



GLOBAL JOURNAL OF HUMAN-SOCIAL SCIENCE: A
ARTS & HUMANITIES - PSYCHOLOGY
Volume 22 Issue 2 Version 1.0 Year 2022
Type: Double Blind Peer Reviewed International Research Journal
Publisher: Global Journals
Online ISSN: 2249-460X & Print ISSN: 0975-587X

Study of Voice in Toni Morrison's Black Feminist *The Bluest Eye*, *Beloved* and *Paradise*

By Zadmehr Torabi

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GJHSS-A Classification: *DDC Code: 814.6 LCC Code: HQ1421*



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I. INTRODUCTION

a) Feminist Voice and Language

Gender discrimination in language has an important role to play when it comes to the construction of male and female stereotypes in a given literature and culture. French feminists such as Helene Cixous and Luce Irigaray have drawn from psychoanalytic and linguistic theory to analyze the uses and misuses of language for women. They argue that language is inherently phallogocentric, or centered on a male view point, one that typically involves domination over women. In this view, language directs the cliché roles assigned to men and women in patriarchal societies, and it is not independent of its social connotations and cannot be seen in isolation. It signifies meanings and controls the attitudes rooted in specific cultures. This, in turn, gives meaning to our understandings and perceptions. Literature is one component that clearly demonstrates the ideas proposed by language, and if one examines literary history, for example, it exclusively refers back to the concept of man, to his torment, and his desire to be the originator. The reference is always directed back to the male, particularly to the father figure. The philosophical construct itself starts with the subordination of the feminine to the masculine order that appears to be the condition for the functioning of the society. This is a man-made world where mankind thrives. (Lind 551)

II. BLACK FEMINIST VOICE IN *THE BLUEST EYE, BELOVED, AND PARADISE*

According to African American critics and black feminists, the black oral tradition survived slavery and became part of African American culture. Even though most African Americans who migrated North gave up

their Southern and rural ways of life, they preserved the Southern oral tradition with them in their language systems. African American women writers, Morrison among them, have historically tried to recreate their own unique voices. Morrison enlivens her fiction with rhetorical tropes from the Southern oral tradition of Black English, especially the trope of signifying which is the art of verbal battle, call and response, and witnessing and testifying. Morrison's emphasis is on the voices of adolescent black girls growing up in a hostile adult environment. Morrison's novels discussed in this study attempt to demonstrate that language loaded with sexist terms has typically looked down on womanhood or glorified it to suit to the needs of male-dominated societies and to demonstrate that black women in literature "have been represented by male writers as embodiments of tolerance, affection, and love" or as "belligerent, wicked, and gossipy. Both sacred and profane roles are assigned to women and language has served as an instrument in establishing" such depictions "by defining social rankings and promoting social hierarchies" (Lind 551). Gates writes "Precisely because successive Western cultures have privileged written art over oral or musical forms, the writing of black people in Western languages has, at all points, remained political, implicitly or explicitly, regardless of its intent or its subject" (*The Signifying*, 132).

The debate on gender and racial discrimination in language demonstrates the importance of voice as a strong component of patriarchy. It reveals the role played by the patriarchal language in supporting black women's lower status in society based on gender and race. Race and gender discrimination in language create restricted social spaces for women and speak as if these spaces are natural to them. However, black feminist scholars disagree as to whether language should be prioritized as the source of gender and racial discrimination towards black women, or whether other factors such as culture, religion, or political economy should be viewed as sources of gender and racial inequalities.

In twentieth-century African-American literature, the pursuit of narrative form often becomes the pursuit of voice, accordingly, Morrison and other African American novelists push their written texts toward orality. For the majority of African Americans it was the oral tradition and not writing that was the medium for preserving black culture. Historically, then, the bias of

Author: e-mail: zadmehrtorabi@lihu.usb.ac.ir

literacy in schools rendered black voices and black arts of language invisible in the West. Since Western knowledge privileges literate values over oral ones, cultural knowledge preserved through an oral tradition is marginalized in relation to knowledge that can be researched through writing. Morrison's voice illustrates how race functions as a metaphor crucial to American literature and culture. Her work consistently demonstrates the difficulty of escaping racially inflected language that perpetuates unspoken messages of racial domination (Beaulieu 277).

