

Tracing Intersectionality, Individual and Familial Struggle in Morrison's Novels: A Digital Humanities Study

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Abstract

Since close reading is a time-consuming activity to explore quantified information from literary works, the digital natives of the modern age have started to build big databases of literary works to knowledge patterns. This study aims to use the text mining technique to extract key themes and characters as a previewing and digitized summarization technique. The research data comprises Nobel laureate Toni Morrison's four novels: *Beloved*, *A Mercy*, *The Bluest Eye* and *Sula*. The study in hand employs a mixed-methods technique because the data have qualitative, statistical and visual characteristics. The generated data have been discussed with Sinclair and Rockwell's Hermeneutica theory. Cirrus tool presents an interactive word cloud that comprises textual, visual and statistical data to preview key motifs and characters. Major findings reveal that the word clouds of four novels verify the recurring themes and characters from the selected texts. The key themes of the selected novels are slavery, family, home, human bondage, race, and racism, and they can be instantly extracted from big data with the help of the Cirrus tool. This study has implications for students of literature to visualize themes and characters as previewing, memorization and pedagogical strategies.

Keywords: Cirrus, Corpus, Slavery, Racism, Morrison

Introduction

Innovation encourages human beings to figure out how to extricate information patterns directly. Therefore, technological devices spare human beings from relentless undertakings and they produce precise outcomes, even before close reading. Reviewing is a skimming method to get an abridged thought regarding key subjects and significant characters of a novel without its complete close reading. The current study analyses the generated word clouds as a review of Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (Morrison, 1987), *Sula* (Morrison, 2012), *A Mercy* (Morrison, 2008), and *The Bluest Eye* (Morrison, 1994). Cirrus is a word cloud that unveils statistical and visual images of prominent themes and characters. The generated cirrus is based on statistical weight, where the most occurring words show the bigger fonts.

The concept of race is not only defined in terms of skin colour, or facial features, or the natural texture of one's hair but it is also defined by the place of one's origin, ethnicity, socioeconomic class and educational background. Toni Morrison's novels reveal the miserable plight of Afro-Americans who live in America which has a notorious history of persecuting and oppressing the black community. These people suffer because of various forms of human bondage that were common in the late 17th century. Owing to old persecutions, the Black community confronts the delineation of the history which portrays the white Americans consistently double-dealing with the Black community out of their land and their rights by applying the American Exceptionalism tactics that assign them the right to manipulate the laws of the land, its social norms and even its language.

The atrocious act of slavery and the lifelong enslavement of the Blacks dehumanize these people by treating them as purchased animals. To these slave owners, these Afro-American slaves are inferior human beings, and the whites consider them as a means of earning money. Another cruel factor of the lifelong enslavement of the Afro-American slaves is that staying in a dehumanizing form of captivity for a long period haunts their subconscious until these slaves were ruining their lives, even after gaining freedom. In American history, slaves have been exploited throughout the colonies with the help of various forms of human bondage. The horror of being a slave abodes them in numerous ways. It includes the painful memories that stay with them for the rest of their lives and the literal scars are a result of the cruelty of the slave owners.

Slavery is an awful institution that leads mothers to kill their children or to give them to the hands of others to save them from the dehumanizing form of captivity. Another consequence of slavery imposed by the white community upon the Blacks is that it breaks up the family units. These people are already living in a community. They attempt to form a community or a home, but they are unable to do it. Their attempts to find a home can be considered a result of the original dislocation of the slaves from their homeland. This horrible voyage has disastrous effects on the lives of these people, as they never got a place to settle down and they are to this day regarded as outsiders.

The interconnected nature of social categorizations such as violence, racism, classism and sexism as they apply to an individual or a group and a family is regarded as creating an overlap and an interdependent system of discrimination or disadvantage and how a person individually and on a familial level cope with the overlapping system of discrimination.

The black community has a history of the struggle for their basic rights. Dehumanizing form of enslavement has disastrous effects on almost every aspect of their lives. They have strived for their identity and rights generation after generation. Toni Morrison examined the issue of Afro-American slavery in detail and made it her core theme to unveil violence, violation of human rights, racism and the physical as well psychological life of the slaves. Being an Afro-American novelist, she felt her obligation to highlight issues of her racial community. This study aims at accomplishing the following objectives:

- I. To explain the role of lifelong enslavement in the life of an Afro-American.
- II. To explore the struggles of Afro-American slaves on an individual and familial level.

