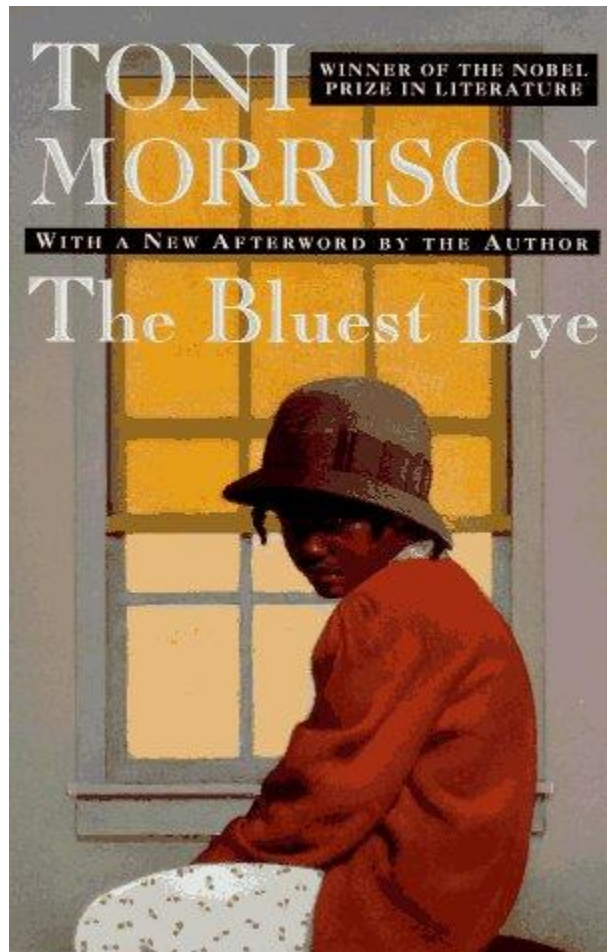


Blacks Estrangement and Journey for Individuality in the Select Novels of Toni Morrison

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Abstract

The persistent search for, and sometimes assertion of, an independent, integrated identity within a sphere that can be called one's own has been an insistent theme in writing by Afro-Americans, both past and present. Blacks, who once enjoyed freedom in their own ancestral home, are deprived of freedom in the new world. In course of their long years of servitude, they lost their individuality and as a result felt estranged. One has to remember that these Africans were brought as slaves and experienced the enslavement for centuries. Toni Morrison achieved

the impossible by becoming the first African – American to win the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1993. Here the author brings out the Blacks Estrangement and Journey for Individuality in the select novels of *The Bluest Eye* and *Beloved*.

Key words: Black Feminism, Racism, Classism, Black Slavery, Communal Integration, Culturalism, Tony Morrison

Introduction

Toni Morrison achieved the impossible by becoming the first African – American to win the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1993. She has added substantially to the body of African – American literature through both the fiction and critical essays.

Her critical essays add immensely to the canon of African – American aesthetics. They enlarge on the theme of African – American women novelist’s role. They give a velar understanding of black life, society and culture.

This persistent search for and sometimes assertion of an independent, integrated identity within a sphere that can be called one’s own has been as insistent theme in writings by Afro – Americans both past and present. And Morrison has dealt with this theme in all her novels. Obviously the Afro – Americans of later generations knew very little about their own African culture and traditions. White American world, for certain, dominated them and as a result they didn’t feel at home. So they quest for their individuality that would recognize them basically as humans.

Black’s Journey for Individuality

Morrison brings forth the notion through the characters that Blacks in their quest for individuality either succeed or succumb or go for a compromise. She warns that characters like Pecola succumb to the White hegemony and so it is highly impossible for them to find an identity. The epigrammatic opening of *The Bluest Eye* reveals the trauma of the young Black, Pecola.

The familiar opening of Dick and Jane reader foreshadows Pecola's devastating estrangement. Jane, in a red dress, wants to play. She approaches all the members of the family. Yet the mother who is described as "very nice", ironically, laughs at Jane's proposal to play with her. She does the smiling father. Even the cat and dog are no playmates in the story.

Here is the house. It is green and white. It has a red door. It is very Pretty. Here is the family, Mother, Father, Dick and Jane live in the Green - and white house. They are very happy. See Jane, she has a redDress. She wants to play. Who will play with Jane (1).

