

Women's Resistance
Portrayed in Toni Morrison's novel
Beloved, The Bluest Eye and Sula

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August 2013



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A Thesis Submitted to
The Department of English and Humanities
of BRAC University

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In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Bachelor of Arts

August 2013

Acknowledgements

I would like to take this opportunity to thank my supervisor Professor Firdous Azim for her patience with me. I would like to thank all the teachers of my department who have helped to shape me. I would also like to thank my friends and family for supporting me throughout and mostly I would like to thank Allah for everything.

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Abstract

Being a minority population in American society, African-Americans encounter various social and political conflicts and discriminations in their lives. The enforcement of the values and norms of the dominant white culture has made it impossible for them to hold on to a distinctive way of life. African-American history is a record of the struggle of this community for the right to exist and a recognition of their place in American society. The struggle has been long and hard and taken on various forms. This past or history has a great impact on Afro-American lives, and marks their fight for recognition and social and political progress. Resisting dominant opposing forces has been an integral part of this struggle. Therefore, this paper attempts to present the way African-American have resisted. Having said this, the paper attempts to explore those paradigms of the African American struggle that seek to create their own space, particularly focusing on women to highlight what they went through. It is in this context I will be looking at Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved*, *The Bluest Eye* and *Sula*.

Introduction

“If there's a book you really want to read, but it hasn't been written yet, then you must write it.”

---Toni Morrison

Chloe Anthony Wofford was born in 1931 in Lorain (Ohio). She was the second of four children in a black working-class family. Her father, George Wofford, worked primarily as a welder, but held several jobs in order to support the family. Her mother, Ramah, was a domestic worker. Her parents moved away from the South in order to provide a better life for their children. Her family was proud of their background, however, and they shared stories and songs of Southern black folklore amongst themselves. Their child, Chloe Anthony or Toni displayed an early interest in literature; the author Toni Morrison later credited her parents with instilling in her a love of reading, music, and folklore. In 1949, Morrison graduated from high school with honors. She studied humanities at Howard and Cornell Universities and it is in Howard University where she joined a performance group that frequently traveled to the South. This is where she first experienced the life of the Southern black community that her parents had left behind.

Morrison met her husband at Howard University, and they had their first son in 1961. After a few years, Morrison was no longer happy in her marriage. She started her academic career at Texas Southern University; Morrison learned that in Texas, Black culture was a field of study rather than just a way of life. She stayed in Texas for a short period of time, and returned to Howard University to teach in 1957. She was very busy with teaching and taking care of her family, so she decided to participate in a writing club to help her find some time for herself, the

group met to share and discuss their writing with other people who enjoyed literature. This writing group is where Morrison first shared her writing of *The Bluest Eye* – a story about one of her childhood friends who prayed for blue eyes. At the time, Morrison set the story aside and continued to focus on her family. In 1964, Morrison divorced her husband and moved back to Lorain, Ohio. Shortly after her divorce Morrison got a job as an associate editor for Random House in New York, and she was promoted to senior editor in 1967. At this time she gave her story *The Bluest Eye* a second chance, and it was published in 1970. Morrison did not wait long before starting another novel. *Sula*, her second novel, was published in 1973. Excerpts from the book were published in *Redbook* magazine and it was nominated for the National Book Award in fiction in 1975. She soon gained the attention of both critics and a wider audience for her epic power, unerring ear for dialogue, and her poetically charged and richly expressive depictions of Black America. A member since 1981 of the American Academy of Arts and Letters, she has been awarded a number of literary distinctions, among them the Pulitzer Prize in 1988. In recognition of her contributions to her field, she received the 1993 Nobel Prize in Literature, making her the eighth woman and first African American woman to win the Nobel Prize.

Toni Morrison has written in depth about the African American life and people, and their place in the American canon. In this context I have chosen her essay “Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature,” where she posits various questions and asks what qualifies a work to be included in the canon: “...what use is it to go on about ‘quality’ being the only criteria for greatness knowing that the definition of quality is in itself the subject of much rage and is seldom universally agreed upon by everyone at all times?” (Morrison 202). I will also use her critical essay *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* [1992] where she highlights the absence of the African American presence in the

American canon. She argues that the African American characters in mainstream American canonical were ornamental and given subsidiary roles. They were secondary characters and no major roles were given to them. She further discusses, in the second portion of the essay, "Romancing the Shadow," the contradiction in the New World or American writing, that on the one hand claimed to represent a place where freedom is embraced and celebrated while on the other hand this very place accepted the repression, torture and confinement of 'others', especially the Black slaves. It is in this differentiation which makes African Americans be regarded as "non-Americans" while others, that is the white population, had the quality of "Americanness" as she terms it. The new canon of writing, the American canon, signaled a new departure and helped to differentiate it from the tradition of European writing. Finally to illustrate her points, in the third chapter she discusses Hemingway's *To Have and Have Not*, where she points out that the virtues of the hero such as self-reliance, power over their surroundings, control over their life, confidence, and independence are determined through the presence of servants, or slaves. In other words, the hero needs a subservient other for the validation of his heroic virtues. Thus, to ensure his power, the hero needs to exercise power over the weak. The hero is always judged on the basis of binary divisions between him and the Black characters, making Black characters into minor or secondary characters.

With this background in mind, in the first chapter of my thesis I will be looking at the novel *Beloved* to elucidate the past history that is so well articulated in the form of fiction. Then I will go on to discuss the way the characters demonstrate their resistance. For my second chapter I will be looking at *The Bluest Eye* to depict the various dominant ideologies that African Americans absorb and how they then exhibit resistance against them. For my third chapter I will look at the novel *Sula* and highlight the consequences of the absorption into the dominant white

society, where the characters are evaluated even by their own society on the standards and paradigms set by the white community and demonstrate how anyone who fails to fit into the rigid circle and shows resistance is associated with negative characteristics. Thus the question this thesis asks is how much African Americans, particularly women, can represent themselves and their history. This examination will be done through a record of their struggle and resistance to a complete surrender to the oppression and domination that the dominant white society wants to impose over them.

