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Feminism and the Quest for Identity in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*

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Abstract

Over the years many scholars have strived to discuss the slave narrative focusing on the origin of slavery and quite often on autobiographies of freed slaves. How they were forcibly uprooted to the new world and barely on the issue of colour as a jinx. The black female characters in the African American society widely known as a society embedded with mixed racial identity and difference has not been fully explored. This paper is basically on the exposition in the quest for identification of self and to reveal the effects of stereotype and societal conformity as the African Americans were regarded as "second class citizen" due to gender, colour and racial disposition. Womanism as a strand of feminism is the theoretical underpinning used to interrogate the quest for identity, racism and gender disparity as presented in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*. The paper finds out that embracing one's black image, family, and culture is crucial for resisting white oppression and maintaining authentic identities for black women. As a writer, Morrison, a black woman herself, rejects mainstream

cultural influences and instead portrays black women as central subjects, as seen in her depiction of Claudia in *The Bluest Eye*. The paper concludes with the position that the African American women depicted by Morrison are undaunted and not restricted by the unfavourable sociocultural boundaries in their milieu.
Keywords: Identity, Oppression, Feminism, Quest, Crisis, Slaves, womanhood

Introduction

Black females who were born during the later years of the nineteenth century were destined to continue the path of freedom along the twentieth century. Women started to challenge the stereotypes, unequal political laws, social constraints and mainly sexist decisions that assumed them to have a subordinate position, because it was the last thing that would prevent them from living as normal as all other women. Accordingly, while black females worked hand in hand with black males to resist racism, they found themselves following a different path because they realized afterwards that this resistance actually started in favor of the whole black community but turned towards constructing a patriarchal society, in this regard Bell Hooks claims:

> Although black women and men had struggled equally for liberation during slavery and much of the Reconstruction era, black male political leaders upheld patriarchal values. As black men advanced in all spheres of American life, they encouraged black woman to assume a more subservient role. (4)

In the above citation, it is apparent that the society was partitioned so that black men gained advancements in various aspects of American society, they sometimes promoted ideologies that relegated black women to subordinate positions, thereby perpetuating gender inequality within the black community. This analysis underscores the intersectionality of race and gender dynamics within the context of systemic oppression.

According to A. D. Morris "a tripartite system of oppression is the system of dominance in the south that protected the privileges of the white society" (qtd. in Foster and Tillman 27). He assumes that in the shadow of this system Afro-Americans were "controlled economically, politically and personally" (27). This means that when the whites dominate blacks financially, the social and personal aspects are to be controlled unwillingly. In view of that, blacks were concentrated in the cities with low paid jobs, and most of black women in the southern states were either holding domestic jobs or working in the plantations, while the whites were highly positioned in jobs and enjoying a better working condition and status. The class paradox favored whites, granting them control over those deemed beneath them. Yet, for black individuals, it sparked a call to revolt against unjust inequalities. Similarly, women, who once internalized racism and accepted invisibility, saw a shift with a new generation embracing defined goals and cultural rebellion rooted in hope.

Black women of the late 19th century started resistance primarily by understanding what it takes to become free and to get out of the silent zone. They knew that liberation is not only confined to rejecting sexist ideas within black society and just sit there waiting for a miracle to set them free. Rather, they believed in their ability to participate in social movements calling for women's rights, and eventually, this was the case. Black women participated in the women's rights movement with female figures such as Anna Cooper, Maria W. Stewart, Sojourner Truth, and others. And although they emerged gradually alongside men to make a change in the way blacks were perceived by others, activists from both genders emerged having the same objectives. For some reasons, men's voices seemed to receive greater importance in comparison to females. In this regard, during the equal rights convention Sojourner Truth delivered her famous speech saying:

> There is a great stir about colored men getting their rights, but not a word about the colored women; and if

> colored men get their rights, and not colored women theirs, you see the colored men will be masters over the women, and it will be just as bad as it was before. So I am for keeping the thing going while things are stirring; because if we wait till it is still, it will take a great while to get it going again. (Hooks 4)

This paper explores how African Americans navigate their identity between African and American cultures, grappling with dual personality and societal expectations. It examines how this identity has been used to combat racial segregation and discusses the psychological and social limitations faced by African Americans, tracing their origins from slavery to present-day stereotypes and societal conformity.

