

Theme of Old Age in Toni Morrison's Novels

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Abstract

*Ms. Toni Morrison born on February 18, 1931, in the small town of Lorain, Ohio, was the first American woman in the fifty years to win Nobel Prize for Literature in the year 1993. Moreover, she became the first African American to be honored by the Nobel Award Committee of Sweden. She belongs to the black generation and was brought up amidst the white world of America, facing the onslaughts and insults at the hands of the white people around. At her back, she has a painful rich tradition of the Negro slaves who suffered untold miseries at the hands of their white masters. Generation after generation, the black people struggled hard for the crumbs of bread. They were treated like animals. They were cursed, condemned, exploited and tortured for no fault of their own. Morrison, through her novels, has very beautifully depicted the miserable life of the black people in America. Her novels *The Bluest Eye*, *Sula*, and *The Beloved*, present a vivid picture of the exploitation, discrimination, poverty, and privation of the black people done by their white masters. The wounded Negro psyche also finds an apt expression in her novels. Particularly, the female characters become the victims of suffering caused first by the white people and then by their own family members for whose existence they struggled hard throughout their life. They are deprived of their children and their right to be a mother. The novelist, Toni Morrison has presented the pathetic condition of the women in her novels.*

Keywords: Humiliation, Old Age, Treatment, Community, Morality, Slave, Funeral, Woman.

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The birth name of Toni Morrison was Chloe Anthony Wofford. Her father was a shipyard worker and choir singer. Her mother was also a singer. In her family, she had an elder sister and two younger brothers. Her grandfather played violin and her grandmother had a unique habit of having a dream book where from symbols were used to play the numbers. She developed an early appreciation for language, folklore and literature. She enjoyed listening to the family history and all the anecdotes related to the black community. She learned from her parents that racial politics was a reality and that African-Americans had to face it. The race prejudice continued for two centuries. After the second world war, the Negroes began to demand full equality. By the time Toni Morrison comes to write, the Negroes had improved themselves much.

Toni Morrison inherited black culture. Her parents were hard-working and industrious black people. They fought against racial discrimination and all the evils related to it. The father took up one job after another and the mother sang in the church when there was a financial crunch in the family. Morrison acquired her father's anger and hostility towards the white people. He had the worst hatred against the white people and felt that things would never improve though the mother believed that individual efforts could change race relations in America. The parents were of the opinion that education alone could improve their lot. Under these conditions, the young girl developed a strong sense of herself, her character and her capabilities. Resultantly her writings include her personal and autobiographical experiences. Morrison, in her novels, has mentioned the pathetic condition of the old people who sacrifice even the parts of their bodies for the upbringing and survival of their children, and are neglected by the same when they are old. Old Age for the characters of Morrison, seems to be a curse. This paper highlights the pathetic Old Age condition of the female characters in her novels, *The Bluest Eye*, *Sula*, and *The Beloved*.

Toni Morrison's novel *Sula* begins with a nigger Joke and the book remains a joke from the beginning to the end. Bottom, the place where the blacks live is at the top of hills where nothing grows. Then there is Shadrack who celebrates National Suicide Day. Soon we are introduced to Cecile Write, an old woman, the mother of Helene who married Willey Wright. Helene gave birth to a daughter, Nel who came to be obedient and polite. Helene goes to attend the funeral of Cecile and on the way, she suffered humiliation. The funeral is an honorable affair though Helene could not be there at the time of her death. Morrison mentioned the whole account in her novel:

A man in a collarless shirt opened the door
Helene identified herself and he said he was
Henri Martin and that he was there for the
settin'-up. She stepped into the house. The
Virgin Mary clasped her hands in front of her
neck three times in the front room and once
in the bedroom where Cecilie's body lay.
The old woman had died without seeing or
blessing her granddaughter.

Helene has all the respect due to an old lady and particularly to the dead woman. "In the somber house that held four Virgin Marys, where death sighed in every corner and candles sputtered, the gardenia smell and canary-yellow dress emphasized the funeral atmosphere surrounding them.

