

## Portrayal of Human Relationships and its Impact on Identity Formation in The Bluest Eye

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### ABSTRACT

In the male dominated American society, black women were dominated by both the whites and the black males. They faced triple oppression of race, gender and class. Treated merely as sex objects, their space in American society was insignificant and faceless. So when the black women writers determined to establish their identity womanhood, a plethora of black women writers emerged to challenge the hegemony of the masculine perspective through their writing. Among all of them, Toni Morrison is a powerful voice and one of the most remarkable and influential novelists in the field of contemporary African American literary circle. Any literature and its structure is built on human relationships and that is the reason that a writer's art and its greatness lies in the deft portrayal and presentation of such human relationships. These relations may be the sources of comfort, connection, and happiness and they may also be the sources of obligation, responsibility, enmity, and friction. The genius of Toni Morrison lies in her writing about human beings and rich rainbow human relationships, especially of Afro-American people. The present paper attempts to explore and analyze a wide range of human relationships depicted in her novels. The aims and objectives of this study are to understand and analyze the different aspects of human relationships, such as, exploitation, deprivation, alienation and so on. Two types of human relationships are discussed in this paper. Those are parent-child relationship and the relationship between man and woman. This paper also tries to analyze how these relationships play a very important role in the formation of identity. Historical background of the blacks and African American literary tradition is also peeped into to understand the writing of Toni Morrison. The historical background of the blacks has highly influenced the human relationships of her characters.

**Keywords:** Race, Gender, Class, Human Relationships, Identity Formation

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### I. INTRODUCTION

Any society is formed by a group of people who maintain human relationships with different people. Toni Morrison advocates the need and importance of strong and healthy human relationship in African American society. She also deals with the pain and agony that the blacks have suffered at the hands of the white masters. The enigmatic sufferings of the blacks and the distorted human relationships in the American society make an integral part of her novels. Her novels talk about

black experience, black values, black tradition, black life and human relationships within the black community. She herself has affirmed: "I'm interested in the relationships of black men and women and the axes on which those relationships frequently turn, and how they complement each other, fulfill one another or hurt one another and made whole or prevented from wholeness by things that they have incorporated into their psyche" (Davis, 49). Morrison's debut novel, *The Bluest Eye* offers a story of two black families namely, the Breedloves and the Mac Tears having a difference in perceptions of survival techniques.

## II. PARENT-CHILD RELATIONSHI

A Parent-child relation, which is considered the most important and integral part of family relationships is depicted with its complications and complexities in the novels of Toni Morrison. In *The Bluest Eye*, a bitterly distorted and shockingly realistic parent child relationship leading to domestic violence is prominently dealt with. An eleven-year-old girl named Pecola Breedlove is the protagonist of the novel. We get to see her through the eyes of Claudia, the narrator of the novel. She is of the same age as Pecola. Pecola's concept of beauty and she perceiving herself as 'ugly' batters her relationship with her parents and with all the other people around her.

The novel begins with a passage from a familiar primer used by many schools in the 40's which describes an ideal and happy American white family having healthy family relations. This passage is used skillfully to show the contrast between the black and the white families.

"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 red dress. She wants to play. Who will play with Jane? See the cat. It goes meow-meow. Come and play. Come play with Jane. The kitten will not play. See mother. Mother is very nice. Mother, will you play with Jane? Mother laughs. Laugh, mother, laugh. See father. He is big and strong. Father, will you play with Jane? Father is smiling. Smile, father, smile. See the dog. bowwow goes the dog. Do you want to play with Jane? See the dog run. Run, dog, 74 run. Look, look. Here comes a friend. The friend will play with Jane. They will play a good game Play, Jane, play" (Morrison, 1).

