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Treatment of Violence: A Study of Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* and *Beloved*

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Treatment of Violence: A Study of Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* and *Beloved*

A

Dissertation

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of the Requirements for the
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DECLARATION

This is to certify that the material embodied in the present work, “**Treatment of Violence : A Study of Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye and Beloved*,**” is based on my original research work. It has not been submitted in part or full, for any other degree or diploma of any other university.

My indebtedness to other works has been duly acknowledged in relevant places.

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(Shubhanku)

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Introduction

Toni Morrison is one of the well-known Afro-American female writers. Along with the prestigious Pulitzer Prize, she also received Nobel Prize for literature in 1993. Her novels have received wide recognition not only from the common reader but from the critics and reviewers as well. A vast range of critical acumen has been spent on her fiction. Her novels have been subjected to multiple readings. In fact, there is no dearth of critical material on Toni Morrison. However, there are areas such as treatment of violence which, as it seems, call for a more thorough and incisive examination than has been done so far.

The Bluest Eye, her first novel, for example, has been read variously by different critics. Several trends immediately become perceptible as one reads the existing critical material. For example, Wilfred D. Samuels and Clenora Hudson Weems¹ in their essay, "The Damaging Look: The Search for Authentic Existence in *The Bluest Eye*," argue about the authentic existence. Their main point is that people can only live authentically, if they define themselves as they are. The paper also examines the cause of Pecola's tragedy with Sartrean perspective in mind. Their conclusion is that though the external forces are responsible in determining character, it is the individual who is largely responsible for his or her authentic or inauthentic existence.

Jennifer Lee Jordan Heinert² introduces another trend in the essay “Novel of ‘Education’: Bildungsroman and *The Bluest Eye*”. Here, the writer places the novel in the tradition of Bildungsroman writings with the conclusion that *The Bluest Eye* does not qualify for the claim of Bildungsroman novel, in fact, it is an anti-Bildungsroman writing. Here, the narratives of the various characters end not with fulfilment or self-actualisation as it happens in Bildungsroman writings. Here, the narratives of various characters such as Cholly, Soap Head Church, Geraldine and Pauline are interrupted by racism which denies any growth in them. Since all the major characters come from the marginalised stratum, so they are excluded from the conventions which define the traditional Bildungsroman writings. Even the narratives of Pecola and Claudia also end with madness and rejection.

In the essay, “Invisible Name and Complex Authority in *The Bluest Eye*: Morrison’s Covert Letter to Ralph Ellison,” John N. Duvall³ introduces yet another perspective or approach in his study of the novel. The writer argues that the Letter written by Soap Head Church to God can be read as Morrison’s Covert Letter to Ralph Ellison. Here, the links are first established between Morrison and Claudia and then Claudia is further equated with Soap Head Church. The main focus of the author is to prove that Cholly’s rape of his daughter is feminist revision of Jim Trueblood’s accidental rape of his own daughter in *Invisible Man*. The focus of the writer is to highlight that Morrison has done something which was left out by Ellison. Here, she listens and records the voice of silent victim. The essay also focuses on the issue of authorial identity and authentic existence.

Morrison's outlook is deemed as immature in the essay, "*The Bluest Eye: The Need for Racial Approbation*" by Doreatha Drummond Mbalia. Here, the central point of argument is that in early stage of her career Morrison considered "racism"⁴ as chief enemy of the Africans. But, this does not mean that she neglects the issue of class. However, her focus is on the "skin colour" (p.31), instead of "capitalism" (p.31). The primary focus of racism instead of classism is "dialectically related to inorganic structure" (p. 33), of the novel. Morrison has used various "artificial props" (p. 33), here to develop her theme, a fault which she overcame in her later writings.

Then, there are reviews which highlight the constructional and stylistic merits and demerits. For example, Haskel Frankel in "*The Bluest Eye*" argues that Morrison is "lost in her construction"⁵ but there are some entertaining and captivating scenes as well. In fact, the review treats merits and demerits "flaws and virtues"(p.4.) alike. Similarly, L.E. Sissman in the review of the novel calls it as "dossier"⁶ of various characters. Then, the review also points out how a few black characters lived in fantasies by imitating the white. The occasional lapses made by Morrison during narration, such as use of "false and bombastic line" (p.5) and playing with the orders of the name as, "the real name of Soaphead Church is given as both Elihue Micah Whitcomb and Micah Elihue Whitcomb" (p.5).

Though, a few Indian critics like Hari Prassna in his essay, "Racial Discourse in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*," has studied the novel from the standpoint of racial oppression, his focus is on psychological damage wrought upon the negroes by the dominant white standards. But, he also points out how

the black themselves are also responsible for their own suffering. Pecola is maltreated by her community as well as by her own parents. He concludes with the words that “Pecolas”⁷ of this world can survive only if the black community starts loving its own self.

In short, there is no scarcity of critical material on *The Bluest Eye*. But, amidst a vast range of interpretations what is conspicuous by its absence is the lack of an in depth study of the theme of violence in the novel. Critics have certainly touched upon this aspect, but in a rather passing manner. Their focus is largely on the psychological violence directed on the black by the dominant culture. Moreover, the novel has been read from feminist, Marxist, psychoanalytical standpoints. Now, all these readings surely touch the concept of violence, but in a limited way. Gender studies focus on the violence perpetrated on women. Marxist studies focus their attention on the class conflict. The psychoanalytical studies are devoted to the internal damage done by racial stereotypes. In other words, they do not deal with the theme of violence in totality with its various nuances and consequences in depth. The present study is an attempt to fill some of the gaps perceptible in the existing critical studies.

Like *The Bluest Eye*, *Beloved* is also subjected to multiple readings. Here also, various trends can easily be identified. For example, there are critics like Marilyn Sanders Mobley⁸ who in her essay, “A Different Remembering: Memory, History and Meaning in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*,” and Bernard W. Bell⁹ who in his essay, “*Beloved*: A Womanist Neo-Slave Narrative; or Multivocal Remembrances of Things Past,” have argued that *Beloved* is the

extension of the slave narratives. The only difference being that the focus of Toni Morrison is on the psychological disintegration along with physical devastation wrought upon the slaves. In her essay, Mobley argues that the earlier narratives were linear and were replete with eye-witness accounts of external incidents of torture and agony. On the other hand, *Beloved* is non-linear in narration and also probes in the psyche of the ex-slaves. She also performs an inter-textual study of *Beloved* and the *Black Book* and The slaves' narratives by Douglass and Jacobs. Bell argues that if earlier narratives were univocal in voice, then *Beloved* is multivocal in voice. If earlier narratives were narrated from men's perspective, then *Beloved* presents a womanist perspective, with special concentration on the inner life of a slave woman.

Then, there are the critics like Wilfred D. Samuels and Clenora Hudson-Weems¹⁰, who, in their essay, "Ripping the Veil': Meaning through Rememory in *Beloved*" have touched on another dimension, that is the search for wholeness. Their line of argument is based upon Sethe's and Paul D's quest for wholeness and fulfilment which both of them achieve at the end. The writers have also touched on the aspects of myth, colours and numbers in the novel. They also talk about how this novel is also an improvement upon the slave narratives.

A few scholars like Susan Bowers¹¹ along with Josef Pesch¹² have made an apocalyptic and Post-apocalyptic reading of the novel. Bowers in her essay, "*Beloved* and the New Apocalypse," has argued that *Beloved* can be situated in apocalyptic tradition, not of American novel, but of Afro-American novel. Her major point is that apocalyptic novel has forward looking tendencies, but

Beloved is backward looking, though it contains the other features such as: four horsemen and an anti Christ figure which are the hallmark of apocalyptic literature. Josef Pesch in his essay, “*Beloved: Toni Morrison’s Post-Apocalyptic Novel*,” goes one step forward. He locates *Beloved* in post-apocalyptic tradition with the view that the novel can be categorised in post-apocalyptic tradition since the major apocalypses had already transpired 18 years before when 124 was approached by four horsemen, including the school teacher, a nephew, a slave catcher and a sheriff.

Yet another group of critics like Ashraf H.A. Rushdy¹³ in his essay, “*Daughters Signifying History: the example of Toni Morrison’s Beloved*,” and Linda Krumbolz in the essay, “*The Ghosts of Slavery: Historical Recovery in Toni Morrison’s Beloved*,” have argued how Toni Morrison tries to revive the past which is an essential part of the present. Rushdy focuses chiefly on the daughters; Beloved and Denver, to show how they represent two aspects of history: oppression and joy, forgetfulness and remembering, unforgiving and loving. His main aim is to prove that Toni Morrison wanted to give an artistic and proper burial to those who were unburied, or at least unceremoniously buried. Morrison, according to him, wanted to remember so that forgetting may become possible. He also stresses that this novel revives the African tradition of storytelling in which memory and articulation are pivotal for the sake of self-understanding and self-claiming. On the other hand, Lind Krumbolz directs her attention upon equating “personal trauma”¹⁴ with “national trauma” (p.80). Her point of consideration is also that past is inevitable, its beating back is almost impossible. The repression of personal trauma is as much debilitating as the

suppression of the national suffering. History can rescue the individual from present pain, agony, suffering and torture.

There are also certain critics who focus their studies on the stylistic and linguistic merits of the novel. For example, Roger Sale¹⁵ in his article, “Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*,” extols the verbal texture of the novel. For him, Morrison has the capacity to trap her readers in her linguistic maze in such a way that unless the readers reread the text, meaning is vague. Similarly, Harold Bloom in his “Introduction” to *Viva Bloom’s Notes: Toni Morrison’s Beloved* also writes that *Beloved* can be properly understood, if placed in the tradition of writers like Faulkner, Virginia Woolf and Cormac McCarthy because Morrison shares affinities with these writers. Ralph Ellison, Alice Walker and Toni Cade Bambara do not contribute much in understanding Morrison as writer. Zora Neale Hurston also differs from Morrison in her mode and vision. He further argues that *Sula* and *Song of Solomon* are Morrison’s masterpieces. On the other hand, *Beloved* and *Jazz* are the novels in which political propaganda gets better of arts. For him, *Beloved* is problematized by Morrison’s prophetic and political vision. He also highlights that the task of categorising *Beloved* in one category is difficult since his own acquaintances are divided. For some, the novel is a “masterwork”¹⁶ and for others it is “supermarket literature” (p.8).

The theme of motherhood is brought home by scholars such as: Elizabeth Fox Genovese¹⁷ and Stephanie A. Demetrakopoulos¹⁸. Fox in her essay, “Unspeakable things unspoken: Ghosts and Memory in *Beloved*,” grounds her argument on the point that the slavery as an institution imperilled both the sexuality and the motherhood. A mother was even denied the right to

nurture her own offspring. Relating her study of the *Beloved* to Jacob's *Incident in the Life of a Slave Girl*, she points out that *Beloved* is more explicit in its exposition of the havocs which slavery wreaked upon women. In Jacob's case reviving the past *in toto* was risky, but for Morrison it is a necessity. Whereas Stephanie in her essay, "Maternal bonds as Devourers of Women's Individuation in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*," points out that the mothering can also be hazardous for the growth of an individual. Her chief concern is to prove that Sethe in mothering her children forgets or annihilates her own sense of self. However, Pamela E. Barnett¹⁹ in her essay, "Figurations of Rape and the Supernatural in *Beloved*," drives readers' attention towards the issue of violence. Though her study circumscribes the broad issue of violence unto sexual harassment still her canvas is broadened by her discussion not only of the whites perpetrating sexual violence on the black, but also by her highlighting the way in which the black subjugate the members of their own community by dragging them in an incestuous and homosexual relationship. She also mentions the ramifications of the sexual violence.

What all these critics have done is that either they have neglected the theme of violence completely or if they have touched it, they have not dealt with it in its wide implications. Most of the critics have either spoken about physical violence or sexual violence perpetrated on the black by the white. A few of them have also taken into account the sexual harassment directed against the black by the black or physical violence heaped on the Africans by Africans. At a few places, the emotional violence inflicted on the black by the white has also been given its due. But still, there are aspects which have been ignored by the

critics either completely or in parts, such as verbal violence and the consequences of the phenomena of violence.

