

RACISM AND RELIGION IN TONI MORRISON'S *THE BLUEST EYE*

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American Literary stage has an array of expression. It is rightly asserted by Bhongle "Almost every literary genre is rich with new notions, and new ideologies. Women's writings in America, Afro-American Literature, and Literature of the Immigrants Experience, and of the other ethnic groups- and the actively operating small but significant factors within these broad movements - make the contemporary American Literary scenario highly appealing" Representing principally, feminist cultural theory and ideology, this paper explores the relationship among the chief components— race and religion within the fictional narratives of Afro-American women writers; with reference to the first novel of Toni Morrison. Morrison has gained reputation internationally with the publication of her first novel *The Bluest Eye*. This novel shows us the terrible consequences for blacks personalizing the values of a white culture that rejects them both directly and indirectly. It also pays tribute in sheer ways to the variety of forms of society- African- American call on to resist; race and religion. This paper examines the nature of the blacks' struggle for their Intellectual (race) and Spiritual (religion) endurance in a predominantly multicultural post colonial white America. She creates symbolic characters; the kind of people found in typical America and makes them universally identifiable.

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African American writers have not only represented themselves but also their race. They have established African American identity through their magnificent writing. Toni Morrison entwines the concerns of two main themes in her novel *The Bluest Eye*. She explores a problem specific to groups targeted by racism, that of internalized racism and religion which has been part of their culture and taken for granted. Afro- Americans, begin to believe about themselves and imagine that European Americans are superior in beauty, morality, and intelligence. In *The Bluest Eye* Morrison focuses on

this problem of internalized racism as it affects blacks and the psychological mechanism called religion which is pivotal on the cycle of oppression. Despite the rising status of African American literature, black authors have shared a common burden over time that of representing the Afro - American race. Maintaining the position of what it means to be black in America allowed authors to establish an Afro - American identity that transcended the individuals, by cultivating what authors were able to prove the intellectual potential of blacks.



Toni Morrison is a skilled writer. She is the winner of Nobel and Pulitzer prizes. Morrison has left an enduring mark on American culture with her novels. Toni Morrison has distinguished herself as an author, editor, and critic who has transformed the American literary setting with her charisma in the Afro - American literary institution. When she won the Nobel Prize in Literature (1993), the Swedish Academy referred to her as one, who characterized her novels by visionary force and poetic import that gives life to an essential aspect of American reality. She has delivered her Nobel lecture, on 7 December 1993 in Stockholm, which demonstrated that the visionary force and poetic import of her novels reflect her worldview and understanding of how language shapes human reality. Writing was the most extraordinary way of thinking and feeling for Toni Morrison. It became the one thing that she had absolutely no intention of living without.

Toni Morrison penned ten novels, *The Bluest Eye* (1970), *Sula* (1973), *Song of Solomon* (1977), *Tar Baby* (1981), *Beloved* (1987) and *Jazz* (1992), *Paradise* (1997), *Love* (2003), *A Mercy* (2008) and *Home* (2012). Through her novels, Toni Morrison traced the plight of black people who have suffered the inferior social and economic status in a conspicuous culture. Morrison lodges a stern denunciation against the overriding society for its unfair tyranny of African-Americans. Blacks' subjugated culture is made noticeable by her literary representation. She has given a voice to the black minority. As an African-American female writer, her writings are profuse in rank about black culture. Her accountability as a black artist is to uphold black cultural perception, to enlighten and reinforce the values of black cultural legacy. The repressive life experience of African-American women in a racially prejudiced culture is treated with an eccentric voice in Morrison's work *The Bluest Eye*.

Toni Morrison has created new spaces for readers through her spoken and written word to bring their mind's eye and their intellect to the complex cultural, political, social and historical issues. Although her novels typically concentrate on black women, Morrison does not identify her works

as feminist works. She believes that, "Writers are among the most sensitive, the most intellectually anarchic, most representative, most probing of artists. The ability of writers to imagine what is not the self, to familiarise the strange and mystify the familiar, is the test of their power."