Chapter 1

Reclaiming the Encumbered History and Exhibiting Resistance

Slavery is an ancient and heinous institution which had adverse effects on the sufferers at both the physical as well as psychological levels. The text of *Beloved* depicts the excruciating life of Sethe, before and aftermath the end of slavery. The depiction of her life represents the lives of various slaves. Thus this novel is taken to meticulously look through the traumatic situation, recognize where the damage has been done and then finally living without denying the scars (Lucas 39). The novel is set against the backdrop of slavery in the American South in the period immediately prior to and following the civil war (1861-1865). Toni Morrison looks at the writing of the novel *Beloved* (1987) as a revisionist history, where she projects a factual account of the fugitive slave mother Margaret Garner who killed her daughter to save her from the horrific life of the institution of slavery (Parker 1). Its narrative which is primarily concerned with the painful resurrection or rebirth of buried memory and repressed psychological motivation is thus crucially informed by the paradigms of master and slave, colonizer and colonized, power and powerlessness, which have dominated the lives, identities and relationships of all the novel's Black characters. This chapter elucidates the oppressed history of slavery as depicted in the novel and discusses how the female characters are doubly oppressed at the hands of patriarchal society as well as within the institution of slavery.

Being a slave, Sethe, along with Paul D, Baby Suggs and other characters undergoes immense sufferings. Even with the abolition of slavery the remains of the past pervade in their

life in symbolic ways. The scars on Sethe's back which was a result of the whip that the nephews of the schoolteacher wielded on her, took the shape of a tree, a Chokecherry tree. Sethe says "and when it closed it made a tree. It grows there still" (17). The scars on her back are an embodiment of the past growing like a tree on her body. The tree which usually symbolizes life or family tree in her case represents the haunting memory that can never be erased. Paul D becomes an equal partner in his share of grief with Sethe, thus drawing the contours of a Black community.

He rubbed his cheek on her back and learned the way her sorrow, the roots of it; its wide trunk and intricate branches.... He would tolerate no peace until he had touched every ridge and leaf of it with his mouth, none of which Sethe could feel because her back skin had been dead for years. What she knew was that the responsibility for her breasts, at last, was in somebody else's hands. Would there be a little space, she wondered, a little time, some way to ... just stand there a minute or two . . . relieved of the weight of her breasts . . . and feel the hurt her back ought to. Trust things and remember things because he last of the Sweet Home men was there to catch her if she sank? (17)

The legacies of these past experiences cannot be eradicated even if they try to forget. There are various instances where past events make an indomitable and ineradicable impact on their present lives. These incidents include the return of Beloved, at the age of twenty, the age Sethe was when she had killed her daughter, and this implies that past events, which were part of actions performed during the period of slavery, cannot be erased. Parker emphasizes the importance of "confronting, reclaiming and transforming history" and alongside that he ponders at memory as the site for healing as well as exploring the politics of gender and race (1).

The interference of the various signals that hinges the characters to their past, forms a traumatized state of mind and as a result becomes a pivotal marker of a way of resisting. Parker shows that the character Beloved represents a form of hysteria: a haunted subject who unconsciously expresses repressed psychic trauma through physical symptoms and uses a corporeal discourse to articulate what is otherwise unspeakable (1). In other words, the feelings and actions that one fails to express and represses are vented eventually through bodily actions.

Hysteria thus represents hostility and desire transformed into physical symptoms that simultaneously reveal and conceal those feelings... As hysterics suffer from the reminiscence, Hysteria functions as a useful conceptual tool in reading a novel which concerns what Morrison calls “rememory”: (Parker 1).

The word “rememory” is coined by Morrison as a term to express the incarnation of the past. Sethe’s past memory of the days she had spent in the Sweet Home plantation in Kentucky, when she was a slave are horrendous. She was a replacement for Baby Suggs who was being freed by her son Halle with five years of weekend labour. She chooses Halle as her partner and bears two sons and a daughter with him. They were separated when they escaped. Later Sethe had no idea of Halle’s whereabouts. She was raped by the schoolteacher’s nephew and whipped brutally when she wanted to meet Baby Suggs and her children. Sethe was left with the legacy of slavery even after the abolition of slavery. After gaining freedom the past continues to haunt her and she fails to achieve a sense of equilibrium. Instead the ghost, who was the incarnation of the daughter Sethe had killed, reverberates through her actions. Paul D in symbiosis with Sethe shares a similar history and Beloved’s sudden arrival at 124 (as their home is called) provides them the opportunity to discuss their history together. Freud and Breuer argue that hysteria as “psychic disorder” is opposed to physical illness and that it is a result of a traumatic event that is

subsequently excluded from the conscious state of the mind. Repressed memories of unresolved trauma are unconsciously transferred into bodily symptoms, which function as physical metaphors of psychic distress. Similar to Freud, Irigaray is also of the opinion that hysteria is “nonverbal language”. Irigaray understands hysteria primarily as a form of protest against “patriarchal law” opposing “the rule-governed phallic economy”. She comments on “hysteria's potential to resist and subvert symbolic law in terms of mimicry. It represents an imposed femininity. By mimicking hegemonic modes of behavior to excess - by taking on, in most exaggerated form, what is expected but to such an extreme degree that the end result is the opposite of compliance - the hysteric challenges the dominant order” (Parker 2). In other words, she asserts that repetition and acceptance of dominant codes of behavior, result, in the case of hysterics, in the opposite, that is in a way rejecting and subverting dominant codes, values and norms. Unlike Freud, Irigaray is of the view that hysteria has an aspect of motherhood and that it has a privileged relation to the maternal body. Her theorization of hysteria allows for a broader sense of social-historical trauma, which focuses on the hysteric's relationship to her family (Parker 4).