Feminism and the Quest for Identity in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*

Many researches have been conducted on Morrison's first novel *The Bluest Eye*. And each research took a different angle. Zsofia Agnes Sneider wrote a paper entitled *Strategies of dealing with Individual and cultural trauma in Toni Morrison's The Bluest Eye and Songs of Solomon.* Her dissertation is about how previous experiences and white cultures traumatizes African Americans; and the measurement taken to cope with their traumatized lives. Whitney Renee Smith conducted a research entitled "*Quite as it kept": Secrecy and Silence in Toni Morrison's The Bluest Eye, Jazz, and paradise* She studied the novels from the angle of silence as a barrier to constructing strong communities then, she demonstrated how fighting silence could be an act of seeking salvation.

She examines in her paper the extent to which women and children are affected by the sexist and patriarchal in American society. She further construes sexuality as an extreme use of power and dominance. Pauline Anderson highlights the natural elements in

the novel including Earth and Water in *Earth, Water and black bodies: Elements at Work in Toni Morrison's Literary Landscape.* Anderson argues that there's a link between destructing nature including trees and fortes with the mistreatment of black bodies. In her article Melissa Sue Smoak *The Bluest Eye,* Alice Walker's the Third life Grange Copeland and Fae Myenee *Ng's Bone* was broadened from the perspective to involve the psychological effects of oppression on both African and Asian Americans. Smoak emphasized how society plays a part in developing a sense of self-hatred. Lin Li ting examines the novel in terms of self-loathing as a result of white community's lack of appreciation to blackness. Self-hatred is the outcome of unreasonable norms set by a superior community. In her dissertation Jessica Duncan *Hateful Prairie: Violence and Ecophobia in Twentieth Century American Gothic.* Jessica dealt with the gothic historical violence as well as the ecophobia which is the fear of the world in the novels including *The Bluest Eye.* From our perspective we analyzed the novel from the angle of identity construction.

We explored the different reasons behind the destructed identity of blacks. Throughout the history of western culture and thought, certain people, concepts, and ideas have been defined in terms of other. These others pose a threat to the social norms of a civilized society. Stephen Morton says such "others have included death, the unconscious and madness, as well as the oriental, non-western other, the foreigner, the homosexual, and the feminine" (Morton 59). Black women are doubly marginalized; they can be called the other among others. Being a black writer, Morrison gives us deep insight into black women's psychology. Patricia Hill Collins in *Black Feminist* Thought argues that black women are always treated as others in white patriarchal society. No system of oppression can work without ideological justifications. The dominant groups always present black women in detrimental light. The portrayal of black women as ugly unfeminine breeders gives white women an edge to be defined as a delicate and civilized

feminine beauty (80). Morrison challenges the traditional approach of dividing everything in watertight compartments like white/black, masculine/feminine, virgin/whore in her novels. The first one is privileged at the expense of the other. And this is what Morrison challenges as the negative representation of black women in literature. Black women are presented as mammies, whores, matriarchs, breeders, superwomen and the beasts. These negative images of black women are promoted to hide their political, social and economic exploitation. Morrison tries to create a "black aesthetic" that would capture the experiences of coloured women who are "left out of literature". These stereotypical images of black women are sabotaged by Morrison who writes "of the silence behind the stereotype" and gives voice to black female identity (William 4).

