

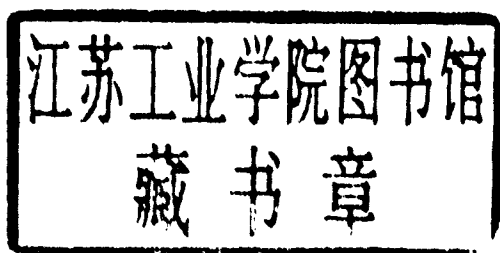
TONI MORRISON'S Developing Class Consciousness

Doreatha Drummond Mbalia



Selinsgrove: Susquehanna University Press
London and Toronto: Associated University Presses

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To all people of African descent,
with love and commitment

Contents

Preface	9
Acknowledgments	11
1. Nkrumaism and the Novels of Toni Morrison	15
2. <i>The Bluest Eye</i> : The Need for Racial Approbation	28
3. <i>Sula</i> : The Struggle for Individual Fulfillment	39
4. <i>Song of Solomon</i> : The Struggle for Race and Class Consciousness	50
5. <i>Tar Baby</i> : A Reflection of Morrison's Developed Class Consciousness	67
6. <i>Beloved</i> : Solidarity as Solution	87
7. A Rationalization for and an Assessment of Toni Morrison's Developing Class Consciousness	103
Notes	120
Bibliography	137
Index	141

Preface

I first became aware of developmental patterns in Toni Morrison's canon after teaching her novels for a number of years. It has always been my practice to reread literary works along with the students in my classes no matter how often I might have already read them. This practice of rereading, as well as my habit of letting the classroom force me to analyze elements of works that I am otherwise too lazy to analyze, helped me to spot these patterns.

In each of her novels, Morrison explores some aspect of and/or solution to the oppression afflicting African people. *The Bluest Eye* examines racism; *Sula*, gender oppression; *Song of Solomon*, the necessity of knowing one's family, community, and heritage; *Tar Baby*, the class contradictions that keep African people divided; and *Beloved*, the solution that will help solve the class exploitation and racial oppression of African people.

While commendable, the exploration of these various themes did not seem extraordinary until I saw the thread that runs through and connects novel after novel. One work picks up where the other one leaves off, thematically and structurally.

Certainly, no one could choose and develop such themes as racism, gender oppression, the importance of knowing one's history in determining one's identity, class exploitation of and class contradictions within the African race, and collective struggle without herself having a commitment to struggle for African people. And certainly no one would be concerned enough to shape her works into narrative structures that enhance the themes without herself being interested in turning theory into practice. If the works didn't tell me this, the many interviews and various critical essays on Morrison—once pieced together—did.

Assured of Toni Morrison's increasing commitment to help solve the problems of African people, I began to think about the particular nature of the evolutionary pattern—why, for example,

Morrison examines problems of race and gender oppression before exploring class contradictions within the race. It became clear that Morrison was gaining knowledge as she experienced life, read about it, wrote about it, and thought about what she wrote. With each succeeding novel, she herself was developing, and her works chronicle this development!

Next, I wanted to know what other elements—other than the reading and writing processes—were involved in Toni Morrison's increasing commitment to struggle for African people. Family background, historical and current events, personal and professional experiences, and literary predecessors seem to have contributed to her development.

Accepting Morrison's comment—if there were better critics, there would be better writers—as an invitation, I thought it necessary to devote the final part of the study to exploring elements of Morrison's canon that are left undeveloped. The exploration is undertaken only in an attempt, like Morrison's, to struggle for a solution to the plight of African people.

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The struggle of African people, for giving me the ideological perspective needed to write such a study.

TONI MORRISON'S
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1

Nkrumaism and the Novels of Toni Morrison

Fundamentally, there are two distinct and opposing world views: the materialist and the idealist. The materialist world view holds that matter, reality that is not conscious, is primary and existed before mind, reality that is conscious. The idealist world view holds that mind is primary and existed before matter. One's epistemological choice between these two viewpoints has everything to do with how he or she perceives events and conducts his or her life. For example, an idealist, believing that the world was created and is guided by a supreme being, may feel unequipped to change conditions in society while the materialist, understanding that a change in the material conditions of society will bring about a change in one's thinking, may feel obligated to struggle for change. This study is based on a materialist world view.

From a materialist perspective, literature is a product of the society in which it is produced, arising from and dependent on the material conditions of the society. Documenting the dialectical relationship between the material forces in society and the ideas that pervade that society, European economist Emile Burns writes: "When the form of production changed—for example from feudalism to capitalism—the institution and ideas also changed."¹ And when the institutions and ideas change so does the literature. According to African critic and novelist Thiong'O Wa Ngugi, literature is "given impetus, shape, direction and even area of concern by social, political and economic forces in a particular society."² Of course, dialectically, literature can in turn help shape the particular society in which one lives. Again, Burns writes: "Although ideas can only arise from material con-

ditions, when they do arise they certainly exert an influence on [people's] actions and therefore on the course of things."³

Since literature is mainly born out of those ideas prevalent in society, it can either reflect a ruling-class perspective or a people-class perspective. When that literature reflects a ruling class perspective under a capitalist economic system, it primarily focuses on the profit and well-being of only a small sector of the population. When that literature reflects a people-class perspective, it primarily focuses on the welfare of the exploited and oppressed majority. Toni Morrison's novels are people-class oriented. All of them are concerned with the exploited and oppressed condition of African people.

Just as the literary writer's ideas arise from material conditions in society, so the critic's methodology or tools of analysis arise from those same conditions. This methodology can reflect either a ruling-class or a people-class perspective. If it is derived out of a concern for the exploited masses, it will have a people-class orientation. It will be an analysis based on the general laws that govern both the natural and human-made environments, as well as an analysis based on the particular history of the people about whom the literature is written, in this case African people. Only then can it uncover the truisms and dispel the myths that serve to keep African people oppressed and exploited. Then, too, if used to analyze a body of work like Morrison's, which is essentially people-oriented in nature, the methodology serves as a vehicle in which to bring together author and critic in service to the interests of African people.

The method of analysis used in this study is people-oriented in general and Nkrumaist in particular. Nkrumaism is an ideology that applies the universal laws of nature to the particular conditions of Africa and African people scattered throughout the world. Specifically, it uses dialectical and historical materialism first to explain the uniqueness of the African's oppression, an oppression grounded in race and class, and second to propose a viable solution to that oppression.

Dialectical materialism asserts that matter is primary and that all things are knowable. It consists of four basic principles: (1) everything and everyone are interdependent; (2) everything and everyone change (develop); (3) these changes gradually accumulate to a point, and then a qualitatively new reality appears; and