Before a detailed discussion of Morrison's novels: *The Bluest Eye* and *Beloved* is undertaken, it will be pertinent to understand the concept violence. In the words of Neelam Rathee, "The world today is undergoing a revolutionary transformation. The present millennium began with dangerous conflicts raging in various parts of the globe. We are confronted with problems not only related to global security but also human security."²⁰

Aditi Sharma also maintains, "Every now and then we read new pieces about riots across the world, nations having wars, several attacks across the nations, whether it is in the form of an attack on Indian parliament or an attack on World Trade Centre in U.S. . No country in this world ranging from the strongest to the weakest is left untouched from the ghastly impact of violence."²¹

It is a fact, not of today but of all times, not of India but of the whole world, that violence has been the chief point of discussion not only among political and religious representatives but among literary artists as well. In fact, violence is as ubiquitous as love and other emotions are.

Wikipedia, the free encyclopaedia, defines it as, "violence is a use of physical force to cause injury, damage or death. The word violence covers a broad spectrum. It can vary from a physical altercation between two being to war and genocide where million may die as a result."²²

Rajbir Singh explains violence as an escalated form of conflict.

According to him: "Conflict may be defined as escalated natural competition

between two or more parties about scarce resources, power and prestige, where as violence could be defined as form of severely escalated conflict. It occurs when two opposing parties have interest or goals that appear to be incompatible which can occur anytime.”²³

Anderson and Bushman have their own concept of violence. They differentiate it from aggression. For them, aggression is, “Behaviour intended to produce deliberate harm to another and violence having extreme harm as its intent. Violence can be defined as the physical attack on one person or group by another in the context of aggressive behaviour.”²⁴

Clements observes in this context, “Violent processes flow from the arbitrary exercise of coercive power, threat and force, insecurity (fear and anxiety), marginalization (control, isolation and enmity) and violence.”²⁵

Guneeta Chadha describes violence in relation to art. She writes: “If art is the creative force of the mind, violence is the destructive force of the mind.”²⁶

According to Ilfeld: “ violence as an act of intense, willful, physical harm committed by an individual or a group against himself or another individual or group.”²⁷

Megargee defines violence as: “ overtly threatened or overtly accomplished application of force which results in the injury or destruction of persons or property or reputation, or the illegal appropriation of property .”²⁸

Feshbach explains violence as: “the more severe forms of physical aggression.”²⁹

As Megargee rightly points out, “No definition of violence has ever proved completely successful. Although everyone ‘knows what violence is’ no

one has ever been able to define it adequately so that every possible instance of violent behavior is included within the definition while all the excluded behavior is clearly non-violent.”³⁰

However much wider and inclusive definition of the concept violence is provided by the World Health Organization, according to which violence is explained as, “The intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or against a group or community that either result in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment or deprivation.”³¹

What all these definitions tend to highlight is that the violence is distorted human behaviour. It is a response or retaliation to a person, a group or a situation. It is a desire to hurt, injure, harm or kill anyone. In other words, if any word, any gesture, any action is loaded with the intention of hurting or injuring the recipient, it is deemed as violent. It is misuse of power, a misappropriation of force, it is misapplication of strength in a negative way. It reveals malicious instincts of men. It establishes an affinity between man and animal. It exposes primitive and barbaric instincts of a human being. It is an assertion of power and desire to dominate in a brutal way since violence occurs when either of the two groups or persons refuses to comply with the ideas of the other.

Broadly speaking, there are many forms of violence, but most prominent and widely accepted are: physical, sexual, verbal and psychological. It is very difficult to draw lines between these forms. All of them tend to overlap and intersect each other. For example, physical violence can be considered as a

substitute for sexual violence. Similarly, sexual violence cannot take place without hurting the physical self. Then physical, sexual and verbal violence always affect the psyche in one way or the other. Yet, an effort can be made to distinguish them from one another.

Physical violence can be described as the use of power to hurt or damage someone's body, partially or *in toto*, like hitting someone with a stick, killing with a gun or beating with hands etc. Sexual violence is the use of one's force or position to gain sexual advantage or pleasure from unwilling or unconsenting others, like rape, forced prostitution or fellation and many more. Similarly, verbal violence is the use of language in sarcastic, satiric or abusive way that hurts the listener, for example, to abuse or to criticise someone. Psychological violence can be described as a way of hurting someone's emotions, feelings and sense of worth. It also refers to a state of fear of being victimized or hurt by others, for example, the fear for actual separation from one another by force, to disrespect or disobey someone or hoax or cheat someone etc.

Literature, as a mirror of human actions and emotions, has always reflected the wide range of human experiences, including violence along with love and other emotions. Somdatta Mandal makes a germane observation when he writes, "Apart from agreeing with W.B. Yeats that literature is created out of the quarrels with ourselves, we believe that literature is also created in times of upheaval when one is assaulted physically, emotionally and psychologically from all quarters."³²

Gulshan Rai Kataria also speaks the same when he comments: "literary activity always follows a period of crisis. Well that's what Matthew Arnold

said, that the political upheavals and cataclysmic events have always sent human imagination into a spin. Turbulence and catastrophes, personal or social, relating to the country or the community, make man look both within and around him at what man has made of man and his civilization.”³³

He further argues, “The epics of the *Ramayana*, the *Mahabharata*, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* of the ancient times have had wars and rampant violence as the stomach of their gripping narratives or the crux of their themes. The civil war in the U.S. , The French Revolution, the two world wars, the partition of the Indian sub-continent have been such powerful events as to shake the lives of many, shatter families and subvert faith in the goodness of man.”³⁴

A vast range of books have been written with the theme of violence as their background. The writers like Hemingway, Heller, Khushwant Singh, Richard Wright, Baldwin, Alice Walker and Toni Morrison have produced literature with violence as a theme.

In the fiction of Toni Morrison, one comes across variety of themes. In fact, she has a vast knowledge of human nature. Her writings present not only love in various forms, such as love between mother and children, husband and wife, between two friends, grandparents and grandchildren and love among neighbours, but violence in its various kinds as well, such as racial violence, gender violence, class violence, violence against elders and child abuse. Now, all these forms of violence are manifested vividly in her novels, *Beloved* and *The Bluest Eye*.

As far as physical violence is concerned, there are numerous examples, such as, Sethe’s act of infanticide. Actually, Sethe, along with her mother-in-

law and four children, was staying in 124. One day, she saw the school teacher approaching the yard of 124 with a Sheriff, a nephew and a slave catcher. Sethe knew very well that the ex-master would take her and her children with him and they would be condemned to live the life of slavery once more. The idea of going back agitated her. She had had the first-hand experience of being a slave on a plantation owned by the white master. She immediately became active, picked a handsaw and beheaded one of her daughters. She planned to do it with each of her children, but she was stopped before she could do it.

Similarly, in *The Bluest Eye*, there are many scenes where the characters hurt each other physically. For example, there is a scene describing the physical battle between Mr. and Mrs. Breedlove. On a morning, Mr. Breedlove was provoked by his wife. He pounced at her at once in response. There was exchange of blows betwixt them. At last, Mrs. Breedlove got a chance of attacking her husband with a stove lid top that hurled Cholly into the state of unconsciousness.

Likewise, sexual violence is also present in Morrison's novels in abundance. For instance, in *Beloved*, Ella, an ex-slave, was kept as prisoner in a room for several days and was sexually exploited by the father and the son. As a result, she also gave birth to a child whom she refused to nurture. Similarly, in *The Bluest Eye*, Henry, a new paying guest in MacTeer's house, misbehaved with Frieda. When Frieda was all alone in the house, Mr. Henry came to her, went down on his knees, touched her arms and then pinched her tiny breast.

No less perceptible is the verbal violence in Morrison's fiction. For instance, in *The Bluest Eye*, young boy sarcastically asked a question to Pecola

that she was not able to answer. In fact, she feels so bad and hurt that she could not utter a word. They teasingly say, “Black e mo. Black e mo. Yadaddrleepshelked.”³⁵

Similarly, in *Beloved*, Nelson Lord asked a question to Denver that almost marred her spirits and put an end to her visits outside 124. He inquired sarcastically whether her mother went to jail and was she along with her.

Apart from physical, sexual, verbal violence, Morrison also depicts psychological violence in her narrative world. For example, in *The Bluest Eye*, Pecola is injured psychologically by almost everyone she comes across. Her mother does not trust her, her father rapes her, her brother does not take her with him, her classmates make fun of her, a shopkeeper does not notice her, her best friends, Claudia and Frieda, also start avoiding her. One can easily imagine the plight of this poor girl who has no one in this entire world to play with except an imaginary friend. Likewise, in *Beloved*, Paul D’ hurts Sethe’s emotions. First, he comes back in her life, shares his grief with her and listens to her as well, chases the baby ghost out of 124, takes her and her daughter to a carnival and even asks her to be pregnant for him. When everything seems to be moving in the right direction, he jilts her comparing her with an animal with the words that she had two legs not four.

After understanding what violence is and what are its various kinds, it is essential to understand the forces that might have compelled Morrison to write on such a theme in such details and depths. What are the shaping influences that make her select such a theme? There appear to be three major factors

responsible for her choice of this subject- the family she was born in, the books she read and the race she belonged to.

As Carmen Gillispie points out, “Toni Morrison’s family had a profound influence on her development as a writer. Morrison spent a great deal of time with her extended family, particularly with her maternal grandparents.”³⁶

In fact, Morrison’s grandparents, paternal as well as maternal, left the South and came to stay in the North. Morrison’s maternal grandfather was deceived by the white people, which prompted him to take his family out of the Southern states which were more hostile towards the black. Ron David observes in this connection: “Her mother Ramah Willis Wofford, came from Alabama, but after those white Southern gentlemen cheated Ramah’s father out of his property- all 88 acres- Mr. John Solomon Willis decided he’d had enough of the South, thank you, and walked his family North through Kentucky and on up in to Ohio.”³⁷

Not only her mother came from Alabama but her father George Wofford also came from Georgia. Now, both Alabama and Georgia were slave states, quite famous for lynching and other types of tortures inflicted on the slaves, such as the use of iron collars, iron bits and chain gangs. In fact, Morrison’s father witnessed three lynchings in Georgia before he came to settle in the North. Carmen Gillespie opines in this connection: “The family’s move may also have been motivated by three lynchings of African-American men that occurred in the town. Witnessing these injustices may have left a lifelong impression on George Wofford.”³⁸

Now, all these incidents might have influenced Morrison's temperament. Either on dinner table or during certain other family gatherings, Morrison's grandparents and her father certainly might have apprised her about all acts of cruelty and violence. After listening to such tales, Morrison certainly might have realised that life for her parents, more particularly her father and grandparents, was not an easy one. They had to swallow bitter pills for their survival. That's why, incidents like lynching and many more in which the white direct miseries on the black, become the stuff of her fiction, more particularly in *Beloved*.

Apart from the tales which she might have listened, she also had first-hand experience of the racial violence. Ron David³⁹ narrates an incident which occurred when Morrison was a child and which reveals the racial prejudice resulting in physical violence. He records that one day Morrison's father threw a white man down from stairs. Actually, he suspected that the white man was guilty of chasing Chloe and her elder sister. So, he first threw that man and asked questions afterwards. Being a participant in this entire drama, Toni Morrison, surely, might have learnt a lot. She, surely, might have noticed that no race was ready to receive ignominy at any cost.

Yet another incident of the racial violence, in which Morrison was herself a sufferer, occurred when she was a child. Morrison also had to face the law of racial segregation. Lisa R. Rhodes explains the entire incidents as: "While segregation laws were not as prevalent in the North, African-American still faced discrimination in housing, employment, and the use of public facilities. For example, Chloe, her siblings, and other blacks in Lorain, were not

allowed to swim in Lake Erie during the summer, while whites enjoyed the lake whenever they wanted to.”⁴⁰

Now, this incident, certainly may have forced Morrison to think as to what was wrong with her. Was she not human? Why was she denied certain privileges while others enjoyed them frequently? All these questions find concrete expression in *The Bluest Eye* where the central character, Pecola, faces the same problem of denial and invisibility.

