

Exploring Self- Identities

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Abstract:

Identifying the self is an incessant quest among the African Americans. Why do they search for their genealogy? It is a question which is to be answered for the readers of the Toni Morison. A person is provided an existence in a society on the basis of belongingness to past but the blacks struggle to find repute in the American society where their past is erased at the cost of living in a new white world of America. The Africans feel strange to live with the whites with an inseparable weight of the pathetic begging past and their blackness which really make them subject to oddity in the white America.

Three issues can be explored in the context of the search of identity by African Americans in America. One is, they are sick of their, 'Black Skin, White Self', second is their love for Americanism which is, 'American Dream, Cultural Pariah', and the third is 'their unforgettable traumatic past'.

Keywords: Identity, American Dream, Society, Nigger, Feminism, Heteroglossic, carnivalesque.

Introduction:

The *Bluest Eye* (1970), *Sula* (1973), *Tar Baby* (1981), *Song of Solomon* (1977) and *Paradise*(1997), these novels are charged with the details of the search of identity by the central figure. Characters are found searching their genealogical roots to clear their own identities in a new white world where their dark black color strengthening more the roots of colorless whiteness in America, infect giving a new identity to the Americans under the shadow of their physical darkness.

Ostracized by both white and black society, Pecola's deep-seated feelings of inferiority suck her in the *Bluest Eye* (1970). Her father Cholly is a frustrated man due to his own painful past. When he was a boy he was forced to do sex with his friend forcefully and that was watched in night by the torch lights and impotency ashamed him; Moreover, he was a bastard.

"The men had shone a flashlight right on his behind. He had stopped, terrified. They chuckled. The beam of the flashlight did not move. 'Go on,' they said. 'Go on and finish. And, nigger, make it good.' The flashlight did not move" (Blue 42).

Cholly Breedlove the father and eventually rapist of Pecola, is a bastard. He was born to an unwed mother; his father ran away the day of his birth and his mother abandoned him three days later. Cholly whose mother abandoned him a long time ago try to find his father to make his certain image but when he fond him that was a loss because his father scolded him.

"The man's eyes frightened him. 'I just thought... I mean my name is Cholly.Tell that bitch she got her money. Now, get the fuck outta my face!'" (Blue 156).

The main theme in this novel is the quest for individual identity and the influences of the family and community in that quest.

Pecola is abuse by her own father Cholly because the father wants to prove his potency as he was seen by few whites as an impotent boy in the childhood. She herself loves to drink out of her Shirley Temple cup. The reason for her preference lies in Shirley's blue eyes. Pecola's father Cholly imagines God as:

"a nice old white man, with long white hair, flowing white beard, and little blue eyes" (Blue 134).

Pecola's search for identity was defined by her everlasting desire to be loved by people in society or in family. Pauline Breedlove, wife of Cholly, mother of Pecola, is a servant in a white household. She likes more the children of the master. One day an incident takes place where the Pecola falls on the blueberry pie and cursed by her own mother thought she is burnt due to the hot blueberry pie. Pecola needs love of her mother but the mother never takes care of her.

"Obviously burned by the hot pastry, her mother completely ignored Pecola's feelings of pain and instead tended to the comforting of her white "daughter". 'Crazy foo...my floor, mess ...look what you...get on out...crazy...crazy...my floor , my floor....' Her words were hotter and darker than the smoking berries. The little [white] girl in pink started to cry. Mrs. Breedlove turned to her. 'Hush, baby, hush. Don't cry no more'" (Blue 109)

Her classmates also have an effect on her. They seem to think that because she is not beautiful, she is not worth anything except as the focal point of their mockery. "Black e mo. Black e mo. Yadaddsleepsnekked. Black e mo black e mo ya dadd sleeps nekked. Black e mo...." (Blue 65).

At home she was put through the same thing, if not worse because her family members were the ones who were supposed to love her. Her mother was not able conceal her obvious affection towards a white girl over her. Finally the rape by her father is the last evidence Pecola needs to believe completely that she is an ugly unlovable girl.

