

# Cries of the Blacks: Psychic Anxieties of Pecola and Sethe in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and the *Bluest Eye*

Sukhvinder Kaur, Jitpal Aggarwal

**Abstract:** Toni Morrison is the Pulitzer Prize winner for her famous novels, *Beloved* (1987) and *The Bluest Eye* (1970). Experiencing psychic anxiety is an inevitable part of human life. Both the novels are a poignant study of the trauma of the blacks who were considered as animals by the whites during the regime of slavery. Morrison explored in this novel how trauma damages the psyche of the characters resulting in disconnection and paralysis in the community. Most of her themes are focused on the plight of the women who suffered from racial discrimination and sexual assault. Morrison's *Beloved* depicts various characteristics of trauma including fragmentation, blending of the past and the present and repetition. The characteristics of trauma are found in individuals, generations and communities. Morrison's trauma narrative contains many traumatic characteristics but the predominant feature is the unspeakable nature of overwhelming events[6][13]. This paper explores the cries of the blacks, their dilemmas, anxieties and mental anguish of the black people of Toni Morrison.

**Index terms:** Anxieties, Dissociation, Discrimination, Dilemmas, Fragmentation, Paralysis, Predominant, Slavery, Trauma

## I. INTRODUCTION

African Americans are the descendants of slaves in American history. People were forced to work in their homelands. They led a horrible and miserable life because of the domination of the whites and the denial of the fundamental rights. Nevertheless, African Americans have made a lasting contribution to American history and culture. Black Americans used to live in actual or abstracted villages, compounds or enclaves. The black characters have enriched with literary traditions and cultural wealth and the language offers verbal forms and skills obsessed with writing. Morrison deliberately accompanies her narratives with what might be called as black music. Free blacks of North wrote against slavery and racial injustices and put faith in God. However the slave narratives lacked coherence; well defined imagery and coherent style. However Richard Wright and Gwendoly Brooks made new innovations in fiction and wrote on the themes of racism and Black Nationalism. Richard Wright wrote *Native Son* (1940), *Black Boy* (1945) and *The Outsider* (1951) under the influence of Sartre. His main focus is on the sufferings of the African -American who suffered discrimination and violence. Many other great black writers

such as James Baldwin, Lorraine Hansberry, Le Roi Jones, Alex Hailey brought revolution in black literature. W. B. Dubois wrote *The Souls of Black Folks* (1903) depicts the fractured identities of the blacks and the harsh attitude of the whites. The collection of essays depicted the moods and conscience of the blacks and their fiery ideas. Du Bois wrote that "the problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the colour line" (10). Booker T[14]. Washington rejected the ideas of Du Bois and took up a confrontational stance to end slavery and racism from America. Washington contended that the blacks should rise against slavery and end it with force. Harlem Renaissance gave the slogan that black is beautiful and many writers wrote on the themes of slavery; injustice; racism and violence.

The plot of the novel *Beloved* is about Sethe who is the enslaved woman living in Sweet Home Plantation owned by Mr. Garner and his wife. She marries Halle and gives birth to three children. But after the death of Mr. Garner the plantation is given to School teacher who is abusive, malevolent and monstrous. Many of the slaves including Paul D, Paul A. and Six O Run away to escape the terror of the schoolteacher. Schoolteacher uses all powers to oppress the blacks. His nephews sexually assault Sethe in the barn while Halle and Paul D watch the scene in horror. The modern critics and reviewers have expressed their interest in Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved* (1987) which is rated as one of the best traumatic fiction. Cathy Caruth observes that violence, dehumanization and loss of identity are common factors in a traumatic fiction. The plot of *Beloved* is packed with the elements of trauma such as neurotic behavior of Sethe and the School teacher and the element of fragmentation. There are many textual gaps, and repetition in the story line. Sethe suffers from the psychological ailment of amnesia and is often confused and bewildered. Morrison has given many songs in the plot which have historical and cultural significance. The white culture is contemptuous of the black experience and this mutual hatred and aversion defines the ways that create trauma for black Americans. Morrison uses the tools of trauma to structure the plot of the novel. Morrison has used her poetic powers introducing songs to intensify the themes of the novel and to retell the black history and culture.

Toni Morrison and other black writers recognize that the black aesthetic in art "should, by definition, incorporate a sense of what it is like to face life's multitude of complexities as a person affected by racial values.

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As Henry Louis gates Jr. Has discussed, “racial values” as a function of “race” are not a biological but a cultural phenomenon. Morrison signifies upon the wholesale acceptance of the aesthetic of idealized beauty, one of the most dangerous of societal constructs of physical criteria. Morrison has depicted the physical and mental deformity of her protagonists to intensify the sufferings of the Blacks struggling in the White dominated community in America. Morrison has depicted the traumatic and harrowing experiences of a slave mother Sethe in *Beloved* who is compelled to kill her own daughter to save her from the sexual oppression of the whites. The horrifying appearance of the ghost adds to the metaphysical dimension of the novel. Morrison explores the issues regarding the history of the blacks who were subjected to all forms of oppression; deportation and enslavement. The critics have relied on Freud’s notion of trauma while analyzing the plot of *Beloved*. The ghost of past still haunts them as they feel alienated from the main stream of their community. The plot reveals the fragmentation of families and shows how painful the legacy of slavery is still to them. In the very opening of the novel Morrison refers to the empty space and the inability of the blacks who are unable to narrate their stories. Vickroy argues that Morrison shows silence, the repression of trauma depicted through incoherent scenes.

