

# The Experience of Alienation in Toni Morrison's Work: Man's Fragmentation and Concomitant Distortion

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## Abstract

The question of alienation has always been a pervasive theme in the history of modern thought, and it occupies a considerable place in contemporary work. Literature in general, and fiction in particular, raise this issue to reveal its influence on human beings and communities. Novelists have been trying to unravel its complexities and concomitant consequences. The paper aims to explore the experience of alienation through depicting the issue not as a purely racial reality, or something restricted to the colour of the skin or gender of the victim. It is rather presented as a distressing state which cripples the victims and makes them susceptible captives of the dominant forces. In the selected novels, Toni Morrison has delved deep into the experience of alienation through her male and female characters, showing the different forms of this experience. The present research investigates Morrison's portrayal of the issue from an African-American prospect. References will be made to novels such as *Tar Baby*, *Sula*, *The Bluest Eye*, *Song of Solomon*, and *Beloved*.

**Keywords:** Toni Morrison, African-American, alienation, black literature, western culture

## 1. Introduction

The question of alienation is a prevalent theme in the history of modern thought, and it occupies a considerable place in contemporary work. The thinker who coined the concept of alienation was Hegel. According to him, man's history coalesces with the history of man's alienation. In fact, the concept of alienation is one of the most important and fruitful part of Hegel's social philosophy and his discussion of the relation between man and existence. It is usually regarded to be an entirely negative idea. Alienation as understood by Hegel, is a developmental phase in man's history. Thus "In Hegel, alienation is not purely negative phenomenon; it is a stage in the process of human development" (Sayers, 2011, p. XII). Marx inherited the concept of alienation from Hegel, and it figured most prominently in his early writings. It is quite implicit throughout Marx's work, providing a major basis for his treatment and understanding of other major concepts. He formulated the materialistic conception of alienation in opposition to Hegel who was more idealistic. Alienation, as Marx interprets it, arises when individuals are separated from their "species-being", which comprises the features of human beings. People become alienated when they are not living a life worthy of their humanity. Melville Seeman, an American sociologist, identified five varieties of alienation: powerlessness, meaninglessness, normlessness, isolation, and self-estrangement. According to the *New Fontana Dictionary of Modern Thought*, alienation indicates "a sense of estrangement from society, a feeling of powerlessness to effect social change and of the depersonalization of the individual" (Bullock & Trombley, 1999, p. 55). And given Marx's hypothesis that alienation is based on the distinction between existence and essence, it is clear that alienation tends to be a subjective reality leading to a deformed stance of reality. Alienation springs from the fact that man does not become what he potentially is: a fragment of the whole. Depersonalization, powerlessness, and self-estrangement all seem to suggest a sense of detachment within the self, and at the same time lead to a distorted attitude towards the relation between man and the world around him. Thus, Hegel, Marx, and Seeman seem to confirm the core of alienation that it is essentially a distinction between man's subjective and objective existence. In the twentieth century, man started to confront a problem of his own creation: How to overcome fragmentation in an increasingly hostile environment? In the process, man "becomes alienated, estranged from self and world" (Taylor & Mark, p. 28)

In her fiction, Toni Morrison has succeeded in unraveling and explaining the complexities of African-American

experience. As a novelist who has placed her narratives in fundamental periods of black U.S. history, Morrison has dedicated her literary career to portraying and exploring issues of paramount importance in African-American experience. Morrison therefore has succeeded in this by illuminating the lives of her narratives' characters as they endure, cope with, or react to the effects of alienation. In the work of Toni Morrison, man, who is chained to the single fragment of the whole, never appears to maintain a sense of harmony between his subjective and objective realities. In this context, the whole is partly the African-American community constantly suffering from alienation, and mainly American society at large. Thus depicting a disjointed culture striving to coalesce in a racial society, Morrison tries to convey her characters, who fail to negotiate meaningful identities due to their acute sense of alienation and fragmentation. "Characters' psyches are revealed to be whole yet divided, families oscillate between unity and separation, communities exist yet are always already fragmented, and blacks and whites are always of odds" (Page, pp. 3-4). In fact, as a black American author, Toni Morrison reveals the extent to which her characters are influenced by alienation; she portrays in her fiction that alienation is not limited to men and women, but it encompasses towns, localities, landscapes and streets. As depicted in her novels, African Americans desperately cling to anything that may come in their way in an effort to overcome oppression and segregation. If any outlet could be suggested, Morrison would have maintained a return to one's roots, and to have roots is to have a shared history. The lack of roots and the disconnection from the community and the past leads to individuals' alienation. Morrison tries to shed new light on the failure of her characters to identify, to fulfill an essential self, and thus to maintain a balance between their subjective and objective realities, between existence and essence.