Many black feminist scholars including Morrison agree that language is white male-centered because it privileges traits traditionally associated with white men. In other words, language, as it has been viewed, is expected to be powerful, decisive, and logical. Women, on the other hand, have been wrongly represented as being incapable of clear verbal expression, and more reliant on emotional and incomplete utterances. While agreeing that society has — gendered|| traditional language so that it reinforces the dominant position of white men, the novels discussed in the current research highlight that women's ways of communicating only appear to be chaotic because men, from their expectation of what language is and does, fail to comprehend the creativity, challenge, and unifying characteristics of women's communication. A woman's approach to language is not meant to overpower or to conquer, but strives to build bridges of understanding and inclusion in a society where her voice, in order to be heard, must resonate with difference. This is not to suggest the existence of a biological determinism; the uniqueness does not exist because a woman is female. Rather, it exists because she is a woman, a product of a specific cultural environment—a male-dominated society—in which she has created a way of communicating that is characterized by various combinations of words, nonverbal sounds, silences, and secrets, among others. In a black feminist approach to reading texts, awareness of these sometimes subversive communicative techniques is helpful since they not only influence many black women writers but also help to shape the characters and actions within the texts that these women writers create.

One of the last remnants of the South to be shed was, and is the African American oral tradition. The language of this tradition, or Black English, has unique rituals, codes of conduct, pedagogy and rhetoric that shape and define those who speak it and their place in the world. According to Geneva Smitherman, Black English is defined as An Africanized form of English reflecting black America's linguistic-cultural African heritage and the conditions of servitude, oppression and life in America. Black Language is Euro-American speech with an Afro-American meaning, nuance, tone, and gesture. (2) It includes the oral "stories, old sayings, songs, proverbs, and other culture products that have

not been written down or recorded" (Smitherman 30). To be more precise, in *The Bluest Eye* Pecola can speak of nothing because the patriarchal racial language does not provide her the opportunity to express her emotions. This leads to her complete mental breakdown. As if Pecola has no voice in the novel and if ever she has a voice it tells her that everywhere the message resounds in American culture that black cannot be beautiful; and that the blacker, the less beautiful. In *The Bluest Eye*, the survival of black female language is a way to talk indirectly about a difficult situation and this marks Mrs. MacTeer as an in-group member who continues to perform the language in the tradition of her Southern and African ancestors as it is evident in her three-quarts of milk soliloquy:

Three quarts of milk. That's what was in that icebox yesterday. Three whole quarts. Now they ain't none. Not a drop I don't mind folks coming in and getting what they want, but three quarts of milk! What the devil does anybody need with three quarts of milk? I don't know what I'm supposed to be running here, a charity ward, I guess. Time for me to get out of the giving line and get in the getting line. (Morrison, *The Bluest*, 22-23)

Her voice is directed indirectly, at Claudia, Freida, and Pecola, but it is also directed at the reader. The reader is allowed to participate in the signifying act by recognizing the signifying and relating it to knowledge of others who have also participated in the ritual. Mrs. MacTeer is teaching her audience about waste, but she is also teaching them life lessons: one must be ever vigilant against poverty because it is always waiting to consume the unaware; there are limits to things, too much of anything is bad, and family takes care of family. Morrison and other African American novelists know it their mission to push their written texts toward African American orality which means in current African American fiction the pursuit of narrative form often becomes the pursuit of voice or the writer's attempt to conjure the spoken word into symbolic existence on the page. As that happens, the reader is also immersed in the oral tradition, becomes an active participant, joins the community, and makes the connection to replenish his or her soul. The reader metaphorically crosses the threshold into the text in union with its community. Anglo- African female writing arose as a response to allegations of its absence. Black women responded to these profoundly serious allegations about their "nature" as directly as they could: they wrote books, poetry, and autobiographical narratives. Traditionally, political and philosophical discourses were the predominant forms of writing. The narrated, descriptive "eye" was put into service as a literary form to posit both the individual "I" of the black author and the collective "I" of the race. Text created author, and black authors, it was hoped, would re-create the image of the race in European discourse. The very face of the race, representations of the features of which

are common in all sorts of writings about blacks at this time was contingent upon the recording of the black voice. According to Gates

