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Acceptance and Rejection as a Means of Self-assertion in Selected Novels by Toni Morrison: *The Bluest Eye*, *Sula* and *Beloved*

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To my Father's Soul

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Abstract

The present study deals with the existentialist ideology in Toni Morrison's fiction. The aim of this study is to trace Acceptance and Rejection as Means of Self-assertion in Toni Morrison's novels namely: *The Bluest Eye*, *Sula* and *Beloved*. The concept of self-assertion in these three novels varies from one book to another. It represents the concern to probe the inner psyche of the three protagonists in the selected novels from an African American perspective.

In the African American context, people struggle to achieve wholeness and fulfillment. They have either to conform to those norms that are prevailing their societies or to reject such norms and to have a set of values of their own. In both cases they have to struggle to achieve personal existence. In the selected novels the main characters try to assert their individuality each on her own way.

This oscillation between acceptance and rejection emphasizes the individual effort of each of these characters to find the moment of individuality to assert the much desired individual freedom and the struggle to liberate themselves from the limitations imposed by the different codes that govern their societies. In their endeavors to assert their own existence, each of these characters sticks to their own values and principles accepting or rejecting those values and norms that govern their communities.

The analysis of the three texts involve a lot of serious inquiries into the nature of acceptance and rejection as a complicated pattern of self-assertion.

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Introduction

Existentialism is a philosophy of life. It is a literary as well as a philosophical movement. It is a philosophical tendency that stresses individual freedom and free will, that has come as a reaction to the human feeling of the absurdity or meaninglessness of life. It represents a revolt against the conventional or traditional way of life, stressing the need for a new approach; that is a new way of survival. It calls for human independence of the values of his/her society and his/her need for creating his/her own values in a world where materialism has been prevailing. Representing such a new attitude in life, existentialism has affected the approach of many diverse men of letters worldwide.

Toni Morrison is one of the most outstanding contemporary African American writers whose concern in most of her writings has been the call for free and authentic existence. Toni Morrison is read worldwide. Her books have been translated into many languages and read by different populations. Due to growing up in an ethnic and a raciest community and being a contemporary of the Civil Rights Movement, Toni Morrison displays a unique approach in her writing. Of course, she is not the first African American writer to touch upon issues of human existence, but her works reveal deeper and illuminating philosophical insights more than any of her fellow black writers.

The aim of this study is to trace Acceptance and Rejection as a Means of Self-assertion in Toni Morrison's novels namely: *The Bluest Eye* (1970), *Sula* (1972), and *Beloved* (1987). The researcher has chosen these three novels for many reasons. First, they embody the African Americans' history objectively. Second, the existentialist ideology is quite dominant throughout these novels in particular, where the concept of self-assertion varies from one novel to another because they offer some existentialist aspects like acceptance and rejection in *The Bluest Eye*, disconformity in *Sula*, and rationalizing the irrational as a strategy of survival in *Beloved*. Finally, these novels try to probe the inner psyche of the three protagonists.

Humanity is in a lifelong strife for personal existence. In the search for this need humanity develop a desire for fulfillment. Ihab Hassan, in his *Radical Innocence*, remarks, "Society may modulate man's awareness of his situation, but only existence determines his

stand" (31). In their process of self-assertion the humanity are faced with a lot of obstacles that attempt to limit their freedom. As such, Toni Morrison varies the concept of personal existence from one novel to another so as to draw upon issues that are universally significant. The study also aims at gaining new insights into human life experience in the New World in general, and in the African American experience in particular.

It is a socio-analytical study that is conducted from an ethnic literary perspective with careful consideration to the African American social and ideological context. Morrison's novels are examined from a philosophical perspective; this study gives due respect to the concept of characterization throughout the selected novels. This is a technical device employed by the novelist in order to portray existential characters for illuminating the philosophical dimension of her writing. In other words, characterization will be employed as a tool in sketching existentialist characters capable of conveying existentialist thoughts.

