



FROM CHILDHOOD TO ADULTHOOD: SYSTEMIC OPPRESSION AND INTERSECTIONALITY OF BLACK GIRLS IN TONI MORRISON'S THE BLUEST EYE AND BELOVED

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Abstract:

This study aims to analyse the depiction of 'systemic oppression and intersectionality' in Toni Morrison's novels *The Bluest Eye* and *Beloved*. Toni Morrison is celebrated for her examination of the black female experience, which exposes the fact that young black girls endured psychological, physical, and sexual abuse during their girlhood. These experiences led to a loss of innocence as they struggled against marginalisation, rape, murder, and oppression within African-American society. This research seeks to underscore how societal biases resulted in oppressed and disturbed girlhoods for young black girls while shedding light on their plight within the African-American community. By delving into these themes, it contributes to the broader understanding of black literature by exploring the unique experiences rendered by black authors.

Key words: Systemic oppression, girlhoods, black girls, sexist bias, African- American society.

Introduction:

Toni Morrison, also known by her birth name Chloe Anthony, made substantial contributions to the progress of African-American literature. As an African-American writer, she provides a distinct viewpoint on this genre, highlighting its inclusion of literary works produced by writers of African origin in the United States. In particular, African-American literature delves into subjects such as enslavement, subjugation, racial discrimination, gender bias, and socio-economic disparities. Specifically, Toni Morrison made history by becoming the first black woman to receive the Nobel Prize in Literature. The Nobel Committee awarded her this recognition for her exceptional portrayal of people and profound examination of racism, injustice, and psychological distress resulting from oppression and enslavement in her novels.

In the bargain, Toni Morrison's novel *The Bluest Eye*, published in 1970, centers on the experiences of Pecola Breedlove, a young African-American girl. Pecola is obsessed with white beauty ideals and desires blue eyes, which she links to whiteness to escape the challenges imposed by her dark complexion. However, a sense of inadequacy resulting from being stigmatized as unattractive due to her skin and facial characteristics drives her longing for blue eyes. The narrative of this novel takes place in Lorain, Ohio, during the Great Depression. Moreover, Morrison, through this novel, provides insights into the African American experience and explores topics such as discrimination, incest, and child molestation.

Moreover, Toni Morrison's highly acclaimed novel *Beloved*, was published in 1987 and delves into themes of love and the supernatural. The story draws inspiration from the valid account of Margaret Garner, an enslaved African-American woman who escaped to Ohio. In this state, slavery was illegal but was pursued relentlessly by slave-catchers. Upon facing capture, she tragically chose to take the life of her two-year-old daughter before authorities could return her to slavery. In Morrison's novel, the spirit of the deceased child returns as a haunting presence named Beloved, causing turmoil within her family and especially with her mother. While *Beloved* did receive significant recognition, including the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction and the Anisfield-Wolf Book Award, figures like Stanley Crouch criticised it in *The New Republic* for what they perceived as a melodramatic tone. The main character, Sethe, grapples with the haunting memory of having killed her own child out of fear of them enduring the same fate of enslavement she experiences. Here, this tragic event serves as a pivotal point in Morrison's exploration of the struggles faced by African Americans in their pursuit of survival and cultural identity within a society where racism and sexism intersect in particularly damaging ways, especially for young girls of African descent.

Research methodology:

The research offers a thorough analysis of the text to illustrate the concept of Double Consciousness in Toni Morrison's novels, specifically *Beloved* and *The Bluest Eye*. Double Consciousness is a term Coined by W.E.B. Du Bois, which refers to the internal struggles experienced by marginalised groups within a society that

another dominant group controls. It involves the perception of oneself within the context of the prevailing white society while also considering one's identity from the perspective of a nation that views them with disdain. Therefore, in environments where men wield the majority of power and influence, this concept has been associated with various forms of social inequity, significantly affecting women.