Apart from the biographical influences, Morrison was, most probably, influenced by the books which she read. Lisa R. Rhodes⁴¹ explains that Morrison read the writers like Dostoyevsky, the author of *Crime and Punishment* and Tolstoy, the author of *War and Peace*. Apart from these, Morrison read Gustavo Flaubert, the author of *Madame Bovary* and Jane Austen, the author of *Pride and Prejudice*. All these books deal with violence in one form or the other. For example, *Crime and Punishment* is the story of murders and forced prostitution. Similarly, *War and Peace* as the title itself suggests, is the tale of duels and injuries received in war. Likewise, *Madame Bovary* is the painful narrative of a woman named Emma who is exploited by her lovers. *Pride and Prejudice* does not deal with violence in its physical or sexual forms. Still, one can agree that violence is also present there in a different way. Almost all the female characters live under a constant pressure exerted on them by patriarchy. They are endlessly traumatized by the idea of getting married soon. In other words, they suffer the pangs of anxiety till they are married. Now, the reading of the theme of violence in these various forms

certainly might have left a deep impression on Morrison's psyche. That's why, perhaps, she deals with this theme in depth.

Another influence on Morrison was her race. Every person belongs to a particular race. Every race has particular experiences which are peculiar to that particular race. These experiences become part of collective memory and sink deep into the unconscious of the members of that race. These experiences are passed on by one generation to another, both vocally and in written form. These experiences differentiate one race from the other.

Morrison belongs to Afro-American or the black race. The black in America have their own history. Since their arrival in America, they have witnessed violence in various forms. They were captured by force from the African coasts. Then, the condition, they faced on the slave ships, were also very excruciating. They were chained and beaten like animals. After arriving in America, they were sold to the highest bidders and were taken to the plantations where they worked from dawn to dusk.

Morrison, being a member of such a race, might have heard these horrific tales from her ancestors. Moreover, she also edited *The Black Book*, an account of the life as it was lived by the black for the last 300 years. These experiences surely must have inspired Morrison to depict the theme of violence in her fiction. *Beloved*, her fifth novel, is a graphical account of such an experience, peculiar to the black. Sumana Chakraborty aptly observes:

African American literature, or the literature produced by the black American descent differs from the Euro American literary tradition most significantly in

its thematic concerns. The peculiarities of the African American experience essentially contribute to a distinctive exploration of issues like identity and gender politics, effects of slavery and racism, and the celebration of the unique aspects of the African American cultural heritage in the works of these writers. However, along with these primary thematic concerns, an important subtext of nearly all the seminal African American literary texts has been the issue of violence because violence was the essential weapon that was used to forcibly create this unique American community.⁴²

To conclude, it can safely be asserted that the theme of violence is as important as the theme of love is in Morrison's novels. As has been mentioned earlier, Morrison did not have to excavate hard layers in order to find substance. The family, she was born in, the literature, she read and the race, she came from provided her ample content for her writings. However, one should remain conscious about the fact that the presentation of the theme of violence does not reduce her novels to mere series of sensational events. She deals with this theme in such a way that it becomes an integral part of her art, as will be evident from the discussion in the following chapters.

As has been mentioned earlier, this dissertation is a modest attempt aimed at filling up the gaps which have been left by the critics in existing critical material. The study consists of four chapters. The first chapter is devoted to the analysis of the existing critical material on the novels: *Beloved* and *The Bluest Eye* along with the theoretical framework of the concept of violence, the shaping influences which propelled her to deal with such a theme have also been mentioned. Second and third chapters are devoted to a detailed analysis of

the theme of violence as depicted in the novels: *The Bluest Eye* and *Beloved* respectively. The last chapter is the summing up of the entire argument which will be followed by a detailed bibliography.

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Chapter-2

Treatment of Violence in *The Bluest Eye*

The Bluest Eye (1970) is Morrison's first novel. It announced her arrival in literary arena, though it did not receive a positive response at the hands of few critics. For some, it is an expression of undeveloped vision of the world. For others, its style is faulty. Whatever may be the views of the learned critics, the fact remains that the novel truthfully examines the life as it was actually lived by the Afro-Americans in the 1940s.

The first half of the twentieth century, which provides the novel its setting, was no less different from that of the nineteenth century when slaves were mercilessly beaten or exploited. Now, in the twentieth century, though constitution did not permit slave trade and slave beating, this does not mean that the life of negroes in the USA was not free from tortures and agonies. The white, the masters, still considered themselves as superiors and still continued the process of subjugating the black. The only difference betwixt the preceding century and the contemporary one was that the means of hurting the Africans became more subtle and more psychological. *The Bluest Eye* truthfully examines the entire process of subjugation and suppression of the black at the hands of the white. Apart from exposing the plight of the Negroes in the USA, the novel also sets out to explore the way in which some Afro-Americans exploited the members of their own race under the impact of racial hegemony.

The novel also unfolds how a few individuals direct their anger and frustration at others who are below them in status and power because they cannot raise their voice against their exploiters who are in any case superior to them.

As far as the white inflicting violence on the black is concerned, there are numerous instances of it in the novel. The white, who in the 1940s, were in majority and formed the dominant culture, exploited the Afro-Americans with their words and deeds. The black who were excluded from the main stream felt almost castrated at the cruelty of the masters. They could not do anything but comply with the wishes of the white. For example, when Cholly is enjoying with Darlene in an open field, he is apprehended by two white men who first direct the flash light on Cholly's back and ask him to continue the act with the words, "I said, get on wid it. An' make it good, nigger, make it good." ¹

This incident damages Cholly's psyche completely. It leaves a lifelong scar on his mind. It makes him realize that he is powerless in the society dominated by the white. According to Wilfred D. Samuels and Clenora Hudson Weems: "Cholly, too, is bruised in a visual confrontation that involves the negating glance of 'the Other'." ²

Similarly, Pauline, Cholly's wife, experiences the racial violence while working for a white mistress as a maid. Drunken Cholly arrives there to demand money. At this, the enraged mistress threatens to call police. Later, she tells Pauline to forsake her husband. She denies Pauline her eleven dollars which she owes to her. She is adamant in her demand that until Pauline leaves her husband, she will not receive the money. As a result, Pauline has to leave the

job, heartbroken. In this way, the white mistress inflicts economic injury also on the black lady, Pauline Breedlove.

This entire process of subjugation of the black by the white leaves the black psychologically crippled. This makes them think whether they exist in this world as human beings or not. They are constantly reminded of their marginality. In order to sustain their domination, the white, after the demise of slavery, propagated their own stereotypes concerning beauty. One who qualifies the test as prescribed by the masters is deemed beautiful, and one who fails is considered ugly. In this way, the white hurt or harm their black objects in a subtle psychological way. Their myth regarding beauty includes “blue eyes, blonde hair and white skin.”³

Some black characters in the novel are constantly haunted by their own ugliness. They crave to be beautiful. They long for acceptance and acknowledgement by the white, but they fail because they are not biologically white. For example, Pecola Breedlove, the central character of the novel, prays frequently to God every night without failure for the blue eyes.

She thinks that if she had blue eyes, things would have been different. She would have been taken along by Sammy, her brother, loved and recognized by her peers and her parents would not have quarreled before her. She is considered ugly by everyone she encounters. The boys on the playground tease her by calling her black. Her teachers do not glance at her and ask only when everyone is required to speak. She sits all alone on a double desk in the class. The shopkeeper, Yacobowski, does not notice her as if she does not exist at all. Geraldine looks down on her and expels her from her house. Even, her mother

thinks her to be an ugly child at her birth. Now, all these incidents tend to plant the seeds of inferiority in Pecola's heart. After receiving such a treatment, she might have felt as if she was an outcast or a pariah. She might certainly have thought that it was her colour which was responsible for such a neglect. It is not that she is ugly, but the fact is that she comes from a section of society that is perceived to be inferior. Had she come from the dominant section of the society, that is the white, things would have taken a different turn altogether. Literally, she is not ugly, but the prevailing stereotypes regarding the colour of skin, eyes and hair never let her imagine herself as beautiful.

When Pecola's father, Cholly Breedlove, sets his own house on fire, she is taken in by MacTeers. There she gulps three quarts of milk from Shirley Temple mug only to gaze at the image of pretty, beautiful Shirley Temple whose image is carved inside the mug. Similarly, she ingests Mary Jane candies in the hope of becoming beautiful. Morrison remarks in this context: "she eats the candy, and its sweetness is good. To eat the candy is somehow to eat the eyes, eat Mary Jane. Love Mary Jane. Be Mary Jane"(p.38).

Wilfred D. Samuels and Clenora Hudson Weems also comment: "Set in a small Midwestern town in Lorain, Ohio, during the Depression, *The Bluest Eye*, tells the story of Pecola Breedlove, who, hating her black self, yearns for blue eyes she believes will make her white, extinguish her position as pariah, and give her the love and security that are desperately missing from her life." ⁴

In order to get the blue eyes, Pecola goes to Soaphead Church and is ready to perform the rituals prescribed by him. Haskel Frankel aptly observes; "In this scene, in which a young black on the verge of madness seeks beauty and

happiness in a wish for white girls' eyes, the author makes her most telling statement on the tragic effect of race prejudice on children.”⁵

Not only Pecola, but the entire Breedlove family considers itself to be ugly. Morrison categorically writes: “you looked at them and wondered why they were so ugly; you looked closely and could not find the source. Then you realized that it came from conviction, their conviction. It was as though some mysterious all-knowing master had given each one a cloak of ugliness to wear, and they had each accepted it without question” (p. 28).

The characters have internalized this myth of ugliness in such a way that they start hating themselves. They imitate the ways of the white community. For example, Geraldine, a coloured woman, teaches her son about the differences between the coloured and the niggers. For her, the coloured are akin to the white. Similarly, Pauline, Pecola's mother, dresses and combs herself like the white Hollywood actresses whom she has seen in magazines. L.E. Sissman astutely verbalizes this as: “here again we see, as the overriding motif of this book, the desirability of whiteness, or, as the next-best thing, the imitation of whiteness; as a corollary, blackness is perceived as ugliness....”⁶

As the white harm the black, so do the black in return. They perpetrate violence on the white, though in lesser degree. As has been mentioned earlier, the Africans are excluded from the wider culture. They do not own power. Hence, their reaction or retaliation is not very often explicit and open. That's why, not many negroes are depicted in the novel as reacting violently. In fact, many of them accept their fate silently. But, there are a few characters like Claudia and Frieda who exhibit a spirit to revolt. For example, when Frieda and

Pecola are behind the bushes, and Rose Mary, a white girl shouts for Mrs. MacTeer, complaining against the girls. At this, Claudia gets annoyed and scratches Rose Mary's nose. Similarly, Claudia exhibits her spirit of questioning against the standards set by the white when she is given the white baby dolls as Christmas present. In order to see where lies the beauty of the white baby dolls, she dismembers them. Likewise, Frieda conveys to Claudia that when Rose Mary told her that her father would be taken to jail, she beat her hard. In this way, the black also return violence back to the white, though in lesser proportion.

Yet another instance where one notices racial violence is an attack made by three prostitutes on a Jew. Actually, upstairs on the store front where Pecola lived, there lived three black prostitutes named: Mary, China and Polland. Once, they got hold of a Jew, dragged him upstairs, pounced on him all three at once and looted whatever they found and threw that man out of the window.

Other than the racial violence, the novel also contains instances of intra-racial violence where the members of one community inflict tortures on the members of their own community. In the novel, *The Bluest Eye*, readers find the black directing violence on other blacks. It seems astonishing that in a society where the negroes are already oppressed by the dominant culture, instead of helping each other, the Africans are seen damaging and hurting their own brethren.

