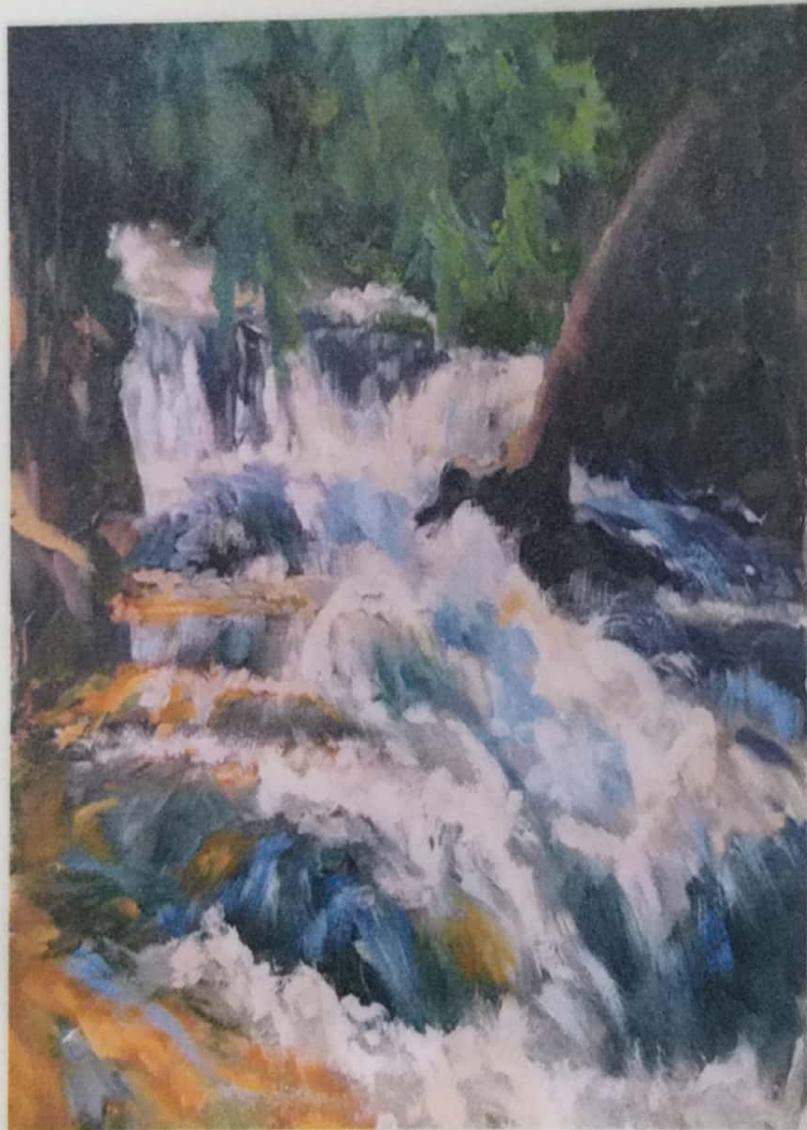


ECHOING CASCADES

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Periyakulam, Tamilnadu, India

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SEARCH FOR IDENTITY IN TONI MORRISON'S THE BLUEST EYE

A. GREENI

Identity, gender-bias, slavery, marginalisation, alienation and Community have always been the underlying theme of Toni Morrison. Through the accounts of her novels, Toni Morrison shows numerous ways in which identity, is the most tyrannical period in the black history, which has affected the identity of African Americans. In *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison shows how a black girl who searches for her true identity feels aggravated by her blackness and yearns to be white because of the constant panic of being redundant in her surroundings. She exposes the inhumanities of the American slavery system and its impact on the African Americans. Thus Morrison tries to establish the black identity in the socio-political ground where cultures are hybridised, powers are negotiated and individuals are reproduced as challenging agents.

On the other hand, just "being black" in her novels does not promote unity within the community as there also exists class differences within the black group. So through her characters Morrison portrays the identity crisis through slavery and racism. This paper traces the vision of black identity that Morrison attempts to figure in her novel, "The Bluest Eye". The paper describes the multifaceted mixture that characterizes the relationship between black and white. The paper explores several injustices and the harmful impact which the institution of identity has on the African American society.

The term "Identity" refers to one's rights, equality and dignity, equal opportunity in work and education and equal pay. Here the focused "Female identity" denotes a movement advocating the cause of women's rights and legitimate demands, particularly equal rights with men by challenging blatant and rampant inequalities between the sexes in the society. African-Americans have widely accepted that they are socio-historic products, not only bound to one another by racial and biological commonalities, but also moulded by the consequences of slavery and betrayal. Many women writers like Zora Neale Hurston have naturally emerged to focus their identity and autonomy on the literary horizon. The

writers of all races have recognized inexhaustible literary potential of African-American self-examination and self-exploration.