Parker remarks that hysteria in *Beloved* can be seen as a product of public as well as personal repression, a response to what is repressed in history. Hysterical symptoms in *Beloved* are a result of the inability of language to articulate the immensity of the horrors of slavery. Hysteria, according to Parker, is productive because it provides a means to express what is otherwise inexpressible, what Morrison terms 'unspeakable thoughts, unspoken' not simply in terms of the individual psyche but in terms of history. However her usefulness is limited as she only examines on issues of “sexual difference” and overlooks issues of race (4).

Parker underscores that the presence of Beloved can be closely linked with hysteria as both a hysterical subject as well as hysterical symptoms. She thinks that “her ambivalence blurs the philosophical systems of masculinity and whiteness as culturally central and normative by constructing femininity and blackness as other. As a hysteric Beloved highlights the insights that psychoanalysis can offer- as well as its shortcomings - in understanding Black female subjectivity”. As a symptom of the hysteria of the ‘Other’, “she represents the return of the repressed and the community’s response to her reveals possible ways of dealing with the pain of personal and historical trauma” (4).

When Beloved haunts 124, she mimes various feelings thus demonstrating her angst. Her resentment and anger are expressed through acts of violence. She suppresses her feelings and does not speak of her pain in literal terms but demonstrates it through action. The violence unleashed by Beloved and the fear she engenders in the inhabitants of the house, can be read in a metaphoric way by referring to what Cixous calls the “dissatisfaction with the established order” (qtd. in Parker 5).

Irigaray also links hysteria to obsession, which is expressed with doing certain things excessively and repetitively.

Beloved becomes voracious “She took the best of everything first. The best chair, the biggest piece, the prettiest plate, the brightest ribbon for her hair” (241). However, her desire cannot be abated. Just As Irigaray says of the hysteric, “the 'I' is empty still, ever more empty, opening wide in rapture of soul... no hands can fill the open hungry mouth with the food that both nourishes and devours”... so Beloved is insatiable because nothing can make reparation for her death (Parker 5).

Beloved's devouring of sugar has historical and ideological implications. Sugar is associated with the history of slavery as most slaves had been kidnapped from Africa to work on the sugar plantations in the New lands during the 17th and 18th centuries. Also Beloved was born in Sweet Home, the name of which reminds the reader of the slaves who were made to work in sugar plantations. Likewise, her endless desire for sugar is metaphoric of her desire for the sweetness of her mother's love. She develops a cannibalistic appetite and devours Sethe metaphorically. "Sethe was licked, tasted, eaten by Beloved's eyes" (57). Beloved draws her sustenance from Sethe and grows "plumper by the day". "Beloved ate up her life, took it, swelled up with it, and grew taller on it" (250).

Furthermore, sugar signifies race and gender power structures and evokes powerful stereotypes of femininity. Beloved's love of sugar thus exemplifies the assertion that hysteria is a form of self-fashioning in which hysteric strategies of self-representation imitate the culture that produces hysterical symptoms. Beloved's unappeasable appetite for sugar makes her far from a sweet girl, and demonstrates how the excessive and parodic character of the hysteric's symptoms functions as a counter-hegemonic form of mimicry (qtd in Parker 6).

Parker says that Irigaray asserts -another key characteristic of hysteria as the pre-oedipal, homosexual desire for the mother which is a central aspect in *Beloved*. Hysterics withdraw from the patriarchal realm and step towards the "pre-oedipal state of merger between the self and the Other". "I am not separate from her there is no place where I stop. Her face is my own and I want to be there is no place where her face is to be looking at it too" (210). Hysteria which comes from the Greek word *hysteros* means womb, is ironically an apt description of Beloved's condition because she not only has a wandering womb, she desires to return to a womblike fusion with her mother. This idea is represented through the breakdown of syntax and the

absence of punctuation in these passages, which shows, as Kristeva points out, that although some emotions or instincts are repressed they are capable of defying the Law-of-the-father when they erupt (qtd. Parker 8).

Another noticeable aspect of hysteria is its destructive nature. Irigaray acknowledges that long-term hysteria is not possible as it takes the shape of violence. Denver, Sethe's younger daughter, seems to notice this destructive potential for destruction, as she watches Sethe get thinner and thinner while Beloved grows and she fears that Beloved may kill her mother.

Sethe's decision to live with her two daughters in a house when she loses her job represents a subversive defiance of patriarchal law. She lives with her daughters in a place where there is a complete absence of a male figure. She also fails at her job. She lives a reclusive life away from society. The emphasis on individualism and avoidance of the community is an act of subversion that hysterics are capable of. However, one of the important arenas that Morrison directs her reader to ponder is the point that community solidarity can bring forth change. The collective actions of the women bring about the change and makes healing possible. With the assistance of the women in the locality Denver is able to make Beloved leave their home and thus saves her mother.

In contrast to Beloved is her sister Denver who represents the time after slavery. She is not represented in the grotesque manner in which Beloved is portrayed. There is a stark contrast between them. Denver is very caring and is happy to get Beloved as a playmate. Later she starts to feel for her and understands that she is her sister. Denver says "Beloved is my sister. I swallowed her blood right along with my mother's milk"(205). Denver was often apprehensive of the fact that Beloved might leave someday, showing her attachment to Beloved. Denver

represents the post slavery period where a person even while aware of past history has overcome the memories of the sufferings of that period.

