

# TONI MORRISON'S PROJECTION OF BLACK WOMANHOOD THROUGH PECOLA AND SETHE IN THE BLUEST EYE AND BELOVED

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## ABSTRACT

Before the civil war in America, the black African people were treated as chattels and were subjected to all kind of injustice and discrimination. Slavery and discrimination, for instance, have brought severe miseries to Afro-Americans such as being treated as animals, losing their human rights, and subjecting to violence. But the real victims were the black African women, as these women had no position in society and were living the most pathetic and humiliating life. These women were ill treated first by their own male members in their own homes and secondly they were subjugated to all kinds of humiliation by the white people. They had no honor or any sense of right as they were kept in complete ignorance and darkness for a long time. Since times of slavery, black womanhood has been destroyed, distorted, dismantled and abused with racial, sexual and inhuman practices by black men and white men and women. In the process, they have lost their genuine "self", and have developed a complexity in themselves. This has ultimately been responsible for the destruction of their self-confidence and the feeling of being human. The paper deals chiefly with Toni Morrison's portrayal of Pecola and Sethe, which chiefly celebrate the black womanhood. The central theme of the paper deals with the black women characters who are raised from their poor, down trodden and most humiliating position to a new sense of awareness of freedom, liberty and equality in their society. They are filled with new desires, aspirations and ambitions and thereby are made conscious of social honor and dignity.

**Keywords:** womanhood, struggle, victimization, discrimination, awareness

Toni Morrison is among the pioneer of the contemporary black writers who have redefined African-American writing in many ways. Black women in America being black, female and poor have been victimized by racism, sexism, and classism, not only from the white world, but also from their own men. These women have faced the problems of race, class and gender, which have pushed them towards a margin. They are separated from the society. They have to endure all the violence and racist behaviors of both white men and women. In addition to these, a colored women not only struggle against racist society, but also she has to suffer at the hands of black men. Being aware of these facts, Toni Morrison aim to portray the experiences of black women in her novels. Morrison expresses her knowledge about black life creating fictional characters. "Morrison's strengthening of definitions and focusing of perception is reflected in the novels' narrative structures" (Birch, 151).

The black woman is the main concern when Morrison plans her characters. She tries her best to depict different women experience in her novels and each female character has some specific features which are interesting to discuss. Adolescent girls often appear as characters in Morrison's stories. Unlike common young people, those girls have no choice but to accept some trauma instead of possessing the happiness of their youth. The author wants to make some issues clear by making her characters special in some way. One of the features of Morrison's adolescent girls is that they get hurt and enter the adult world early. Her first novel *The Bluest Eye* examines the consequences of black womanhood in an oppressive white world. The reader witnesses the psychological disintegration of Pecola Breedlove, an adolescent girl whose blackness is shame to a society in which blue eyes are valued above all others.

*The Bluest Eye* is the story of Pecola Breedlove, a young black girl in Ohio. It deals with the great range of black feminine voice into the artificial mould of stereotype. It allows us to get a deep look into the black woman's dilemma, oppressions and trials symbolized by the tragic life of Pecola, who is driven insane by the pressure of having absolute physical beauty, the beauty of a white woman, by having fair skin, blond hair and blue eyes. This was the definition of beauty in the society, which was impossible for Pecola to meet them. The sense of "unsettling emptiness" and the "enemy within" drive Pecola to the need of a man who could make her happy. The emotionally deprived life of Pecola's parents forces her to a state of schizophrenia. Her mother Pauline is troubled by the feeling of motherhood in her life. The daily need of her children seem to her troublesome, as she is totally disappointed in her personal life. Even the life of Pecola's father Cholly is an instance of negligence, frustration and quest for identity. Without parental affection and care, he feels himself alienated from his family. Pecola thus becomes the victim of her parent's bitter dissatisfaction with life; dissatisfaction is greatly connected to the various forms of discrimination with which blacks have to live within white American society. She is trapped in a world of taunts, threats but yearns for love and protection. But neither Pauline nor Cholly can provide her with any emotional or moral support since they themselves are without roots and are emotionally and spiritually depraved. Pecola desires to have blue eyes, she wants in fact to be white, and like her mother Pauline she wants to identify herself with the white women.

