

# Loss of Self-Identity in The Bluest Eye by Toni Morrison

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## ABSTRACT

The life of African American women seems pathetic as they are not only affected by the damaging forces like racism, sexism and classicism but also from the society which humiliate them. The societal norms and values that they treasured for centuries now seems corrupted by the entering of Whites into their society. Now they themselves learn to keep White standards which remove the values that they already uphold for their own race. They forget their past glory and become submissive before the White Standards. Women are kept as a separate caste by virtue of their sex, thus they are doubly oppressed both for being a woman and black. Black women try to survive all these evils but the existing patriarchal society continuously force them to suffer. The characters in the novel *The Bluest Eye* find it so difficult to form a sense of self identity. The pressure to meet society's white standard is on the female characters of the novel. The inequality and gender bias also crushed the liberty of female characters in the novel. This paper gives the insight into how the female characters in the novel lost their self- identity by the damaging forces that existed during that period of time.

## Keywords

humiliation, dominance, inequality, gender bias, self- identity

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## Introduction

African-American history talks about how they were transplanted from their homeland to the new place. These were the descendants of Africans who were forced to leave their homeland into slavery after being captured during the colonization to work on the sugar plantations under the Whites or being captured during war or raids. These African-Americans were descendants of different ethnic groups that lived in Western Central Africa and some from the Eastern side also. In the work, *The Slave Trade* by Hugh Thomas that talks about the history of the slave trade of African-Americans says:

The Northernmost zone of Africa used as a slave harbor was the stretch of five hundred or so miles (350).

They were traded for very smaller amount and were transported to sugar plantations, cotton industry and so on. They were treated so badly and had to play according to the whims and fancies of the masters and the mistress. They were taken away from their values, culture and the memories which once they treasured in their life. The masters never allowed them to stay as a family as the father, mother and the children were usually owned by the masters.

Even the mothers were not allowed to breast feed their infant child and were sold to white people as

slaves. During the last months of pregnancy they were supposed to work hard in fields. The White owners found it pleasing when a black woman gives birth to a baby. So that the owner can sell the kid in the market at a higher rate and the kids were not allowed to see or stay back with their mother. Even the full term pregnant black women were raped before having childbirth. Black girls got pregnant during their teens and they suffered all these without any rage against the master. The case of Black men were also difficult but women suffer the more.

In addition the stereotypes such as slavery was to be noted. During this period the white women were considered pure and the black women were thought as impure by the patriarchal society to devalue the black womenfolk. The period did not even visualize black women as women or even as a human. They were treated with a sense of contempt and as an object to play as the men desired to be. In the work, *To Be a Slave* by Julius Lester where the journey of a slave is reflected says:

Out of seventeen of us sold to him, only four of us got back home. Some died; others he killed (45).

These lines were the proof of how they were humiliated, even their lives were in the hands of their master. Long years of suffering made them to unite and fight against injustice that led to many black movements but still they are in the journey

to attain freedom and justice. In the work, *Feminism Is for Everybody: Passionate Politics* Bell Hooks says:

Sisterhood could not be powerful as long as women were competitively at war with one another (3).

It is true that for black women none raise voice, they were sidelined by the White women. The triumph and complexities of past slavery to present faced by Black Women seems quite disturbing when the world came to know all these through the writings of Black Women. The conditions of Black women were entirely different from Whites. As a result, Black Feminism emerged where black women started to raise their voice for the unvoiced Blacks though failed to succeed. Thus Black Feminism was an effort made to meet the needs of black women who felt they were being oppressed in different ways both sexually and racially. The theory gave rise to many Black female authors and some Black male authors who reflected the feminist perspective. African – American literature is the literature produced in the United States by writers of African descent. The writers of this literature tried to put forth the lives of black women. The life of black women seems really different from any other women in other countries. The toils and tribulations that they faced from childhood to adult age is much more different than any other people. The pioneers of this literature were Phillis Wheatley, Zora, Neale, Patricia Hills Collins, Bell Hooks, Toni Morrison. Patricia Hill Collins in her work exhorts:

Placing the ideas of ordinary African American women as well as those of better-known Black women intellectuals at the center of analysis produces a new angle of vision on Black women's concerns (18).

