

History as an Inevitable Element in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* and Ben Okri's *The Famished Road*

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Abstract

This paper in particular analyses the interconnectedness between history and reality of two different writers. This comparative literary study scrutinizes the narrative strategies of contemporary writers –Toni Morrison and Ben Okri. This paper argues the historic representation as a mode of rendering the past. Unrecognized pain of the past suffered by every individual stands as a history in the works of Toni Morrison and Ben Okri. Toni Morrison through her novel *Beloved*, recalls the system of slave trade practice held in her homeland to her fellow beings. She daringly unveils the lives of African American ancestors through her memories. On the other hand, focusing parallel study on Nigerian writer Ben Okri, the identity and the facts of Africa and its inner regions in his novel *The Famished Road* is brought out. He portrays much imagery to voice to those who are without any power. This comparative study represents history as a key role in representing the life of people and rewriting the histories through their narrative skill.

Keywords: Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, Ben Okri's *The Famished Road*, History, Culture, African American, Slavery, Cultural Identity.



i. TONI MORRISON (1931-)



ii. BEN OKRI (1959-)

Picture Courtesy: i. <https://www.google.com/search?q=toni+morrison&source>

ii. <https://www.google.com/search?q=ben+okri&source>

Introduction

The alphabets, the words and the sentences written in a paper joined together have the great power to produce ideas and intention of a person, which radically change the way one views of himself or herself and the place of his/her history. Percy Bysshe Shelley defined the poets as “unacknowledged legislators” of the world. It is simple in thought, yet at its core, it represents the powerful truth of writer’s role in a society. Writers create a lasting impact on people’s mind and provoke the philosophical faith. Exactly this is the task played by Toni Morrison and Ben Okri through their writings. Both carry out the power of writing to create a social empowerment change focusing human in general beyond gender bias.

Literary Introduction

African American literature frames the body of literature written by Americans of African descent. This literature illuminates the African American’s search for identities. African American writers largely focus on the culture, racism, slavery and social equality in and around the society. The incorporation of oral forms, spiritual ideologies, the issues of freedom and equality are also found in it. Writers like Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, W.E.B. Dubois, Zora Neale Hurston, James Baldwin, Langston Hughes, Maya Angelou, Lorraine Hansberry have lifted the honour of African American literature to a world-wide one by winning Booker Prizes and Nobel Prizes for literature.

African Literature and its offspring Nigerian literature is taken into consideration with regards to long literary tradition of oral history, artistic folklore, verbal art and oral literature. The cognitive writers in Africa speak for their country through the medium of literature. The works of Amos Tutuola, Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka and James Ngugi are amongst those well known inside and outside Africa. Their language communicates cultural, social and racial ideas and the nuances of traditions, with the blend of old and new philosophies.

Author Introduction

Toni Morrison forcefully throwbacks the history of African American’s live. Through the medium of novel, Morrison has reshaped and restructured the prevailing facts and pain of slavery. Generally, literature throws light upon a society’s people, manner of living, economic crisis and structure, political movements and history. In the same way Morrison has focused on African American’s pain of slavery, problem of politics, culture and traditional values. Morrison emphasizes on the living of black people amongst the whites both in the present and the past. She provides the problems of her folks artistically, historically and politically which is important forever. Through her works she constructs and reconstructs the importance of past in the present world.

Ben Okri is a respected author of the book *The Famished Road* which won the Booker prize in 1991. He was born in northern Nigeria. Immediately he moved to London and grew up there. He is best criticized as a Cosmopolitan writer, considering that he has studied in England, lived in London and finally Okri’s point of view remains decidedly African root rather than metropolitan. Okri has spent much of his adult life in England but acknowledges that Africa is the only place that he really wants to write about. Besides bearing the award Booker Prize for

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fiction, he has won many prestigious awards. Okri's works frequently focus on the political, social and economic conditions of contemporary Nigeria. The rich quality of Okri's writings is, he employs paradox and dualism to contrast the rich and poor areas of typical Nigerian city.

Ben Okri in the post World War has offered the transformation of history, cultural significance, the interruption of hybridity. He has enabled a new way of looking problems and observed the world from different perspective. He paves way to see the 'truth' with an enchanting vision of human mind. Okri investigates the sociocultural issues, historical secrets through the medium of literature. The language of dreams and magical events are constantly found in his seminal works. Okri specifically trap the African consciousness to connect the politics with history. Okri analyses postcolonial ideologies with his third eye vision.

Historical Elements in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*

Morrison's fifth novel *Beloved* is her literary triumph. The novel is set at the end of Civil war. Violence was a great deal among the blacks. Morrison has used the historical events concerning the people of her society. Morrison has exclusively given a new perspective to the historical context. The horrifying past of the slavery which remains untold are re-written in the form of historical novel. The trauma is in the form of racism, slavery, subjugation and search of cultural identity of the African Americans. She returns to history to search for the complex truth and pain of human. Morrison selects up the issues of unknown historical personages in order to revitalize their painful past at the same time to build them as a hopeful presence in a contemporary setting. She incorporates historical elements in order to find something subjectivity and complexity. Morrison dedicated *beloved* 'to sixty million and more' who failed to survive the 'Middle Passage' voices for the dismembered and unaccounted for.