This research study addresses the following research questions:

- I. What is the outcome of lifelong violence on the lives of Afro-American slaves?
- II. How do the victims of racial differences cope with their situation on an individual as well as familial level?

Literature Review

This study reviews various studies on corpus and the digital humanities regarding the close and distant reading of literary texts. Voyant tools of the present study intermingled its corpus and the digital humanities to discover the novel word clouds and the recurring/key themes.

The black community has long strived for an identity all their lives regardless of having an identity that does not have anything to do with the deeds, personality traits or family convention but a meagre designation that has been there solely for the master's ease and not the self-identification. Morrison's works explored the theme of salvaging identity and self-actualization. Her novels explored the racial history of black people in terms of how their oppression is lived out through relationships within their families and how these relationships carry the possibility of human dignity and connection (Lyles-Scott, 2008).

Although slavery has been an ancient tradition; hence, it brought the lifelong oppression and dehumanizing form of black people's captivity, and it had threatening consequences that overshadowed generation after generation. To name some person is meant to declare authority and ownership. The institution of slavery portrayed the continuous battle for authority and

dominance. The nameless Black community in America has suffered for their identity across generations. Toni Morrison's novels *Sula*, *Beloved*, and *A Mercy* displayed the complexities of naming and misnaming in the people who sought to create a rooted identity in the face of a violent and dehumanizing past (Schreiner, 2019).

The lifelong enslavement has destroyed Black individuals and their communal identity. This devastating situation caused an identity dilemma for many Black individuals and families within the prison of slavery. They were taken from their homeland into a foreign land where they encountered white people for the very first time in their lives and with a different language and different cultural practices which led them to face oppression at the hands of the white community for the rest of their lives.

Being judged based on race and colour is no such novelty for an African American. Morrison's *A Mercy* provided an ironic look at America's origin, showing that the American myth of Exceptionalism of the "selected people" rests upon the pernicious binary separations between the elect and Others (Strehle, 2013). American Exceptionalism claimed that America being a nation has an exceptional destiny as a saviour nation that was founded by a group of chosen people. The group of chosen people consider themselves as the supreme power and do not accept the authority of anyone else.

However, the irony invoked by Morrison in her works portrayed an ironic view of the myth of chosen people where there are separations made based on the elect and damned, white and black, male and female and the old and the new worlds. It gave the justification for the lifelong enslavement of the Black community. This prejudice had disastrous effects on the lives of those who once had a dream of a prosperous life in their eyes. Moreover, the assumed idea of the American Exceptionalism represented that only God and the chosen people who are white and chosen by God are the true pictures of it. It illustrated how material realities, corporeal differences and biased understandings of place, race and racism are mutually constructed (McKittrick, 2000).

These inhuman behaviours led Morrison's characters to commit lamentable acts to avoid violence and to escape from the oppression of the white society. Their choices of violence often concentrated on those within their community or family and redirected that febleness and transformed it (Amanda Putnam, 2011). Mothers often strangled their daughters and new-borns to save them from lifelong enslavement, sexual and emotional exploitation. The strong maternal love prohibited the mothers to let their children be exploited at the hands of their white masters. Thereupon it made them do acts of unselfish cruelty. Despite its cruelty and perplexity, each choice has been rather ethical (Shang, 2018). The unselfish cruelty of the mothers does not mean the abandonment of their children but instead a compassionate and deep love for her children. However, this regret then made them suffer all their life, it ruined the families and only broken shelters were there then.

These grievances took a lifetime of struggle to leave Morrison's characters. Addressing this grief, Toni Morrison, whether intentionally or unintentionally, structured her novel around the steps Elisabeth Kubler-Ross perceives as the typical order in which human emotions evolve regarding grieving and death (Pass, 2006). Amidst the chains of slavery, the physical and psychological survival strategy has been regarded as an achievement.

In Morrison's works, the extraordinariness of magical realism has been portrayed by her embellishments of the concept of magic (Huber, 2010). Consequently, the literary technique used by Toni Morrison (magical realism) helped her characters to cope with the oppression and stand against it with courage (Łobodziec, 2012). In Morrison's understanding, the 'magical' dimensions of that experience served as an effective survival strategy that enabled black people to physically, psychologically, and spiritually endure the pain and loss (Łobodziec, 2012). However, the rootless people who lost their cultural heritage and were also excluded from the culture into which they were pushed, were in a need to create their norms, culture, customs and traditions.