Voice presupposes a face but also seems to have been thought to determine the contours of the black face. The recording of an "authentic" black voice, a voice of deliverance from the deafening discursive silence which an enlightened Europe cited as proof of the absence of the African's humanity, was the instrument through which the African would become the European, the slave become the ex-slave, the brutal animal become the human being. ("Canon Formation" 63)

In her own writing, Morrison struggled passionately for a black woman's voice free of male domination, which she attempted by both writing about sexism in language and by utilizing non-gendered signifiers in her own stories, which were often centered on utopian societies devoid of men as *Paradise*. Lind writes "language itself reinscribes oppressive structures". Black "women in general," black "feminist critics" and black "women writers in particular", have shown resistance to the varied aspects of sexism in language in their own ways. (555) In her many interviews and essays, Morrison emphasized the aesthetics of black female voice and the character of black female voice that she wants her readers to hear in her novel. She states voice is the distinguishing feature in the work of any story-teller: "Anybody can think up a story. But trying to breathe life into characters, allow them space, make them people whom I care about is hard. I only have twenty-six letters of the alphabet; I don't have color or music. I must use my craft to make the reader see the colors and hear the sounds" (Tate, *Domestic Allegories*, 120). *The Bluest Eye* opens with the voice of a child, a narrator who disarms the reader's sense of oral-literate conflicts. The story also opens with strong reflections on black women and the oral arts of survival or, more specifically, on these women as carriers of the feelings and wisdom that enable the black family to survive racism, sexism, and white political oppression. Only briefly do we hear men's voices (Claudia's father, Cholly Breedlove, and Mr. Henry), for in this opening chapter, the women's voices predominate, through conversations or through the voice of the narrator. An early scene in Mrs. MacTeer's kitchen shows black women in the community gathered together for conversation and gossip. As Morrison sketches the kitchen scene, her readers who are also listening overhear the dialogues of these women in the kitchen. Recalling her girlhood feelings, Claudia tells us what these speech events mean, commenting on the verbal and body language: Frieda and I are washing Mason jars. We do not hear their words, but with grown-ups we listen to and watch out for their voices (Morrison, *The Bluest*, 15).

Morrison puts the art of language in motion:

Their conversation is like a gently wicked dance: sound meets sound, curtsies, shimmies, and retires. Another sound enters but is upstaged by still another: the two circle each other and stop. Sometimes their words move in lofty spirals; other times they take strident leaps, and all of it is punctuated with warm-pulsed laughter — like the throb of a heart made of jelly. (Morrison, *The Bluest*, 16)

In the MacTeer family home, unlike in the Breedlove home, the oral tradition is a personally empowering tradition. Claudia and Frieda, their memories engaged, inherit this tradition and look forward to passing it on. Moved by her mother's singing, Claudia responds a highly rhythmic, aural passage that begs to be read aloud. In a clear structural contrast to the survival rituals of the MacTeer family, the Breedlove family does not pass on the communal memory of the African American oral tradition in their home. No music, laughter, gossip, and most of all no celebratory rituals are represented in their family's story. In an early interview, Morrison describes:

[Language] is the thing that black people love so much — the saying of words, holding them on the tongue, experimenting with them, playing with them. It's a love, a passion ... The worst of all possible things that could happen would be to lose that language. There are certain things I cannot say without recourse to that language. (Le Clair 373) By privileging orality so that the traditions of both orality and literacy might be equally heard - that is, so that the literate tradition does not discredit the knowledge and voices of the oral tradition, Morrison enables her readers to feel the integrity of cultural oral tradition and to understand the social and psychological problems that are linked to oral-literate conflicts.

