



The Racial Myth of Black Violence in Toni Morrison's Novels

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Abstract

Toni Morrison's novels examine racial myths through the lens of verbal aggression. Toni Morrison explores the African American identity and focuses on the myths and slogans as examples of symbolic violence in the Žižekian tradition. In terms of methodology, this research examines the political discourse analysis, black-gendered feminism, and psychoanalysis of Slavoj Žižek's ideas on violence. New insights into ideology and violence emerge from merging psychoanalytic and political terminology. The purpose of this research is to investigate how the Black violence myth propagates the racist assumptions that Africans are inherently more aggressive and tolerant of pain than Europeans. To normalise the violence against non-European races and prevent the African subalterns from resisting the European incursions, the myths' rhetoric serves as pseudo-ideologies, according to the study.

Keywords

African American, Black violence myth; Žižek; Morrison, Racism.

Western ideology is rife with misogyny and racism and has been so for an extended period. So, while studying racism in the United States, it becomes necessary to delve into how racial myths of violence and aggression are created and manifest in the narratives over the ages to justify white supremacy and to create the myth related to Blacks. Most critics and readers usually tend to read Toni Morrison from the point of view of the female characters in her novels and look at the feminist aspects in their criticisms. This study, by focusing on the relationship to the psychology of violence, goes beyond analysing Toni Morrison's portrayal of traditional gendered violence to look at the racial violence which is often rooted in racial myths. Despite the lack of research on Žižekian violence in Toni Morrison's novels, this research paper examines how African Americans in Morrison's novels – *The Bluest Eye*, *Sula* and *Beloved* – absorb the racist myth of black violence and utilise it as a political instrument and pseudo-ideology.

According to Slovenian radical thinker Slavoj Žižek (Violence: Six Sideways Reflections 2008), Black violence is associated with the myth, which can be categorised into three types of violence: subjective, which includes crimes and terror, and objective, which includes prejudice, hate speech, and covert racism. Thirdly, it "suffers the zero-level standard against which we perceive something as subjectively violent" (Žižek 2), in contrast to the previous two, which centre on the intentional use of physical force to inflict injury. "Symbolic violence" refers to the aggressiveness inherent in language, whereas "systemic violence" explains the disastrous effects of long-standing economic systems. Žižek, through his systematic study of the myth of Black violence, thus tries to understand the basis of the racial victimisation and oppression that African Americans experience. Žižekian parameters of understanding violence and the dehumanisation processes have been used as the parameters to read Toni Morrison's novels to understand how Morrison, too, works within the Žižekian parameters to counter the Black violence myths and, thereby, shows her commitment to fighting against the white supremacy and its myriad discourses to defame, marginalise and oppress the Blacks, especially the Black women.

Slavoj Žižek claims that the Black Violence myth exemplifies the verbal and symbolic violence present in hate speech. It is a symbolic act of violence to "other" someone. Racial prejudice occurs when one treats another person or group with disdain because they are fundamentally different from oneself. A possible result of racism, an objective type of violence, according to Žižek, is the transmission of trauma from one generation to another. Long after the incident has happened, the psychological and emotional effects of prejudice might continue as it does in terms of racist thoughts, behaviours, actions and stereotypes. Overcoming internalised racism-related inferiority and White supremacy complexes requires more than just talking things out. According to Žižek, racism is a form of violence that, unless it results in bodily or psychological injury, is likely to remain unpunished and unacknowledged. Many types of covert violence, such as xenophobia, economic injustice, and social isolation, have racism as their origin, and thereby, racism shows up in one's thoughts and actions.

A common fallacy, known as the "myth of Black violence," asserts that people of African heritage are disproportionately violent and, therefore, are prone to crimes or criminal mindset. This misconception spreads because of several issues, such as drug misuse, teen pregnancies, domestic violence, and physical assault. Violent crimes like robberies, murders, rapes, and hostile activities put Africans in jail at a rate of about 50 per cent. On the other hand, Black people face an outsized quantity of violence. Black community violence seems to be perpetuating the violent stereotype due to society's inflexible reaction and perception. Despite the end of slavery in the United States, segregation, discrimination, and all other forms of racist violence persists due to the widespread

belief in fundamental differences between whites and blacks. However, resistance to such racist victimisation and violence is also on the rise, as evident in the Black Lives Matter Movement.