Their need for identity was not only fashioned from an individual's physical attributes but the cause was also for the mental, emotional and spiritual attributes. The magical character of *Beloved* reminded Sethe of her brutal past which she never wanted to remember and then it enabled her to create her history which has largely been snubbed in the white slave-owners version of history and aided her to form an identity of her own (Abdullah, 2015).

Another survival strategy that according to Toni Morrison has been apt to survive in a white-dominated society is to cherish the African culture, heritage and values. The cultural clash between the dominant ruling class including the white and Western male elite and those people who do not have any kind of power in their hands led them to consider that they were altogether disrespected in the white American life. Morrison, through the tragic story of Pecola, wanted to reveal a sense of hope and how to identify between two cultures to survive in the white conventional society as well as how to cherish their native culture (Yuan, 2018). Myths and symbols practised in Africa had been discussed in '*Home*' by Morrison as a rhetorical device. The horses symbolised oppressed slaves who carried burdens and faced trauma. Likewise, animal imagery is employed to comprehend rituals (Alonso-Recarte, 2021).

One Nobel prize-winning novel, '*Never Let Me Go*' was analysed with the Cirrus tool. It discussed key themes and characters as a previewing technique (Ullah, Uzair, & Mahmood, 2019). Here only the Cirrus tool from the Voyant suite was used for text mining. All intermediate English textbooks comprising fifteen short stories, three one-act plays, twenty poems, ten literary essays and six biographical essays have been analysed with five text mining tools namely, Cirrus, Phrases, Links, Summary and Contexts tools (Ullah, 2022). This study was quite extensive with the use of five tools and fifty-four literary units including six literary genres. Recently, the novel, '*Goodbye Mr Chips*' by James Hilton has been analysed with five text

mining tools including Cirrus tool and word cloud (Ullah & Mahmood, 2022). The study in hand is in continuation of these studies.

The interconnected nature of social categorizations such as violence, racism and classism were explored as they apply to a given individual or a group or a family. The dehumanizing social categorizations are regarded as creating an overlapping and interdependent system of discrimination and the drawback of it was analysed as to how a person individually and on a familial level copes with the intersecting system of discrimination. The current study has shown 25-500 themes of four novels at a time with the help of a statistical word cloud in the Cirrus tool. Close/manual reading enabled its readers to read a literary text at a time whereas distant reading facilitated the reader to read four literary works of the same author at a time while exploring 25-500 prevalent themes and the main ideas along with the detail of the central characters. An individual cannot read and analyse big data through subjective analysis. Through text-mining tools, we can study and analyse big data to uncover the patterns and unspoken rules behind the chosen literary texts from a technical perspective.

Research Methodology

Durant (2004) presented a typology of research to write a comprehensive research methodology for digital humanities.

Theoretical Framework

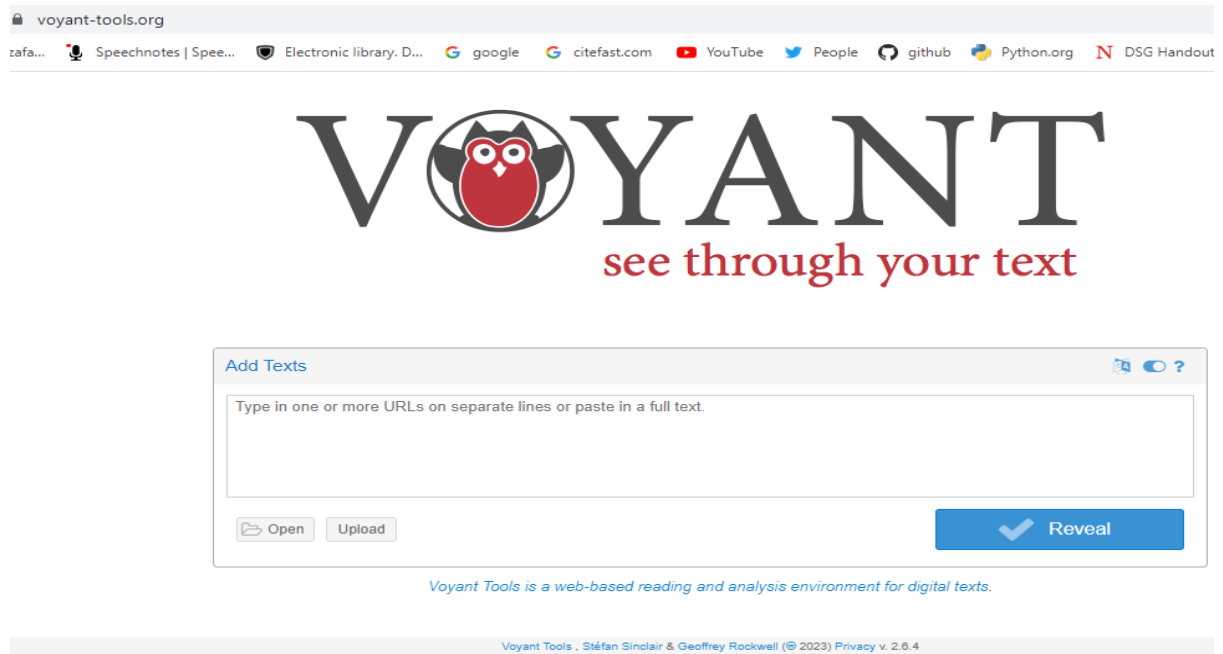
Geoffrey Rockwell and Stefan Sinclair propounded the Hermeneutica theory which was applied as a theoretical framework for the interpretation of the literature. The main postulates of the theory are: “Hermeneutica Theory is embedded in a context.” “Manipulation is in service of exploration and understanding.” “Knowledge-bearing tools provoke reflection.” “They can be extended to expose new things” (2016, p. 166). The interpretation in its broader sense involved an understanding that can be reasonable. The findings were not hidden; they have displayed themselves in a manner that has allowed us to understand the principles of operation. It has been made easy for the readers to understand the literary and philosophical texts.

