


Contextualizing Gender
Prof. Rashmi Gaur
Department of Humanities and Social Sciences
Indian Institute of Technology, Roorkee

Lecture – 13
Gender-Blurring in Toni Morrison's Novels III

Good morning and welcome dear friends to the second module of our discussions on gender blurring in Toni Morrison.

(Refer Slide Time: 00:35)

- Gender roles are social constructs or labels given to people based on behavior, societal and cultural norms, and expectations. Gender role beliefs shape and are shaped by childhood and adult experiences; thus these constructs change over time.
- Gender roles are inescapable. We are constantly bombarded with images of how we should behave: there are sexually biased societal norms from which the majority of individuals operate. Conceptualizations of polarized gender dichotomies influence a range of life experiences and have become a popular topic of interest among scholars.
- Gender Blurring may result in better self-respect, as well as in equal measure, in internal diffidence or feelings of social shame. Reading a literary work in the light of this concept illustrates the revisionist potential of the work in the context of later dated interpretations of Gender.
- Published in 1987, Morrison's *Beloved* is often cited to illustrate the concept of gender blurring.



IT ROORKEE NPTEL ONLINE CERTIFICATION COURSE 2

Published in 1987, Toni Morrison's *Beloved* is often cited to illustrate the concept of gender blurring. Gender roles are social constructs or rather labels which are given to people based on behavior, societal and cultural norms, as well as expectations. Gender role beliefs shape and in turn are shaped by childhood and adult experiences and thus, we find these constructs can also change over a passage of time.

Even though it is said that by the time the child is three years old has started to realize gender conditioning which is dominantly practiced in the cultural environment of one's place. Therefore, gender roles cannot be escaped. We are also constantly bombarded with images of how we should behave as a girl or as a boy etc.

There are sexually biased societal norms from which the majority of individuals operate. We often fashion our lives according to the dominant gender models available to us

according to the media. Gender blurring as a practice sometimes may result in better self-respect, particularly in the context of women; as they are considered to be weaker according to the cultural norms. However, we find that almost in equal measure, it can also result in internal diffidence or feelings of societal shame.


Particularly, it is felt by men, because masculinity is normally associated with strength. Reading a literary work in the light of this concept illustrates the revisionist potential of the work in the context of later dated interpretations of gender as we have discussed in the previous modules.

(Refer Slide Time: 02:41)

- Gender role beliefs of African American women in the United States should be investigated in a manner that considers their unique experiences and the distinct background of their cultural sharing group. Several ethnographic studies have been conducted in this context.
- A 2012 thesis, Jasmine Abrams, "Blurring the Lines of Traditional Gender Roles: Beliefs of African American Women," Virginia Commonwealth University.*
- Themes for gender role beliefs about women and men
 - Women: 1) Having Multiple Roles, 2) Dedication to Care of others, 3) Perceived social Inferiority, and 4) Strength.
 - Men: 1) Lack of Commitment, 2) Strength, 3) Mental and Emotional Immaturity.

Related contextual factors of gender roles were assessed on grounds of Personal and Socio-historical Experiences of race.

[*https://scholarscompass.vcu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=3781&context=etd](https://scholarscompass.vcu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=3781&context=etd)



IT ROORKEE NPTEL ONLINE CERTIFICATION COURSE 3


The concept of gender blurring has also resulted in several ethnographic studies. I would particularly refer to a 2012 thesis, by Jasmine Abrams with the title of, "Blurring the Lines of Traditional Gender Roles: Beliefs of African American Women". The thesis has taken up certain themes for gender role beliefs about women and men within the African American community.

These gender role beliefs for women were taken up as having multiple roles, dedication to the care of others, perceived social inferiority and strength. For men, the parameters taken were lack of commitment, strength and mental and emotional immaturity. This study had also tried to assess related contextual factors of gender roles which were assessed on grounds of personal and socio-historical experiences of race.

And that is why; it becomes very important for us to realize that gender role beliefs of African American women in the United States should be investigated in a manner that considers their unique experiences and the distinct background of their cultural sharing group. We cannot compare them with other ethnic groups.

(Refer Slide Time: 04:14)

- The narrative of *Beloved* is set in 1873. Atrocities committed on slaves during this time are common history now.
- History reveals situational facts, while suppressing sensitivity towards individuals living through those situations. Literature alone can unravel the intricacies of experiential patterns which an individual had to suffer while history was being made.
- In her interview to Mervyn Rothstein (New York Times, August 26, 1987), Morrison records her reaction when she came across the story of the young Margaret Garner
<https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/books/98/01/11/home/14013.html>



IT ROORKEE NTEL ONLINE CERTIFICATION COURSE 4

The narrative of *Beloved* also reinforces this belief. It is set in 1873. Atrocities which were committed on slaves during these times are common history now. History to us reveals only situational facts. It also suppresses sensitivity towards individuals who have to live through those situations.

