to faithfully reproduce the expressive modalities of black culture, goes beyond language. He incorporates meaning beyond denotation, to transmit experience and emotion as musicians do: the sound body of the text vibrates with meanings and semantic ones. If Ellison and Baldwin had been the first to realize the exceptional potential of jazz, despite the attempt to reproduce its sound on the page, they would not have exploited it and should have explored its polysemic potential. Morrison goes further: he does not just “write a voice” but entrusts several meanings to a word, just as the jazz musician loads multiple meanings with a sound: the active listening of the reader will change according to the inner sounds of each one. Rejecting the realistic models defined by the male narrative, he will narrate what mothers were unable or failed to narrate, drawing on their heritage of stories and myths, revealing those secrets that black women have passed down from

generation to generation, too bold to be revealed. Moreover, he will do this with the language of black female speech, full of signs and meanings, a mother tongue of sounds imbued with silence and dialogue.

The beginning of *The Bluest Eye* is a clear example of mother tongue, which, as Morrison herself explains, alludes to a secret revealed to a small circle of people, with the express request not to make it public. The text refers to the verbal heritage of generations of women, the need to preserve, but also to break the silence or, in this case, to give voice to the drama of Pecola, the little protagonist, who, raped by her father, will give birth to a stillborn child. With bold linguistic experimentation, Morrison enigmatically connects this drama to the lack of marigolds flowering, thus signaling nature's discreet but decisive participation in human pain. For Morrison, silences and secrets are barriers that undermine the construction of a personal and communal identity. Moreover, if, in *The Bluest Eye*, there is only one voice that breaks the silence, in *Jazz*, several voices will share their secrets, while in *Paradise*, an entire city will claim the right to speak.

Her novels are populated by women who sing the blues; music has the power to heal, a power that transcends words, and the sound that transcends language is the primal cry that echoes from prehistory: "Voices as sweet as strawberries," "voices which make one remember of pebbles," or "misery colored by the greens and blues took all of the grief out of the words" (*Bluest Eye*, 30, 45, 60).

Milkman, the protagonist of *Song of Solomon* (1977), at the end of his journey from North to South in search of his roots and past, discovers in the darkness of the forest that the cries of hunters and the calls of dogs are not a language, but "what there was before language before words were written down" (281). This immaterial and universal language of sounds, this overlapping and blending of voices, will improve to become a simulated orality in *Beloved* (1987).

Morrison builds her most famous novel around an actual event: Margaret Garner, a real historical character, the runaway slave turned criminal mother, becomes Sethe, the formerly enslaved person haunted by the ghost of her murdered daughter, who, crossing the barrier between the worlds of the dead and the living, returns to claim the love she was denied. In the novel's preface, Morrison says that slavery is a formidable and uncharted terrain: "To invite readers (and myself) into the repellent landscape (hidden, but not completely; deliberately buried, but not forgotten) was to pitch a tent in a cemetery inhabited by highly vocal ghosts." (*Beloved* 2004, xvii).

Aiming to fill the void left by slave narratives and to lift the veil on events considered too traumatic to be told, Morrison shifts her gaze from the institution of slavery to the experience of the slave. Still, in the novel's preface, she adds that for them, "the herculean effort to forget would be threatened by memory desperate to stay alive." Moreover, she specifies: "To render enslavement as a personal experience, language must first get out of the way" (idem, xix).

5. Thematic Concerns

The colonial origin of the United States has left visible traces in society. To a greater or lesser extent, in other former colonies. The transformation into a superpower has eliminated some distinctive features or diminished their presence without eliminating them. At this point, whether a nation is developed or not is irrelevant. The colonial system, having its logic, has universal elements (such as social and cultural ones) inherent in all the nations that were victims of this system because they were colonies. The collapse of colonialism, the acquisition of independence, and social and economic transformations do not necessarily imply the loss of these elements. Toni Morrison built her literary career and wrote her books within the framework of a literary project, not for purely aesthetic reasons, but to combat some of these elements directly related to the African-American community, particularly the problems of women belonging to this community.

