

Generational Conflict in Toni Morrison's Novels

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Abstract

People conflict for many reasons, such as economic imbalance, racial and cast or class differences, colour background, ideology, etc. When we speak about conflicts, we must not confine ourselves outside the home. Inside any home itself conflicts arise and they become more powerful than that of the conflicts outside homes. Among the conflicts, generational gap takes a major role. Age differences between two sets of people is called generation gap and this gap plays the main role for any kinds of conflicts “within” a group where the term “within” could be expanded inside and outside home. Toni Morrison is an American female novelist who deals with many themes. Her themes include conflicts between Black and White Americans. Among the Black community inside the USA conflicts for many reasons such as economy, ideology, prestige, etc. Further within the Black Community there are conflicts between the “Blacks” and “Americanized Blacks.” The above conflict could be identified as “ethnic or ethnicity-seeking Blacks” and “Americanized or American-adapted Blacks.” This research brings out one of the major and important themes; generational conflict. Though Morrison is a Black American Female writer, she does not confine herself to Black or American or Feminine, instead she deals the theme as universal and makes herself as a universal writer.

Keywords: generation, conflict, economic imbalance, race, class, age

1. Introduction

Most of Toni Morrison's novels are apparently structured by a number of oppositional structures. And these oppositions make invariably conflict with the other. Both the Black Americans and the White Americans conflict for many reasons, apart from racial purposes, also for many other reasons such as economy, ideology, prestige, etc., they conflict. For instance, the Black American Guitar Bains in *Song of Solomon* fights with the whites for racial purposes. He fights with the Whites physically, involving with a militant group called “The Seven Days.” Son in *Tar Baby* does not directly fight physically with the Whites, rather he is against the so called “White Ideology.”

Toni Morrison mostly uses the Black community for her portrayal of this ideological conflict. The third kind of conflict arises between the ethnic or ethnicity-seeking blacks and the Americanized or American-adapted blacks. For instance, the “Americanized” Jadine and the “ethnicity-seeking” Son in *Tar Baby* conflict with each other throughout the novel. The same way Pecola Breedlove seeks for the “textual or theoretical beauty” of blue eyes in *The Bluest Eye*. She indirectly conflicts with her ethnicity-seeking friend Claudia MacTeer – an ideological conflict.

The fourth and the major kind of contrast and conflict arise between the older people and the younger ones where generational gap is the main cause for this conflict. Apart from all other matters such as economy, politics, ideology, etc. this conflict becomes a prominent one in Morrison's novels. Most of the fights of this kind take place within the family members like the old lady Alice Manfred and the young one Dorcas Manfred in *Jazz*, Sula Peace and Eva Peace in *Sula*, the Streets and their son Michael in *Tar Baby*, etc.

2. Literature Review

The critic Earl Frederick writes about Toni Morrison as follows: "If there is any hope that a current black author can achieve, to the satisfaction of the whites, not just an adequate but an irrefutable mix of black form and human content ... then it must rest with Toni Morrison (536)." This indicates that Morrison deals with universal problem and thus she becomes a universal writer, Morrison does not encircle herself to any race or gender. In an interview with Rosemarie K. Lester, Toni Morrison tells, *I write without gender focus ... It happens that what provokes my imagination as a writer has to do with the culture of black people. I regard the whole world as my canvas and I write out of that sensibility of what I find provocative and the sensibility of being a woman. But I don't write women's literature as such. I think it would confine me ... (54).*'

Morrison's above statement is clear that she is far away from calling herself a feminist writer nor is a black writer nor is an "American" writer. Morrison uses her power as writer to make her readers achieve her goal – love each other. As Nellie McKay rightly quotes Margaret B. Wilkerson in the essay "The Dramatic Voice in Toni Morrison's Novels" says "Morrison successfully mines the natural ore of human experiences, creating believable characters who challenge ordinary notions about human behavior and who are shaped as much by their own mysterious psyches as by circumstances (183)." And it is only Morrison among the contemporary writers who can successfully involves her readers to make the world a loveable one with loveable human beings.

2.1 The Generational Conflicts

Usually the old and the young conflict for many reasons. As in the words of Susan Adcox "A generation gap is commonly perceived to refer to differences between generations that cause conflict and complicate communication, creating a 'gap' (<https://www.verywellfamily.com/looking-at-the-generation-gap-1695859>)." For instance, the young are accustomed to the latest modes of living, which the old may not want to adopt. Many of such conflicts arise without the conscious of each party, they start out of no reasons but they continue.