As has been mentioned earlier, the black were precluded from the main stratum. They had no say in politics, religion and economy. They were helpless or powerless before the white who emasculated or castrated them

metaphorically. The black could do nothing before the masters. This makes Cholly reflect after being destroyed by two white men that he could not react against them since they were white, powerful and armed, on the other hand, he was black, ugly and poor. Now, the Africans carry such frustration and helplessness to home where they see the members of their family who remind them of their own blackness and of their own exclusion, helplessness and frustration which sprout in them a feeling of self-abhorrence. It is this self-loathing that finds its way out in the form of physical, sexual, verbal and emotional aggression.

Nellie Mackay rightly argues: “the book examines the experiences of a young black girl as she copes with the ideal of beauty and the reality of violence within the black community. Within the novel Morrison demonstrates that even with the best intentions, people hurt each other when they are chained to circumstances of poverty and low social status: “violence” says Morrison, “is a distortion of what, perhaps, we want to do.” The pain in this book is the consequence of the distortion that comes from the inability to express love in a positive way.”⁷

The novel is rich in the examples of physical violence within the black community. For instance, Cholly Breedlove and Pauline Breedlove are shown as quarrelling in a horrible way. Cholly came home too drunk to fight. So, the battle was postponed for the next morning. Mrs. Breedlove, in the morning, demanded from Cholly to fetch her some coal. Cholly was not interested in helping his wife. As a result, Mrs. Breedlove emptied a pot of cold water on her husband. Cholly stood at once and was on his wife in no time. Both of them fell

on the ground. Cholly put his leg on her breast. He also slapped her many a time on her face. She also, on her part, reciprocated in the best possible way. Very soon, she found an opportunity to slip away and gather a stove lid top which she hurled at Cholly in such a way that it almost knocked him down, but not before Cholly had received blows from his son, Sammy, as well.

Actually, Cholly has lived a life of deprivation and denials. At his birth, he was abandoned by his mother, his nurturer aunt, Jimmy, also died when he was very young, and then his father also disowned him. He has not seen a happy married life throughout his career. He has also lived an unrestrained life. His wife demands from him to be an indulging and a caring husband and father which he cannot be because he has not known anything like this in his life. Moreover, he is not very successful in his life. So, when he is provoked, all his frustration comes out in the form of violent actions.

Yet another instance of physical violence is seen when Pecola receives beating from her mother. Actually, Claudia and Frieda went to see Pecola at her mother's work place. There, Pauline invited both the girls inside the house and asked them to wait in the kitchen with Pecola till she returned with laundry. Pecola, by chance, tilted the pan full of boiled blue berries and the entire juice was spilled on the ground. Pecola's feet were scalded. Mrs. Breedlove, after noticing this, responded violently. She knocked Pecola down mercilessly and chased all three of them out. This is how Morrison describes the entire episode: "in one gallop she was on Pecola, and with the back of her hand knocked her to the floor. Pecola slid in the pie juice, one leg folding under her. Mrs. Breedlove

yanked her up by the arm, slapped her again, and in a voice thin with anger, abused Pecola directly and Frieda and me by implication” (p.84).

Actually, Pauline lived in a house which was full of chaos and disorder. Since her childhood, she had a predilection for arranging things in order. In the white’s household, she got an opportunity to perform this task. She could not do this at her own house because perhaps there she was reminded of her own ugliness. In the master’s house, she was referred as Polly, a nick name, she desired from her childhood. Moreover, they often say that Polly is the best servant, they have ever got. There she is in charge of the kitchen and does not leave till everything is arranged in order. Now, when this order is disrupted, she perhaps cannot tolerate this. Perhaps, she is worried about what the masters will think of her and there is danger of losing the job. That’s why, she transfers her entire love and affection onto the white girl and beats her own daughter severely.

Besides physical violence, the novel also contains instances of sexual violence in the black community in abundance. For example, Cholly rapes his own daughter. On a Saturday afternoon, Cholly returned home drunk and saw his daughter busy with the dishes. She was bending over the sink and with her toe was scratching her calf. When Cholly saw her, he was at once reminded of his wife’s gesture which was exactly the same when he first met her. At that point of time, Cholly was free, no mother, no father, no great aunt, no blue Jack and no one to answer to. Now, Cholly was again free. He was drunk, almost out of his senses. He was the man who no longer cared for his family, his house, his wife and his children. He was free to do anything then, he was free to do

anything now. Moreover, he also reflected on the present state of his daughter. He thought why she was so unhappy and he himself, so helpless. It was exactly the same experience that he had when he was caught by the two white men during his first sexual escapade with Darlene.

He could do nothing then, and he was helpless now. He wanted to love his daughter, but as Claudia, the narrator remarks, “his touch was fatal” (p.163). The rape of Pecola by her father certainly precipitated Pecola’s journey towards madness because this rape left her pregnant and as a result, she was disowned or excluded by the entire black community.

Likewise, Cholly’s sexual intercourse with his wife, can also be considered violent. As Pecola recalls at one place how Cholly acted in bed. Cholly made sounds as if someone held him tight. On the other hand, Mrs. Breedlove made no sound at all. Similarly, Mrs. Breedlove also recalls that her sexual relationship with her husband has become mechanical. There was no enthusiasm of the past. Cholly, as has been mentioned earlier, was a frustrated man. He was a failure in life. Perhaps, his wife had become merely a body for him, which he played with at his own will. And the result of all this was that he started considering his wife’s body as an object on which he unleashed his frustration and anger either through physical beating or through sexual exploitation.

Other than physical and sexual violence, the novel also reveals instances of verbal violence as inflicted on the black by the black. Here the Afro-Americans speak sometimes satirically or teasingly and sometimes in a condescending manner. Their utterances are so powerful and scathing that they

almost shock the listeners. For example, Maureen Peal shouts arrogantly at Pecola, Claudia and Frieda as, “I am cute! And you ugly! Black and ugly black e mss. I am cute!” (p.56).

The words uttered by Maureen Peal were so powerful that they might have accelerated Pecola’s journey towards disintegration.

Geraldine is yet another character who speaks in such patronizing way that her words make Pecola realize her inferiority. In the words of Wilfred D. Samuels and Clenora Hudson Weems; “the most damaging intra racial confrontation related to colour, however, involves Pecola and an adult, Geraldine, whose life is defined by her efforts to escape the ‘Funk’.”⁸

Pecola was invited by Geraldine junior to his house. There he threw his cat on her. Later on, he noticed that the cat was not hurting Pecola, that’s why he spun the cat and threw it towards the window and the cat died. Mrs. Geraldine then came there and he held Pecola responsible for this. Geraldine, who hates niggers, shouts at Pecola as, “Get out,” she said, her voice quite. “You nasty little black bitch. Get out of my house” (p.72).

At this insult, Pecola felt so ashamed that “she held her head down” (p.72) and moved homewards. The black inflict violence on the members of their own race not only physically, sexually and verbally, but emotionally as well. They hurt the emotions of each other frequently. In this kind of violence, it is Pecola again who is victim of everyone she encounters. To quote Wilfred D. Samuels and Clenora Hudson Weems: “Pecola experiences the most damage from intra racial prejudice, however at the hands of her abusive, negligent parents.”⁹

One expects emotional comfort from one's parents, but when parents are bent on destroying their children, there can be no worse enemy. The same holds true in the case of Pecola. She is damaged more by her parents than by others. For instance, her mother prefers a white girl instead of her own daughter, takes her out of school, does not talk to her and even does not trust her. Similarly, her father does not take good care of her. In fact, he ends up raping her.

Like Pecola, Cholly Breedlove also suffers emotional violence at the hands of his parents. He is abandoned on a junk heap by his mother before he is four days old. His father also considers him a deputy of someone to whom he owes money. One can easily imagine how a child might have felt after such a rejection. Pauline Breedlove, likewise, is also the victim of the negligent treatment that she receives at home. She was the ninth child out of eleven children. There was no nickname, no anecdotes, no one took notice of her predilections. In this way, she suffered the pangs of loneliness.

The novel not only unfolds the violence perpetrated by men on humans but it also unravels the violence inflicted by man on the animals. Actually, a few individuals receive harsh treatment from their elders or superiors. They feel ignored, neglected and despised. They cannot retaliate against the perpetrators. Their frustration gets directed, hence, on the animals which their elders love so dearly. The victim, in such cases, considers his act of harming the animals as an act of vengeance and justice. In fact, they register their revolt against the authorities (parents, elders or superiors). One such instance is that of young Geraldine junior. On one occasion, he invited Pecola in his house and threw the cat on her. In fact, his mother prefers the blue eyed cat to him. He feels

neglected and isolated. Now, he cannot fight against his mother who not only prefers the cat but also forbids him to play with the niggers. As a response to such a treatment, he beats the cat frequently and on that occasion too, noticing that the cat is not hurting Pecola in any way, he grabs it with his hind legs and spins it round and round over his head. Pecola moves forward to make him halt, but as she goes for the hand which was spinning the cat, she along with him falls down. The cat is released in mid-motion and is flung against the window. Later, the cat falls down in the radiator and dies. In this way, by hurting the cat and inviting the nigger, Pecola, in his house, he gives vent to his frustration and acts against his mother's wish.

The theme of violence, as has been dealt with by Morrison, shows a pattern of cause and effect. Morrison deals not only with the phenomena of violence but also depicts how it affects various aspects of life. The major consequence of the violence, as has been presented in the novel, is disintegration of the families. The characters inflict pain and suffering on their own family members in such a way that they are no longer in a condition to live together. For example, Cholly Breedlove puts his own house on fire without thinking about the plight of family members afterwards. As an upshot, the family members get scattered. Mrs. Breedlove stays with the white for whom she works. Cholly is taken to jail. Sammy is taken in by a family and Pecola comes to live with MacTeers. To quote John Duvall: "life in the Breedlove household is anything but restrained. The ritualized violence of Cholly and Mrs. Breedlove relation emotionally scars their children, who repeatedly witness parental fights...." ¹⁰

The result of all this is that Sammy is told to have run away from his house twenty-seven times by the time he is fourteen years old and Pecola prays to God to make her disappear.

Another outcome of violence, as depicted in the novel, is loneliness. When the violence is unleashed on the characters, they are immediately thrown into the world of isolation. For example, when Cholly goes to meet his father, his father refuses to recognise him. In fact, he remains busy with his game of cards. Cholly was already alone in this world. His mother, his aunt and his mentor were no longer with him, and now his last hope was also completely destroyed when his father almost ignored him. At this, Cholly must have felt all alone in this world since he had no place to go from here. Likewise, Pecola's fate does not differ from that of her father. Disowned by her mother, abused by her classmates or peers, expelled by Geraldine, neglected by Yacobowski, misused by Soaphead Church, rejected by the entire community and shunned by her best friends, Claudia and Frieda, Pecola feels so lonely that she imagines herself talking to an imaginary friend and is ultimately driven into the world of madness.

Yet another effect of violence, as presented in the novel, is loss of identity. The white set such high standards of beauty that are impossible to attain for the black. The Americans and the Europeans are born with the white skin. In a country where the white are in majority and where to be white skinned is considered to be beautiful, it becomes almost next to impossible that the black will be considered someday beautiful. As D. D. Mbalia opines, "The African's self-image is destroyed at an early age as a result of a ruling class (i.e., the

Europeans capitalist classes) promotion of its own standards of beauty: long, stringy hair, preferably blonde; keen nose, thin lips; and light eyes, preferably blue. By analogy, if the physical features of the Europeans are accepted as the standards then the Africans must be ugly.”¹¹

There are many Afro-American characters in the novel who believe these standards to be absolute. They judge themselves in relation to these standards and as a result, they find themselves ugly. Hence, they lose their own identity. For example, Pecola wants to look like Shirley Temple, an icon of beauty. She fervently prays for the blue eyes which will make her not only beautiful but also acceptable in the racist society. W.D. Samuels and C.H. Weems maintain, “Pecola, a young girl, in quest of womanhood, suffers an identity crisis when she falls victim to the standard set by an American society that ascribe what is beautiful to a certain image of white women.”¹²

Similarly, Pauline also tries to behave like the white actresses. When she realizes that she nowhere fits on the scale of beauty, she, in order to gain acceptance, becomes an ideal servant. There she is not only respected but admired as well because that is how the black women are perceived by the white. In this way, she tries to become what she is actually not. To quote Jennifer L.J. Heinert: “Pauline, who has learned what she believes is the true definition of beauty from her education at the movies, realizes she will never fit that definition and therefor hides herself in the narrative of the ideal servant.”¹³

The violence inflicted on the characters also puts an end to their growth. J.L.J.Heinert,¹⁴ in her study of the novel as a Bildungsroman novel, writes that the novel more justly qualifies the test of anti-Bildungsroman novel. Since, all

the characteristics of Bildungsroman writing are defined by the dominant culture and hence, they can aptly fit only to the characters coming from the main strata. In *The Bluest Eye*, all the major characters come from marginalized section, that's why their growth is hampered by racism. Instead of ending with self fulfillment and completeness, their narratives end in disaster. For example, Cholly, when forced to copulate with a girl for the white men's pleasure, feels humiliated and castrated. His growth stops there and then. Earlier his life was characterized by zest and enjoyment. He used to learn things from his friends and admired a person named Blue Jack. But now, the exploitation which he has to undergo, undermines his growth. It bruises his psyche leaving him helpless and impotent. Similarly, Pecola, who exhibits the talent of decoding the world around her, fails miserably when she encounters racism. The neglect, she receives at the hands of various persons in her life, leaves her mad and isolated at the end.