It is only a work of literature which is able to unravel the intricacies of experiential patterns which an individual has to suffer while history is being made. In this context, it is pertinent to refer to an interview by Toni Morrison. This interview to Mervyn Rothstein which was published in New York Times, the 26th August 1987 edition records Morrison's reaction when she first came across the story of the young slave Margaret Garner.

(Refer Slide Time: 05:21)

- "I was amazed by this story I came across about a woman called Margaret Garner who had escaped from Kentucky, I think, into Cincinnati with four children," Ms. Morrison said, sitting in an office at Alfred A. Knopf, her publisher, on a visit from her home near Nyack, N.Y.
- "And she was a kind of *cause celebre* among abolitionists in 1855 or '56 because she tried to kill the children when she was caught. She killed one of them, just as in the novel. I found an article in a magazine of the period, and there was this young woman in her 20's, being interviewed - oh, a lot of people interviewed her, mostly preachers and journalists, and she was very calm, she was very serene.
- "They kept remarking on the fact that she was not frothing at the mouth, she was not a madwoman, and she kept saying, 'No, they're not going to live like that. They will not live the way I have lived.'"



IT ROORKEE | NFEEL ONLINE CERTIFICATION COURSE 5

I have quoted from this interview in detail. Every single sentence of this interview is a revelation. Morrison says, I quote, "I was amazed by this story I came across about a woman called Margaret Garner who had escaped from Kentucky, I think, into Cincinnati with four children. And she was a kind of cause celebre among abolitionists in 1855 or '56, because she tried to kill the children when she was caught.


She killed one of them, just as in the novel. I found an article in a magazine of the period, and there was this young woman in her 20's, being interviewed – oh, a lot of people interviewed her, mostly preachers and journalists, and she was very calm, she was very serene.

They kept remarking on the fact that she was not frothing at the mouth, she was not a madwoman, and she kept saying, "No, they are not going to live like that. They will not live like the way I have lived" unquote. Morrison's interview underscores certain things. First of all, it tells us that this woman was interviewed by several people. Particularly, by preachers, as well as journalists. She became a cause celebre among abolitionists during that time.

Strangely Morrison notes, they were repeatedly remarking on the fact that she was not a madwoman, that she came across as a very normal human being who simply wanted to save her children from the trauma which she had to face every day of her life. Morrison is also surprised at this reaction of those people who had interviewed this young lady.

(Refer Slide Time: 07:12)

- Katrin Rindchen in her article has remarked that Sethe, the character modelled on Margaret Garner, is probably the most male character in the novel.
- Though she normally behaves as a woman, her actions and several characteristics easily can be termed as being under the tag of conventionally understood as masculine ones. Sethe had married Halle. While he went mad after seeing the brutalities in front of his eyes, she had struggled to survive.
- She has remarkable mental strength and resilience. While her sons have left the house (124 Bluestone Road), she endures the phantom presence with equanimity. After the death of Baby Suggs, she stays with Denver who is not in her full sense after her nervous breakdown.
- In the first chapter Morrison has gendered her characters: women are able to face the presence of Beloved, while men prefer to leave. Even Paul D. feels scared.



IT ROORKEE | NPTEL ONLINE CERTIFICATION COURSE | 6


In the very first chapter of the novel, Morrison has gendered her characters. We come to know that women are better able to face the presence of beloved, while men are afraid and prefer to leave. Protagonist's son's leave; even Paul D. feels scared and ultimately leaves. It has been remarked in her article by Katrin Rindchen that Sethe, the character who has been modelled on Margaret Garner, is perhaps the most masculine character in the novel.

Though she normally behaves as a woman still, we find that there are several actions and characteristics of her which can easily be treated as those characteristics which are conventionally understood as masculine one's. For example, she had married another slave Halle. While Halle went mad after seeing the brutalities in front of his eyes, Sethe was able to survive those brutalities even though she was directly the victim.

She had struggled to remain alive. This struggle had also given her an inner strength which somehow was not possible to help to have. We can make out from the characterization that Sethe has remarkable mental strength as well as resilience. While her sons have left the house, she is able to endure the phantom presence with equanimity. After the death of Baby Suggs, she stays with Denver; her living daughter, who is not in her full sense, because she had a nervous breakdown earlier.

(Refer Slide Time: 08:58)

- Sethe opens up about the harrowing experiences of her slavery with others only after a gap of eighteen years, with the return of Beloved.
- With what effort she fights back her slavery past is evident when she hears Baby Suggs voice, who advises her to lay down “sword and shield” and to not “study war no more” (86). In Sethe’s own eyes “[t]he future was a matter of keeping the past at bay”.
- Nevertheless, she does not only aim at fighting back her past because of herself only; her daughter Denver is also to be protected from Sethe’s terrible past, as well. The warlike behavior of striving against something is normally associated with the male conduct and therefore gender-blurring is evident again.
- According to Beaulieu it is not only courage which is considered as a masculine trait, but also the readiness to fight, which too is manifested in the characters of the African women portrayed in Morrison’s novels, particularly Sethe.



