

Psychological Agonies in Toni Morrison's Novels 'The Bluest Eye' and 'Beloved': A Comparative Study

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Abstract:

Toni Morrison is the most celebrated writer of African American literature. She strongly attacked upon the western ideology of racism, sexism and classicism and initiates the idea of feminism, equality and brotherhood. She gave the platform to the muted voice of Africans by her writing. *The Bluest Eye* is her debut novel while *Beloved* is her most celebrated and Pulitzer Prize winning novel. The stories of the novels narrate about the Africans who were brought as a slave to America. They were judged by the eyes of Eurocentric cultured people and graded as secondary by them. The African descents failed to established their identity as African in America. The white beauty standards confront the identity of Africans and making them uncomfortable with black skin. This resulted in psychological agony. The stereotype black and white become barriers in their development. Their poverty and unemployment are major cause of their frustration and psychological ailments. In her novels generally it can be traces that sexism paralyzed and infected the mind and sensibility of black women. In *The Bluest Eye* (1970) Pecola Breedlove and in *Beloved* (1987) Sethe are the victim who are mentally oppressed. Although both are suffered with racism, sexism and classicism but their conditions are different. Pecola was raped by her own father while Sethe is raped by a white man who is her master in Sweet home. Morrison brutally depicted their situation which make the reader cry. This paper conducts a comparative study of psychological agonies in the *Bluest Eye* and *Beloved*, focusing on the roots of trauma, the manifestation of psychological suffering and the narrative strategies Morrison employs to represent mental distress. Through a psychoanalytical and trauma theory lens, the analysis will consider how these novels depicts the mental collapse, endurance or healing of characters shaped by a legacy of racialized violence.

Keywords: Psychological Agonies, Identity crisis, racism, White supremacy, Slavery, Inhumanity.

Introduction:

Toni Morison was the first African American writer to win the Nobel prize in literature. she was born as Chloe Anthony Wofford on Feb 18, 1931 in Lorain Ohio. Although she grew up in semi-integrated area, racial discrimination was a constant threat. She faced many challenges in her life. This is the reason, she presented the live picture of slavery, racism, slavery and femininity in her novels. Her novels are recognized for her microscopic scrutiny of characters, epic themes, and assortment of dialogues. Morrison's works continued to influence writers and artist through her commentaries on race relations. Her novels are marked by profound exploration of trauma, memory, identity and lingering effects of

historical violence such as slavery racism and cultural dislocation. Her best novels are *The Bluest Eye*, *Sula*, *Song of Solomon*, *Beloved* and *God Help the Child*. She won the Pulitzer Prize and the American Book Award in 1988 for *Beloved* and the Nobel Prize in literature in 1993.

The *Bluest Eye* and *Beloved* is most famous novel of Toni Morrison. In the *Bluest Eye* and *Beloved*, Morrison presents complex portrayal of characters who endure profound psychological agonies rooted in both experiences and collective historical suffering. It is the best way to apply psychological theory to understand the real sense of the novel. The protagonist of both the novel was suffering with psychological agonies. The story of the novels based on the real incidents. The *Bluest Eye* is based on the story of a little girl in Ohio who met with Morrison in her childhood, while *Beloved* is about the life of Margaret Garner who suffered with slavery and the great example of middle passage. *Bluest Eye* exposes the devastating impact of systematic racism, self-hatred and familial dysfunction. In contrast, *Beloved* set after the American civil war, deals with the haunting legacy of slavery through the character of Sethe, a formerly enslaved woman who is tormented by her traumatic past and the ghost of her deceased daughter.

The *Bluest Eye* embodies the plight of the Black community of America especially its women. The story revolves around a little girl Pecola Breedlove. Because of her parent's negligence, she goes to the state of alienation from where she never returns. Because of black color, she becomes a subject of racial discrimination in the society. Pecola's father makes her pregnant in his lust. She is alienated physically and mentally from the society and also from her family.

In *Beloved* Morrison represent the horrific effects of slavery. The Black women are shown as the victim of slavery, American racism, maltreatment, exploitation, rape and subjugation. Being treated as animals, millions of women bear the scars of slavery on their bodies with embittered souls. Sethe, the protagonist of the novel, killed her baby daughter to save her from slavery system and justified her act saying, "I took and put my babies where they'd be safe." She did not want her daughter face the same troubles as she has suffered in her life. Koolish explains the Sethe's trauma as, "erupts in the form of a ghost, a spectral reminder that the past can not be buried." (MELUS 172)