Then in the same novel, we have Eva Peace who lost her one leg to bring up her children. She is bold enough to burn Plum, her youngest son but there is her granddaughter Sula who does not want to have anything to do with the old woman. Eva is thrown into the old house meant for old people who have no one to help and support them in their old age. When Eva was put in Sunnydale, all the people in the Bottom were surprised and condemned Sula, Nel proposes to go to Sunnydale to see Eva. There the rooms were like the green cages. Nel turned the knob and entered the room of Eva Peace. The novelist has presented a vivid account of the condition of Eva in the following words:

At first, she could not believe it. She seemed
so small, sitting at that table in a black-
vinyl chair. All the heaviness had gone and
height. Hers once beautiful leg had no stock-
ing and the foot were in a slipper. Nel wanted
to cry-not for Eva's Milk-dull eyes or her
floppy lips, but for the once proud foot accus-
tomed for over a half-century to a fine well-
laced shoe, now, stuffed gracelessly into a
pink terry cloth slipper.

Eva Peace has lost her memory; whatever remains with her is a topsy-turvey situation of the past. But she had a logic, a logic of old age with her. It was Sula who threw the little boy into the water. Nel pleads that she did not do it, and Sula did.

“You. Sula. What’s the difference? You were there. You watched, didn’t you? Me, I never would’ve watched.” “You are confused, Miss Peace. I’m Nel. Sula’s dead.”

“It’s awful cold in the water. The fire is warm. How did you get him in”.

Eva has got ill-treatment at the hands of Sula, and now Nel gets an ill-treatment at the hands of Eva. Nel comes to realize that Eva had done great wrong to her children. Nel now realizes that Eva Peace had to mean throughout. It is old age and one is feeble-minded at that time. Nel is shocked to see that she is also blamed by the old lady though she herself has led quite an honest life and was always free from the spite that was part of the place. “Feeble-minded or not – old whatever. Eva knew what she was doing. Always had. She had stayed away from Sula’s funeral and accused Nel of drowning chicken Little for spite. The same spite that galloped all over the Bottom”.

In *Beloved*, Baby Suggs, is another powerful black woman. Slavery didn’t allow her to be a wife and a mother of her children. Slave life had “busted her legs, back, head, eyes, hands, kidneys, womb and tongue, “she had nothing left to make a living with but her heart-which she put to work at once”. Her youngest child Halle purchases her freedom with his Sabbath. She became “an unchurched preacher, one who visited pulpits and opened her great heart to those who could use it”.

Baby Suggs, whose broken hip is the physical legacy of sixty years of bondage, bore “the nastiness of life.” Mother of eight children, she is denied to claim her motherhood. Her “two girls, neither of whom had their adult teeth, were sold and gone and she had not been able to wave a goodbye”. She made coupling with a straw boss for four herself pregnant by the man who promised not to and did. “That child she could not love and the rest she would not”. She knew, “A man ain’t nothing but a man.” So baby Suggs’ eight children had six fathers”. Halle gave her freedom, when it didn’t mean anything. But “what does a sixty-odd-year-old slave woman who walks like a three-legged dog need freedom for.” And when she stepped foot on the free ground she could not believe that Halle knew what she didn’t ... knew that there was nothing like it in this world”.

Her freedom pours new life into her. These hands belong to me. These are my hands. Next, she felt a knocking in her chest and discovered something else new: her own heartbeat. She is blessed with “the heart that pumped out love, the mouth that spoke the word, didn’t count”

She had a great love and care for the people. “She fixed on that and her own brand of preaching, having made up her mind what to do with the heart that started beating the minutes she crossed the Ohio River”. And it worked out too. She became a loving ancestor in the black community. People wonder, “where does she get all, Baby Suggs, holy? Why are she and hers always the center of things? How come she always knows exactly what to do and when? Giving advice; passing messages; healing the sick, hiding fugitives, loving, cooking, preaching, singing, dancing, and loving everybody like it was her job and hers alone”.

She welcomes her daughter-in-law Sethe when she escapes from Sweet Home. She nurses her wounds and injuries with love and sympathy. She celebrates her return with a grand party “124, rocking with laughter, goodwill and food for ninety.” She was overwhelmed to see her grandchildren. She herself never allowed to enjoy her motherhood,

The last of her children, whom she barely glanced at when he was born because it wasn't worth the trouble to try to learn features you would never see change into adulthood anyway. Seven times she had done that: held a little foot; examined the fat fingertips with her own fingers she never saw become the male or female hands a mother would recognize anywhere. She didn't know to this day what their permanent teeth looked like; or how they held their heads when they walked... All seven were gone and dead.

On the arrival of Sethe and her children, they had “a celebration of blackberries that put Christmas to shame”. When Sethe killed her daughter, to save her from slavery, Baby Suggs' heart sank forever. “Her authority in the pulpit, her dance in the clearing, her powerful call – all that had been mocked and rebuked by the blood spill in her backyard. God puzzled her and she was ashamed of him to say so... She just up and quit”. She **referred to her pondering** about colors, “By the time Sethe was released she had exhausted blue and was well on her way to yellow”.