## 2. Discussion

Through her characters, Toni Morrison portrays the problems of people that spring from the interference of an alien culture on their racial, social, and personal lives and the imposing of strange ideas, ideals, and definitions which are difficult to cope with. Toni Morrison depicts black people's estrangement and alienation. The main characters of *Tar Baby* experience alienation although they are living in modern society. The reason for their alienation is capitalism. From the inception of her literary career, Morrison has suggested the link between capitalism and African-American suffering. In *Tar Baby*, which has received the least attention among her early novels, Morrison explores the concept of fragmentation through the exposition of interracial cultures. Morrison explores the experience of the retired white man, Valerian, his wife, and his son. Valerian and his wife go to a Caribbean retreat. The family paradise also holds two loyal black servants, Ondine the cook and her husband, Sydney the butler. The servants' niece, Jadine, arrives on the island from the Sorbonne where she was educated at Valerian's expense. The integrated tranquility of the street household is broken by an intruder from the American South, a poor black sailor called Son. Taken in by Valerian, Son is ultimately the reason behind the division of the family. Toni Morrison reveals the influence of alienation upon these two characters, and how they become fragmented and split through two cultures: the dominant white culture or the traditional African culture. Son and Jadine, through the course of the novel, made their choice. Morrison suggests that, although Jadine and Son have made their choice, they are still disturbed by the feeling and state of alienation. Son has chosen his own culture only to suffer from estrangement with the urban society. Jadine has identified herself with the dominant white culture only to be troubled by her isolation from the black culture:

She's one of the tar babies of the novel, a creation of capitalist America, her behavioral patterns, dress, language associations, and ideology are all those of ruling class and, as such, demonstrate her hatred of Africa and all that is associated with it... It is this attempt to be other than herself that causes Jadine's insecurity throughout the novel. As a Europhiliae, she feels threatened by African women who are ashamed of their identity and culture. (Mbalia, 1998, pp. 94-95)

Jadine's European education and Paris experience do not exempt her from being terrified by the dreams in which strange black women appear to intimidate her, and a dark, dark African woman gives vent to her contempt by spitting at her. "As the individual whose cultural exile is the most profound, Jadine is haunted by waking visions, born out of guilt and fear" (Willis, 1993, p. 314). These terrifying visions, experienced by Jadine, appear in a different form to Pauline Breedlove in *The Bluest Eye*. Pauline is drawn deeper down into frustration by the contrast she sees in the life depicted on the silver screen, and her front store house: "...she was never able after her education in the movies to look at a face and not assign it some category in the scale of absolute beauty, and the scale was one she absorbed in full from the silver screen". (Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*, 1990, p. 97)

Toni Morrison has conveyed her dislike for the impingement of cultural standards, by portraying some of her female characters as victims of cultural adjustment. In her *Sula*, Morrison depicts a woman who refuses to conform to strict community connections. Sula turns the conventions of her small home town upside down. Envisioned by Morrison as a non-conformist, Sula rejects the traditional notions of feminine responsibility and

refuses to see women as only wives and mothers. Sula, the non-conformist, Jadine, the affluent model, and Pauline, who is enslaved by the silver screen belles, are examples of Morrison's characters who in the venture to evade the solidarity of their race and society fall into the betterment of alienation.

