

LANGUAGE IN INDIA

Strength for Today and Bright Hope for Tomorrow

Volume 12 : 1 January 2012

ISSN 1930-2940

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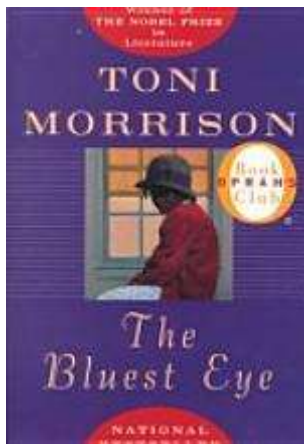
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Maternal Images: Reading Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*

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Abstract

The present paper explores the maternal images as portrayed in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*. The analysis highlights the irritatingly negative attitude of African American motherhood which stems from the deep disappointment and negligence in the lives of these women. Still, there are a couple of mothers who derive their inspiration from African values and cultural practices and offer a resistance against the maternal stereotype imposed by the white literature. The basic tenet of the paper is to stress the construction of the stereotypes of black motherhood as an ideological tool to control and define the black mothers in American society. Confronted with the reality that the patriarchal order around which society is structured does not allow black women equal access at par with their white counterparts. Numerous black children

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have suffered at the hands of many black females, but when their dividends are dependent on class, race, and social status, it becomes impossible to fulfill their roles as mothers.

Key Words: Maternal Images, African American Motherhood, Stereotypes, Patriarchy

Aspects of the Portrayal of Motherhood

Portrayal of motherhood has always been one of the most dominant preoccupations of all the Black women writers as it finds its vivid and graphic manifestation in their works. These writers build upon black women's experience of and perspectives on motherhood to develop a view of black motherhood in terms of both maternal identity and maternal role. Their perception of motherhood is radically different from that of dominant culture where Black motherhood has been used as a distinctly complex ideology to control Black women. They have been assigned certain stereotypes as breeder, concubine, sapphire, mammy, and mule and projected as more eager for motherhood than their white counterparts in most of white literature. Furthermore, the white literature also endorses their capability as mothers as compared to the white women "...all black women became superhuman mother, not only for their own people, but for white people as well. More than white women, it is assured, black women look to motherhood as their chief justification in life; and more than white women, they are physically and emotionally capable of handling the responsibilities with it" (Wade-Gayles, 59).

Furthermore, the mother-daughter bonding or the portrayal of motherhood is an extension of the necessity of female bonding which brings attention in the wake of the feminist movement of the 1960s. The major writers who vividly portrayed this concept are Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, Brenda Wilkinson, Jamaica Kincaid, Gayl Jones, Gloria Naylor, and Maya Angelou. Against a racial and sexual domination, these writers have consistently expanded motherhood into a creative and personally fulfilling role.

How African American Authors Deal with Mothering



Toni Morrison

The Black women novelists, on the other hand, deal with experience of mothering rather than the image of it which is yet another way of countering the stereotypical images of black women in white literature. African American authors have given vibrant portraits of what a

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mother is and what the act of mothering could be. Mothering in their view, is fundamentally and profoundly an act of resistance, essential and integral to black women's fight against racism. They also prove that the state of black motherhood has more depth than any other stereotype. The power of motherhood and the empowerment of mothering are what make possible the better world they seek for themselves and their children. Maya Angelou's cycles of autobiographical works, for example, make important contributions to the literary record of black motherhood. Her autobiographies are an important record of how black mothers affect their families and communities.

This paper is a celebration of African American women's resistance and resilience as mothers. It further illustrates how black women writers have deconstructed motherhood as an experience in itself and focuses on the value given to motherhood by these women.

Handerson may be quoted in this regard when he says:

Black women have...brought into the literature a special knowledge of their lives and experiences that is...different from the descriptions/portrayals of women by men....They (Black women writers) freed themselves from the roles assigned to them in the writings of their male counterparts, where, depicted as queens and princess, or as earth mothers and idealized Big Mommas of superhuman wisdom and strength, they were unrecognizable as individuals (Henderson XXIV).

Barbara Christian in one of her essays, "An Angle of Seeing: Motherhood in Buchi Emecheta's *Joys of Motherhood* and Alice Walker's *Meridian*" from her book, *Black Feminist Criticism* (1985) has compared the perception of motherhood in African and African American cultures and has found that though certain societies in Africa proclaim themselves to be matrilineal but only in letters and not in spirit. Certainly they are valued as mothers, yet their motherhood does not put them in special esteem when they are elderly. Their value as mothers largely exists because they have sons and subsequently that they allow men's names to have a continued link to the next generations. Christian shows that the African American women have moved from being 'un-free' to control their own reproductive experiences. She further puts that motherhood is more than a 'function' of the women rather an entire state of being. Mothering is not restricted to the definition imposed by male writers or other dominant social entities, but is defined by those who are the protectors and nurturers of the children they bear.

