

LANGUAGE IN INDIA

Strength for Today and Bright Hope for Tomorrow

Volume 12 : 5 May 2012

ISSN 1930-2940

Managing Editor: M. S. Thirumalai, Ph.D.

Editors: B. Mallikarjun, Ph.D.

Sam Mohanlal, Ph.D.

B. A. Sharada, Ph.D.

A. R. Fatihi, Ph.D.

Lakhan Gusain, Ph.D.

Jennifer Marie Bayer, Ph.D.

S. M. Ravichandran, Ph.D.

G. Baskaran, Ph.D.

L. Ramamoorthy, Ph.D.

Assistant Managing Editor: Swarna Thirumalai, M.A.

Black Women and Racial Stereotypes: A Black Feminist Reading of Morrison's Novels

Khamsa Qasim

Mazhar Hayat

Uzma Asmat



Toni Morrison

Courtesy: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Toni_Morrison

Challenging the Negative Representation of Black Women

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

12 : 5 May 2012

Khamsa Qasim, Mazhar Hayat and Uzma Asmat

Black Women and Racial Stereotypes: A Black Feminist Reading of Morrison's Novels

Many black women writers have challenged the negative representation of black women in their fiction but Morrison's novels not only challenge those stereotypes but also destroy them. Her novels give us deep insight into black women's minds and souls. She makes us listen to the voice of the suppressed group who are left out of literature. Black women are not positively defined by the dominant discourse. In her novels, she presents black women as subjects who try to cultivate positive identity in a very hostile world.

Collins in Black Feminist Thought points out the logic behind the negative representation of black women. She says that no system of oppression can work without "powerful ideological justification."¹ Thus the portrayal of black women as the breeders, mummies, matriarchs, and hot girls, women with the deviant sexuality, welfare recipients and the ugly and unfeminine creatures justifies their oppression. The portrayal of black women as others is enough to justify any kind of oppression. This negative representation has caused great harm to them and presents just the one side of reality. It distorts their true image. Morrison makes us see the other side of the coin. Thus the destruction of those prevailing and controlling images gives birth to a new definition.

Challenging the Stereotypes

Morrison's black female characters challenge all the stereotypical negative images which are associated with black women. They are considered extremely ugly as compared to delicate and beautiful white ladies who are equally admired and appreciated by both black and white men. Linda Peach says that skin lightening and hair straightening creams are basically "a part of the process" which denies black women subjectivity and

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

12 : 5 May 2012

Khamsa Qasim, Mazhar Hayat and Uzma Asmat

Black Women and Racial Stereotypes: A Black Feminist Reading of Morrison's Novels

the “history that was in their bodies.” The white standard of beauty dominates the American society. Straight hair, blue eyes and white skin are the symbol of beauty while dark skin is “associated with ugliness and lack of morality.”² Collins says that the derogatory representation of black women enhances the value of white women. In binary thinking, “blue-eyed, blond thin white woman” can not be called beautiful without black women. They are others and their African features, kinky hair, lips, nose are associated with ugliness.³ It is almost impossible to live in any society without internalizing its standard of beauty. Black women are forced to accept the white standard of beauty which is accepted by both white and black men.

What Critics Say

Naomi Wolf in The Beauty Myth says that one hurdle in the struggle for equality that all women have yet to face is the myth of female beauty. She calls it a destructive form of social control. She argues that during early 1970s, the standard of beauty was very rigid and it was almost impossible for women to attain that ideal and especially “women of colour were seldom shown as role models.” She also criticizes the prevailing controlling images which are used to dominate women all around the world and argues that “beauty is not universal and changeless; though the west pretends that all ideals of female beauty stem from one platonic ideal woman.....Beauty is a currency system like the gold standard. Like any economy it is determined by politics.”⁴ These ideal images of beauty promoted by the cosmetic industry and the white racist society are used to humiliate black women. They do not allow alternate images and standards .In the absence

of alternate images which might validate and endorse a kind of virtue not linked to physical beauty, black girls begin to hate themselves.