The concept of double consciousness was first introduced by Du Bois in his article "Strivings of the Negro People," which was published in the *Atlantic Monthly*. Subsequently, it was incorporated and modified as a chapter entitled "Of Our Spiritual Strivings" in his literary work, *The Souls of Black Folk*. Du Bois defines this idea as "the sensation of always perceiving oneself through the perspective of others, evaluating one's worth based on society's judgment with amusement, disdain, and pity. One senses a duality inside oneself - being both American and African American; harbouring two souls, two sets of thoughts, and two opposing aspirations within one subjugated body that is only held together by sheer determination."

Significantly, Morrison reveals this form of double consciousness through Pecola in *The Bluest Eye* as she and her family internalise the ideals of white beauty. It is important to note that their society values blond hair, white skin, and blue eyes as the epitome of beauty, promoting European standards while marginalizing those of African-American descent. Consequently, Pecola convinces herself that she cannot be deemed beautiful without possessing traits commonly associated with whiteness. This shows that her intense longing for blue eyes signifies her desire to align herself with this idealized beauty standard, illustrating the concept of 'double consciousness' in Toni Morrison's writing. Additionally, Pauline's rejection and neglect of Pecola due to her race serve as another example of the internal conflict they face within their family dynamics, known as double awareness. Therefore, these instances highlight the profound impact of Pecola's dual identity, which is her sense of double consciousness influenced by her mother.

Notably, in the novel *Beloved*, both Sethe and the African American community experience a profound sense of double consciousness. Sethe views herself as a victim of white enslavers, leading her to tragically end her daughter's life to protect her from being enslaved by white individuals. While the black community understands Sethe's motivations, they choose not to openly support her actions out of fear of facing criticism and exclusion from mainstream society. This illustrates the pressure felt by the black community to conform to white standards in order to gain societal approval and avoid being seen as uncivilized. Overall, it emphasises their willingness to uphold the norms that uphold white supremacy.

This study aims to examine the influence of social gender prejudice on the parenting of young black girls and elucidate the difficulties encountered by African-American girls in Toni Morrison's novels *The Bluest Eye* and *Beloved*. Typically, black girls go unrecognizable within a historically disenfranchised black population in a racially separated culture due to their ethnicity, age, and gender. Thus, Morrison focuses on the experiences of these marginalized young girls "who are disregarded and suffer from many forms of abuse, including physical,

psychological, and sexual assault (qtd. in Roye 212). Toni Morrison's novels, *The Bluest Eye* and *Beloved* depict the psychological turmoil experienced by black girls as they confront persecution and neglect in a racist society, and this hindrance impedes their development from adolescence to womanhood.

Analysis of Trauma and Transition of Black Girls in *The Bluest Eye*:

Toni Morrison's novel, *The Bluest Eye*, delves deep into the struggles marginalised girls often unseen in society. In this regard, Susmita Roye asserts that "Morrison's goal is to highlight the significance of individuals who have been historically ignored and bring their stories to the forefront". It is significant to note that black females encounter significant challenges in forming their identities in a society that values whiteness as the epitome of beauty and where misogyny is pervasive. Moreover, the black community has internalized a sense of marginalization perpetuated by the white community. This theme is evident in the character of Pecola Breedlove, who is ostracized within her own black community. Shubhanku Khochar observes that "*The Bluest Eye* offers a candid exploration of the systemic oppression and dominance of black individuals by white society. The novel also addresses the exploitation of African Americans by some members of their own race within the dynamics of racial dominance". (Khochar 563)

Prominently, the novel *The Bluest Eye* centres on young African American females, specifically Pecola Breedlove, Claudia MacTeer, and her younger sister Frieda. Claudia takes on the role of the narrator in the story and lives with her family in a dwelling described as old, cold, and verdant. The residence also houses tenants named Mr. Henry and Pecola Breedlove. Pecola, as the main character of the novel, yearns for blue eyes as she associates them with whiteness and beauty. She believes that whiteness embodies a unique allure, contrasting it with her blackness, which she sees as inherently unattractive. Pecola feels neglected compared to the attention Claudia and Frieda receive from their parents, albeit in a harsh manner that they struggle to comprehend at a young age. Moreover, these girls face gender inequality and attend a school that favours white children over others. Furthermore, individuals in positions of authority in education, retail, and within families, as well as other members of society, the so-called white people, exhibit behaviour that undermines the dignity of those from racial minorities.