Toni Morrison deals with the conflicts between the young and the old too. Some of the conflicts arise from age, whilst the others arise from economy, race, family set-up, and love. For instance, Claudia MacTeer and her elder sister Frieda MacTeer in *The Bluest Eye* conflict with their parents due to age differences. The protagonist Milkman Dead in *Song of Solomon* conflicts with his father Macon Dead – II due to familial and economic factors. Again, Claudia MacTeer and Frieda MacTeer in *The Bluest Eye* conflict with Rosemary Villunacci due to racial and economic differences. Sammy Breedlove with his father Cholly Breedlove in *The Bluest Eye* conflicts due to their family set-up, and the young Dorcas Manfred's conflicts with old Joe Trace in *Jazz* has possessiveness as reason.

2.2 Age

Morrison carefully deals with the conflicts among the characters when age difference become in the forefront. Researches show that many conflicts within the family (or society on a larger scale) break due

to age gaps among the family members. Most commonly the older people do not want to accept the younger ones for many reasons and this later breaks into conflicts. The family set up may be parent – children or grandparents – grand children relationship.

Morrison's younger characters like Claudia MacTeer and Freida MacTeer conflict with their parents Mr. and Mrs. MacTeer in *The Bluest Eye*; Dorcas Manfred Manfred in *Jazz* does not get along with her aunt Alice Manfred; and Sula Peace fights with her grandmother Eva Peace in *Sula*. In *Circle of Sorrow, Lines of Struggle*, Gurleen Grewell points out the historical constraints of "human relationships" and social "relations," and the link between desire and interiority as follows: *Morrison's novels allow us to examine the quality of human relationships under the constraints of historical process and social relations, in the context of a collective. The emphasis is on the interiority of her characters, the acknowledgement and enactment of desire in all its unruly forms, becomes a way of countering the diminishing of the subordinated, alienated self* (13).

In the same manner, the younger characters of Morrison conflict with the older ones and vice versa. The conflict of age is not confined to parents and offspring, but is extended to other kinships as well. When Claudia MacTeer and Frieda MacTeer in *The Bluest Eye* are nine and ten years of age respectively, they start hating their parents. Claudia narrates the behavioural patterns of the adults in her society as follows: *Adults do not talk to us – they give us directions. They issue orders without providing information. When we trip and fall down they glance at us; if we cut or bruise ourselves, they ask us are we crazy... Our illness is treated with contempt, foul Black Draught, and castor oil that blunts our minds* (5-6).

Claudia MacTeer does not like the way her mother treats her at the time she catches a cold. Or Claudia does not understand her mother's love when she is nine. She narrates an incident when she catches a cold and her mother's medication as follows: *... Her hands are large and rough, and when she rubs the Vicks salve on my chest, I am rigid with pain. She takes two fingers' full of it at a time, and massage my chest until I am faint... A hot flannel is wrapped about my neck and chest. I am covered up with heavy quilts and ordered to sweat, which I do – promptly* (6).

One of the reasons for the younger ones conflict with the older due to the social advantages the later get. As Santrock puts "the argument is that older adults are advantaged because they have publicly provided pensions, health care, food stamps, housing subsidies, and other benefits that younger groups do not have ... Adolescents have especially been underserved by the governments (21-22)."

Claudia who expresses this hateful attitude when she talks about her father who always has an eye on his daughters. After his bath every night he watches whether his daughters are asleep (55). The above reactions of Claudia show the generational gap. However, later she accepts the reasons for her parents' attitudes and justifies their actions.

Geraldine and her son Junior in *The Bluest Eye* have the same age-gap problem as well. Geraldine's up bringing is different. Her familial background is different and that makes her restrict her son in many ways (63-66). Geraldine does not have any emotional bondage with her son and makes a gap between herself and her son, and this in turn leads the child hating other children of its age (67-68).