Toni Morrison and Maternal Body

Paula Gallant Eckard in her book, *Maternal Body and Voices in Toni Morrison, Bobbie Ann, and Lee Smith*, (2002) celebrates a paradigm shift in American fiction that marks significant departure from that of patriarchal orientation. She exclusively deals with the works of three 20th century women writers—Toni Morrison, Bobbie Ann, and Lee Smith who portray maternal experiences in their works. In *Toni Morrison and Motherhood: A Politics of the Heart* (2004), Andrea O'Reilly has brilliantly explored the complexities of motherhood and mothering in Morrison's novels from *The Bluest Eye* to *Paradise*. She has correlated the experience of motherhood with their struggle against racism and sexism and their resistance to oppression.

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In creating intense mother figure in fiction African American writers have paid tribute to the beauty, struggles, and sorrows of black motherhood. These probable and real mothers offer an important counter to the negative images of black womanhood disseminated in other media. Most of the times neglected, sometimes alienated by socio-cultural factors, the black woman has struggled and survived on her own supporting her children. She could have succumbed but maternal bonds hold her. She looks at her children for every possible emotional support. For the purpose of study, Toni Morrison has been selected from the vast arena of Black female writers on the basis of the merit of portraying multiple aspects of black motherhood unraveling the layers of reality that constructs the life of the women of African descent.

Toni Morrison is an African American author, who was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1993. In her work, she has explored the experience and roles of black women in a racist and male dominated society of the United States. In the center of her complex and multilayered narratives is the unique cultural inheritance of African-American people in general and the women in particular. Morrison has been a member of both the National Council on the Arts and the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters. Morrison's oeuvre of writing is marked by its consistent critique of black community which has traditionally suppressed black women. Morrison's creativity and encouragement stems from her realization of the responsibility of portraying the black women's experiences of motherhood which is different from white motherhood altogether. She goes on to politicize the issue of black motherhood in the wide discourse of racism in the United States.

Morrison's Focus on African American Consciousness

Morrison has continually attempted—all through her seven novels—to focus on African American consciousness, particularly that aspect of it which deals with the black women's problems. What stands out above all these is her skill as an expert storyteller who has looked into the hearts of men and women and extracted there from a bitter sweetness which we recognize today as Morrison's worldview. Her critical essays add immensely to the canon of African American aesthetics. They enlarge on the themes of the African American woman novelist's role, on the importance of black aesthetics with regard to specific readings of black literary works, and on the relevance of African American literature towards a clearer understanding of modern black life, society and culture.

***The Bluest Eye* – Several Aspects of African American Mother**

The first novel to emerge from the canon of her brilliant career is *The Bluest Eye* (1970). It is the study of the tragic life of a young African American girl Pecola Breedlove who yearns for love and concern from her family members and her white counterparts at school. She becomes conscious of her despicable birth into a black family which makes her the butt of ridicule. She longs for blue eyes and blond hair like those of white children and for looking like Shirley Temple. She understands that her frail self image is brutally viewed by the world outside, and consequently she goes insane and withdraws herself into a world of fantasy in which she possesses the bluest eye of all.

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In *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison presents several aspects of the Black mother. Pauline Breedlove, the crippled mother of Pecola and Tommy, is one of the negative figures in the novel. Her negative feelings towards her children are a result of her inability to adequately provide for them. She feels more comfortable in the luxurious home of her white employer, so she ignores and fails to identify a sense of pride in her own culture and her family which results in Pecola's madness. She never fails to be "an ideal servant" at work (127). It was a matter of pride for her to be in their service and guard their possessions as if they were her own. Pauline tries her level best regarding "creditors and service people" on behalf of her masters and never ever let anybody do compromise in terms of having the best out of everything for her employers: "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" (128).

Contrary to it is set a strong mother-daughter bond between Claudia and Mrs. MacTeer. Like Pauline, she is destitute and has inconsiderate conditions in her life which sometime shape Mrs. MacTeer's rough and cruel treatment of her children. Yet she has come to terms with her situation rather than becoming bitter like Pauline. She is a very loving and understanding mother who realizes the value of motherhood. When in the opening of the novel, Claudia is vomiting, Mrs. MacTeer scolds her but she also remembers her mother's love, "Love, thick and dark as Alaga syrup, eased up into that cracked window. I could smell it—taste it—sweet, musty, with an edge of wintergreen in it base—everywhere in that house" (12). Claudia, unlike Pecola, experiences a moment of bonding with her mother: "so when I think of autumn, I think of somebody with hands who does not want me to die" (12).

Child Rearing and Economic Oppression of African American Mothers

If observed closely, it comes out that the economic repression of Black mother results in the suffering of her child. The mother is incapable to give care and attention to her child during the day because she has to work outside; hence, the child is neglected. Pauline is working as a housekeeper for a white family. Her job is the major resource of income for her family's living expenses. Family's economic situation prevents them from enjoying a comfortable position in society. On the other side, she is also physically abused by her spouse, which also affects her bond with the children. Yet another reason for Pauline's unwillingness as a mother is the life experiences of her own mother where her motherhood had brought only more work and no delight. She, therefore, escapes into the world of fantasy and experiences vicarious pleasure in identifying herself with white women in the movies.

