Remembering Toni Morrison

By Rasna Warah

“We die. That may be the meaning of life. But we do language. That may be the measure of our lives.” – Toni Morrison

A writer who had a significant impact on how I viewed the African-American experience has died. Toni Morrison, the Nobel laureate and author of The Bluest Eye, Sulu, and Beloved, among many other books, has passed on at the age of 88.

I read Beloved – a novel that explores the brutality of slavery in America – on the insistence of my friend Betty Wamalwa (also known as Sitawa Namwalie), who thrust the book in my hand when we were both in our 20s and demanded that I read it. The book shook me to the core. It is remarkable in that while it exposes the powerlessness and pain of generations of slaves, it also portrays slaves as deeply human, capable of love, hate, anger and empathy. But this love had to be measured, and taken in small sips, because slaves were even denied this right. So slaves learnt to “love small”, which was both a survival instinct and a form of self-preservation. However, while slavery emasculated slaves, it did not take away their humanity.

There are many passages in Beloved that left me speechless. Like the one of Paul D, a character in Beloved, describing what loving means to a slave who is denied the right and the permission to love by “men who knew their manhood lay in their guns”:

“And these men who made even vixen laugh, could, if you let them, stop you from hearing doves
or loving moonlight. So you protected yourself and loved small. Picked the tiniest stars out of the sky to own; lay down with head twisted in order to see the loved one over the rim of the trench before you slept. Grass blades, salamanders, spiders, woodpeckers, beetles, a kingdom of ants. Anything bigger wouldn’t do. A woman, a child, a brother – a big love like that would split you wide open in Alfred Georgia.”

Morrison defined freedom as “a place where you could love anything you chose, not need permission for desire”.

Throughout her body of work, you could feel the rhythms of her slave ancestors. Morrison lifted the English language into a world that had its roots in her African heritage. Quite often the rhythmic music of her words would break into a wail, as in this haunting passage from Beloved:

“There is a loneliness that can be rocked. Arms crossed, knees drawn up; holding, holding, holding on, this motion, unlike a ship’s, smooths and contains the rocker. It’s an inside kind – wrapped tight like skin. Then there is a loneliness that roams. No rocking can hold it down. It is alive, on its own. A dry and spreading thing that makes the sound of one’s own feet going seem to come from a far-off place.”

Loneliness is a common theme in her female-centric books – the loneliness of slavery and bondage, the loneliness of not being understood, the loneliness that comes with being a writer, especially a female writer of colour who has to maneuver a white literary establishment that is generally hostile to black authors.

Born to a father who worked as a welder and a mother who was a domestic worker, Chloe Anthony Wofford, who would later be known as Toni Morrison, like her contemporary, James Baldwin (whose collected essays she edited for the Library of America), was the embodiment of a black American writer who dissects society with the stealth and precision of surgeon. She laid bare all the sicknesses of her society, especially racism, then proceeded to cut them up into pieces through words and language.

She was particularly disturbed by racism, which she described as “a social construct” and an “insult”. She believed that the main function of racism was distraction – to keep black people so busy explaining themselves to white people that they would not have time for anything else:

“It [racism] keeps you from doing your work. It keeps you explaining, over and over again, your reason for being. Somebody says you have no language and you spend 20 years proving that you do. Somebody says your head isn’t shaped properly so you have scientists working on the fact that it is. Somebody says you have no art, so you dredge that up. Somebody says you have no kingdoms, so you dredge that up. None of this is necessary.”

Early in her career, Morrison taught at Howard University, where she met her husband, Harold Morrison, a Jamaican, with whom she had two sons. She later became a professor at Princeton University and then worked as an editor at Random House.

For her literary efforts and achievements, she was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature 1988, amid much controversy. Her detractors and critics claimed that the Swedish Academy was trying to be politically correct by awarding the prize to a black woman, and that her work did not merit such an award. Her response to accusations of political correctness was: “What I think the political correctness debate is really about is the power to be able to define. The definers want the power to name. And the defined are now taking that power away from them.”

One of the criticisms levelled against Morrison was that you had to be black to understand her
novels, hence they lacked universal appeal. Often she was asked when she would write a novel where the main characters were ordinary white people, which she usually dismissed as a racist question because no one asks white authors why they do not write about black or non-white people. She also viewed such questions as a form of censorship because they assumed that writers seek the approval and permission of readers before they embark on writing a book.

However, she was also aware that her books would appeal to people like her who do not see characters like themselves reflected in novels. “I’m writing for black people, in the same way that Tolstoy was not writing for me, a 14-year old coloured girl from Lorain, Ohio,” she said. “I don’t have to apologise or consider myself limited because I don’t write about white people – which is not absolutely true, there are lots of white people in my books. The point is not having the white critic sit on your shoulder and approve it.”

The question about who a writer writes for also becomes irrelevant at some point. Most writers don’t write with a particular reader in mind, just as an orchestra recording classical music doesn’t think about who will buy its album when it is eventually released. J.K Rowling’s Harry Potter series could as easily appeal to a child growing up in the British countryside as it could to a child living in a city in Bangladesh. If Morrison wrote only for black men and women living in America, then how is it that her books resonated with a woman of Indian heritage living in Kenya? Surely, her books’ appeal was universal.

Yet, it is ironic that nearly thirty years after Morrison won the Nobel Prize, racism has remained stronger than ever in the United States. Donald Trump would agree with Morrison, who once said that “American means white” (though he probably wouldn’t notice the cynicism in her comment).

The literary world has lost yet another icon. Another healer of wounds is no longer with us. But Morrison’s language and words will always comfort us, especially in these trying times when extremism, hate and paranoia are fragmenting societies and spreading fear. As Morrison noted, language has the power to heal. “Language alone protects us from the scariness of things with no names,” she said. “Language alone is meditation.”

Morrison believed that something beautiful can emerge even out of pain. “I know the world is bruised and bleeding, and though it is important not to ignore the pain, it is also critical to refuse to succumb to its malevolence. Like failure, chaos contains information that can lead to knowledge – even wisdom. Like art.”

Born: 1931 – Died:2019

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