Pecola and her family members all accept the expression of the people around them. "The community senses the Breedloves self-hatred and encourages it by agreeing that the Breedloves are ugly" (Kubitschek, 34). Thus, Pecola herself knows the truth that she is a colored person and ugly. As a member of black race "Pecola, suffering from a sense of self-loathing and false identity..." (Peach, 27) wants God to give her bluest eyes that are seen the mark of beauty in the community.

In *The Bluest Eye*, the superiority of white people is displayed by standards of beauty. Therefore, Pecola cannot live the happiness of being different and treated in a different way in white society. As the narrator of the novel, states the problem is not Pecola's and her family's "...ugliness, but their "conviction" of their ugliness that makes the difference" (Bloom, 13). Not only Pecola, but also the members of her family accept the state of ugliness and this acceptance causes them to experience nearly all evil racial and interracial acts of people.

The novel *The Bluest Eye*, begins with Morrison's comments "...on the movement's assertions of racial beauty" (*The Bluest Eye*, 2). The political movements assertions of 1960s and 1970s, demonstrate that in fact the colored ones are beautiful. Likewise, Morrison aims to imply this thought by the help of her

story. In the novel, “The self-hatred is often focused on the body as the most obvious indicator of race; hair and color, for example, are recurrent concerns” (Peach, 28).

The real cause of the discrimination is color of people’s skin in *The Bluest Eye*. “The poignancy of Pecola’s victimization arises not only from the racism and resulting interracial conflicts...but also from the intraracial conflicts related to color ...”(Bloom, 12) In the novel the concept of black “...is a construct partly of the characters own making but mostly social, based on white definitions of blackness which associate it with violence, poverty, dirt and lack of education...” (Peach, 26–27)

Morrison states that the black females are only seen as housemaid or slaves at the hands of white race. Even, the white little children order something and they act as if they have no wish. The white people “...use to despise African Americans” (Kubitschek, 34). The colored women are always viewed as a person who should endure violence and hardness even they are at home. The black women should “...combat the waywardness of their husbands and children and the racism of whites” (McKay, 70).

In Morrison’s novel *The Bluest Eye*, the first act of violence seen through bad behavior of Claudia MacTeer. When a white baby doll is given her as a Christmas present, she wants to break it. Her family states their puzzlement “Now-you-got-it-up-what’s-the-matter-with-you?” (*The Bluest Eye*, 21) Claudia accepts his violent behavior indicating “I destroyed white baby dolls” (*The Bluest Eye*, 22).

In fact, Claudia wants to learn the secret of beauty of white people. “Claudia’s acts are motivated in the main by a need to locate the source of white beauty that is not immediately apparent to her” (McKay, 61). Even though she tears the white babies to pieces, she cannot adopt the superiority of white race. “But dismembering of dolls was not the true horror. The truly horrifying thing was the transference of the same impulse to little white girls” (*The Bluest Eye*, 22). This terrifying instance of Claudia is the result of this fact “...Claudia is envious of Shirley Temple...” (Bjork, 35) who is a little white girl.

The violent manners are also seen by means of Pecola’s father, Cholly. He not only beats her daughter, but also rapes her, that is the signifier of incest occurring in a black family. Toni Morrison displays “...the emotional violence heaped, upon children by parents as a special concern” (Bloom, 13). Pecola is the representative of both psychologically and physically abused girl.”*The Bluest Eye* delineates how Pecola is repeatedly exposed to psychological violation, and how physical violation completes the psychological destruction” (Kubitschek, 30). Pecola’s only concern is not having the bluest eye; she also wants to get rid of the racist behaviors of white people. Therefore, Morrison’s novel *The Bluest Eye*, “...bears witness not only to the trauma of the incest and rape that Pecola experiences, but to the trauma of pervasive racism” (Matus, 47).