IT ROORKEE | NPTEL ONLINE CERTIFICATION COURSE | 7

Sethe had not spoken about her experiences of her slavery days with others. She had been silent about this trauma for as many as eighteen years. It is only with the return of Beloved that she gradually learns to talk about it. We can only imagine the mental effort it must have required her to keep quiet about this past. With what effort she fights back her slavery past is evident when she hears the voice of Baby Suggs, who advises her to lay down “sword and shield” and to not “study war no more”.


In Sethe’s own eyes, the future was a matter of keeping the past at bay, because the past would have corrupted; whatever semblance of future she and her living children could have. However, it also becomes clear to us that she does not want to fight back her past only for herself; she also wants to protect her daughter Denver from the experiences of her terrible past.

The war like behavior of striving against something is normally associated with masculine characters and therefore, we can say that gender-blurring is evident again. According to Beaulieu, it is not only courage which is considered to be a masculine trait, but also a readiness to fight, which is also manifest in the characters of several African women portrayed in this novel, particularly Sethe.

(Refer Slide Time: 10:42)

Motherhood and Gender Blurring: Significance is generally accepted by critics, including Simone de Beauvoir. Association of certain roles with it. Unlike marriage, is not treated as an institution by several thinkers.

- Toni Morrison's Neo-Slave Narratives suggest that motherhood contains both *very female* and *very male* character traits and is to be regarded as a Gender-Blurring in itself.
- Sethe's behavior as a mother, and also the depiction of motherhood in the novel can be considered as examples of gender blurring: feminine, and also masculine characteristics are associated simultaneously.
- Racial experiences and memory of slavery: branded as animals, slaves had no identity or gender, still the sex of a slave was important to the masters.



IT ROORKEE | NPTEL ONLINE CERTIFICATION COURSE 8

The concept of gender-blurring is also clear to us in this novel's portrayal of motherhood. Motherhood has been accepted as being significant by almost every critic. Even a critic like Simon de Beauvoir had suggested that the experience of motherhood is necessary for the fulfillment of a woman's life.


We also say that certain roles are automatically associated with motherhood. Unlike marriage, it is not treated as an institution by several feminist thinkers; rather it is also treated as an experience. However, Tony Morrison's Neo-Slave Narratives suggest that motherhood contains female as well as male character traits.

It can be very female and very male as an experience and it has to be regarded as an illustration of Gender-Blurring in itself. Another aspect of the novel which is important in this context is the racial experiences of the black people and the memory of the harrowing experiences of slavery.

During the slavery days, African American people were not considered as human beings at all. They were branded as animals. They were not given any identity or gender; for example, Baby Suggs is never called by any name by her owner Mr. Garner throughout the narration. Still, we find that the sex of a slave became important to the masters. As a woman slave could be exploited in multiple ways. She could be treated as a breeder and a milking cow.

(Refer Slide Time: 12:34)

- Sethe's killing of her child is the central trope of the novel.
- Sethe's own experiences of slavery act constantly as reference points in the narrative. She often remembers her mother.
- Brought on a ship from Africa and continuously used as a milking cow by slavers, her mother had thrown all her children into the sea except Sethe. She had disowned children from the crew or from the Whites, protecting the girl from a Black man and giving her his name. For her it was an act of hatred, helpless anger as well as pride. Sethe's act on the other hand had resulted from the compulsive love of a mother to safeguard her children.
- In *Sula*, Eva had claimed "maternal omnipotence" (131) after killing her son to shield him from a slow death by addiction. This can also be understood in the context of Sethe.



IT ROORKEE NPTEL ONLINE CERTIFICATION COURSE 9


Sethe's killing of her child is a central trope of the novel. Her own experiences of slavery become continuous reference points in the narrative and in this context, she often remembers her mother. Sethe's mother was brought on a ship from Africa and was continuously used as a comfort and as a milking cow by slavers, as well as by the crew.

Her mother had given birth to some other children also, but she had thrown all her children into the sea except Sethe. She had disowned all her children who were from the crew or from the Whites. But she had decided to protect the girl who was born out of love from a black man and had decided to give this infant this lovers name; however, killing of her off-spring was an act of hatred, as well as helpless anger for Sethe's mother.

Saving Sethe's from this type of a death was also an act of pride for her mother as she wanted her race to survive. Sethe's act on the other hand, had resulted from the compulsive love of a mother to safeguard her children. We have seen how in the previous novel, *Sula*, Eva had killed her own son. She had claimed "maternal omnipotence" after killing her son to shield him from his slow death by addiction. This can also be understood in the context of Sethe, as she did not want her children to suffer in the same manner in which she had.

