

DIES ACADEMICUS

Université de Genève
Le 14 octobre 2011

Intervention de Toni Morrison

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I am especially gratified by the honor offered me by the University of Geneva—an institution of great age, prestige and commitment to humanities, social sciences along with its universal recognition in pure sciences.

Even more pleased am I by the topic I was encouraged to address: human rights and women's rights. And it is interesting, if troubling that human rights is still not naturally and automatically understood to include women. It's as though there are humans and then there are women—a supplement to, if not separate from, real human beings.

But I do understand the need if not to separate at least to dramatize the necessity of reminding ourselves how hard it has been, historically, for women to enter the terrain of

human rights; how difficult it has been garnering attention to the routine repression of our gender as well as our erasure from the concept of human rights.

This erasure has exacerbated a number of problems in the discourse on women's rights. And I have gathered a few examples:

1. Emphasis on equity as an end in itself rather than its moral and ethical obligations. The struggle, the poisonous controversy in 19th Century America was whether to include black men in the press toward universal voting rights or to expand that right only to white women. As provocative as that battle was, for me the signal erasure was the elimination from discussion those who occupied both camps of race and gender—black women.
2. Years ago I gave a commencement address which I titled "Cinderella's Sisters" in order to draw attention to the glorification of the harm women do to each other.

Cinderella is a fairy tale about a household of women gathered together and held together in order to abuse another woman. The theme of my lecture was to discourage women from the oppression of other women and to call attention to the violence women do to each other, to remind the audience of that Women's College that mothers who abuse children are women and another woman has to stay her hand, that women who beat and enslave their domestic help are women and another woman must stay her hand, that mothers who sell, abandon or slaughter their children are women and other women have to stay her hand. What I hoped to convey was that women's rights are not merely an abstraction, a cause; it is also a personal affair. It is not only about the collective "us"; it is also about you and me. Just the two of us.

3. In the US there has surfaced a general condemnation Affirmative Action laws—laws designed to end

discrimination in the work place, at educational institutions etc. Because 'racial discrimination' in the United States is so prevalent, so central, the public has come to see these laws as purely and solely about race. But the largest group of beneficiaries under this law are white women, women who seem reluctant to counter the vicious and prevalent notion of so-called "reverse racism" or to raise their voices for vigorous support of these laws, in spite of the fact that feminists movements in the United States have always followed black freedom movements. It was so in the 19th century following the Civil War against slavery; it was so in the 1960's following the Civil Rights movement for voting rights, jobs and the elimination of segregation.

4. The discourse surrounding sexual assault is another area in which the language of women's rights is becoming twisted. Violence against women is understood primarily as sexual assault or domestic violence. But viewing such assault through only the

victim's eyes is vital but also limiting. Where is the scholarship, the analysis on men who rape? Are they simply the mindless Grendels born to monstrosity when given a chance? Or are they our husbands, sons, brothers, fathers? Something is missing. Why does rape, this most flesh bound attack, remain so focused on the victim? Where is the analysis of the masculinist coupling in these abuses? I would like to see an examination of homoeroticism in gang rape, which has nothing to do with homosexual males but everything to do with the eroticism of heterosexual men. Sharing, watching increases and distributes the joy. The legitimate focus on female victims must not erase or diminish the aggressor.

5. Fortunately, and most gratifying there are powerful signs of change—signs that assume women's rights are indeed human rights. The lashing of women for walking alone in public, having a cell phone and other equally childish prohibitions has outraged men and women in

the Middle East and elsewhere. The crowds demanding to be heard, demanding accountability, responsibility from the corrosive marriage of money and politics; insisting on value instead of costs—these crowds that are springing up everywhere assume the equity of females in the battle.

6. The most gratifying sign of the seamless merger of women into the human race are the three women who have been awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for their work not for women, but for humans: the environment, the cessation of war, the democratization of a nation. All of which suggests that the supplement term 'women's rights' may finally be redundant.