Toni Morrison’s Sethe is the main woman character in *Beloved*; she is a black woman representing all the black women who desperately struggle to forge their identity in the white dominated society and get crushed. Their one point programme is to break the chains of slavery forever. Sethe dreams of a future for the black children of a happy and prosperous life but all her dreams are shattered as she raped repeatedly and chased like wild hounds in the forest. The novels of Toni Morrison depict the trapped and depressed protagonists who are fear ridden and depressed because of the dehumanizing tendencies of the whites. Sethe’s relationship with Paul D, “the kind of man who could walk into a house and make the women cry” (Toni Morrison, *Beloved* 17) re-establishes her body as a site of pleasure. Sethe kills her daughter so that no “gang of whites [would invade] her daughter’s private parts, [soil] her daughter’s thighs” (251).

*The Bluest Eye* is the debut novel of Toni Morrison published in the year 1970. Toni Morrison’s Pecola is a victim of anxiety; beauty phobia; and other psychic syndromes[9]. She looks at the mirror and compares herself with the girls around her who are blessed with blue eyes. Pocola’s rape is the outcome of her psychological pressures. Cholly, her father is depressed and abnormal because of alcohol, poverty and injustice. Morrison exposes the cruelty of family which plays the dominant role in crushing the individuality. Karen Horney in her *Our Inner Conflict* and *Neurosis and Human growth* observes that psychic anxiety leads to restless of mind and results into the loss of rational thinking. It is fact that every human being has a conscious as well as an unconscious life. In *The Bluest Eye* Cholly is another neurotic protagonist. The fact that Morrison describes the horrors of slavery as “too terrible to relate” points to the premise of this study. Cathy Caruth, Brooks Bouson and Allan Young have examined the existence of traumatic existence in the plot[3]. Cathy Caruth wrote *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma Narrative and History* arguing that there is no systematic relationship between

historical narrative and experiences of trauma. In *Beloved* of Toni Morrison the detachment of Sethe and Paul D is the main cause of trauma. His mind and sensibility is shattered by abject poverty; injustice of the whites and his being humanized in the Black society. His slavish life and the eternal humiliation by the whites make him sick and abnormal. He loses his sense of right and wrong since he is reduced to an animal. Morrison gives insight of Cholly’s neurotic state of mind prior to the rape:

Guilt and impotence rose in a bilious duet. What could he do for her – ever? What give her? What say to her? What could a burned-out black man say to the hunched back of his eleven-year-old daughter? If he looked into her face, he would see those haunted, loving eyes accomplish that would earn him his own respect, that would in turn allow him to accept her love? (Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* 161-62)

Cholly is sick and decadent; he is the victim of mental disorder[11]. Freud propounded his theory of hysteria on the basis of his investigation of Dora. He propounded the theory and contended that symptoms of hysteria stem from psychological trauma or sexual problems. In a fit of depression he sees his daughter eleven years old Pecola washing dishes in the kitchen alone. He is drunk; he sees his daughter’s crippled foot. Now his existential despair turns into sexual passion as her foot becomes a fetish image. In *The Feminist Reader*, Morrison contends that fetishization is a strategy often used to assert the categorical absolutism of civilization and savagery.” (*The Feminist Reader* 39) Morrison exposes the cruelty of family which plays dominant role in crushing the individuality. Morrison depicts the plight of women suffering racism, sexism, and sexual oppression. Karen Horney in her *Our Inner Conflict and Neurosis and Human Growth* observes that anxiety and restless of mind results into the loss of rational thinking. It is fact that every human being has a conscious as well as an unconscious life. While the conscious aspect of man’s life is that which he has absolute knowledge and possible control of, the unconscious aspect controls him without his consent or even knowledge. The unconscious aspect, hidden from the conscious mind, plays a very influential role in the way human beings think, act, and feel. Sometimes, the activity of the unconscious finds expressions through dreams and moments of inactivity, like during sleep. Disorientation emerges as characters struggle to overcome the problems of life and as they experience the vicissitudes of life. Both male and female protagonists do feel “out of sort” with themselves in their societies. Man loses interest in life and starts behaving like an irrational being. Freud identifies the id, ego and the superego as the three major systems of personality that coordinate the human mind and whose cooperation ensures a balanced personality. Freud observes thus in his essay on *Hysteria*: “Psychosis occurs when in the process of repressing unconscious desires, the link between the ego and the external world is ruptured, and the unconscious begins to build up an alternative delusional reality” (Freud, 123). Psychosis occurs when in the process of



repressing unconscious desires, the link between the ego and the external world is ruptured, and the unconscious begins to build up an alternative delusional reality (Freud 123).

To conclude, Morrison got Nobel Prize for Literature for her serious interest in depicting the cries of the black women who were subjected to all forms of oppression and subjugation[12]. She used innovative stylistic techniques to retell the history, culture of the blacks to the contemporary world; the novels *Beloved*, *The Bluest Eye* are the mighty achievements of Toni Morrison the domain of American fiction. Her Black feminism is an exceptional trait of her fiction which made her an international celebrity[17].

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