

# Toni morrison's depictions of african american culture



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## Abstract

Toni Morrison is an award-winning author, best defined for her explicitly intricate narratives displaying African Americans throughout history.

Morrison reconceptualizes the cultural perception of African Americans through her depictions of fictitious stories. She is critically acclaimed for this type of writing, such as in the novel *Song of Solomon*. She allows readers outside of the African American community truly to grasp the devastating effects of life-altering racism today.

*Keywords* : Morrison, African American, racism, reconceptualize

Toni Morrison: No Need to Apologize

“ I’m writing for black people... I don’t have to apologise” (Morrison, Toni Morrison: ‘ I’m writing for black people ... I don’t have to apologise’, 2015).

Toni Morrison, an African American novelist, professor, and editor, rose to fame with her incomparable ability to depict the history of racial prejudice and the demonization of African Americans in a timeless manner. Her fictitious narratives displaying African Americans in society best define Morrison, allowing her to create a lens into the life of a minority, which lead her to receive a Nobel Prize, a Pulitzer Prize, and a presidential medal of freedom from President Barack Obama. Morrison published her first novel in 1939, and continues to publish novels through the critical race theory period and cultural period. These periods focus on the cultural perceptions of race, which appears evident in Morrison’s focus on the effects of racial prejudice relating to self-image/perception, identity, and life itself. Morrison uses the effects of storytelling and the imagery in the characterization of characters

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in her novels to achieve this. In an era of blatant bigotry against members of the African American community, Morrison has no need to apologize. She is undeniably authentic.

#### Section I:

Toni Morrison displays the African American culture like none before.

Morrison grew up in Ohio in 1941. Her obsession for the characterization of African Americans began here- telling stories to her family about the African American community. Stories of African American demonization encapsulated her life from a young age, leading her to write her own in the future. Morrison recounts a memory of her childhood in an interview with BBC, "As a child I had to retell those stories [African American folklore and stories of her childhood with her family] to other adults. These tales were pretty much horror stories about life as an African American. They were powerful and highly metaphorical but that's really what was at the bottom of it" (Morrison, Toni Morrison: Childhood Memories , 2014). Morrison's childhood rooted in storytelling relates to her writing presently. She writes fictitious stories depicting African Americans and intentionally chooses to spare no detail. " Morrison focuses on inter- and intraracial violence in her fiction even at the potential cost of alienation, or even unsettling or hurting, some of her readers" (Bouson, 2000). The personal relationship Morrison has with storytelling shapes the personal relationship she has with her readers. There is no need to spare any detail; she has no need to apologize.

Morrison grew in an era of racism and bigotry, leading to a desire to

reconceptualize the cultural perception of the African American culture  
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through literature. Morrison's works were part of an African American literature renaissance in the 1970's that led to the reconceptualization of African Americans. One author states, " During the time that *Love* depicts, the role of black women in the Civil Rights Movement had not been adequately been recognized" (Duvall, 2012). Morrison redefines African American women by this era. Duvall further describes this writing as " patriarchal", which defines Morrison perfectly.

Not only did Morrison's childhood directly affect her literature, but also the present day. " Describing herself as living in " a present that wishes both to exploit and deny the persuasiveness of racism" and in a society in which African Americans have had to " bear the brunt of everyone else's contempt" (Bouson, 2000). Many individuals in the present believe that racism has ended. African Americans serve as symbol, according to Morrison, of this reoccurring racism today. Morrison writes to reconceptualize this thought and give African Americans a new sense of identity.

## Section II:

The novels written by Toni Morrison were critically acclaimed for both the good and the bad. Toni Morrison is able to redefine African American cultural perception through the characterization in her novels, which relates to her main goal in " writing for black people".

One critic believes this is not an effective tactic. The critique states, " Toni Morrison is far too talented to remain only a marvelous recorder of the black side of provincial American life" (Napier, 2000). This critic recognizes

Morrison's as a " marvelous recorder", but fails to see the purpose in <https://assignbuster.com/toni-morrison-depictions-of-african-american-culture/>

Morrison's writing. Blackburn believes Morrison is limiting herself remaining in the constraints of African American history.