Lacking their own voice and playing the role of passive objects, Pecola, Pauline, and many other passive female characters of Morrison's novels follow the rules of the hegemonic patriarchal language, ignorant of what language does to them and their mentality. They take the ideas imposed on them by the hegemonic and arbitrary language as granted, internalizing its monolithic system while being impotent of analyzing its performance. On the other hand, those who have a resisting mentality, being potential observers and analysts of the linguistic process, can sometimes be resisting subjects. The latter are not immersed in words; they are not mesmerized by the symbolic system and the way it works. In *The Bluest Eye*, all the black characters suffer from the impotency of the language to express their maladies and desires. Being unable to express and cure their maladies, each of them experiences some sort of breakdown in their lives. Pecola Breedlove was most touched by the oppressive language of the white society. As a child, she was belittled as ugly by her mother. Her father and mother failed to support her. The dominant language which acts in accordance with the society's views of the black minorities does not contain the words expressing

Pecola's maladies. In this discourse, Pecola's suffering as a black girl has no place and no definition. Pecola's voice is excluded from both the language and the discourse of the society. And the friend does not answer Pecola's question about where she lives since she dwells in Pecola's mentality. The sole subjects of their conversations are either Pecola's rape by her father or Pecola's blue eyes. These are the unspeakable sufferings of Pecola that she has no opportunity to express in the affectless symbolic language which does not speak of taboos and Pecola's wishes. As if Pecola has no voice in the novel and if ever she has a voice it tells her that everywhere the message resounds in American culture that black cannot be beautiful and that the blacker, the less beautiful. The manifestation of affects in abnormal language which is the result of the split between language and affect is the sign of melancholia. The phobic, melancholic subject who suffers from this situation feels the lack of a meaningful language to express his/her affects which are considered as taboo in the symbolic language which causes a split between the affect and the word. Hence, melancholia causes an abnormality in the symbolic act or using language. Pecola's language is distinctly "female," but also depends upon the performance aspects of the African American oral tradition, the music of gospels and the blues, and the blurring and interplay between poetry and prose. The textual structure of *The Bluest Eye* and Morrison's construction of characters support the point that women have a unique understanding of language and voice and have their own especial use of alternative communicative devices. In *Beloved* through the device of the ghost story, Morrison gives a voice to the infant killed by Sethe who is desperate to save her child from slavery: the dead baby, Beloved, comes back in the body of a nineteen-year-old, able to have her own voice and articulate infantile feelings that ordinarily remain unspoken. *Beloved* by subverting reason and the white master's language gives a strong voice to black culture, and it challenges the construction of Otherness which has traditionally objectified African Americans, as well as other marginalized groups in society.

In *Paradise* gazing and gazing back, the black women in the Convent use their voice as a way to invent the future and to help black folks cope and survive in a white supremacist society. In *Paradise* and in the following passage, Morrison's voice describes an ideal space for a black feminist language: The whole house felt permeated with a blessed malelessness, like a protected domain, free of hunters but exciting too. As though she might meet herself here—an unbridled, authentic self, but which she thought of as a "cool" self—in one of this house's many rooms. (Morrison, *Paradise*, 177) In sum, Morrison in her novels has been interrogating and resisting the tradition that standard English is the only acceptable language of writers, and

most importantly, she is acknowledging the high regard that African American communities give to their storytelling tradition.

a) *The Development of Women Characters in Beloved, The Bluest Eye, and in Paradise*

While Pauline and Pecola in *The Bluest Eye* are deeply infected by inferiority complex, in *Beloved* no black woman demonstrates signs of inferiority complex. During the course of Morrison's three novels discussed in this study, slavery is weakened and opposed and in *Paradise* slavery is almost ended. The trend of the development of black female characters in the three novels discussed in this study demonstrates that by honoring black femininity and challenging racial ideologies over a period of time, at personal, as well as social and cultural levels, new constructive racial identities and meanings will be formed. During the course of Morrison's writing career, through *The Bluest Eye* and *Beloved* to *Paradise*, we witness the demand for black rights and dignity, especially black women rights and freedom, and this demand is almost achieved for the black female characters in *Paradise*.

