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## **STUDY OF TONI MORRISON'S NOVELS: SULA & BLUEST EYE**

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# Study of Toni Morrison's Novels: Sula & Bluest Eye

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**Abstract – Eco feminist interpretation of Toni Morrison's novels: Sula & The Bluest Eye. The present paper aims at the study of Toni Morrison's novels with an Feministic approach. IT is based on the study of three novels The Sula & The Bluest Eye. It shows how women and nature are related to each other and how both are oppressed by the patriarchal society in the same way and how women and nature both are showing resistance towards this dominance in their own ways. All the female characters in these novels are related and affected by nature in one or other ways. This oppression is still there in the contemporary period.**

**Key words: Eco-meminist, Sula & The Bluest Eye**

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## INTRODUCTION

Morrison admits that she reads reviews of her books, but they do not determine the direction of her works. "I am very much concerned about what is happening to my people and what we are doing with our precious tradition."<sup>1</sup> It is improved only by her experience as a woman and African American and by the ancient stories of the African-American Community. Unfavourable commentary on her novels after Morrison asserts, "evolves out of a lack of understanding of the culture the world, the given quality out of which I write."<sup>2</sup> Morrison measures success not by the estimate of her critics but rather by how well her books evoke the rhythm and cosmology of the people. She writes,

"If anything I do, in the way of writing novels (or whatever I write) isn't about the village or the community or about you, then it is not about anything."<sup>3</sup>

Morrison's novels have a vital role to play in this process of acculturation. They cannot replace the village but they can summon its spirit. Folk culture, as revealed in maxims, beliefs attitudes, and ways of speaking, Walking and thinking permeates Morrison's fiction and inspires its identifiably lyrical style. In her work mythic truths are revived examined and passed on, keeping the individual in touch with black American and African tradition. Morrison writes,

"I want to point out the dangers to show that nice things don't always happen to the totally self-reliant if there is no conscious historical connection."<sup>4</sup>

The culture and geography of her childhood, figure centrally in her work. The first novel, *The Bluest-Eye* is a classic example of her cultural consciousness. In an interview with Claudia Tate, Morrison remarks-

"*The Bluest-eye* my first book is set in Lorain Ohio ..... I am from the Midwest, so I have a special affection for it. My beginnings are always there, no matter what I write, I begin there."<sup>5</sup>

The Northern part of Ohio has underground railway stations and history of black people escaping into Canada. Ohio is a curious juxtaposition of what was ideal in the country and what was base. It is like Mecca for black people. They come to the mills and plants because Ohio offers the possibility of freedom, even though there were some terrible obstacles. *The Bluest Eye* was well received and established an early following for her particularly among black people who understood so poignantly the issues addressed in the novel. The novel begins with a passage from the familiar Dick and Jane primer by means of which many of us learn to read. The first well punctuated version shows the life of white people. The second represents the life of Black Macteer family which survives all the evils of poverty and racism. Another third disorder version stands for Breedlove family. Klotman Comments that, "It also serves as an ironic comment on the society which educates and unconsciously socializes its children like Pecola with callous for its cultural richness and diversity of the people."<sup>6</sup> This observation illuminates the socio-political implications behind Morrison's first novel. Inspired by the climate, the revolution and evolving black consciousness of sixties, the novel presents a period characterized by an almost evangelical for personal and racial identity. Morrison

chooses as the basic theme and the subject of this novel the obsession of blacks with an American standard of beauty that seems inescapable and destructive.

The novel is a tragic tale of Black Pecola's desire for blue eyes. It is a symbol of beauty for her by which she can be accepted in white society as she (Morrison) talks to Charles Raus about her childhood friend who wanted blue eyes, Morrison clearly questions her strange desire against her cultural background.