Dorcas Manfred in *Jazz* is an "eighteen-year-old girl" (3), and her aunt Alice Manfred is fifty-eight (76). Dorcas is raised by her aunt Alice Manfred since Dorcas has been orphaned in the East St. Louis riots (57). Dorcas does not maintain an affectionate relationship with her aunt, because Dorcas feels that Alice is old and does not know the latest trends that the teens follow. As Feldman puts "Adolescence, the developmental stage between childhood and adulthood, is a critical period. It is a time of profound changes and, occasionally, turmoil. Considerable biological change occurs ... these changes are rivaled by

important social, emotional, and cognitive changes ... (432).” There may be the reasons for the adolescent Dorcas fight with the older Alice. For instance, Alice does not like the just-coming Jazz for various reasons. The text shows as indicated below how Alice hates the music: *She knew from sermons and editorials that it wasn't real music – just colored folks' stuff: harmful, certainly; embarrassing, of course, but not real, not serious. Yet Alice Manfred swore she heard a complicated anger in it; something hostile that disguised itself as flourish and roaring seduction. But the part she hated most was its appetite. Its longing for the bash, the slit; a kind of careless hunger for a fight or a red ruby stickpin for a tie – either would do. It faked happiness, faked welcome, but it did not make her feel generous, this juke joint, barrel hooch, tonk house music* (59).

The places the narrator uses viz. juke joint, barred hooch, and tonk house show how Alice hates the music as the people of her age do. But at the same time her niece Dorcas Manfred has a radically different view on the music as follows: “For her the drums were not an all-embracing rope of fellowship, discipline and transcendence. She remembered them as a beginning, a start of something she looked to complete” (60). But for Alice, the music appears to call and tell “come and do wrong” (67).

Further, Alice Manfred does not allow her niece to wear certain kinds of dresses, but Alice admires them privately (55). The text shows how certain things are forbidden to the teen aged Dorcas: ... *but as the girl grew older, more elaborate specifications had to be put in place. High-heeled shoes with the graceful straps across the arch, the vampy hats closed on the head with saucy brims framing the face, makeup of any kind – all of that was outlawed in Alice Manfred's house...* (55).

Alice wants to nurture her niece as she has been nurtured by her own mother. She did not like those prohibitions when she was young but she lays down the same to her niece as the text evidences: “Growing up under that heated control, Alice swore she wouldn't, but she did pass it on. She passed it on to her baby sister's only child. And, wondered now would she have done so had her husband lived or stayed or if she had had children of her own” (77). These kinds of differences emerge because the nieces are separated by a generation gap.

Dorcas' fate to fight with the older people does not stop with her aunt Alice, but she is predestined to have the “fifty odd” year old Joe Trace as her lover. It can be argued that Dorcas does not have any outlet to pour her emotions out. That might make her involvement with the fifty-plus-year-old Joe Trace. This relationship could be explained as infatuation, however, whatever emotional attachment Dorcas has with Joe Trace, their age becomes a barrier, if not at the earlier stages of their affair. So after certain years they reap the consequences of their abnormal affection. Their age-gap is exposed when she meets a suitable boy of her age group, Acton. She falls for him, and does not want to continue with the father-like figure, Joe Trace. Naturally Dorcas fights with Joe, and Joe gets flooded with misunderstanding and mistrust towards her. This ends up Joe Trace killing the teen-aged girl, and his wife disfiguring the corpse of Dorcas at the funeral.

Sula Peace is the granddaughter of Eva Peace in *Sula* where Sula Peace is a courageous girl even when at twelve, unlike the other black girls of her age (54). This is well illustrated by Morrison in the text as while she returns from the school with her friend Nel, four white boys “occasionally entertained themselves in the afternoons by harassing black children ... (53).” But Sula takes a different stand with a knife as follows: *Sula squatted down in the dirt road and put everything down on the ground: her lunchpail, her reader, her mittens, her slate. Holding the knife in her right hand, she pulled the slate toward her and pressed her left forefinger down hard on its edge. Her aim was determined but inaccurate. She slashed off only the tip of her finger* (54).

Finally she warns those boys: “If I can do that to myself, what you suppose I'll do to you?” (54-55). This fearlessness has been passed to Sula from her grandmother, Eva Peace, since when she was

abandoned by her husband, leaving her with three small children (31-32). Eva is courageous too. She leaves her three children and goes away to earn money. "Eighteen months later she swept down from a wagon with two crutches, a new black pocketbook, and one leg (34)." The narration of the scene goes as; *Somebody said Eva stuck it [her disappeared leg] under a train and made them pay off. Another said she sold it to a hospital for \$10,000 – at which Mr. Reed opened his eyes and asked, 'Nigger gal legs goin' for \$10,000 a piece?' as though he could understand \$10,000 a pair – but for one? (31).*

On that account, it is no wonder that the grandchild acquires the courage from her grandmother. But it is sad to note that the generation gap separates the two, though they are courageous enough to live alone.