That anybody white could take your whole self for anything that came to mind. Not just work, kill, or maim you, but dirty you. Dirty you so bad you couldn't like yourself anymore. Dirty you so bad you forgot who you were and couldn't think it up (Morrison 251). These lines from Morrison's novel Beloved depict many dimensions of intersecting oppression of race, class and gender and the way the 'matrix of oppression' cripples black women's ability to love. Morrison's black female characters learn to craft significant identities by challenging all racial stereotypes. Collins in Black Feminist Thought discusses black feminist consciousness, she believes that "a distinctive, collective, black women's consciousness exists." Black women have always resisted every sort of oppression; apparently, they learn to wear the mask of conformity but this mask does not destroy their inner strength and power to resist. They have always pulled together their power of resistance, sometime by denying the so-called established tradition and cultural norms and sometimes by daring to do something which is forbidden in white patriarchal society. She further elaborates her idea that this resistance "could not have occurred without black women's long-standing rejection of mammies,

matriarchs, and other controlling images". Many black writers have tried to explore "private hidden space of black women's consciousness" that give them energy and power to resist oppression. She says that the "voices of resistance" has always been there and these voices are not of "victims but of survivors" (Collins 98).

Womanism as a strand of feminism emerged from the writings of Alice Walker, particularly in her 1983 book *In Search of Our Mother's Garden: Womanist Prose*, as a movement within feminism, with a focus on Black feminists. Walker introduced the term "womanist" in her 1979 short story *Coming Apart* which evolved to encompass a range of issues and perspectives affecting Black women and beyond. She defined womanism as embracing the courage, audacity, and self-assuredness of Black women, along with their love for other women, themselves, and humanity. Since Walker's introduction, womanism has broadened to include concepts such as Africana womanism and womanist theology/spirituality.

The protagonist in *The Bluest Eye* is Pecola Breedlove. By society's standards, Pecola is ugly. Morrison takes this poor, innocent, ugly, little black girl to show the devastating effects of daily events. Morrison tries to show a little girl as a total and complete victim of whatever was around her. People, in many cases whites, would comment and say things without even thinking twice about their implications. For example, at one part of the book, Pecola has three pennies in her shoe which she has been saving to buy Mary Jane candy. In the shop, Mr. "Yacobowski towers behind the counter... Somewhere in the space between sight and perception, his gaze retreats, pauses, and lingers" (1, 36). Upon exiting the store, "Pecola experiences the unexplainable shame dissipate" (1, 37), followed by a surge of anger. An innocent act of going to the store and buying candy, an act usually filled with happiness and anticipation, has turned into one of

shame and anger. Pecola, certainly, 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.

For Pecola, constant abuse by society and her family had made her so utterly alone. Her brother had run away from home by encouragement from his mother, who had rejected the family and gone to work for a white family. By working for the white family, she got everything that she wanted and was needed. In doing so, she rejected the needs of her family entirely, not even her own daughter could call her "mother" instead she was forced to call her "Mrs. Breedlove", a symbol of hatred and rejection. This increased when Pecola was raped by her father, followed by her mother beating her until the baby died. This final blow, the hopelessness of rejection caused by both the internal and external racism, was what drove Pecola insane, and would drive any person to madness, because the pain that this racism caused is the pain of being alone, a pain which no human can bear.

Fultz claims that Shoaphead Church together with Geraldine bears the largest responsibility besides Cholly Breedlove for Pecola‟s insanity. Fultz says that "Shoaphead, like Geraldine, is struggling with blackness and finds Pecola an easy target for his self-loathing" [2, 58]. They are indeed both struggling with their blackness. Whitney Renee Smith conducted a research entitled "*Quite as it kept": Secrecy and Silence in Toni Morrison's The Bluest Eye, Jazz, and paradise.* She studied the novels from the angle of silence as a barrier to constructing a strong community then, she demonstrated how fighting silence could be an act of seeking salvation. She examines in her paper the extent to which women and children are affected by the sexist and patriarchal in American society. She further construes sexuality as an extreme use of power and dominance.

They become mutilated self or totally eradicated self in abject insanity. Pauline Breedlove, Geraldine, Maureen Peal, and Pecola are black characters who try to conform to an imposed ideal of femininity. They are absorbed and marginalised by the "cultural icons portraying physical beauty: movies, billboards, magazines, books, newspapers, window signs, dolls, and drinking cups" (The Bluest Eyes 4, 20) Pauline Breedlove, for example, learns about physical beauty from the movies.