Thus the structure or trend of Morrison's novels, studied in the three mentioned novels, follows a pattern or movement demonstrating the development of black female characters from initially weak women in *The Bluest Eye*, to morally strong, but victimized black women in *Beloved* and then to very strong and independent black women in *Paradise*.

In Morrison's early novels, some of the black female characters like Pecola and her mother are brainwashed and are very passive and cannot defend themselves against the Western racist and masculine norms of beauty; in one of Morrison's middle novels, *Beloved*, Sethe by killing her own daughter can make her get rid of slavery, and in her final novels such as *Paradise*, black female characters such as the Convent women in *Paradise* are able to strongly defend themselves with simple kitchen tools against the armed Ruby men. While brainwashed black women in *The Bluest Eye* could not turn self-loathing into self-loving, Sethe in *Beloved* almost does this, and Convent women accomplish this aim successfully and succeed in their aim of reclamation of an African American culture. In *The Bluest Eye*, black women could not assert meaningful agency by repudiating the norms white culture was imposing, in *Beloved*, female characters decided to do so, as for Sethe, it is time to leave the bloody side of the Ohio River to a promised land on the other side. In *Paradise*, Convent women asserted meaningful agency by repudiating the norms white culture was imposing.

b) *Passive Black Female Characters in The Bluest Eye*

Black female characters in *The Bluest Eye* were often injured physically and emotionally by the hegemonic and domineering social contexts around them, and they passively could not do much

constructive action to restore their equilibrium and their identity. Pecola and Pauline were proper instances and cases of this condition, and even black male characters were subjugated and helpless against the white hegemonic society. The black women in *The Bluest Eye* and *Beloved*, lived in constant awareness of their sexual vulnerability and in perpetual fear that any male, white or black, might single them out to assault and victimize (Hooks, *Ain't I*, 24). But in *Paradise*, the convent women are secure from this feeling and worry because they are living in the Convent and away from all men. A main point of this study is that African American girls adhering to African cultural heritage are more likely to have a higher self-esteem, experiencing more social support and greater life satisfaction. In Hooks' words

As long as black people foolishly cling to the rather politically naïve and dangerous assumption that it is in the interests of black liberation to support sexism and male domination, all our efforts to decolonize our minds and transform society will fail. (*Black Looks* 101)

The achievement of self-esteem would mean black people especially black women must give up patriarchy and envision new ways of thinking about black masculinity. In slave societies, both men and women constantly challenged the system that oppressed them with small daily acts of disobedience or non-cooperation or, less frequently, with rebellions or plots of uprisings to end slavery. Many black females of *The Bluest Eye* surrender to the "systems of domination, imperialism, colonialism, and racism" which "actively coerce black folks to internalize negative perceptions of blackness, to be self-hating" (Hooks, *Black Looks*, 166). Yet, despite the vulnerability of black women in *The Bluest Eye*, and *Beloved*, gender consciousness continues to grow among the Convent women in *Paradise*. Morrison in *The Bluest Eye* depicts those social contexts that have succumbed to the pressure of mainstream US culture and a racist system where black people are doomed to invisibility and in *Beloved* and *Paradise* she praises the efforts of African American women to construct a nurturing home that resists western attempts of domination.

As an emblem of ugliness and inferiority, Pecola is abused and rejected by her parents and others. Throughout the novel, one detects the origins of Pecola's miseries in her family as well as the dominant system of slavery which marginalized the black women. One vivid instance of the weak and brainwashed mother is Pauline, Pecola's mother who does not show any signs of maternal love to her. The white society oppresses Pauline and she passively obeys the regulations of this society. She even prefers the child of a white family to Pecola. The beautiful white child calls Pecola's mother as Polly while this intimacy never existed between her and Pecola; she called her mother as Mrs. Breedlove. Pecola did not possess a mother who taught her self-love because the mother was also

the victim of her immediate environment, which finally pushed her to disguise her blackness by taking refuge in the white master's home. In short, Both Pauline and Pecola were victimized by racist and gender crises in the novel for defying Walker's womanistic ideals. In contrast both Claudia and Frieda managed to survive the racist crises through their womanistic behaviors.