Furthermore, Morrison exemplifies several incidents in *The Bluest Eye* to highlight the instability and turmoil experienced by girls during their childhood. Claudia experiences several forms of powerlessness stemming from her ethnicity and gender in an unstable socioeconomic context. It is evident in the novel that she strongly dislikes the preference for white dolls and blue-eyed baby dolls with blonde hair that she received as a Christmas present. Here, Morrison reflects the societal prejudice through Claudia, who is perplexed by the societal bias that considers white dolls and girls as appealing while marginalizing black dolls and girls. This leads Claudia to question the lack of respect given to her personal choices for Christmas gifts. Moreover, Claudia is bewildered by the widespread belief that white dolls and girls are beautiful, contrasting with the lack of esteem

for black representations. However, she wonders why no one considers her opinions on Christmas gifts. In analysis, it is found that her aversion to white dolls and girls stems from their portrayal as symbols of racial ignorance within a prejudiced society, particularly impacting black girls. Ultimately, her animosity towards white dolls and girls originates from their depiction as emblems of racial ignorance within a racially biased culture.

Besides, the challenges faced by girls transitioning into womanhood are multifaceted and vary significantly based on individual experiences. One key aspect to consider is the intersectionality of these challenges, where factors like race and gender significantly shape a girl's journey towards womanhood. In the case of Frieda, a young black girl, she not only grapples with the typical pressures of adolescence but also navigates the additional complexities that come with her identity. For example, an incident where Henry, a tenant in Frieda's home, inappropriately touches her breasts highlights the impact of inappropriate behaviour on young girls. This experience not only disrupts Frieda's sense of identity but also marks a pivotal moment in her transition into womanhood. Lacking the vocabulary and understanding to articulate what happened to her, Frieda is left feeling ignored and confused. In analysis, her parents' lack of awareness and education on sexual matters further compounds the situation, leaving Frieda to grapple with the aftermath of the incident on her own. That is, despite the lack of support and guidance from her parents, Frieda's response to the situation is one of resilience and determination. However, rather than succumbing to feelings of humiliation or failure, she is motivated to take action and address the inappropriate behaviour she experienced. This highlights Frieda's strength and agency in the face of adversity, underscoring the importance of providing young girls with the knowledge and tools to navigate such challenges effectively.

Conversely, the protagonist, Pecola, faced challenging circumstances in her domestic life. Cholly Breedlove, the father, consumed alcohol and engaged in abusive behaviour against Pauline Breedlove, the mother. Their relationship was characterized by frequent and intense conflicts. At one point, her father burned down the family home, leading Pecola to live as a tenant at the Macteer's house at a young age when she should have been experiencing her girlhood in her own parents' house. However, as Duvall asserts, living in the Breedlove household "is far from being controlled. The children are emotionally traumatized by the ritualistic violence that occurs between Cholly and Mrs. Breedlove, as they are repeatedly exposed to their parents' disputes" (Duvall, 44). In essence, Pecola lacks the affection that she should have received from her parents, resulting in her experiencing turmoil and a disrupted childhood. However, this belief led her to yearn for blue eyes, thinking that possessing them would make her more attractive and would halt her parents' arguments, her father's excessive alcohol consumption, and her brother's repeated departures from home. Therefore, it is this turmoil which fuelled Pecola's inferiority complex, intensifying her desire for blue eyes, which she believed would make her comparable to white people in terms of whiteness and beauty. One evening, an inebriated Cholly Breedlove arrived home, and the following morning, when Mrs Breedlove started to nag Cholly about

getting coal for the furnace, he adamantly refused, leading to a physical altercation between them. Feeling frightened and isolated in her bed, Pecola implores God to make her invisible, murmuring into the cupped palm of her hand, “Please make me disappear” (*The Bluest Eye*, 45). She contemplated her unattractiveness and believed that having different eyes would result in a transformed personality. Therefore, her emotional turmoil prevented her from experiencing joy during her childhood. Subsequently, it is recognized that the conflicts between her parents had deleterious psychological repercussions for her. According to Wilfred D. Samuels and Clenora Hudson Weems, the story takes place in a “small community in Lorain, Ohio, during the Depression. The novel *The Bluest Eye* narrates the tale of Pecola Breedlove, a character who despises her own black identity and longs for blue eyes, which she believes will transform her into a white person, end her status as an outcast, and provide her with the affection and stability that she lacks” (Samuel et al.11). Thus, Morrison represents as a representation of all other black females who pray for the same things.

