



Revue Baobab: Numéro 8

Premier semestre 2011

The Reconstitution of Black Families in America During Slavery in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* and *Beloved*.

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Introduction

The history of black people in America started in 1619 when a Dutch frigate in distress landed at Jamestown and exchanged 20 African slaves who had probably been captured in the West Indies for food and supplies. Africans, along with white indentured servants, continued to arrive not only in Virginia, but in all other fledging colonies.

Since Blacks were transplanted in the United States, they have been dehumanized through bondage, discriminatory legislation and the creation of demanding stereotypes. Blacks' history has been dotted with sufferings, alienation and terror. It was on the spur of those hard times that black writers sought literature to reverse and supplant the dehumanized values promulgated by white American culture. African-American writers showed that fiction could celebrate blacks' efforts to preserve their humanity and also permitted them to recall the history of Blacks. Their purpose was to move black people to consciousness, to attitude and even to action. Among those African-American writers, we have Toni Morrison.

Born on February 18th 1931 in Lorrain (Ohio), Toni Morrison is one the most prominent American writers. She first went to Lorrain High school and to Howard University and received a B.A in English in 1953 and a Master Degree from Cornell in 1955. She taught English at Howard University and worked as a textbook editor before turning to write fiction.

She has written several novels among which we have: *The Bluest Eyes* (1970), *Sula* (1973), *Song of Solomon* (1977), *Tar Baby* (1981), *Beloved* (1987), *Jazz* (1992), *Paradise* (1998) and *Love* (2003).

In her writings, she deals mostly with problems relating to the living conditions of Blacks in America. Her major themes are about the burden of history, the social effects of racism and social classes on Blacks. In her writing she lays a particular stress on the impact of African culture on African-American families.



Revue Baobab: Numéro 8

Premier semestre 2011

The term African culture can be defined as «the particular system of art, thought and customs of African societies; the arts, customs, beliefs and all the other products of human thought made by African people at a particular time »¹

Our purpose is to show how African cultural values helped black families adjust to the living conditions of the New World. In what way have African cultural values been useful to black families in America?

To analyze the reconstitution of black families through the novels of Toni Morrison, we will first see how they were dislocated during slavery. Blacks were so mistreated that they could not preserve the unity of their families. Next, we will clarify cultural aspects that helped Blacks to reconstruct their dismembered families and cope with difficult living conditions; these cultural aspects permitted them to examine and understand social events according to their own visions. Finally, we will describe types of families Blacks succeeded in reconstituting with the help of their culture.

I) The dislocation of black families during slavery

From the earliest days of American slavery in the 17th century, slave owners sought to exercise control over their slaves by attempting to strip them of their African culture. Slave owners deliberately tried to repress political and social organizations in order to prevent the many slave rebellions that took place in the southern colonies. In her novels, Toni Morrison shows how black families were disorganized through alienation.

A) Cultural Alienation

In Toni Morrison's novels, cultural alienation is a major theme because it is a factor that endangers the stability of African-American families. Several black characters are presented as alienated either because they reject their own culture in favor of the white cultural values, or their original names have been removed and replaced by new names that have nothing to do with their origin.

In *Tar Baby*, Jadine Child is described as a young black girl. She is bred up by her uncle and aunt (Sydney and Ondine) after the death of her parents. She is then assisted by Valerian

¹ Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English ;London, Pitman Press, 1978; P271



Revue Baobab: Numéro 8

Premier semestre 2011

Street, a white wealthy man. Since her meeting with the Streets, a white family, she behaves like a white girl. She rejects all black cultural values and breaks off her family relations with her uncle and aunt, which means that she rejects her past.