Other critics feel differently about Morrison's identity throughout her novels. One critic states about Morrison, "From her vantage at the intersection of race and gender, Toni Morrison represents an exemption from "phallographic law"; her own language and her theory of language, as she has demonstrated in her five novels and explained in a number of essays..." (Rigney, 1991). The critic goes on to talk about racial identity and feminism as seen through Morrison and other African American female writers. She acknowledges that Morrison and other African American female writers argue for liberation and oppression, but views this as a strength in constructing liberating literature. The ways that Morrison views the world through her race and gender allow her to assert identity in her novels. According to Rigney, "In Morrison's texts, to be "other," i. e., black and female, is to have privileged insights, access to that "special knowledge" she both inscribes and describes repeatedly in her novels" (Rigney, 1991). This "otherness" that Morrison describes about the African American community is further explained by Rigney later in the novel. Rigney states that the "otherness" that Morrison possesses is a strength in her writing, not a weakness as Blackburn stated. Rigney uses the metaphor of a mirror to describe the "otherness" that Morrison captures through her writing. African American readers can "come to terms with one's own otherness". She describes how Morrison represents the culture of African Americans and allows the community to reside in her literature as a home (Rigney, 1991).

### Section III:

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The reconceptualization of African Americans that Toni Morrison achieves in her novels presents itself in her novel *Song of Solomon*. *Song of Solomon* displays characters that depict the epitome of the effects of racism. In the novel, identity is the unfortunate paralyzer- plaguing each character in various ways. The purpose of *Song of Solomon* is to decisively show the impact of racism and how many African Americans view racism.

“ In *Song of Solomon* , the spiritual rebirth of its central protagonist, Milkman Dead, is dependent upon the rediscovery and black cultural identity and history embedded in black folk stories, black myths... oral black history that includes tale of atrocities” (Duvall, 2012). Milkman experiences a journey of self-discovery, which roots through his identity with his skin color. One author states, “...in *Song of Solomon* , how Milkman Dead is weighed down by the “ shit” of inherited family and racial shame” (Bouson, 2000).

Milkman's grandfather, Solomon, is a family prophecy in which Milkman journeys to discover. Solomon is both a prophecy and “ real” in the novel. As Milkman journeys to discover the prophecy of his grandfather, he creates a prophecy of his own. Morrison shows the cyclical nature of man in self-discovery through generational change. The racism that plagued both Milkman and his grandfather were the same, which again reiterates Morrison's emphasis on both storytelling in the African American community and immense characterization in her novels. Milkman was able to reconceptualize how racism affects him by listening and absorbing the stories of his grandfather. The stories of his grandfather allowed him to find an identity with his race, apart from the societal stigmatism placed about him at birth. Being African American is powerful to him and he is able to “

fly" with this knowledge at the end of the novel. Morrison uses the "shit" that Milkman experiences in to depict the true definition of the African American community today.

Another character in *Song of Solomon* that Morrison utilizes is Hagar. Hagar is presented as Milkman Dead's "girlfriend", or at least sexual partner in the novel. As Milkman struggles with his identity as a black male, Hagar struggles with her identity as a black female. As the novel progresses, Milkman becomes significantly less interested in Hagar due to a new finding of white women. Hagar starts to questions why Milkman does not like her, which raises concerns about the beauty in her own identity. " Compared to Black males, Black females have been more profoundly affected by the prejudicial fallout surrounding issues of skin color, facial features, and hair" (Ashe, 1995). Society did not perceive natural African American traits as beautiful and still does not today. One author raises the question, " But whom do African-American women hope to attract by attaining this ' high desirability'" (Ashe, 1995). The answer is white women. Morrison personifies this prejudice against African American culture with her characterization of Hagar. Morrison redefines what beauty is. Hagar has no need to apologize for her natural features- society does.

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