(Refer Slide Time: 14:16)

- Sethe's troubles had unfolded gradually in Sweet Home", a farm in Kentucky, kept by Garner as a model of good ownership. She enjoys six years of a semblance of family, watching Buglar and Howard rolling down the patches.
- Baby Suggs was denied this pleasure: seven times she had to see her children being sold at a very tender age.
- Garner allowed limited choices to his slaves: of buying liberty to a mother, handling guns, learning to read and moving freely inside the property. It changes when the Schoolteacher and his nephews take control.
- Under the Schoolteacher's tutelage, his nephews learn to turn people into animals, pushing the slaves to plan an escape to the magical 'North' for survival.
- Sethe had loved her children on the plantation, but she realizes that love expands in a free atmosphere.



IT ROORKEE | NPTEL ONLINE CERTIFICATION COURSE | 10

Sethe's troubles had gradually unfolded in Sweet Home, which is a farm in Kentucky. It was kept by Garner as a model of good ownership. She had enjoyed six years of semblance of a family, and she had been able to watch two of her sons Buglar and Harvard rolling down the patches playing around in pleasure.


This happiness was denied to her mother-in-law. Baby Suggs had to see seven of her children being sold into captivity at a very tender age. She was unable to imagine their looks at a mature age. The slave owner Garner allowed limited choices to his slaves. Nonetheless, there were certain choices in a land of choicelessness.

For example, the choice of buying liberty to a mother at whatever cost. The liberty of handling guns within the premises, learning to read, and moving freely inside the property. This situation changes abruptly when the school teacher and his nephews take control. Under the tutelage of the school teacher, his nephews learned to turn people into animals, pushing the slaves to plan and escape to the magical north for survival.

As a mother, Sethe had loved her children while she was living on the plantation. When she is able to escape to the North and is able to survive with three of her children, she realizes that in a free atmosphere, love also expands as she was able to love her children without having this worry at every moment that they can be sold the next day into a different captivity.

(Refer Slide Time: 16:08)

- Sethe has deep rooted and generic fears of going back to the evil owners. Having tasted 28 days of freedom, she is determined not to surrender her children to *tree cages, collars, ankle ropes, wells and imprints of chokecherry trees*.
- When she saw the Schoolteacher and the Sheriff coming towards the house, she just flew. She wants to kill all of her children but only manages the murder of one. When she comes out of the jail, she still has some satisfaction, "I stopped him, I took and put my babies where they'd be safe" (201).
 - Despite her risking her own psychic hardship and a huge crisis between herself and her living daughter Denver, who is "scared of her because of it [the infanticide]" (205), she acts deliberately to spare her child a future equal to her own past.
- Sethe's behavior testifies her power of self-determination. Her maternal omnipotence enables her to decide over her child's life and death in a rare courageous manner.



IT ROORKEE | NPTEL ONLINE CERTIFICATION COURSE | 11


Sethe is able to spend 28 days of freedom. After this time, she suddenly sees the Schoolteacher and the Sheriff coming towards the house so that, she can be carried back to the plantation along with her children. When she sees them coming towards her and her family, she just flew. She wants to kill all her children, but only manages the murder of one.

When she comes out of the jail, she still has some satisfaction. And I quote, "I stopped him, I took and put my babies where they would be safe" unquote. Killing one's own child by a mother has always been considered as one of the most heinous crimes. A mother risks her own psychic hardships when she is forced to take such a decision.

Sethe also has to risk it. She has to risk her psychic well-being and at the same time, she also has to risk the relationship between herself and her living daughter Denver who is scared of her, because of the infanticide. She wants to spare her child a future equal to her own past. Sethe's behavior at this juncture testifies to her power of self-determination. Her maternal omnipotence enables her to decide over her child's life and death in a rare courageous manner.

(Refer Slide Time: 17:41)

- The warlike behaviour of striving against odds is usually associated with male conduct and therefore, gender-blurring is evident again.
- Sethe, as the *weak* gender and also pregnant with Denver, still manages to escape. She finds a job and raises three of her children without any male help. Despite the experiences in her past as a slave she states that “[n]ot since that other escape had she felt so alive.” (Beloved191).
- Her physical power is manifested in the fact that her flight succeeds.
- Helplessness and despondency of Black men slaves is another trope which is sensitively presented in the novel with the help of Gender Blurring.
- Among other attributes, manhood is also understood as being self-possessed, capability to earn property and keep it, ability to protect one’s family etc.
- Slavery systematically deconstructed it, as is shown in *Beloved*.



IT ROORKEE | NPTEL ONLINE CERTIFICATION COURSE | 12

The warlike behaviour of striving against odds is usually associated with male conduct and therefore, gender-blurring is evident again. Sethe is considered as a member of the weak gender. Women are normally considered as being weak. She is also pregnant with Denver, but still, she is able to manage her escape.


She finds a job and raises three of her children without any male help. Despite the experiences of her past as a slave, she states that “not since that other escape had she felt so alive”. The fact that she has been able to successfully fly from captivity is a testimony to her mental as well as her physical courage.

Another aspect of gender-blurring, which is illustrated in the novel is helplessness and despondency of Black men. Among other attributes, man-hood is normally understood as a state of being self-possessed. It is related with one’s capability to earn property and money and keep it also. It also is associated with one’s ability to protect one’s family.

