

# TONI MORRISON: SOUL WRITER

Lakmali Gunawardena

"I do not have the same access to the(se) traditionally useful constructs of blackness. Neither blackness nor "people of color" stimulates in me notions of excessive limitless love, anarchy, or routine dread. I can not rely on these metaphorical shortcuts because I'm a black writer struggling with and through a language that can powerfully evoke and enforce hidden signs of racial superiority, cultural hegemony, and dismissive "othering" of people and language, which are by no means marginal or already and completely known and knowable in my work".

Toni Morrison

*Playing in the Dark*

The Nobel recipient for literature 1993, is an African-American woman novelist, and critic — Toni Morrison, who teaches creative writing at Princeton University, U.S.A. She is one of eight women who have received the Nobel prize for literature since its inception in 1901, and the first African-American to do so.

Born Chloe Anthony Wofford, in 1931, in Lorrain, Ohio, to parents who were share-croppers, she is the second child of four children, and the grand daughter of Alabama slaves. Despite the fact that her family was severely hit by the depression, she persevered to complete her education at Howard and Cornell Universities. Thus what the world celebrates is not only her writing, but the achievement of a woman born to a class deprived in every sense of the word, who has become so empowered to articulate her heritage and culture as an African-American woman, in a language that includes the black experience, not only into American Literature, but also the whole of world literature.

It is this articulation about the African American experience that Jane Smiley, in her review of Morrison's work acknowledges, when she observes that "Morrison (and other black writers) offer Americans, all Americans, a way of knowing the whole truth about America and a way of knowing what the pivotal American concept of racism really is."

The Swedish Academy, in presenting her with the Nobel prize described Morrison as a writer "who, in novels characterized by visionary force and poetic import gives life to an essential aspect of American reality".

Morrison, who has said that writing is important to her because she understands things when she writes, states that she was inspired by "huge silences in literature, things that had never been articulated, printed or imagined, ..... the silences about black women." Her novels *The Bluest Eye*, *Sula*, *Song of Solomon*, *Tar Baby*, and *Beloved* give strong voice to these silences.

In her book of critical essays *Playing in the Dark* in which, Morrison questions the exclusionary aspect of (white)

American literature, commented on by Jane Smiley as one in which Morrison focuses upon, "racism's unkillable sturdiness in our time", Morrison states that "black slavery enriched the country's creative possibilities. For in that construction of blackness and enslavement could be found the not-free but also, with the dramatic polarity created by skin color, the projection of the not-me. The result was a playground for the imagination."

Morrison's use of a language, which has its roots in the soul of black America is intensified by her sense of black history and her intent to include their experience into American literature. Carolyn Denard in *Black Women in America: An Historical Encyclopedia* (1993) cites Morrison's view of her role as a writer as saying that a minority writer, must go through four stages: a period of anger, a period of self-discovery, a period of celebratory use of the culture, and finally an arrival at a "conceptual notion of the ethnic experience."

This view pervades her whole work and what one can perceive in readings of her novels, as can be seen in these passages from *Beloved*, the story of Sethe an escapee-slave who would rather see her children dead than taken back to their 'owners'.

Outside a throng, now, of black faces stopped murmuring. Holding the living child, Sethe walked past them in their silence and hers. She climbed into the cart, her profile knife-clean against a cheery blue sky. A profile that shocked them with its clarity. Was her head a bit too high? Her back a little too straight? Probably. Otherwise the singing would have begun at once,.....Some cape of sound would have quickly been wrapped around her, like arms to hold and steady her on the way. As it was, they waited till the cart turned about, headed west to town. And then no words. Humming. No words at all.

If the above is stated with a poetic starkness, Morrison is relentlessly honest in this passage,





All forty-six men woke to rifle shot. All forty-six. Three whitemen walked along the trench unlocking the doors one by one. No one stepped through. When the last lock was opened, the three returned and lifted the bars, one by one. And one by one the blackmen emerged — promptly and without the poke of a rifle butt if they had been there more than a day; promptly with the butt if, like Paul D, they had just arrived.

and this;

It was in front of *that* 124 that Sethe climbed off a wagon, her newborn tied to her chest, and felt

for the first time the wide arms of her mother-in-law, who had made it to Cincinnati. Who decided that because slave life had “busted her legs, back, head, eyes, hands, kidneys, womb and tongue,” she had nothing left to make a living with but her heart — which she put to work at once.