The inner motive of using history as an element to express her thoughts is she rediscovers the history and the past and shares the communal struggle. The discovery of history is to ensure that prestigious and painful heritage of her black community which will never be forgotten. As said above, the novel is set at the end of the Civil war, the aftereffects of slavery is still fresh both physically and psychologically. Sethe is the central figure who communicates to the readers the fragments of history. The voice of Sethe is heard not as an individual voice but as a communal voice. Through the narrative device of 'history', Morrison depicts the historical reality and emphasizes the period of 1860s and 1870s, and straightly maintains the social changes before and after the civil war throughout the novel. It mainly depicts and results the maintenance of cultural behavior and the shift of cultural change because of the war.

During, before and after the war he had seen Negroes so stunned, or hungry, or tired or bereft it was a wonder they recalled or said anything. Who, like him, had hidden in caves and fought owls for food; who like him, stole from pigs; who like him, slept in tress in the day and walked by the night... he saw a witless colored woman jailed and hanged for stealing ducks she believed were her own children (*Beloved* 78).

From the above quotes it is understood that the novel is a true inspiration and effects of real-life incidents. As mentioned briefly in the introductory section, Morrison maintains the abnormal development of slavery and the painful memories with the psychological dimension. Morrison herself has said regarding the historical perspectives, “I wanted it to be truly felt. I wanted to translate the historical into the personal” (Art 103). She translated the voice of memory into the voice of personal. The happened histories are filled with blood and beat and given life through the character Sethe. Therefore, Morrison has opened a new possibility of writing to envision history. In the selected work of art *Beloved*, the re-enactment of past experience aiming to reveal the true reality of history is achieved through the arrangement of facts and fiction of historical evidence and imaginative constructions. She has also made it interesting by collecting fragmented interior by a disintegrated pretense. For example,

the Fugitive Bill, the Settlement Fee, God’s Ways and Negro pews; antislavery, manumission, skin voting, Republicans, Dred Scott, book learning, Sojourners’ high wheeled buggy, the colored ladies of Delaware, Ohio and the other weighty issues that held (slaves) in chairs, scrapping the floorboards or pacing them in agony or exhilaration. (*Beloved*173)

By reimagining and re-enacting a cultural past and memory in *Beloved*, Morrison retells the unforbidden history which is buried in the past of history. *Beloved* is the personification of the white folk’s jungle, the psychological effects of slavery. As a crucial link, *Beloved* connects Africa and America for the enslaved women. Morrison marvelously renders the history in a way that will never be forgotten universally. She stands as an example to the verdict that history as an inevitable element.

The dehumanization and torture made Sethe and her children like animals. The School Teacher who is an owner of a Sweet Home tortured and dehumanized the family of Sethe. The tortures of School Teacher made the everlasting mark which has been termed as the historical element in the life of Sethe. Sethe decided to free herself from the clutches of slavery and after twenty-eight days of freedom she was able to reconstruct her identity which she had lost in slavery. She is therefore gained control over her body, milk, children, mind and decision. Sethe describes her feeling after freedom,

Look like I loved em more after I got here. Or, maybe, I could not love em proper in Kentucky because they wasn’t mine to love. But when I got here, when I jumped down of that wagon-there wasn’t nobody in the world I could not love if I wanted to. (*Beloved* 162)

This was the first step to heal her traumas that she suffered under slavery. She is the one who commits her infanticide by killing her daughter *Beloved* which adds a new trauma and brutal memories in her mind. Her feelings of motherhood is too thick in which she decides death is primary than slavery. By killing her daughter Sethe felt that she freed both her daughter and herself. She in turn acts as a defender of freedom of herself and her children. Killing of one’s own daughter becomes a historical mark which Toni Morrison daringly brought out in African

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American Literature. Rajini in “*Subsistence in Distress: The Protagonist’s Confrontation in Shashi Deshpande’s That Long Silence*” says that, “the inequity, the hostility, the subordination and the torture caused to women are the armaments that the writers of women offered to protest and revolt” (1).

For Morrison and Sethe, killing her beloved daughter is a solution to stop racism and oppression that are caused by White people. The child Beloved becomes the embodiment of the traumatic past later begins to consume Sethe and deprive her extraordinary potential. Cathy Caruth asserts, “Trauma as an overwhelming violent event or events that are not fully grasped as they occur, but return later in repeated flashbacks, nightmares...” (91). Beloved grows so huge where they cannot be controlled by anyone. The body of Beloved becomes the symbol of the past and the communal history is emphasized. Toni Morrison portrayed the character Beloved as a symbol of African American history and memory.

