

# Women’s Revolt against Social Stereotypes in Toni Morrison’s Novels

Ritu Rathi, Department of English, Rohtak

**Abstract :** Toni Morrison, born Chloe Anthony Wofford, is a contemporary novelist who was awarded the Nobel Prize in 1993. The Nobel Committee stated that Morrison is an author who “in novels characterized by visionary force and poetic import, gives life to an essential aspect of American reality” (The Nobel Prize in Literature). In her novels Morrison not only explores racism in the twentieth-century United States from the point of view of blacks, but by centring her stories on black women and their positions within their communities, she draws the reader’s attention to intra-racial issues. Russell emphasises that “Few authors had taken on the task of writing about the diverse and complex lives of black women within the black community as well as holding that community responsible for its own actions”. Although the impact of white racism on black communities is undeniable, Morrison addresses the question of the position of women within black communities, and how their relationships with both men and other women shape their lives. She employs themes of “feminist concerns like female selfrealization, mother-daughter relationship, friendship between women and community bonding all of which is encompassed in the wide-ranging theme of the search for identity. The aim of my thesis is to analyse and compare Morrison’s novels *Sula*, *The Bluest Eye* and *Paradise*, particularly the resistance of female characters to social stereotypes. The three social stereotypes are: the image of black womanhood, the ideal of white beauty, and the gender inequality. I argue that although the female characters of the three novels by Toni Morrison I analyse come from different backgrounds, they share a common characteristic, the search for identity, which triggers their individual revolts against the respective social stereotypes.

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## Definition of the Term ‘Stereotype’

In order to provide a plausible analysis of the revolt of female characters against social stereotypes in Morrison’s novels, it is important to clearly define not only the three social stereotypes I explore but also the term „stereotype“ itself. In their article “Development of Sex Role Stereotypes” Naffziger and Naffziger mention the origin of the term as well as its



use in a contemporary sense of the word. Although they discuss principally the development of sex role stereotypes, their definition of the term „stereotype“ is general and thus relevant for my topic: “The term stereotype first appeared in 1798. Didot, a French printer, employed and perhaps invented the industrial process designed to duplicate pages of type and relief printing-blocks. The essential features of these blocks were their permanence and unchangeableness” (251). These qualities were later “applied to monotonous regularity and formalization in whatever context they would appear.” In a contemporary sense of the word, Naffziger and Naffziger state, the term „stereotype“ refers to “assumed differences, social conventions or norms, learned behaviour, attitudes, and expectations,” and they add that stereotypes usually are “views and opinions” held by a majority of people in a community. I believe that any perceptible differences of an individual from a social stereotype can easily result in his/her repudiation and exposure to the rest of the community that not only brings uncomfortable feelings to both the exposed and the community, but can also have damaging effects on the individual’s personality, and cause his/her complete isolation or even death

### **The Stereotypical Image of Black Womanhood in Sula**

First, I delineate the image of black womanhood at the beginning of the twentieth century. It was a current issue then and it is addressed in Morrison’s novel *Sula*. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, Kennedy in his article claims, two different kinds of women, both kinds referred to as “the New Women,” started to emerge: “the self-sufficient working girl and the dependent, restless „parasite woman. Gradually, women realized what their position in the society of the United States was like and began to fight for its improvement. “The New Women ... appealed to society’s sense of [their] victimization when [they] did demand compensation in the shape of legal, economic, and social reforms, ... they asked for political power to combat the forces that victimized them”. These were the spheres where the changes were most visible, but there was much more to change. Kennedy points out that “with the liberation of women, the transformation of masculine sexuality, the destruction of the double standard ... and the encouragement of a new sense of subjectivism, the nineteenth century had set the scene for the revolution in morals of the twentieth. Yet, it would be a mistake to assume that black women were included in this movement. At the beginning of the twentieth century, black women were still considered practically worthless. Bell Hooks emphasizes the fact that little has changed since the times of slavery: As far back as slavery, white people established a social hierarchy based on race and sex that ranked white men first, white women second, though sometimes equal to black men, who are ranked third, and black



women last ... Most Americans, and that includes black people, acknowledge and accept this hierarchy; they have internalized it either consciously or unconsciously. Although there were courageous black women who rebelled against this hierarchy, who are represented by Sula, the main character of the novel, it was only a small number compared to those who did not have the strength to reject it. Not only were black women at the bottom of the social hierarchy, negative stereotypes were attributed to them as well. “These negative myths and stereotypes have effectively transcended class and race boundaries and affected the way black women were perceived by members of their own race and the way they perceived themselves”. Thus, in addition to the racism black women encountered during their contact with white people, they often had to endure the harsh treatment of their husbands. In addition, Hooks claims that “the predominant image [of black women was] that of the „fallen woman, the whore, the slut, the prostitute. Being surrounded by people with this attitude, black women could only find support and sympathy among other black women who were in the same situation, which is, in my opinion, the reason why friendship played a significant role in black women“s lives.

### **‘Whiteness Stands for Beauty’ and the Concept of Double-Consciousness in The Bluest Eye**

Another stereotype I want to explore is the sentiment that whiteness stands for beauty as it is portrayed in Morrison“s first novel, *The Bluest Eye*, and the concept of double-consciousness coined by W.E.B. Du Bois in his essay “Of Our Spiritual Strivings.” Since whiteness was considered the ideal of beauty in mainstream culture in the United States in the 1940s (the temporal setting of the novel), black people found themselves in a peculiar position. They had to face prejudice that they were ugly and inferior to whites, which inevitably brought self-questioning and reappraisal of their values. Du Bois described this conception and coined the term „double-consciousness“, which is closely related to the social stereotype I discuss: After the Egyptian and Indian, the Greek and Roman, the Teuton and Mongolian, the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second sight in this American world, - a world which yields 12 him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this doubleconsciousness, this sense of always looking at one self through the eyes of others, of measuring one“s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness, - an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings, two warring ideals in one dark body Blacks, Du Bois emphasizes, do not desire to turn white, but only “wish to



make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American, without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of Opportunity closed. This is another point of their difficult position. Encountering western stereotypes around them all the time, it is very fatiguing for blacks to stick to their original African traditions and maintain them openly. As Sunanda Pal points out, “The Black Americans are often deluded into thinking that the dominant ideology is the only valid ideology. Although blacks have their own culture, they sense that whites, followers of mainstream culture, look down on them with disdain, which makes them see themselves through the overly critical, disdainful eyes of whites. Thus blacks adopt the ideals and values of whites and feel inferior, not worthy of the same opportunities as whites have. This common sentiment was supported not only by contemporary race theories, but also by the attitudes of the presidents of the United States Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson. Although Roosevelt invited Booker T. Washington for a dinner at the White House, he did not consider blacks equal to whites and in a letter to Owen Wister said that blacks “as a race and in the mass they are altogether inferior to the whites. As for Wilson, Gossett asserts, he approved the policy of his administration that “federal civil service workers were segregated by race in their employment, with separate eating and toilet facilities”. Other politicians shared the same opinion that whites are superior to blacks. For instance, James Kimble Vardaman, who campaigned for governor in 1900, characterized blacks as “lazy, lying, lustful animal which no conceivable amount of training can transform into a tolerable citizen. Since the sentiment of ordinary people was supported by public figures, many blacks yielded to the conviction that they actually have all the characteristics assigned to them, which resulted in the feeling of double-consciousness.

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