Toni Morrison is one of many African American women such as Ella Fitzgerald, Angela Davis, Judith Jamison, Alice Walker and Whoopi Goldberg, who have and will make a mark in American and world cultural history. We celebrate her achievement!

## COMMUNICATION

# PRINCESS MANAME: THE *FEMME FATALE*

Manisha Gunasekera

In an age when Sarachchandra plays are being labelled as “anti-feminist,” as Lakmali Gunawardena aptly points out in the August/September issue of *Pravada*, I feel it is topical to focus upon the gender issue, of at least one of his plays. The most appropriate in this context would perhaps be the controversial *Maname*.

“A woman, even when guarded from the womb itself would err (indulge in immoral activities) the moment an opportunity arises” (*Andhabhutha Jatakaya*).

Since this much reiterated assertion (by none other than the Bodhisattva himself), is only a component of a range of such patriarchal “morals” that umbrella the entire gallery of the much esteemed *Jatakas*, I feel it is appropriate to begin a reading of *Maname* thus.

The ancient wisdom of the *Jatakas* seems to take pride in placing the woman in a ghetto, and judging her (the words “womb” and “guard” connote a life sentence in prison). She is irredeemable because of an inherent moral flaw in her character exclusive to her sex. Thus the Princess Maname in the *Jataka* story, from the optic of the moral imposed upon it, is placed in a limbo deliberately excluded from all sociopolitical forces, and she errs for no other reason except for the fact that she happens to be a woman.

In contrast, Ediriweera Sarachchandra’s rendering of the role of the Princess in his epoch-making play *Maname*, still playing after nearly three decades, visualizes the politics of a gendered, class specific social structure. In his play, the female protagonist/victim is the anchor around which the discourses of patriarchy and class structure operate. According to the rigid phallogocentric demands of the central plot, she is fixed and ghettoized within a specific discourse which is deliberately left static

and immobile through male manipulation. Thus, in this context, the role Sarachchandra has played in “unfixing” the *femme fatale* even to a small extent is significant.

*Maname* renders itself very effectively to a potently phallogocentric psychoanalytic reading. It has a generous portion of sexual iconography floating around and partaking of the main dramatic event: the death of Prince Maname at the hands of the Veddah King. The phallic icon here is the sword, a twofold symbol of sexual as well as class power. The predatory weapon lies in the hands of the female. Both males are anxious for self preservation alias preservation of manhood through the annihilation alias castration of the other. Princess Maname, brought up to respect and obey her father, then her husband, and make marriage her business in life, wields her sexuality, her only insurance against absolute socio-cultural oppression, like a lethal weapon. She feels insecure despite the ‘security’ offered by her marriage to Prince Maname. She begins to have doubts about her husband’s capabilities when faced with the elemental forces of the jungle. Notice that when within the safe structured arena of Taxila, she considers herself blessed to have acquired a husband as handsome and as accomplished as Prince Maname. But against the primordial chaos, Maname’s title *dhanuddhara* (one who is accomplished in the art of archery), seems almost ridiculous, and the world of civilisation seems light years away. The jungle, yet another sexual icon, metamorphosizes through the course of the play from a romantic Never Land to one of primordial chaos, life giving as well as deadly. This primordial force in the form of the Veddahs, penetrates the cocoon of the two blissful lovers. The Veddahs emanate strength and virility, and the Veddah King becomes





a blatantly phallic symbol. It is also significant to take into account the setting in which the duel takes place. It is fought in an unstructured, unexplored, primitive arena. Had it taken place in the kingdom of Baranas, the Princess may not have been overanxious to refrain her husband from killing the Veddah. She might have been more (socially) conscious of her actions.