*The Bluest Eye* is based on Morrison's conversation with a black girl during her childhood. Morrison recommends that her thoughts about why that black girl pleads for blue eyes are stimulated when the racial beauty of "Black is Beautiful" is reclaimed. She says, it "wasn't that easy being a little black girl in this country--it was rough. The psychological tricks you have to play in order to get through--and nobody said how it felt to be that. . . And I wanted to explore it." (1970:17). *The Bluest Eye* speaks strongly of the tone of the demoralized black females in the insignificant society which has become mute and it also expresses the victims' voices.

#### RACE

Racism, as a distinct fact of the American social and political scene, was clearly embedded in that period of history where in, the first Africans were brought as cheap labor on to the American work force. In her interview to the newspaper *The Guardian* Morrison says, "In this country American means white. Everybody else has to hyphenate" (29 Jan 1992). Racial bigotry in *The Bluest eye* is an obvious indication of Toni Morrison's concern to describe creatively the insensitivity of the white folks towards black. Pecola, the chief character in *The Bluest Eye* is the most woeful creation who consistently suffers from racial discrimination. Her own mother Pauline Breedlove abuses Pecola by treating the white girl of her employers as superior to her just because of the colour. She has never felt the love of her mother. She believes that it is because of her colour; her dark skin, dark eyes, and "woolly" hair that she is not seen as beautiful, and from these thoughts she begins to hate the beauty of the white children. Pecola once visits her mother at her working place with her friends; she tries to touch the silvery pan near the stove to see if it was hot. Pan tilts under Pecola's fingers and falls to the floor, splattering blackish blueberries everywhere. Mrs.



Breedlove enters and slaps her and in a voice thin with anger says, "Crazy fool . . . my floor, mess . . . look what you . . . work . . . get on out . . . now that . . . crazy . . . my floor, my floor . . . my floor. Her words were hotter and darker than the smoking berries, and we backed away in dread."(1970:109)

When Pecola walks to the grocery store to buy candy, Mr. Yacobowski the shopkeeper cannot bear Pecola's presence and he cannot look at her, "How can a fifty-two-year-old white immigrant storekeeper... see a little black girl?" (1970:36) .This shows the influence of the white-beauty. Claudia, the 11 year old girl, narrator of the story apprehends white beauty as horrible. She doesn't like the admiration of Frieda and Pecola towards Shirley Temple; an icon of white beauty. Another evidence for racism in The Bluest eye is Young Junior's wicked deed towards Pecola. Geraldine who is also a Black (light skinned) does not allow her son Junior to play with other black children which made him dislike his own race. Once Young Junior observed pecola taking shortcut through play ground. He had seen her many a time standing alone at recess. Nobody ever played with her because she is very black and ugly. One day Young Junior talks to her so gently and invites her to his home. He says that he has something to show her at home. Believing him Pecola follows him. He opens the door for her and fosters her to get in. She is scared but still goes in, because she finds a big red-and-gold coloured Bible on the dining-room table and a colour picture of Jesus Christ on a wall. Hence she did not anticipate any disaster to her. But Young Junior discloses his original wicked character. He pulls her into another room and throws a big black cat right on her face. He guffaws cruelly runs around the room and says "You can't get out. You're my prisoner," (1970:89) When his mother Geraldine sees the girl trapped in her house, insults her emotionally. She says, ""Shut up!" Hair uncombed, dresses falling apart, shoes untied and caked with dirt. The end of the world lay in their eyes, and the beginning, and all the waste in between. They were everywhere. They slept six in a bed, all their pee mixing together in the night as they wet their beds each in his own candy-and-potato-chip dream. "Get out," she said, her voice

quiet. "You nasty little black bitch. Get out of my house."(1970:90)

Cholly, the father of Pecola has also been a victim of racism and emotional abuse since his childhood; it makes him person who cannot show love or express his feelings. He suffers from racism when he is caught having sex with his friend Darlene. Two white men catch him in the act and scream, "Get on wind it, nigger. . . . An' make it good, nigger, make it good" (1970: 148). Toni Morrison illuminates on the sufferings of black females in a white society in The Bluest Eye. This novel "...shows racism's damaging effects on the black community at large and on black families" (Kubitschek, 27). In The Bluest Eye, Pecola Breedlove realizes the supremacy of white society and longs to have the features of white females. She prays to God to give the bluest eye in the world. This word itself reveals the eagerness to have even more finer features than white women.