In particular, the girls’ blackness is seen as otherness and ugliness, setting them apart from the rest of their community. Pecola’s nervousness is especially evident during a visit to a confectionery store owned by Mr. Yacobowski, a white shopkeeper. Her apprehension stems from the belief that she is invisible to him, as if not deserving of even a casual acknowledgement, “At a specific moment in time and space, he feels that he need not waste the effort of a glance. He doesn’t see her because for him there is nothing to see.” (*The Bluest Eye* 48). The reason he fails to notice her is that, from his perspective, there is no visual stimulus to register. This notion is further reinforced when Mr. Yacobowski shows reluctance to engage in physical touch in her hand based on her race, as depicted: “He hesitates, unwilling to hold her hand... Eventually, he extends his arm and retrieves the pennies from her hand. His nails graze her damp palm.” (*The Bluest Eye* 49-50). However, these interactions deepen the sense of disconnection and validate the girls’ fears that white society would never fully acknowledge their humanity.

Moreover, Morrison consistently explores the recurring theme of neglect and adversity in the lives of black girls. Morrison, through the novel, makes it apparent that their schooling atmosphere is one where they experience both psychological and verbal harassment, with a clear preference for white children. Pecola, along with others of her race, experiences not only mockery from individuals outside of her race but also from her classmates. Specifically, she is targeted by black boys at her school, namely Woodrow Cain, Junie Bug, Buddy Wilson, and Bay Boy. They form a circle around her and taunt her with derogatory remarks like ‘Black emo’ while also making cruel comments about her father’s actions. Claudia defends Pecola by criticizing Bay Boy, while Frieda confronts Woodrow Cain using her schoolbooks. Eventually, a new girl named Maureen mocks Pecola, who has a lighter complexion, furthering her experience of bullying. Claudia’s failed effort to attack Maureen accidentally hits Pecola instead, causing Maureen to quickly run away while insulting the girls by calling them ‘Black emos.’ While Claudia and Frieda respond with anger, Pecola remains passive, overwhelmed with guilt and displaying evident mental pain. This causes Claudia to get frustrated with Pecola for not standing

up for herself. Thus, it is inevitable that Pecola's reaction is not one of apathy but profound melancholy that aggravates Claudia.

Others often manipulate these young black girls in the novel in their community for selfish ends. For instance, on one winter day, Junior, a light-skinned boy and the son of Geraldine, who is a light-skinned woman and is more devoted to her cat than to people, exploits Pecola's innocence. That is, when Junior sees Pecola walking past the playground, he feels envious of the attention the cat receives, and he lures Pecola into his home with the promise of playing with kittens. However, as soon as Pecola enters the house, he cruelly uses the cat to attack her, causing facial scratches. Consequently, Junior thwarts Pecola's attempt to escape, declaring her to be his prisoner. In a fit of rage over the cat's perceived loyalty to Pecola, Junior hurls the animal to its death. Upon Geraldine's return home, Junior falsely accuses Pecola of killing the cat. Geraldine's verbally assaults Pecola, calling her a "nasty little black bitch. Get out of my house" (*The Bluest Eye*, 92). In a similar vein of exploitation, Pecola visits Soaphead Church, a psychic faith healer, in her desperate wish for blue eyes. He cunningly instructs her to feed meat to his landlady's pet dog, implying that if the dog behaves oddly, her wish will be granted. Unbeknownst to Pecola, Soaphead has laced the meat with poison, using her to kill the dog he detests. The dog's subsequent death horrifies Pecola, yet she clings to the belief that this macabre exchange will secure her the coveted blue eyes. These incidents illustrate how racism perniciously exploits the innocence of young girls through deceitful manipulations.