In conclusion, we can say that *Beloved's* hysterical symptoms are a way of demonstrating resistance. The word *Beloved* inscribed in the headstone shows that *Beloved* is the representation of African American women and thus her characteristics; such as her insatiable hunger, represents her cultural discontent. The spirit of *Beloved* is “the spirit of the memory of her African American ancestors”(Parker 12). After *Beloved's* departure, when Paul D asks Denver if she thinks that the mysterious young woman was her sister, Denver replies, “At times I think she was more” (266). Subsequently, the fact that her footprints fit the feet of adults and children alike suggests that if *Beloved* is from the past, she is also of the future. Her memory of the Middle Passage indicates that she is an ancestral spirit. Thus alongside depicting the historical background, she is also an embodiment of resistance. Also, *Beloved* is a narrative that gives a voice to unspeakable sufferings. *Beloved* is given three interior monologues which follow the discovery of her identity (Kenon 2). These monologues challenge the cultural construction of gender and race in history and draw our attention to the past. *Beloved* addresses the pain and protest and further suggests finding sources of salve for historical trauma. Through the sentence “Remembering seemed unwise” (274), Morrison implies that the traumatic impact of slavery can never be fully effaced. The line “not a story to pass on” shows the pain of slavery and that her story will never pass on or away, that is, it will never die. For Morrison's characters, what they should embrace is “something that involves learning to confront grief without being governed by it, to possess the past without becoming possessed” (Parker 16). The repressed re-memory that is resurrected needs to be carried on, though the history does not represent a glorious past, its burden must pass on and no denial is possible.

Chapter 2

Obtruding White Aesthetics and Evincing Resistance

“Adults, older girls shops magazines, newspaper, window signs –all the world had agreed that a blue-eyed, yellow-haired, pink skinned doll was what every girl child treasured” (14).

These lines depict the transmission of the dominant culture into the other culture that Morrison has described so graphically. In an article entitled *Seeds in Hard Ground: Black Girlhood in The Bluest Eye* Rosenberg elucidates the reasons that the African American women writers often posit regarding taking up writing, saying that they have never read what they wanted to read. “Black girls did not exist as far as the school anthologies were concerned” (345). Furthermore, Morrison mourns for people like herself; Blacks or African American who always remained in the periphery and are never given center stage. Therefore, in 1964 Morrison took on the task of writing *The Bluest Eye* which was “working out of her memory of what Lorain, Ohio, had been like in 1940, [and] she reconstructed her own childhood” (346). She places three Black characters at the centre of the narrative: Claudia Macteer, her sister Frieda and Pecola Breedlove who are 9, 10 and 11 years old respectively. The novel explores the journey of the characters through an initiation story. The theme of racism and white supremacy, incest, and other related issues are explored in a complex manner. The aim of this chapter is to ascertain influences of White aesthetics on African American culture, and direct/ indirect ways of resisting such influences.

In The Bluest Eye: Notes on History Community and Black Female

Subjectivity Kuenz underscores Morrison's motive to "rewrite the bodies and history of Black Americans whose positive images and stories have been eradicated by commodity culture" (421). Although the primary narrator is Claudia, other characters are given voice and are able to tell their own stories. Thus it is through multiple voices that the novel "represent[s] black female subjectivity" (430). Initially characters such as Pauline or Cholly appeared to be quite negative because of the way they treat their family and how they are perceived by their society, but this behaviour when seen through the treatment and experiences that they have undergone, seems quite justifiable. Pauline's maiden life is described where the account of how she met Cholly and fell in love with him and lived a happy life, until she lost one of her teeth and she started to regard herself as ugly, which ruined her married life. Also even when Cholly was presented as a drunkard who beat his wife, the readers learn to forgive or understand his behaviours when later in the novel they are informed that he had never had a proper family i.e. a father figure. The shifts in the narrative create spaces for other characters to speak and by doing so every character gets an opportunity to represent themselves. This is how Morrison provides different perspectives. Kuenz observes that "the virtues of the book is its capacity to empathize and allow its readers to empathize - something not possible in the absence of history and context- with all his characters perhaps specially those who seem irredeemable Cholly, Pauline and Soaphead Church" (430). He further remarks that the naturalism of African American life has been "adapted" and "altered" as a result a new literary genre emerges, that includes themes such as the importance of cultural heritage or... "ancestries" - problem of assimilation, the conflict between self and nominal barriers created by community, the psychological and eco-racism and the resulting quest for wholeness that is essential before exploring overcoming these obstacles (442).

Kuenz notes that “mass culture has made the process of self-denial a pleasurable experience” (423). The sense of “self-denial” is expressed in the lives of Pauline, Pecola and Geraldine. For instance Pauline wasted her life by embedding the white aesthetics in her mind, by comparing herself with the ideas of physical beauty and romantic love that she watched in movies. These expectations that she developed through virtual life could not be met in real life, so she retaliates by not paying much attention to her own family, which cannot meet the standards and dreams that have been fed to her. Instead, she gives all her time and dedication to the white family she works for. She even named her daughter Pecola on the actor from the movie *Imitation of Life* in the hope that her daughter would be regarded as white even with her mixed ancestry. In other words, the characters always want to deny their racial identity as they feel inferior. Thus there is always a wish to be the Other, who is regarded as the more desirable entity. Light skinned Soaphead and other characters such as Pauline and Geraldine are similar as they are all victims of self-denial. Nevertheless Soaphead is in a better position as he was given a proper education which along with the light skin from his mixed parentage gives him a false sense of superiority.