Slavery had systematically deconstructed it as it is shown in *Beloved*; whereas, on the one hand, we find that in a woman character like Sethe, it had resulted in a more positive self-worth, in a more positive concept of self-assurance, amongst men it has had a debilitating impact.

(Refer Slide Time: 19:28)

- The sense of possession that comes through love and marital ties is cancelled by the abnormal ownership of slavery. The White masters were the “definers” – and as Morrison has aptly suggested, definitions belonged to them, and not to the defined (Morison, 1988: 190). Slaves were not allowed to marry by choice.
 - This explains Mrs. Garner’s reaction to Sethe’s desire to get married to Halle. She does not take it seriously and laughs, as she knows, Halle and Sethe would be separated, anyway, if one of them was sold away; in the manner Paul A. Garner was sold.
- Non-agentic roles had crippled man-hood in slaves. When Halle witnesses the stealing of Sethe’s milk, he is unable to oppose it or protect her. As he is aware of his moral duty of protecting his wife, he does not feel like a man after this incidence.
- Paul D.’s inability to talk to Sethe because of an iron bit in his mouth is another such example.



IT ROORKEE | NPTEL ONLINE CERTIFICATION COURSE 13

It is commonly understood that men are able to possess a sense of possession through love as well as marital ties. Their capability to protect their love, take care of their family, provides them with certain pride, but this is automatically cancelled by the abnormal ownership of slavery. The White masters were the definers and as Morrison has aptly suggested in *Beloved*, definitions belong to the definers and not to the defined.


Slaves were not even allowed to marry by choice. In *Beloved*, Sethe desires to get married to Halle, but Mrs. Garner does not take it seriously, instead she starts laughing. As she knows that Halle and Sethe would anyway be separated, if any one of them is sold away in the manner Paul A. Garner had been sold. Non-agentic roles had crippled man-hood in slaves.

When Halle witnesses that Sethe’s milk is being stolen, but he is unable either to oppose it or to protect her, he is not able to consider himself as a man at all. He is aware of his moral duty of protecting his wife, but his inability makes him pathetic. He is not able to be a man after this incident. In the same manner, we find that Paul D. changes.

Paul D. had tried to escape to the North along with another slave. Paul D. is caught and then an iron bit has been put into his mouth so that he is unable to talk. When he is brought back to the plantation, he wants to talk to Sethe, but is unable to do so. At this moment, he feels that he is nothing and even the rooster of the farm had somehow more individuality.

(Refer Slide Time: 21:31)

- Identity crisis is another phenomenon of Racism. Slaves are not given individual names. Baby Suggs was never called by any name by Mr Garner. He also called all his slaves in alphabetic order; eg., Paul A. Garner, Paul D. Garner, and Paul F. Garner.
- Paul D., the only male slave of the plantation to survive recalls how he can never be his own true self, "... I wasn't allowed to be and stayed what I was. Even if you cooked him you'd be cooking a rooster named Mister. But wasn't no way I'd ever be Paul D again. Schoolteacher changed me. I was something else and that something was less than a chicken sitting in the sun on a tub" (72). Even years after being a slave he still reflects on his master and wonders what he was before Sweet Home and before slavery.
- Even when he reached freedom the cumulative experiences of his past left Paul D deeply traumatized, forcing him to lock away his feelings in the "rusted tobacco tin" of his heart.
- Unable to settle down, he is drawn towards Sethe for her strength.



IT ROORKEE | NPTEL ONLINE CERTIFICATION COURSE | 14

And he recalls how he cannot be his own true self anymore. He thinks that the Schoolteacher had changed him and I quote from the text "I was not allowed to be and stayed what I was. Even if you cooked him you would be cooking a rooster named Mister. But was not no way I would ever be Paul D again. Schoolteacher changed me. I was something else and that something was less than a chicken sitting in the sun on a tub" unquote.

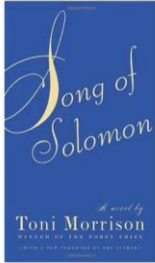
Paul D. is the only male slave of the plantation to survive and he recalls these horrifying days. Even years after, he has gained his independence and he keeps on wondering what he was before he entered the sweet home or before he became a slave. Even when he has reached freedom, the cumulative experiences of his past leave him deeply traumatized forcing him to lock away his feelings in the "rusted tobacco tin" of his heart.

He is unable to settle down, he is afraid and therefore, he is drawn to Sethe for her strength, in the hope that he would also be able to have certain emotional sustenance. Such descriptions tell us that slaves were not given any identity at all. They were even denied individual names as the practice of naming them in alphabetical order testifies.


(Refer Slide Time: 23:09)

Song of Solomon (1977)

- Third novel of Morrison
- The novel is told by a male narrator who is in search of his identity.
- It blends African American folklore, history, and literary tradition to celebrate the moral and spiritual revival of Macon Dead, the first male protagonist in a Morrison novel, via the guidance and example of his aunt Pilate, another of Morrison's unconventional, soul-liberating heroines.
- It was cited by the Swedish Academy in awarding Morrison the 1993 Nobel Prize in Literature.
- Spiritually grounded in the Afro-American folktale of people who could fly, depicting the escape of slaves by taking flight.