The writer's immense possibilities lie in her ability to provide a narrative texture of great lyrical density and easily recognizable belonging, as well as in making the particular character of the African-American "experience" a basis for representing all of humanity. Her novels are not just about the black community (wherever it may be), nor about the 1930s or 1940s, even when their action is in that context. Just as the writings of James Joyce can never be reduced to anthropological studies of the Irish, or the dramaturgy of Wole Soyinka to treatises on the Yoruba community, Toni Morrison's work remains symbolic of the human condition as it is shared by all her peers, inscribing itself on the coordinates of class, gender, and race relations, and transcending them. Morrison places particular emphasis on the colonialist and hegemonic threat of writing, which can be transformed into an instrument of subjugation. The characters go through a profound learning process that makes them aware of the importance of correctly interpreting the world they perceive, inspiring us with the potential for personal growth and understanding. Rejecting the hypothesis of the destruction of African cultural heritage through the middle passage, Morrison effectively rehabilitates stories, myths, and legends of African origin in order to thwart their systematic erasure that threatens Eurocentric discourse. Once again, the illusion of neutrality is thwarted by minor repressed discourses, implying that cultural identities and belonging should not be neutralized. Morrison says that she wants to write for blacks, but she is read mainly by whites:

> "I'm writing for black people […] in the same way that Tolstoy was not writing for me, a 14-year-old coloured girl from Lorain, Ohio. I don't have to apologize or consider myself limited because I don't [write about white people] – which is not absolutely true, there are lots of white people in my books. The point is not having the white critic sit on your shoulder and approve it" (Morrison, *The Guardian*, 2015)

In her novels, Toni Morrison addresses issues of central human concern, including racism, sexism, war, poverty, incest, betrayal, hate murder, and other traumas, and the complex meaning of community and love. She began her literary career with *The Bluest Eye* (1970), a novel that reflects the contradictions of American society, especially in issues of race, ethnicity,

and discrimination against blacks. The influences of these issues can still be seen, from time to time, in the relationships within American society and in the psychological effects on blacks. According to Mbalia, Morrison emphasizes society rather than the family unit. The African's self-image is altered by whites' imposition of their standard of physical beauty. The central thesis advanced by the novel is that "the African's self-image is destroyed at an early age as a result of the ruling class (i.e. the European capitalist's class's) promotion of its own standard of beauty: long, stringy hair, preferably blond, keen nose, thin lips; and light eyes, preferably blue" (Mbalia, 2004, pp. 32–33).

The Bluest Eye is the first novel published by Toni Morrison. The main character is Pecola Breedlove, an eleven-year-old black girl who dreams of being blonde and having blue eyes. *Sula* (1973) addresses gender oppression in which the author emphasizes the dynamics of friendship and expectations for social approval. In *The Song of Solomon* (1977), we read about the protagonist's search for her family and community. *Tar Baby* (1981), set in the Caribbean, is evidence of the writer's ability to explore the effect of the relationship between race, class, and gender. In *Beloved*, a 1987 Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, Morrison is aware of the nature of oppression and advocates for a solution, demonstrating the transformative power of literature to bring about change. *Jazz* (1992) is a story of violence and passion in Harlem, New York in the 1990s. Morrison also wrote *Paradise* (1998), describing in detail the idealized black society in Oklahoma. *A Mercy* (2008), in which she dealt with slavery in the 17th century, was followed by *Home* (2012) and *God Help the Child* (2015). The novels address the experience of black Americans, both men and women, in an unjust society, paying special attention to women who are exposed to a "double jeopardy" due to the overlap of racial and gender discrimination. For Toni Morrison, literature became an expressive form of expression of the way of representing the social context to reveal inequality, racism, and social injustice. The recurring themes of the novels come from her status as a militant writer who addresses the African-American community, from her position as a woman: poverty, loss of innocence, incest, sexual abuse, madness, racial prejudice and the myth of color. We will limit ourselves to presenting the central themes which are always present in the novels. From all that has been said, we can say that her writing development is linked to the desire to address these themes from which she built her literary style, a style that empowers and enlightens the reader.

