

WEEKEND MAGAZINE

1993 Nobel Prize for Literature

Toni Morrison: The Poetics and Politics of Remembering and Forgetting

by Azfar Hussain



The writer whose area of interest, among others, includes Black literature and politics, here takes a look at some of the important works of Toni Morrison, "the most important black novelist in America since Ellison", as Martin Seymour-Smith observes. Toni Morrison, 62, is the first black American writer and the eighth woman to have won the Nobel prize for literature. She was awarded the 1993 prize on October 7, by the Swedish Academy, and was cited for "writing prose with the luster of poetry" and "visionary force".

THE spinning of public speculation was on, as usual. October is the feverish month breeding anticipations and expectations about the possible winner of the Nobel prize for literature. Well, it was Derek Walcott last year. It was a case for the Caribbean, a gain for blacks, but this time this prize might not go to a Caribbean nor to a black writer in the West Indies, say to Edward Brathwaite, who is no doubt competent enough to win the prize. Well, then, the prize for Milan Kundera of Czechoslovakia, or for Gunter Grass of Germany, or for Carlos Fuentes, the leading Mexican novelist of his generation in terms of international reputation, has remained almost indisputably overdue. Thus, speculations ran their course.

The name of R K Narayan, the Madras-born Malgudi-centred wise novelist, was also being bandied about along with that of Mahmud Darwish, probably the best-known Palestinian poet in the world. But, it was Toni Morrison who put an end to October speculations. And speculations were followed by uneasy exclamations, frequent frowns, and even by caricatures. "I could not believe it. Toni Morrison was just an improbable name. The news of her winning the Nobel prize is dramatic indeed," commented H Terry, one of the Nobel prize speculators.

Interestingly, the list of the possible Nobel prize winners, successively featured in the Swedish newspapers, did not even include the name of Toni Morrison. But, an impressive line-up of possible winners was very much there, with sporadic and edgy debates circulating about and around: Seamus Heaney (1939), the Irish poet noted for his unself-conscious response to paradoxical rural realities; Hugo Claus (1929), the Belgian poet and dramatist noted for such works as *The Dawn Platoon* (1958), a drama providing a robust treatment of a brother-sister incest theme and *Astonishment* (1962), a very powerful novel playing fast and loose with the rather feeble and fashionably mythological structure; Bei Dao, the Chinese poet in exile, and Ali Ahmad Said Adonis (1930), the Syrian-born Lebanese poet noted for developing and broadening the scope of the classical form *qita* (short poem) and the *gasida* (a pre-Islamic poetic form) so as to accommodate, on an epic scale, the whole of the Arab heritage.

But, it was finally none but Toni Morrison who bagged the prize with the spotlight of world attention somewhat curiously focused on her. True, she was less or hardly known internationally, not even as known as Nadine Gordimer was, yet another black woman writer winning the Nobel prize in 1991. But, Morrison was certainly a felt force, a powerful presence that sped off to the front rank of the Afro-American novelists within an unusually short stretch of time.

Born in 1931 (nee Wofford) in the steel town of Lorain, Ohio, Toni Morrison was the second of four children of the Alabama sharecroppers who migrated north. She was brought up in a family not very well-off, making also an ideal case for platitudinous but sputtering familial crises.

After her schooling in Ohio, Toni Morrison moved on to Washington's Howard University, known as the Black university and noted for Black studies, from where she took her B A in English literature, while she obtained the M A degree in English from Cornell University. Later, Morrison started teaching English at Texas Southern University, Houston. But, she came back to Howard to teach, and it was at this time that she got married to Harold Morrison, a talented architect. But, in 1964, Morrison got divorced from her husband.

Presently Toni Morrison teaches English at Princeton University, and is one of the editors of a publishing house called Random House which, at Morrison's passionate initiative, brought out a couple of interesting books — one on Muhammad Ali, the legendary boxer and the other one on Angela Davis, a committed communist activist. Toni Morrison, it needs mentioning, is certainly fond of boxing games and, perhaps, boxers too; but, definitely, she is not a communist nor is meant to be.