The theme of violence has been delineated by Morrison in such a way that when the characters heap violence on the other characters, they tend to constitute a pattern of contrasts. For example, there are two groups of parents in the novel, the first consisting of Mrs. and Mr. Breedlove and the second of Mr. and Mrs. MacTeer. Mr. Breedlove rapes his own daughter more than once. Mrs. Breedlove beats her daughter and does not trust her. The violence which is directed by the parents on their daughter drives her a step closer towards insanity. They present themselves as unprotecting and uncaring parents. On the other hand, when Frieda, the youngest daughter of the MacTeers, is assaulted notoriously by Henry, Mrs. and Mr. MacTeer are infuriated. Mr. MacTeer hits

Henry with the cycle and even shoots at him. Mrs. MacTeer beats Henry with a

broom. In this way, they use violence not to harm their daughter, but to protect her and thus they emerge as protecting and caring parents.

Traits of the white characters are also unmasked through the theme of violence. The white are presented as authoritative and inhuman. For example, when the white men compel Cholly to continue the sexual act for their amusement, they reveal themselves as uncivilized and hedonist. Likewise, a white lady who forces Pauline to forsake her husband if she wants to continue working in her house, reveals herself as a stone hearted and unsympathetic kind of lady.

Morrison has also unfolded her outlook on the world around her by dealing with the theme of violence. In fact, she seems to be suggesting that the life does not offer flowers all the time. There are difficulties and obstacles on the path as well. Now, in America, the Afro-Americans are confronted with the question regarding their identity. The problem before them is how to define themselves. There are two possible solutions as presented in the novel. The first is that of surrendering oneself completely to the notions of the wider culture. People within this attitude start considering themselves either as misfits or begin to imitate the ways of the white. For instance, Pecola believes herself to be an ugly child who will only be happy if she is granted the blue eyes. Only then, she feels, she will become acceptable in the society. Pauline, Pecola's mother, also surrenders her true self and first tries to imitate the white Hollywood actresses and later becomes a servant in the house of the rich white. As a servant, she gains recognition and acceptance because she is still subordinate to the white. Geraldine, also, tries to define herself by going away from her African roots.

She believes that she is a coloured lady who may be less than the white, but certainly more than the niggers. These characters are always traumatized by the existing standards, according to which they are the outcasts.

Wilfred D. Samuels and Clenora Hudson Weems¹⁵ point out another group of characters who live happily as they are instead of trying to become what they are not. For example, Claudia, who is a young girl like Pecola, does not run after the white baby dolls and the blue eyes, she does not want to eat candies so that she might become sweet and pretty like the beautiful images which are printed on them. In fact, she dismembers the white baby dolls which she receives as gifts. She is happy with what she is and what she has. Likewise, three prostitutes, who live above Breedlove's apartment, do not hate themselves for being black. In fact, their hatred is directed outwards. As John Duvall shrewdly observes; "their conversation is a running critique of the sexual politics of middle class convention, even as they recognize their own follies and implication. And their identity clearly does not depend upon men whom these women hate."¹⁶

Similarly, the community of women who visited Aunt Jimmy when she was on her death bed, also spent their time cheerfully. Their life was also characterized by troubles and misfortunes. They also come from the black race, but they never grumble about it. In fact, when one of them, Aunt Jimmy, is about to die, they become agile. They bring food for her. One of them even reads Bible to her. In fact, they participate actively in the funeral rites of Aunt Jimmy. In a nutshell, these are the characters who plant their own "garden of Marigold."¹⁷

They judge themselves not by the standards set by others, but by their own selves. That's why, they are happy.

Last, but not the least, the way the writer has dealt with the theme of violence also has its own moral and aesthetic impact. It arouses feelings, such as: pity, sympathy, appreciation and disgust in the hearts of the reader. For instance, one sympathizes with Pecola when she suffers at the hands of everyone, she comes across. Pecola's mother, Mrs. Breedlove, also wins the sympathy of the readers when she is asked by a white mistress to forsake her husband. Likewise, one feels pity for Pecola's father, Cholly Breedlove, when he is forced to copulate in front of the white for their pleasure. Similarly, one appreciates Claudia when she tries to react against the oppressive system by rejecting its norms of beauty. Likewise, one feels disgust for the white characters more particularly for white men and a white mistress who exploit Cholly and Pauline without a solid reason. In this way, the theme of violence, as presented in the novel, enables the writer to produce cathartic effect for the reader.

It is evident from the above discussion that Morrison has dealt dexterously with the theme of violence. Here, one meets the white characters inflicting torture and pain on the black. Not only this, the Afro-Americans also are presented as equally responsible for the misfortunes of the members of their own race. Then, there are other characters who unleash their anger not on the cause of it, but on someone else (animals or any other subordinate). The novel also examines the upshots of the violence as it is inflicted on the characters resulting in their psychological disintegration.

Notes

¹Tonni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* (rpt. 1979; London: Vintage Books, 1999), p.116. All subsequent textual references have been quoted from the same source and their page numbers have been mentioned immediately after them within the parentheses.

²Wilfred D. Samuels and Clenora Hudson Weems, “The Damaging Look: The search for Authentic Existence in *The Bluest Eye*,” *Toni Morrison* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1990), p.27.

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Treatment of Violence: A Study of Morrison’s The Bluest Eye and Beloved

³Ibid., p.10.

⁴Ibid., p.11.

⁵Haskel Frankel, "The Bluest Eye," *Toni Morrison: Critical Perspectives Past and Present*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and K.A. Appiah (New York: Amistad Press, 1993), p.3.

⁶L.E. Sissman, "The Bluest Eye," *Toni Morrison: Critical Perspectives Past and Present*, p.5.

⁷Nellie Mckay, "An Interview with Toni Morrison," *Toni Morrison: Critical Perspectives Past and Present*, p.397.

⁸Wilfred D. Samuels and Clenora Hudson Weems, p.12.

⁹Ibid., p.13.

¹⁰John N. Duvall, "Invisible Name and Complex Authority in *The Bluest Eye*: Morrison's Covert Letter to Ralph Ellison," *The Identifying Fictions of Toni Morrison: Modernist Authenticity and Post modern Blackness* (New York: Pal Grave, 2000), p.44.

¹¹Doreatha Drummond Mbalia, "The Bluest Eye: The need for racial Approbation," *Toni Morrison's Developing Class Consciousness* (Solinsgrove: Susquehanna University Press, 1991), p.29.

¹²Wilfred D. Samuels and Clenora Hudson Weems, p.11.

¹³Jennifer Lee Jordan Heinart, "Novel of 'Education': Bildungsroman and *The Bluest Eye*," *Narrative Conventions and Race in the Novels of Toni Morrison* (New York: Routledge, 2009), p.22.

¹⁴Ibid.

¹⁵Wilfred D. Samuels and Clenora Hudson Weems.

¹⁶John N. Duvall, p.45.

¹⁷Wilfred D. Samuels and Clenora Hudson Weems, p.30.

Chapter-3

Treatment of Violence in *Beloved*

“Here,” she said, in this here place, we flesh; flesh that weeps laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet on grass. Love it. Love it hard. Yonder they do not love your flesh. They despise it. They do not love your eyes; they’d just as soon pick em out. No more do they love the skin on your back. Yonder they flay it. And O my people they do not love your hands. Those they only use, tie, bind, chop off and leave empty.

Toni Morrison¹

“Once, the time was,” he said, “that I cried all night. What’s the matter? What’s the matter? Matter enough. The next morning my child was to be sold, and she was sold; and I never ’pected to see her no more till the day of judgement. Now, no more that! No more that! No more that! With my hands against my breast I was going to my work, when the overseer used to whip me along. Now, no more that! No more that! No more that! ... We’s free now, bless the Lord! [Amen! Amen! said the audience.] They can’t sell my wife an’ child no more, bless the Lord! [Glory! Glory!] No more that! No more that! No more that, now!”¹

Lerone Bennett Jr.²

Valerie Smith aptly observes, “physical pain has no voice, but when it at last finds a voice, it begins to tell a story.”³

Beloved is such a story of pain, suffering and atrocities. It is the saga of the black men whose backs were lacerated by the white men. It is the tale of the black women who were manhandled by their white masters. It is the woeful narrative of the African mothers whose milk was pilfered from them. Margaret Atwood remarks in this context; “ This new novel is set after the end of the civil war, during the period of so called Reconstruction, when a great deal of random violence was let loose upon blacks, both the slaves freed by Emancipation and others who had been given or had bought their freedom earlier.”⁴

In the novel, *Beloved*, Morrison depicts the violence inflicted on the black by the white. But, there are also instances where torture and suffering are perpetrated on the white by the members of their own race. Then, there are scenes where the Negroes not only resist but retaliate in violent ways. Quite like the white, the black also do not spare their own black counterparts. They inflict atrocities on the members of their own community. But, the white behaving with violent disposition toward s the black is preponderant in the entire novel.

The white hurt or injure the black in many ways. The Africans are whipped, sexually assaulted and separated from the members of their own family quite frequently. In other words, physically, sexually and psychologically, the Negroes are harmed or smothered by the white masters. Physical violence is deployed as a strategy by the white to intimidate the Africans in America. The black were abducted by force from their own land by the Europeans. Their main target was to use them as cheap labour. Now, in order to instil their domination, they use physical force to ensure that there is no resistance or revolt. They believe in the dictum might is right. This makes the

school teacher convey to Sixo when the latter tries to outwit the former:

“Definitions belong to the definers-not the defined” (p.225).

Whenever any slave becomes recalcitrant, he is punished savagely. Any reaction or retaliation is deemed as blasphemy by the masters which results in the most severe punishment i.e. death. For example, Sixo is tied to a tree and shot and burnt later. Paul A is also hanged on a tree with his torso. Paul D is first iron collared and a bit is planted in his mouth. Sethe, similarly, is flogged ruthlessly when she grumbles against the stealing of her milk before Mrs. Garner. *Beloved* also divulges in her recollections of her past life that when she, along with her mother, was picking flowers, she was forcefully kidnapped and was brought to America in the most unhygienic of circumstances. The food and water which was provided to the Africans on the slave ships was adulterated. The list seems endless. The white left no stone unturned in beating, whipping and mutilating the skin of the black slaves.

Not just physical tortures were used as means of suppression, but sexual tortures were also quite frequent. The master took undue advantage of the female bodies who were working under them. In fact, the violence which was directed against the black women was greater than that directed against the black men. Elizabeth Fox Genovese astutely maintains; “Since the nineteenth century, it has been common to assert that slavery was necessarily worse for women than for men, since they were subjected to special brutality and indignity on account of their sex.”⁵

The pretext which was in the background of this sexual violence was the same. The Europeans wanted complete domination and control over their slaves.

