

Journey to Nowhere: A Critique of Toni Morrison's Fiction

Abstract

This article studies and records the aimless voyages of the slave-protagonists of Toni Morrison's fiction. Morrison in her novels like *The Bluest Eye*, *Song of Solomon*, *Beloved* and *Jazz* has exposed an account of the plight and for that purpose the flight of the important characters. Of being oppressed and suppressed by the Whites, the Blacks finding no way out have tried to run away with life. When they find that their life is nothing but a never-ending train of suffering they run away from the clutches of their masters without having any destination. They lived in an era where slavery was all pervasive and there was no slightest respect for the slaves. In spite of the very knowledge that they would be caught at any moment, they escape with a ray of hope. Morrison in these novels has beautifully portrayed the predicament of the slaves who wish to run away without any destination.

Keywords: Voyage, Fugitive, Infanticide, Immigration, Subjugation.

Introduction

Since the earliest days of slavery, free as well as fugitive African American slaves risked everything to attain a gleaming spark of freedom. They were madly haunted to run away to an unknown place, which they hoped would be free of slavery, torture and death. Sometimes they did not know their destination and their voyage was aimless, but their ultimate goal was to escape the dungeon of that slavish institution. They faced every possible risk in the process of escaping. Sometimes slaves had to use all their skills, including deceit, burglary and many other violent acts when needed as that time their acts were guided by perception and not by reason. Sometimes they had to fight aggressively in order to achieve freedom from ever-lasting bondage, hunger, humiliation and silence imposed on them. The historical process of journeying is not only connected to a desire for escapism and anonymity, but also to the painful processes of telling and remembering the unspoken and unspeakable past which is an ever-present presence in Morrison's novels. Here an endeavor has been made to look into the multiple reasons, excuses, explanations and justifications of the nomadic and directionless journey which is made out of a longing for freedom, self-fulfillment, curiosity or spirit of discovery.

Aim of the Study

The objective of this article is to highlight the desperate attempts of the African American slaves to get rid of the slavish institution by escaping; sometimes physically and sometimes spiritually. They only tried to be converted into a normal human from the status of a beast and a non-human cargo. They fled away from this land of torture and trauma without knowing what will happen next. By leaving this hellish life, they aspire only to live with the status of a citizen with some rights, with a job, the family and kinship. How happily and urgently they undertook this challenge to defy slavery has been portrayed by this author.

The mere existence in the alien land with no promise of citizenship and where right means only slavery, the soul of the African-Americans cried and filled with havoc who were born into slavery and bought as slaves. They became incapable to put up with the burden of the past on the present, which is multiplied by injustice, extreme violence and loss externally as well as internally. Gradually awareness grew among the Negro slaves to defy bondage and to liberate themselves and their families from the curse of slavery. They raised voice against this institution in one way or another- either running away from slavery or through violent revolts to portray themselves as free humans.

A mass of African American slaves chose to deal with their horrifying anguish through a variety of ways, including fighting, external compliance and spirituality. When they resorted to commit suicide, it was recurrently in reaction to a resolve in their circumstances or dissatisfied



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expectations. During the Middle Passage, some slaves physically fought back; others survived in more concealed ways; others jumped overboard. Putting an end to one's own life or the lives of one's own children is undeniably the most horrendous and shocking thing one might ever execute. Yet, when life seems unbearably heavy under the institution of slavery, some of the Morrison's characters try to liberate their souls in the very act of destroying their selves and making their flight to the infinity. As a form of struggle, this escapism usually proceeds from a reluctance to identify one's survival with victimization, powerlessness and hopelessness. The English historian Hugh Thomas quotes from Jacques slavery at the end of the Seventeenth century:

These slaves have so great a love for their country that they despair when they see that they are leaving it forever, that makes them die of grief, and I have heard merchants who engage in this commerce say that they die more often before leaving the port than during the voyage. Some throw themselves into the sea, others hit their heads against the ship, others hold their breath to try and smother themselves, others still die of hunger from eat nothing (412).

Again James Walvin writes in his book *Short History of Slavery*, "Given the chance, slaves flung themselves into the ocean, diving off the main deck, slipping through post-holes, or leaping from the small boat carrying them from shore" (56).

