



## **Feminism and Black Consciousness in Toni Morrison's Non-fiction**

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**Abstract:** *The paper explores about the feminism and black consciousness, which includes black women, and their views on feminisms and literary theories, focusing on Morrison's perceptions of feminist ideology in her non-fictional works. The early editions of the Oxford English Dictionary defined feminism as a state of being feminine or womanly. But in today's World Feminism is a global and revolutionary ideology. It calls for a set of attitude, a definite stance. Toni Morrison defines the term Feminism, as appreciating for all aspects of womanhood and the commitment to the survival of both men and women. The ability of writers to imagine what is not the self, to familiarize the strange and mystify the familiar, is the test of writers power. Being An Afro-American Writer Toni Morrison became a Nobel laureate and creative female writer, who achieved the impossible by becoming the first African-American to win the Noble-Prize in literature in 1993. Her contributions have become the body of African-American literature through both her fictions and non-fictions. Her non-fictions largely focus on the various themes of problems faced by African-American women. They give clear understanding of black life, society and culture.*

**Key words:** *Feminist, theory, perception, ideology, non-fiction and womanhood*

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Toni Morrison is a very familiar name in Afro-American literature. She is a Nobel laureate, spokesperson for social reforms, and the most prominent issues in her writing, involve the problems of black women in various social situations. Morrison traces women's response to the society in the literary theories and activities.

To understand the term 'feminism', K.K. Ruthven in his essay "*Feminist Literary Studies*" from the book *Feminist Literary Theory* has said that, The term 'feminism' was first used by the French dramatist Alexander Dumas, the younger, in 1872 in a Pamphlet 'L' *Homme-femme* to designate the emerging movement for women's right. Then it generally grew into a world-wide cultural movement to secure the complete equality of women with men in the enjoyment of all human rights, religious, social, political, educational, legal, and so on.

From Christinede'Pisan to Marry Wollstonecraft, from Simonde'Beauvoir to Jane Austen and beyond, women have been demanding and fighting for their rights in an andocentric world. Feminism is a protest movement launched by women of West for equal social, political, legal, moral, cultural rights with men. Feminism is sentiment that differentiates a female from the doormat. It is an anti masculine movement of the women, by the women and for the women.

However, the roots of feminism may be traced to the late eighteenth century, the period of French Revolution, but before this there were feminist writings done by Mary Astell, the first English feminist, almost centuries earlier. French Revolution was an era of questioning of demands for a revolutionary restructure of society, of awareness of social injustice. Through this movement, it brought spiritual, racial, economic and social equality to sexually colonized, historically neglected and biologically weak women in focus. The rise of feminism in Europe in the seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries is related to the economic prosperity of the new bourgeois resulting in the use of servants to perform domestic work. In nineteenth century, Feminism remained a protest movement against the suppression of women's rights.

Morrison says that Feminist consciousness is the – consciousness of victimization. It talks about the oppression of women and discoveries and changes that can be done. Present day Feminist Theorists believe that, strictly speaking feminism is an impossible position. The agnostic definition of feminism sees it as the struggle against all forms of patriarchal and sexist oppressions.

The observation above makes it clear that, Feminism is a term, which has been used for women, and it talks about their social, political, religious and most importantly social equality. As Morrison said that the theories of Black Feminism and Womanism were forgotten. These two theoretical concepts were developed to call attention to the multiple oppressions experienced by women of color, reflecting and defining their everyday experience in their own terms. There is prominent distinction between the black feminist and womanist movement from the modern feminist movement, and this has created separation of ideologies from one another.

The modern's movement has excluded the issues of crucial importance to the lives of black women and women of color. Therefore, for a certain time black women forgot their own terms and ideologies, the black feminist movement. Black feminism was initialized in order to focus on the specific issues that affect and shape the lives of women of color. And to understand modern feminism and its various aspects, it is absolutely necessary to trace Black Feminism and aesthetics in America.

Toni Morrison says in *birth of nationhood* that during the revolutionary period when the Declaration of Independence and Constitution of United States were written, the quarter of the Population that was black, was not included. From the outset several centuries ago, the fate of black people in North America involved deportation, slavery, oppression, and struggle. In the



pre-civil War era black leaders like Douglass advocated social reform and racial integration while others like Delany recommended Black Nationalism. Washington argued that black citizenship in America should be attained gradually by hard work, vocational education, and moral improvement. The things, which typifies the early years of the civil rights struggle are resistance to segregation, the upsurge of non-violent protest organizations, the goal of racial integration, and attainment of limited success in the courts and news media.