Eva hates her husband for some reasons which may be justifiable. But the pathetic situation here is that her hatred towards her husband extends towards Sula at the time Sula enters the town, Bottom. The conversation between Eva and Sula shows their entrenched positions. *Bible say honor thy father and thy mother that thy days may be long upon the land thy God giveth thee. 'Mamma must have skipped that part. Her days wasn't too long.' 'Pus mouth! God's going to strike you!' 'Which God? The one watched you burn Plum?' 'Don't talk to me about no burning. You watched your own mamma. You crazy roach! You the one should have been burnt!' 'But I ain't. Got that? I ain't. Any more fires in this house. I'm lighting them!' 'Hellfire don't need lighting and it's already burning in you...' 'Whatever's burning in me is mine!' 'Amen!' (93).*

And Sula goes one step further to warn, "... And you know what? Maybe one night when you dozing in that wagon flicking flies and swallowing spit, may be I'll just tip on up here with some kerosene and – who knows – you may make the brightest flame of them all' (94)." Finally, this unconventional relationship leads Sula sending her grandmother to the elders' home. They would have sorted the problem between themselves, but the generation gap and egoism between them are insurmountable barriers which do not allow them to sit and talk; rather, they fight and blame each other.

The same way Valerian Street and Michael behave in *Tar Baby*. Though they are father and son and rich whites, they do not go along with each other. Only at the end Morrison makes the old Valerian feel through the servant maid, Ondine, that Michael's mother and Valerian's wife, Margaret, are the root cause of the misunderstandings between the father and the son. The novel does not say that Valerian and Michael hate each other, but it does stress the fact that they do not have a normal, typical father – son relationship. For instance, on the occasion of the son's visit for a particular Christmas after a long interval, the father does not feel joy like his mother. They do not have any other offspring other than Michael. Yet the father Valerian does not want to celebrate his son's arrival after several years from abroad. He does not fight with his son literally, nor does he hate him like his mother Margaret who gloats over the pains of her son. Only at later stage the parents, particularly the father feels that he has not sympathized with Michael in pain at his young age. Being a capitalist, Valerian naturally did not like the Marxist views of his son. The text corroborates Valerian's nature: "His [Valerian] face smiling at him [Son] from the bowl of peaches was both the winsome two-year-old [Michael] under the sink and the thirty-year-old Socialist" (144).

2.3 Economy:

Conflicts on economic grounds become another major theme of Morrison, irrespective of race, family, age, etc. Macon Dead – II in *Song of Solomon* is a typical example of this kind. He is a rich Black and tries to suppress his family members along with other Blacks. He has a confrontational attitude towards his only son Milkman Dead and his daughter, First Corinthians. Macon Dead – II does not want his daughter to be married with a wage-earning yardman. Even at the age of thirty-five, the eldest daughter First Corinthians Dead is afraid of her father Macon Dead – II. In his presence the two sisters become

like inanimate dolls as the text describes "... Lena and Corinthians sitting like big baby dolls before a table heaped with scraps of red velvet (10)." The two sisters make "bright, lifeless roses that lay in pack baskets for months (10)." The image "bright, lifeless roses" shows their plight in their own house.

The volcanic image of Macon Dead – II shows how he is dangerous. The narrator explains Macon Dead – II: *Solid, rumbling, likely to erupt without prior notice, Macon kept each member of his family awkward with fear. His hatred of his wife glittered and sparked in every word he spoke to her. The disappointment he felt in his daughters sifted down on them like ash, dulling their buttery complexions and choking the lilt out of what should have been girlish voices. Under the frozen heat of his glance they tripped over doorsills and dropped the salt cellar into the yellow of their poached eggs. The way he mangled their grace, wit, and self-esteem was the single excitement of their days. Without the tension and drama he ignited, they might not have known what to do with themselves ... (10-11).*

It is the decision of the father to send his daughters to college for their degree. Only at the age of 42, First Corinthians decides to work as maid, tells a lie to her family members that she is secretary to a State Poet (187).

The same way Dr. Foster, Macon Dead – II's father-in-law, treats the latter. The words of Macon Dead – II reveals his father-in-law's treatment towards him, "When I'd come from, the farm we had, that was nothing to them. And what I was trying to do-they didn't have any interest in that. Buying shacks in shacktown, they called it. 'How's shacktown?' That's the way he'd greet me in the evenings (71-72)." Dr. Foster has been "worshipped" by his fellow-blacks though he "called them cannibals (71)." Being an elderly man, Dr. Foster could maintain his only young son-in-law a good relationship, but does not do anything below his self-conceived dignity. Here again the old-young conflict is sparked off by economic imbalance between the two in-laws.