Data Generation and Rationale

In 2003, Geoffrey Rockwell and Stefan Sinclair designed the Voyant suite and one of them, the Cirrus tool, had been applied to Toni Morrison’s novels. It has 25 tools under the broader categories of the corpus, document, visualization, grid and others. These categories were further drawn-out into several data visualization methods. Cirrus tool generated the word cloud showing key themes. Graham Milligan and Weingart (2013) acknowledged the Voyant tools as an ideal tool for classroom and educational purposes.

Figure 1

Voyant Interface



Mixed Methods Approach and Rationale

The mixed-methods approach has been opted because the corpus of Toni Morrison’s four novels (*Beloved*, *A Mercy*, *Sula*, and *The Bluest Eye*), visual data and their statistical weight were combined. Research questions and objectives were analysed and answered. With the lens of Hermeneutica theory, the vocabulary density, total words, and the recurring themes through the lens of their context were interpreted.

Data Quality for Data Mining

The PNG image on the paper troubled the interactivity of the word cloud where the claim was to present the interactive word cloud on the Cirrus panel. Given that, the complete corpus and word cloud can be accessed online by pressing the CTRL key and a click on any highlighted yellow-coloured theme in the MS Word file. Validity and the reliability of the generated Cirrus or the word cloud and its statistical data were effective every time as the Cirrus and the word frequency generated with the Cirrus tool were the same every time.

Data Handling and Data Analysis

The research strategy was that PDF files/digital copies of the novels by Toni Morrison were uploaded on Voyant tools and it exposed the data. As the current study concentrated on Cirrus, a 45 words Cirrus/ word cloud for each novel was generated for the analysis. Afterwards, its statistical weight and visual data were analysed. The statistical data had a limitation as it was

a. Characters:

Major characters of the novel are “Sethe (473),” “Denver (321),” “Paul (287),” “Baby Suggs (275)” and “Beloved (183)”. Sethe is a runaway slave who has a daughter named Denver, and they live with her mother-in-law Baby Suggs. After Baby Sugg’s death, another runaway slave Paul D comes to live with them. A strange woman named Beloved appears at their house and starts living with them. Her presence leads to certain mysterious events and reminds them of their painful past. The aforementioned characters are generated based on their frequent occurrence. Consequently, the statistical weight of a character’s name increases, so, its size and dominance also increase in the Cirrus/word cloud.

b. Slavery:

One of the major themes is slavery and its statistical evidence is thought (153) and time (182) that the characters think about their past lives as slaves. The time that they spent as slaves had very destructive results on them. Their past is full of instances where they were treated as lesser beings by their owners. The masters did not think of them as human beings and sold the members of a family to different masters as cattle are sold nowadays. That is the reason that whenever Sethe thinks of her family she cannot do so as the worst aspect of slavery is that it breaks the family units. As a result of this dehumanizing aspect, Afro-Americans have broken families, hence; they struggle for their survival throughout their life. Another horrific factor of slavery haunts its survivors even after their freedom. As in *Beloved*, Sethe kills her daughter to save her from being a slave all her life and when she thinks of that instance or the days at her masters’ farm, she feels the pain and suffering of that life which is very traumatic. Moreover, the haunting character of Beloved is also a piece of evidence that the cruel act of slavery has lifelong psychological consequences on the survivors. Their bodies have gotten freedom from shackles but their soul is still undergoing those torments and agonies.