Her house 124 Bluestone, is the gathering place, the community center. These people came to discuss “the true meaning of the Fugitive Bill, the Settlement Fee, God's ways and Negro-Pews; ... and other weighty issues” that concerned them. Baby Suggs teaches them to dance, to laugh and to love themselves. “Here,” she said,

“In this here place, we flesh; flesh that weeps,
laughs’ flesh that dances on bare feet in the grass.
Love it. Love it hard. Younger they do not
love your flesh. They despise it”.

She tells them that “the only grace they could have, was the grace they could imagine”. But when the community falls short of her expectations and fails its obligation to the individual, Baby Suggs gets disturbed. She abandons her ministry of love and slows it gives up life, “to belong to a community of other free negroes- to love and be loved by them, to counsel and be counseled, to protect and be protected, to feed and be fed- and then to have that community step back and hold itself at a distance-well, it could wear and even Baby Suggs, holy”. Thus, she is a strong-willed, compassionate and sensitive woman, who lives and dies for the sake of other people.

In the novel, *The Bluest Eye*, there are just one or two black-aged characters who represent almost the whole community of the black old women. There we have Jimmy, the great Aunt of Cholly who brings him up and enables him to adapt himself to the social environment with some values. Cholly does not turn out to be a gentleman but Aunt Jimmy as long as she is kept alive, left no stone unturned in teaching him the lesson of humanity, morality and sociability. She names him after her dead brother Charles Breedlove and took care of him as a mother would. We note how Cholly was saved by Aunt Jimmy when his mother placed him on a junk heap by the railroad:

When Cholly was four days, his mother
wrapped him in two blankets and one newspaper
and placed him on a junk heap by the wail road.
His Aunt Jimmy, who had seen her niece carrying
a bundle out of the back door, rescued him. She
beat his mother with a razor strap and and would not let
her near the baby after that. Aunt Jimmy raised
Cholly herself, but took delight sometimes in
telling him of how she had saved him. He gathered
from her that his mother wasn’t tight in the head.
But he never had a chance to find out, because she
ran away shortly after the razor strap, and no one
had heard of her since.

We read of Miss Alice, a very close friend of Aunt Jimmy who came to the old woman during her last days. Alice used to read Bible to Aunt Jimmy. Aunt Jimmy was declining but Miss Alice continued her advice- "Don't eat no whites of eggs." "Drink new milk." "Chew on this root." Aunt Jimmy did not care for what she advised but she did ignore Miss Alice's Bible reading and quite often "sweet amens" came from her lips. Soon after we are introduced to another old woman, a midwife, who could look after Aunt Jimmy and suggest some remedy:

My Dear was a quiet woman who lived in a shack
near the woods. She was a competent midwife
and decisive diagnostician. Few could remember
when M' Dear was not around. In any ill-ness
that could not be handled by ordinary
means- knows cures, intuition, or endurance-
the word was always, "Fetch M'Dear".

Toni Morrison presents a realistic picture of the black women. When they are young, they are commanded by white women and white children- do this, do that. When white men beat ones, they cleaned up the blood and went home to receive abuse from their husbands. They loaded sheaves and pales and rocked their children into sleep but life for them changes when they enter in unavoidable old age. The novelist draws a very graphic picture of the black old women and this applies to the black women in every community and city in America.

Then they were old. Their bodies honed, their
odor sour. Squatting in a cane field, stooping
in a cotton field, kneeling by a river bank, they
had carried a world on their heads. They had
given over the lives of their own children and
tendered their grandchildren with the relief they
wrapped their heads in rags, and their breasts
in flannel; eased their feet into felt. They
were through with lust and lactation, beyond
tears and terror. They alone could walk the
roads of Mississippi, the lanes of Georgia,
and the fields of Alabama unmolested. They were old
enough to be irritable when and where they chose,
tried enough to look forward to death, and disinterested

enough to accept the idea of pain while ignoring the presence of pain. They were, in fact, and at last, free. And the lives of these old black women were synthesized in their eyes- a puree of tragedy and humor, wickedness and serenity, truth and fantasy.

Toni Morrison has observed every corner of the life of black women in America. She found everything there except, indeed, contentment and happiness. Childhood is painful, youth is torture and old age is a curse- that is what Toni Morrison seems to suggest.

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