The current research also exposes how the white culture creates false standards of beauty and how these standards affect African-American women and men. For instance, these standards confuse Pecola's self-identity, as well as her notion of love and self-love in the face of a racist culture. *The Bluest Eye* offers a poignant interrogation of the impact of dominant standards of beauty upon those who lack those cultural norms, and demonstrates the devastating effects of racial self-loathing upon the black female characters. The MacTeers are able to create an undeniably loving home for their children, in contrast, Pecola's parents, Pauline and Cholly Breedlove, carry deep wounds from their earlier lives, and they transfer their inferiority complexes to their children and to each other. Due to white oppression, white standards of beauty are forced on blacks with attendant psychological repercussions. Besides that, blacks prey on blacks. Claudia is the only character in the novel that consciously makes an attempt at deconstructing the ideology of the dominant society, seen in her dismembering of the dolls. Because the Breedlove family believe in their own physical ugliness, their lives collapse: Pauline, as a mother, neglects her own husband and children in favor of her white employer's home and children; instead of compensating for his shortcomings as provider of the family, Cholly rapes his daughter Pecola, and Pecola daydreams that having blue eyes will deliver her from abuse. In *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison presents her first African-American women as lacking the resources to resist the very standards of beauty and success that devalue them, as lacking precisely the alternative values and resources Morrison summons in her later works. In other words, Morrison presents her first African-American women as incapable of imagining themselves as a community.

Pecola sees herself as ugly, as an object possessing an abject body. In this way, Morrison challenges the Western standards of beauty and demonstrates that the concept of beauty is socially constructed. Morrison also recognizes that if whiteness is used as a standard of beauty, then the value of blackness is diminished and this novel works to subvert that tendency. Pecola's parents, Pauline and Cholly, feel the same way, ugly in body and soul, and therefore unworthy and inferior; they perpetuate this condition by transmitting it to their daughter. The sisters, Frieda and Claudia, face the same problem but they are more aware and critical of the abstract nature and injustice of those standards. Another important point to be

highlighted is that Pecola's conviction of her own ugliness stems from the society's judgment of her being unattractive rather than from herself:

Long hours she sat looking in the mirror, trying to discover the secret of her ugliness, the ugliness that made her ignored or despised at school, by teachers and classmates alike. (Morrison, *The Bluest*, 34). Finally, having been treated very badly by most people surrounding her, Pecola yearns to have blue eyes in the hope that people will love her. The only work Pecola can do is to passively accept and endure self-erasure and blindness, an act that can be considered as the safety of oblivion or childhood innocence. Pauline, Freida, Claudia, and the three prostitutes cannot prevent Pecola's loss of innocence nor inspire a positive movement towards adulthood in her. Pauline, Pecola's mother states a black female is at the bottom of a society. As such, Morrison's novel itself is a warning about the need to and importance of self-love for African Americans and it highlights the need to terminate the detrimental effects of racism, which force young African-American girls like Pecola to succumb to self-loathing. Accordingly, most black feminists consent that a process of remembering black traditions is essential for the political self-recovery of colonized and oppressed black peoples. Pecola surrenders herself to white supremacist ideals of beauty and desperately longs for blue eyes which she states to be the standard by which all beauty is judged. In other words, she accepts the white standard of beauty and denigration of her race.

c) *Reconstruction of African American and Black Female Identity in Beloved*

Though physically punished and abused, in *Beloved*, black women are not helpless or powerless, and they can create new contexts in which they refuse and subvert hegemonic gender and racial discrimination that have constrained them, and they are not brainwashed and patriarchal women. Unlike the passive black female characters in *The Bluest Eye*, in *Beloved* Sethe, Baby Suggs and some other black female characters risk their own lives or the lives of their children in order to resist the white patriarchal hegemony, redeem their past and their identity, and in order to create themselves as subjects and agents.