For this, they even reduced not only the black men, but black women too to a thing or toy with which they played in accordance with their own will. And *Beloved* is replete with numerous instances of this kind. In the words of Pamela E. Bennett, “while Morrison depicts myriad abuses of slavery like brutal beatings and lynching, the depictions of and allusions to rape are of primary importance; each in some way helps explain the infanticide that marks the beginning of Sethe’s story as a free woman.”⁶

Sethe slew her own daughter because she knew pretty well that to be a woman in the times of slavery was a cardinal sin. She herself was subjected to this brutal assault. She was held down by two young boys, one held her down while the other thieved her milk. Ella, an ex-slave, was similarly kept in a room and was maltreated by the father and the son for several days. Baby Suggs, the mother-in-law of Sethe, had to barter herself in order to ensure that her third born might not be auctioned away from her. Not just that, even Sethe’s own mother, as Nan told her, was, along with her shipmates, constantly taken up by the crew.

Sethe also had to surrender her body to an engraver in order to engrave ‘Beloved’ on the tomb of her dear daughter. Then, there are surmises in the community after Beloved’s advent that she is the same woman who was rumoured to be imprisoned by a white man and who ran away when the white man was found dead. To believe that only the black women were sexually exploited will only be half-truth. Even the black men had his hard time when he was required to satisfy the unnatural whims of the masters. For example, Paul D, along with other members of the chain gang, is required to fellate the white

guard, and on mere watching this, he pukes out. Pamela E. Barnett notes many such examples in her study of the novel. She also remarks: “Morrison depicts rape as a process by which some white men keep some black women and even some black men in state of fear.”⁷

Besides physical and sexual violence, the white masters also inflicted emotional violence on their black objects. The known indigenous black in America were also mangled psychologically. The masters played with the emotions of their black slaves. First, the negroes were segregated from their lands, their tribes, their culture, their people and their language and then whatever community they entered in during middle passage was also mercilessly knifed. In the words of Margaret Atwood: “The slaves are motherless, fatherless, deprived of their mates, their children, their kin. It is a world in which people suddenly vanish and are never seen again, not through accident or covert operation or terrorism, but as a matter of everyday legal policy.”⁸

The novel provides numerous examples to prove this fact. For instance, Baby Suggs had eight children, but she was never given any chance to keep any one of them. The only one she kept the longest was her eighth child, Halle, who in 1855, when Sethe arrived in 124 at Blue Stone road, was either missing or dead. She remembers that her first two babies, who were girls, were sold away from her during their infancy. She got no time even to wave her hands at them. Morrison categorically writes : “Anybody Baby Suggs knew, let alone loved, who hadn’t run off or been hanged, got rented out, loaned out, bought up, brought back, stored up, mortgaged, won, stolen or seized” (pp.27-28).

Similarly, Paul D, Paul A and Paul F, who were three half-brothers, same mother but different fathers, were also insulated from one another whenever the occasion demanded. For instance, first this trio was procured by Mr. Garner and brought to Sweet Home. After the demise of Mr. Garner, lady Garner sells Paul F in order to clear the debts. Likewise, the school teacher's act of selling Paul D to another white owner, is an example of psychological damage inflicted on the black slaves. The novel reminds the reader of the famous words of Chinua Achebe⁹, spoken by Oberika that the white man had put a knife on the things which held them together and they have fallen apart.

The white community not only exploited the black, but the men of their own race as well. The condition of penurious white man was not better than that of the Africans. They were also subjected to a similar sort of injustice. Amy Denver of Boston can be cited as an illustration. Wilfred D. Samuels and Clenora Hudson- Weems¹⁰ draw reader's attention to this fact. For them, there are many similarities between Sethe and Amy. Both are fugitive slaves, motherless, uneducated, tired, un-neat, uncombed and barefoot. Amy's mother was a slave who worked on the plantation only to pay for her passage. Amy is rumoured to be the upshot of the copulation between the master and the slave mother. Amy, like Sethe, has faced physical beating as she confesses: "I had me some whippings, but I do not remember nothing like this. Mr. Buddy had a right evil and too whips you for looking at him straight. Sure would, I looked right at him one time and he hauled of and through the poker at me. Guess he knew what I was a thinking" (p.93).

Margaret Atwood makes a germane statement when she argues: “here’s Amy the young runaway indentured servant who helps Sethe in child birth during her flight to freedom, and incidentally reminds the reader that the nineteenth century, with its child labour wage slavery and widespread and accepted domestic violence, was not tough only for blacks, but for all but the most privileged whites as well.”¹¹

Apart from the white inflicting violence on the non-whites, the novel also contains instances where the non-Europeans perpetrated violence back on the Europeans. It is almost like a boomerang on themselves. Freedom, as has been commonly believed, is one of the most sumptuous, most delicious and most cherished dreams of an individual. An enslaved person cannot even dream freely because of overpowering system of oppression. The desire for this freedom makes these Africans agile and their alacrity in violent actions is directed against the hard exploiters. When the white remain intransigent as rocks, the black attack them, even though they have to face fiasco at the end. For instance, Paul D attacks Brandywine, his new expropriator. Similarly, Sixo, before dying, tries to inflict a lethal wound on the white master. Sethe also becomes jittery when she sees a white man approaching the yard of 124, and later, when Mr. Bodwin arrives to take Denver, Sethe is no longer able to control herself, and thinking Mr. Benefactor to be the slave catcher, rushes towards him with every intention of knocking him down.

It’s true that the masters or the white men unleash suffering and torture on not only the black, but on the white as well, but it is equally true that the black, the Africans, do not spare the members of their community quite like the

white Americans. In the African community, this violence manifests itself in different forms: physical, sexual, emotional and verbal.

The instances of physical violence within the black race are not many in the novel. The Africans, already slaughtered and pulverised by the white Americans, exhibit a strong bonding yet there are numerous occasions when anger and frustration or some other emotion gets better of their sense of unity. For example, Sethe's own mother slapped her own daughter when the latter inquired as to why she was not marked beneath her breast like her mother. In response, she only receives a slap. She is never able to make out the reason of that slap till she receives her personal mark on her back. The act of slapping was not preceded by a desire to hurt which is the criteria of judging any gesture to be violent yet it was enveloped in sheer anger and frustration which Sethe's mother harboured against her exploiters and which Sethe's mother could never give vent to because of her marginalised status. Now, it bursts out as she is reminded indirectly of the time of branding.

There are a few other occasions as well when the black community loses its control over itself and directs physical beating on its own members. For example, Sethe, watching the white slave master coming with the slave catcher, a nephew and a sheriff, rushes towards her daughter, picks a handsaw and pierces her throat. Susan Bowers remarks in this context: "This prefiguring of the novels climactic, redemptive moment is the most violent episode in the novel. Although violence is characteristic of apocalyptic literature, this violence is especially notable because it consists of the victim inflicting the violence on her own children out of utter helplessness."¹²

Not only the black contused each other physically but sexually as well. Pamela E. Barnett¹³ draws parallels between succubus and incubus on the one hand and *Beloved* on the other which can be cited to illustrate the sexual violence heaped on the black by the black themselves. According to orthodox belief, a succubus is the incarnation of female demon that gets up from the grave in the night and sucks the substance out of men. Likewise, incubus is the reincarnation of a dead man who in the night sucks the women of their substance.

Beloved in the novel is both, succubus and incubus. As a female demon reincarnate, she steals semen from Paul D, and becomes pregnant. Paul D here is almost crippled. He is reluctant to yield, but he can't help it. He reflects upon this situation later in the novel when he recalls that "coupling with her was not even fun. It was more like a brainless urge to stay alive" (p.311).

Linda Krumholz verbalises this view in different words. She opines: "she functions as the spur to Paul D's and Denver's repressed past, forcing Paul D to confront the shame and pain of the powerlessness of man in slavery."¹⁴ When she comes in his cabin and seduces him, he is confronted with the same emasculation which he had to undergo during the time of slavery. His heart, which is like a red tobacco tin in which are stored all the painful memories, is unlocked and he yells in pain, "Red heart. Red heart" (p. 138).

Beloved is also equated with vampire or incubus. Though, she is not the male spirit impregnating the slumbering women, "but the vampire figure in *Beloved* enacts as incestuous, homosexual desire," as has been established by P.E. Barnett.¹⁵

Beloved has come back for Sethe. She wants to take vengeance on her for her premature murder. She drains Sethe of her vitality. First, in the clearing, she plants a deadly kiss over Sethe's neck, then later She enacts as if she is a just born child. Sethe is ready to fulfil all her desires. Whatever Beloved wants is given to her such as the best chair, the best food and so on. And when Sethe runs out of things, Beloved invented desire. Later, one notices Beloved with protruding belly and Sethe becoming thinner and thinner. So thin that flesh betwixt her fingers and thumb dissolves. In this way, the advent of Beloved and her over-demanding attitude become detrimental to Sethe.

The black community harms its own people by impairing them psychologically and emotionally as well, and Margaret Atwood succinctly remarks: "Toni Morrison is careful not to make all the whites awful and all blacks wonderful."¹⁶

Indeed, the negroes are here not romanticised, they are human enough to let down each other. For example, Sethe, after butchering her daughter, is segregated by the entire black vicinity. Similarly, when Paul D is on the verge of settling down with Sethe, Stamp Paid shows him the newspaper clipping in which was printed the face of the murderer mother which hurts Paul D badly. When Sethe feels that everything was transpiring smoothly and Paul D will almost be a good company for her and will hold her if she falls down, the latter injures Sethe with the words, "you got two feet, Sethe, not four" (p. 194).

Last, but not the least, the verbal violence is yet another weapon with which the Africans cripple each other. Their words carry so much sarcasm that

they pierce the hearts of the listeners. For instance, Denver enquires from Paul D, “how long he was going to hang around” (p. 52).

The phrase hurt Paul D so much that he became angry. He dropped the cup from which he was gulping the coffee. Another instance, where verbal violence is noticed is a question asked by Nelson Lord when Denver was seven years old. He investigates, “Didn’t your mother get locked away for murder? Wasn’t you in there with her when she went?” (p. 123).

The question damages Denver’s verve in such a way that she relinquishes altogether the idea of continuing her education. In short, she prefers seclusion rather than integration with the community to avoid such inquiries. Apart from racial and intra racial violence, one also notices self-directed violence in the novel. In such cases, an individual, instead of perpetrating atrocities on others, directs them at his own self. Now, in *Beloved*, it is Beloved herself who enacts such an episode. Actually, what psychoanalyst affirms is that whatever is repressed tends to come out in various ways, and injury to self in sheer frustration is one among many of its manifestations. In the novel, Beloved, the reincarnation of Sethe’s dead daughter, is frustrated when Sethe dotes more on Paul D than on her. Beloved wants that Sethe must remain most of the time with her because she has come back for her. But, Sethe’s propensity is more for the last of the Sweet Home’s man, Paul D. At this, enraged Beloved pulls her tooth out and shows it to Denver and thinks, “This is it. Next would be her arm, her hand, a toe. Pieces of her would drop may be one at a time, may be all at once” (p.157).

Violence in the novel results in many consequences. Among them, the primary is disintegration of the families. The white pay no attention to this aspect. For them, money is more important than human relationships. They purchase and sell the black as if they are commodities. Its upshot is that the families are broken, brothers are sold away from the brothers as it happens with Paul D, Paul A and Paul F, out of whom it was Paul F who was sold away from his brothers. The children are separated from their mothers as it happened with Baby Suggs whose seven children were snatched away from her in their infancy. The wives are taken from their husbands for carnal pleasure as it happened with Stamp Paid whose wife was taken up by the master's son for his own enjoyment.

The destruction of self is yet another ramification of the violence. The characters, more particularly the Africans, in *Beloved* lose their self-identity. There is regression in them. They even become worse than beasts. For example, Halle goes frantic after watching his wife's milk being stolen. Sethe goes berserk and decimates her daughter in order to save her from the violence which she herself has experienced. Paul D also feels less than a chicken when he contemplates: "Mister was allowed to be and stay what he was. But I was not allowed to be and stay what I was" (p.86).