Consequently, in trying to conform to the ideal of white femininity, the black women characters despise their blackness which in turn leads to self-hatred. They see themselves through the eyes of white people and their worship of white beauty also has destructive effects on their own community. This is because, as Taylor argues:

> One of the cornerstones of the modern West has been the hierarchical valuation of human types along racial lines. ... The most prominent type of racialised ranking represents blackness as a condition to be despised, and most tokens of this type extend this attitude to cover the physical features that are central to the description of black identity (5, 16).

There is a great influence of Afro-American Folklore on Toni Morrison. The Afro- American Folklore is the basis for Morrison's fiction, as for most Black American Literature. Themes like the quest for identity, freedom, the nature of evil and the powerful versus the powerless became themes of Afro-American literature. This folklore encapsulates the history of Black and White interaction in the United States and also epitomizes the sentiments expressed in the Protest Literature. In her novels, she goes much deeper into the very roots of racism, sexism, and classism and exposes the ideological basis of these pernicious social evils.

While racial inequality is undoubtedly a prominent issue, particularly during the era in which the novel was written, Morrison's focus in her novel is primarily on the self-image of the black community she portrays, rather than solely on the problem of racial inequality. Morrison begins the novel with reference to the "Dick and Jane" reading primer. As the story progresses, Morrison repeats the passage from the primer, first without punctuation, then without spacing between the words. This example carries over to the main text. The reader finds a family; mother, father, sister and brother, but key elements are missing. Father is a drunk, and mother is self-loathing, they are not capable of being nurturing parents or expressing love. Pecola's only recourse to escape a tragic world without love is to go insane, thereby creating an alternate world of her own and blocking out the ugliness of the real world. The implications of the dead marigolds have to do with the fact that Pecola, like so many other African-Americans, never had a chance to grow and succeed because she lived in a society that was inherently racist and would not nurture her.

To avoid a sense of their own victimization, the community projects its sense of inferiority onto Pecola, who "is the epitome of the victim in a world that reduces persons to objects and then makes them feel inferior as objects"; in order to escape from a similar fate their response is to act within "the interlocking hierarchies that allow most to feel superior to someone" [The Bluest Eye 6, 330]. According to Claudia, in 1930s America the oppressed and traumatized cannot help one another because the only power they have available to them is that of feeling superior to the weakest. This is especially evident in the treatment of children. Miller stresses that the kind of contempt and violence shown to children is really the weapon of the weak to mask their own feelings of helplessness and loneliness [7, 67-69]. Pecola's belief that she has blue eyes represents her pitiable attempt to take power but they more importantly symbolize the trauma of not

being loved. This delusion makes her more of an outcast because her madness spooks everyone, including her mother.

Smith makes the case that "a work can be classified as lesbian literature if its female characters have pivotal relationships with one another, if it takes a critical stance towards heterosexual relationships, and if its form and language is in no way related to that of the white, patriarchal canon" [8,14,16]. In this sense, Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* with their unique representations of female sexuality, can be classified as a lesbian novel. In her article, Smith argues that the need for a Black feminist criticism emerges from the male (both Black and white) critic's inability to understand Black women's sexual experience. She calls for a "primary commitment to exploring how both sexual and racial politics and Black and female identity are inextricable elements in Black women's writings . . ." [8, 1415]. From this starting point, Black feminist criticism can be applied to a specific work, overturning previously held assumptions and exposing it in a new light. "A work may be revealed as lesbian literature if it emphasizes the interaction between women, is critical of heterosexual relationships, and if it has a uniquely feminine form and language" [8, 1416].

In the eyes of Black feminist criticism, *The Bluest Eye* emerges as lesbian novel. The first important aspect that characterizes a novel as lesbian literature is that female characters play pivotal roles in one another's lives. This makes sense when considering the importance of friendship to women, adolescent girls in particular. One study has found that "friendships satisfy adolescents" desires for intimacy and greatly enhance their interpersonal skills, sensitivity, and understanding" [9, 206]. The importance of female friendship is evident in Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* and the development of female sexuality is dependent on the presence of female relationships. In *The Bluest Eye*, Pecola's first sexual experience, menstruation, occurs in the presence of Claudia and

Frieda. Pecola panics at first, not knowing what is happening to her, but is quickly reassured by her friends: A brownish-red stain discolored the back of her dress. She kept whinnying, standing with her legs far apart.