Toni Morrison's portrayals of Black aggression heavily rely on nonverbal cues. Slavery capitalised on the fact that Africans could express themselves violently even when they could not speak for fear of retaliation. Toni Morrison details and defends the psychological and physical assault that both abolitionists and slaveholders utilise as tools in the struggle against Black resistance. Slavoj Žižek claims in his work that violence originates from within the system. In this way, the current social and political order is both maintained and strengthened by systemic violence. Nonverbal cues of African subalterns' oppression are recurrent in Toni Morrison's works. The branding of Sethe with a hot iron in *Beloved* symbolises her servitude. Something like "a circle and a cross burnt right in the skin" (72) is visible. No one may claim Madam's body now that the branding signal is on it. A physical manifestation of the bare cruelty of slavery is the branding scar that Madam bears. "Growing" on Sethe's back is a chokecherry tree, which Toni Morrison uses as additional evidence. Using the description of "a mighty lot of branches" adorning a cleft open trunk and mentioning that the teacher had marked her with a leather whip, Amy detailed Sethe's brutal beatings.

Some negative stereotypes about Black men persist, including that they are disproportionately violent, aggressive, criminal, stupid, unemployed, and even neurotic. Words like "slut," "cunt," "whore," "bitch," and "angry Black woman" are instances of gendered language that derogatorily describes Black women. One of the main reasons racist views toward African Americans have persisted is because of black slavery. White enslavers expected enslaved Black people to act under these widespread prejudices, even though they never expected it on an individual basis.

The destructive sexism and racism fell disproportionately on Black women. That Black women have been "socialised out of existence" (7) is unique among American groups, says Bell Hooks. They occupied the lowest rung in society's hierarchy. Morrison succeeds intellectually rather than politically in her treatment of enslaved Black women in *Beloved* by attributing to their obsessions, negative stereotypes, and images. Some have accused Black women of being whores because of the economic pressures to have children at an excessively high rate outside of marriage. The sexual brutality that Africans suffered while enslaved is the basis of the terrible stereotype of Jezebel. By labelling Baby Sugg and Sethe as Jezebel, breeder woman, and mammy, respectively, *Beloved* depicts a type of intellectual control. The governing party exploits the first two stereotypes—that Sethe and Baby Suggs are jezebels since they did not have a legitimate marriage

license—by having them give birth to slave infants for their owner. The uniqueness of Sethe's situation was undeniable.

African Americans bear a disproportionate share of the burden of the dehumanising concept of race, and Toni Morrison's novels have emerged as a powerful tool in the fight against this. It should be no surprise that Toni Morrison has let the idea of race rule her thoughts. In creating her vulnerable characters, Toni Morrison aimed to make her readers feel the pain of racism. Racism in *The Bluest Eye* is characterised by ugly, uncleanliness, and savagery. The racial stereotypes that plague Toni Morrison's debut work portray African Americans as less-than-perfect citizens. Black is a colour that frequently represents dirtiness and ugly throughout the novel. As they go about their days amidst filthy debris, Pecola, Claudia, and Frieda "could go up the alley and see what is in the trash cans" (*The Bluest Eye* 26). Africans' minds and worldviews are hardwired to believe negative stereotypes, which causes them to despise themselves. The premise that White people are distinct and tidy, together with Morrison's white heroes and non-Black characters, perpetuates the stereotype that Black people are unrecognisable and untidy.

In the late fourteenth century, when Eurocentrism was gaining ground, the word "other" began to denote diversity. Mistakenly excluding others from the group of "selves" due to their gender, colour, ethnicity, caste, religion, or sexual orientation is what "othering" is all about. A person's Blackness justifies the use of dehumanising, aggressive, and othering tropes. The white majority frequently portrays the oppressed minority as being inherently weaker and less powerful. White characters in *The Bluest Eye* criticise Pecola when she falls short of their expectations. Besides the physical stigmas of femininity and horror, the character Pecola faces the tribal stigma of being African-American. The reader can witness Pecola's harrowing life from the first page to the last. Both her tribe and white culture have shunned and excluded her.

Slavery studies have investigated gender and race in almost virtually every way imaginable. According to Slavoj Žižek, aggressive discourse is a reflection of natural aggressiveness. According to Sigmund Freud, Michel Foucault, and Jacques Lacan, one's environment can impact one's thought processes. As a tactic for establishing and maintaining power dynamics, activities like hate speech serve to enslave the brains of oppressed individuals further. Judith Butler discusses how language "acts against us" (1) and the "power to injure" at that level in her 2013 political book *Excitable Communication*. "Speech does not merely reflect a relation of social domination; speech enacts domination" (4) is a phrase that Butler utilises to bolster her conclusions. As far as many people are concerned, speech actions theory is crucial to understanding topics like cultural diversity, verbal abuse, sexual assault, sexism, gender discrimination, and identity crises.