Cormier in an article entitled “Black Naturalism and Toni Morrison: The Journey away from Self-Love in *The Bluest Eye*” approaches the novel from the point of view of Black naturalism, a name that he coins himself—“the idea that one's social environments can drastically affect one's nature and potential for surviving and succeeding in this world.” Therefore, he defines Morrison’s distinct examination of Black life as Black naturalism (109). In this context, Cholly’s disintegration of mind is justified; by narrating it from his point of view. After living a hard life having been abandoned by his father, as well as having faced sexual

humiliation and racism from three white men, his life was transformed and harmed beyond repair. Social values were broken and from then onwards he started to live his life without social constraints, and even went to the extent of raping his own daughter. Thus Cholly is described as being “dangerously free. Free to feel whatever he felt-.....free to live in his fantasies even to die” (126).

Cormier finds Morrison’s novel “strictly naturalistic” and the presentation of the naturalistic aspects are challenging and complex. Morrison’s protagonist faces a lot of hurdles such as “inter-racism”, “intra-racism”, “sexism” and “poverty” (111). Geraldine, a lady, stands as the example of Black ladyhood, who denies and puts down her own race because she is in a better position in society than other members of her community. This is what is termed intra-racism. She is emblematic of people who are determined to uplift their position by associating with white people. Her husband being white ensures her a better social position. It is quite apparent that he chooses to marry her because she is educated and because she will ensure that his house and his clothes are taken care of, not because he loves her. The personal motive behind the marriage is apparent, based as it is on personal interest and not on love. To reiterate, there is no mention of any affectionate gestures between Geraldine and her husband. Both seem to be too busy to have any time for each other or to demonstrate any gesture of love and affection. Thereby, family chores and responsibilities are performed out of a sense of responsibility and not out of love. She makes sure that her body and home are neat and tidy. She is more concerned in keeping her son Junior clean than caring about him. Most of all she shows more affection towards her cat than her own son. In other words, Geraldine’s life is very superficial. Though from a distance it appears perfect in reality there exists only futility and aimlessness. Intra-racism is projected through Geraldine’s hatred towards dirt and is expressed in her dismay at

Pecolabeing a “nigger” and not an upper-class “colored” person. These are the words that she uses to describe Pecola when she comes to her house and plays with her son.

In addition, Maureen Peal is another nearly white girl and the behaviour meted out to her is guided by the same reason:

A high yellow dream child with long brown hair beaded into two lynch ropes that hung down her back. She was rich at least by our standards as rich as the richest of the white girls, swaddled in comfort and care.....she enchanted the entire school. When teachers called on her, they smiled encouragingly. Black boys didn't trip her in the walls white boys didn't stone; white girls didn't suck their teeth when she was assigned to be their work partners (48).

This shows the persistence of inter-racism in the community. The fact that Maureen was whiter than the others, makes her get greater attention from her teachers, black/ white boys and white girls.

Subsequently, the examples of feminine beauty in everyday objects and consumer goods - white baby dolls with blue eyes, Shirley temple cups, Mary Jones Candies and even the clothes of “dream child” Maureen Peal - are regarded as stylish. These are some of the references to the process of the internalization of white aesthetics (Kuenz 97). Pecola's fascination with Shirley Temple - signifying her latent wish to be like her - is presented through her excessive drinking of milk. Pecola desires to have blue eyes, as she believes that possessing blue eyes can solve all her problems and fulfill all her desires. Also her family life is not happy, and when her parents fight in front of her she feels as though her existence is nullified. However she believes that if she had blue eyes her parents would think twice before fighting, that is they would internalize the gaze of her ‘blue eyes’ and stop fighting. Also people would regard her as beautiful and would treat her

well. She sees this as the only way to overcome the vicious cycle and shortcomings of her life. Despite this, in one incident Pecola is shown to prefer the dandelions over Mary Jane candy wrappers, signaling to some kind of Black naturalism. However, in the very next moment, when her interaction with Mr. Yacobowski, the store owner becomes unpleasant, she agrees that Mary Jane wrappers are beautiful. Here it is apparent that the shop owner does not treat her courteously as a customer because of her race. Whenever she feels rejected or ignored, she conforms to the white standardization of beauty. The way Pecola enjoys the candy is symbolic of her wish to dissolve her Black identity and become white if it could be at all possible. Pecola's desperate longing for blue eyes is portrayed as part of "self-destructive even nihilistic impulses" (Corner 80).

Similarly, Pauline Breedlove is also influenced by the ideas and values of the white community in her actions. Pauline "was never able . . . [again] to Look at a face and not assign it some category in the scale of absolute beauty" which she had absorbed in full from the movies (95). She was obsessed with the white family for whom she worked. "She became what is known as an ideal servant for such a role filled practically all of her needs" for "here she found beauty, order cleanliness and praise" (98-99). She ignored her family and did whatever she could to take good care of the Fishers. "She refused beef slightly dark or with edges not properly trimmed. The slightly reeking fish that she accepted for her own family she would all but throw in the fish man's face if he sent it to the Fisher house" (99).

