

32.

**Portrayal of Black Women  
In Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye***

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**ABSTRACT**

African people were ill-treated in the nineteenth and twentieth century America. Racial discrimination, slavery and injustice were the beastliness and brutality in the Afro-American society. Especially, the black African women had not been given much importance in the white American society. These women were harassed by both the white and the black men. They were kept in complete silence and consequently their lives were at stake for long time. During the time of slavery, the black womanhood was destroyed and abused. As a matter of fact, in due course, these dehumanising activities made the black women lose their self-identity. Many novelists like Zora Neale Hurston, Barbara Christiana, Gerda Lerner, Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, James Baldwin, and Paul Lawrence Dunbar have dealt with racism, sexism, gender and class in their novels. This paper analyses the character of Pecola as portrayed by Toni Morrison in her novel *The Bluest Eye* and examines black women characters who are raised from the poor, down-trodden, mostly seeking liberty and searching for self-identity in the white American society. The study also observes how father-mother-relationship works in a family. The main objective of the paper is to celebrate and glorify the black womanhood – “Black is Beautiful” – through which the male-chauvinistic society should perceive even the black woman a human who has her own likes and dislikes.

*Note:* The following abbreviations are used after quotations: *The Bluest Eye* – BE; *Toni Morrison* – TM; *Self, Society, Myth in Toni Morrison's Fiction* – SSMF; *I Have a Dream* – IHD; *New Dimensions of Stability* – NDS; *Toni Morrison's The Bluest Eye* – TMBE; and *African American Literature and the Classicist Tradition* – ALCT.

Black women in America have been victimized by racism, sexism, and gender. They are ill-treated by their own men through which they have been marginalised and separated from the society. They have to endure all the violence and racist behaviour of both white men and women. Since the time of slavery, black-womanhood has been destroyed, dismantled and abused by black and white men and also by white women. The black woman faces the reality of double discrimination – race and sex.

The contemporary writers of Morrison have portrayed the black women. Zora Neale Hurston, especially in her novel, *Their Eyes were Watching God* deals with the recent civil rights and feminist movement. It describes the sufferings of very long dominant of race and sexism. Barbara Christian, a critic, in *The Development of a Tradition*, discusses the issues of the black women who are slaves and poor under the capitalist society which sees her as an inexpensive commodity and therefore utilizes her to the utmost without any sense of guilt. Gerda Lerner, in her pioneering work *Black Woman in White America*, has much light to throw upon this awful predicament on the slavery imposed on the black women. The male writers such as Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, James Baldwin, Paul Lawrence Dunbar, find the racism and sufferings of black women as their major themes in their novels.

Morrison also portrays the black women who face the traumatic experiences. She often depicts the adolescent girls who play vital roles in her novels. Unlike the common young people, those girls have no choice to live lives of their own instead, they have to adapt to the given situation. The novelist wants to make clear that women are forced to lead their lives according to the likes and dislikes of the male-dominated society. Her first novel *The Bluest Eye* examines the consequences of black womanhood in an oppressive white world. The black characters in this novel try to endure gender discrimination, violence, racial attitudes and sexual abuse. It proves that racism damages the whole effects of the black community at large and on black families. The black female characters in the novel have the opportunity to find their identity and survive in the hard atmosphere of racial society. Morrison novels are meant to celebrate black womanhood and thereby to create awareness for the honour and dignity of black women in the society. Her novel mainly focusses on the physical wound caused by the male-society. The utmost painful suffering that a woman undergoes is molestation which affects her psychology.

Morrison's life is reflected in her novels, especially in *The Bluest Eye*. Raised in the North, Toni Morrison's southern roots were intentionally detached by both her maternal and paternal grandparents. A greedy white man swindled her maternal grandfather's property and as a consequence of the injustice he moved his family first to Kentucky. Racism obviously made life intolerable in this place too. So her grandfather had to shift the family to Lorain, Ohio, a mid-western industrial centre which employed a large number of migrating southern blacks. Her paternal grandparents also left their Georgia home due to the hostile and oppressive acts of racist culture which encouraged the blood-thirsty white mob lynching the innocent blacks. Her parents had also experienced the racial issues across the United States which made her father be active disdain for white people. Therefore, Toni Morrison grew up with a "politicizing" awareness which led her novels focussing on the black women in the white American society. Her chief aim was to glorify the black – 'Black is beautiful' which was her slogan and mantra. "That all I needed was a slogan: 'Black is Beautiful.'" (ALCT 131)

In the novel *The Bluest Eye*, Cholly Breedlove, a renting black, having put his family "outdoors", tossed himself beyond the reaches of human consideration. He had almost turned out an animal and was "indeed, an old dog, a snake, and a ratty nigger" (BE 18) He was violent and drunkard. As a result of his barbaric, beastly, brutal and inhuman attitude, Cholly was imprisoned. Mrs. Pauline Breedlove, a lame-footed woman, was staying with the woman she worked for. She used to encourage the brutality of her husband and failed to understand the reality as well as believe her words; Pecola's brother, Sammy Breedlove (14 years) expressed the effect of his inadequate upbringing through withdrawal, intimidation of others, and running away from home and staying with some other family; and Pecola Breedlove (11 years), the protagonist of the novel stayed with MacTeer girls – Claudia (9 years) and Frieda (10 years).