The marginalization of the African-American community is a consequence of the racial demarcation that delineates two spaces within American society: the center of the majority (white) and the peripheral space of the minority (black). This shared experience of reduction to skin color leads to the exclusion of the black community from the circle of power, whose members acquire a secondary role, as suggested in *Sula*, a novel by Toni Morrison. In *Sula*, Jude is repeatedly rejected during his job search because of the color of his skin: "It was after he stood in lines for six days running and saw the gang boss pick out thin-armed white boys from the Virginia hills and the bull-necked Greeks and Italians and heard over and over, "Nothing else today. Come back tomorrow," that he got the message." (*Sula*, 1973, p. 82).

The effect of this marginalization on Jude represents the psychological violence that racial discrimination inflicts on the heart of African-American identity, revealing what Gloria Wade-Gayles describes as "a smaller circle, a narrow space in which black people, regardless of sex, experience uncertainty, exploitation, and powerlessness" (Wade-Gayles, 1984, p. 4). However, at the center of this circle, which is already the second in the scheme of American society, is a third, more restrictive one, which places the black woman on the periphery. In fact, in the case of women, the experience of racial minimization is added to that of sexual minimization. Thus, in *Sula*, Jude's masculine ego, wounded by the humiliation of racism, finds refuge in the institution of marriage as conceived in the patriarchal model:

> "So it was rage, rage and a determination to take on a man's role anyhow that made him press Nel about settling down. He needed some of his appetites filled, some posture of adulthood recognized, but mostly he wanted someone to care about his hurt, to care very deeply. Deep enough to hold him, deep enough to rock him, deep enough to ask, 'How you feel? You all right? Want some coffee?' And if he were to be a man, that someone could no longer be his mother. He chose the girl who had always been kind, who had never seemed hell-bent to marry, who made the whole venture seem like his idea, his conquest. The more he thought about marriage, the more attractive it became. […] With her he was head of a household pinned to an unsatisfactory job out of necessity. The two of them together would make one Jude. (*Sula*, 1973, pp. 82-83)

Thus, in Morrison, the black woman lives on the margins, pushed almost to the point of being almost erased, insofar as "regardless of class, black women are twice burdened because they are both black and female, and are doubly invisible because of the way a racist, white, patriarchal society tries to erase their presence" (Eisenstein 1984, p. xx). The black woman is crushed under the weight of the double reduction that closes off access to discourse or instead has closed off this access.

Indeed, Morrison rejects this tendency towards invisibility and the silence of the black woman in American society. On the contrary, she tries to give voice through writing to this minority of discourses, even within the black community. The voices in her novels are almost exclusively female since she proposes a gallery of portraits of women, victims of double discrimination from which they seem unable to escape. The project of allowing the female voice to be heard, either beyond the word or through the unspoken words, becomes an accurate principle of writing, her literary project, a significant challenge to societal norms. As she wrote in "Playing in the Dark": "My work requires me to think about how free I can be as an African-American woman writer in my genderized, sexualized, wholly racialized world" (Morrison, 1992: 4). The experience of racial aberrations is often described from a female point of view, whether it is the experience of segregation experienced by Nel and her mother on the New Orleans train and the "COLOURED ONLY" car (in *Sula*), or in *Beloved*, where Sethe is described as an enslaved person, half human, half animal, or in Felice's expulsion from the luxurious Tiffany boutique in New York (in *Jazz*), or the racial segregation that, in *Paradise*, costs Ruby her life.

Morrison illustrates the "double jeopardy" of the situation of black women in the United States. Indeed, "regardless of class, black women are defined in this nation as a group distinct from white people only because of the double jeopardy of race and sex." (Wade-Gayles 1984: 7). However, as Ruby's death "on the waiting room bench" suggests, this marginalization proves deadly. It is, therefore, necessary to transgress the limits imposed by this double reduction, which highlights the female experience in the African-American community by reducing the black woman to a body – an object whose femininity is nothing more than a construction of the opinion of the other. As a writer, Morrison has chosen to emphasize the feminine presence through a mighty charge of feminine energy. The fact of being a writer cannot be neglected in the analysis of her texts because the construction of the image of a woman in a novel from the aspect of a woman completely changes the focus and appreciation of this image, unlike the man who, no matter how much he tries to distance himself from his sex, will always speak of a woman from his position as a man. Unlike the other novels, *Song of Solomon* has a powerful masculine energy charge, but not enough to overshadow the feminine presence. Thus, no matter how important its role may be, the masculine presence does not overshadow the feminine one. From this point of view, we can better appreciate how Morrison approaches the issue of sexuality, creating characters that go against masculine stereotypes, such as Sula. Her aggressive sensuality provokes repudiation, as does the destructive pleasure that accompanies her relationships. Sula assumes a role that, until then, was given only to men: the right to start and end a relationship in their own interests. Moreover, she violates a silent community norm when it comes to white men.