Pecola Breedlove is ill-treated by her abusive parents. Her relationship with her parents is very bitter and biting. Her parents Cholly and Pauline consider their daughter as black and ugly, being very unkind to her. Both prominent black mothers Pauline Breedlove and Mrs. MacTeers are portrayed with a contrast. Pauline Breedlove has two children named Pecola and Sammy. Her relationship with her children lacks filial attachment, natural affection and love resulting into the unhealthy growth of mother-child relations. Instead of calling her by 'mummy' or 'mom', her children call her by her name. When Pecola accidentally pulls a blueberry pie from the table burning her leg painfully, Pauline loses her temper treating her very harshly:

"In a 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 79 with anger, abused Pecola directly ... crazy fool ... my floor, mess ... look what you ... work ... get on out ... now that ... crazy ... my floor, my floor ... my floor." (Morrison, 84-85).

On the other side, Pauline shows all love and care for the children of her white mistress.

When the little girl cries, she immediately gives her the attention and consoles her saying "Hush, baby, hush. Come here. Oh Lord, look at your dress. Don't cry no more. Polly will change it" (Morrison, 85). Even when Pecola is raped by her father Cholly, and becomes pregnant, she is not given any sympathy by Pauline. Instead being whimsical she beats her and restricts her from going to school.

Pauline herself was the ninth child of her parents. She always felt neglected and ignored by her parents. Moreover, she had "a crooked, archless foot that flopped when she walked" (Morrison, 86). She was forced to run the house and perform all her mother's duties when her mother went out for work. Probably all this created an inferiority complex in her resulting into lack of self-worth and self esteem. As the narrator describes, "her general feelings of separateness 81 and unworthiness she blame[s] on her foot" (Morrison, 86).

On the other hand, the relationship between Mrs. MacTeer and her children, Claudia and Frieda is less bitter in comparison with Pauline Breedlove. Mrs. MacTeer is strict and harsh but caring and protective mother. She is practical enough to provide survival tactics to her two children, Frieda and Claudia, from childhood. When Claudia catches cold while collecting coal, her mother frowns at her: "Great Jesus. Get on in that bed. How many times do I have to tell you to wear something on your head? You must be the biggest fool in this town" (Morrison, 6). Even though she gets angry on Claudia for not obeying her, her actions show utmost care, love and affection for her child. Claudia narrates: My mother's anger humiliates me; her words chafe my cheeks, and I am crying. I do not know that she is not angry at me, but at my sickness. I believe she despises my weakness for letting the sickness 'take holt'. (Morrison, 7).

In addition, Mrs. MacTeer not only cares but also gives lessons and tactics for survival. She sings the songs for her children that talks about the hardships of life and set rules but there is a sense of sweetness and hope in her singing. She talks about the grief and pain that she has gone through but she also teaches her children how to fight back and how to stay strong during bad times. Claudia reminiscences in the following lines: "Saturdays were lonesome, fussy, soapy days. ... If my mother was in a singing mood, it wasn't bad. She would sing about hard times, bad times, and somebody-done-gone-and- left-me times. But her voice was so sweet and her singing-eyes so melty I found myself longing for those hard times, ... Misery colored by the grebes and blues in my mother's voice took all of the grief out of the words and left me with a conviction that pain was not only endurable, but it was also sweet." (Morrison, 17-18)

Claudia says: "Adults do not talk to us – they give us directions. They issue orders without providing information. When we trip and fall down they glance at us; if we cut or bruise ourselves, they ask us are we crazy. When we catch colds, they shake their heads in disgust at our lack of consideration. How they ask us, do you expect anybody to get anything done if you all are sick? We cannot answer them. Our illness is treated with contempt, foul Black drought, and castor oil that blunts our minds." (Morrison, 5-6) At the same time, Claudia also says in her wish for Christmas: "I want to sit on the low stool in Big Mama's kitchen with my lap full of lilacs and listen to Big Papa play his violin for me alone" (Morrison, 15).