In the novel *The Bluest Eye* we may find how the protagonist got sexually and racially oppressed by the society, peer group and the family. She was treated with a sense of contempt by the society and the society considered Whites as civilized people. So they tried to adapt themselves into White Standards forgetting about who they are and what they used to be. We can find the innocent life of a Black girl destroyed by the people around her. They used protagonist as their outlet to do anything that they please in form of oppression both racially and sexually. All these

damaging forces made her to lose her self-identity.

Toni Morrison is one among the celebrated writers in America who mainly tries to write novel on the viewpoint of black women. Her first novel *The Bluest Eye* started the emergence of black women writings in America. Now this novel became one of the widely read American classic.

The novel was published around 1970 after The Great Depression. It is about a story that happened in the hometown Lorain, Ohio of Pecola Breedlove, an African American girl who is from an abusive home. The story is also about two families MacTeers and Breedlove and how things turn upside down in the novel. The author got the inspiration to write this novel based on his childhood conversation with her friend in which she came to know about her friend's longing for blue eyes. The novel revolves around the damaging forces like race, caste, sex, gender inequality and how it destroyed the lives of black women in the novel especially the protagonist. In the novel we also come to know the vulnerability of black women because of the bad experience they received from the society all through their life. Toni Morrison, a well-known African American writer, essayist, tried to discover the complex lives of black women under the damaging forces like racism, sexism and gender inequality. The black women were not only affected by these forces but were hardly recognized as humans by their own society who put white standards in a higher position. Toni Morrison in her novel *The Bluest Eye*, portrays an incident where the protagonist is humiliated by her peer Maureen as:

I am cute! And you Ugly! Black and Ugly black e mos. I am cute! (71).

It is visible that the community they lived in started humiliating themselves which ultimately lead to the loss of self-identity of Pecola, who is the protagonist of the story. The study of Toni Morrison's novel gives us an insight about how frustrated and humiliated the black women under the white supremacy in America. The black women were hated not only by the white men and women but also by the black men. The black women were either an object to be played or to be used for the whims and fancies of White people. They seem unworthy to live in the world. That was the attitude of world to them.

Paulina Breedlove is Pecola's mother. She is called as Polly by her White people and Mrs. Breedlove by the family members. She faces many hardships in life. When she marries Cholly, she expects good and a happy life with him but sees herself as a victim of Cholly's physical and verbal abuse as she is the only breadwinner of the family.

In addition she fails to show love and care to her kids as she is preparing herself as a strong stubborn person because the society humiliated her for her lame foot and called her ugly. As a result, when she started her job as the servant of the white house, she turned herself to be perfect in their eyes. She sets white standards as high standard of life. She sees her own daughter as ugly and is really hard with Pecola as she is trying to reflect the same contempt which she received from her masters. Claudia in *The Bluest Eye* said: The familiar violence rose in me. Her calling Mrs. Breedlove Polly, when even Pecola called her mother Mrs. Breedlove seemed reason enough to scratch her (82).

Even her daughter calls her in a formal way because of the absence of mother-daughter relationship. Pauline changes this way because she tries to find her identity lost in her society. So she takes a drastic transformation of being a "perfect servant" of whites. The society sees her with a sense of contempt so as to keep herself with the societal norms and values that allows her to give away her identity.

Claudia MacTeer, who is the narrator of the novel is actually a person in the novel who develops her point of view from being young to an adult. The novel opens with the reflection of adult Claudia and gradually moves on to young Claudia reminiscing the story of their lives. She has fascination towards Whites but she never gives away her self-identity and shows strong repulsive nature towards White standards encroaching her life. When Claudia is given a white doll, she dissects and destroys it. She is happy to stay as what she is now and has resisted the influence of White Standards by avoiding admiration towards Shirley Temple and Dick and Jane's narration. She has not learned self-hatred from her peers and the adults of the community. Pecola and Freda are trying to adapt with white standards and have got admiration to Shirley Temple.