Sethe by killing Beloved resists the objectification of the black body and controls slaveholders by withholding Beloved from them and that Sethe is aware of the right of black women over their bodies and over their pregnancy, and decides to have her own family planning, though it happens in a grotesque way, killing her daughter, Beloved. In *Beloved*, women are neither as passive as black women of *The Bluest Eye* nor as strong as black women of *Paradise*. For instance, Sethe feels humiliated but not devastated when she is suddenly made aware of schoolteacher's profound disgust for her race, and when schoolteacher's nephews milk her like an animal. In *Beloved*, the physical and emotional scars committed by the white slave owners continue to injure the physical

and psychic health of the black women especially as can be seen in Sethe, Beloved, and Denver. However, physically and emotionally exploited, black women in *Beloved* are decisive and whether verbally or physically make reactions that reveal they are not helpless victims of the white slave owners and are not easily overcome by them. Sethe in *Beloved* shows violence against her child as an act of rebellion and a form of resistance to oppressive white power. In other words, in *Beloved* black female characters use violent reactions to discursive contexts as a way of escape and a way of disruption of the oppression they have suffered in a white hegemonic and patriarchal society. Sethe is traumatized by the experience of having her milk stolen because it means she cannot possess her own body. The first time Schoolteacher, a white man, comes into her yard, Sethe commits self-murder; plays the role of victim and victimizer by killing a part of herself by killing her child. Even though Sethe is self-assertive and almost autonomous, she is not strong enough to keep her daughter safe and alive. Sethe's fate suggests that the journey of creating radical black female subjectivity is too dangerous. And while Sethe has broken the white patriarchal rules, she is not a triumphant figure. She has no conscious politics and never links her struggle to be self-defining with the collective plight of black women.

However, when Sethe kills Beloved, she demonstrates her firm intention to keep her daughter from being dirtied and shamed by whites and to protect her children from the dehumanizing forces of slavery and the dirtying power of racist discourse. She is aware that whites not only can work, kill, or maim the black women but also can dirty them so much that they cannot like themselves anymore. And certainly Sethe's murder of her own child can be seen as the ultimate act of resistance, embodying as it does not only a condemnation of slavery but also an assertion of property rights and individual autonomy for Sethe. To kill Beloved is to claim Sethe's right to decide what is best for her child, a right denied to slaves in slavery culture.

Baby Suggs, Sethe's mother-in-law teaches escaped and freed slaves to love themselves through her sermons in the woods, and she makes her house into a place where black people can really find acceptance.

d) *Wise, Rebellious and Strong Black Women in Paradise*

In *Paradise* by rejecting to follow the patriarchal stereotyping of women, Convent women make a strong statement against the social and economic oppression which has aimed to force them to submission since slavery and make serious attempts at recreating their own distinct individualities and destinies. (Ghasemi, 478) The Convent women are not brainwashed by the mainstream US ideology and know that because of the racial and gender discrimination inherent in the US

social values, they can never enact real cultural transformation. Actually they believe Reverend Misner's words that: Since the murder of Martin Luther King, new commandments had been sworn, laws introduced but most of it was decorative: statues, street names, speeches. (Morrison, *Paradise*, 117)

The Convent women are aware that the Western intellectual tradition works against the establishment of alternative modes of knowledge, and they illustrate how the African American female identity could be reconstructed through its cultural heritage and social structure. As Convent women demonstrate, the only way a black woman can assert her existence as a subject is by rebelling against the system that makes her an object. In the act of rebellion, the slave realizes herself, gives order to the chaos of her condition, and claims what we might call an existential authenticity and freedom while still in bondage. Women in *Paradise* accomplish this but women in *The Bluest Eye* and *Beloved* do not. *Paradise* depicts black women as willful and strong, thereby, contrasting the image of a black woman as subservient and inferior. They challenge the Ruby men and try to break from the traditional definition of womanhood; actually in *Paradise*, women shatter the old image of passivity and seclusion.