Women have been standing on the crossroads for the centuries. Their existence has been by and large peripheral. They have been treated as 'other'. A sense of inferiority, has always been a cause of mental turmoil and sufferings of women physical as well as mental exploitation has been a part of their life. women have been suffering since ages on the basis of race, caste, culture, religion and gender discrimination. They are the victims of the dual oppression due to orthodox and dogmatic social norms. Women are marginalized not only in cultural beliefs, but have been oppressed and exploitation through political, economic, social and physical forms of power. If we examine the history of world, the condition of women in general has been that of a subalternized lot but the black women have undergone the worst atrocities. The subjugation and exploitation of African American women has its root in racism and slavery. The miserable condition of black in America started during the 17th century with forced migration of millions of Africans from the interior of the west coast of Africa. In European colonies, the enslaved Africans were sold. They were brought to America for the employment perspectives. The blacks were illiterate living in poverty. The white took it as a golden opportunity to exploit and rule over them. During that epoch, the black women had to face numerous difficulties. They were used like commodities and were brought and sold for field works. This section of society has been treated brutally. After the abolition of slavery system, they were taken to the house of their white masters as domestic servant. The white never regards them as human beings. They were not only suppressed by the white master but also by their own men. Black women are the victim of triple oppression- class, gender and cast. Despite a lot of progress

worldwide a large section of black women is still getting the same cruel and harsh treatment in the hands of their own men. They are not safe in their homes even at the hands of close relations. Rape, molestation, physical torcher and mental agony are the common phenomenon of their lives. The tragedy of their life is that their own men prefer white women to them.

Toni Morrison's novels stress the need for self-discovery and self-identity leading to self-actualization. They emphasize the individual self's need to actualize his or her minor potentiality in order to enhance self-esteem. Morrison portrays the alienated individual's odyssey for attaining the integration of the self by assimilating or discarding the social values of the community they live in.

Morrison presented the trauma of black life. She universalizes oppression where blacks torment blacks, white oppress blacks, women are against women, parents torture their children etc. the picture of black life that emerges from her novel indeed harrowing.

The Bluest Eye is the story of a young black girl Pecola Breedlove, her inability to either understand or adjust to the ways of the world around her and the consequences thereof. The sultry and harrowing tale of the blacks, especially that of Pecola Breedlove, appears more miserable in contrast with warmth, love and security of the MacTeer household who though poor are able to give their offsprings their love. The Bluest Eye through its strong narrative voice gives a sensitive delineation of the miseries of the black life.

Morrison's fifth novel, *Beloved*, published in 1987, is unique in many respects. This critically acclaimed masterpiece is beyond all shade of doubt to win her the Pulitzer Prize in 1988. This novel holds up a faithful mirror to all the physical and psychological horrors of the institution of slavery. The magnificent piece, written by the author in a mood of righteous indignation is subdued by a sense of sobriety and restraint. The author with her matchless creative imagination has woven historical facts into a magnificent novel. The whole dehumanized drama of the darkest period of the new continent that continued for three centuries has been unveiled beautifully by her through the present work. The motto of this supreme genius is to present the hoary African culture, the traditions of their ancestors, the ethos of their race and finally to protect their racial identity. She is a formidable champion of her racial integrity and wisdom largely preserved in their folklore. She has created a new consciousness for her community and taught them to respect their own racial status and identity. She has successfully educated her community in the right direction especially during a point of time when they felt proud of being derogatively addressed as mulattoes.

The psychological sufferings, indescribable agonies, the physical torture beyond human endurance and more have been vividly described by her. This rare genius has thoroughly imbibed the all-embracing spirit of the collective suffering of those nameless victims and translated their harrowing experiences into knowledge. She has equally exhorted the African American readers in particular to dwell on the horrors perpetuated by white slaveowners. During Antebellum period, particularly in the year after the War of 1812 to 1815 and before the Civil War from 1861 to 1865, and following the circulation of the great Emancipation Act, the slave-narratives were expelled. The action of the story began in 1873 exactly eighteen years after the civil war came to an end. Although the great Emancipation Act was promulgated in practice, it was ineffectual and the people were trying to forget the nightmarish period of slavery. In Kentucky, there was a plantation named „Sweet Home“ owned by Mr. Garner and his wife. Mr. Garner was very kind, treated his slaves as men and his slaves in return loved him, but the slave-master somewhere within him was not inclined to leave them to freedom.

All this happened thirty years before 1873. Paul D and his two brothers, Paul A and Paul F, Sixo and Sethe were slaves at “Sweet Home” when Baby Suggs, an elderly slave woman, joined them with her only son,

Halle just aged 14. Baby Suggs was crippled but gentle. Compared to all the other plantations, the Sweet Home was a miniature-Eden or Paradise and richly worthy of its name. Their master was so loving and kind that the inmates of Sweet Home regarded him as their god. The other slave owners used to feel jealous of Mr. Garner. But unfortunately for the slaves of Sweet Home, Mr. Garner passed away and his wife found it difficult to manage the plantation. As a result, she brought her husband's brother-in-law, popularly known as schoolteacher as the caretaker of Sweet Home. The ill-fated slaves were hereafter heavily scarred and treated worse than animals. All of them had different horrifying experiences of slavery and their narratives were distinct from each other. Hence, they made every effort to escape from the plantation. Above all, Schoolteacher was perhaps the cruelest character without any of kindness that Morrison had ever created. He was indeed a reminiscent of Hitler, an embodiment of horror and the greatest sadist under the canopy of Heavens. All the slaves were stripped away from their voices, language and narrative in a way that their sense of self almost diminished. They tried to repress these bad memories and, in the process, lost their true identity.