"What I later recollected was that I looked at her and imagined her having them and thought how awful that would be if she had gotten her prayers answered. *I always thought she was beautiful.* I began to write about a girl who wanted blue eyes and the horror of having that wish fulfilled and also about the whole business of what in physical beauty and the pain of that yearning and wanting to be somebody else, and how devastating that was and yet part of all females who were peripheral in other people's lives."<sup>7</sup>

The novel makes a powerful attack on the western standard of female beauty and psychological oppression of black woman. Morrison examines Pecola's life- her unloving childhood, her repudiation by nearly everyone she encounters and finally the complete disintegration of self. The belief that black is not valuable or beautiful is one of the cultural hindrances to black people throughout their history in America. This belief informs the tragedy of Pecola Breedlove who comes from a black family that is cut off from the natural life of a community. The search for culprits is not difficult. The store keeper who sales Mary Jane Candies to Pecola avoids touching her hand when she pays and barely disguises his contempt for her. She looks up at him and sees the vacuum where curiosity ought to lodge. It has an edge, somewhere in the bottom lid is the distaste. "The distaste must be for her, her blackness and it is the blackness that accounts for that creates the vacuum edged with distaste in white eyes."<sup>8</sup> The white Yacobowski is condemned for his cultural blindness, but he is not the only one responsible for Pecola's pain. Responsibility must be shared by blacks who assuage their own insults from society by oppressing those like Pecola who are vulnerable. Little black boys jeer and taunt her with 'Black e mo. Black e mo, defensively ignoring the colour of their own skin, but,

"It was contempt for their own blackness that gave the first insult its teeth. They seem to have taken all of their smoothly cultivated ignorance, their exquisitely learned self-hatred, their elaborately designed hopelessness and sucked it all up in to a fiery cone of scorn that had burned for ages in the hollows of their minds."<sup>9</sup>

Teachers ignore Pecola in classroom, giving their attention instead to a high yellow dream child with long brown hair. When this same high yellow girl declares to Pecola and to Macteer sisters,, "I am cute And you

Ugly! Black and Ugly black a mos"<sup>10</sup> she is dangerously affirming interaracial acceptance of the world's denigration of blackness. Respectable milk brown women like Geraldine see Pecola's torn dress and uncombed hair and are confronted with the blackness they have spent lifetime rejecting. For Morrison these women are antithetical to the village culture she respects. They attend to the careful development of thrift-patience high morals and good manners as these are defined by white society. They fear the dreadful funkiness of passion, the funkiness of native, the funkiness of wider range of human emotions because these qualities are defined by black society. Geraldine executes the tyranny of standardized beauty that enthalls some in community and terrorizes too many others.

When Pecola stands in Geraldine's house-tricked there by her hateful son- she transgresses a line demarking 'colored people' from 'niggers'. In her innocence Pecola does not perceive the transgression or its consequences. To her Geraldine's world and house are beautiful. Michael Awkward discusses this purgative abuse of Pecola in terms of the black community's guilt about its own inability to measure up to some external idea of beauty and behaviour. Timothy Bell aptly points out that "Morrison literally deconstructs the essential white text, removing capitalization punctuation and finally the spacing until the white text is nothing more than a fragmentation of its former self at the beginning of the chapter."<sup>11</sup> Claudia and her sister Traverse Morrison's landscape of black girlhood. Bound by a social environment that is hostile to their kind, they have become head strong, devious and arrogant. With ingenious faith in themselves Claudia and Frieda attempt to rescue Pecola and her baby. They would make beauty where ugliness resides by planting marigolds deep in earth and receiving the magic of their beauty as a sign of Pecola's salvation. When neither marigolds nor Pecola survive, the girls blame the community that is reduced by a white standard of beauty and that make Pecola its scapegoat.