Toni Morrison is full of the passing glimpses of a Seneca involved in contemporary bloodshed, of a Faulkner involved in deaths and diseases and depressions, of a Baudelaire uneasily teetering on the edge of the 70s' type of black American *erudit*, and of Latin American and Belgian writers confronting a bizarre line-up of witches, sorceresses and survivors. Certainly dense, intertextual, and, at times, inaccessible by an over-obtrusive use of symbolism, Morrison's novels certainly zoom in on the essentials of black life in America, which, for Morrison, have demanded music and mythology all her own, yet not always dissociated from the collective historical unconscious.

With the publication of *The Bluest Eye* in 1971, Morrison's first novel, she was catapulted into the limelight of fame, particularly for the language she uses — a language insistent on breaking the hegemony of the

Newtonian-Euclidean spell of linear time on the one hand, and also a language somewhat sandwiched between the Ellisonian type of curvilinear, sleazy rhythms and the Faulknerian mode of symbolism, on the other. Morrison was then 40, and she had published virtually nothing before 40. The theme she captures in this particular novel is basically black in tone and tune and tenor: that Morrison focuses on the inevitable alienness and loneliness from which blacks in America suffer.

As one can see, there is this world of mindless, gratuitous troubles lurking in the very existential drama to which a young girl, Pecola Breedlove by name, is helplessly doomed. Breedlove, a name or a noun coming from Morrison's characteristic *apronymic* flair, is shown as a space-seeker. She is full of voids and she tries to replace such voids by space — space that would accommodate

love and compassion and shelter. But with eyes black and hair similarly black, Pecola Breedlove finds love and shelter from none. She, therefore, longs to have blue eyes; if needs be, the bluest ones. But, blue eyes, like love and shelter themselves, only keep Breedlove in the waiting, perhaps of the Beckettian type. Meanwhile, though she gets love from no man around in the community, she at last gets it from her father. But, the shelter is immediately wiped out, as the father rapes his daughter. She then becomes mad, her search for blue eyes yet continues, and finally she believes she has acquired them.

The Bluest Eye, thus, brings to the fore the black existential crisis heavily saddled with the conflict between the real and the imagined, between the black desire and the white repression, between the world within and the world without. But Morrison never poses or foregrounds the conflict strikingly, as is the

case, say, with the black American poets. For example, an Afro-American poet like William Thigpen, who was killed at twenty-three, could assert with an unmistakable, physical force of agony thus: "Black baby stands naked clothed/in smog-coloured sunlight/pot-bellied, bow-legged and hungry/crying, dying but alive". But, such an assertion is never there in Morrison; she rather keeps assertions and conflicts hidden in the dark, dense labyrinth of symbols and metaphors, though Morrison, with time, tries to move towards a zone of linguistic transparency which is never finally achieved. Martin Seymour-Smith rightly observes: "Toni Morrison is not an easy writer... she has never succumbed to an easy or simply cerebral way out: her vision is not that of anyone else, but her imagination's own".

Morrison's second novel *Sula*, published in 1974, is certainly darker and more nihilistic. The pseudo-magic realist motif coupled with the mythic one also comes in; for, *Sula*, the central female character, appears as a witch and a pestilence, exhibiting the Hobbesian style of selfishness. But as a witch she "shocks the lives of those around her into a kind of improvement". There is another character — *Sula's* grandmother who comes as a contrast with *Sula* herself. This grandmother perpetrates ravagery, savagery and violence in her own way on the microcosmic world at her disposal: she burns her own son to death for having become a junkie. Yet, she has sympathy. Indeed, the world Morrison portrays in *Sula* is too bleak to be immediately intelligible. But, the linking is there that Morrison is concerned, in her characteristic tangential style, with the blackness of blacks rising from the depths of the collective unconscious and also with the blackness of the white capitalist, hegemonic world very much existing in America. But, one should not be misguided by thinking that Morrison brings to the fore her political self so easily or so visibly. It is there of course, lurking in the womb of symbols, and one only needs to find it out. It remains so until her novel *Tar Baby*, where one begins to feel that Morrison is