Pecola suffers merely from a particularly acute case of internalized racial self-hatred, which manifests itself as an unshakable belief in her own ugliness.

"You looked at them and wondered why they were so ugly; you looked closely and could not find the source. Then you realized that it came from conviction, their conviction....They had looked about themselves and saw nothing to contradict the statement; saw, in fact, support for it leaning at them from every billboard, every movie, every glance" (Blue 39).

Geraldine, a colored woman, who refused to tolerate "niggers", loves the blue eyed cat than the human beings of her own community of black people. Junior uses this opportunity to kill his mother's cat and blame it on Pecola. Blacks thus lock themselves into a self-destructive cycle in which their only victory lies in their ability to simulate whiteness.

Mr. Yacowbski, a fifty-two-year-old white immigrant storekeeper as a symbol for the rest of society's norm, treats Pecola as if she were invisible."a series of rejections, some routine, some exceptional, some monstrous" that combine to form the means of Pecola's ultimate destruction (Blue 210).

Toni Morrison says, "All of us--all who knew her--felt so wholesome after we cleaned ourselves on her. We were so beautiful when we stood astride her ugliness. Her simplicity decorated us, her guilt sanctified us, her pain made us glow with health, her awkwardness made us think we had a sense of humor....And she let us, and thereby deserved our contempt" (Blue 205).

In contrast to Pecola's pitiable situation as a piece of social refuse, the Stephen of Portrait refuses to live a life circumscribed by his restrictive society. In this way, both the Irish and the African Americans attach themselves firmly to social mazes by internalizing the limitations imposed on them.

Stephen goes on to compare Ireland to an "old sow that eats her farrow," a comparison that parallels the condition of blacks in American society (Blue

220).

Morrison describes Pecola's final, tragic state:

"The damage done was total....Elbows bent, hands on shoulders, she flailed her arms like a bird in an eternal, grotesquely futile effort to fly. Beating the air, a winged but grounded bird, intent on the blue void it could not reach--could not even see--but which filled the valleys of the mind" (Blue 204).

Thus Morrison creates the final irony, comparing Stephen's glorious flight from his maze to Pecola's vain and hopeless attempts at escape. In stark contrast to Stephen's winged namesake Daedalus, Pecola can only flap her arms.

In *The Bluest Eye*, Toni Morrison portrays, among other things, an unforgettable dark-skinned young girl who, finding herself (her identity) rejected by her family and the society at large embarks on a search for what he believes to be an "acceptable" self-the blue eyes of a white girl. (Ho 42)

Pecola is locked in a perpetual conversation with herself because her "self" is fragmented. This may in turn be attributed to the dearth of love within her family. E. Earl Baughman expresses a similar idea in *Black Americans: A Psychological Analysis*: "...the child's family is usually regarded the single most important determinant of how he comes to value himself, and , within the family, the influence of the parents(or parent substitutes) is viewed as having special significance.

Pecola has many more experiences like there is a candy wrapper image of Mary Jane. The shame that wells up in Pecola-because, reduced and objectified by Mr. Yacobowski, she loses her independence reality- is greatly relieved after she remembers the Mary Jane she has bought:

Each pale yellow wrapper has a picture oflittle Marry Jane, for whom the candy is named. Smiling white face, blond hair in gentle disarray, blue eyes looking at her out of a world of clean comfort.... To Pecola they are simply

pretty. She eats the candy and its sweetness is good. To eat the candy is somehow to eat the eyes, eat Mary Jane, Love Mary Jane, Be Marry Jane (Blue 43).

The novel is, then, a blues enunciating the pain of the black man in America and an attempt to grapple with the pain which is sometimes existential. The superlative “bluest” implies that other groups are “blue” and “bluer” and, of course, the black race is “bluest”.

Pecola’s desire for blue eyes is exacerbated after being beaten by her mother and raped by her father. In her belief that only a miracle will relieve her, the impregnated Pecola finally seeks the help of magician called Soaphead Church (alias Elihue Micah Whitcomb). As a “Reader, Advisor, and Interpreter of Dreams,” the crazy old mulatto ironically comprehends Pecola’s pathetic request for blue eyes.