One day, when Cholly returned home and found Pecola washing dishes, with mixed motives of tenderness and hatred, he molested her. Pecola's mother found her unconscious on the floor. On seeing her mother, Pecola passively intimated her about beastly attitude of his father. "Pecola regained consciousness, she was lying on the kitchen floor under a heavy quilt, trying to connect the pain between her legs with the face of her mother looming over her." (BE 161) Even though, Pauline was unable to voice for her daughter against her husband's brutality, she thought that her "Christian" duty is to punish her husband. It shows how black women faced sufferings from their own community. When Claudia and Frieda learnt that Pecola was victimised by her own father, they pitied upon her. They wanted the baby in her womb to be born alive. So, they

bought marigold seeds out of their savings believing that if flower blossomed in the plant, Pecola's baby would be born alive. But the flower did not blossom and simultaneously Pecola begot the dead baby. To her dismay, Cholly, again molested her daughter, absconded and died. Pecola, as a result, became mad and her thought was full of improbable desire – to have bluest eyes.

Further, she was totally ignored and abused by her society for she was black. Even the cobbler scolded her for spilling pieces of fish in the kitchen. Geraldine is one of Morrison's "sugar-brown" southern women. Coming from the North, she wanted to be merged herself with the dominant white society through which she aspired to de-emphasize her African roots. One must be horrified to hear her scowling at the frightened and innocent Pecola as "a nasty little black bitch". (BE 90) Louis Junior, Geraldine's son, deprived of maternal love, absorbed his self-defeating attitude from her behaviour and found himself isolated and fearful. He developed himself with cruel and controlling tendencies, making Pecola the target of his negative behaviour. Regarding Yacobowski, he was a member of the immigrant working class. He himself had been disregarded and marginalised by his own society, but as a white male, he was allowed to feel superior before the little black girl, Pecola. In other words he marginalised Pecola in his candy store. "She holds the money – three pennies – toward him. He hesitates, not wanting to touch her hand." (BE 47) Lastly, he scraped her "damp palm". (BE 48) From the ill-treatment of Yacobowski, it is noticeable that "Pecola becomes the object of such a disapproving gaze when she visits the candy store with her three pennies." (TMBE 41) Likewise, a group of boys, like "a necklace of semiprecious stones", circled her and cheerily harassed her by singing, "Black e mo. Black e mo. Yadaddsleepsnekked. Black e mo black e mo ya dadd sleeps nekked. Black e mo...." (BE 63) In the case of Soaphead, he deceived Pecola saying that he would grant her blue eyes if she fed the dog poison. To their dismay, she did what he said. Soaphead, unaware of his real colour in the white society, he suppressed the black, especially Pecola. Of course, he granted what she wished but he exploited her by directing to poison the dog.

The present study will become futile if the readers of the novel ignore the white characters – Claudia and Frieda – MacTeers who acted as instruments in liberating the black. This is evident in the following incidents: Claudia and Frieda were the little girls who showed much love and affection towards the young girl named Pecola Breedlove. Throughout the novel, they were the only humans who were the instruments of emancipating Pecola from the fetters of White American society as well as from her own family members. Whether they could emancipate her or not, they voiced for this marginalised, little, poor girl as far as they could. Their mother scolded Pecola folk for drinking milk: "Three quarts of milk. That's what was in that icebox yesterday. Three whole quarts. Now they ain't none. Not a drop. I don't mind folks coming in and getting what they want, but three quarts of milk! What the devil does anybody need with three quarts of milk?" (BE 23)

Claudia and Frieda expressed their protest by feeling sorry for their mother's raw deal which was crystal clear in the narratives of Claudia: "My mother's fussing soliloquies always irritated and depressed us. They were interminable, insulting, and although indirect ...." (BE 24) They did not have any dispute with their mother as she was an elderly person. But Claudia affirmed, "I'm willing to do what I can for folks." (BE 25) In fact, Pecola drank milk not because she was fond of drinking milk but because she loved Shirley Temple's face which was painted in the cup. "Some Milk in a blue and white Shirley Temple cup". (BE 19) Pecola loved Temple for her white beauty with blue eyes and degraded herself as ugly creature. In other words, she

superstitiously believed that if she had blue eyes, she would become beautiful and everyone would love her.