Historically speaking, the social inequality of women has been one of the realities that motivated women's fight for their rights in a macho, profoundly patriarchal society. This inequality, from a historical and social point of view, has affected both white and black women, rich and poor. However, it cannot be denied that racial prejudice has significantly compounded the challenges faced by black women, making their lives even more difficult.

The visible presence of women makes the issue of motherhood a significant element in the novels, influencing the characters' identities and their struggles. The mother-daughter relationship, as depicted in *The Bluest Eye*, has a profound impact. In "Recitative" – a story published in *Confirmation: An Anthology of African American Women Writers* (1983) edited by Amiri and Amina Baraka – we read how the lack of affection from their mothers and the fact that they were placed in an orphanage where they did not enjoy any affection, makes these children characters with problems that they will carry with them into adulthood. Through healing, they can regain the identity that was, to a certain extent, "denied" by these traumas.

However, this does not mean their characters will necessarily play these roles. These themes can receive positive and negative treatment to show the consequences in the characters' lives. The way Pauline treats her daughter Pecola in *The Bluest Eye* is an example of this negative conception of motherhood, demonstrated by the total lack of love for her daughter. Last but not least, we note the presence of violence against women, manifested in multiple forms, all present in the novels: verbal violence, humiliation, physical aggression, rape, and, above all,

murder. This aggression can occur both from whites and blacks (often members of their own family or friends). Her novels continuously denounce women's mistreatment in a macho society.

Conclusions: The Recurring Burden of Color

Due to the historical context in which it emerged, African-American literature has long been a literature of struggle, recrimination, and search. The unfavorable press and negative stereotypes about blacks have forced them to want to embellish their image through writing. The black race's new sense of value and merit gives rise to a new discourse. It is not so much a question of criminalizing the white race as of finding their way. Morrison is mainly concerned with the black community and its fundamentals. Her writing shows that although the activism of the 1960s was a conscious effort to make the concept of community a collective reality, it did not succeed. Her description of the black community highlights practices deeply rooted in their culture. Their behavior is no longer perceived simply as a reaction to a white environment. Morrison revises the reductionist formula that places all black behavior on the negative effect of the white middle-class lifestyle and its values. She depicts the African Americans with aspirations and a sense of self that goes beyond the instinct for survival.

In Morrison's narrative, specific themes are insistently repeated: the importance of community, the value of memory, and the strength of women. Her texts clearly show the ability to investigate the depths of the human soul and the will to describe the world from the point of view of the African American and the woman. All of this is in dialectical opposition to both the dominant white culture and the power of men, even within the black community. Her writing shows a different perspective on African American society and history and gives dignity to the terrible vicissitudes of her people. Women, the great protagonists of novels dealing with the double oppression of racism and male chauvinism, are described and researched in various aspects: their role in society, female friendship, sisterhood, the relationship between men and women, motherhood, maturation, and personal autonomy.

The originality of Morrisonian work lies in the fact that, expressing the aspirations and conflicts of a marginal community that coexists in open confrontation with a majority and adverse culture, it generates a narrative style that significantly departs from traditional literary models. Morrison's association of characters with complex symbology creates an interpretive ambiguity and a continuous process of definition that transgresses conventional notions and transforms his characters into versatile beings.

Morrison's unique characters occupy functions in the community precisely because they do not fit into the generally considered desirables that serve the evolving identity. The continuous changes of the characters seem to represent the stigmatization of a visible difference, collectively reinforced by the hegemonic society on the racial minority. The unusual becomes normal for the oppressed, who, unable to change their situation, transform the extraordinary into another element of everyday existence.

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