All this psychoanalytic/feminist conceptualising is a necessary point of departure for my reading of Sarachchandra's *Maname*. Let us return to square one: to that primordial state of innocence "before the fall." Incidentally, this is a gender specific fall because it is only the Princess who falls and becomes a woman of traitorous qualities (*amana gathi athi meweni anganan*), the stereotypical madonna-whore situation. The men are not subject to the same socio-cultural laws. The Veddah violates the cocoon; takes what he wants and then moves on. A clear cut *veni, vedi, vici*. But to return to the situation of the Princess before the fall, she is the traditional image of the *sati savitri*, virtuous and desirable, venerated upon a pedestal. The duel which is the main dramatic event of the story, viewed from an objective as optic as possible, would be as follows. Maname and the Veddah fight, first with bow and arrow and next with bare muscle. Meanwhile, the Princess holds Maname's sword. Maname finally manages to pin down the Veddah and asks the Princess to hand him the sword in order to kill the Veddah. The Princess hesitates and begs him to spare his life. They argue. The Veddah takes advantage of the delay, breaks free, grabs sword from Maname and kills him. Note that the Veddah *grabs* the sword, the Princess does *not* hand it over. Thus, it is evident that at an apparent level the Princess' conduct is faultless; the death of Maname is beyond her control. But she is responsible in so far as she leaves room for the Veddah to grab the sword. Had she obeyed her husband as is required of a *sati savitri*, the tragedy could have been averted. Thus even though she violates the patriarchal norm here, it is morally that she commits her irredeemable sin of admitting to the intention of killing her husband. This confession comes out as an almost pathetic attempt on the part of the Princess (probably made up on the spur of the moment), to please the Veddah King who is her only saviour now. The Princess is obsessed with self-preservation and acutely conscious of her own helplessness (the word *sarana* — help/security — keeps recurring in her dialogue). She constantly perceives herself in terms of lack: thus, once her legitimate saviour perishes, she hangs on with all her strength, to her surviving protector and indulges in a pathetic attempt at pleasing him in every possible way. She uses her sexuality as well as her cunning to entice the Veddah (the facial expressions are theatrically very effective here). Unfortunately she goes a little too far. The Veddah cannot come to terms with her betrayal alias his splintered image of the *sati savitri*. She has "fallen" and hence has to be discarded. Leaving aside the moral implications of her act, she has not been passive

in her role of the victim: She has affected the course of events and played a very active role which can only be seen as unbecoming of her sex.

The fallen woman's plight in a patriarchal society is acutely portrayed in the play. To the very end she keeps yearning for sympathy and forgiveness from society alias man. It is significant that she does not question nor contemplate the moral implications of her deed, nor has any problem with her conscience. Her pathetic "heartbroken death" (*liya peli miya yama*) takes place only when the Veddah discards her, and had he not done so she would have been more than happy to repeat with him the same act of conjugal bliss that she played with Prince Maname. Her entire concentration is focussed upon begging for sympathy and forgiveness and through these, a fling at ultimate survival. Thus, the end situation of total abandonment makes her plight all the more "tragic."

The tragic protagonist falters for a flickering second; her momentary attraction towards the Veddah King is shown as being acutely sexual and totally feminine. The chorus can be seen as the symbol of conventional wisdom or more appropriately, the dominant ideology. Thus the wavering/fickle mind (*chanchala sitha*) is equated fully with the female mind by the chorus, and hence it becomes a "typical" female weakness: The phallic woman begins to conceive herself in terms of possession and not lack, is treacherous and dangerous causing the plot to reach tragic dimensions. Even the narrator's assertion, *nodanim kage dosa* (how can one speculate on who is responsible?), boils down to the level of mere rhetoric because the implication is that the female is totally responsible for it. For me, this is getting uncomfortably close to the moral underlying *Andhabhuta Jatakaya*.

According to what I have heard, the original *Maname nadagama* was understandably extremely harsh on the "errant Princess," who was condemned to the stereotypical role of the *femme fatale*. They felled her, inflated the scapegoat figure to gigantic proportions and gleefully judged and punished her. After the *nadagama*, one would suppose that the audience went home extremely satisfied that death through a broken heart (or through a bitten off tongue?) is no more than what the treacherous female deserved. The loose ends were all neatly tied up, and it satisfied those who mattered and threatened into silence, those who did not. It maintained status quo and what more did one need?

Thus, what we must not forget is that, taking into consideration the patriarchal ideology within which the plot is firmly anchored, Sarachchandra's *Maname* has redeemed the fallen woman to a great extent from her tragic cardboard status: or in other words exposed to a great extent the politics of male manipulation of female sexuality. Now, Princess Maname, appropriated by a generation of people, has depth and dimension: thus she is equipped to explore and expose.