Source: Random House




IT ROORKEE | NPTEL ONLINE CERTIFICATION COURSE | 15

Song of Solomon, the third novel of Morrison, published in 1977 is also quoted as an illustration of gender-blurring. It blends African American folklore, history, and literary tradition to celebrate the moral and spiritual revival of the male protagonist, a novelty in her novels. This novel was also cited by the Swedish academy in awarding Morrison the 1993 Nobel Prize in Literature. This novel is a spiritually grounded in the Afro-American folktale of people who could fly, meaning thereby the escape of slaves by taking flight.

(Refer Slide Time: 23:54)

- Morrison has treated the motif of communal flight as a solitary escape, for oneself, leaving the family behind.
- The contemporary folktale twirls around an unconventional name Macon "Milkman" Dead III whose quest for identity takes him to his ancestral place where he learns about his great-grandfather Solomon.
- The bequest of slavery and racism has created economic, political and cultural ugliness in the American society. Macon discovers his familial heritage and gains awareness about the pain and agony; brutality and deprivation his ancestors have endured to survive and be a part of the hegemonic world.
- Morrison subordinates sexism to both racism and capitalism, realising that the African American men's exploitation of their women is the result of their racial and class oppression.
 - Sexism is viewed as the consequence of their lack of race and class consciousness.




IT ROORKEE | NPTEL ONLINE CERTIFICATION COURSE | 16

Morrison has treated the motif of communal flight as a solitary escape, escape of an individual who leaves the family behind. The contemporary folktale treatment twirls around an unconventional name, Macon “Milkman” Dead three whose quest for identity takes him to his ancestral place where he learns about his great grandfather Solomon.

Morrison suggests that the bequest of slavery and racism has created political, economic, and cultural ugliness in the contemporary American society. She also subordinates sexism to racism and capitalism; suggesting that the African American men’s exploitation of their women is a result of their racial and class operation.

(Refer Slide Time: 24:43)

- The novel presents an exploration of African-American culture and myths that depict the conceptual notion of ethnic experience and also the cultural sway of White middle-class values on Black families .
- Impact of Capitalist Hierarchies: Though Milkman’s quest for his identity is the dominant strand in the novel, a major obstacle he must overcome to protect himself against racism is the stifling effect of his father’s need to own as much property as possible.
- Sexist Views: Also, he can be truly liberated when he would be able to shed his sexist views of women. Only when he has stripped himself of the ruling class’s views of race and class superiority, he is able to see women as his equals and understand the reciprocal nature of human relationships.
 - Perhaps, the most significant evidence of Milkman’s awareness of the principle of reciprocity as related to women is his commitment to guide his aunt Pilate, who had treated him as a son she never had, to Shalimar to bury her father’s bones.




IT ROORKEE NPTEL ONLINE CERTIFICATION COURSE 17

The novel also looks at the impact of capitalist hierarchies, as well as the sexist views of Afro-American men. Though Milkman’s quest for his identity remains to be the dominant strand in the novel. A major obstacle he has to overcome is his father’s need to own as much property as possible as a safeguard against racism. He also realizes that only when he is able to strip himself of the dominant classes’ views of race and class superiority, he would be able to look at women as his equals and understand the reciprocal nature of human relationships.

(Refer Slide Time: 25:26)

- For Milkman, women in general have value only as 'need providers'. He is given prime importance by all the women in his family. They clean up his mess, cook for him, keep house for him, and generally 'shape their lives around his needs'.
- He takes all this for granted and never shows them any consideration, never trying to really know them or their travails.
- Milkman's pre-liminal stage is marked by his lack of consciousness about his people's race and class oppression.
- In fact, women of the novel become the gauge by which to measure Milkman's maturing race and class consciousness.
- Pilate's role in the novel is dialectically related to his developing consciousness. She is the source, the base from which he must build his consciousness in terms of race and class .
- His growth and initiation are firmly grounded in his journey to the South which conclusively makes him question the dubious morality of the white race.




IT ROORKEE | NPTEL ONLINE CERTIFICATION COURSE | 18

Milkman had initially treated women only as providers of his need. His preliminary stage is marked by his lack of consciousness about his people's race and class operation. Interestingly, women characters of the novel become the gauge by which to measure his maturing race and class consciousness.

(Refer Slide Time: 25:50)

Gender Blurring in *Song of Solomon*

- Morrison interrogates the myths of dominant notions of masculinity, suggesting alternative means for African American men to establish their manhood while also portraying their frustration at disempowerment through her narrative.
- Morrison critiques the racist patriarchy that denies Black men their masculinity, and also those men who accept such patriarchal definitions of manhood and use them to prevaricate communal responsibility.
- She questions the adoption of white definitions of manhood by African American men, a model she portrays as individualist, competitive, misogynist, and destructive.
- She rejects notions of manhood based on economic success or property attainment, focusing instead on more personal philosophies and blurring gender lines.