Pecola Breedlove, the daughter of Pauline and Cholly Breedlove, the sister of Sammy feels

herself unworthy to live. She is not only humiliated by her peer group, teachers and the society but the family too. Pecola says: Please make me disappear (43).

This is what Pecola thinks as the only way to escape from all the humiliations that she is undergoing. This scene shows her need for disappearing because she finds herself unworthy to exist. Her longing for blue eyes is the other way to escape so that she could attain all the love and care from her family that she is dreaming of for a long period of time.

Pecola's desire for blue eyes seems unrealistic, is to correct the world. She believes that the cruelties and sufferings that she has suffered will no more exist if she has the eyes she desires and that no ugly things will happen in front of her. Her self-identity is ruined by the people around her and also by herself. She just thinks to be in other form that would help her life to be happier than that of this life with full of humiliations and sufferings.

Cynthia Davis in her paper "Self, Society, and Myth in Toni Morrison's Fiction," remarked Black women's condition as such:

Is the antithesis of American beauty [...]. Defined as the Other [...] [she] can never satisfy the gaze of society (12).

Even though Pecola is born as a black girl her society does not consider her as normal and humiliate her. Her mother is also trying to keep up with the White's standards and ignores her daughter while comforting the white's kid. Ozamu Desai, a Japanese author in his book *No Longer Human* says:

As long as I can make them laugh, it doesn't matter how, I'll be alright. If I succeed in that, the human beings probably won't mind it too much if I remain outside their lives. The one thing I must avoid is becoming offensive in their eyes: I shall be nothing, the wind, the sky (13).

This is the condition of the characters in the novel for some they sacrificed their self-identity to remain inside the circle and those who are not willing will be seen with a sense of contempt.

Mead George Herbert an American philosopher in his work *Mind, Self and Society* says:

He is successful to the degree that the final me reflects the attitude of all in the community (187). These lines describe that the person in a society will always try to live with the attitude of all in community.

## Conclusion

Here in Morrison's work we can see that almost all the characters blamed Pecola for not getting up to their desires which even erased Pecola's self-identity of being a part of the community. Some resisted this change, while some tried to transform but to Pecola it all brought destruction to her life. It was the society which took an important part in a person's life to shape his or her character. But here we find that from her childhood she was being oppressed or humiliated by everyone around her and only few tried to help her. Everyone just exploited her innocence and destroyed her beautiful life. The damaging forces like racism made her to lose her self-identity because she found that there is no way to escape from this suffering.

It is from childhood that a person is moulding his or her own character. If the society or the people around is not making a suitable environment to grow as they are it will certainly affect their life. They will be an introvert or mentally challenged people if they are bullied or humiliated from childhood. It all will lead to mental trauma where the person no more lead a normal life. Here the protagonist also seems largely affected by all those damaging forces which left her to lose her identity. Loss of identity results in isolation and loneliness. It comes to a point where the person does not know who she is. We find it difficult to connect to others, when we lose self-identity.

If the attitude of the society to us is unpleasant, we will try to transform ourselves into something that they wish to be. This is what we see in the character of Pecola. She was forced to think herself as ugly by the people around her. We see that some were rejected so they transformed to something that they never wanted to be. The novel raised question about society that used to be the custodian of Individual character building, now turned the person to think as an unworthy person to live on earth.

In the work, *The Diary Of A Young Girl* by Anne Frank says:

I want to write, but more than that, I want to bring out all kinds of things that lie buried deep in my heart (2).

As said in the lines, through the lens of Black feminist theory the author brought down many things that she wanted to tell to future generation and to the conscience of the world.

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