In that novel, Toni Morrison makes more vivid the conflict opposing white culture to black one. Through the relation between Jadine and her lover, Son, a young black man, the author presents two different ways of being black. Jadine considers the support that she has from Valerian Street as a freedom and wants Son to get rid of black culture, saying that it is a primitive culture. As for Son, he thinks that the support Jadine receives from Valerian Street is a kind of prostitution and wants her to adopt black culture and reject the white one. Through Son, Jadine sees the black woman who threatens her in her dream. She hates these women. While discussing, Son informs Jadine that he comes from Florida precisely from “Eloe” a village populated only by Blacks. “No white people live in Eloe.”² For this reason, Jadine names Son “country baby” and she tells Son that she comes from Baltimore, Philadelphia and Paris. She wants to leave “Eloe” because for her it is a place that has a past but no future. Jadine’s case is one of loss of identity. Black people also lost their identity through renaming. Names seem to be the simplest, most literal and most obvious of all symbols of identity. The name allows to know each individual and beyond, his family. Each individual comes from a family and it is through the family that the individual acquires his sense of being. When Blacks were taken from Africa to America, they had African names which were removed along with their original culture.

In dealing with the various aspects of black family in American society, Toni Morrison lays a particular stress on racist names in her novels.

Her third novel, *Song of Solomon*, introduces us to a special family the “Deads.” This family receives its name from a drunken Yankee soldier who misfiled the identify paper.

The name “Dead” is a metaphor of Blacks’ condition. In a society where Whites want to relegate Blacks into a worse position, it is not surprising that they attribute such a name to a black family. This name means also empty life and unauthentic existence. The removal of the name is more meaningful in *Beloved* than in *Song of Solomon*.

² Toni Morrison, *Tar Baby*, New York: Knopf, 1981, P. 172



Revue Baobab: Numéro 8

Premier semestre 2011

In *Beloved*, the slave-owner, Garner changes the names of his slaves and replaces them by his own name. Thus we have Paul A. Garner, Paul D. Garner, Paul F. Garner.

This renaming is a means of domination and control over the lives of slaves, since with these new names, we have the feeling that these slaves belong to no family or come from no precise geographic area. They have no origin, no roots and are totally lost.

Racism in the United States has caused serious damages to the whole society, particularly to the black one.

Under a racist policy, Blacks were seen as subhumans and had no rights that any White was bound to respect. They were kept in a permanent state of dependency. Through the fate of the “Dead” family and the slaves renamed Garner, it is the sufferings of the whole black society that Toni Morrison is tracing again.

Apart from cultural alienation which leads to the dislocation of black families, the influence of the criteria of white beauty is another factor that contributes to reinforce this phenomenon.

B) The Criteria of White Beauty

White cultural values are the only ones appreciated and accepted by the white society. Any other form of cultural value is considered as negative and is not recognized by white people. Thus, to be loved and appreciated by white people, certain black characters in the fictitious world of Toni Morrison abandon their own culture in favor of white values.

In *The Bluest Eye*, Pecola, a teenager of twelve years has one wish: to be loved by her family, her classmates and all the society in which she lives. However, all her surroundings seem not to notice her presence. She is ignored. She thinks that it is the color of her skin that makes her ugly. Decided to fulfill her wish, she needs another criterion of beauty: to have blue eyes, fair-hair like Mary Jane whose image appears on the package of candies.

Apart from Pecola, other characters, Claudia and Frieda have been astonished by the behavior of Mr. Henry. While talking to them, he does not see their faces, but those of the famous white actresses. What astonishes the two young girls is that Mr. Henry looks at them without seeing their racial characteristics but sees others which are not theirs. The lesson they learn from this attitude of Mr. Henry is that beauty is not on the side of Blacks.

Through these young girls who are totally influenced by the criteria of white beauty, Toni Morrison shows that the gap between the physical appearance of Blacks and the ideal model



Revue Baobab: Numéro 8

Premier semestre 2011

of their social environment is painfully experienced by young girls and women who know that their ability to be accepted by the American society depends on their external aspects.

Through *The Bluest Eye*, Toni Morrison emphasizes the dispossession of black's cultural values and their replacement by the criteria of white beauty. But the development of the criteria of white beauty to the detriment of black cultural values is not the only factor that causes Blacks to disorganize their families. We also have the disallowance of black culture by Blacks.

C) The Disallowance of Black Culture by Blacks.

In the fictitious world of Toni Morrison, most of black characters are influenced by white culture. They consider theirs as negative. Therefore, they experience a certain disdain for themselves. This disdain is in fact a self-destruction which precludes any familial cohesion.