#### RELIGION

Religion is the faith in God who is Omnipotent. The comprehensive study of religion would disclose the implicit body of human activity cannot pay to overlook the implied significance of religion. Religion insists on the democratization of society, offering freedom, sameness and fraternity. Almost all of Morrison's novels are filled with religious themes. If we keenly examine her novels, we can find number of issues related to religion either Catholicism or Christianity. The use of The Holy Bible is seen very often in her novels. It can be a direct Biblical reference or scriptures from the Bible. Sermons and songs are also found in her novels. There is a strong basis for this in her life. In one of her interviews Morrison said that there are people who used to speak sermonic language in her family. People used to quote Bible, they have Biblical phrases in regular conversation or they had lyrics or songs. Morrison's mother herself was a singer. So there was nothing so strange about religion to Morrison.

In the very beginning of the novel the author writes: "Quiet as it's kept, there were no marigolds in the fall of 1941. We thought, at the time, that it was because Pecola was having her



father's baby that the marigolds did not grow."(1970:5)It is obvious in the above quoted lines that there is something that is against God's will has been done. That is the reason why the land is cursed. Marigolds did not blossom, "Not even the gardens fronting the lake showed marigolds that year." (1970:5). This means, marigolds did not blossom even though there is water. It reminds us of God's judgement in Genesis chapter: 3:17, 18(Old Testament) God has cursed the land for the sin committed by Adam and Eve.

Characters in this novel are born Christians. Some are very loyal to the Lord but some are very far away from the Lord both in their thoughts and deeds. For name sake they have Bible in their houses. They hang the picture of Christ on their walls (Geraldine). When Pecola is teased by Young Junior, she saw the picture of Jesus and felt that Jesus looking down at her with sad and unsurprised eyes, his long brown hair parted in the middle, the gay paper flowers twisted around his face. (1970: 93). These folks know in and out of the Bible. After Aunt Jimmy's death, all the ladies have cleaned the house, aired out everything. They stitched together a white wedding dress for Aunt Jimmy, a maiden lady, to wear because they believed that she would meet Jesus (1970:140). People who came to see Aunt Jimmy's funeral say the Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away. This is symbol of unbreakable faith that job has in the Bible, "20Then Job arose and tore his robe and shaved his head, and he fell to the ground and worshiped. 21He said, "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked I shall return there. The LORD gave and the LORD has taken away. Blessed be the name of the LORD."22 (Old Testament Job: 1:21)

The characters in the novel are projected as Christians, god-fearing and faithful. They seek god for help. They use the scriptures to correct their conduct. The narrator says "Bible says watch as well as pray" (Morrison Pg 25) . In Claudia's opinion folks don't care for their children. They don't even bother whether their child has had a loaf of bread or not? Mr Cholly Breedlove has been released from the jail. But he did not bother his daughter. Claudia's family takes care of Pecola. Claudia feels ". . . Bible says

feed the hungry. That's fine. That's all right."(Morrison Pg.27). All the Characters in the novel know that they should follow scriptures, but some characters in this novel (Soap, head of the Church) live as Christians for name sake.

Soap, head of the Church, a self-proclaimed Anglophile, (a term applied to someone who has an enormous admiration for and devotion to things Anglo-British) is a damaged character. He is the storehouse of all the sickness of internalized racism. He comes into the narrative only at the end of the novel, where Morrison attempts to give his full history in too short a space before continuing the narrative about Pecola. He is `` disgraceful African-American character in the novel and a child molester who believes he is better than God. Having dallied with the priesthood in the Anglican Church, he abandoned it to become a caseworker. He became a "Reader, Adviser, and Interpreter of Dreams." It was a profession that suited him well. (1970:165)

He was called by the townspeople Soap head Church. No one knew where the "Church" part came from—perhaps somebody's recollection of his days as a guest preacher—those reverends who had been called but who had no flock or coop, and were constantly visiting other churches, sitting on the altar with the host preacher. But everybody knew what "Soap head" meant—the tight, curly hair that took on and held a sheen and wave when pomaded with soap lather. A sort of primitive process. (1970:167). Soap head Church is the deceitful spiritualist; He is wise enough in his own mad way, though, to recognize the pathos of Pecola's situation. Morrison uses Soap head Church's letter to explore how some of these forces cannot find redemption, even in the presence of the divine. He questions God for not giving blue eyes to Pecola and creating her so ugly.