Lisa William says that in her first novel The Bluest Eye, Morrison narrates the story of eleven years old girl, Pecola Breedlove, who is silenced and destroyed by her own “internalized self hatred.” She hates her darkness and longs for white skin and blue eyes. She believes that white features like white skin and blue eyes will help her gain entry to all that has excluded her. This small self-hating poor girl is silenced by sexual abuse and racial self-contempt. She finally finds retreat into a world of madness and cannot express her muted anger. In The Bluest Eye Morrison examines the very conditions that become the cause of Pecola’s destruction. Her blackness becomes the cause of her marginalization. Morrison establishes her own identity as a writer by giving voice to the “erased presence” of a poor black girl. She is “the ultimate other, the most outsider member” of the community in which she lives.⁵ In her afterword to The Bluest Eye, Morrison writes,

“I focused, therefore, on how something as grotesque as the demonization of an entire race could take roots inside the most delicate member of the society: a child, the most vulnerable member: a female. In trying to dramatize the devastation that even casual racial contempt can cause, I chose a unique situation, not a representative one. The extremity of Pecola’s case stemmed largely from a crippled and crippling family- unlike the average black family and unlike the narrator’s. But singular as Pecola’s life was, I believed aspects of her woundability were lodged in all young girls.”⁶

The Bluest Eye

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

12 : 5 May 2012

Khamsa Qasim, Mazhar Hayat and Uzma Asmat

Black Women and Racial Stereotypes: A Black Feminist Reading of Morrison’s Novels



In The Bluest Eye, Morrison depicts a society in which race class and gender prejudices destroy its most vulnerable member, an eleven years old poor black girl. She is the victim of the devastating effects of the western notions of beauty. Morrison does not give voice to Pecola. Her story is narrated by her friend Claudia Macteer who analyses the disastrous effects of internalized racism. She affirms her identity by criticizing the white notion of beauty. William says,” the construction of white womanhood serves to affect negatively such female characters as Pecola and her mother Pauline, who consider themselves ugly when compared to white western standard of femininity.”⁷ The images of white beauty are promoted through movies and advertisements. These movies portray white woman as a symbol of beauty. Pecola and her mother accept white middle class values of womanhood and strive to become like the delicate white ladies. As Morrison writes in the novel The Bluest Eye, “She was never able, after her education in the movies, to look at a face and not assign it some category in the scale of absolute beauty, and the scale was one she absorbed in full from the silver screen.” Movies introduce her to “probably the most destructive ideas in the history of human thought.” That’s why she

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

12 : 5 May 2012

Khamsa Qasim, Mazhar Hayat and Uzma Asmat

Black Women and Racial Stereotypes: A Black Feminist Reading of Morrison’s Novels

cannot love her baby girl and finds her terribly ugly, as she says, “her head full of pretty hair, but lord she was ugly.”⁸ Breedlove family is convinced of their own ugliness. They are considered aggressively ugly people, “they had looked about themselves and saw nothing to contradict the statement: saw, infact, support for it leaning at them from every billboard, every movie, and every glance.” Pecola’s faith in her own ugliness makes her more ugly and she often herself behind that mask,” Concealed, veiled, eclipsed---peeping out from behind the shroud very seldom, and then only to yearn for the return of her mask.”⁹ Pecola becomes the symbol of ugliness. She does not know her beauty and only see herself from the eyes of other people. William says that she “is deemed ugly by virtue of her race, passive because of her gender.”¹⁰

Pecola is always perceived as nobody, as other and ugly. She can feel the distaste for her blackness in the eyes of all white people. Her longing for whiteness depicts her desire for love and care. She wants to transcend the indifferent hostile gaze of white world and this desire can only be fulfilled by possessing blue eyes. She aspires for an impossible goal.