Morrison describes in *What Moves at the Margin* that the real feminism is a term, which is used for women, where women talk about their oppression, domination through men and society, but in terms of feminism, women feminist themselves have created two divisions and that is in terms of color. For this, within modern feminist movement, white women have been accused of crossing on oppression in terms of gender ignoring issues of race, class and sexuality.

The presentation of woman in Morrison's fiction and non-fiction is different, she does not show woman as an image of angel and mother Mary, but as a victim of white and male society where she may have to act differently.

Morrison further talks about the black feminism in *What Moves at the Margin* that, like the history of white people, black history is very much the history of black men. Black history also became the history of Black men, as black feminists point out, black male critics, radicals and moderates, nationalists and integrationists, and they regularly 'forget' black women. In the non-fiction *what moves at the margin*, Morrison says that the formation of numerous black feminist groups in United States, especially the National Black Feminist Organization, observes the rise of Afro-American women, who in order to make their demands known to the world, must struggle with black men along with white men and women. They are so different that even the, white feminist organizations do not recognize the interests of black women.

Morrison writes that many black women find closer allies with women of color and Third World Women than with white women, because for them the issue of gender is inextricably enmeshed with the issues of class and race. Within the racial ghettos of contemporary colonial and neocolonial societies, the economic, familial, and political situations of many third world women of color have much in common. White women inhabit another world.

Among contemporary African-American literary women it is common to regard black women's literature as having its own special poetics and its own traditions. It is perhaps arguable whether the literature of white women in western societies also constitutes 'Minority Literature' given the numerical superiority of white women in such societies. However, the fact that exceedingly few such women writers enter into the canons of great works in a uniformed society as being in a minority status. Morrison sums up about her non-fictions in her own words as black female writer:

If anything I do, in the way of writing non-fictions (or whatever I write) isn't about the village or the community or about you. Then it is not about anything. I am not interested in indulging myself in some private, closed exercise of my imagination that fulfils only the obligation of my personal dreams, which is to say yes, the work must be political ..... it seems to me that the best art is political and you ought to make it unquestionably political and irrevocably beautiful at the same time.

(*What Moves at the Margin*, 46)

Through her non-fictional writings, Morrison presents the non-linear African-American socio-historical reality, where she shows the effect and the after effect of the history of slavery. Her works offer a fresh perspective on black life, their history and genealogy. Morrison talks about a woman, who loves other women, sexually and/or non-sexually, appreciates and prefers women's culture, women's emotional flexibility (values tears as natural counterbalance of daughter), and women's strength ... committed to the survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female.

Morrison gives a background of black women in the feminist movement, who participated in the feminist movement during the 1960s often met with racism. It generally took the form of exclusion: black women were not invited to participate on conference panels which were not specifically about black or Third world women. They were not equally or even proportionately, represented on the faculty of Women's Studies Departments, nor were there classes devoted specifically to the study of black women's history. In most women's movement writings, the experiences of white, middle class women were described as universal "women's experiences" largely ignoring the differences of black and white women's experiences due to race and class. Part of the overwhelming frustration black women felt within the women's movement was at white feminists' unwillingness to admit to their racism. This unwillingness comes from the sentiment that those who are oppressed cannot oppress others. White women, who were (and still are) without question sexually oppressed by white men, believed that because of this oppression they were unable to assume the dominant role in the perpetuation of white racism; however, they have absorbed, supported and advocated racist ideology and have acted individually as racist oppressors. Traditionally, women's sphere of influence has extended over the home, and it is no coincidence that in 1963, seven times as many women of color (of whom 90 percent were black) as white women were employed as private household workers. It has been the tendency of white feminists to see men as the 'enemy' rather than themselves, as part of the patriarchal, racist and classist society in which people live.



Morrison describes that not only did some white feminists refuse to acknowledge their ability to oppress women of color; some claimed that white women had always been anti-racist. Michele Barrett in *feminism and the definition of culture*, politics points out that 'there is little historical evidence to document Rich's assertion that white women as a collective group or white women's rights advocates are part of an anti-racist tradition. Every women's movement in the United States has been built on a racist foundation: Women's suffrage for white women, the abolition of slavery for the fortification of white society, the temperance movement for the moral uplifting of white society. None of these movements was for black liberation or racial equality. Rather, they sprang from a desire to strengthen white society's morals or to uplift the place of white women in that society.

Finally, Morrison supplements her definition in *playing in the darkness*, that feminism may be defined as the emphases on self-determination, appreciating for all aspects of womanhood, and the commitment to the survival of both men and women. This definition is both affirming and challenging for it commends a woman's stretching of her personal boundaries while at the same time calls on women to maintain their connections to the rest of humanity. The entire self, who is connected to others in the community, is valued in womanism.

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