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'Like One of those Redwoods': The Writings of Toni Morrison

by Robert F. Holden
USIA Staff Writer

WASHINGTON: "I know what every black woman in the country is doing... Dying. Just like me. But the difference is they're dying like a stump. Me I'm going down like one of those redwoods."

Those are the deathbed words of *Sula*, the incoherent main character in Toni Morrison's 1974 novel of the same name. Although those words may not describe Morrison's personal philosophy, they certainly describe the impact of her work on world literature.

Morrison, who has been a professor of humanities at Princeton University since 1989, won the 1993 Nobel Prize for literature October 7. She is the first Black American to win the literature prize and the eighth woman to win it since it was first awarded in 1901. She is the eleventh American to win it. Pearl S. Buck was the first American woman to win the prize in 1938. Morrison is the only other American woman ever to have won this highest honor for a writer.

Morrison, who was born Chloe Anthony Wofford in 1931, has written six novels, one short story, one play, and numerous critical essays. Carolyn Denard, profiling Morrison for 1993's acclaimed *Black Women in American: An Historical Encyclopedia*, calls her "one of the preeminent writers of our time".

In its Nobel Prize citation, the Swedish Academy said Morrison's novels had "the luster of poetry," a characterization the writer has taken issue with in the past. "The works cannot be only, or even merely poetic," she said in a 1981 interview with Paul LeClair, "or that would defeat my purposes, my audience."

But what purposes? "I think long and hard about what my novels should do," Morrison told LeClair. "They should clarify the roles that have become obscured, they ought to identify those things in the past that are useful and those things that are not and

they ought to give nourishment."

"In all of her writings," Denard writes, "Morrison is concerned about crafting a special, clarifying angle for remembering the past and making it a useful mechanism for survival in the contemporary world."

This device works well in Morrison's third novel, *Song of Solomon*. In that story, protagonist Macon "Milkman" Dead III starts out on a quest for gold and revenge only to end up in the caves of Virginia where, instead of a long lost family fortune, he finds a glorious connection to his ancestry through the myths and songs and legends that his great-grandfather, Solomon, left there. The legend of a great-grandfather who could fly, and who indeed did "fly" away from slavery, fills Milkman with love, strength, and a desperately needed sense of his own identity.

"He could fly? You hear me? My great-grand-daddy could fly? He whipped the water with his fist, then jumped straight up as though he too could take off... He didn't need no air plane. He just took off; got fed up. All the way up. No more orders. No more bales! No more orders... He just flew, baby. Lifted... up in the sky and flew on home!"

Although the Swedish Academy hailed Morrison for delving "into the language itself, a language she wants to liberate from the fetters of race," she has always seen herself as a "minority writer" who uses her experience as a source of strength and knowledge. Denard cites Morrison's views on that role: "A minority writer, she had said, 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.'"

That progression, Denard says, is most apparent in

Other novels by Morrison include *The Bluest Eye*, the story of a young black girl who quietly slips into insanity when she equates love and acceptance with a race outside her own; *Sula*, a novel about a woman not bound by any social codes of propriety, a pariah who ironically inspires goodness in those around her; *Tar Baby*, the story of a doomed relationship between two blacks, one a jet-set model and one a vagrant, because they fail to recognize that they are each victims of racial exploitation; and *Jazz*, a story of black city life in the 1920s and 1930s.

On how she goes about her work, Morrison told Tate: "I always know the story when I'm working on a book. That's not difficult. Anybody can think up a story. But, trying to breathe life into characters, allow them space, make them people whom I care about is hard. I only have twenty-six letters of the alphabet; I don't have color or music. I must use my craft to make the reader see the colors and hear the sounds."