The Bluest Eye introduces us the Breedlove family and informs us about the permanent disputes and mainly the scorn that this family has for itself. That novel tells us about the failure of the Breedlove to conform to the white standards whereby beauty and happiness are measured. Pecola Breedlove, the main character of the novel, is the type of an outcast. Her story illustrates the destructive potentiality of a culture that takes into account only a standard of physical beauty and assimilates it to virtue. Pecola becomes crazy because of her incapacity to have blue eyes. But her craziness results really from her self-disdain and from the scorn of those who project on her their self-disdain. The members of this family appear as cultural orphans. They get rid of their African cultural legacy and are unable to conform to the cultural values of Whites.

Geraldine, another black character, assimilates black color to evil. Thus, she decides to deny this evil and not to exhibit any characteristic of African qualities. For her, to get rid of her difficulties means to get rid of her black skin in an environment where the fact of being black is synonymous with evil. When she meets Pecola Breedlove for the first time, she reacts with horror and anger. For her, Pecola is the expression of poverty and ugliness.

Pecola represents the evil that she tries to eliminate. The behavior of Geraldine is the expression of a duality in her personality: one side is guided by a quality that she tries to maintain, and the other side is led by evil that she fights to suppress. It is this duality that prevents her from loving her family and destroys it. In *Tar Baby*, the disallowance of the



Revue Baobab: Numéro 8

Premier semestre 2011

black culture by Blacks is more stressed than in *The Bluest Eye*. In *Tar Baby*, Jadine appears to be a cultural orphan because she refuses her own cultural legacy and identifies with another culture which is not hers. The novel illustrates the drawbacks of her bad cultural and social behavior. The quest of Jadine fails because she adopts blindly the values of the white middle class and rejects cultural constructions of race and maternity which can heal and transform her divided mind. The attitude of Jadine symbolizes the refusal of her self-determination in comparison with her familial past, her tradition and her cultural legacy which can transmit her real teachings.

During slavery, slave masters prevented Black people from using their culture. Instead, they adopted and used the cultural elements of Whites. This impossibility to use their culture has contributed to disorganize and destroy any familial relations in the black community. Despite this attitude of masters, the slaves preserved certain aspects of their culture. Through human contacts and exchanges of ideas among slaves and between them and their masters, they succeeded in producing a distinct culture allowing them to analyse social events according to their own vision and to support better the atrocities of slavery.

II) The Importance of Culture for Black Families

The culture that is produced by Black people is necessary because it constitutes an obstacle against alienation. Cultural forms created by Blacks allow them to cope with harmful and destructive effects of slavery and racism. Among the cultural forms developed, we can quote folklore, myths and religion. Together, these cultural forms enable black families to have a social welfare in a hostile land as if they were in an African environment.

A) The Role of Black Folklore

Folklore may be defined as: «The traditional knowledge of the folk. It is a body of traditional customs, beliefs, tales and songs which has no known author or source.»³

In the novels of Toni Morrison, black folklore is a major theme. It involves cultural elements such as customs, beliefs, tales and songs through which Blacks transmit to each other messages and share their knowledge. These cultural aspects permit them to be close to one another emotionally and to alleviate the hard working conditions. Songs constitute a great

³ Jone Polly, (ed) *American Folklore and Legend, the Reader's Digest association*, New York, 1978,P6.



Revue Baobab: Numéro 8

Premier semestre 2011

element in black folklore. They are the first forms of African-American oral expressions. They show the beginning of tradition in African-American literary history. These songs commonly called Negro-spirituals give more information about the reaction of slaves facing physical landscapes of their living environment.

In *Song of Solomon*, it is through the song of children that Milkman understands historical facts and reconstitutes his family genealogy. This song is the following: «Jake the only son of Solomon, come booby yale, come booby tambee Whirled about and touched the sky.»⁴

This song enables Milkman to know the history of slaves who came back to Africa by flight. Among these slaves, he finds his great-grand-father, Solomon.