For the most part Mr. and Mrs. Macteer, save Claudia and Frieda from dangers. Mrs. Macteer's place is not in kitchen of white family but in her own where familiar smells hold sway and her singing that proclaim that the pain is endurable, even sweet. To her daughter she bequeaths a legacy of compassion for others and defiance in the face of opposition. Her love for her children is dark and thick as Alaga Syrup. The Macteers embody the communal residency at the heart of black culture. Mrs. Macteer is one of Morrison's nurturers. Claudia remembers the feel of her mother's hands on her forehead when she is sick. She takes Pecola in when Cholly burns out his family. She presides over Pecola's first menses and hugs her reassuringly. The only hug Pecola receives is by Mrs. Macteer.

Morrison always includes the characters of uncanny behaviour in her novels. Morrison brings the rejected,

orphaned, the deformed, the mentally ill the evil people center the stage with the stable and responsible so that Morrison is able to probe their separate lives and the roles they served in their communities. When Colette Dowling talks to Morrison about the role of folks in her community, Morrison says, she "wanted to find out who these people were and why they lived the way they did, to see the stuff out which they were made."<sup>12</sup> In *Bluest Eye*, while readers learn about the failure of Breedloves, they also came to know the responsibility of the members of community to avoid excesses that put them outdoors. In the time of need the community comes to the aid of one of their own, without family. Even the disdainful prostitutes are protective and they take part in raising community's children. The community like the one, Morrison remembers for her own part, remarks their failure but moves into offer as best as it can, the protection and love, the Breedloves cannot provide for themselves.

Morrison observes the problem of individual right as the primary cause of the oppression of Africans. In the novel *Sula*, Sula suffers not only at the hands of whites but also at the hand of blacks. Morrison's characters discover that they escape the black community's socio economic disorder only to face, later, the all-encompassing psychological chaos, characteristic of life in a society polarized on racial lives. Constant racism forms a continuity in the cycle of frustration from which the town folk cannot easily escape. Racial issues are interwoven with fabric of the novel throughout. The origin of The Bottom with its roots in slavery and the lack of development of the Deweys are classic instances of racism. They remind the readers that all niggers look alike. Even the dead Chicken Little's space is designated by the bargeman who drags little body from the river dumps it into a burlap sack and tosses it in a corner. The Sheriff's report that, "They did not have no niggers in the country but some lived in those hills across the river up above the Medallian,"<sup>13</sup> underscores the expectation that black life will not split out of the hills. Morrison acknowledges the destructiveness of this enforced separation. But she converts the negative meaning into positive one cordoned off as they are, the people are self-sufficient. They cannot break because it gives continuity to their past and present.

Almost in all her novels, main characters leave the place and community in search of higher ambitions or to escape from the present. This leaving of community began her move to Syracuse and intensified when she moved to New York, affected Morrison deeply and still affects her. It is classic American story of young innocent leaving the small town for the big city. This moving exacted a heavier price for her because she believes even under the best of circumstances, rarely are the blacks to connect culturally.

"If the black people are going to succeed in this culture, they must always leave. There is a terrible

price to pay. I could edit in the place where editing is being done. I had to make sacrifices. Once you leave home, the things that feed you, are not available to you any more, the life is not available to you anymore. And the African life, the white life that is certainly not available to you. So you really have to cut yourself off. Still I can remember that world. I can favour it. I can write about it."<sup>14</sup>

Morrison recalls community in a way of keeping in touch, of savoring that community's life and keeping it alive. There are strikingly remembered places in her novels. In *Sula*, the entire narrative is cradled in the reflection of a place, a neighbourhood with a way of life now past. In that place they tore night shade and blackberry patches from their roots to make room for Medallian City. Golf course where once was a neighbourhood. The Bottom, the separately defined black community of Medallian contains a memorable array of characters and places. Time and Half Pool Hall, Reba's grill where the owner cooked in her hat because she could not remember the ingredient without it. There are Deweys, Tar Baby, Shadrack and Sula, all accepted as part of the community even if other folk do not understand or totally approve of their ways.