History as a Mode of Expression in Ben Okri’s *The Famished Road*

On the other hand, the comparative study of Ben Okri’s novel *The Famished Road* explores familiar themes and narrative strategies. *The Famished Road* leads to a world where historical importance is enlarged and augmented. Life existing at different levels of consciousness is appropriately rendered. This novel influences African religion and philosophy which becomes the element of history. The protagonist of *The Famished Road* is a spirit child; his spiritual existence in many worlds provides the author with an important point to recount the visible and invisible suffering of the poor and the powerless during historical changes. The poor black people were tormented; frustrated by the other which made a history in his novels.

The supernatural and the magical manner highlight the fundamental characteristics of African life and people. The protagonist chooses to leave the spirit world and stay in the living despite depressions prevails. Ben Okri portrays the future developments of his native Nigeria through his novel. He also praises historical changes at various levels by exploring different points of view and by reshaping European literary traditions with African views. As a result, history in *The Famished Road* takes fantastic and mythical dimensions. According to Okri, Africa is a still undiscovered continent. He not only challenges the dream of Africa but also brings out an extensive conversation between European and African ideologies and aesthetics. Okri redirected the history and the legend of Africa at the time of shocking colonialism. His literary imagination dwells upon the areas of the African consciousness such as resilience of spirit, elasticity of aesthetics and the capacity of dreaming. The novel examines the inviolate areas together with socio realistic, geo political and historical issues.

In general, Okri’s fiction condemns the perverted corruption and violence in contemporary Nigeria which altogether voices to the poorest and the most powerless members of the African community. He also describes the confrontations between western and indigenous traditions in postcolonial Africa. Like Okri, other Nigerian writers such as Chinua Achebe and Wole Soyinka have also frequently explored the theme of empowering the poorest and the powerless members of Africa. *The Famished Road* is one of the greatest contributions to postcolonial fiction which culminates the bringing of mythical images to portray the public and the outside world.

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The protagonist Azaro's description of the rainy season in which his father is recovering from a terrifying Coma as a result of his boxing attack with a mysterious and creepy man in a white suit creates historical elements. In his unconscious state his father is actively re-dreaming the world. Following his father's cyclical dreams Azaro recounts the "sequence of things" that his father sees and dislikes.

He saw our people drowning in poverty, in famine, drought, in divisiveness and the blood of war. He saw our people always preyed upon by other powers, manipulated by the Western world, our history and achievements rigged out of existence. (*The Famished Road* 564)

The integrity of poverty, tyranny, corruption, division and warfare becomes a historical element in many of post independent African countries. In a different manner the father's dream as a historical element re-enacts what Ade an abiku child prophecies before his return to the spirit world. "Suffering is coming, there will be wars and famine, terrible things will happen, new diseases, hunger...there will be changes" (*The Famished Road* 547). Through these lines Okri pinpoints a change in African way of life. Azaro and Ade are able to express and foretell history because they are abikus living once in a human and the spirit world. An abiku is a spirit child or a "roaming child" who dies and returns again and again to plague the mother. In other words, an abiku is repetition with the temporal difference. Abiku becomes trope for the nature of being. It is also considered as a cycle which symbolizes the birth, death and the rebirth and of past, present and future. The meaning of the road becomes even more diverse and it also takes mythic and spiritual dimensions.

The road as a historical element witnesses to pre-colonial, colonial and post colonial realities. The protagonist from the three-headed spirit unique beings has been breeding for two thousand years in which the road cannot be finished. They consider the road as their soul and the soul of their history. The protagonist's father's new vision of the road brings out wisdom and transformation. Ben Okri through these historical elements brings out the transformation to African people. The road becomes a timeless historical element in which pre-colonial, colonial and postcolonial expressions are interacted and blended together. The cyclical nature of history suggests that human beings are doomed to protest corruption and evil in each generation. These people are fated to repeat the errors of the past without making any decisive progress. Becoming tired of the restless cycle Azaro chooses to be born and likes to stay in the human world to revolt the authority of the spirits. Okri asserts that he is "very interested in history and the book is about the history" (Wilkinson 86).

Conclusion

Historical facts play a vital role in determining the characters in their assertion of their own individuality and identity. Morrison in *Beloved* discovered the self of the black people who involved in slavery and struggled with one's own past and present. African Americans and even Nigerians continue to be relatively powerless and less able to define and refine themselves. Both the African Americans and Nigerians are manipulated by the 'other' which becomes the

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autonomous construction of African American identity. Both Toni Morrison and Ben Okri strived hard to give an identity and equality to the black. These writers have taken historical elements as a tool to get rid of the torments and sufferings of slavery for the future generations. After experiencing slavery, these writers have daringly incorporated historical elements in their fictions. Black people are inscribed by whipping, torture and violent death which has become the identity marker. *Beloved* and *Azaro* have been constituted to be the inherent identity of the black. Both the writers used the black as evidence to depict African American traumas and proved that the history lives in the present. Not only Morrison succeeds in using the black as mode of trauma narrative, Ben Okri asserts the importance of expressing the true image of black through the arena of fiction.

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