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### **STRUGGLE AGAINST RACISM IN THE NOVELS OF TONI MORRISON**

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#### **ABSTRACT**

Toni Morrison is one of the most respected American writers and cultural critics, who brought recognition to the genre of African American literature. She won the Pulitzer Prize (1988) for *Beloved* and Nobel Prize (1993) in Literature. She is an Editor and Professor at Princeton University, who continues developing her skill in writing. She has an extra-ordinary ability to create beautiful language and striking characters. Her most important gift is the one which gives her a major author's universality and the insight with which she writes of human problems. Her writing clarifies about the trouble of Afro-Americans. At the core of all her novels, there is a penetrating view of the unyielding heartbreaking dilemmas which torment people of all races. Her writing explores Afro-American experience, culture, and language, which is widely taught in literature, history, women's studies, and African American studies courses in high schools and higher studies.

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*Keywords:* Toni Morrison, struggle, racism, culture, African American

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In America, Racism is a distinct phenomenon of social and political milieu, which was deeply rooted in the history of slavery. In human history, beginning of slavery and the years following, mark one of the ugliest examples of superiority of one race over another. Torn from the womb of their communities, African's were shipped across the sea bound in chains. So, dehumanization of the black slaves into static was only one of the steps that went into the creation of a racist America. For economic prosperity blacks were objectified which lead to the initiation of racial discrimination on American soil. Afro-Americans were ghettoized and were brutally outlawed from the main stream participation. In racist social order Afro-Americans have been marginalized. Gloria Wade-Gayles explain the phenomenon of Afro-

Americans in American society through the imagery of circles:

There are three major circles of reality in American society, which reflect degree of power and powerlessness. There is a large circle in which white people, most of them men, experience influence and power. Far away from it there is a smaller circle, a narrow space, in which black people, regardless of sex, experience, uncertainty, exploitation, and powerlessness. Hidden in this second circle is a third, a small dark enclosure in which black women experience pain, isolation, and vulnerability. These are the distinguishing marks of black womanhood in white America. (7)

Thus, a sense of inferiority and inadequacy had been inculcated the Afro-Americans, throughout the several years of their oppression and exploitation by the dominant white group. The basic myth of racism is that the white are more intelligent and more virtuous than the black. Furthermore whiteness is automatically equated with beauty and culture; blackness with ugliness and slavery. What we see here is the omnipresent, all – embracing reality of racism as a common factor in the lives of all blacks irrespective of sex. The man faces with the hard fact and cruel reality to racism realized right from the days of slavery that his color and physiognomy were terrible handicaps, and as such would mark him off as evil, despite all claims, to the contrary. Judged by the white man's standards of life, behavior and beauty, his life became unbearable. Universal codes of social and psychological praxis as laid down by the dominant white culture were forcibly thrust upon him. Thus began the oppressive story of racism in America. It brought with it pain, sorrow, bloodshed, death and above all, the negation of an entire race. The African American race was ghettoized, persecuted and viciously outlawed from all avenues of decency, hope, progress and livelihood. Racism, as life-threatening, non nurturing force, exists even today, thus becoming the forum for all types of discussion. Racism, as a man-made phenomenon, may be defined according to Hernton as:

All of the learned behavior and learned emotions on the part of a group of people towards another group whose physical characteristics are dissimilar to the former group: behavior and emotions that compel one group to..... Treat the other on the basis of its physical characteristics alone, as if it did not belong to the human race. (75)

Racism started in America when white masters of the land brought the first Africans in Chains and used their labor to enrich their coffers. As a result, black people soon ceased to exist as human beings in the white world. In an illuminating study of the origin of racism in the United States, Joel Kovel says that the white master:

First reduced the human self of his black slave to a body and then the body to a thing; he dehumanized his slave, made him quantifiable, and thereby absorbed him into a rising world market of productive exchange. (18)

The novels of Toni Morrison reflected the triumphs and complexities of black life from the painful past of slavery to the frustrating and agonizing, racial discrimination hovering over the present. At the beginning of her writing career, she thinks that racism is the main source of oppression of blacks in white America, but at the later stage of writing her emphasis of race matters varies from novel to novel.

Whatever would be the basic concern in the novels, but racial matters are ever present

as Afro-Americans have their origins in it. Inspired by the climate of revolution and evolving black consciousness of the sixties, a period characterized by an almost evangelical struggle for personal and racial identity, Morrison chooses, as the basic theme and subject of her first major work, the obsession of black with an American standard of beauty that seems both inescapable and destructive. The novel, '*The Bluest Eye*' is the story of the destructive effects of inter and intra-racial prejudices upon impressionable black girl children in America. It is about the contradictions fostered by racism, sexism and class distinction, affecting the black people in white America. It is primarily the story of dark-skinned Pecola, who, knowing that people consider her ugly, believes they would love her if she had blue eyes.

The main idea in the novel is the domination of blacks by the existing American standards of beauty: blue eyes, blond hair and white skin. It deals honestly and sensitively with the damaging influence of white standards and values on the life of black people. It portrays in poignant terms the tragic condition of blacks in the racist America. It shows how the ideologies, perpetuated by the institutions controlled by the dominant groups, shatter the psyche of the black people, especially children. Pecola, who never considers herself beautiful, is all admiration for the eyes of the whites which she longs to possess through some miracle. According to Morrison when the strength of a race depends on its beauty, when the focus is turned to how one looks as opposed to what one is, we are in trouble and the concept of physical beauty as a virtue is one of the dumbest, most pernicious destructive ideas of the western world, and we should have nothing to do with it. Physical beauty has nothing to do with our past, present or future. Its absence or presence was only important to 'them' the white people who used it for anything they wanted.