IT ROORKEE | NPTEL ONLINE CERTIFICATION COURSE | 19

The concept of gender-blurring in *Song of Solomon* is clear by Morrison's interrogation of the myths, of dominant notions of masculinity. She rejects notions of manhood which are based on economic success or property attainment; rather she focuses on more

personal philosophies and blurring gender lines. She also questions the adoption of white definitions of manhood by African American men. A model she thinks as individualist, competitive, misogynist, as well as destructive.

(Refer Slide Time: 26:26)

- *Song of Solomon* suggests that manhood should be rooted in community, cooperation, equality, and constructive behaviour. The novel reveals the frustrations of African American men and the violence that often functions as a self-defining tool for them, and is often directed at women in a spectacle that divides the community across gendered lines.
- The use of violence marks Black manhood in *Song of Solomon* when Guitar Baines and Milkman Dead join the 'Seven Days', a group that kills white persons as vengeance for lynching, as well as for other culturally *legitimate* murders of African Americans.
- The group sees these retaliations as a means of reclaiming Black subjectivity and exacting vengeance against white culture.




IT ROORKEE NPTEL ONLINE CERTIFICATION COURSE 20

The novel suggests that manhood should be rooted in community, cooperation, equality, and constructive behavior. The novel also reveals the frustrations of African American men and the violence that often functions as a self-defining tool for them. This violence is often directed at women in a spectacle that divides the community across gendered lines.

The use of violence marks black manhood in the novel when Guitar and Milkman join the 'Seven Days', a group that kills white persons as vengeance for lynching, as well as for other culturally legitimate murders of African Americans. The group sees these retaliations as a means of reclaiming Black subjectivity as well as executing vengeance against white culture.

(Refer Slide Time: 27:20)

- Violence becomes a means of negotiating the political space of America, where Black men are disenfranchised. It replaces tenderness and love for Guitar, becoming his means of interacting with the world.
- Yet even as Morrison reflects these feelings, she provides an alternative. Milkman, who initially joins the 'Seven Days' and participates in its rituals, moves beyond violence and comes to find his identity outside it.
- It can be read as Morrison's critique of the decision of several African American men to resort to violence, suggesting that it damages the community it seeks to help.
- The novel argues that the problem of masculinity does not belong solely to individual males; rather, it is a community issue.




IT ROORKEE | NPTEL ONLINE CERTIFICATION COURSE 21

The novel discusses how violence replaces tenderness and love for Guitar, becoming his means of interaction with the world. Yet even as Morrison has reflected these feelings, she has also been able to provide an alternative. Milkman, who had initially joined this group and participated in its rituals, is able to move beyond violence and come to find his identity outside it. The novel argues that the problem of masculinity does not belong solely to the individual men; rather it is a community issue and has to be taken care of accordingly.

(Refer Slide Time: 28:01)

- The novel focuses on Milkman's search for manhood. As he travels, he must discover how to be a Black man, creating an identity that will integrate with the African American community.
 - As a young boy, he does not consciously realize the privileges accorded to males; instead, he accepts them as given, disrespecting his sisters as the weaker sex.
- When he arrives in Shalimar, Virginia, he meets other men who test him in a series of African American rituals by which he must prove his manhood.
- Morrison replicates tribal rituals within the context of American individualism: success means communal acceptance, whereas failure would mean rejection by the community.
 - The fight and the hunt in which he partakes provide further means to him to demonstrate his ability to compete with other males.
- Depicting these rites in detail, Morrison also critiques them as barriers erected to divide African Americans into strict gender dichotomies; viewing these tests of individual prowess as abetting individualist beliefs that undermine Afro-American unity.




IT ROORKEE | NPTEL ONLINE CERTIFICATION COURSE 22

The novel focuses on Milkman's search for manhood. As he travels, he must discover how to be a Black man, creating an identity that will integrate with the African American community.

(Refer Slide Time: 28:15)

- Milkman's success comes when he gives up individualistic notions of manhood and embraces the community and its definitions of identity through communal patterns of beliefs expressing symbolically their characteristic attitudes.
- His acceptance of his ancestral mythos, as evidenced by his final ambiguous leap, signifies his movement away from individualist notions of identity toward the communal model.
- Morrison profoundly destabilizes notions of Black manhood and suggests that all traditional identity structures are differential. Thus, Black manhood results from the repudiation of women and whites.
- Slavery denied manhood to Black males while objectifying Black women and using them as a means to assert manhood.
- Morrison also shows that the notion of pure identity is a white fantasy, providing instead the reality of a communally constructed identity.



IT ROORKEE NPTEL ONLINE CERTIFICATION COURSE 23


It is only when Milkman gives up individualistic notions of manhood and embraces the community; he is able to find certain happiness. His acceptance of his ancestral mythos, as evidenced by his final ambiguous leap, signifies his movement away from the individualistic notions of identity toward the communal model.