c. Home:

The theme of “house (163)” is very prominent in the novel, even after getting freedom: they are constantly in search of a place that they can call their own home. In this sense home for slaves not only serves as a shelter and protection but also as a place that they can own with all human rights. The concept of one’s own home is very important for the slaves because they have worked for their owners’ land and lived in very pathetic and miserable conditions. After getting freedom from their cruel masters, they need a place where they can find protection, respect and dignity. A place where they can have all their family together and where they do not have to follow any inhuman and inhumane commands (Gardner, 2016). The idea of a home for Baby Suggs and Sethe is very important after getting freedom as 124 is the place where they can finally start a family of their own and their slavish and exploited struggles will come to an end.

Word Cloud of *A Mercy* by Toni Morrison

Figure 3

Cirrus of A Mercy



a. Characters:

The major characters of the novel are “Lina (177),” “Sorrow (105),” “Jacob (73),” “Florens (58),” and “Rebekka (50)”. Jacob is the owner of Vaark farm. He goes to a nearby farm for a business where the owner offers him a slave of his choice to have some compensation. Jacob, though not in favour of keeping slaves, chooses Florens’ mother. Her mother wants to save her daughter from the cruel treatment of her owner. Upon seeing the owner’s lavish house with rich paraphernalia, Jacob plans to build one house for himself. At Vaark farm, Florens gets acquainted with Jacobs’s wife Rebekka and two slaves namely Lina and Sorrow. Lina starts taking care of Florens as a mother. Florens falls in love with a blacksmith who comes to work at Jacobs’s new house. Jacob dies of smallpox, and his wife also contracts the disease. She sends Florens to fetch the blacksmith. Thus, the blacksmith goes to cure the lady and leaves Florens in charge of his adopted boy. Florens hurts the child in her jealousy: as a result, the blacksmith throws her out of his house. Florens comes back to Vaark farm and she has been changed. She starts writing her story on the walls of the rooms hoping that someday someone will read it.

b. Human Bondage:

The theme of human bondage is prevalent throughout the novel. “Thought (52)” refers to the ideas of Jacob as he feels disgusted by the cruel practices of slavery and the inhumane behaviour of slave owners. He also observes the wreckage that the spirits of these slaves undergo

a. Characters:

The major characters of the novel are “Sula (203),” “Nel (137),” and “Eva (103)”. Nel lives with her mother in the same town where Sula lives with her grandmother Eva and her mother. Both Sula and Nel are good friends. When they accidentally kill a little boy, they hide it from the town’s people. After the death of Sulas’ mother, she leaves the town for further studies. When she returns several years later, she finds that her friend was happily married. She starts an affair with Nel’s husband; as a result, Nel leaves both of them. Her husband leaves the town without even telling her any reason. After some years, Sula dies of disease and when Nel visits her grave, he weeps for her.

b. Race and Racism:

The theme of race is prevalent through “black (71)” and “white (63)” in the novel. The white community discriminates between whites and blacks. The place where the Afro-Americans live is far away from white society. They keep themselves distant from the people living at the Bottom. The Black community struggles to be accepted by white society. Characters living on the Bottom plan to move to the areas where White live to upgrade their living standards. Moreover, within their community, they hate each other due to the colour of their complexion. The chaos in their lives leads them to the destruction of their family life and the deterioration of their morals.

Morrison’s novels analyse the lives of Afro-Americans through the lens of slavery and racism. Her characters suffer throughout their lives. Their sufferings do not end with the end of their slavery. The cruel practice of human bondage has its roots in the minds of people and they cannot get rid of it. Throughout their lives, they are treated as lesser, underprivileged and inferior human beings. This practice further leads them to several complications that have horrifying impacts on their bodies, souls and characters. The horrendous effects of the cruel practice leave its everlasting inscriptions on the individual and familial lives of Morrison’s characters.