In *Beloved*, the unidentified woman jumps overboard during the Middle Passage not vigorously, but by preference. Sethe is obsessed with these atrocious, subjugating and dehumanizing ways to which her relations were frequently exposed during the horrible journeys of The Middle Passage. Nan, her mother's friend and her care taker informed her that her mother threw all her children to whom she gave birth during the Middle Passage but her because she was the baby of a black man: "She threw them all away but you. The one from the crew she threw away on the island. The others from more whites she also threw away" (74). Ella, a black female slave, who guided Sethe to cross the Ohio River, deserted her baby to die out of neglect which she bore of a white man. Sethe's shocking act of murdering her baby girl can only be out of her tough decision to liberate herself and her kids from the restraints of slavery. At the minute she saw the slave holders, she determined to send her children 'where they should be safe' (163).

This act of infanticide is a reaction to Sethe's desperate choice between life and death in slavery. In *Sula*, the shell-shocked veteran Shadrack observes National Suicide Day on 3 January 1920; in *Jazz*, Rose Dear, Violet's mother climbs into a well and drowning herself; In *Song of Solomon*, Robert Smith leaps from the top of Mercy Hospital; In *The Bluest Eye*, Pecola Breedlove wishes to fade away through a craving to have the bluest eyes which symbolizes the white beauty. These deaths and death wishes

correspond to the difficulties of slavery and black survival in America.

Morrison's *Sula* pathetically depicts the disappearance of a black neighborhood and the deaths of "Peace" due to the direct impacts of World War I and Jim Crow Segregation on Black Americans. The chapter 1919, in *Sula* introduces the ravaged war veteran Shadrack, who comes back to an eternal protection after a long journey during which he goes through a deep-seated crack internally and externally. He is preoccupied with the horrible thought of permanent presence of war in such a way that he no longer recognizes himself. As a result, he retains one option for action: celebrating National Suicide Day, which merges into the Bottom calendar; the people "absorbed it into their thoughts, into their language, into their lives" (15). Katy Ryan in his article, entitled, "Revolutionary Suicide in Toni Morrison's Fiction" describes, Shadrack's this annual holiday teaches and encourages the people of Bottom to evade death's random blows and free themselves of the existing disorder by killing themselves.

The slave narratives as well as Black American Literature are stuffed with a sequence of journeys- from the ancestral land to slavery in South America. Each part of the slave's escaping journey included an attempt to recover lost relations and to visit their birth places to which the course of time, social turmoil and freedom have wrought. The term 'escape' holds two connotations. First one is 'migration', which refers to the shift of humans or animals from one place to another. The second one is 'immigration' which refers to the shift of humans when they cross established state boundaries and are regulated by the rules of the territories they involve. So, the term 'immigration' is more apt, logical and rational in the modern framework. To escape the unspeakable conditions under the institution 'slavery', the African Americans shifted, migrated and immigrated to the other side which attracted them with its glittering hew. Poverty, stress, torture, unpaid labor, lack of family life, no future aspiration, no power, no money, no bread in one side and a beam of hope, superior future, paid labor, employment facilities, housing, family reunion, own land, own identity, own life in the other side made them to move, as there was no other option to lead the life itself. Whatever the type of journey is; migration, immigration or mere shifting like birds from one nest to the other, it is a matter of much debate and discussion, myths, stereotypes and unquestioned assumptions formed by social studies, text books, politics and media.

In the United States, African American survival has been framed by migrations and voyages; forced and free. The Trans- Atlantic slave trade from Africa to America and the interior slave exchange in which the human cargo was transported from the Atlantic Coast to the American South were the forced migration and forced voyages. In the year, 1755, Olaudah Equiano, an eleven-year-old African boy was kidnapped from his home. The stealing of millions of the free West Africans by slave traders who then sold them to wealthy merchants and plantation owners

was also included in the category of forced migration. In the 360 years between 1500 and the end of the slave trade in 1860, at least 12 million Africans were forcibly transported to the Americas. This was the largest forced journey between Africa and the Americas in the human history, which took duration for weeks, months, sometimes as long as a year.