The difficulty of adjustment, which usually emanates from an acute sense of alienation, drives some of Morrison's characters to find an outlet for repressed emotions. In the *Bluest Eye*, she points out that it is the lack of such an outlet that distorts even a positive emotion like love. Cholly Breedlove expresses his love to his daughter after raping her:

Cholly saw her dimly and could not tell what he saw or what he felt. Then he became aware that he was uncomfortable, next he felt that discomfort dissolves into pleasure. The sequence of his emotions was revulsion, guilt, pity, and then love... Her back hunched that way; her head to one side was though crouching from a permanent and unrelieved blow. Why did she have to look so whipped?... Why wasn't she happy?... guilt and impotence rose in a bilious duet. What could he do for her-ever?... What could a burned out Black man say to the hunched back of his eleven-year-old daughter? (Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*, 1990, p. 127)

Morrison has also used Sula to show the extent of derangement created in the character and personality of human being as a result of alienation. She comments on this character of Mellie McKay:

She is a masculine character in that sense. She will do the kinds of things that normally only men do, which is why she's so strange. She really behaves like a man. She picks up a man, drops a man. The same way a man picks up a woman, drops a woman. And that's her thing. She's masculine in that sense. She is adventuresome, she trusts herself, she's not scared, she really ain't scared. And she is curious and will leave and try anything. So, that quality of masculinity and I mean this in the pure sense in a woman at that time is outrage, total outrage. (McKay, 1993, p. 392)

An impressive point in Toni Morrison's fiction is her all-inclusive outlook; she does not try in this sense to exclude men from her works. Morrison excels in providing literature with some very impressive male characters. Her heroes, like her heroines, experience the pangs of alienation. Morrison honestly acknowledges the fact that the influence of slavery and its repercussions is not exclusively gender based.

Morrison's use of multiple perspectives has always allowed her to show a number of subjects as comments and variations on the central character. And her early alterations between male and female versions of the "free" character, show that she does not exclude women from subjective life of choice. (Davis, 1998, p. 37)

Thus irrespective of gender, Morrison depicts the impact of alienation in the hearts and minds of her male characters. She has portrayed the distressing experiences of people who have deliberately distanced themselves from the community in their quest for material prosperity; or besieged by the commands of the white masters who turn these male characters into mute followers. Macon Dead of *Song of Solomon* thinks that his money and the keys to the shacks that he rents out are compensations for an unhappy marriage; he advises his son, Milkman:

Let me tell you right now the one important thing you will ever need to know: Own things. And let the things you own, own other things. Then you will own yourself and other people too. Starting Monday, I'm going to teach you how. (Morrison, *Song Of Solomon*, p. 55)

This extensive scope of African-American life, as presented by Morrison's works, is quite evident. She suggests that men, women, and people in general bond more strongly, developing filial relationships and retaining the inherent qualities which are still assimilated within their psyches. It is interesting to note that most of these characters are women, the women not in the prime of their lives, but those who have endured and succeeded in overcoming the assailments of brutality, whose lives "Were synthesized in their eyes—a puree of tragedy and humor, wickedness and serenity, truth and fantasy" (Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*, 1990, p. 109).

The failure and reparation, experienced by these powerful heroines, have rendered them "suspended between the nastiness of life and the meanness of the dead..." (Morrison, *Beloved*, p. 4). The others like Jadine, Sula, and Pecola are taken in by the cruel forces due to their failure to attach themselves to the links that might have helped them to associate with the natural forces which "are vital to Black women as female healers. Black women merge mystery and madness in a way that deepens and gives roots to their lives, their souls. And this depth, resonance, darkness, in the crux of what Jadine ever has and Pecola is denied". (Holloway, 1987, p. 152)

Alienation diminishes the Blacks into properties, enabling their white masters to loan them, rent them, buy them, store them, mortgage them, steal them or seize them as commodities. Seen as just fragmented objects by white masters, due to their sense of alienation, these African Americans become a kind of ownership. In *Beloved*, Morrison mentions, "Anybody Baby Suggs knows, let alone loved, who hadn't run off or been hanged, got

rented out, brought up back, stored up, mortgaged, won, stolen or seized” (Morrison, *Beloved*, 1991, p. 23). The novel captures the consequences of a lifetime of slavery and the atrocities inflicted on two former slaves, Paul D and Sethe. After the death of their original master, Mr. Garner, their new master, the Schoolteacher, puts them in a position among animals. He treats them as though they were animals without emotions. Toni Morrison reveals in *Beloved* that this dehumanization does not only operate on the individual level but also on the societal level; the white people believe them to be close to animals and should remain in slavery: “Because African Americans are inferior to the whites in the endowments both of body and mind, slavery becomes justified and necessary”. (Jefferson, 2017, p. 38)