It does not matter if an Afro-American is a slave or not. He/she is treated based on colour and race. During the Slavish epochs, they were enchained and treated as lesser beings by their masters. Even after the abolition of the practice of slavery, they are still maltreated and assaulted everywhere as ill-treatment does not require slavery or the race tag. The mindset of the white community is fixated, so they do not accept the free status of the Afro-Americans. The white community considers itself the master of the Afro-Americans. The masters sell the members of the slave family individually to different slave owners which almost ends the prospects of familial life. Helplessness and enduring violence without the support of their families further lead them to live a life with pangs of slavery that still haunt their lives miserably.

As a result, the horrors of their past compel them to carry out such acts which make them

a paragon of remorse and mockery. Like the mothers who have suffered all the violence and discrimination of the dehumanizing practice of slavery, some of them strangle their children to save them from the molestation and violence that they were subjected to. They do not want their children to experience the dark and ailing moments that they have experienced. Their masters rape them and molest them frequently. These mothers do not want their children to see the dehumanizing aspect of life. In a moment of agitation, they try to save their child from a life of discrimination and suffering but it has its tragic effects afterwards. Their act of pure love directs them to lead a life of regret and it seldom leads them to insanity and hallucination.

c. Family and Home:

This novel is devoid of themes of family and home; therefore, they have not been discussed in this novel. Slaves were sold like animals even through their family bond was split according to the buyer's desires. Moreover, they were deprived of their family, home and even identity.

Discussion

Firstly, the themes of slavery and racism have explained the role of lifelong enslavement and its effects on the lives of Afro-Americans as the black community has a history of the struggle for their basic rights and the dehumanizing form of enslavement has its disastrous effects on almost every aspect of their lives. Secondly, they have strived for their identity and rights generation after generation. However, the dehumanizing form of captivity leaves them nothing but destruction and the cruelty that they face as slaves leaves behind horrors that then do not allow them to be stable all their lives. The scattered families find it difficult to start their lives like one unit again. Their individual life also does not succeed as most of the time; it leads them to insanity or the hatred of community and isolation. Fourthly, throughout the novels of Toni Morrison, her characters can be seen struggling for them to develop a sense of self-respect as all their lives have been regarded as sub-human beings and it destroys their personalities/individual lives and families. Even they do their utmost to develop themselves in the communities that are solely defined by the rules of white society. Fifthly, Thereupon, Morrison has portrayed the social conditions of the Black community through her writings in the dominated white society and the intersectional situation of the Black individuals and their struggle for their identity and community has been brought to light. Also, the interconnected nature of social categorizations such as violence, racism, and classism play their frenzied role in the lives of Black people and the mobilizing and dominant power in the community leads to the loss of culture and identity.

Table 1*Statistical Data of the Selected Novels*

Serial No.	Novel's Title	The Theme of Slavery/Human Bondage	The Theme of Race and Racism	The Theme of Home/Family
1	<i>Beloved</i>	thought (153), time (182)	face (145), little (145), eyes (144)	house (163)
2	<i>Sula</i>	time (111)	black (71), white (63)	-
3	<i>A Mercy</i>	thought (52), mistress (110)	-	eyes (70)
4	<i>The Bluest Eye</i>	-	black (98), white (83), blue (74)	house (67)

The extraction of the most occurring words of each novel shows five key themes and they have been chosen based on their statistical weight. These themes comprise the characters and central ideas of each novel.

Conclusion

The major findings of this study bring all the prevalent themes of the novels to light. These themes were mined in the form of word clouds. The word clouds are generated based on their statistical weight. The Cirrus tool is valid in successfully extracting defined and prominent themes. For instance, it has extracted the themes of slavery and human bondage, race and racism and home and family along with the names of the central characters in the novel. Moreover, the Cirrus tool/word cloud arranges for its viewers to mine the central ideas without manual/close reading.

Future research should be conducted on other works of Toni Morrison. Her works explore the living conditions of Afro-Americans in the present American society where white society has its dominance to date. Once their slaves, the Black community never got the status of free citizens. They are killed on the streets in broad daylight without any reason and no one asks for justice or the motive behind it. The injustice prevalent in the society has its link with Edward Said's theory of Orientalism as the Orientals in America are the Black community. They are regarded as illiterate savages and the mindset of the white society is still the same. Consequently, they consider it their right to torture or kill a black person without any reason as they regard them as lesser human beings. Other future research works can be conducted on multiple literary texts of the identical genre with the help of Cirrus tools. It allows analysing more than one literary text at a time while exploring their central characters, key ideas and main themes.

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