However, the shifting story of the Great Migration begins with the commencement of the 20th century. In the 1870s, they began shifting to North and West in huge numbers in part by financial concerns, and in part by frustration. In the 1890s, the figure of African Americans heading to the North and Mid West was twice that of the preceding decade. In 1910, it doubled yet again and in the 1920s, more than 750,000 African Americans vacated the South. Between 1910 and 1970, about 6 million African Americans left the South. This was the time when racism was on decline in northern states and as turbulent as ever in southern states, as the enormous mass of Black Americans lived in the South. The Jim Crow laws under Southern Democrats led to segregation, increased racism and the unchecked violence of lynching. When World War II broke out, the northern industries experienced a labor shortage. Firstly, this need for workers was created due to the enlistment of white males in the military. Secondly, the governmental restrictions on European immigration, and thirdly, the demand for increased productivity contribute towards the cause of creating immediate job opportunity. The black news papers in the South began to publish and highlight the North as a golden land of economic opportunity. They also promised to pay wages which were more than twice the amount paid for labor in the South, including better educational opportunities, better working and living conditions, and a promise to relief from the category of second class citizenship. As a result, about one third of the South's black population moved to the North, which facilitated the cultural flowering known as the Harlem Renaissance.

This getting away from slavery involves three possibilities: firstly, the slaves escaped on the Underground Railroad either to the North or to the East Coast of Canada to gain freedom and a suitable job; secondly, the black people living in the South before and during the Civil War preferred to maintain a tie with their ethnic space and ancestors and hence did not move; and thirdly, the freed blacks as well as the fugitives permanently shifted to their African homeland in search of a better life between 1910 and 1970. Still, no African American was free from the vicious circle of enslavement. Slavery reached out from the South to threaten not only the fugitives, but also all black people. They were always within the risk zone of the kidnapers and slave catchers because of the Fugitive Slave Act, which was approved by the United States Congress on September 18, 1850, as part of the negotiation between Southern slave holding states and Northern free-states. The issue of slavery had caused a deep splitting up between North and South. Because, the plantation owners of the Southern states complained about their loss of property as a result of the escaped slaves. On the

other hand, the Northern states like Delaware, Ohio and Pennsylvania obstinately refused the contractual relationship between slaves and the slave owners in the free territory. There was a pervasive terror of selling them again in to servitude due to this act. The consequence of this act was to return Africans and African Americans who had run away from slavery in the Southern states and were living in the North, back into captivity. This is why the greater part of fugitives headed to Canada, where they would be secure from the Fugitive Slave Act. This act constrained the slave mother to slaughter her baby daughter as a tough response in Morrison's *Beloved* and due to the privilege of which, School Teacher found his lost property; if not runaways like Sethe might break away from slavery very easily.

Be it Shadrack and Plum in *Sula*, Paul D and Sethe in *Beloved*, Frank Money in *Home*, as the accurate and representative victims of the horrors of slavery, they move from one destination to another with the hope of life and freedom. Their story of frustration, torture and identity crisis never ends with this shift from one place to another. Violet, Dorcas and Joe Trace in Morrison's *Jazz* can never find any solace even after the great migration. This novel tells the story of the New York neighborhood, Harlem, from the perspective of Joe and Violet. Personal and racial issues, violence, poverty, failure, frustration, trauma and human trafficking and many more pre-migration factors haunts each and every characters and make them devoid of a sane mind to get used to in the post-migration world and they develop severe psychosomatic disorders.

In *Jazz*, Toni Morrison represents the complex set of reasons that goaded black people to migrate to the city and compelled them to stay there. Economic opportunity, social equality, safe job, secure environment from war and violence were the main reasons for migration. The first part of *Jazz* depicts the motivating factors of the great migration, the second part describes the pre migration stress factors of the characters, and the third part describes the post migration factors like resettlement and employment in the new society. Their historical voyage from rural to urban America resulted in stress and deprivation as Morrison describes in the novel:

People living in the City and some who'd been there and come home with tales to make Baltimore weep. [...] The money to be earned for doing light work- standing in front of a door, carrying food on a tray, even cleaning stranger's shoes- got you in a day more money than any of them had earned in the harvest. [...] there were streets where colored people owned all the stores; all block of handsome colored men and women laughing all night and making money all day (106).