Jadine, the young black female model in *Tar Baby*, conflicts with her adopted parents, Sydney and Ondine, the servant and the maid to the rich white Valerian. This tendency of earning (having) more money does not allow her to look after her adopted parents, Sydney and Ondine. Her mind resides, "Please don't need me now, not now. I can't parent now. I cannot be needed now. Another time, please. I have spent it all. Please don't need me now (282)." She knows that the old couple does not have a happy relationship with their master and mistress, Valerian Street and Margaret as well, however, Jadine does not want to take care of them at the time of their need.

Thus, economic imbalance becomes a prominent feature of Morrison's characters where they are already in conflicts because of age-gap.

2.4 Racial Prestige

Morrison brings out the old versus young conflict due to racial prestige as well. For instance, in *Jazz* Vera Louis Wordsworth Gray, a young rich white girl falls in love with her black servant and her mother comes to know that Vera Louis is impregnated by the Black slave. Vera Louis' mother "never spoke about it to her daughter, or, after she found out, ever spoke to her daughter at all, she was the one who would have had to let the Colonel know (140)." When the "old father, Colonel Wordsworth Gray" comes to know his daughter's present condition, he is unable to digest it as the text narrates the repercussion of the calamitous news: *He looked hurt, deeply, deeply hurt for a few seconds. Then his rage seeped into the room, clouding the crystal and softening the starched tablecloth. Realizing the terrible thing that had happened to his daughter made him sweat, for there were seven mulatto children on his land ... slap Vera Louis into the serving table (141).*

The rich White father never accepts his only daughter's affair and her pregnancy due to prestige through race than economy. The text delivers the consequence as; *No word, then or ever, passed between them. And the*

lingerie case full of money that lay on Vera's pillow the following Wednesday was, in its generosity, heavy with contempt. More money than anybody in the world needed for seven months or so away from home. So much money the message was indisputable: die, or live if you like, elsewhere (141).

The racial prestige leads to conflict between the old and the young among the Whites too as in the case of the Blacks like Macon Dead – II and his children in *Song of Solomon*.

2.5 Family Setup

The family setup becomes another strong base for the conflict between the old and the young in Morrison's novels. In *The Bluest Eye*, Pecola Breedlove's family is poor but there are continuous fights between the father Cholly Breedlove and the son Sammy Breedlove. Likewise, the Deads in *Song of Solomon* are rich, but the father Macon Dead – II always fights with his children, especially with his daughters First Corinthians and Magdalena. In both the above cases, they are Blacks.

Sammy Breedlove in *The Bluest Eye* is fourteen (25) who uses his *ugliness* “as a weapon to cause others pain. He adjusted his behavior to it, chose his companions on the basis of it: people who could be fascinated, even intimidated by it (29).” His father Cholly Breedlove comes home drunk, fights between the father and the mother erupts the following mornings, Sammy supports his mother in beating his father. The text shows the reactions of the son during the fights: *Sammy, who had watched in silence their struggling at his bedside, suddenly began to hit his father about the head with both fists, shouting 'You naked fuck!' over and over and over. Mrs. Breedlove, having snatched up the round, flat stove lid, ran tippy-toe to Cholly as he was pulling himself up from his knees, and struck him two blows, knocking him right back into the senselessness out of which she had provoked him. Panting, she threw a quilt over him and let him lie. Sammy screamed, 'Kill him! Kill him!' (33).*

Macon Dead – II in *Song of Solomon* always conflicts with his children, especially with his *over- aged* daughters, never allows his daughters' wishes – whether reasonable or unreasonable. He suppresses their emotions which lead the daughter to getting a *servant-maid's* job and to have an affair with a yardman, Henry Porter.

The Streets in *Tar Baby* and the Wordsworth Grays in *Jazz* are rich whites. They too conflict among themselves. Hence, it is their family setup which has been constructed within the family members that lead them conflict with each other. The mistakes may lie on the part of the old fathers and mothers who are rigid, but the young versus old conflict continuous without abatement or abrogation.

3. Conclusion

In conclusion, Morrison beautifully brings out how generational gaps become reasons for conflicts whereas the basis would be age, economy, race, family setups, etc. may be treated as secondary. By showing through the above theme that generational conflict is universal, Toni Morrison also becomes a universal writer who writes for the humanity.

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