The father-daughter relationship between Cholly and Pecola crosses all limits of the family relationships, society, and ultimately the human relationships. It is the climax of the novel when an

eleven-year-old black girl Pecola is raped by her drunken father Cholly. A father always gives strength and support to the child to fight against all the odds in the society. But here his relationship with his daughter is utterly distorted and perverted. Contrary, Mr. Macteer of *The Bluest Eye* is always instinctively protective and caring father who is always present for his two daughters namely Frieda and Claudia. We can see the bond and the memories of a father-daughter relationship in this narrative by Claudia. She says: "My daddy's face is a study. Winter moves into it and presides there. His eyes become a cliff of snow threatening to an avalanche; his eyebrows bend like black limbs of leafless trees. His skin takes on the pale, cheerless yellow of winter sun; for a jaw, he has the edges of a snowbound field dotted with stubble; his high forehead is the frozen sweep of Erie, hiding currents of gelid thoughts that eddy in darkness. Wolf killer turned hawk fighter, he worked night and day to keep one from the door and the other from under the windowsills. A Vulcan guarding the flames, he gives us instructions about which door to keep closed or opened for proper distribution of heat, lays kindling by, discuss qualities of coal, and teaches us how to rake, feed and bank the fire. And he will not unrazor his lips until spring. (Morrison, 47)

We can also see him as a devoted father during Frieda's molestation by Henry, their tenant. We can sense the serious and genuine anger of a father in the following lines: "And Mr. Buford came running out with his gun, and Mama told him to go somewhere and sit down, and Daddy said no, give him the gun, and Mr. Buford did, and Mama screamed, and Mr. Henry shut up and started running, and Daddy shot at him and Mr. Henry jumped out of his shoes and kept on running in his shocks. Then Rosemary came out and said that Daddy was going to jail, and I hit her." (Morrison, 77)

## **THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN MAN AND WOMAN**

The prominent husband-wife relationship in *The Bluest Eye* is on the anvils of love and hatred. Suffering from inferiority complex, we always find Pauline Breedlove and Cholly Breedlove continually quarreling with each other. The unhealthy and ungratified relations between husband and wife is beautifully portrayed in this novel. However, the beginning of their married life is depicted as quite charming, enthusiastic, and full of love for each other. Pauline was a country girl not knowing much about the cultured ways of city life and having a lame foot but Pauline felt for her intensely and relished her company. For the first time Pauline felt that "her bad foot [is] an asset" (Morrison, 90). Then they migrated to North from Ohio for better job opportunities. Here Pauline felt awkward and uneasy living among almost white people. We hear her saying "I missed my people. I weren't used to so much white 157 folks. The ones I seed before was something hateful, but they did not come around too much" (Morrison, 91). Feeling lonely on that contemptuous atmosphere, Cholly is her only soothing support but he neglects her. This makes their happy and healthy relationship start deteriorating. Cholly's brutal behaviour of ignoring his wife may be because of his frustration with the society. His relationship with his wife and children is so deteriorated that one day in a fit of anger, "he [burns] the rented house where they [live], and put his family outdoors" (Morrison, 12). He starts drinking and one day being drunk, he even rapes his own daughter Pecola. Cholly quarreling with his wife, getting addicted to liquor and raping own daughter, this all shows his failure in establishing himself and his identity.

On the other hand, we find soothing stability in the husband-wife relations of the MacTeers. They are also struggling for survival like Breedloves but they are optimistic and hardworking. They show generosity and sympathy not only for the family, but for the community also. They help Pecola by

providing shelter to her when Cholly burns their rented house.

### III. CONCLUSION

Pecola falls into grave downfall. She does not get any opportunity and strength to fight back for her survival and existence. She does not have any chance of rising up again. She cannot come out from the oppressive labyrinth of sexism, classism, and racism. Unlike Pecola, Claudia and Frieda are strong and lucky enough to observe and adapt tactics to fight back for survival and existence. The reason for this being the difference in their upbringings by their respective families. There is a difference with the two daughters of MacTeers because of the strong sense of individuality imparted to them by their parents. Differences in their upbringings make them react differently to the situations.

Arya says: "... Claudia sustains herself because she saves herself from the adverse effect of the White Euro-centric standard. She was taught by her parents' survival technique, which Pecola's parents never give to their children" (Arya, 38).

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