Subjected to Racism

Another point of focus for Morrison is that black children are subjected to racism. Since parents are incapable of shielding their children from the racism and violence of the outside world, most of the times they surrender which is the case with Pauline. She fails to nurture the feeling of self worth in Pecola because of the lack of self esteem in herself which further results in her dissatisfaction as a mother and she carries motherhood as a burden. She has buried her motherhood some deep in her heart which has never come out throughout the novel. If you go

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deep you find that Pauline herself has not given proper care and attention when she was a child. Pauline was totally ignored by her parents and she blames their parental neglect on her limp foot. Very early in her life she was introduced to the traditional duties of a woman, like babysitting, which she performs efficiently. Because of racist stereotyping black mothers are denied the attention and respect enjoyed by white mothers. Pauline's experience at the maternity hospital has been bad. She recounts the hospital incident prior to the birth of Pecola when the white doctors attending on her comment: "They deliver right away and with no pain. Just like horses" (97).

The racism that controls every other aspect of the black mother's life and her relationship with her family even dictates whether or not she is capable of feeling pain. Anger on such a comment is diverted towards her children. Pecola becomes victim of her anger. One more thing adds to her disillusionment is that like her mother, Pecola too, believes in the white standard of beauty. There is a distortion in the natural self of Pauline because she exchanges her role of an ideal mother with that of an ideal servant. It is interesting to note that black mother's assessment of her condition gives first consideration to her relationship with the racist whites. Morrison's narrators suggests that there existed a void in Pecola's psyche of a mother which is reflected in where, "Pecola, like Sammy and Cholly always called her mother Mrs. Breedlove" (43).

Absence of Normal Mother-Daughter Relationship

A close reading of the novel shows that Pecola and Mrs. Breedlove never enjoyed a normal mother-daughter relationship as such. There may be one reason as Mrs. Breedlove, throughout the novel never been able to show maternal love to her. Instead, she has practices force and violence on Pecola. There is one incident when at her white employer's kitchen, Mrs. Breedlove strikes out on her for spilling the hot blueberry pie on the floor which caused a sudden burn to Pecola, "for she cried out and began hopping about just as Mrs. Breedlove entered . . ." (Morrison, 109), but all the consoles and comforts of Pauline go to the Fisher's child rather than Pecola. Pecola just receives the outburst anger of her mother who "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 with anger, abused Pecola directly and Frieda and [Claudia] by implication" (109).

Not only this, Pauline shuts Pecola out of the doors of her white employer's house in some literally harsh and insulting words: "Crazy fool . . . my floor, mess . . . look what you . . . work . . . get on out . . . now that . . . crazy . . . my floor, my floor . . . my floor" (109). Through this insulting act Pauline rooted deep in Pecola's mind and heart the superseding value of Whites over Blacks. It is the refusal of maternal love that leads Pecola to find out love outside world where she stared fantasizing about Shirley Temple and in the absence of the mother figure; Shirley Temple assumes a maternal image for Pecola.

Detachment from Family Members

Pauline's utmost attachment to the Fisher's family was resulting in the negligence of and detachment to her own family members: "More and more she neglected her house, her children,

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her man—they were like afterthoughts one has just before sleep, the early–morning and late–evening edges of her day, the dark edges that made the daily life with the Fishers lighter, more delicate, more lovely” (127). The outcome of her negligence towards her family members and the sweet home itself was diminishing and losing its ground day by day. “Two sofas, an upright piano and a tiny artificial Christmas tree, which had been there, decorated and dust–laden, for two years” (35) were themselves narrating the entire story that the home is not more than a so called sweet home. Some naughty fights which are considered to be helpful in making the home more lively were converting into great disputes and most of the times leading to physical violence even in the presence of the children. Pauline never miss a chance to make Cholly realize his failures in life and her own successful efforts to earn bread for her family: “You sure ain’t bringing in nothing. If it was left up to you, we’d all be dead . . .” (41). All these things were affecting the bringing up of their offspring whose reflections were soon visible. Instead of making her children obedient and good human being, Pauline was incorporating “into her daughter a fear of growing up, fear of other people, fear of life” (128).

Despite all the blames on part of Pauline regarding her husband, children and home, the fact that she stands like a strong pole to support her family cannot be ignored. Circumstances made her so. She was fulfilling all he basic needs of her family to which Cholly was totally unaware with. “The demands of providing for children in intersecting oppressions are sometimes so demanding that [black mothers] have neither the time nor the patience for affection” (Collins 187). Her inclination towards her white employers was due to the attention and appreciation she used to receive from them. Another reason was that she was living in the illusion of having an idealistic family in the name of Fishers. Thus her life revolves around the two worlds made by herself: one was being an ideal, obedient, loving, caring and efficient servant at work, another being a controlling power at home.

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