The nurturing of girlhood within the family is essential for the development of young girls, and the lack of love and emotional support leaves it stunted. As Shubhanku Kochar notes, "children typically seek comfort from their parents, but when parents become the primary source of harm, they embody the worst kind of adversary" (Khochar 574). This is the tragic reality for Pecola, whose own family inflicts deeper wounds than society at large. An incident at her mother Pauline's workplace exemplifies this; As Pecola in her mother's workplace finds a berry cobbler and accidentally drops all the berries on the floor. Here, Pauline reacts by violently beating her instead of showing concern for her daughter's injury. Toni Morrison vividly describes this scene as, "in one gallop, she was on Pecola, and with the back of her hand knocked her to the floor... Mrs. Breedlove yanked her up by the arm, slapped her again and in a voice thin with anger abused Pecola directly." (*The Bluest Eye*, 109). This highlights Pauline's disregard for her daughter for the daughter of whites. In the similar vein, Pecola's father, Cholly, also neglects her well-being, culminating in his drunken rape of his 11-year-old daughter, leaving her unconscious. Even upon knowing about this atrocity, Pecola's mother refuses to believe her and adds to the abuse instead of offering protection. The family's disregard for Pecola is not limited to her parents; therefore, in Pecola's case, the disruption of girlhood is prominently evident. Despite having a family, Pecola experiences solitude. Her mother shows more care and affection towards her employer's child than her daughter. Furthermore, even her brother Sammy excludes her from his escape plans and ultimately leaves her behind in an oppressive home environment. The physical and psychological violation by her parents

effectively breaks Pecola's spirit. Her mother, by denigrating her self-worth, and her father, through physical assault, are both implicated in the destruction of Pecola's girlhood. Ultimately, Pecola finds solace in a delusional state of mind, embracing madness as her refuge. Abused and isolated, she conjures an imaginary friend for companionship, ceasing to attend school and convincing herself that others are envious of her imagined blue eyes. S.P. Swain and Sarabjit Das perceive Pecola as a character who, though she "suffers from extreme alienation and a fragmented identity, achieves a sense of integration and wholeness in her psychosis" (Swain et.al 90) at the narrative's conclusion. Thus, in the end, Pecola wanders, speaking to herself and mimicking the motions of a bird, yet she cannot experience the fulfillment that such freedom should entail.

Analysis of Trauma and Transition of Black Girls in *Beloved*:

Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved* delves into the profound and intricate trauma endured by black girls as they navigate womanhood in a society coloured by the shadows of slavery and widespread discrimination. In addition, Morrison presents the young female characters in *Beloved* as subjected to a spectrum of harrowing ordeals encompassing physical, mental, emotional, and psychological abuse. However, their intersecting identities of gender and race result in dual marginalization, exposing them to distinct and compounded forms of oppression. However, the characters in *Beloved* not only confront systemic racism and classism but also grapple with sexism, further exacerbating their anguish. Moreover, instances within the narrative illustrate the stark realities of neglect, sexual assault, murder, rape, and isolation that these girls endure. Such acts of violence warp and hasten their journey from childhood to maturity, robbing them of the usual joys and purity associated with adolescence. Therefore, the grim destiny of Morrison's young female characters, burdened by overwhelming trauma, is that they are prematurely thrust into the realm of adult responsibilities and hardships. Thus, this premature transition to adulthood, catalyzed by the trauma they suffer, emerges as a recurring motif in Morrison's examination of the African American female narrative. Hence, through her literary oeuvre, Morrison illuminates the brutal repercussions of societal injustices on the individual lives and psyches of black girls.