“A tragic story of child abuse, with race, gender and class mixed in, *The Bluest Eye* is concerned with racial self-loathing, the loss of identity, and shame.”(Surányi 35)

However, while sympathetic with the predicament, the misanthrope Soaphead Church takes advantage of the helpless black girl by urging her to kill an old dog whom he abhor on the one hand and is identified with on the other. Consequently, the dog is poisoned as an “Offering” for Pecola’s prayer for blue eyes to be answered. After witnessing the violent death of the mangy dog Bob, Pecola in her madness thinks that she has got a pair of blue eyes. In the end, as she takes refuge in insanity, she “invests” a “friend” who will play with her only if she gets the bluest eye of all.

“What is an African-American?” It is a relevant question given the historical circumstances in which blacks were robbed of several traces of their identity – land, name, language and cultural past. The answer doesn’t only interest a minority but a whole nation that is self-defined by the kaleidoscope of all ethnic groups who live and interact in it. (Mancelos 115)

In *The Bluest Eye*(1970), for instances, Pecola, a black teenagers raped by her own father, embodies the legendary Persephone and the sterility of the land; *Sula*(1973) depicts the tension between a small and passive rural African-American community and a striving white town; in *Tar Baby*(1981), Morrison holds colonialism and capitalism responsible for the destruction of nature. In an interview Bessi Jones, Morrison argues that the black culture sees the land as a generous mother; on the contrary, western capitalist culture values the earth as a source of profit. In the African tradition, the soil is common property and its exploitation is linked not to possession but to tradition and ancestral heritage.

Sula presents two opposite spaces- Medallion, the town of the whites, and Bottom, where the blacks live:

“a neighborhood where on quiet days people in the valley could hear singing sometimes, banjos sometimes, and, if a valley man happened to have business up in those hills-collecting rent or insurance payments- he might see a dark woman in a flowered dress doing a bit of a catwalk, a bit of black bottom, a bit of ‘messing around’ to the lively notes of a mouth organ”. (*Sula* 56)

The break-up of the black community occurred in 1927 when Nel married Jude and surrendered to the traditional African-American way of life, and when Jude got a job as a servant in Hotel Medallion in town. These attitudes represents opposite positions: on one hand, maintaining the tradition without questioning it; on the other, moving out of Bottom. Neither attitude led to what could have been a renewal within the principles and physical space of the community, or reconfiguration.

The author develops a new understanding of selfhood, emphasizing the double conflict of black females who are torn by antagonistic dual selves in their search for identity and freedom. Morrison’s choice of narrative strategies allows these paradoxes to become simultaneously theme and style. Contrastive parallelism, antithetical character development, subtle intricacies, multi -perspective points of

view, and ambiguous figurative language are used in order to say one thing and mean another. The following text-centered analysis explores these ambiguities in two women's dual struggle for independence and self-creation.

In *Song of Solomon* (1977) and *Tar Baby* (1981) Toni Morrison artfully employs African American vernacular language and folklore to foreground her concern with subversion both in the language itself and in narrative structure. Indeed these two novels effectively exemplify M. M. Bakhtin's theory of the carnivalesque through the enactment of ritual spectacles, comic verbal exchanges, and various examples of "abusive" language. In both *Song of Solomon* and *Tar Baby* the carnivalesque is at once "heteroglossic" - simultaneously producing multiple meanings - and "disruptive" - challenging hegemonic structures on two levels. First, it establishes an interracial dialogue that challenges white America's view and ordering of the world; and second, it give voice to an intra-racial dialogue, which confronts a privileged black middle-class materialism with the vernacular discourse of the black folk community. / *Song of Solomon* / For Milkman Dead, Morrison's protagonist in *Song of Solomon* (SOS), history, identity, and spiritual healing are linked to the power of naming and the verbal facility to impress his experience on the language. This he ultimately achieves through initiation into the discursive formulas of the African American vernacular.