Consolata and Mavis Albright are self-confident, make the decisions in relationships, and avoid any appearance of self-doubt. They have not remained passive objects and have turned into subjects who decisively challenge the white supremacist and patriarchal norms and who go against the grain. They fight to obtain complete control over their bodies. The Convent women's move from Ruby to the Convent is generally regarded to be a flight from oppression and limitation to freedom and possibility. The weak and the most vulnerable black women of *The Bluest Eye* and *Beloved* have internalized or accepted oppression. This internalization destroys their ability to respond, to feel and to claim a positive identity. The strong black women of *Paradise* have the power to cultivate their own identity. Bakerman emphasizes the fact that most female characters in Morrison's novels are engaged in the quest for a sense of worth, a sense of belonging and search for their own identity (542). This aim is achieved in *Paradise*. As mentioned before, Cholly's rape of Pecola which happens twice is linked with his childhood trauma, that is, with being raped culturally by two white hunters. He takes out his childhood trauma on her daughter who is absolutely helpless and weaker than him. When Pecola goes mad, we learn that Pauline is also guilty in Pecola's madness because when Pecola tells her about the rape, Pauline does not believe her. Instead of helping Pecola, Pauline beats her. Pauline allows the abuse to continue because she is not able even to break away from her husband, as she has no one to turn to and nowhere to go.

By depicting young Pecola as permanently written on and controlled by social discourses with devastating effects on her mind and on her body, the novel stresses the urgency for critical rethinking of social constructions of gender and race. As a result, both home and community, as Toni Morrison portrays in most of her novels, particularly in *The Bluest Eye*, are transformed into a hostile environment for children. In that concern, the role of women is again crucial to create a place where children learn self-love and self-esteem.

Paradise also demonstrates that freedom for black men as long as they advocate subjugation of black women is unachievable, and that there can be no freedom for patriarchal men of all races as long as they advocate subjugation of women. In other words, the emphasis on the male as oppressor often obscures the fact that some black men are also victimized. This is especially true in the case of Cholly whose sexual identity had been perverted, in part, by the white men's humiliation of him during his early sexual encounter with Darlene. The novel also demonstrates that psychological and political bonding among women based on the recognition of common experiences and goals must include attention to individual differences among women including race and class. Pecola and her family, being different in skin color, are rejected from the mainstream society which does not accept them as a part of itself. As a result, they and many other black females in the society surrender their wishes and desires to the other. This process of being oppressed in the society brings about their psychological death. Finally, African American girls adhering to Africentric cultural heritage are more likely to have a higher self-esteem and greater life satisfaction. Hence, Claudia comments: I fingered the face, wondering at the single-stroke eyebrows; picked at the pearly teeth stuck like two piano keys between red bowline lips. Traced the turned-up nose, poked the glassy blue eyeballs, twisted the yellow hair. I could not love it. But I could examine it to see what it was that all the world said was lovable. (Morrison, *The Bluest*, 14) By completely accepting the female role as defined by patriarchy, black women of *The Bluest Eye* embraced and upheld an oppressive sexist social order and became both accomplices in the crimes perpetrated against women and the victims of those crimes.

Yet at very young ages male children like her classmates who hurt Pecola, are socialized to regard females as their enemy and as a threat to their masculine status and power- a threat, however, they can conquer through violence. As they grow older, they learn that aggression toward women lessens their anxiety and their fear that their masculine power will be usurped (Hooks, *Ain't I*, 107).

III. CONCLUSION

This study brings home the point that during the course of Morrison's novels, her black women characters like modern black women struggle for equal opportunities and get them; they gain the respect of men who heretofore opposed them. They prefer to be bread-winners rather than half-starved wives; they are not afraid of hard work and by being independent, they get more out of the present-day husbands than their grandmothers did in the good old days (Hooks, *Ain't I*, 174). The study also emphasizes that mutual understanding and affection between black women can help them subvert the multiple systems of oppression, fight against them and ameliorate the conditions of the society. The sisterhood that is necessary for the making of feminist revolution can be achieved only when all women release themselves from the hostility, jealousy, and competition with one another that has kept them vulnerable, weak, and unable to envision new realities.

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