It is tragedy of Pecola who becomes a victim to white values of beauty mainly through the influence of her own family on her tender and formative soul and mind. Her tragedy begins at the time of her birth, when her own mother Pauline, feels repelled by her sight and does not even wish to have a second glance at this new born baby. Her mother's indifference and hatred towards her breeds in her a feeling of being unwanted and unloved by everyone around her. Pauline's attitude makes her daughter Pecola hate her black self more and more. This hatred for self in Pecola further deepens when her mother one day scolds her for spilling blue-berries in the fisher's kitchen where she is working as a housekeeper. This makes Pecola feel that her mother is more concerned about the little yellow girl and the floor than for the feeling and comfort of her own daughter. Her mother's preference to white owner's daughter leaves her own daughter Pecola with a feeling of inferiority. Her mother's temptation towards the glamorous life of whites instills in her an irresistible longing for blue eyes. It is not only the mother of Pecola but her father also responsible for her flight from reality. Her father, Cholly Breedlove has himself been a victim of certain perverted relationships and humiliating experience in his life. He has been rejected by his parents and raised by his aunt. Cholly, who has had no family or parents, knows nothing about the significance of the family or parent-child relationship. As a result of this, he is incapable of giving love, protection and care as a father, which he himself has never known. This manifests itself in his erratic, irresponsible and violent behavior towards the member of his family, forcing his son, Sammy, to run away.

The experience of blacks in America has been full of horrendous sufferings and humiliations. The slavery system not only uprooted them from their cultural and family

moorings, but they were also subjected to a systematic exclusion from participation in the major institution of the American society. American society has been working overtime to deny the blacks their rights and privileges as citizenship of America. Glazer and Moynihan came out with observations that Negro has no values and culture to guard and protest. This kind of systematic decimation has incapacitated the blacks to relate themselves fruitfully to their culture, community, history, and even their family. The family is at once the most sensitive, important and enduring element in the culture of any people. Whatever its structure, its most important function is everywhere the same to ensure the survival of its people. It plays a very vital and multidimensional role in the development of a child. It serves not only as a source of warmth and love, which nourishes the child, but also goes a long way to shape the psyche of the child. The protection and care which family provides to the child engenders in him sense of self-worth and confidence. Thus the family acts as a primary unit of social organization, initiating child in human relationship and preparing him to encounter challenges in life.

But the study of black family in America shows that they have been under a tremendous disruptive and disintegrating pressure of the white, undermining its very viability as an institution. The white American society distorts and dehumanizes at least some of them to extent that they appear too incapable of a normal family life. They thus have been dispossessed of their own past, their culture and even the basic norms of a human life. This has pushed them deeper into the quagmire of slavery, making them believe that all that is white is good and all that is black is bad or evil. The sense of violence between Cholly and Pauline in *The Bluest Eye* throwing missiles at each other, breed a sense of fear and insecurity in their children. This is a family which, lives together without the structure of a strong relationship or punctuation of living gestures ordeed.

Thus, Breedloves, ironically enough, instead of breeding love, breed only hate among their family members. They are so much absorbed in self-hatred that they see each other as mere objects. Pecola becomes an object for her father, when his fatherly tenderness and protectiveness, unfortunately, slip into lust and rage towards her. In his drunken state, he tries to show his love for his daughter Pecola, but tragically enough, this show of love leads to most heinous crime of incest: "The sequence of his emotions was revulsion, guilt, pity then love. His revulsion was a reaction to her young, helpless, hopeless presence." He makes his daughter pregnant, which ultimately makes her totally deranged. Pecola, thus, is the epitome of the victim in a world that reduces persons to objects and then makes them feel inferior as objects. Thus, Pecola's predicament arises mainly out of his rejection by her parents. In her desperate bid to be loved, she yearns for blue eyes, symbol of white beauty and the cause of her tragedy. Pecola's presents fail miserably to develop in her a sense of self-confidence and security which, in turn, totally incapacitates her to confront the outside world.

Morrison has depicted this destructive role of the black families with so much of understanding and insight that it emerges as a powerful and authentic treatment of the predicament of the American black in the white society. This has led some of her critics to accuse her of betraying the black race in their racial struggle by diverting the focus of her criticism away from of white to the failure of the blacks themselves, even in the area of their family relationship. But the lack of substance in this charge against Morrison becomes evident when one examines the role of other black families such as the MacTeers' in *The Bluest Eye*. In contrast to their courage and confidence, Pecola suffers silently and internalizes all the humiliations heaped upon her where Maureen Peal hurts at her most sensitive point of feelings: "I am cute!". Pecola fails to protest because of her deep-rooted feelings of self-negation and even hatred.

Unlike Pecola, who longs for the white's standards of beauty, Claudia rebels against them? Pecola loves blue-eyes Shirley Temple doll, but Claudia hates them. She tears their heads off and wonders why adults love them. Claudia and Frieda appear as rebel figures, and unlike Pecola, they refused to be helpless victims. They oppose all kinds of white tyranny and even protect Pecola from bullying boys at school.

Morrison, however, does not confine herself to the depiction of the predicament of black child in her family alone; she places the black families in the context of the larger milieu of the American society, dominated by the white, and shows critically how the black families and the psychology of their members have been distorted by racial prejudice and hatred. This is evident from the way she gives us scenes and situations where the outer world impinges on the self-image of the African female in general, and African female child in particular. Morrison's purpose of revealing the psyche of Pecola under the pressure of white dominated society is to expose the vicious genocidal effects of racism on the black thereby providing insights into what it means to be black in a racist society. This is further discernible in the novel when Morrison described how an innocent child like Pecola, whose childlike desires and demands have all along remained suppressed, yearns to have a candy, but feels terribly shocked and demeaned when she received no recognition whatsoever even from the shopkeeper, a white man.

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