The characters after facing so much pummelling and mauling acquire a negative attitude towards life. For example, Paul D develops his own credo of loving small instead of loving thoroughly. Similarly, Ella believes that one should love nothing. Above all, the characters are not able to define themselves as mother, father, husband and brother. For instance, Stamp Paid and Halle

believe themselves to be emasculated as husbands when they witness their wives being robbed in front of them and they could not do anything. Sethe also, in order to prove herself as a caring mother and also to prove that her children belong only to her and no white men would even insulate them from her, smites one of them and plans to do the same with other children. In the entire novel, she keeps on defining herself or at least tries to define herself as mother. She is on the path of finding fulfilment or wholeness as has been declared by Bernard W. Bell. According to him: “On a sociopsychological level, *Beloved* is the story of Sethe Suggs quest for social freedom and psychological wholeness.”¹⁷

Alienation or loneliness is yet another consequence of the violence inflicted on the characters. For example, when Sethe murders her own daughter, she is ostracised by the vicinity of the black. She, along with her daughter, lives in sheer isolation. Similarly, when baby ghost becomes livid and violent, it manifests its rage by shattering the mirror and putting the handprints on the cake. The consequence of this is that Sethe’s two sons, Howard and Buglar, are so intimidated that they run away from 124 and Sethe and Denver are again left bereft of any human company till Paul D arrives after 18 years.

The characters are unveiled through the treatment of violence by the writer. For instance, the White, the Europeans who claim to be more educated, more civilized and more cultivated are portrayed as more barbaric, more uncivilised, and more beastly when they unleash so much of violence. For example, the school teacher who is supposed to be the representative of a cultivated and disciplined outlook on life, fails to stop his nephews when they

violate every lesson of the book called humanity and put Sethe down and steel her milk. One wonders what a school teacher!

Likewise, the strength, endurance and the indomitable spirit of the black are also unfolded by the treatment of violence. The black received merciless belting and beating. But, under all these vicious circumstances, they manifest immense courage, patience and stamina with almost an undying spirit. Paul D, for instance, had an iron bit in his mouth, Sethe was whipped mercilessly; but nowhere does one notice in the novel either of these characters ever cursing anyone for his/her fate. They tolerate stoically whatever comes their way. The violent treatment of the black at the hands of the white masters not only joins the black with one another, but also makes them one with one of the white who receives similar handling. The common experiences of the black make them react collectively against the masters. For example, Paul D escapes with 45 other members of the chain gang. Similarly, Sethe and company also decide to flee with all the other slaves at Sweet Home. They understand each other quite well because each of them had a similar sort of experience under excruciating circumstances. Likewise, the white such as Amy Denver, who herself is a fugitive slave, massages not only Sethe's legs but also aids her in delivering her fourth offspring. No other white might have done this. Only the white like Amy behaves in this manner because of the similitude of experience shared by them on different plantations.

Violence heaped on the characters also becomes instrumental in their growth. When a person receives too much of brutality, physical, sexual and psychological, one generally ceases to think. In fact, one can become almost

moribund. But, in the novel, Sethe and Baby Suggs are two characters who are exceptions to this general notion. Sethe has faced too many hardships in life. She is beaten, her milk is stolen, her back is scarred, she has to deliver on the boat, her husband is not with her yet she never loses her capacity to think. She resolves that she will save her offspring. She slays her daughter so that she might not be killed by the violence which she herself has experienced. With sheer confidence and sense of possession, she speaks to Paul D, “I took and put my babies where they’d be safe” (p.193).

Wilfred D Samuels and Clenora Hudson Weems remark quite pertinently: “clearly, her intention here is not denial but rationalisation; yet, it is rationalisation based on conviction.”¹⁸

Baby Suggs is another woman, in the novel, whose personality undergoes a metamorphosis. She, like Sethe, is subjected to physical, sexual and emotional atrocities. After receiving emancipation, instead of retiring into reclusion, she becomes a preacher who gathers the black in the clearing and urges them to love their flesh.

There are some other characters in the novel for whom confronting violence produces negative effects, since it destroys their capacity to feel. For example, Paul D is a man who has witnessed so much of devastation in his life that he no longer remains sensitive. It makes him tough. He has seen his own brother sold away, another hanged and killed, and a friend burnt and shot, another going mad, himself experienced a bit and iron collaring and filthy experience in wooden grave and chain gang. And to crown it all, during his strolling, he has seen more dead than alive Negroes. All this render him

incapable of responding to a particular situation in an exuberant way. Susan Bowers wisely maintains: “What had led to his own inability to feel was the systematic destruction of his manhood.”¹⁹

The violence is handled by the writer in such a way that the novel shows how violence begets violence. For instance, Sethe receives violence which she further redirects on her daughter who haunts 124 as a ghost and inflicts violence on the inhabitants of 124, and later, by arriving as a voluptuous young maiden, she exploits not only Paul D but Sethe as well.

The theme of violence, as dealt with by Morrison, also leads the reader to experience a kind of cathartic effect. The reading of the novel arouses various emotions in the hearts of its reader. To quote Susan Bowers: “Apocalyptic literature is very like Greek tragedy in arousing emotion and creating the condition for catharsis.”²⁰

The violence which the rulers inflict on the ruled creates the disgust for the masters. On the other hand, it arouses pity, sympathy and appreciation for the sufferers. The way they endure suffering also motivates the reader to confront the battles of life more courageously. For example, one feels sympathy for Sethe when she is beaten and her milk is stolen. Likewise, one also sympathises with Paul D whose brothers are snatched away from him and who is treated worse than the beasts. One also appreciates the way in which the slaves try to resist collectively against the cruelties of the masters. Similarly, one also feels repulsion for the white such as the school teacher and the plantation-owner who was the master of Amy.

Above all, with the help of the theme of violence, Morrison is able to unveil her outlook on life. What Morrison seems to be suggesting is that life is not the bed of roses. One has to confront many difficulties. Each individual reacts to the hostile environment in his or her own way. In the novel as well, one notices different types of individuals responding in different ways to the oppressive circumstances. First, there are Paul D and Sethe who unflinchingly face all atrocities. For example, Paul D lost his brothers and his friends, and was himself treated as even worse than an animal. Similarly, Sethe lost her three children and her husband and lives in sheer segregation for 18 long years until Paul D and Beloved arrive in 124. But these characters are never noticed grumbling or beating their heads. They tolerate every misfortune with immense tenacity.

Then, there are men and women who also try to change the situation by acting accordingly. For example, Sethe, who is a veteran as far as the excruciating experiences of slavery are concerned, tries to alter the fate not only of her children but hers as well. When she learns that in future her children might be separated from her, she resolves to send them to a safe place. First, she sends her three children through underground rail road and later she herself escapes from Sweet Home and successfully makes it to Baby Suggs in 124. After her advent, when few days later she is traced by school teacher and his gang, Sethe again comes into action. Instead of letting the masters capture her and her progeny, she decides to end the life of her children so that they might be saved from hellish circumstances in slavery. Her plan is to slit all her children, but she is only able to do it with one of them.

Similarly, Paul D who was sold to Brandy Wine and later on was kept with forty five other men in dismal wooden graves also resolves to change his fate. He along with other counterparts runs constantly for 86 days till they all are unchained with the help of Cherokee men. The third broad category of the people in the novel is of those who seek escape from the situation. Here, the cases of Howard and Buglar can be cited for illustration. When Baby ghost starts making its presence felt through cracks in the mirror and hand prints on the cake, these two boys are so intimidated that they take to their heels, never to return. Similarly, there are people who go mad. For example, Halle, after watching his wife's milk being stolen, goes out of his wits.

Another kind of person depicted in the novel who respond to violence in their own way, is of those who become negative, such as Ella. Ella has faced so much of violence in her life that now she believes that one should not love anything. She was an ex-slave who was kept and misused by a father and a son for several days. She also gave birth to a baby whom she would not nurture. Moreover, she also remembers the beating to which she was subjected. The result of so much torture is that she ultimately becomes negative in her attitude. Similarly, Stamp Paid also becomes somewhat cynical. His wife is snatched away from him by the master for his son. When she is thrown out of the master's bed, instead of accepting her, Stamp Paid purchases his freedom, changes his name and walks out from slavery. Later, he thinks that by helping the ex-slaves from this side to the other side of the river, he is paying penance for a wrong that he committed.

In the final analysis, one can safely affirm that *Beloved* is a novel in which the theme of violence is portrayed in all its colours. It is not that only the white, the Europeans; the masters are portrayed as inflicting violence on the black. Even, the Negroes in their own turn redirect violence back on the masters. The scale of the novel is comprehensive enough to present the white as inflicting injustice on the members of their own community, as it deals, at the same time, with the black who also heap violence on the members of their own race. Self-directed violence is another form which gets manifested in the novel. Apart from these, the novel also vividly explicates the consequences of violence. Wilfred D Samuels and Clenora Hudson Wheems rightly maintain: “*Beloved* records the cruelty, violence and degradation whether the physical or psychological fragmentation of the black family that often victimised slaves irrespective of age or gender.”²²

NOTES

¹ Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (1997; rpt. London: Vintage, 2005), p. 103. All subsequent textual references have been quoted from the same source and their page numbers have been mentioned within parentheses immediately after the quotation.

² Lerone Bennet Jr., "The Jubilee War: Witnesses and Warriors," *A History of Black America*, 5th ed. (Chicago: Johnson Publishing Company, 1982), p.198.

³ Valerie Smith, "Circling the Subject: History and Narrative in *Beloved*," *Critical Perspective Past and Present*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and K.A. Appiah (Newyork: Penguin Books, 1993), p.342.

⁴ Margaret Atwood, "Haunted by Their Nightmares," *Viva Modern Critical Interpretations: Toni Morrison's Beloved*, ed. Harold Bloom (New Delhi: Viva Books Private Limited, 2007), p.5.

⁵ Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, "Unspeakable Things Unspoken: Ghosts and Memories in *Beloved*," *Viva Modern Critical Interpretations: Toni Morrison's Beloved*, p.98.

⁶ Pamela E. Barnett, "Figurations of Rape and the Supernatural in *Beloved*," *Viva Modern Critical Interpretations: Toni Morrison's Beloved*, p.193.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p.204.

⁸ Margaret Atwood, p.7.

⁹ Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* (New York: Anchor Books, 1994).

¹⁰ Wilfred D. Samuels and Clenora Hudson-Weems, “‘Ripping The Veil’: Meaning through Rememory in *Beloved*,” *Toni Morrison* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1990).

¹¹ Margaret Atwood, p.7.

¹² Susan Bowers, “*Beloved* and the New Apocalypse,” *Viva Modern Critical Interpretations: Toni Morrison’s Beloved*, p.17.

¹³ Pamela E. Barnett.

¹⁴ Linda Krumboltz, “The Ghost of Slavery: Historical Recovery in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*,” *Viva Modern Critical Interpretations: Toni Morrison’s Beloved*, p.86.

¹⁵ Pamela E. Barnett, p.199.

¹⁶ Margaret Atwood, p.8.

¹⁷ Bernard W. Bell, “*Beloved: A Womanist Neo-Slave Narrative; or Multivocal Remembrances of Things Past*,” *Viva Modern Critical Interpretations: Toni Morrison’s Beloved*, p.59.

¹⁸ Wilfred D. Samuels and Clenora Hudson-Weems, p.108.

¹⁹ Susan Bowers, p.34.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p.40.

²¹ Wilfred D. Samuels and Clenora Hudson-Weems, p.96.

Chapter-4

Conclusion

Morrison started her literary career in 1970 with the publication of *The Bluest Eye*. Seventeen years later, in 1987, she published *Beloved*. There appeared a sea change during these seventeen years in her conception regarding the plight of the Negroes in America. Earlier, she believed that race and colour were the main cause of the sufferings of Afro-Americans. But, later when she came out with *Beloved*, she seems to be suggesting that along with race, class was another reason of the miseries of the black. What remained unchanged during these years, is her presentation of the phenomenon of violence. In her first novel, *The Bluest Eye*, and in the fifth novel, *Beloved*, violence is portrayed as a theme which gives unity to what is generally believed to be an inorganic structure. Both the novels are graphic accounts of the atrocities heaped on the black by the white in the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries.