Another engaging aspect of Toni Morrison’s narratives is that it is the “respectable negroes” who are more susceptible to alienation than ordinary Blacks. The repulsion of Geraldine on seeing Pecola in her house and Macon Dead’s aversion to the Black tenants, the objection raised by Childs in retaining Son in the villa reflect their fear of their Black selves which threaten to come out of the mask of being strong supporters of everything English. They are quick and loud in expressing their disapproval. In fact, this exposes their agony in losing the self-improved superiority which they flaunted before the “loud, dirty, niggers”. These unrestrained selves, living in an alien society, cling desperately to any harbor that may free them from their fragmentation:

Knowing that there was such a thing as outdoors bred in us a hunger for property, for ownership, the firm possession of a yard, a porch, a grape arbor Propertyed Black people spent all their energies, all their love, on their nests. Like frenzied, desperate birds, they over decorated everything; fussed and fidgeted over their hard-won homes; canned, jellied, and preserved all summer to fill the cupboards and shelves... And these houses loomed like hot house sunflowers among the rows of weeds that were the rented houses. (*The Bluest Eye*, 1990, p. 12)

This reveals a frantic sense of ownership in as much as shows their desire to identify to place and reluctance from fragmentation. This would also form the starting point towards affiliation with society at large.

Toni Morrison excels in portraying the subjugated and defeated characters in her narratives. They are “marginal, luminal personalities who lack social, spiritual, psychological, historical, geographical or genealogical place or “center”. The betwixt—and betweenness necessarily involve them in a quest for a personal and or communal wholeness and fulfillment” (Wilfred & Hudson, 2000, p. 87). Following these defeated personalities come the dynamic Blacks who try to make an attempt to eliminate the remnants of alienation. They are presented in Morrison’s works as characters undergoing transition. However, the most sparkling spot in Toni Morrison’s vision of fictional characters is her portrayal of the victorious, those who tower over others, unhampered by the enveloping chaos. They are those who have the art of “flying without ever leaving the ground”. (Morrison, *Song of Solomon*, 1978, p. 340) Through these characters, Morrison confirms the fact that even an agonizing experience like alienation can be defeated. Although Toni Morrison has adequately made use of the theme of alienation in her fiction, she does not deem it as a perpetual existence. She depicts it, in her narratives, as a phase through which some generations of Africans and Americans have to go through due to conditions related to the system of slavery, where the owners use a lot of tactics to dissuade the slaves that their situation is helpless:

These mind controlling tactics took a variety of forms, beginning with the destruction of family and linguistic groups in the assigning of slaves to plantations in the New World. The psychological damage attendant upon realizing that one was separated from blood relatives and kin people essentially alone in the world, worked to the benefit of the slave holder and was designed to teach dependency in the slave. At the least sign of pitilessness slaveholder could further “break” slaves with a series of barbaric punishments, including whipping, branding a letter on the face or back, cropping an ear or a finger confining them in bits... All of these tactics were everyday reminder to slaves that the masters possessed their minds and memories—had indeed erased if not destroyed their histories—even as they owned their bodies. (Gillespie, 2012, p. 53)

### 3. Conclusion

In this paper, attention is centered upon the discussion of the agonizing experience of alienation in African-American communities through a process of fragmentation and distortion. Toni Morrison has skillfully delved deep into the bitter experiences of her characters, revealing the amount of subdued emotions and tacit feelings that desperately needed an outlet. In her early novels, *Tar Baby*, *Sula*, *The Bluest Eye*, and *Song of Solomon*, Morrison depicts how the experiences of alienation transform her black characters into creatures vulnerable to defeat. The paper also finds that Morrison’s interest in and endeavor to confront the darkness and complexity of human nature requires her to create characters whose trauma results not only from a single aggression or detached events, but also from a sequence of life’s experiences, a sustained exposure to danger,

and an ongoing pattern of abuse. In Cholly's rape of his daughter, Pecola, in *The Bluest Eye*; in Eva Peace's setting fire to her son in *Sula*; in Sethe's slitting her infant daughter's throat in *Beloved*, and in Guitar's attempted murder of his friend, Milkman Dead, in *Song of Solomon*, Morrison dramatizes the fragmentation, distortion, isolation, violence, and abuse that her characters experience and suffer from.

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