Frieda said, "Oh. Lord! I know. I know what that is!" "What?" Pecola‟s fingers went to her mouth. "That's ministratin."

"What's that?"

"You know."

"Am I going to die?" she asked.

"Noooo. You won‟t die. It just means you can have a baby!" (1, 19)

This important step in Pecola's sexual development – her initiation into womanhood – is accompanied by the presence and reassurance of other female characters. Keeping with the importance of female relationships in lesbian literature, Pecola‟s further knowledge of sexuality is attributed to her friendship with a group of prostitutes. Besides Claudia and Frieda, these prostitutes are Pecola‟s only outside social contact. Pecola visits these women whenever she can, and by listening to their conversation, absorbs their ideas about sexuality and relationships:

"Oh, Lord. How that man loved me!"

China arranged a fingerful of hair into a bang effect. "Then why he left

you to sell tail?" "Girl, when I found out I could sell it – that somebody

would pay cold cash for it, you could have knocked me over with a

feather." Poland began to laugh. Soundlessly. "Me too. My auntie

whipped me good that first time when I told her I didn't get no money. I

said "Money? For what? He didn't owe me nothin".‟ She said, „The hell

he didn't!" "They all dissolved in laughter." (1, 42)

From her relationship with these women, Pecola gathers much of her knowledge of the dynamic between men and women. The prostitutes have a disdain for all men which they do not hide from the young girl: ". . . these women hated men, all men, without shame, apology, or discrimination. They abused their visitors with a scorn grown mechanical from use. Black men, white men, Puerto Ricans, Mexicans, Jews, Poles, whatever-all were inadequate and weak" (1, 43). The prostitutes steal money from their clients, and even occasionally beat them. They offer an opposing viewpoint on traditional depiction of prostitutes.

Pecola picks up on this hatred for men, and this, in addition to her troubled relationship with Cholly, leads her to fear the males in her life. The prostitutes have a profound effect on the development of Pecola's sexuality. Pauline and Cholly's relationship is depicted as violent and loveless. Pauline resents Cholly for not having a job, and Cholly feels emasculated by Pauline‟s drive to work in order to support the family. This leads to a domestic environment of constant fighting and emotional conflict. The perverted form of heterosexuality is translated to the relationship between father and daughter when Cholly rapes Pecola in a haze of desire and anger:

> Following the disintegration – the falling away – of sexual desire, he was conscious of her wet, soapy hands on his wrists, the fingers clenching, but whether her grip was from a hopeless but stubborn struggle to be free, or from some other emotion, he could not tell. Again, the hatred mixed with tenderness. The hatred would not let him pick her up, the tenderness forced him to cover her. (The Bluest Eyes 1, 129)

Pecola's rape by her father is painful to read and reminds the reader how sexuality can be used as a weapon. Even a relatively

nice male character in the novel, Mr. Henry, abuses Frieda for no apparent reason. *The Bluest Eye* presents almost a hyper-critical view of heterosexual relationships. Feminist criticism dictates that the third important aspect of lesbian literature is its unique form and language. If "in a woman writer's works, a sentence refuses to do what it is supposed to do, if there are strong images of women, and if there is a refusal to be linear, the result is innately lesbian literature" [8, 1416]. Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* is a prime example of a uniquely feminine form and style. She breaks up the book into seasons, prefaces each chapter with "Dick and Jane" narratives, and uses colloquial dialogue. Her descriptions of sexuality are distinctive in that they are infused with jazz songs and undertones. Moses asserts that, "The three whores embody the blues singer's assertion of sexuality, desirability, and ownership of their bodies" [10, 4]. In one passage, Poland expresses her grief and sense of isolation in the following song:

> I got blues in my mealbarrel Blues up on the shelf
> I got blues in my mealbarrel Blues up on the shelf
> Blues in my bedroom
> Cause I‟m sleeping by myself. (38).