The study falls into four chapters and a conclusion. Chapter one is divided into two sections. Section one sheds light on existentialism as a literary as well as an intellectual movement that has affected a lot of writers worldwide. It deals with the emergence of existentialism as a reaction against the traditional way of thinking and the domination of materialism in a world where the political as well as the economic map has been changed. The two successive world wars had their overwhelming consequences that have been of great impacts on the minds of different people around the world. They have acted as a catalyst on changing the view of people towards the prevailing circumstances on the international as well as the community levels. Such circumstances have resulted in the need for a new ideology or approach in life. As such, existentialism has found in the new world a fertile land to flourish.

A considerable number of philosophers have taken existentialism as their own philosophy of life. Jean Paul Sartre, Simone de Beavoir, Albert Camus, Soren Kierkegaard, and some other philosophers have embraced existentialism as their umbrella thought. The perspective of human existence vary from one philosopher to another. Both Sartre and Camus think that man's life is marked by freedom of choice since he is mainly condemned to be free. They argue that it is every one's duty to constitute the essence of his existence. On the other hand, some other existentialists consider this freedom from other perspectives. For example, Kierkegaard considers man's freedom from a religious perspective. As such, definitions of existentialism vary from one definer to another, but they all communicate some basic principles or concepts that underlie it as a philosophy.

The last section of chapter one deals with the most remarkable experiences that Toni Morrison has had in her life, it underscores how she could draw on such experiences in order

to convey the approach she has adopted in portraying her characters. Morrison's sense of self is strengthened by the community in which she has lived. She has lived in an era that was marked by the need for self-affirmation and, in turn, the necessity of struggle. In her writings, she displays a growing concern with the African American existence in America in particular and the human existence in the new world in general.

Generally speaking, Morrison's characters survive in a world defined by the domination of the whites. It is a world where black people are marginalized. In her novels, Morrison is concerned with how one should live in the world through her portrayal of characters and situations. She stresses the need for a new existence or being. She wants her characters to free themselves through both their individual choice and free will. One of Morrison's concerns is the emphasis on highlighting the impact of slavery and racism on the life of the African Americans. She probes deep into the history of slavery so as to show the difficulties the African Americans face in their search for a meaningful life or an authentic existence.

Chapter two is mainly concerned with Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*. This novel narrates the story of a black girl who lives in a community where blue eyes, blond hair, and white skin are valued as means of love, happiness and acceptance. On the contrary, the blacks are rejected due to their lack of such standards. Here, it is Morrison's intention to portray two opposing types of characters (Pecola Breedlove and Claudia Macteer) in order to underscore the existential aspects of their personality. In this novel, Morrison wants to highlight that one's existence and being in a certain community depend on acceptance or rejection of its values or norms.

Chapter three tackles Morrison's *Sula*. Sula, the title character and the central figure, is a character whose individual needs drive her to constitute a set of values that are personally unique. Sula is a nonconformist as far as this is her means of survival. The novelist presents Sula as a figure whose conducts justify her existentialist status.

Throughout the analysis of *Sula* from an existentialist perspective, the researcher traces the heroine's quest for wholeness through her outlook to her community and its moral and social codes of behavior is concerned. In addition, she examines her relationships with her family, her friends and the males of her community.

The last chapter of this thesis expounds the story of an African American slave woman who resists the traumas of slavery by means of existential acts. Accepting what is logically unaccepted as a strategy of self-assertion is the main concern of the researcher in her manipulation of the existentialist theory in *Beloved*. Sethe, the central figure comes to a

point where she realizes that killing her baby child rather than allowing it to be taken back into slavery is the most rational act. She kills her baby out of her own conviction that she does the ultimate right and free act.

Moreover, Morrison's *Beloved* is interested in issues of existence and being. She wants to underscore the responsibility of every human being to chart the directions of their life. Implicitly, she wants her characters to assume existentialist freedom in resisting what life imposes on them, regardless of the cost. In Morrison's portrayal of Sethe as an existentialist figure, the actions she assigns to her are the very means that make of Sethe a figure as such.