Morrison introduces a willing pariah a woman who consciously chooses to reject the values of her community. In the novel two childhood friends, Nel Wright and Sula Peace, find solace in each other arms and are strengthened by their desire to rebel against the values of their parents. As they grow older Nel submits to the community's standard of acceptable female behaviour. She marries, has children and cares for the sick and old of her community. Sula goes away to college lives a life outside her community and then comes back to town. She openly challenges the community culture. She sleeps with men and Nel's husband, goes to church without underwear and worst of all she sleeps with white man. Like Pecola the community excludes her and keeps her away. But she is not put outside the culture despite her defiance to their values. Clearly the community requires her and tolerates her is a measure of their generosity. The community names her a devil and prepares to live with her. Her revolt unifies the community by objectifying its danger.

Blacks of Bottom waste no time in complaining and go with the business of their life. "Morrison captures here, as she does elsewhere, the rhythm of the black community, men on the street corner, in pool halls, women shelling peas, cooking dinner, at the beauty parlour, in church, interpreting dreams and playing the numbers, working roots".<sup>15</sup> In assigning character to Bottom Morrison establishes self-worth in terms of human relationship. She tells that there was life giving very strong relationship that people got from the neighbourhood. All the responsibilities that

agencies now have were the responsibilities of the neighbourhood. So that people were taken care of,

"If they were sick, other people took care of them, if they were old, other people took care of them, if they were mad, other people provided a small space for them, or related to their madness or tried to find out the limits of their madness".<sup>15</sup>

Shadrack's presence in the Bottom is the evidence of the community's willingness to absorb the most bizarre of its own. When Shadrack returns from World War I and does not know who or what he was, with no past no language no tribe. He struggles to order and focus experience and to conquer his fear of death. The result is national Suicide day which he observes on 3<sup>rd</sup> January believing, "that if one day a year is devoted to it (death) everybody could get it out of the way and the rest of the year would be safe and free."<sup>16</sup> At first frightened of him, in time people embrace him and his day. Once they under stood the boundaries and nature of his madness, they could fit him in to the scheme of things. That is according to Morrison, the culture of Black Community Like Medallian,

"There are hundreds of small towns and that is where most black people, live..... And that is where the juice come from and that is where we made it, not made it in the terms of success but made who we are."<sup>17</sup>

Flight, free fall, consistently means freedom, independence, unconventionality, self-knowledge for Morrison. In *Song of Solomon* flight also evokes the American folk tradition. Solomon's song is Morrison's version of the flying African myth about enslaved Africans who escaped slavery in the South by rising up and flying back to Africa and to freedom. Morrison improves upon the story to a new generation and her novels serve an essential function as cultural artifact. Myths are forgotten and misunderstood because people in transit move away from the places where they try were born and from the culture bearers who remain in those places. The flying myth is her example of one that is misunderstood by those who can relate to it in Western classical terms only. But Morrison wishes to restore its tutorial power for black people. She says,

"If it means Icarus to some readers, fine I want to take credit for that. But my meaning is specific, it is about black people who would fly. That was always part of the folk love of my life flying was one of our gifts. I don't care how silly it may seem. It is everywhere-people used to talk about it, it's in the spirituals and gospels. Perhaps if was wishful thinking- escape, death and all that...."<sup>18</sup>

When Milkman realizes that the children's song. "Solomon done fly, Solomon done gone/Solomon cut across the sky, Solomon gone home," is about his great grandfather Solomon who had such powers, he rejoices. Solomon "did not need no aeroplane. He just took off, got fed up. All the way up! No more cotton! No

more bales! no more orders! no more shift. He flew baby. Lifted his beautiful black ass up in the sky and flew on home".<sup>19</sup> Milkman is excited but Morrison is alert. African myth is not less vulnerable to contamination than Western fable. Solomon flies off and Morrison questions about the people that were left by him. What about the wife and twenty one children that he left here on the ground?