Unlike Pecola, Claudia fights "to counteract the universal love of white baby dolls, Shirley Temples, and Maureen Peals" (Rosenberg 440). Though she is only nine years old, she demonstrates her disapproval of accepting these aesthetic ideals, questioning them she finds no relevance or feels no connection to them in her own life. Claudia hates both Shirley Temple and

the doll which has blue eyes and fair skin - the embodiment of conventional beauty. Her attitude to her own doll Frieda is completely different. She says "I fingered the face, wondering at the single stroke eyebrows...poked the glassy blue eyeballs... I could not love it". She rips the doll apart and this action becomes metaphoric of her latent desire to harm the little white girls in a similar way. This is the way in which Claudia resists white standards of beauty which are unquestioningly accepted by other members of her Black community. She is unable to comprehend the logic behind considering a fair skin and blue eyes as the standard when she herself is Black. Unable to comprehend that all standards of beauty are constructed, she nevertheless registers her objections to the established standards. Her resistance, albeit small is noticeable. Claudia's hatred of the whiteness of the white girl and her protest against ideals of cleanliness thus becomes another form of resistance. However her hatred towards white and established norms and values is only outward and she is unable to reject everything, and is forced into transforming her feeling into a show of pretentious love. Hamilton quotes Elaine Showalter tracing her description of the three phases of the female subculture in "Female Tradition" where in the initial stage the minority imitates the dominant norms and ideas and internalizes them.. The result in this case is the internalization of the 'white gaze'. In this novel, the Black female characters are shown to internalize the established white ideal of beauty. Here Claudia, who denies these ideas, can be seen to be ahead of the other Black characters in the sense that she is already in the second phase that is the phase of resistance. In other words, she is in the feminist phase unlike others who are in the feminine stage. On the other hand, Pecola's wholesale internalization of the concept is also remarkable. She believes that had she possessed blue eyes, she would have been regarded as beautiful and thus would attain happiness. The young girl fails

to understand that being beautiful does not bring happiness nor that happiness and beauty are not related.

Thus it can be deduced with the examples presented above that all the Black characters in the novel regardless of the position they occupy, are linked in sorrow and suffering, subject to the white gaze that defines them as 'Other'. In other words, Black characters are subject to racism which makes them unhappy and dissatisfied with their own lives. In having to live up to the constructed ideology of beauty and status, they feel completely shattered as they can never live up to these ideals and they are caught in a ceaseless desire to reach an unattainable goal. Their pursuit of this ideal persists, despite the obvious unachievability of this artificial construct. They want to pass as white girls and women, and to be beautiful by white standards of beauty. Pecola, her mother and Geraldine thus are examples of characters who conform to the dominant ideology, always looking for ways in which can *pass* as white. Kuenz shows that *The Bluest Eye* focuses on the histories and bodies of Black women, and the alternative shift of perspectives given "from young girl to older woman to black man to omniscient narrator" that examines Pecola's life in all its dimensions, from race to gender. In this process, different perspectives merge to show her life from both insider and outsider standpoints, and shows how damaging the absorption of white aesthetics may turn out to be.

Wong in her article "Transgression in Poesis in *The Bluest Eye*" highlights the fact that Morrison doesn't follow the conventional way of writing that is she eliminates punctuation and doesn't leave any space in between words. Despite this, the words are comprehensible, and the meaning they convey a form of resistance to established norms and ideals:

In refusing the terms of the dominant culture's patterning of experience one in a position to restate the familiar, that is, to retrace the particular contours of one's own experience,

to regain the practice of one's own narrative. This refusal of ready-made terms, and the responsibility it entails, plays itself out through other art forms, such as music-in particular, jazz (473).

The resistance is shown through the actions of the characters as well as through the writing style.

Therefore, this novel has succeeded in representing the African Americans female desire, a desire that seeks to assimilate into the dormant society. It is this unattainable desire that makes women of Black descent in America fall prey to white supremacy and brings about suffering in their lives. Pauline fails to cope with the white standard of beauty when she arrives in Ohio from Kentucky. Her life begins to change till her marriage fails and her life is ultimately ruined. Realizing that she would never be considered beautiful by white standards, she fails to find any meaning in life and finds solace only in working for the Fishers white family. Similarly, Pecola's fantasy of having blue eyes is the pivotal reason for her downfall. She embodies those Black women who while trying to measure up with the white standards, are on the verge of destroying themselves. Claudia is a foil to Pecola in the novel. She despises anything that symbolizes the dormant ideals of beauty such as the blue-eyed dolls or Shirley Temple. When neither the marigold nor Pecola's baby survive she blames it on the society where Pecola will always be the victim as she fails to fit into the norms of white beauty (Furman 21). Through Pecola, Morrison challenges the notion of beauty as essential: "inborn, original, or un-self-conscious virtue" (Corner 85).

Chapter 3

Trajectory of Self-Creation and Resistance in *Sula*

“Lonely, ain't it?”

Yes, but my lonely is mine. Now your lonely is somebody else's. Made by somebody else and handed to you. Ain't that something? A secondhand lonely.”

Toni Morrison *Sula*

The extract depicts one of the major themes of the novel in concise form. It hints at freedom, where freedom means a lack of confinement, no boundaries. There is an overcoming of any kind of bond, defying social forces that place one, if not within the centre, then at the peripheries. Sula, placed as she is in the periphery of societal norms, along with other characters want to be free of all such barriers and break all conventional bonds. Some characters are indeed caught within the limits of social expectations and deny their individual latent talent. Thus, this chapter will look at how the inner self of each character is developed and accentuate the direct and indirect factors responsible for the formation of the self, as well as highlight the resistance that they put up, and the barriers they encountered in this process.