The conclusion gives a brief account of the main points covered in the body of the thesis. It concludes the findings of the study and offers some recommendations for further studies in Toni Morrison's art of fiction.

CHAPTER ONE

Toni Morrison as an Existential Novelist

Existentialism as a literary and philosophical movement:

Generally speaking, existentialism is a philosophy as well as an intellectual movement that sprang in Europe and influenced many diverse writers in the late 19th century and the 20th century. Originally, it was as a reaction to the 19th century materialism that was dominant in the Western society. There, people were searching for significance in a meaningless and absurd world. It was at such times that people found a way out in ideology as a reaction to the changing political conditions that affected the economic systems greatly.

Simple definitions of existentialism are offered in dictionaries. According to the Webster New World Dictionary existentialism is "The doctrine that existence takes precedence over essence and holding that man is totally free and responsible for his acts. This responsibility is the source of dread and anguish that encompass mankind" (Collin 19). On the other hand, the American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language defines it as "The philosophy that emphasizes the uniqueness and isolation of the individual experience in a hostile or indifferent universe, regards human existence as unexplainable and stresses freedom of choice and responsibility for the consequences of one's acts" .(The New York Times Company 2)

Here, the researcher sees that it is important to underscore that all the major tendencies taking existentialism as their umbrella body of thought differ from one philosopher to another. That is to say they may agree on some aspects and disagree on others. Therefore, it is so hard to put a set of rules including all these tendencies and call them existentialism. That is because existentialists disregard any set of conventional or conceptual system depending on the knowledge that comes from an individual experience. However, despite the difficulty of

explaining existentialism, there are some basic principles and concepts that underlie it as a philosophy.

For men and women, according to existentialism, life is a difficult process of becoming, of choosing to make themselves in a world that is both absurd and meaningless. Existentially, man is to make choices in his life but his choice is accompanied neither by obligation nor by force. Therefore, they imply full responsibility and commitment (faith). He chooses either to accept or reject the moral codes prevailing in his surrounding area. In this regard, Raymond J. Corsini remarked that:

Existentialism involves the following contentions. First, choice is ubiquitous. All my actions imply choice. Even when I do not choose explicitly, as I may not do in the majority of cases, my action bears witness to an implicit choice. Second, in many of my actions, my choices are governed by criteria. However, these criteria are chosen. (149)

As one of the leading figures of existentialism, Kierkegaard asserts the real meaning of existence as "Freedom of choice,...to be human, and to possess this freedom to choose, and to exercise it. Every man must first choose who he is, then decide to be what he is" (qtd in Noonan 5). Kierkegaard considers freedom of choice from a religious perspective. To him, existence emerges as a philosophical problem in the struggle to think the paradoxical presence of God. One's actions always form part of a coherent way of life in which principles are treated as binding and it is in this sense that behind any action there lies a choice. The concept of freedom of choice is "a decision between fundamentally different ways of life" (Edwards 145). He contends that "action and choice can be understood only if viewed from the standpoint of the agent rather than from that of the spectator" (Edwards 147). Thus, for both Sartre and Kierkegaard, man is totally free and responsible for what he makes of himself. It is this freedom and responsibility that is the source of man's dread.

By large, peoples' approach towards the prevailing systems flourished where the two successive world wars had their overwhelming consequences on many nations especially the defeated ones. As such, analyzing humanity existence and their role in the war was approached by many thinkers. It became popularized in France and associated with Jean Paul Sartre. It mirrored the spiritual crisis that aggravated during the war. Hence, existentialism flourished in the mid-1900s.

Thus, existentialists insist that one's authentic existence involves acting upon his own convictions. Lavine T.Z points out that "the human self is the true center of philosophy and the sole legitimating authority"(327). In other words, in their lives people are exposed to the

common laws set by human beings such as social and moral codes. But due to the fact that one's experience within a certain community differs from those of the others', each person lives his life according to what he sees as right and wrong, bad or good for himself. The individual's experiences are the base of his own personal truths that constitutes his essence.