So, we can see that in this novel, Morrison has destabilized notions of Black manhood and suggested that all traditional identity structures are differential. And accordingly, Black manhood has resulted from the repudiation of women as well as of whites. Slavery had denied manhood to Black males while it had objectified Black women and used them as means to assert manhood. Morrison also shows that the notion of pure identity is a white fantasy, providing instead the reality of a communally constructed identity.

(Refer Slide Time: 29:22)

Morrison and Gender Blurring

- Morrison demonstrates the arbitrary nature of gender characteristics through her prominent characters. Gender blurring in this manner demonstrates the fluidity of identity and its arbitrary connection to biological notions.
- Morrison disrupts biological notions of gender. She demonstrates through several characters that women can adopt masculine traits, and contrariwise.
 - Sula Peace is described as possessing characteristics normally associated with masculinity. Her assertiveness and sexual aggression cast her as masculine, interrupting simplistic biological notions of gendered behaviour.
 - Sethe, though feminine in many respects, is often connected to war imagery, a traditionally masculine domain. Isolated from the female community, she must be more assertive and forthright to survive.
 - Paul D takes on many characteristics normally associated with the feminine. His empathy and willingness to show emotion are some instances.




IT ROORKEE | NPTEL ONLINE CERTIFICATION COURSE 24

And analysis of these novels suggests that Morrison has been able to demonstrate the arbitrary nature of gender characteristics through her prominent characters. Gender blurring in this manner demonstrates the fluidity of identity as well as its arbitrary connection to biological notions. Morrison has disrupted biological notions of gender and suggested through several characters that women can adopt masculine traits and contrariwise. It has been illustrated with the help of characters like Sula, Sethe, and Paul D.

(Refer Slide Time: 30:01)

- Morrison's fictions depict a plurality of masculine identity formations, reflecting the anxieties of African American men living in a culture that has refused to accept their masculine identities.
- She critiques the violent responses of Black men to oppression, particularly when that violence is directed toward the Black community itself.
- Morrison redefines Black manhood in her texts, producing a more egalitarian model that disrupts traditional individualist beliefs and reasserts the social dimensions of identity.
 - Paul D Garner, for example, has difficulty asserting his manhood when facing white racists who demean him and in front of women.
- She thus disrupts reductive biological notions of gender, placing traditionally feminine qualities in her male characters to blur gender lines and stress the cohesion of human beings.




IT ROORKEE | NPTEL ONLINE CERTIFICATION COURSE 25

Morrison's fictions have depicted a plurality of masculine identity formations, reflecting the anxieties that African American men live in a culture that has refused to accept their masculine identities. In her novels, Morrison has been able to produce a more egalitarian model of masculinity; a model which disrupts traditional individualistic beliefs and reasserts the social dimensions of identity. She has disrupted reductive notions of gender, biological as well as cultural placing traditionally feminine qualities in her male characters to blur gender lines and stress the cohesion of human beings.

(Refer Slide Time: 30:51)

- She takes issue with the adoption of white definitions of manhood by African American men, a model that she portrays as individualist, competitive, misogynist, and destructive. She, therefore, rejects notions of manhood based on economic success or property attainment, focusing instead on more personal philosophies and blurring gender lines.
- Morrison's fiction, therefore, becomes a treatise on a manhood rooted in community, cooperation, equality, and constructive behaviour; blurring the genders.
- Morrison interrogates the myths of dominant notions of masculinity, as well as femininity, suggesting alternative means for African American people to establish their selfhood while also reflecting their frustration at disempowerment.



IT ROORKEE NPTEL ONLINE CERTIFICATION COURSE 26

While she has been able to valorize the portrayal of her women characters, she has also been able to suggest it to ties on a manhood which is rooted in community, cooperation, equality, and constructive behavior. She has taken issues with the adoption of white definitions of masculinity; a model which she has portrayed as competitive and misogynistic one.

Morrison has interrogated the myths of dominant notions of masculinity, as well as femininity, suggesting alternative means for African American people to establish their selfhood while also reflecting their frustration at disempowerment. With it, I conclude my discussion of gender-blurring in the novels of Toni Morrison. Thank you.

(Refer Slide Time: 31:44)

References

- Abrams, J. (2012). *Blurring the Lines of Traditional Gender Roles: Beliefs of African American Women* [Doctoral dissertation]. <https://scholarscompass.vcu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=3781&context=etd>
- Morrison, T. (2020). *Song of Solomon*. Arrow.
- *The New York Times: Book review search article*. (1987, August 26). The New York Times Web Archive. <https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/books/98/01/11/home/14013.html>
- Manufacturing Intellect. (2019, Aug 8). The Life of Toni Morrison documentary (2015). YouTube. <https://youtu.be/-OURXCUdeOA>



ITI ROORKEE



NPTEL ONLINE
CERTIFICATION COURSE