Sokolof's essay entitled “Imitations of Matriarchal Age: Notes on the Mythical Eva in Toni Morrison's *Sula*” explores how strong matriarchal lines of temperamental inheritance shape the major female characters. Specifically, how the Grandmother of Sula, Eva is the shaping force in the formation of the protagonist (Sokolof 430). Eva's history is connected to the family and community. Eva is portrayed as a woman who for the sustenance of her family has had the courage to amputate her legs to claim the insurance money. She holds so much power and legitimacy over her children that she even goes to the extent of determining her son's fate. Her son Plum after returning from World War becomes a drug addict. Unable to witness her son's

disintegration, Eva burns him to death. Sokoloff says: “just as she is prepared to do violence to herself for the protection of her children, she is ready to do violence to her children themselves when she feels powerless to protect them” (432). Also, when Eva sees her daughter, Hannah (who accidentally ignites herself with boiling water), “bobbing like a jack-in-the-box,” she is reflexively prepared to act violently and swiftly to save her grown child. In an attempt to use her own body to douse the fire, she hurls herself through the window pane from the upper floor of the house. Ironically, Eva has already witnessed the death of two other children: one which she had caused herself, the other that she had failed to prevent. She names the three children whom she adopts as “dewey” which again remarks on her “God like” role in the lives of others. Morrison writes: “The creator and sovereign of this enormous house ... was Eva Peace, who sat in a wagon on the third floor directing the lives of her children, friends, strays and a constant stream of boarders” (25). Sula also demonstrates a ‘lawless’ quality (Sokoloff 434). Like her grandmother she also inflicts violence. Sula uses her grandmother’s paring knife and cuts the tip of her finger to turn away the teenage boys who were teasing her and Nel, which shows that “there are few limits to the violence she would do to herself and no constraint in what she would do to others” (20). Therefore, the difference in Eva’s character is perceptible when she acts in the interest of protecting her children from poverty, “Sula transforms into a move that seeks not merely to survive, but to challenge, threatening forces” (434). Eva and Sula differ in that the vitality that Eva acquired through a life time of endurance, Sula redirects into defiance. When Eva tells her that she needs a man and children, she replies she wants only to “create herself.” Sula celebrates the self (Furman 23).

Likewise, the other major character Nel is woven into four generations of women (430).

Nel's mother, Helene Wright, has been raised by her grandmother (Nel's great-grandmother), who took her as an infant from her own Creole mother (Nel's grandmother), an independent woman who has made her living as a madam Helene, in reaction against her mother, is strenuously conventional, married, and proper. Nel, raised and tamed by these standards her friendship with Sula an expression of the otherwise muted parts of her personality, parts of herself that, by implication, derive from the maternal ancestor: her grandmother, the Creole madam, who, like Sula, is sensuous and independent (Sokoloff 431).

Nel's encounter with Eva, many years after Sula's death, shows how Sula and Nel were just the same, a remark that Eva makes. Eva refers to the incident where Nel witnessed the drowning of Little Chicken with a certain thrill and curiosity similar to how Sula felt when she witnessed her mother burn (Sokoloff 433). Sokoloff concludes that the creation of a matriarchal community became "the source of vitality and truth telling that, in the end, permits her progeny to prevail" (435).

Similarly in the article "In Search of Self: Frustration and Denial in Toni Morrison's *Sula*" Nigro shows that Morrison's individual characters as well as the entire community of characters whose concept of self has been thwarted by the "absence of opportunity for respectable, gainful employment" (735). She notes the condition of the people and says that

In the tightly knit community of the Bottom, survival is serious business, and each person must determine a means of existing in a world that is alien-White and male. Residents manage as best they can, working menial jobs, scrimping, and helping each other but always remaining within the understood boundaries prescribed by the hostile White world (726)

Furthermore she highlights the fact that even before Sula is introduced, an account of her delineated family tree is provided. It is said that her grandmother Eva has been abandoned by her husband Boyboy, leaving behind three children. One of Eva's children Hanna is shown to have been widowed leaving behind a child. Thereby, they both create an unconventional and female-headed household. Nigro then stresses the hurdles and obstacles that the characters face in their everyday lives. He writes,

The business of survival is an everyday concern for Eva and Hannah, but because they are Black women in the 1920s, the only paid work available in Medallion is as domestics for ungrateful White families or as prostitutes. And even the prostitutes have fallen on hard times. So mother and daughter devise their own means of coping. During the summer, they join their neighbors in canning the harvest of fruits and vegetables in preparation for the hard winter ahead. The mysterious loss of Eva's leg provides a much-awaited monthly check. In addition, Eva takes in an array of boarders and stray people, some of whom pay and some of whom do not. It is in this unconventional and often chaotic household, filled with boarders, adopted children, and gentlemen callers, that Sula Mae Peace grows up (727).

Likewise, Sula's friend Nel whom she met in school is taken care of by her mother Helene Wright. Sula and Nel find in each other what they lack in themselves. Nel's house is always kept neat, but she "relishes the casual disorder order of Sula's household, where people drop in unannounced, chat and laugh and where dirty dishes or stacked newspapers pile-up". Similarly Sula enjoys sitting in the neat red velvet sofa while she is in Nel's house for ten to twenty minutes.

However over time, Nel, growing as she does in a household that maintains conventional social standards, upheld by her mother, eventually gets married to Jude where she continues in the conventional role of a good wife and a good mother. Sula, on the other hand, decides to “make herself” instead of going on to “make somebody else.” In an era when a woman was clearly defined by social convention, Sula is determined to be herself. She refuses to accept the conventional boundaries of race and gender and by rejecting the mores of the outside world and her community, she stands alone. She has physical relationships with men she meets, and there are rumours of her having sexual relations with White men as well. She sleeps with her best friend’s husband, resulting in the breakdown of her friend’s marriage. She is always defiant, and does not hesitate to trample on social conventions.

On the other hand, Jude, Nel’s husband, wanted to better his position by doing a “self-affirming job to build something where nothing has existed before.” That is, when the construction of the New River Road was about to start he wanted to work there so that he could say “I build the road”. He was distressed when he learned that they were only recruiting White men, men from Italy but not the young men from the Bottom. He was really disappointed at this. Nigro asserts

In *Sula*, Morrison offers the deadly consequences when the natural feelings of aggression lack a suitable outlet because it is through our work that we define ourselves. Work need not be confined to the concept of earning a living: Work can also be understood as that outlet that allows our creative energies to surface (734).