These young black girls, at such a tender age, deserve to be enveloped in the love and affection of their families rather than being deprived of such essential elements due to the horrors of slavery. For instance, Sethe, the protagonist, was born to an African mother she never had the chance to know because, at the age of 13, she was sold to the slave owner Garners who resided at Sweet Home. Sethe carries the heavy burden of feeling abandoned by her mother during the crucial period of her life when she needed love and care the most. Thus, she barely even knew her mother's name. Sethe's heart ached with the belief that her mother had disregarded her. She recalls, "she never fixed my hair nor anything. She didn't even sleep in the same cabin most nights" (*Beloved*, 60-61). Here, the repercussions of being stripped of maternal affection were devastating for her. For this, Manuela Lopez Ramirez aptly observes, "Morrison endeavors to depict the narratives of both the mother and the daughter, shedding light on the mother's absence in her daughter's life as a direct result of the brutal slavery system." (Ramirez 152)

Moreover, it is observed that young black girls have historically been subjected to both sexist and racist oppression. In the novel, *Sethe*, a young black girl, experienced severe suffering and abuse during slavery at the hands of white men such as schoolteacher and his nephew. In one particularly horrific incident, they cornered her in a barn and forcibly suckled milk from her breast. When Sethe attempted to seek justice by reporting this brutal act to Mrs. Garner, the owner of the farm, the schoolmaster and his nephew punished her severely by whipping her to the point of permanently scarring her back. Moreover, she was physically assaulted and exploited by her master due to her social status, with no recourse for defense. This exemplifies the immense pain endured by black women. Therefore the consequences of this bodily harm result in a psychological outburst. Notably in the novel, the physical and psychological impact of these experiences led Sethe to tragically take the life of her own daughter in order to protect her from the horrors of slavery. As described by Fuston White as “this act was driven not by madness but by the harsh reality of slavery. Sethe was fully aware of the brutality of her act, as well as its compassionate intention”. (Fuston, 464) Here, it is crucial to note that, from a young age, Sethe assumed the role of a mother and that pushed her to believe that she had the authority to determine the destiny of her children, where she viewed the act of killing her daughter as an act of mercy, while it is actually a cruel act. Moreover it gets apparent that this not only caused the death of a valued individual, but also deprived her of her childhood. That is, she should be transferred to someone instead of being killed at such a tender age.

Young black females are often subjected to seclusion during their childhood as a consequence of the wrongdoings committed by the people around them. Denver, the daughter of Sethe in the novel *Beloved*, experiences profound loneliness and isolation as a result of her mother’s actions. Sethe, who commits the unforgivable sin of killing her own child, inadvertently forces Denver to live a solitary existence, disconnected from the outside world. Even Denver’s discontent is palpable when she expresses, “I can’t live here. I don’t know where to go or what to do, but I can’t live here. Nobody speaks to us. Nobody comes by. Boys don’t like me. Girls don’t either.”(*Beloved* 9). This explains the extreme seclusion in which Denver lives prevents her from fully enjoying the typical experiences of girlhood. Denver’s gender further compounds her sense of entrapment in comparison to her brothers, Howard and Buglar, who were able to escape the haunted house. While her brothers had the freedom to leave, Denver remains within the confines of the isolated home environment, which significantly disrupts and disturbs her girlhood experiences. Therefore, the experience of ‘girlhood’ in these conditions is both bewilderingly overwhelming and severely repressed.

Conclusion:

In Toni Morrison’s narratives, particularly in *The Bluest Eye* and *Beloved*, the author intricately delves into the multifaceted intersectionality of race, gender, and class that profoundly influences the challenging transition from childhood to adulthood experienced by black girls. Characters such as Pecola, Claudia, Frieda, Beloved, Sethe, and Denver symbolize the pervasive systemic oppression that distorts their experiences of girlhood and hinders their personal growth. Morrison skillfully exposes the societal blindness towards the far-

reaching consequences of ingrained prejudices. By highlighting these poignant narratives of young black females, Morrison not only confronts society's apathy but also advocates for the acknowledgment and healing of these disrupted lives. Moreover, her depiction of the complexities and hardships faced by black girls adds a significant voice to the ongoing discussion on racial and sexual politics, urging for the recognition and transformation of marginalized identities constrained by the prevailing forces of racism and sexism.

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