Being Toni Morrison’s fifth novel, *Beloved* is a prominent work awarded Pulitzer Prize. It is a story about “...a powerful account of mother love, murder, and the legacy of slavery...” Like Morrison’s previous novels, *Beloved* focuses on “motherhood” (Kubitschek, 6). *Beloved* tells the story of a mother, Sethe who is a black slave female formerly. She suffers from slavery, racism, violence and rape.

Morrison’s novel *Beloved* “... is lovely based on the story of Mary Garner, a slave who killed her child and attempted to kill herself rather than return to slavery” (Peach, 93). Likewise, the protagonist of the novel Sethe kills her child and this murder does not become distant, each time it comes closer. In “Beloved” one can comprehend how difficult it is to be a slave woman at the hands of a slave-holder.

This cannot be denied that the reasons behind Sethe’s murder of her own baby girl emerge due to the brutal sides of slavery. The violent act of Sethe has “...relation to slavery” (Kubitschek, 115). When “a cruel man called school-teacher becomes the master, the slaves attempt a group escapes” (Kubitschek, 116). During this flight some of the slaves die. “Sethe is stopped after she cuts two-year-old Beloved’s throat with a hand saw. The child dies” (Kubitschek, 117). Sethe doesn’t want “...her children to be taken back into slavery...” (Matus, 104)

The memory of past, takes Sethe to the cruel white man during slavery. “Schoolteacher’s nephews brutally abuse Sethe sexually, sucking milk from her breasts and whipping her back bloody” (Kubitschek, 116). This incident affects Sethe deeply and she always remembers the viciousness of white man and the murder of her own child. She cannot endure to see her daughter at the hands of this brutality. Therefore, she decides to kill her. “I got a tree on my back and a haunt in my house, and nothing in between but the daughter I am holding in my arms” (*Beloved*, 18).

Sethe dares to kill her child that influences her motherhood in a baddish way. "...Morrison indicates Sethe's response to the trauma of motherhood under slavery and in particular, Beloved's death" (Matus, 108). In addition to this, Morrison manages to demonstrate how the "...maternal loss..." (Bjork, 157) can be the ruin of a black female. "Sethe was powerless to keep her children from enslavement except by killing them" (Birch, 179). Portraying Sethe and her experiences of slavery, Morrison "...emphasizes both the enormity of slavery and the powerlessness of the black slave woman" (Birch, 179).

In *Beloved*, at first, blacks are at the hands of white people and they are slave. They have not only "...been abused by white men..." (Matus, 119), but also they begin to lose their humanity. Even, the black people aren't given permission to learn writing and reading. It is clear that "...if blacks could write they should not be treated as animals" (Rice, 103). The female characters in the novel, especially Baby Suggs is brave to mention the inhuman acts of white race in her community. "Those white things have taken all I had or dreamt, "she said, "and broke my heartstrings, too. There is no bad luck in the world but white folks" (*Beloved*, 104-105). Baby Suggs utterances help one to visualize the hardness of the black life in a racist surrounding.

In most parts of the novel, the racist thoughts and attitudes are displayed vividly. Knowing the truth that Sethe has killed her own baby daughter, Paul D insists to look over the newspaper pages. "Stamp Paid reluctantly shows Paul D the clipping from the newspaper concerning Sethe's crime. Even so, the very fact that he has kept the clipping is significant" (Rice, 110). Both of these characters know that if a black's face is seen on papers, there should be an unusual event, since black race is ignored even in newspapers. To white people, Sethe's act is seen as a "...private story" (Rice, 111). In addition to this, there is a mystery meaning under this news. "The newspaper is the product of white society" (Rice, 111). There is also an implication that the reason of Sethe's behavior is white race.