"My stories come to me as clichés," she said. "A cliché is a cliché because it's worthwhile. Otherwise, it would have been discarded. A good cliché can never be overwritten; it's still mysterious. The concepts of beauty and ugliness are mysterious to me. Many people write about them. In writing over them, I try to get underneath them and see what they mean, understand the impact they have on what people do."

"The problem I face as a writer is to make my stories mean something," Morrison said. "You can have wonderful, interesting people, a fascinating story, but it's not about anything. It has no real substance. I can fall in any number of ways when I write, but I want my books to always be about something that is important to me, and the subjects that are important in the world are the same ones that have always been important."

"Black people take their culture wherever they go. If I wrote about Maine, the black people in Maine would be very much like black people in Ohio. You can change the plate, but the menu would still be the same. The barbershop in Maine would still be the same kind of barbershop as in Ohio; there would be the same kinds of people sitting around. They cook a little bit differently, but I know what the language will be like," she said.

Two Americans Win Nobel Prize in Economics

ROBERT W. FOGEL and Douglass C. North of the United States have won the Nobel Prize in economics for using modern statistical methods to explain past economic events and for questioning long-held theories about growth and development.

The Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences announced October 12 that Fogel, 67, with the University of Chicago and North, 72, of Washington University in St. Louis, won the \$845,000 prize and cited the two for providing a better understanding of why economic change occurs.

Since the Nobel Prize in economics was established in 1968, Americans have captured 21 out of the 34 prizes. Fogel is the seventh winner from the University of Chicago.

The Swedish Academy described Fogel and North as leading figures within the field of "new economic history" whose works challenged widely held ideas.

It said that modern economic historians contribute to the development of economic sciences in at least two ways: by combining theory with quantitative methods and by constructing and reconstructing databases or creating new ones. This has made it possible to question and reassess earlier results, which has not only increased our knowledge of the past but has also contributed to the elimination of irrelevant theories.

The academy cited a 1964 Fogel book that argued that US economic development was the result of many factors and did not hinge on the building of the

railroads, as others had claimed. It also noted a controversial 1974 book by Fogel that argued that pre-Civil War slavery in the United States, despite its inhumanity, was economically efficient. Fogel, who was not defending slavery as an institution, wrote that its collapse was due more to political decisions.

Much of Fogel's research, according to "Who's Who in Economics," has focused on the retrieval of data that clarified the relationship between the current and past behavior of households. "Data sets linking together up to ten generations have been constructed to analyze the interaction of economic and cultural factors on such variables as the savings rate, the female participation rate, fertility and mortality rates, economic and social mobility and migration rates," it said.

The Academy called North "an inspirer, a producer of ideas who identifies new problems and sows how economists can solve the old ones more effectively."

North, in a piece for the *American Historical Review* in 1991, wrote: "Understanding how an economy works (price or microeconomic theory) is a necessary condition to writing economic history, but economic theory is static in its implications, and the key to good economic history is explaining change over time — something missing in economic theory. It is precisely that missing ingredient that should be the contribution that economic history could make to improving economic theory." Economic theory

has become more and more mathematical, formal, and precise about less and less."

During his career, North developed a model of growth in the American economy during the period 1790 to 1860. The academy cited his analysis of one sector — cotton plantations — that stimulated development in other sectors and led to specialization and interregional trade.

North also has developed an economic model designed to explain why new institutions develop, both in the United States and in Europe, and what role institutions play in economic development.

In a 1991 article for the *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, North wrote: "Institutions provide the incentive structure of an economy; as that structure evolves, it shapes the direction of economic change towards growth, stagnation, or decline."

North maintains that new institutions arise when groups in society see a possibility of availing themselves of profits that are impossible to realize under prevailing institutional conditions," the Swedish academy said.