By allowing the oppressed to express their innermost feelings, Toni Morrison's stories highlight the emotional and physical toll that slavery took on its victims. Since the literary elite had disregarded or muzzled Morrison, she felt compelled to speak on behalf of "[...] a whole world of women" (Lister 8), according to Morrison. In Morrison's stories, the white characters disgrace and degrade the black characters through crude speech patterns, sarcasm, and an offensive tone. On multiple occasions, white characters refer to Cholly as "an old dog, a snake, a ratty nigger" (18) and "dirty nigger" (189).

The Black community suffered through the tragedy of *Sula* in a culture where White people predominated. In White culture, the derogatory and racist word "nigger" represents the plight of Black people. White supremacists' use of linguistic dichotomies in hate speech is an example of "out-group" and "in-group" tactics. When Krug et al. describe it as "the instrumental use of violence by people who identify themselves as members of a group - whether the group is transitory or has a more permanent identity - against another group or set of individuals, to achieve political, economic or social objectives" (115), they refute this form of collective violence. As a psychological issue, victims are more prone to internalising unfavourable European stereotypes. In *The Bluest Eye*, for instance, most characters think the Breedloves are hideous. Since terror evokes thoughts of evil and darkness, the Breedloves probably considered themselves embodiments of these characteristics.

Strategies of dehumanisation in racist and political discourse pertain to power, oppression, and exclusion. The mental aspects of dehumanisation are the primary subject of this study. "Perceiving a person or group as lacking humanness" is the cornerstone of universal dehumanisation, according to Nick Haslam (61). It happens when one group makes an effort to damage another psychologically. When parties to a conflict refuse to acknowledge and appreciate one another's humanity, dehumanisation happens psychologically. In Morrison's *Beloved*, Sethe recalls, "Those boys came in there and stole my milk," and she also mentions "the men coming to nurse her" (6). Two lads, one of whom had sharp teeth, pinched my breast as their reading teacher watched and recorded the occurrence. The brutal rape and dehumanisation that Sethe endured at the hands of the schoolteacher's nephew—who does little more than record the events—keeps replaying in her mind.

A person experiences deindividuation when they get so absorbed in the group's norms that they no longer know themselves. Using this mental approach, dehumanising someone is easier. No longer are deindividuated individuals considered human. Consequently, their social support is lower than individual laws prohibiting violence. The prohibitions prohibiting violence usually fall by the wayside if a group is characterised as wicked, psychologically and physically inferior, and not wholly human. As desensitisation continues, the chances of experiencing other forms of aggression

rise. The expected outcomes of dehumanisation are violent acts, human rights violations, and even genocide, from which no one ever fully recovers.

Slavery dehumanises Black women by making them nothing more than possessions. Their enslavement was a direct result of numerous harmful preconceptions about Black women. For instance, they falsely believed that they could give birth as quickly as animals and work as hard as men during labour. Slaveholders of White descent exploit these lies as political justification for their brutal measures to control their reproduction. Black women are great breeders because they are larger, stronger, and more muscular than white women. They also have wider buttocks and larger breasts. Black bondwomen are oppressed because racist preconceptions about breeder women justify it ideologically. There was a bargain for strong, childbearing Black women for their reproductive and productive capacities.

Like many other prevalent misconceptions, the idea that Black people are inherently violent has its roots in racial notions. Black men are believed to be inherently aggressive, savage, and eager to mate with white women for the warm blood and flesh, according to the Black aggression myth. Discriminating against women based on the myth that they cannot procreate was one racist tactic. Slaveholders would frequently purchase infertile women because they saw them as expendable. The slave narratives of Toni Morrison centre on the dehumanisation of African Americans. The tragic event that befalls *Beloved's* protagonist, Sethe, occurs "[...] after they handled me like the cow, no, the goat, back behind, the stable because it was nasty to stay in with the horses" (237). Pecola informs the doctor, "They [niggers] deliver right away and with no pain," as she compares herself to an animal (*The Bluest Eye* 124). The quotes make it crystal clear that people of colour are associated with savage and filthy behaviour.

Toni Morrison is critical of the myth of Black aggression and the use of false slogans and prejudices about Africans, as shown in her novels *Sula*, *Beloved*, and *The Bluest Eye*, which all deal with Black violence. Morrison's main argument seems to be that the White slaveholders brutally abused their Black properties (the enslaved Africans) to protect themselves and their community from the widespread crime, rape, and violence that existed among the slave population. Lastly, Toni Morrison's writings poignantly show how the Black violence myth and other Western pseudo-ideologies enable the enslavement of African Americans. To justify their exploitative actions, including enslavement and control over slave labour, enslavers used the myth of Black aggressiveness and violence.

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