Toni Morrison uses this song to maintain living events that happen within the black community and transmit these events from generation to generation. Thus it is through this song that Milkman understands the whole history of his great-grand-father and the one of flying Africans. This song is not only a metaphor of the past, but also an umbilical cord for Milkman that connects him to his genuine legacy. In *The Bluest Eye*, it is from a song that Cholly celebrates his new identity.

At birth, he is denied by his father; his aunt who took care of him is dead. He has then no other assistance and support. For this reason, he loses his self-control and he retires in the forest. There, he has a wash and washes his clothes like in a ritual of purification. For him, a new life begins. Fortunately, he is comforted by the song of a carter which is the following: “Fresh from the wine, sweet as sugar, red as wine.”⁵

This song has a link with the new life of Cholly. He must now assume his responsibilities.

Apart from songs, tales constitute another important element in black folklore. On farms, slaveholders limited or prohibited education of enslaved Africans because they believed it might empower their chattel and inspire or enable emancipation ambitions. Hence, African-based oral traditions became the primary means of preserving history, morals and other cultural information among the people. This was consistent with the griot practice of oral history in many African cultures that did not rely on the written word.

Many of these cultural elements have been passed from generation to generation through storytelling. The folktales provided African-American with the opportunity to inspire and

⁴ Toni Morrison, *Song of Solomon*, New York: Knopf, 1977, PP306-307

⁵ Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eyes*, New York: Winston, 1970, p. 123



Revue Baobab: Numéro 8

Premier semestre 2011

educate one another. Examples of African-American folktales can be found in the novels of Toni Morrison.

In *Song of Solomon*, Macon Dead II compares his sister Pilate to a snake. To bring his son Milkman understands the division of the dead family, he tells him the following story about a snake:

Ever hear the story about the snake? The man who saw a little baby snake bleeding and hurt. And the man felt sorry for it and picked it up and put it in his basket and took it home. And he fed it and took care of it till it was big and strong. Then one day, the snake turned on him and bit him. And while he was laying there dying, he turned to the snake and asked him : “what’s you do that? Didn’t I take good care of you? Didn’t I save your life?” The snake said “yes,... But you knew I was a snake, didn’t you ?⁶”

For Macon Dead II, Pilate is not grateful because when they were teenagers, Macon Dead II took care of her after the death of their father. Thanks to him, her sister did not die. For this reason, Pilate should acknowledge all his efforts to make her survive. Since Pilate does not behave as he wishes, he tells his son that Pilate is as worse as a snake.

In *The Bluest Eye* one of the tales is about ghosts. A ghost is believed to be the manifestation of a departed person. To make Cholly understand how ghosts affect social life, Blue Jack tells him this story:

She was walking across the yard with this neighbor’s friend of hers and they both looked up and saw a woman comin down the road. They stopped and waited to see who she was. When the woman got near, the neighbor called « howdy », and soon she said the word, the woman turned into a white bull. Right before their eyes. The neighbor’s friend fell down on the ground in labor pain right then and there.⁷

⁶ Toni Morrison, Op.cit, P. 54-55

⁷ Toni Morrison, Op.cit, P. 110



Revue Baobab: Numéro 8

Premier semestre 2011

Through tales related to ghosts, Toni Morrison demonstrates that in African culture, people think that the physical world and the spiritual world are closely connected and the spiritual world has an influence on the physical one. In her fiction, Toni Morrison appears as a storyteller who uses folklore and oral tradition, accepting African legacy and culture in the lives of African-Americans. Tales remain one of the cultural forms used in Africa. They show that Africans as well as African-Americans give a real value to familial relationships, to children and to knowledge.

Generally speaking, the tales allow the slaves to express their scorn, hatred toward their masters and to describe the hard working conditions on farms. At the same time, they create a space beyond the reach of their masters. They enable the slaves to express their own vision of the world. Used as a means of entertainment, they transmit wisdom and moral values which are used as advice to educate young people.

Black folklore contains distinct cultural forms through which African-Americans express their own vision of the world. They are the proof of the survival of black culture in America. Apart from the folklore, myths also appear as another factor that recreates a solid black culture.