On another occasion, when Pecola attained puberty, the two girls cleverly and shrewdly reacted to the situation and after knowing the difficulty, their mother looked after her as 'her mother'. "Mrs. MacTeer is quick to shut down any display of "nasty," but in the course of administrating her punishment, she figures out the truth and instantly transforms herself into a nurturing mother." (TMBE 36) MacTeer sisters rescued Pecola when the school boys danced "a macabre ballet around her". (BE 65) Finally, the sisters took care of her during her pregnancy to delivery, to such an extent, they prayed for her child's birth and behaved like midwives at the time of delivery. The above three situations prove that the racial discrimination was not present in the little hearts. Toni Morrison might have designed the characters – Claudia and Frieda – mostly favouring Pecola as Morrison's mother had judged white people through their behaviours in contrast to her father. Moreover, Claudia and Frieda's concern towards Pecola reminds of the words of Martin Luther King Jr., who foresaw "...little black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls as sisters and brothers." (IHD 59). It is sure that discrimination, slavery, and male-chauvinism must have existed because of politics or political leaders in the particular country.

Still, as grown-ups, it is indispensable to reiterate that her novel *The Bluest Eye* studies the consequences of black womanhood in the oppressive white American society. Bloom rightly points out, "The poignancy of Pecola's victimisation arises not only the racism and resulting interracial conflicts related to colo(u)r..." (TM 12). It is regrettable to see that the black females are only seen as housemaid or slaves at the hands of white race. The white people use to despise African-American's. It is crystal clear in the case of Pauline, Pecola's mother who was working as a housemaid humbly under a white house owner. The house owner treated her as a slave. It shows the dominance of white race and their practice of racial discrimination over the black race. The black women have been portrayed in relation to the influence they suffer from the white ones and from the society in search for their own selves. These black women are excluded from a universe of love and tenderness where the figure of man is a key element for their imprisonment in madness, silence, sexual oppression and lack hope. Being silent, desperate and isolated, these women cannot escape a life of unfulfilled desires. The novel has some of the recurring points that would become decisive in all Morrison's works. The characters:

Exist in a world defined by its blackness and by the surrounding White Society that both violates and denies it. The destructive effect of the White society can take the form of outright physical violence, but oppression In Morrison world is more often psychic violence. She rarely depicts white characters, for the brutality here isles a single act than the systematic denial of the reality of black lives. (SSMF 07)

Further, each member of the family interpreted and acted out of his or her ugliness. The projection of their own passive mythology of beauty and ugliness oppressed them beyond their already grim social oppression. At this juncture, one has to agree that not only the blacks, the unvoiced, but also the 'supreme' whites, like Frieda, are exploited. Freida, joining hands with her sister Claudia, wanted to look after Pecola but the former was sensually exploited by Henry, who came as a guest to their home. Even though they knew that he was not a human but a beast, they

did not reveal his true identity to their mother. They failed to keep themselves from him. Their lethargies caused Frieda to be victimised at last.

From this study, it is explicit that the black women are the puppets in the hands of the white American society which expects them to dance to their music. The sad plight of Pecola makes the readers think:

Pecola is...obstructed and deflected from higher consciousness of self because she is female. [She] is expunged from human society even before she has awakened to a consciousness of self. Pecola stands for the triple indemnity of the female Black child: children, Blacks, and females are devalued in American culture. (NDS 34)

If Claudia and Frieda had not been with her, she would have been completely deprived of love, affection, and care. Morrison had portrayed them to voice for this black and poor girl.

A man is said to be a human if he understands and acts according to the wish and will of his fellow beings. If not so, he is nothing but an animal. The black is not only suppressed and oppressed by the whites but also by the blacks themselves. A father who has to be the God or safeguard to his daughter exploits her for his sensual pleasure. A mother who has to be with her daughter at all situations and teach her how to lead her life safely, morally and successfully, fails to understand her basically. In other words, their family gets ruined completely.

Secondly, poverty has played its cruel role in the lives of the blacks. Breedlove's family undergoes this suffering endlessly. National leaders and patriots have dreamt how their nation should emerge in future. Will their dream come true? Or else even in the third millennium will the racism, sexism, gender and class continue to take their hoods and threaten the so-called womanhood? Or will each and every black in America search for their self-identity? Won't the colours stop their discrimination and liberate the men and women from the shackles of the white American society? Won't the society glorify the blacks saying the slogan "Black is Beautiful"?

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