Basically, existentialism is that one's personal existence is "constituted neither by nature nor by culture since to exist is to constitute such an existence" (Stanford Encyclopedia 16). To exist depends on one's look upon himself and how others think of him. However, one's subjectivity of himself differs from his subjectivity by others. "When I become aware of being looked at, that is when my subjectivity is invaded by the subjectivity of another for I am part of the world, I become aware of having a character of being or doing something".(Stanford Encyclopedia 25)

On account of one's practical engagement in the world all things appear to have reasons for being meaningful. It means one's practical participation in the world which gives shape to his life and implies responsibility for this free act. Again, existentialism stresses the importance of creating one's own set of truths suggesting that such truths are unique to him. Existentially, truth is "something that a person inwardly knows and accepts as a guiding principle for his life. It is part of that knowledge that one has chosen to embody and express while living a meaningful life."(Noonan 6). One's reaction to a certain situation remains unknown to others because the others are unaware of what is in the mind of that person. Therefore, we must remain objective to the behavior of others and be subjective only to our own experience. Thus, this subjectivity to ourselves and objectivity to the others means creating our own truths and values regardless of the codes and values of society.

Thus, choosing a matching way of life with one's beliefs and desires and defying society's codes means acting in what is existentially referred to as "good faith". On the contrary, denying one's own potential and the qualities one possesses and acting upon what the society wants him to be means acting in what is existentially referred to as "bad faith". In this sense, such a person rejects the meaningful existence for himself. "Obligated to make our own choices, we can either confront the angst of this responsibility or evade by claiming obedience to some determining conventions or duty; that is acting in bad faith" (Baldick 72).

Sartre contends that existentialism is "the one philosophy of our time which we cannot go beyond. According to him, the ideology of existence was itself an alienated form of the analysis of social and historical reality" (Stanford Encyclopedia 14). Generally, existentialism suggests the stress on concrete individual existence and, consequently, on subjectivity, individual freedom and one's choice of his own way regardless of universal

objective standards. Unlike the traditional view that moral choice involves an objective judgment of right and wrong, existentialists have argued that no objective rational basis can be found for moral decisions. In this regard Sartre points out to the difference between "good faith" and "bad faith" is:

A man of "bad faith" ignoring his instincts, and refusing to choose his own path in life, and a man of "good faith" is one who understands and accepts the responsibility of living a life of freedom and is actively engaged in the business of living. (Noonan 4)

Therefore, one's choice of one path and not the other depends on his own inward self and the set of truths that help him to create a unique life. Again, in the light of what was mentioned so far, existentialist freedom has two faces: One is negative, and the other positive. The positive side of freedom applies to one who chooses to lead a unique life belongs only to his set of truths, disregarding any social conventions that is a man of "good faith". That is his rejection of the previously conceived norms and codes to be what others want him to be. As such, human leads an authentic life. Authentic existence is a morality that is "personally rather than socially dictated. There is only the consciousness of ourselves which drives us about a world that is always but a vain and floating appearance"(Morris 161). It is a condition of self-making.

On the contrary, the negative side of freedom applies to the person who leaves his life to be decided by others. In other words, he allows his life to be what others want him to be. Existentially, to allow one's life to be dictated by the others is to lead an inauthentic life (bad faith). And on account of making his choice, one develops a sense of self-hatred and leads a distracted life. In fact, this distraction comes out as a reaction of the inconsistency between his own conception of himself and the outer world's view. "Inauthentic life is a life of denial characterized by depersonalizing generalization". (Andrews 115)

As an aspect of existentialism, authenticity is defined differently by each existential philosopher. To Sartre, as illustrated in his *Being and Nothingness*, authenticity implies "One's ability to let himself/herself fall into nothingness after which he/she would be able to become capable of transcending the social being and therefore reaching the state of uniqueness in which he/she can realize his possibility". (Ali 3)

According to Sartre, man will be what he will have planned to be. A person alone determines what he/she would do or be. Life is a struggle between man and the surrounding community. That is, individual freedom is considered according to the possibilities that one

has. In a world surrounded by others, one's subjectivity by himself varies from his subjectivity by "the Other".