B) Myths

Myths are popular accounts telling about superhuman beings and outstanding actions. Myths express the deepest perception of a culture and when they are given a form of fiction, they can awake an audience.

The historical African-American fiction merges history and myth to a new reality enabling Blacks to maintain their humanity despite the negative forces acting against them. Myth is the process by which writers emphasize values, perceptions and behaviors they want the audience to recognize within a particular culture. Myths deal with a world populated by gods, devils and supernatural forces; an abstract world which is not necessarily accessible to humans. Thus, African-American writers lay a particular stress on heroes within their community.

A hero is the main character of a literary work that plays the most important role and he distinguishes himself by extraordinary deeds and his courage facing danger. African-American writers invent heroes and spaces with new meanings, dismantling racist stereotypes. These heroes refuse the values imposed by white culture. This way of conserving myths through the history of African-American fiction constitutes a radical act inviting readers to



Revue Baobab: Numéro 8

Premier semestre 2011

upset white racist mythology and to replace it by a mythology rooted in black perspective. Among these Africa-American writers who rehabilitate black culture which is depreciated by white mythology, we have Toni Morrison.

In her novels, she uses myths to show the value of black culture in a hostile world.

In *Song of Solomon*, Toni Morrison introduces us to a mythical character, Solomon. He is described as an African who was sent to America during slavery. To escape the difficult living conditions, he flew back to Africa. This flight has created a myth in America about Africans who were supposed to have the power to fly. The town where this event took place has been “baptized” Shallimar, in memory of Solomon, the flying African. To maintain this myth alive and transmit it from generation to generation, it was used in a song by Africans who remained in America. Here is one verse of this song: “Oh sugarman done fly away, sugarman done gone, sugarman cut accross the sky, sugarman gone home...”⁸

In conceiving heroic or mythical characters coming from the black community, Toni Morrison shows that Blacks are able to struggle efficiently against white power to improve their living conditions. On the other hand, in adapting mysticism to African-American history, Toni Morrison wants to revive the customs of black culture.

In the fight that black people undertook against the white repressive system to renovate their culture and their dignity, heroic and mystical characters had not been the only ones, we have also black church which played a decisive role.

c) **The Role of the Black Church**

Religion played an important role in the social organization of African-Americans, who were both subordinated to and isolated from white American society. At the same time, they were practically stripped of their African heritage and their traditional social organization. As slaves, their role was to be the labor force in the plantation economy. Their sufferings have been chronicled.

In that context, Black church that emerged was an institution helping Blacks to cope with and defend themselves against slavery and later against the subsequent racism and segregation. From the Bible, the slaves learned about the God of the white man, that he was the ruler of the universe and superior to all other gods, including those of Africans, and he punished and

⁸ Toni Morrison, Op.cit., P.5



Revue Baobab: Numéro 8

Premier semestre 2011

rewarded Blacks as well as whites. Blacks were expected to accept their lot in this world and if they were obedient, honest and truthful, they would be rewarded in the world after. These were the different conceptions that Blacks had of white church in slavery times.

But during the Reconstruction Period (1865-1877), Black people seized control of their own churches, the first social institution fully controlled by Blacks in America. Its multiple functions testified to its centrality in the Black community.

Places of worship, churches also housed schools, social events and political gatherings. As a community center, the church and its leaders offered solace from loneliness. This solace continued even when one was alone, through direct communication with God in walking and talking with Him, they became converted and found salvation when He told them they were free of sin. Later, they would go to church to tell the others how they found God. This aspect of religion is found in the novels of Toni Morrison.