Joyce Scott says, "Milkman must acquire the vernacular speech and culture of black urban males in order to be spiritually reborn and "discursively" reinserted into a history from which he and his family have been estranged. The narrative structure of Milkman Dead's quest depicts a series of initiatory phases of reappropriation of folk knowledge through encounters with black culture-bearers who actively engage in the production of their own meaning."(Scott 10)

Sula(1973) confronts two opposing characters who represents two different ways of life. Grandmother Eva- who stands for survival in the novels- and Sula who, by affirming her identity in a community which had been taught to escape from any sign of it, makes the first move to break the chain of continuity. Her second move is to annihilate the authority of those who are the keepers of the values of that society: the old people in the tribe. In a ferocious argument, Eva and Sula confront history and revolution:

“It ain’t right for you to want to stay off by yourself. You need... I’m to tell you what you need. Sula sat up,” I need you to shut your mouth.” (Sula 85)

Furious and deeply offended by her granddaughter’s lack of respect, Eva resorts to religion in order to reaffirm her authority:

“Bible say honour thy father and thy mother that thy days may be long upon the land thy God give thee.”(Sula 86)

Sula shows, sarcastically, her indifference towards Christian commandments and she uses the same arguments against Eva to suggest the hypocrisy which hides in religion (Varez 35)

“Mamma must have skipped that part. Her days wasm’t too long.” “ Pus mouth! God’s going to strike you!” “which God” The one watched you burn plum?” (Sula 86).

M. Àngels Francés writes in her essay, “*An Appeal for Sisterhood: A Comparison of Toni Morrison's Sula and Montserrat Roig's L'hora violeta*” based on a comparative approach to two novels selected from Toni Morrison and Montserrat Roig’s literary careers, *Sula* (1973) and *L'hora violeta* (1980) [*The Violet Hour*], respectively. I consider this parallel analysis to be both important and suggestive due to much evidence of common interests and themes in their work, despite the racial, cultural and historical differences between the societies where Roig (a Catalan writer born under the Francoist regime, after the Spanish

Civil War) and Morrison (an Afro-American writer and winner of the 1993 Nobel prize for literature) wrote their texts. In both the novels characters, “focus insistently on the quest for self-acceptance and fulfillment, often looking back to the origins and the maternal legacy as a source for self-creation and identification.”(Francés 67)

Sula’s roaming in the noisy, disordered, exciting American cities means not only a physical travelling through space but also an interior process of self-discovery. When she returns, her potential narcissism, her difference has become real. This is visually evident from the very moment she reaches the town, before she speaks a word, in her way of dressing, which establishes a considerable distance between her and the women in the Bottom, “She was dressed in a manner that was as close to a movie star as anyone would ever see. A black crepe dress splashed with pink and yellow zinnias, foxtails, a black felt hat with the veil of net lowered over one eye. No one had seen anything like it ever before, including the mayor’s wife and the music teacher, both of whom had been to Rome.

While Morrison’s vision deals with a set of characters throughout a lifetime, Roig’s fiction has a more generational structure and develops around the axis of the Miralpeix and Ventura-Claret matriarchal families, ruled by women in search of their own Catalan and female identity - some energetic and vital, others victimised and conformist. *L’hora violeta* (1980) is one of her most ambitious novels. It has often been regarded as a pretext to give a voice to her own theoretical vision of feminism and friendship between women.

“for Morrison, the questions: "Who am I?" and "Where are we going?" are inseparable from "Where do we come from?", and the two sides -- the search for self-definition and an understanding of what the past is about -- interact constantly throughout her work. "The reclamation of the history of black people

in this country is paramount in its importance. . . . You have to stake out [your part of the work and identify...". (Deborah 577)

In contrast to the conservative Nel, Sula actively resists her community's codes of acceptable female behavior and sexuality. In doing so, "Sula develops an open identity that openly opposes the Bottom's construction of the black male subject as the object to which black female identity should address it. Sula's resistance to her community's mores mobilize it to reject and ostracize her." (Matthews, 67) The solidarity created by having a scapegoat in common allows the residents of the Bottom to deny their own racial oppression—and it is only after her death that they begin to confront it. For her part, Sula, "who lives according to her own terms, predicts that a day will come when her life will become comprehensible to history and that then she will be loved." (Komarovskaya, 95)