The Bluest Eye captures the spirit of the 1940's, when Morrison was a child and when to be a black was deemed as ugly and inferior. Through the character of Pecola, Morrison has highlighted the plight of a black girl in the society dominated by the white. Similarly, *Beloved* captures the spirit of preceding century, when slavery was in practice and the black were mercilessly beaten. Through the character of Sethe, the writer has presented the suffering and misfortunes undergone by a slave woman in slavery and in freedom.

Morrison was not the first Afro-American writer who has dealt with the issue of violence. Before her, the writers like Richard Wright and Baldwin had depicted the theme of violence in their novels. The main difference between Morrison and her predecessors is that their focus was largely on the white inflicting pain and sufferings on the poor black. On the other hand, Morrison not only demonstrates the way in which the white emasculated the black but also she examines how the Africans castrated the members of their own race. In fact, she deals with the entire issue of violence with its wider implications in an objective manner. For example, in *The Bluest Eye*, Pecola, a young black girl, is harmed by both: her black acquaintance and the white masters. Likewise, in *Beloved*, Sethe, an ex-slave, is equally let down by both the communities: the black and the white.

Yet another difference in Morrison and her precursors in delineating the theme of violence is that her forefathers had presented the suffering of the black through the eyes of men. How a black man tries to cope with the violence unleashed on him and his family was their chief concern. For instance, Wright in *Native Son* unfolds the misfortunes encountered by a man named Bigger. Likewise, Ellison in *Invisible Man* unearths the problems and difficulties confronted by a young unnamed black narrator. While Morrison being a woman views the world around her with the eyes of a woman. For example, *The Bluest Eye* is a record of the difficulties encountered by young girls like: Pecola, Claudia and Frieda and adults like Pauline and Geraldine. In the same manner, *Beloved* is a graphic account of hardships faced by women like Sethe, Denver, Beloved, Baby Suggs, Ella, Sethe's mother, Nan and thirty miles woman.

Violence, as has been presented by Morrison, achieves artistic credo of its own. It leads to many outcomes and consequences. In fact, it presents a series of cause and effect that creates a nice chain of interrelated incidents. For example, it presents how the families are disintegrated when violence is unleashed on its members. In *The Bluest Eye*, one comes across the Breedlove family that is disintegrated because of the violence that Cholly, the head of the family, directs on his own family members. When he sets his own house on fire, all the members of his family are scattered in different directions. Similarly, in *Beloved*, one comes across not one but many families that get disintegrated because of the cruel treatment of the white. The members of black families were auctioned away from each other for lucrative gains. For example, seven children of Baby Suggs were taken away from her. Paul A, D and F were also purchased by Mr Garner from somewhere and Mrs. Garner, at the demise of her husband, sold Paul F to clear her debts.

The difference between both the novels is that of focus. In *The Bluest Eye*, the focus is on individual disintegration characterised by Breedlove's family, while in *Beloved*, the focus shifts on the collective disintegration characterised by the slave community. The reason behind this is that in *Beloved*, Morrison deals with slavery as an institution which was the offshoot of capitalism. Almost the entire society of the black in America was affected by this institution. While in *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison depicts the time between the two world wars, when slavery was the thing of the past. Many characters in *The Bluest Eye* suffer not because of their poverty, but because of colour. Even, Cholly who is shown as the cause of the disintegration of Breedlove's family suffers from frustration and helplessness because of being black. These

circumstances were common to almost every black family. However, the failure did not result in the scattering of the family members in all cases. For example, there is MacTeer's family which also consists of the persons who are poor and black. There, the father does not burn his house, does not rape his daughter, does not beat his wife. On the other hand, the father proves himself as protecting and caring one. He looks after his family rather than destroying it. This clearly proves that Morrison's emphasis in this novel is on individual disintegration rather than collective disintegration.

Violence results in disintegration which further leads to loneliness. The characters perpetrate violence on each other in such a way that as a result, the recipients are left isolated. For example, in *The Bluest Eye*, Pecola feels isolated when she is neglected by everyone, she comes across. Cholly also feels somewhat lonely when his father disowns him. In *Beloved*, Sethe loses her mother when she was quite young. She also might have felt lonely when she is brought at the Sweet Home plantation without a father, brother, mother and friends. Though, for some time, she enjoys the company of husband, children, friends and the kind master and mistress. But, very soon, she is hurled into isolation. When she runs away from the plantation, she is traced by the school teacher, as a result she murders her daughter, is ostracised by the entire neighbourhood, her mother-in-law dies in grief, her husband fails to return and her only surviving daughter turns out to be a sensitive kind of girl. So, for eighteen years, she lives her life all alone.

This loneliness is portrayed producing negative results in *The Bluest Eye* and positive results in *Beloved*. For example, Cholly feels frustrated and

castrated when he is lonely. Pecola, because of sheer negligence, goes mad. On the contrary, in *Beloved*, Sethe who has spent eighteen years sans husband, sans community, only with a daughter who is too weak to go out, but Sethe is as obstinate as she was eighteen years before. Loneliness has not weakened her conviction in anyway regarding her act of infanticide. With sheer confidence, she speaks to Paul D that whatever she did was right.

Loneliness, which is the result of violence directed on the characters, is also presented as forced or self-imposed. For instance, in *The Bluest Eye*, a few characters are shown helpless. They are not given any choice. They have to accept whatever comes their way. For example, Pecola cannot help feeling segregated when she is rejected by her parents and her society. She has to live isolated whether she wishes or not. While in *Beloved*, the characters have a little bit of choice. No doubt, the masters did not seek their permission before offering them to the highest bidders. But still, there is some hope; if not in slavery then outside it. For example, Denver who stopped her outward escapades only because she was afraid of the questions that she might be asked regarding her mother's visit to jail along with her. Had Denver wished, she could have neglected such petty things, after all her mother was also going out for job. Denver remains all alone only when she is perturbed about such trivial happenings. By the time, she makes up her mind to go out and work, she finds people to talk and community to ask for.

Morrison, by dealing with the theme of violence, has unfolded her outlook on the world around her. She seems to be suggesting that violence is a perennial phenomenon active in one form or the other. Violence can be

perceived as larger metaphor for the obstacles and hardships that one has to face in one's life. Now, different persons respond to difficulties in different ways. Morrison presents a wide range of characters who try to cope with the oppressive forces in their own way.

There are individuals who surrender without putting any effort on their part. For example, Cholly and Pecola in *The Bluest Eye* surrender easily. Cholly, when asked to copulate by the white, complies unquestioningly with the wishes of the masters. Likewise, Pecola constantly craves for the blue eyes that she can never acquire. As a result, she goes out of her wits. Geraldine and Pauline also, on their part, imitate the ways of the white community. In *Beloved* as well, one meets Ella who also accepts her lot silently and later develops a negative attitude towards life.

However, there are characters who try to alter their fate by acting in accordance with their wishes. Though, they may sometimes face fiasco. They do not emerge as triumphant in the literal sense of the word. Still, their efforts win the reader's approval. For example, in *The Bluest Eye*, Claudia, a young black girl, refuses to accept the idea regarding beauty circulated by the dominant culture. She dismembers the white baby dolls and even beats Rose Merry, a white neighbourhood girl. All this proves that Claudia is a revolutionary girl. In *Beloved*, Sethe is also made of similar stuff. She decides to run away from the plantation instead of letting the school teacher lay his hands on her children. Her act of infanticide is yet another instance of her questioning nature.

A few individuals also respond to the hostile circumstances in lively and whole hearted manner. They console themselves with their own make-believe

hypothesis. In *The Bluest Eye*, three prostitutes are an example of such a kind. Though, they are black, they never consider themselves as inferior and outcast. They laugh whole heartedly, eat whole heartedly and concoct stories to Pecola.

In fact, their hatred is directed outward, that is why they live happily. Sixo, a Sweet Home man, in *Beloved*, is also of similar nature. When he dies, he is laughing and singing whole heartedly. The reason for this is that his thirty miles woman has already escaped with the seed of his baby inside her womb. Though, he is dying, his son, as he thinks, will be safe. However, certain other characters who run away from the scene without putting any battle, fail to win Morrison's attention. In fact, Morrison does not delineate such characters in detail. For instance, in *The Bluest Eye*, Sammy is not portrayed vividly. By the time he is fourteen, he has run away from his house twenty seven times. By the time the novel comes to an end, he is again told to have run away. In *Beloved*, Howard and Buglar are two such characters. They are so intimidated by Sethe's act of infanticide that they run away from their house as soon as they are capable of running.

Morrison's narrative world is so rich with the phenomenon of violence that one may criticise Morrison on several counts. The first charge that can be levelled against her is that she has presented a world of horror and terror. She creates a world where the moral values have gone upside down. It is a world forsaken by God. In this world, a father rapes his daughter, a mother kills her daughter and human beings are mercilessly beaten. At the surface level, the charge seems valid. But, after a thorough analysis, one concludes that there is a silver lining in the dark clouds. The positive side of the life is however not

absent altogether. For example, if there are parents like Mr. and Mrs. Breedlove who destroy their children, then there are the parents like Mr. and Mrs. MacTeer who protect their children. Likewise, if there are cruel masters like the school teacher and Brandy Wine who inflict miseries on the black, then there are Mr. Bodwin and Mr. Garner who consider the black as humans. Moreover, the reading of these novels produces feelings such as sympathy and appreciation for the victims.

The second charge that can be brought against Morrison is that of presenting a melodrama instead of a refined work of art. No doubt, blood freezing and hair rising incidents are the stuff on which the edifice of Morrison's novels is built, still, one can argue in defence of Toni Morrison. In melodrama, there is a note of exaggeration; the sensational incidents are created in abundance. In Morrison's fictional world, there is reality. She presents the actual life as it was lived by the black in the U.S.A. She graphically delineates the violence as it was inflicted on the black by the white in the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries.

Morrison can also be taken to task for being topical and limited in her approach. She shows how the black were subjected to physical, sexual and psychological agonies in America in the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries.

A great work of art has timeless appeal. Its subject matter is that of universal significance. Violence, as it is unleashed on the Afro-Americans by the Americans and vice-versa, limits the relevance and appeal of her novels to a certain kind of audience of a certain place. Here again, violence as a phenomena has always been the stuff of the great classics. The world, since time

immemorial, has been broadly divided into two parts: the powerful and the powerless. The powerful has always tried to exercise their power to sustain their domination. The powerless, on the other hand, have always resisted or at least tried to resist the oppressive system. The one, who is powerful, ultimately wins the battle. Now, this entire system of suppression and reaction has acquired the form of the coloniser versus the colonised, the ruler versus the ruled, men versus women and the white versus the black. In this way, the novels of Morrison have a universal and everlasting appeal.

Last, but not the least, Morrison can also be accused of creating novels of actions and incidents rather than novels of character. There are numerous scenes in her novels which seem to lend some weight to this charge. Yet one can argue that Morrison has not altogether neglected the characters in enthusiasm for portraying scenes with violence in the background. The characters have been portrayed with the psychological depth and the minute understanding of human nature. For example, in *Pecola*, one comes across a personality that is damaged altogether by her surroundings. By portraying Sethe, she seems to be dealing with a question as to how a woman can behave if her back is lacerated, milk is stolen, children are gone, husband is absent and society has declared her an outcast.

In a nutshell, by dealing with the theme of violence, Morrison achieves extraordinary outcomes. Primarily, due to this, her writings achieve a universal appeal. Secondly, she has presented the actual life of the black race in America. Then, she has produced a literature that can be put in contrast to the vast literature written on the theme of love. Moreover, she has made her readers

familiar with their own negative instincts that are generally buried beneath the veneer of civilization. She has tried her level best to deal with almost every form of violence such as: physical, sexual, verbal and emotional. To put it differently, she has presented violence in terms of gender, class, race, family and individuals.

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Treatment of Violence: A Study of Morrison's The Bluest Eye and Beloved

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