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Quest for Identity In
THE FICTION OF TONI MORRISOW



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Short Profile

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ABSTRACT:

Toni Morrison's first three novels, *The bluest Eye*, *Sula*, and *Song of Solomon* singularly dramatize the increasing levels of moral, spiritual and cultural dysfunction between individual and society. In these three novels, the protagonist namely Pecola, Sula and milkman are invariably alienated from their cultural moorings. It may be held that the individual in each of the three novels appears to be lost in a world of depressing moral and cultural loneliness, both physical and intellectual, and leads to a

sense of fulfillment, particularly in the case of Milkman, while in the case of Pecola and Sula, it leads to insanity and death. Their insanity is a quest for 'meaning' in our incoherent world of dubious certainties. The character of Milkman in *Song of Solomon* delineates racial significance.

KEYWORDS

Toni Morrisow , physical and intellectual , spiritual.

INTRODUCTION :

Pecola is an embodiment of innocence. She cherishes innocent dreams. She is the only daughter of the Breedloves, a typical black family after the Great Depression. If the mother Pauline is positively disinterested in the cultural complexities of a developing black milieu, her father Cholly Breedlove is a true black father always keeping himself 'out-of-doors'. Pecola's dreams of the bluest eyes symbolize the cultural metaphor of the achievement of the equality of the black psyche with the white mind. However, this impossible dream deepens his alienation from her social and cultural environments. Socially she is an oppressed girl. But her intellectual curiosity is astoundingly unmistakable. She is a silent yet keen observer of life's processes. Her innocence does not come in the way of her adequate comprehension of social and cultural backwardness. She keeps herself ahead of the Mac Teer girls Claudia and Frieda. There is certain clarity of mind and aspiration in Pecola. There are at least two impressionable incidents in *The Bluest Eye* that reinforce Pecola's intrinsic desire for the bluest eyes. For her, Shirley Temple is a quintessentially 'living' example of her dreams for the bluest eyes. It may be inanimate, but it has its own inspiration for Pecola. The bluest eyes of Shirley Temple act as a cultural metaphor that integrates the black psyche. The other instance is that of the picture of Mary Jane on her favorite candy that strengthens Pecola's urge for the blue eyes. All in all, the blue eyes for her appear to be the most effective means of integrating herself with the community around. Her imagination of her social status with the supposed bluest eyes and blond hair is dramatic: "It had occurred to Pecola some time ago that if her eyes, those eyes that held the pictures and knew the sights – if those eyes of hers were different. If she looked different, beautiful, maybe Cholly would be different and Mrs. Breedlove too. Maybe they should say, "Why, look at pretty-eyed Pecola. We mustn't do bad things in front of those pretty eyes." Pecola's seeking the help of Soaphead Church is yet another interesting phenomenon. Soaphead Church is in way a disgruntled social outcast. He feels that he is not necessary for the community at large. He is socially unwelcome. His intellectual skills are certainly dubious for the community: "All in all, his personality was an arabesque: intricate, symmetrical, balanced and tightly constructed except for one flaw. "As a dubious 'saint' with a mission of serving improbable practices, which are socially irrelevant, he proves to be a real source of redemption for Pecola.

Soaphead Church appears at first to be a conqueror of the community. But in real terms he is not only unwanted by the society at large, but he is looked at with sufficient apprehension. In any case, he is not certainly a bridge between Pecola's dreams and the 'mainstream', - the white American mind. The impossible hope of Pecola nullifies the supposed spiritual powers of Soaphead Church. On the positive side, her quaint desire moves her inner conscience. This is a victory for human wisdom and perfection: "He (Soaphead Church) thought it was once the most fantastic and the most logical petition he was ever received. Here was an ugly girl asking for beauty. A surge of love and understanding swept through him." What follows may be a vacant fantasy, but in dramatic terms it becomes at least for a while the climactic moment Pecola in her vain attempt to join "the mainstream." However complex and questionable the process may be, it definitely symbolizes the deep urge of the black psyche for assimilation into the 'supposedly superior' white community.

Pecola's 'acquiring' blue eyes are shattered by yet another communally reprehensible act of incest. Her alienation from the community is because of her father who becomes directly responsible for Pecola's despicable state of intensity. In a society where incest is not treated as a social evil, it is

ultimately the individual who suffers. Pecola's silent and uncomplaining agony lapses into insanity. The very fact that she is insane, speaks ironically of her inverse relationship with the world. When she is supposedly sane, her dream of the bluest eyes truly alienates her from the society. Her insanity, not because of her desire for the bluest eyes, but because of cruelty and barbaric in humanism of her own father, only complete her alienation from the society around her. This tragic alienation leading to insanity and death of pecola is further synchronized with the use of natural images. The narrator speaks thus:

Quest as it is kept, there were no marigolds in the falls of 1941.
Not even the gardens fronting the lake showed marigolds that
Year... We had dropped our seeds in our own little plot of
Black dirt first as pecola's father has dropped his seeds in his
Own plot of the black dirt... Nothing. Nothing remains, but Peocla
And the unyielding earth. Cholly breedlove is dead; our
Innocence too. The seeds shriveled and died; her baby too.