As the novel tells, Pecola cannot fight against the oppressive tendencies of white society but her friend Claudia knows how to fight: her ability to think prevents her from internalizing those destructive images. She does not like Shirley Temple, the symbol of white beauty, who is adored and worshipped by Pecola. Unlike Pecola who has no center to rely on, she guards and protects her center. Claudia is younger than Frieda and Pecola but still she feels hatred for “all the Shirley Temple of the world”. She dislikes the delicate white dolls. She questions and desires to find out why the magazines,

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

12 : 5 May 2012

Khamsa Qasim, Mazhar Hayat and Uzma Asmat

Black Women and Racial Stereotypes: A Black Feminist Reading of Morrison’s Novels

newspapers, media, television, even the sign on the windows are agreed that only the blue-eyed, “yellow haired and pink-skinned doll” is the best doll. She dislikes all the prevailing images and loves to destroy them. Claudia also reveals a very horrifying truth that how by loving the white dolls, the black girls begin to love the white girls like Shirley Temple. She says “the truly horrifying” is “the transference of the same impulses to little white girls.”¹¹ In the meanwhile Claudia emerges as a strong character, who challenges all these standards and tries to find positive answers. She thinks and questions that why Maureen Peal, one of the beautiful white girl calls Pecola ugly. She wonders what makes them call us ugly when we are so comfortable with our blackness. She loves to admire her dirt and is unable to understand this sense of “unworthiness”. She tries to find the root cause and says that one cannot blame and hate Maureen Peal. “The thing to fear was the thing that made her beautiful and not us”.¹² Claudia adores her black skin, her scars; she finds consolation in her own darkness. She refuses to be defined by others. William says that Claudia’s love for herself protects her. This love guards her center. Her perception helps her to transcend the gaze of others who consider her worthless and ugly. Unlike Pecola Claudia is taught by her father how to “resist abuse and fight back”. The position of black girls in a racist society is very vulnerable. Men try to take advantage of those girls who stand “at the bottom of hierarchal order.”¹³

To Hit the Raw Nerve

In her afterword to The Bluest Eye, she writes that her novel tries to “hit the raw nerve of racial self-contempt”. It exposes it and soothes it

“with language that replicated the agency I discovered in my first experience of beauty. Because that moment was so racially infused (my revulsion at what my school friend wanted: very blue eyes in a very black skin, the harm she was doing to my concept of beautiful)...Implicit her desire was racial self-loathing and twenty years later I was still wondering about how one learns that, and who told her? Who made her feel that it was better to be a freak than what she was? Who had looked at her and found her so wanting, so small a weight on the beauty scale?”¹⁴

Blackness and Invisibility

The idea of blackness is always associated with invisibility. William says that Morrison creates Pecola’s character to throw light upon the class, gender and racial prejudices which can sabotage “its more vulnerable members.”¹⁵ Unlike Pecola Claudia successfully creates a self-affirming identity independent of internalized images of whiteness. She defies the hierarchy of domination by nurturing her own life and finding words for grief while Pecola internalizes self-hatred. Through Pecola’s character, Morrison gives voice to the silenced girl, the most marginalized member of the society.

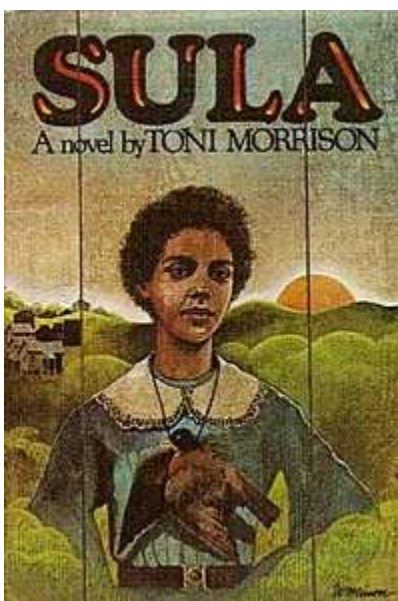
The Mammy Image

The mammy image is also used to exploit black women. It is widely used for black slave women. Collins describes mammy as domestic servant in the white family. She is very faithful obedient and submissive. This image is created to justify all sort of economic and sexual exploitation of black women. Mammy has no identity. She is always defined in relation to black family. This image is used to justify black women’s “long standing restriction to domestic service”. The mammy provides a “normative

yardstick” through which the dominant group judges all coloured women. She is well liked by the white families. She is so loyal to them that she can even sacrifice her own children just to serve them.¹⁶ Cherly Gilkes says that black women emerged from slavery enshrined in the consciousness of white America as “mammy” and “bad black woman.”¹⁷ This image is created for the social and economic exploitation of house slaves. She represents the dominant group’s perceptions of the ideal black female. She enjoys considerable authority in the white family but still she is just an obedient servant who has internalized her subordination. Black women writers have aggressively criticized the image of African American women as mammies. Literary critic, Trudier Harris’s (1982) Volume Mammies to Militants: Domesticity in Black American Literature states the difference how black women are negatively portrayed by the dominant groups and how they portray themselves. Barbara Christian argues that all the “function of mammy are magnificently physical.”¹⁸ Mammy is harmless.