"Identity" is often regarded as a function of place. There is a strong relationship between the environments into which the inexorable fate placed them and their own definition of the sense of female identity and self-assertion. The African American women have longed for their identity and dignity in the society, and they have suffered a lot in different ways such as alienation, colour-discrimination, marginalization, slavery, identity, autonomy, and gender-bias and so on. Toni Morrison is regarded as one of the greatest living writer that has brought new life to African American literature. She is the first African-American woman to win the Nobel Prize for Literature (1993). She has created remarkable characters and explored the emotional trauma of racism, identity, colour discrimination, gender-bias, injustice, oppression and slavery in her novels. Morrison pen portrays and make the readers to think about the history of the struggles of the African American experience.

Toni Morrison depicts the black community with reference to blackness and the inner struggles of the individual as well as the class differences and social structures within the collective. So Each of Morrison's works, *The Bluest Eye* (1970), *Sula* (1973), *Song of Solomon* (1977), *Tar Baby* (1981), *Beloved* (1987), *Jazz* (1992), *Paradise* (1998), *Love* (2003), and *A Mercy* (2008) provides the complexity of black community. She not only writes about claiming the superiority by the white but also about radicalization and class differences within the black collective.

The black woman, ToniMorrison, faced the reality of "Double discrimination" of both race and sex. Racism and Sexism co-exist in a traumatic alliance with in the proves to be a deadly combination. This combination critically affects the lives and consciousness of African American woman. They are like the system of societal and psychological restrictions. Sex and race have been interrelated in the history of American and the black woman ToniMorrison who has necessarily reflected the relationship in his novels. Blacks as a group who are relegated to under classes in America, with regard to their virtue. They

also witness their women as a separate cast by virtue of their sex. In the contemporary period, the black woman novelist Toni Morrison has continued to analyze the relationship among class, race, and gender. All these three elements – race, gender and class are interwoven in the writings of all black writings.

"Clearly, sexism and racism are systems of societal and psychological restrictions that have critically affected the lives of African – American women. Since sex and race have been so interrelated in the history of America, it is not surprising that when black women published novels, they necessarily reflected that relationship" (Sumana 29).

The Bluest Eye, "a timeless study of a social outcast who rejects herself" (Walker 1991: 50) implies an underlying desire for assimilation, verification and acceptance by white people. Morrison also attacks the problem of the oppression of children. In her novel, "The Bluest Eye", she depicts the world from a child's point of view. Morrison shows this cycle of oppression in the treatment of Pecola by other children in her community. They also grew up to act out their own hurts on their children. We see this especially in the abandoned child, Cholly Breedlove, who grows up to become a dysfunctional father, tragically rapes his daughter, Pecola. The rape of a child is thereby given to the reader in two forms, psychological and physical. Morrison thus gives a clear picture of adultism.

"*The Bluest Eye*" (1970), Morrison examines the perspective view of black community about beauty and the psychological damages it created to the black women. *The Bluest Eye* takes place in Morrison's home town of Lorain, Ohio. In the novel, the black community of Lorain is separated from the upper-class white community, also known as Lake Shore Park, a place where blacks are not permitted, unless they are employed by a white family. Morrison portrays two black families – the MacTeers who have the inner strength to face poverty and discrimination of racist society and the Breedloves. Pecola Breedlove is a young African American girl coming of age during the 1940s. She longs to be loved and accepted by her own community as well as in a world which rejects and diminishes the value of the members of her own race and defines beauty

according to an Anglo Saxon cultural standard. She yearns for her identity among the white community. Pecola dreams that if she has blue eyes, which is the symbol of white beauty, she will be beautiful just like Shirley Temple and be loved by everyone.

Pecola's quest for blue eyes concludes in madness. She is ignoring the reality that she cannot have blue eyes. Moreover she thinks that if she has blue eyes, her parents may stop quarrelling and they would all live happily. The novel describes a continual variation between one thing and wanting its opposite. A black female fails to understand her own race in terms of beauty for they believe beauty means white. They search their identity in being white because they are scared of being discriminated by their surroundings. Pecola has very little sense of self-worth, however her fury quickly turns back to shame, an overwhelming, self-blaming, self-hating emotion and passion. Every time she tries to live with her surroundings to make her realise that she is ugly and not worthy even for touch, Pecola self-segregates herself in order to earn self-respect. Whenever their brother and parents fight she shut herself up in the room and prays to God to make her disappear.

"Little parts of her body faded away. Now slowly, now with a rush. Slowly again her fingers went, one by one; then her arms disappeared all the hardest above the thighs. She had to be real still and pull. Her stomach would not go. But finally it, too, went away then her chest, her neck. The face was hard, too. Almost done, almost. Only her tight, tight eyes were left. They were always left" (*Bluest Eye* 39).