If in the case of Pecola, her spiritual aridity is silently portrayed with the magnificence and beauty of the desire for the bluest eyes, Sula's disparaging dissociation with the community forms the central aspect of her behavior. In contrast, her friend, Nel weight appears to be enjoying real communal harmony. Something always goads Sula to establish her credentials in an indifferent community. She is, unlike pecola, belligerent and always appears to be emphatic in her desire to establish her identity with the community. However, there appears to be a deeply felt, but consciously developed enigmatic 'self' in sula.

If in the case of Pecola, her agony is clear and realized with and abiding poetic intensity, in the case of Sula, her both to the community and in particular to the masculine world around her, appears to have been developed with a deliberate ambivalence. There is a conscious logic and prosaic melody in dramatizing the inner complexities of Sula's mind. Sula mind somehow appears, right from the beginning of the narrative, is to be both disinterested in and disoriented to society. Her disinterest is perhaps due to certain amount of her desire for supremacy over others. In contrast, her companion Nel Wright in a way shows a compatible harmony with society. In spite of her explicit admiration for sula, she adapts herself to the harsh realities of life. Again in the case of sula, her hatred towards men is an important part of her dominating psyche. The reason for killing a boy entire drama of causing death to an innocent boy smacks of sexual intolerance. Another example of sexual prejudice is when she forces Jude to make love to her. This is all the more cruel because it involves the feelings of he own friend. Sula's double alienation, both on racist and sexist grounds becomes almost unbridgeable.

Sula also hates the white people and their wealth and prosperity in Medallion. In brief, she quite tragically a social and cultural mastiff. Socially she fails to grasp the dynamics of change characteristics of a technological age. She fails to understand the pace of growths in the 'mainstream' of American life. Her Growth into acquiring mystical powers is a curious blend of her quest for reaching out to the society on her own terms. It is even more tragic that she takes perhaps the longest route of witchcraft to reach the society. Witchcraft and sorcery that sula takes to, completes her isolation. The similarity with Pecola's destiny of madness is quite striking here. However, in the case of Sula, her character is ambivalent, because at a deeply conscious level, she dies insignificantly as her attitude to the

community is ambivalent. This ambivalence is certainly a stage in the growth of the dynamic 'self'. She is certainly more articulate, dynamic and outwardly conscious of her 'self' in relationship with the community. Unlike pecola, she translate her thinking into some real-life. Sula playfully suggests:

Our conceptions of who we are, never include all that we are
Anyway. One answer, then, to the epitaph: what shall we call
Our self? We shall call ourselves by many names. Our
Metaphors of self cannot rest in stasics, but will glory in
difference and overflow into everything that belongs to us.

It sula takes us to the levels of unresolved conflict of both race and gender; Milkman and Pilate in Song of Salomom dramatize a certain level of achieved harmony with the race and the community. If pecola dramatizes unconscious levels of intense suffering, Sula appears to be far more dynamic and articulate in her desires and hopes. Milkman certainly outgrows Sula in his deliberate action. He is certainly a more active pursuer of his quest. It is Pilate who dramatizes more in the tradition of Sula than Pecola with her willingness to survive in adversity and gross domestic disharmony. Milkman and Pilate, in their quest for 'roots', demonstrate great capacity for intellectual labour and critical acumen. Milkman progresses from his father's concern, but ends up seeking s family, Pilate's concern.

If Pecola is delicate and quiet, Pilate is violent and self sustained in her role. She is doubly crossed, once by her own husband and most tragically by her own brother Macon Dead III. Milkman acts as an emotional linkage for domestic harmony. Milkman's quest begins in a certain amount of incompatibility with his own father. Milkman appears to be out of tune with the aspirations of his father. This disharmony between the father and the son sets in motion Milkman's quest for 'roots'. In any case, it is ironic that Macon Dead tells Milkman about the two occasions when he is deceived by his mother Ruth Forster and also by Pilate. In the first instance, Macon Dead's violent hatred for Dr. Forster is symbolic of incest against his wife is the basis of his alienation from his wife.

Quite interestingly, Pilate plays out the role of the savior. She is responsible for the birth of Milkman. This act of Pilate connects the desire of Milkman for his' roots'. This is the point of unity of both the narrative strands of Macon Dead I and Pilate. The death of Macon Dead I is an act of gross racial oppression and disharmony. His death caused by the white family and the subsequent preservation of his dead body is the point of Milkman's quest. His realization of the genuineness of Pilate in not taking away the gold strengthens their bond further. This disharmony between the individual and the community is resolved at the end with Milkman's realization of his 'self' with his great-grandfather Solomon through the Song of Solomon. At the end of the novel, he takes flight to signify his ultimate actualization and freedom. He is without doubt the true heir of Solomon. To this extent, the individual and the community appear to be reaching a point of unity at the racial level.

Thus, in the three novels in the individual is in disharmony with society. Finally, this disharmony and disillusionment are sought to be resolved at the level of racial identity. In the case of Pecola, is\t is a cultural identity whereas for Sula it becomes a racial and gender identity. This quest for identity is resolved unilaterally by Milkman and Pilate. They seem to have attained some level of harmony with the community outside.

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