In Morrison's novel *Beloved*, at first violence is seen with the scene that shows the white men's attacking. The nephew of Schoolteacher attacks Sethe when her husband isn't at home. Especially, "...violence against women" (Kubitschek, 28-29) is the focus of *Beloved*. White nephews of Schoolteacher "...abuse Sethe sexually, sucking milk from her breasts and whipping her back bloody" (Kubitschek, 116). Sethe expresses this brutality by saying "And they took my milk" (*Beloved*, 20).

It is an undeniable fact that "...slavery is brutal..." (Rice, 106) As Sethe also a slave woman, she experiences the evil of white race. She is also exposed to "...a whipping which almost kills her..." (Peach, 94) The horrors of slavery lead her "...to commit an act of violence against their child" (96). Although most of the black community sees this act as an unreasonable choice that is decided by a mother, Sethe explains that she should do it. As a mother, "...Sethe makes it quite clear that in her eyes she has done the only thing that she possibly can do" (Rice, 106). The fear of her race leads her to commit a crime. To Sethe, she didn't do "...anything wrong" (Kubitschek, 117).

In *Beloved*, not only the violence acts of white race and Sethe are seen, but also her dead daughter's presence has caused too much violent acts. At first, the baby girl who has been killed, appears as, "...a ghost in the house, that much we know; it is a ghost that shatters mirrors, that puts its "tiny hand prints in the cake..." (Bjork, 141) At the beginning of the novel, Baby Suggs states "We lucky this ghost is a baby" (*Beloved*, 6). On the contrary, in time the ghost's anger causes to come their house as a grown-up girl. Thereafter, she starts to show her rage towards Sethe.

She always asks questions about past and wants Sethe to feel pain in her heart. In the novel, "...the final vision of Beloved is grotesque-pregnant, inflated, swelling, and insatiable. She is in the process of feeding off and consuming Sethe's life..." (Matus, 119) It is apparent that "...the spirit is covertly attacking Sethe" (Kubitschek, 118). Soon, Denver realizes that "Beloved is trying to kill Sethe" (Kubitschek, 124). She attempts "...to kill her so that they will be dead together" (Kubitschek, 125).

## CONCLUSION:

Written with the impacts of experience of slave life, the social movements emerged in the United States during 1950s and 1960s and the violent racial forces, the novels of Toni Morrison *The Bluest Eye* and *Beloved* succeed in displaying the sufferings of colored women. The black characters in these novels

try to endure gender discrimination, violence, racial attitudes and sexual abuse.

Toni Morrison focuses on the sufferings of black females in a white society in *The Bluest Eye*. This novel "...shows racism's damaging effects on the black community at large and on black families" (Kubitschek, 27). In *The Bluest Eye*, a black girl Pecola Breedlove realizes the supremacy of white society and longs to have the features of white females. She starts his desires by praying to have the bluest eye in the world. The superlative form of this word is used to demonstrate the willingness to have even more superior features than white race.

Morrison's other significant novel *Beloved* is very successful in displaying the most painful part of the African American heritage, slavery. The protagonist of the novel, Sethe remembers the cruel times of slavery. The ghost of her baby girl does not leave her and her daughter, Denver. The spirit of her dead daughter changes into a grown girl and begins to disturb her life after so many years. She goes the place where she is killed by her own mother, Sethe. She always reminds her mother the brutality of slavery and the scene of murder.

It is obvious that these two novels of Toni Morrison portray the sufferings of black women like violence, rape, motherhood and the most important reason that causes this is racism, that is their color. They are discriminated by the white society because of their God-given colors. They are seen as the objects that do not have any feelings. In novels of Morrison, some black female have the opportunity to find their identity and survive in the hard atmosphere of racial society. Her novels are meant to celebrate a sense of black womanhood and to create awareness for the honor and dignity of Black women in the society.

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