Solomon flies leaving Ryna, his wife to take care of the children. Her cries of protest and anguish are still carried on the wind more than a century later for Milkman to hear. In the third generation Milkman and Hagar reenact this tragedy of abandonment. When Milkman goes away, Hagar loses all capacity to think rationally and she dies of a broken heart, when Hagar is facing death, Milkman is flying in dream. Taking the story from black myth, Morrison repeats and recreates the story according to the present need. Hagar like Pecola becomes a prey of white standard of beauty. When her cosmetic beauty is washed away by rain Morrison warns the people like her who are the victim of American white world.

Pilate is another torch bearer in the black picture gallery of Morrison. She is one of timeless people who dispatch their wisdom to others. She can initiate others to the ways of African American culture that gives life continuity and intent. Out of place in big northern city Pilate embraces more natural rhythms like those of women of Shalimar. She does not believe in the modern materialistic ways of her brother. She gives up all her desires for such things and acquires a deep concern for humanity at large. She embodies memorable traits of character that personify black culture and tradition. Born without a navel, Pilate seems ageless, immortal. As a natural healer her qualifications are her compassion for troubled people and respect for other's views and vision. Like a mystical character she has a communication with her dead parents. As ancestor Pilate bears a mega share to the novel's work in passing on cultural knowledge to Milkman and to the readers.

The black man is the subject of *Song of Solomon*. Milkman journeys to the home place of his father and aunt to rescue the gold, he believes, is there. Instead of finding gold, in the caves of Virginia, Milkman finds the myths, the song and the richness of black culture. Every phase of his journey brings him closer to self and community. In Dan Ville, Pennsylvania Fred Garnet, a passing motorist teaches Milkman that everyone is not motivated by capital gain. Reverend Cooper's stories about old Macon Dead, Milkman's grandfather, about Lincoln's Heaven the farm where he worked right alongside his father, reveal for the first time to Milkman the powerful bomb in the phrase, "I know your people." As he listens to the oldman's recollections of the past, he glitters in to the life of their adoration and grows fierce with pride. Their premordial link to earth, to animals and to each other inspires Milkman's respect for them. He understands his own glaring limitations in the place.

"There was nothing to help him-not his money, his car his father's reputation, his suit or his shoes. In fact they hampered him. His watch and two hundred dollars would be of no help there, where all the man had was what he was born with, or had learned to use... They hooted and laughed all the way back to car, teasing Milkman, engaging him to tell more about how scared he was. And he told them laughing too, hard loud and long, really laughing."<sup>20</sup>

Pilate's role should not be underestimated. She provides a marked contrast to her brother and his family. While Macon's love for property and money, determines the nature of his relationship, Pilate's disregard of status, occupation hygiene and manners enable her to affirm spiritual values such as compassion, love, loyalty and generosity. She is modern as well as ageless and teaches Milkman that relation with culture, history and the community is more important than money. Milkman largely resolves the conflict between freedom and relation. Showing the myth coming from the black culture, is not enough. Icarus tale offers a tempting pattern for a black writer interested in myth and folklore since it relates to the folk tales of blacks flying back to homeland. Morrison plays variations on the story to correct the perspective. One version of it has Shalimar flying away and trying to take his son. But the baby is unable to soar with him. This version emphasizes that son's fall is the result of the situation beyond his control and secondly his father's desire for freedom and his family ties are in conflict. The second aspect is central to Morrison's analysis and reconstruction of the myth. The Freedom to fly with children involves denial of social and personal bonds. He does not destroy himself by soaring but he wounds others because he does not feel the responsibility. Milkman comes to ask the cost of heroic quest-" Who he leave believe? His great grandfather Shalimar left the children. Milkman has the example of Pilate before him that she could fly without leaving the ground. Pilate has the bond of relationship without being a part of society. By conceiving himself both free and individual, best member of the social group, Milkman unites the freedom and relationship. Milkman resolves the conflict when he leaps. He does not fly away. He flies towards his wounded brother – Finding freedom in surrender, he recreates the Myth."<sup>21</sup>

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