He is blaming God for all his sins. The letter, itself, is far from clear. In a traditional letter to the divine, one would conventionally express some type of fundamental regret and remorse. The hope would be one would lose one's ego in the face of the divine. But if we observe Soap head's letter, he showed his ego by blaming God as responsible for his sins. He even feels that God did not take care of Pecola. He



created her very ugly and he left her. Tell me, Lord, how could you leave lass so long so lone that she could find her way to me? How could you? I weep for you, Lord (1970:180).

The lack of coherence in the letter and lack of admission for wrong in the letter is seen not only in the case of Soap head's letter but in Morrison's way of inverting this traditional understanding. Soap head does not admit his mistakes. The letter serves as a way to show how Soap head Church embodies hypocrisy and a lack of authentic embrace of individual responsibility. Moments in the letter such as comparing himself to God for being able to grant Pecola's wish. He enquires God, how He could be so forgetful in the case of Pecola for not granting her Blue eyes. "You have to understand that, Lord. You said, "Suffer little children to come unto me, and harm them not. Did you forget? Did you forget about the children? Yes. You forgot. (1970:181). Soap head thinks that he can "work miracles". He believes that he has received power from God. He even made the people believe that he has God's power within him. "I told people I knew all about you. That I had received Your Powers. It was not a complete lie; but it was a complete lie. (1970:179).When he has used his knowledge for Pecola's wish he feels so proud of him and says, "I, I have caused a miracle. I gave her the eyes. I gave her the blue, blue, two blue eyes. Cobalt blue. A streak of it right out of your own blue heaven. No one else will see her blue eyes. But she will. And she will live happily ever after. I, I have found it meet and right so to do Now you are jealous. You are jealous of me. You see? I, too, have created" (1970: 182)

Finally the purpose of Soap head Church's letter is to reflect how the order of things does not eradicate evil and that some of its forms exist. While there is sadness, pain and suffering in the world, evil exists. When the dog is found dead, Soap head Church is asleep, as if nothing is wrong. The letter to God highlights the condition of being in which evil exists and a lack of self- reformation is a part of it.

Mr. Henry is the most awful character in the novel. His full name is Henry Washington. He is not part of the MacTeer family, but simply boards in their

house. Mr. Henry spends much of the book endearing him to both Claudia and Frieda. One day, Henry gives the girls money to buy ice cream and sends them on their way. When Claudia and Frieda return, they find Mr. Henry with two women of questionable reputation (Maginot Line and China). Even though the two women are widely known as prostitutes, Mr. Henry convinces Claudia and Frieda that they are part of a Bible Study group together. Yet, he still reminds them not to tell their mother about him. "Oh." He laughed the grown-up getting-ready-to-lie laugh. A heh-heh we knew well. "Those were some members of my Bible class. We read the scriptures together, and so they came today to read with me." "Bed' not mentions it to your mother. They don't take to so much Bible study and don't like me having visitors, even if they are good Christians."(1970:78-79)

Mr. Henry once misbehaves with Frieda, the sister of Claudia. When Frieda informs about this to her parents, they bashess him badly and finally throws him out of the house. When he was beaten he sings a song, "He got up and started singing 'Nearer My God to Thee.' This shows how malice he is and he uses God's name for his evil doings. This is very much against the Lords Commandment.<sup>7</sup> "You shall not misuse the name of the LORD your God, for the LORD will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses his name. Exodus: 20:7 (Old Testament). In The Bluest Eye there are people who are faithful and are called true Christians in the society. But there are people who seem to be faithful and pious outwardly like decorated tombs which stink. Through this Morrison attempts to project stark realities she has witnessed in Afro- American community.

The Bluest Eye is Toni Morrison's first novel for its vivid sketch of the fear and loneliness at the heart of a child's yearning, and the tragedy of its fulfilment, domination of white race and hypocrisy of people in and out of the community. This novel remains one of Tony Morrison's most powerful, unforgettable novels- and a significant work of American fiction especially remarkable for its projection of racial prejudices and biblical illusions.



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