The issue of "the Other" is pivotal in Sartre's philosophy. Nathan A. Scott in his *Mirror of Man in Existentialism* paraphrases Sartre's interest in it as follows:

Man is to reduce to the state of an object, and thus to diminish his freedom; for he begins to be at the mercy of freedom. Thus, no sooner is one looked at than one is by way of becoming a slave; for, when another man through his gaze reduces me to an object, my reality begins not to depend on my own freedom, but on his. And similarly, when I gaze at him, his human reality becomes dependent on my freedom, and he begins to be my slave. (175)

One of the most outstanding slogans known about Sartre's existentialism is "Hell is the Other". This is because it is through the world of "the Other" that the individual comes to know who he is. It is commonly known that one's view of himself is not always consistent with his view by "the Other". On his subjectivity by "the Other" one is not viewed as he really is. On account of this, a state of instability (anxiety) comes out. According to Sartre such a state exists:

Other people are viewed not as they are but as intentional objects of my perceptions, my beliefs, my emotions. But to myself, I can never be such an object, nor am I in fact. An object, and if they regard me as such their view of me is necessarily falsified. (Edwards 248)

Human beings seek the enjoyment of personal existence wherever they live due to their cultures, which are systems or beliefs that determine their way in life. The individual character is shaped through his relationship with the family and the surrounding community and its values, ethics, or conventions. That is to say, developing a sense of self is an essential part of every person becoming mature. Since each person's self concept is a unique set of many personal needs and truths, sometimes individuals are willing to sacrifice their identity to achieve personal existence. Disregarding their being as members of a certain community that share the same collective identity, individuals indulge in a search for personal existence that fulfills their personal needs during a certain stage of life.

Existentialists contend that no two individuals are alike. Each person has a special world with its unique truths. It is out of this uniqueness that the existentialist concept of alienation arises. Alienation is one of the main principle of existentialism. Sartre considers that the relation between people is a constant affair of conflict and disconnection. He is more

interested in the inner manifestation of alienation than with the outer one. Sometimes it stands as a means to understand and cope with the surrounding world. As illustrated in his *Being and Nothingness*, alienation is "a reaction to socio-economic condition, accepting it as the eternal state of humanity and a social being, attempting to affirm its selfhood by retreating into her/his own individual pattern of life". (Ali 8)

Of course, the basic question here is about freedom which is sometimes gained through disconformity. It is that freedom which stands against morality, against the social order or even against history. . It comes out as a result of some sort of alienation. From among the different types of alienation, we have the alienation of those who do not identify with the institutions of their own society, who find their society empty and meaningless. According to the existential alienation "apart from one's own conscious being, all else is otherness from which he is estranged" (Rice 122). By otherness one means the alienation that arises within the same family between its members about the different codes that govern their life.

Existentialist writers portray characters who search for existentialist fulfillment; that is for freedom and self-definition. Yet, living according to "the Other" is damaging because complete engagement with the otherness of things is a form of alienation but this time from the self. In his *Radical Innocence* Ihab Hassan remarks:

Society modulates and determines one's awareness of his situation but only his being (existence) determines his stand. The recoil of modern self is its way of taking a stand. It weakens its involvement in practical life. It leads it in the way of violence and alienation, augments its sense of guilt and absurdity, and affords it no objective standard of evaluating the worth of human action. (31)

Life is a continual struggle for personal existence. It is a basic need to gain what one does not own. In his search for this need, man develops a desire for fulfilling his existence. That is he seeks to find a position where it is possible to take himself in. In doing so, as Ihab Hassan puts it "Society may modulate man's awareness of his situation, but only existence determines his stand" (31). In the process of self-making man is faced with a lot of obstacles that attempt to limit his freedom.

Resisting such obstacles is an existentialist aspect which is characterized by the sense of not wanting to be as such or not wanting to do this. Of course, this resistance is accompanied by recognizing danger, fear, and admission of the inevitable. It is an attitude that exists in almost every situation in one's life. As such man lives in a world where things