All black feminist writers have strongly disliked and criticized this image. Morrison not merely challenges and destroys this image but also tries to evaluate the factors which force black women to choose such a role. The strong black women have power to cultivate their own identity but the weak and the most vulnerable among them have internalized oppression. This internalization destroys their ability to respond, to feel and to claim a positive identity. The prevailing oppression usually destroys their ability to love. Morrison records the voices of those women who refuse to be defined as objects.

Challenge to the Mammy Image: Eva in The Novel *Sula*



In her novel Sula, Morrison creates a memorable character, Eva, who presents strong challenge to mammy image. She is the most unprivileged black mother who has been left by her husband. Her self respect does not allow her to beg. She sacrifices her leg in order to support her family. Williams says that Eva with the haunting image of one leg depicts what steps a single black woman can take to save her family. She does not become a mammy but emerges as a strong black woman who protects her self respect at any cost.¹⁹ As the text tells us, she sacrifices her leg but refuses to beg. Her husband called BoyBoy is a womanizer. He likes “womanizing best” “drinking second” and “abusing Eva third”. BoyBoy has left Eva in a very helpless and miserable situation. She has just “\$ 1.65” and “five eggs” with none to rely on. Eva bears pain just for the sake of her children. She sacrifices her youth and beauty just to save them. The disappearance of Eva’s leg gives birth to rumors, somebody says that “Eva stuck it under a train and made them pay off. While other people say that she sells it to the hospital for \$ 10,000” Mr.

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

12 : 5 May 2012

Khamsa Qasim, Mazhar Hayat and Uzma Asmat

Black Women and Racial Stereotypes: A Black Feminist Reading of Morrison’s Novels

Reed is surprised to hear the breaking news “ nigger al” legs are sold for \$ 10,000 as though “ he could understand \$ 10,00 a pair---- but for one leg”. Eva’s act is heroic. She is so devoted to her children that “she decided to postpone her revenge for two years”²⁰

Eva is a strong black mother who faces every kind of oppression courageously. Through Eva’s character Morrison challenges passive and pathetic image of black mother. She stands for all single black mothers who learn to resist and fight back. She learns to live for her children. Williams says that Eva sacrifices her leg but refuses to become a low paid domestic worker in a white family. In this way “she shatters the mammy stereotype of black women”.²¹

The Breeder Image

The other controlling image is that of a breeder. The image of the breeder was also exploited during the age of slavery. This image still persists. In The Bluest Eye, when Pauline gets admitted into hospital to deliver a baby, she also experiences racial prejudice. When an old doctor along with the young one comes to examine her, he tells his companions that they don’t have to face any trouble with black women. They do not feel pain and give birth “just like horses”. Their remarks show that they consider her the breeder. They talk and console the white woman but do not say a word to her. Pauline reacts in a very different way, when she feels the labor pain, she is glad to have them. She can control the pain but she moans loudly to make them feel that it is “more than a bowl movement”. She is a woman and feels like woman. Her darkness does not make her less human. Her silence shows her courage not her senselessness. If she does not cry, it does not mean pain is not there. The pain is there in her eyes. Pauline challenges the racial

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

12 : 5 May 2012

Khamsa Qasim, Mazhar Hayat and Uzma Asmat

Black Women and Racial Stereotypes: A Black Feminist Reading of Morrison’s Novels

stereotype of a breeder.²² Black women are also presented as passive silent sufferers. Sula challenges this image. Sula is a rebellious independent black woman. She is a non-conformist, daring enough to challenge all the social norms. She dares to transcend or violate all the boundaries. When Sula's friend Nel visits her on death bed she makes her realize her limitation as a woman. She tells her that a woman cannot act like a man; especially a black woman cannot do whatever she likes. She criticizes her acts and says,