John N. Duvall is Professor of English at Purdue University. He is the author of *Race and White Identity in Southern Fiction* and the editor of the journal *Modern Fiction Studies*. He writes "Henry James' figures remained fixed (however elusive to the critical eye), Morison's figural identity, as Duvall pursues it, is fluid, aleatory, post-modern: "Supplimenting the genuinely autobiographical is the symbolically autobiographical, since ' what makes one write anyway' is the need to confront self". (Duvall 87)

In *Tar Baby*, Toni Morrison explores, "blackness to show readers that we are all implicated in the construction of blackness and to propose ways that black art can reveal and transform those constructions." (Krumholz, 264)

In both *Beloved* and *Tar Baby*, Toni Morrison reveals that these considerations are indivisible. There is also consideration that *Beloved* reveals Morrison's theory on writing the female black body in response to the treatment of that body in historical documents. For Morrison the black female body is peripheral either in previous slave narratives or in

historical master narratives. Thus, for Morrison, “a theory of self-identity includes the idea that cultural and bodily identity is inseparable from notions of home and together these elements give insight into self-identity, self-direction and self-fulfillment.”(Audi 56)

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“As an advocate of ‘a politics of the heart,’ O'Reilly has an acute insight into discerning any threat to the preservation and continuation of traditional African American womanhood and values ... Above all, Toni Morrison and Motherhood, based on Andrea O'Reilly's methodical research on Morrison's works as well as feminist critical resources, proffers a useful basis for understanding Toni Morrison's works. It certainly contributes to exploring in detail Morrison's rich and complex works notable from the perspectives of nurturing and sustaining African American maternal tradition.”(Andrea 243)

Conclusion:

The quest of identity is indispensable and education has raised this sense more pointedly. African Diaspora is sub-Saharan Africans mostly in American and in other continents like Asia and Europe. Via Atlantic Slave Trade from 16th century to 19th century, the West and the central Africans were enslaved and sent to Brazil, US, Canada and Haiti. The etymological meaning of the word ‘Diaspora’ is from Greek and its meaning is scattering. The African Union has given a wide-spread meaning of it as it encompasses the thinking about the birth place and contributing in the development of it while living in the other country. Mobilization of such contribution

is a new area in which African countries are working and ensuring their connections with their own people and bring funds for development. Atlantic till in 19th century and Arab till in the mid 20th century slave trade were the two major occasions where slave trading was at peak in American, Europe and Asia. The pockets in the slavery are exiting in the 21st century as in Haratin and Mauritania. In America, central and southern part is crowded by the European, Amerindians and African expats. In Brazil till 1888, approximately half population was from African regions.

One drop rule in the South American shown disparity among the people in the 20th century where blacks were acknowledging well only black people and generating hate for other native residents. African Union considers the number of Africana Dispora group as the sixth region of their actual territory. The concept of insiderism is popular to decide the two groups in a county; one is 'deserving' and the second is 'undeserving'. Philosophers like W.E.B. Du Bois, popular singers like Roby Rihanna Fenty all are representing the African diaspora and these people are in the quest of supporting their mother land Africa from all available means.

The latest issue is the second African Diaspora which is also called Fourth Great Migration in United States. It refers to a larger group of African people who willingly migrated to US for studies or jobs in the latter half of 20th century. This kind of large migration is not only in America but in Asia and Europe too. This time the migration in US is more in number than any earlier migration. There are umpteen opportunity in America for the blacks like the Hart-Cellar Immigration Act of 1965 or Refugee Act 1980 has opened many ways to migrate in US. In some of the institutions like Ivy League, the black have more presence than the whites and thus the graph of growth is very steady for blacks like they are doctors, teachers, lawyers and what not. This can be seen as the brain drain of African countries and they are now thinking to spend some time at the motherland Africa and in some cases they are settling there permanently. These people are not only migrating to Africa but they have developed

the tendency of moving in different part of the world. This type of migration which is called transnational is only possible because of Afropolitan status of expats where they have gained high education and become rich.

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