This picture ironically reveals Pecola's destiny. She is left lonely at the family level as well as without friends in society. This accentuates Morrison's point at the center of her novels – isolation of young Black girls and disruption of the Black cultural heritage – as revealed in *Sula*, *Song of Solomon* and *Tar Baby*

Pecola's Estrangement

Pecola's tragedy is due to her estrangement from family, friends and the Black community of Lorain, Ohio. The so-called society of the small Black town either pokes fun at Pecola or derives sadistic pleasure from her ruined state.

Even Claudia and Freida do not remain close to Pecola when she is raped by her father, Cholly Breedlove. The sympathetic friendly pair of her sisters is distanced from Pecola. Frieda and Claudia see Pecola sometimes after Pecola lapses into madness.

Pecola's isolation is complete when she retreats into her own world of madness, in which she deludes herself that the drunken father had not raped her. In this dream land, an imaginary friend is her only comfort and reassurance. She loves this newly won friend who assures her that she has the bluest eye in the world. Pecola's deranged nerves say a lot about the socio-economic and political oppression of little Black girls as they get estranged from Black and White America.

Dolls we could destroy, but we could not destroy the honey voices of parents and aunts, the obedience in the eyes of our peers, the slippery light in the eyes of our

teachers when they encountered the Maureen peals of the world. The thing to fear was the thing that made her beautiful and not us (72).

Claudia and Freida, Pecola's friends, too were Blacks and poor, but could recognize their individuality as they valued their identity. Right from the beginning their attitude was rigid towards White beauty.

Even when Mr. Henry playfully flatters them by calling Ginger Rogers and Greta Garbo, actresses who represented the ideal of White beauty in the 1940s, they were able to assume a critical stance toward this message of White superiority. Again when Maureen Peal came of their school, in private they make fun of her "dog tooth" and called her Meeingue pie.

Communal Individuality

But Pecola, on the other hand, unlike them, went blindly after White logos and in fact worshipped them. The White logos imprinted such an effect in her mind that she even in her insanity, remembered them.

And again when Pecola was pregnant, the whole Black community wanted the baby to die because they claimed it would be as "Black" and "ugly" as its parents. But Claudia asserted 'Blackness' in affirmative term that saved her from being estranged. The attitude and temperament of beloved are more or less similar to that of Claudia's. In *Beloved*, Morrison attempts to move her focus outside the sphere of influence of the White logos by centering her novel on a Black Community.

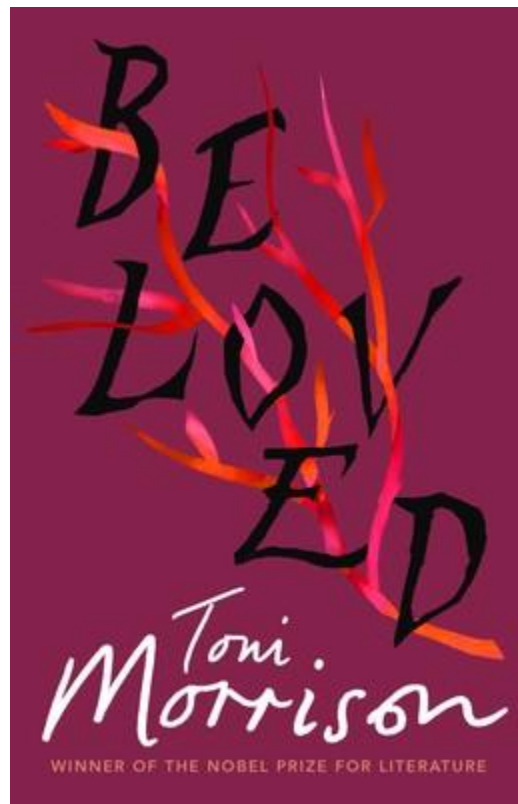
By continuously removing these White eyes, she brings into a focus a world which revolves around a Black cultural center, a community which is governed by Black mythology. And *Beloved's* journey for individuality takes place in this Black community unlike Pecola's. "You nasty little black bitch, get out of my house" (90).

The Bluest Eye

In *The Bluest Eye*, the White logos dominated Pecola and so she felt alienated but in *Beloved* the Black community itself serves as an obstacle in her quest for identity. But like Claudia and Freida, she is not ready to dedicate by the terms of her community.