Therefore,

For Sula, her defiance in refusing to accept demeaning employment or to accept a life prescribed by others may not have been such a tragedy had she had access to an art form

with which to express herself. Sula was stubbornly unwilling to define herself as part of the Medallion community and to conform to its standards, and by deliberately placing herself outside the accepted boundaries, she stood alone. In her quest to “make herself,” Sula was following a path that had never been trod on before, a path for which she had no tools and no directions. Sula may have succeeded in making herself, but the making process involved pain not only for herself but for all those whose lives she touched (734).

Moving on, Bryant, in the essay entitled “The Orderliness of Disorder: Madness and Evil in Toni Morrison's *Sula*” depicts the presence of madness and evil in the novel. Shadrack who was shell shocked, was regarded as mad by the community of the Bottom. He further notes that “in Morrison's novels madness is a survival strategy that empowers individuals with the means to order chaos in unusual ways. Madness, then, is power to the black community.” The point made is exemplified by the line from the novel “They knew Shadrack was crazy but that did not mean that he didn't have any sense or, even more important, that he had no power” (733). Again the presence of Sula seems to be an embodiment of evil. Despite this, the people of community of the Bottom did not want to drive her away; instead community members unconsciously used her to order their society and improve their relationships with one another (734).

The other pivotal aspect that Bergerbholtz in her article “Toni Morrison's *Sula*: A Satire on Binary Thinking” highlights is the comparison and the contrast between the major characters Sula and Nel. Here she ponders at the characterization of both characters and remarks that the seemingly “good” character Nel and the seemingly “evil” character Sula have other aspects to their personalities which are also explored. In other words, she underscores that Nel, like Sula has a bad side, an instance of which can be found when Chicken Little drowns, Nel doesn't try to

save him, instead asks Sula not to disclose this to anyone. This suggests that Nel is an equally blameworthy character and cannot be given a clean chit where she can be regarded as “good” only. Similarly, the fact that Sula cries when Chicken Little dies and discloses the incident at the funeral is an example of how she also has humane feelings and that she confesses out of a feeling of guilt. This shows that Sula is not all “evil”. Thus the conclusion that Bergerbholz reaches is that Morrison satirizes the binary mode of thinking, and tries to blur the lines between the ideal good and bad, presenting characters who cannot be judged in a linear or one-dimensional fashion. Duality and complexity of character are revealed.

In conclusion it can be said that the characters, specially the female characters, are limited by social expectations. Eva, even after her husband had abandoned her, still liked “maleness” and advises Sula to get herself a husband and to have children. Nel who is the contrast of Sula, follows the conventional norms of marrying and taking care of children. The various hurdles that these characters face persist, even as they follow social ideologies and norms. Sula on the other hand, defies these mores, is regarded as a pariah. To reiterate, in forming a self that was beyond the boundaries of the society, Sula had to face a lot of resistance. Morrison in the article “Unspeakable things Unspoken : The Afro-American Presence in American Literature.” describes Sula in the following words

I always thought of Sula as quintessentially black, metaphysically black, if you will, which is not melanin and certainly not unquestioning fidelity to the tribe. She is New World black and New World woman extracting choice from choicelessness, responding inventively to found things improvisational daring, disruptive, imaginative, modern, out-of-the-house, outlawed, unpolicing, uncontained and uncontainable and dangerously female” (446).

Conclusion

Through a selection of Toni Morrison's novels *Beloved*, *The Bluest Eye* and *Sula* I have tried to understand African-American culture and history. This history is of interest as it is based on an understanding of difference. These novels have helped me enter a very different culture and history, and aided me in my understanding of a largely neglected section of the human community, whose lives and cultures, have been indelibly effected, like ours, by imperialist and colonial processes.

Morrison is of the view that a writer's cultural and personal history undoubtedly shapes her work (Furman 105). Her concern is to reflect the racial dimensions of the society through her writings, which provides an elaborate and detailed picture of slavery and racism. In her critical works, she traces the presence of African-American mores and customs or Africanisms from their early appearance in 18th century personal narratives to its use in contemporary fictional narratives. Her fiction also reflects this critical-historical understanding. For example, in *Beloved* she has used her researches into African-American history to depict the entire picture from the time of slavery till the aftermath, which nevertheless still bears the traces of slavery. The historical account is fictionalised through the creation of individual characters, enabling the narratives to record the psychological trauma vividly. Symbols such as the scars on Sethe's back, or *Beloved's* insatiable thirst for sugar refers to the horrible experiences inflicted on slaves as they were made to work in sugar plantations and the traumatic memories that scarred the lives and minds of Black people.

Moving on, in *The Bluest Eye* Morrison has presented the influences of white culture on Black people. In this novel Pecola is a symbol of utter dissolution as she faces both inter-racism and intra-racism. Also she is deprived of her mother's affection, is raped by her father, and lives a homeless rootless existence. She is led to believe that there is only one way out of all these problems – that is to have blue eyes. Her longing for blue eyes makes her feel that like Soaphead she does have blue eyes. However, by the end she is left only with an irrevocable sense of loss.

Likewise in *Sula* there seem to be a continuation of the themes and structures introduced in *The Bluest Eye*, even though the sense of evil is portrayed differently. Sula is different from the people of the Bottom. Before she is introduced in the novel the readers know of other characters such as Shadrack, Helene, and Eva. This not only provides a background of the protagonist, but also shows the stark difference between the other characters and Sula. Even Sula's best friend Nel is completely different from her. Nel is happily married, and represents communal responsibility whereas Sula, who betrays her best friend by sleeping with her husband, is the person who denies all social norms. With these examples from each novel I have tried to highlight and show the history of slavery as well as the history of the resistance against slavery.

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