But for Pecola's mother this fight gives her an identity. She considers herself a good Christian woman loaded by a worthless husband as punishment from God. She often speaks to Jesus about Cholly's sins. Once, during a fight, Cholly falls on the stove, and she yells out for Jesus to take him. Mrs. Breedlove needs Cholly's sins for her sense of self. Cholly Breedlove also needs her. If he hates her, he can keep his own identity free. By the end of the novel, her life is full of hatred which compels her to isolate herself. She is hated by her mother who considers Pecola as "ugly", her father rapes her and is not able to live a worthwhile life which leads to everlasting aggravation and drives her into madness.

And above all she is again dominated by her own people, own race. Even with her own community Pecola longs for belongingness. Thus Morrison attacks the socially constructed Western images of beauty and the psychological damages it creates in black women.

Morrison rightly points out:

"When the strength of a race depends on its beauty, when the focus is turned to how one looks as opposed to what one is, we are in trouble." (1974:89)

Thus she analyses the ways of being that are ridiculed, demonized, declared inferior and irrational, and, in some cases, eliminated and destroyed. But the community reinforces the identities of its members through belief and heritage. Claudia, although she abhors the white ideals which are internalized by her community accepts her heritage and blackness. In *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison analyses the boundaries of black society that are set and defined by the dominant white community. Black people always admire the white geographical boundary but they are not allowed to enter unless they are employed by the white people. Claudia and Frieda MacTeer go in search of Pecola at Lake Shore Park where Pecola's mother Pauline works for a white family, known as the Fishers. The girls admire the beautiful house with great furniture and gardens but their visit is short-lived as Pauline becomes furious at Pecola for tripping over a pan of blueberry cobbler, "Crazy fool...my floor, mess...look what you...work...get on out...her words were hotter and darker than the smoking berries and we backed away in dread" (*Bluest Eye* 109).

This evidently shows the discriminatory treatment over the black people by the white people. Morrison tries to give a clear picture of how black society yearns for their identity amidst hybridized culture. The novel reflects the complex mix of attraction and repulsion that characterizes the relationship between the White and Black. Thus the relationship becomes ambivalent because the black subject is never simply and completely opposed to the White. Hence a black woman who is dissatisfied with the way she is treated in the society because of the black colour of her skin can choose the option of doing almost everything

to change this. In the novel, Whiteness is associated with beauty and cleanliness (particularly according to Geraldine and Mrs. Breedlove), but also with sterility. In contrast, color is associated with happiness, most clearly in the rainbow of yellow, green, and purple memories Pauline Breedlove sees when making love with Cholly. Morrison uses this imagery to emphasize the destructiveness of the black community's privileging of whiteness and to suggest that vibrant color, rather than the pure absence of color, is a stronger image of happiness and freedom.

The Self-hatred that is at the core of Pecola's character affects, on one degree or another, of all the other characters in the novel. If Morrison seems to focus on female self-hatred are not limited to black girls alone. Boys receive just as much negative feedback from the white community, but they are far more likely to direct their emotions- retaliation outward, inflicting pain on others before the pain turns inward and destroys them. Cholly and Junior are prime examples.

The phenomenon of slavery is responsible for immense changes in the life of African American people. It is indeed a traumatic experience for the people who were once a slave to witness the ravaging forces of slavery. Upheavals brought by the conflict between the white and black rupture, destroy and strain the traditional structures in society. The novels of Toni Morrison have penetrated deeply into the traumatic effects of identity of African American and its people. Her novel "*The Bluest Eye*" respond to the traumatic effects generated by the clash between the two cultures. It deals with the plight of black people who have been exposed to western values. As the story unfolds, the reader is made aware of the conspicuous shape of slavery. Ironically, the fruits of freedom and independence appear to be out of reach of the people as they painfully reflect on the endless sacrifices made during the struggle.

In "*The Bluest Eye*" Morrison reflects how Pecola quest for true women identity which according to socially structure culture is being white with blue eye. Morrison clearly mentions that even the black man sees white beauty as something to be admirable that's why Cholly Breedlove hates her daughter. Being a black woman is like a crush during that time as they are often exploited by white men as well as by black

men. Hence, it is observed that Morrison probes the mind of the reader to examine the socio-economic, political and cultural problem during the time of slavery.

Morrison shows in her novel that to have roots is to have a shared history. The individual who does not belong to a community is generally lost. The individual who leaves and has internalized the village or community is much more likely to survive. The lack of roots and the disconnection from the community and the past cause individuals to become alienated; often her characters struggle unsuccessfully to identify, let alone fulfill an essential self. Toni Morrison by using her imagination, historical element and tradition produces a whole new reality of how pervasive "blackness" has been to the structuring of American Texts.

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