“you can't do it all. You woman and colored women at that. You can't act like a man. You can't be walking around all independent-like, doing whatever you like, taking what you want, leaving what you don't”.²³

Sula: An Adventurer

Sula is an adventurer and a wanderer. She destroys the so-called obedient, passive image of black woman. Williams says that Sula is “an outsider, a wanderer, who remains on the periphery of all boundaries.” She says that in appreciating Sula, Morrison stresses on the artist “need to experiment, to think, to do the outrageous.” This is an effort to claim an individual voice. Sula does what she likes; she challenges the traditional gender roles and acts “in ways that are associated with men.”²⁴

In an interview with Robert Stepto, Morrison says, “Sula examines herself, she is experimental with herself, she's perfectly willing to think the unthinkable and so on.”²⁵ Sula is artist who rejects the dominant and hegemonic values of her community. She defies the traditional gender roles. She acts and lives like a man. Morrison says, “She picks a man, drops a man, the same way a man picks up a woman, drops a woman. And that's her thing. She is masculine in that sense. She's adventuresome, she trusts herself,

she's not scared, she's really ain't scared .And she is curious and leaves and tries anything. So that quality of masculinity--- and I mean this in the pure sense--- in a woman at that time is outrageous, totally outrage.”²⁶ Sula’s death shows how difficult and painful it is for a black female artist to dare to live and survive in a racist society. As William says, “her death is emblematic of the many unrecorded death of black women, and most importantly, her death is the outcome of an intense frustration that occurs when a female artist does not indeed find an appropriate form for her creativity.”²⁷ Thus Sula challenges the stereotypical representation of black women in fiction. By sabotaging these stereotypes Morrison attempts to rewrite the lost histories of the black American women whose positive images and stories have been eradicated by the dominant culture.

=====

End Notes

¹Patricia Hill Collins, Black Feminist Thought (New York: Routledge, 2000)69-70.

²Linda Peach, Toni Morrison (Hounds mill (Eng): Macmillan, 1998)139.

³Collins, Black Feminist Thought 89-90.

⁴Naomi Wolf, The Beauty Myth (New York: Harper Collin.2002) 6-12.

⁵Lisa William, Introduction, Artist as Outsider in the Novels of Toni Morrison and Virginia Woolf. (Westport: Greenwood Press 2001)54.

⁶Toni Morrison, Afterword, The Bluest Eye (New York: Plume, 1970)210.

⁷William 57.

⁸Toni Morrison, The Bluest Eye 122-126.

- ⁹Morrison, The Bluest Eye 39.
- ¹⁰Williams 63.
- ¹¹Morrison, The Bluest Eye 22.
- ¹²Morrison, The Bluest Eye 74.
- ¹³Williams 67.
- ¹⁴Morrison, Afterword, The Bluest Eye 207-210.
- ¹⁵Williams 104.
- ¹⁶Collins 72-78.
- ¹⁷(qtd. in Collins 73)
- ¹⁸Collins 73.
- ¹⁹Lisa Williams, The Artist as an Outsider in the Fiction of Toni Morrison and Virginia Woolf (London: Greenwood Press, 2000) 111.
- ²⁰Toni Morrison, Sula (London: Vintage, 1973) 31-34.
- ²¹Williams 111-113
- ²²Morrison, The Bluest Eye 125-127.
- ²³Morrison, Sula 142.
- ²⁴Williams 104
- ²⁵Williams 103-104
- ²⁶(qtd. in Williams 104)
- ²⁷Williams 120

=====

Khamsa Qasim
Lecturer in English

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

12 : 5 May 2012

Khamsa Qasim, Mazhar Hayat and Uzma Asmat

Black Women and Racial Stereotypes: A Black Feminist Reading of Morrison's Novels

Govt. College University
Faisalabad
Pakistan
khamsaqasim@yahoo.com

Mazhar Hayat
Assistant Professor
Govt College University
Faisalabad
Pakistan

Uzma Asmat
Lecturer in English
Govt.College University
Faisalabad
Pakistan

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

12 : 5 May 2012

Khamsa Qasim, Mazhar Hayat and Uzma Asmat

Black Women and Racial Stereotypes: A Black Feminist Reading of Morrison's Novels