In the body of American fiction and Indian English fiction written by women, crucial issues like female alienation and oppression are mirrored and artistically dealt with. One hears and feels the chords of an orchestration too deep to be vocalized. Yet the woman novelist under study has engraved an unique filigree in literary genre in her own light.

Beloved explores the physical, emotional and spiritual devastation wrought by slavery. This devastation continues to haunt the former slaves, even when they are free. The most dangerous of slavery's effects is its negative impact on the former slave sense of self. The novel contains multiple examples of former slave's self-estrangement.



Paul D's Estrangement

Among such slaves, an example is provided by Paul D, who is so estranged from himself that at one point he cannot tell whether the screaming he hears is his own or someone else.

Slaves were told that they were sub-human. They were traded as commodities whose worth could be expressed in dollars as per their slave value. Consequently, Paul D is very insecure about whether or not he is real 'man'. This makes him frequently wonder about his value as a person.

Sethe's Experience of Estrangement

Sethe also has the experience of having been treated as sub-human. She once chances to come upon schoolteacher giving his pupils a lesson on her 'animal characteristics' as a slave. At times, she too seems to be alienated from herself and filled with self-loathing.

Sethe sees the best part of herself in the form of her children. Yet her children too have volatile, unstable identities. Denver conflates her identity with Beloved's, and Beloved feels herself actually beginning to disintegrate physically. Slavery also limits Baby Suggs's self-conception by shattering her family and denying her the opportunity to be a true wife, sister, daughter, or loving mother.

There is a loneliness that can be rocked. Arms crossed, knees drawn up; holding, holding on, this motion, unlike a ship's, smoothes and contains the rocker. It's an inside kind-wrapped tight like skin. Then there is a lonely-ness that roams. No rocking can hold it down. It is alive, on its own. A dry and spreading thing that makes the sound of one's own feet going seem to come from a far-off place (274).

Effect of Inability to Believe in the Meaning of Existence

As a result of their inability to believe in the meaning of their own existence, both Baby Suggs and Paul D feel depressed and tired. Baby Suggs's fatigue appears to be more of a spiritual kind, whereas Paul D's is more of emotional nature. While a slave, Paul D developed self-defeating strategies to protect him from the emotional pain he was forced to endure. Any feelings he had were locked away in the rusted "tobacco tin" of his heart, and he concluded that one should love nothing too intensely.

Sense of Loss of Self Leads to Insanity

There are, however, some other slaves whose sense of loss of self is so complete that they literally go insane. These include Jackson Till, Aunt Phyllis and Halle. Even Sethe fears that she

too will end her days in madness. A kind of madness does overtake her when she kills her own baby. However, this act of madness may be constructed as a kind of sanity, because Sethe's act of infanticide illuminated the perverse forces of the institution of slavery. Under and thus slavery, a mother best expresses her love for her children by murdering them and thus protecting them from more invidious physical and moral degradation and destruction wrought by slavery.

The schoolteacher arrived to put things in order. But what he did broke three more Sweet Home men and punched the glittering iron out of Sethe's eyes, leaving two open wells that did not reflect firelight (15).

Slavery quite often works like a double-edged sword degrading not only the slaves but also the masters. Stamp paid muses that slavery's negative consequences are not limited to the slaves. He notes that slavery causes the whites to become 'changed and altered, made bloody, silly, worse than they ever wanted to be'. The insidious effects to the institution damage not only the individualities of its black victims but those of the whites also who perpetrate it and even the collective identity of the Americans.

Slavery Causes Loss of Humanity and Compassion

Where slavery exists, everyone suffers a loss of humanity and compassion. For this reason, Morrison suggests that the individualities of America, like that of the slaves of the novel, must be made whole. America's future depends on its understanding of the past; just as Sethe must come to terms with her past before she can secure a future with Denver and Paul D, before we can address slaver's legacy in the contemporary problems of racial discrimination and discord, Americans must confront the dark and hidden corner of their history.

Conclusion

In these ways, identification whether from Black to White or White to Black-emerges as a complex, highly charged and multi-faceted phenomenon, linking the violent histories of slavery, colonialism and racial oppression by which they are traversed. They are sights of political struggle and friction; the crossings of identification constitute spaces in others where psychic and historic realities, the subjective and the ideological, dramatically collide.

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