Actually, all throughout the novel the horrors of slavery hung over the characters and one could easily notice from their interactions and recollections of all their past struggles. His deeds of wickedness had no end as Sixo was burnt alive, Paul A hanged, Paul D tortured by all kinds of imaginable devices and Sethe, the protagonist of the novel, was abused physically, mentally and psychologically. Morrison has paid attention on the psychological repercussions of rape and abuse through the character of Sethe in *Beloved*. She was stripped away from her voice, language and narrative in a way that her sense of self almost diminished. A famous critic, Robin E. Field has captivated on the author's representation of these psychological traumas as "Such is the case with Sethe, the most prominent of the novel's many sufferers, who bears the physical scars of slavery's terrible violence upon her back" (3). Just like all the others, Sethe too tried to romanticize her pain and portrayed the same as a turning point in her life. She even tried to beautify all the pain inflicted on her by interpreting the scars on her back as in the shape of "Choke-cherry tree". Besides, Schoolteacher's mentally tortured and humiliated her by encouraging his nephews to suck milk from her breasts during her pregnancy, after getting married to Halle. As he watched the humiliating sight of stealing milk from the loft, helplessly ran away from Sweet Home and never returned again. Thereafter her life became a complete tragedy.

Just like everything else, the author tries to express that human endurance too has its own limits. Once it becomes unbearable or beyond the level of endurance, the spirit in man rebels. At this point of the novel, the very human spirit is squeezed and squashed to nothingness through the barbarous treatment of the slaves. Just against the same background, Sethe, runs away to escape from unbearable agonies of slavery. She gets pregnant for the fourth time and about to deliver her baby at any moment before being ferried to the other side of the Ohio River. Fortunately for her, Amy Denver, a young white lady and an indentured worker helps Sethe in delivering the baby during the hour of great distress. In return the mother names the baby, Amy Denver, in the honor of that white lady. Then Stamp Paid, another co-worker, ferries both the mother and her new born baby to the other side of the Ohio safely and Sethe becomes a free woman for a short period of time. Sethe enjoys her so called freedom only for twenty -eight days till School teacher along with the slave catchers makes his appearance at Baby Suggs, her mother-in-law's house where her two sons, Howard, Bugler and daughter, *Beloved*, are seen with their grandmother. It becomes the moment of crisis for the mother and she is rather "trying to put her babies where they would be safe". She instinctively feels that she would rather kill her children than send them back to the veritable hell of slavery. In a fit of madness, she loses her sense of judgment and maternal instinct.

Finally, the mother's psychological fear dominates over her love for the child. She commits the most heinous and sinful act of infanticide. She slashes the throat of two-year-old daughter, Beloved and the poor baby instantaneously dies in a pool of blood. "Sethe believes death to be a kinder alternative than rape," and that is the mentality that drives her to seek such protection for her daughter. According to the famous critic, Pamela E Barnett, Sethe's actions can be analyzed as, "For Sethe, being brutally overworked, maimed, or killed is subordinate to the overarching horror of being raped and "dirtied" by whites; even dying at the hands of one's mother is subordinate to rape" (419) Baby Suggs and others at that moment try to prevent her from killing the other three children. The reader at this moment feels pity for the unfortunate child and the infanticide mother, but the author manages to draw one's attention on the mind-boggling acts of cruelties carried out by Schoolteacher. Ultimately, he becomes responsible for the ghastliest deed of Sethe's killing her own baby. The author has succeeded in her endeavor to impress the reader about the inhuman attitude of slave-owners towards the slaves. Schoolteacher gets shocked at the ghastly sight and goes back.

To winding up, it can safely interpret that the novels of Morrison can be judged in different ways, and psychoanalysis is the best method to analyze her works. Many readers believe that Morrison's novels are the establishment of her envisioned tradition. *Beloved* present how outer society is responsible for brutal condition of African while *Bluest Eye* elaborate how their own family member and community is responsible for the psychological agonies. Through the character of Pecola Breedlove and Sethe, Morrison reveals how systematic oppression- whether in the form of internalized white beauty standards or the enduring legacy of slavery can fracture the psyche, distort identity and isolate individuals from their communities and even from themselves.

Pecola's psychological disintegration emerges from a society that denies her value, beauty and humanity while Sethe's psychological torment is not only the result of personal loss but also a reflection of the historical atrocities that shaped her existence. Through this comparative study, it becomes clear that Morrison's fiction is not only a literary achievement but also a psychological and cultural testimony to the deep wounds carried by African American individuals and communities.

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