In *Beloved*, Baby Suggs is a slave who becomes a preacher. In her different preachings, she encourages the other slaves to forget their loss, sufferings, anger and wants them to be united. In the novel, “The clearing” is a symbolic place which plays several roles for Blacks. First, it is the place where the fragmented community can meet to overcome and alleviate their painful memories. Secondly, it represents the place the Black community can really imagine freedom. Thirdly, it is a place where new converted stay for a period of time. Finally, the clearing as a church is a place where the Black community can apply its social norms and redefine its social relations. In most of her sermons, Baby Suggs tells Black people who are suffering not to despise or detest white people. Instead, she says: “Love your hands! Love them. Raise them up and kiss them. Touch others with them, pat them together.”⁹

This part of Baby Suggs’ preaching refers to Paul’s preachings to Ephesians. The purpose of Paul’s letter to Ephesians is to fortify unity between human beings and between them and God.¹⁰

The cultural values that African-Americans revived enabled them to adopt their own way of life. These cultural values stood as essential and decisive factors in the socialization of the members of African-American families. Thanks to these factors, Blacks are able to form and live in families.

⁹ Toni Morrison, *Beloved*, New York, Knopf, 1987.

¹⁰ *The Bible: The New Testament* : (Ephesian 6:10-20) Paris, Cerf, 1988



Revue Baobab: Numéro 8

Premier semestre 2011

III) The Reconstitution of Black Families

The harsh working conditions of slavery have contributed to separate and dislocate black families. But these families have not disappeared. They have been recreated by remembering and using certain African values and practices which have been preserved. Thus, the black family appeared as a reliable institution reflecting the most fundamental values, hopes and aspirations of African-Americans. In her novels, Toni Morrison presents several types of black families.

A) Domestic Families.

The living conditions of Blacks are particularly difficult, but there are some differences between the characteristics of domestic families and others. Domestic families are in permanent contact with their masters, since they cook for them and take care of their children. Very often, their way of life and the one of their masters are alike.

In *Tar Baby*, the Childs (a black family) work on behalf of the Streets, (a white family). Valerian and Margaret Street live on an isle and hire Sydney and Ondine as their servants. Sydney and Ondine have a niece, Jadine. They transmit her social and moral values useful for her full integration in American society. Ondine, her aunt teaches her how a young girl must behave to become a responsible woman able to breed a child, take care of a husband and respect the others. She tells her:

Jadine, a girl has to be a daughter first. She have to learn that. And if she never learns how to be a woman, she can never learn how to be a woman. I mean a real woman : a woman good enough for a child, good enough for a man, good enough for the respect for other women.¹¹

From this quotation above, Toni Morrison recalls us certain African practices, mainly in West Africa where an aunt or uncle has more influence in the socialization of a child than his parents.

In the process of socialization of their children, domestic families use what sociologists like Robert Taylor call “racial socialization”¹². This concept consists in teaching children that

¹¹ Toni Morrison, *Tar Baby*, New York, Knopf, 1981,P.

¹² Robert Taylor, “Development in research on Black Families,” *Journal and marriage and Family*; 52 (NOV 1990) PP 993 - 1014



Revue Baobab: Numéro 8

Premier semestre 2011

they have a double identity. They grow by knowing that they are not only Africans, but also African-Americans. This double identity is taught to Pecola by her mother Polly Breedlove in *The Bluest Eye*. Polly Breedlove works as servant in a white family. One day, at her working place, Pecola fought against a white girl, the daughter of her employer. Polly ordered Pecola to leave the place immediately and comforted the white girl.

Generally speaking, the role of a mother is to defend and protect her children. In the case of Pecola, her mother does the contrary. She gives all her love and affection to the white girl. From this experience, Pecola understands that Blacks have to fight to find a place in America, since theirs is limited. This experience of Pecola is similar to the one encountered by black children in *The Fire Next Time*¹³. In that novel the space of life of black children is “down town”. They must live and grow there. They are not accepted in “uptowns” which is the living place of Whites. Children in domestic families grow by having a double socialization. First, they must behave as Africans by taking into account the realities of black culture and second, they must not forget that they live in a racist environment which tries to deny their existence. In the novels of Toni Morrison, apart from domestic families, we have also families working on plantations.