In his latest book, published in 1990, North examines why some countries are rich and others poor, and he concludes, in the words of the academy: "The lack of opportunity of entering binding contracts and other institutional arrangements is a cause of economic stagnation, both in today's developing countries and the former socialist states."

— USIS Feature

American and Briton win Nobel prize in Medicine

TWO scientists have won the Nobel Prize in medicine for a discovery that changed man's view on how genes in higher organisms develop during evolution and helped researchers better understand how some hereditary diseases evolve.

The Karolinska Institute in Stockholm, Sweden, has announced that Phillip Sharp of the United States and Richard Roberts of Britain, both Massachusetts-based scientists, will share the \$825,000 prize for their independent discovery in 1977 of "split genes," which has revolutionized basic research in biology.

The discovery that genes can be composed of several separate segments shattered the scientific thought of the day. Up to then, the gene had been conceived as a continuous segment within the very long double-stranded DNA molecules, the chemical substance of heredity. Sharp and Roberts made the discovery while studying the genetic material of adenoviruses, which cause the common cold. Shortly thereafter it was shown by several researchers that split genes are common in higher organisms, including man.

"Everybody thought that genes were laid out in exactly the same way, and so it came as a tremendous surprise at the time," said Roberts, a native of Derby, England, and currently

research director for New England Biolabs in Beverly, Massachusetts.

Sharp, a native of Falmouth, Kentucky, who now heads the biology department at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), said that numerous laboratories were studying the structure of genes in the 1970s.

"If we hadn't made this discovery, within six months there would have been 10 other labs making the discovery," he said.

In awarding the prize, the Nobel committee said the discovery "has radically changed our view on how the genetic material has developed during the course of evolution."

The committee said it had been believed that evolution took place through an accumulation of minor alterations in the genetic material, called mutations. But the discovery that genes are often split means that higher organisms, in addition to undergoing mutations, may use another mechanism to speed up evolution — the rearrangement or shuffling of gene segments over time to generate an almost infinite variety of molecules.

The committee said the discovery of Sharp and Roberts also led to recognition of the natural genetic process known as splicing. It said that some hereditary diseases now are seen to result from deviations from normal patterns in the splicing process.

While Roberts and Sharp knew of each other's work, they weren't collaborating when they made their discoveries of split genes. Roberts did his award-winning work at the Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory on Long Island, New York, and Sharp made his discovery at MIT. Both scientists made presentations about their discoveries at a meeting in Cold Spring Harbor in 1977.

— USIS Feature

Dying for Peace and Justice

FOR Dermont Devereaux a visit to Dhaka this October has been an odd mixture of pain and pleasure. The pleasure comes

from the fact that he has been here with his family to inaugurate a paramedic unit for



Dermont Devereaux, Sean's father

children at an orphanage in Sreepur. The pain is that it is a reminder of the death of his son Sean Devereaux after whom the unit has been named.

On January 2nd this year, Sean Devereaux, a UNICEF worker from the UK was shot dead in Mogadishu, Somalia by a local warlord named Abdi Dhere who walks freely in the streets even today Sean was 28 years old and the only son of his parents.

Sean, born in Camberley, Surrey had first gone to Liberia in 1989 as a volunteer to work in a school there. In 1990 a bloody civil war broke out, forcing the school to close. Sean stayed on to work with the UN relief operations. In September 1992, Sean went to Somalia as a UNICEF relief officer. "During the crisis," says his father, "both in Liberia and Somalia, he became very concerned about the cruelty to the women and children, especially about the use of children as young as eight years old as combatants in war." Sean also spoke out about the abundance of arms that was being supplied by the "civilized world" — the West. In a letter to his friends in England dated 15 November 1992, originally written on a menu in Kismayo where Dermont had gone to visit his son, Sean writes: "In Kismayo I wander through the market, checking the prices of looted UN food — wheat, rice, beans etc. and I see next to the bananas and camel meat — Ak-47s, Kalashnikovs. Continued on page 11