In *Song of Solomon*, Milkman Dead heads to the South in order to explore his family history of African roots and ultimately, he develops an existentially significant bond to his "own" home with its inheritance. The author describes:

Milkman was curious about these people. He did not feel close to them, but he did feel connected, as though there was some cord or pulse or information they shared. Back home he had never felt that way, as though he belonged to any place or anybody. He'd always considered himself the outsider in his family, only vaguely involved with his friends, and except for Guitar, there was no one whose opinion of himself he cared about. Once, long ago, he had cared what Pilate and Hagar thought of him, but having conquered Hagar and having disregarded Pilate enough to steal from her, all that was gone. But there was something he felt now-here in Shalimar, and earlier in Danville-that reminded him of how he used to feel in Pilate's house. Sitting in Susan Byrd's living room, lying with Sweet, eating with those men at Vernelle's table, he did not have to get over, to turn on, or up, or even out (207).

This narrative is about Milkman's journey to understand and explore his history, heritage, identity and place in the African society which has been generally white washed in historical documents. It is his quest for identity which starts on an emotional and spiritual journey. He kept asking and kept looking for the truth and it was his resolution that started and ended his journey. This journey leads from his urban middle class home of his parents in the Northern city, to his ancestral home in South. As soon as he visits South, he realizes and discovers a sense of place, love in family and community, and friendship that he missed all these years. The effect of this self-discovering is a main affair that has made him feel that he is strong, determined, resilient and a whole individual. Visiting South, he could be able to renovate his family tree out of stories, personal testimonies, songs, jokes and children's rhymes. He gains knowledge about the Civil War and the Reconstruction period. He also learns about his grandfather who had turned his farm into the best farm in the country. He feels proud of him and is pained to know how fragile their happiness had been as the owners of the best farm, and how it was snatched away from them and how they had to leave the homeland, their beloved farm and migrate to the North forcefully, to what they thought was the 'Land of Promise'.

Milkman's expedition is both literal and figurative. Setting out his voyage from Detroit ghetto, he reaches Shalimar, an interior village in West Virginia, down South, travelling via Danville, Pennsylvania, where his father grew up. He learns his family's past from the stories he hears at Danville, and the story of his race's past from the elders at Shalimar. Figuratively, he goes back into the historical past from his present. Categorically, Dorothy H. Lee describes in her article "The Quest for Self: Triumph and Failure in the Works of Toni Morrison", "he... travels from innocence to awareness i.e. from ignorance of origins, heritage, identity and communal

responsibility to knowledge and acceptance" (353). The different changes that happened in Milkman at different stages of his journey represent marginality. At the beginning of his journey he was a 'white negro'. But at the end he emerges as a member of his own community.

Physical and emotional up-rootedness and dispossession are the common issues with geographical voyage, which continue to exert a strong influence on people from generation to generation. The unsettling feeling of being homeless and living in a place of incredulous terror remains as a threat to the African American's sovereignty. The lives of almost all the characters in Morrison's fiction are dominated by a traumatically secret in the past which makes them restless, hopeless and powerless in the present. In order to get rid of this, and to find some peace, they move from one place to another which proves to be aimless and full of conflicts. Ultimately, they fail to complement a balance between the geographical voyage to superficial freedom and a psychological voyage to actual freedom, as they cannot leave their traumatic past behind. The past is such a thing that they cannot ignore it, forget it or get adjusted with it. What they do, is to escape it with a lots of risk. But taking that risk is the only way to attain reconciliation to get away the Sweet Home of slavery and to create a Sweet Home of their own, where they would be able to define themselves as normal human beings.

Conclusion

Reconciliation as a process is often complicated and difficult. Still, the traumatic events of the past must be confronted to move forward into the future. What happened to the African Americans in a long term and what they left behind and their pasts are not simple African American histories. The ultimate truth is that the Africans had to tolerate that black stigma for generations with the identity of a slave. Their voyages to defy this hellish institution were full of horror, pathos and a matter of concern. Although they set out their voyages aimlessly, some way they worked for their aim towards the completion of it.

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