B) Plantation Families

Slaves working on plantations are totally under the guidance of a master whose only goal is to increase production. These slaves suffer more from the atrocities of slavery than other Blacks. In *Beloved*, Toni Morrison accounts for the harsh living and working conditions of black families. In that novel, Toni Morrison introduces us a plantation called “Sweet Home”, a place where living conditions should be as sweet as in the Eden Garden in the Bible. In the Bible, the Eden Garden is a place which is supposed to be peaceful, where no suffering is found. Contrary to the peaceful atmosphere which is supposed to be the Eden Garden, things happen differently in the fictitious place “Sweet Home”. On this plantation, the difficult living and working conditions are expressed through the question Sethe puts to

¹³James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, New York, Dial Press, 1963



Revue Baobab: Numéro 8

Premier semestre 2011

Paul D; when she says: “How come everybody run off sweet home can’t stop talking about it? Look like if it was so sweet you would have stay”

When arriving on this plantation, Sethe was thirteen years old. She finds there five men. Paul D. Garner, Paul F. Garner, Paul h. Garner, N° Six and Halle Suggs.

One year later, she got married with one of the men; Halle Suggs, with whom she got four children. In order to escape the various difficulties met on this plantation, they all decided to flee from this place. They want to leave for Cincinnati (Ohio) in the North for more freedom. During their flight, Sethe is caught by patrollers. She kills her daughter Beloved and tries to slaughter her two other sons: Howard and Burglar. Eighteen years later, Beloved comes back under a human appearance to ask her mother why she killed her. This account about Beloved appearing both in bones and flesh is similar to some stories about ghosts in Africa. Here, Toni Morrison refers to some aspects of African culture which indicate that no death is natural. When death occurs in a community, people think it must be caused by someone. Moreover, in dealing with ghosts, Toni Morrison shows another aspect of African culture which gives particular attention to newly departed persons and ancestors. They are supposed to have an influence on social life and can act on living people. Consequently, they are feared and respected.

In her writings, Toni Morrison uses these cultural aspects to enable her characters to analyse and understand social events. The women from the black community of Cincinnati, seeing this strange person at Sethe’s, understand that this strange person is Beloved that Sethe killed eighteen years ago. These women come to rescue Sethe. Some take black strings, others put some black powders in their pocket or use the bible to pray. Finally, they succeed in getting Sethe’s House rid of this strange being and Sethe recovers from her illness.

On top of domestic and plantation families, Toni Morrison portrays also monoparental families in her novels.

C-Monoparental Families

Monoparental families constitute another type of families during slavery in the novels of Toni Morrison. In this type of family, the father is either dead or sold to another master. Masters lay a particular stress on mother-child relations, since the father is non-existent.



Revue Baobab: Numéro 8

Premier semestre 2011

Marriages are seldom legal and when the husband and wife are separated, children remain with their mother.

In fact, in her fiction, the typical black family has a matriarchal form since the role of the mother in the family is greater than that of the father.

It is common to consider a mother and her children as a family without referring to the father.

In Song of Solomon, Mrs. Bains constitutes a family with her daughter Cincy and her grandchildren. She has to take care of them alone, since no information is given about her husband.

In the same context, Pilate Dead constitutes a family with her daughter Reba and her granddaughter Hagar. She succeeds in transmitting them social and moral values useful for their full integration into American society.

In Sula, the Sabbats is a four-generation family who live together in harmony. Nel Wright, a member of that family, lives with her great-grand-mother, Cecile Sabbat, her grand-mother, Rochelle, her mother Helene.

Through these three monoparental families (Bains, Deads and Sabbats), Toni Morrison shows us the importance of extended families in African tradition. In extended families, more than two generations cohabit and no difference is made between the members. They are given the same importance and are treated the same.

In describing monoparental families during slavery, Toni Morrison shows that these kinship ties in America are the same as in Africa and they enable Blacks to have certain stability during slavery.

Conclusion

On the whole, we can say that slavery has generally destroyed the stability and the organization of Black families: no legal recognition, separation of husband and wife, separation of children from their parents, sexual exploitation. All these misdeeds constituted dangers which threatened the existence of black families. Despite all these wrong-doings, Toni Morrison has succeeded in demonstrating in her novels that thanks to the revival and remembrance of African cultural values, Blacks have reconstituted and organized different types of families which enable them to cope with the various difficulties met during slavery.



Revue Baobab: Numéro 8

Premier semestre 2011

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