Through the unique use of the blues motif, Morrison is able to effectively convey the sense of loss and loneliness that is conflated with a developing sexuality. Through the depictions of pivotal female relationships, in taking a critical stance towards heterosexuality, and through the use of distinct form and language, Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* emerges as lesbian novel. It gives the reader a uniquely feminine view of sexuality and gives us a glimpse into some aspects of the Black female experience.

Finally, having been treated very badly by most people surrounding her, Pecola yearns to have blue eyes in the hope that people will love her. Despite those radical distinctions, the construction of femininity for black women is somewhat similar to that of white women in terms of gendered repetition. For example,

Pecola sees herself as ugly, as an object possessing an abject body. This is paralleled with what Bartky says about the process of disciplining practices to gain the ideal body of femininity which produces "a practiced and subjected body, that is a body on which an inferior status has been inscribed. A woman's face must be made up, that is to say, made over, and so must her body" [11, 71]. This suggests, as Bartky further argues, that "[women's] bodies are deficient" [11, 71].

Being different in race and class, Pauline's and the white lady's concerns in life are very different. Originally, these kinds of dilemmas prevented the black and the white women's liberation movements from integrating. White women wanted to step into the working world as they chose and be considered equal to men. Black women had been forced to work beside their husbands for the mere survival of their families. They were not concerned about getting even with their husbands, they were worried about putting food on the table. Another concern of the black women's liberation movement was how to analyze the black men and women's relationship with each other, simultaneously taking into consideration the affects of the dominating white culture on that union. Mrs. MacTeer, the prostitutes living above the Breedloves, and Claudia are Morrison's feminist, capable women in *The Bluest Eye*. Mrs. MacTeer is a strong character, managing work, poverty and her children with dedication and persistence. She is burdened by her responsibilities; yet, never chooses to give up. She would do anything for her family‟s survival and protection. Claudia, the retrospective narrator of the novel, displays great female insight and intelligence.

Conclusion

The Bluest Eye appears to be the first African American novel which deals with issues of identity within the African American community. The theories used to substantiate our points in this paper is mainly the Feminist theory. Womanism was used to

explore the nature of patriarchal communities. Women are dominated by men and viewed as mere objects, often disregarding their contributions economically or politically. It considers blacks as invisible creatures unworthy of recognition. Invisibility can take many forms, one of which includes the inability to perceive individuals of the opposite gender. Morrison major works tackle black female journey with both racist and sexist oppression under the circumstances of the American culture. Black female's identity is questioned due to objectification and constant re-definitions. She is always defined by her relationship to men, denying her any subjectivity.

The black women identity endured all sorts of traumas... White masters sought to eliminate black's being to ensure their submission. Although black women contributed to building the economic basics of the New World, yet their image or representation in society was deformed by inventing myths such as black females are sexually loose, they are the result of ape's revolution and finally prostitutes.

Mostly black female characters in fiction experience humiliation and suffer an acute isolation in a white racist society that has marginalized them. They are considered outcasts who do not enjoy any class and racial privilege and are often silenced by the hostile gaze of others. Morrison defines female self as one in process that is not restricted and imprisoned by rigid social and cultural boundaries but constantly becoming. Morrison critiques the ways language has been used to justify violence against black women. She destroys different stereotypes and creates various black female characters that reject conventional and self-hating ways of being.

Similarly, she rewrites and explores the hidden stories of pain and degradation. She creates the strong black female characters that reject the dominant racist standards of being.

Contribution to the Knowledge

The paper argues that embracing one's black image, family, and culture is crucial for resisting white oppression and maintaining authentic identities for black women. As a writer, Morrison, a black woman herself, rejects mainstream cultural influences and instead portrays black women as central subjects, as seen in her depiction of Claudia in *The Bluest Eye*. This novel questions the contemporary mantra "Black is Beautiful" and prompts readers to confront issues such as internalized black hatred, psychological struggles, and societal influences contributing to low self-esteem within the black community.

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