

## Objectification Theory: The Themes of Violence and Diverse Sexualities in *Beloved* and the *Bluest Eye* of Toni Morrison

SUPERVISED BY

Ms. VINISHA SHARMA

DR J.P AGGARWAL

REGD NO 11411509

ASSISTANT PROFESSOR

LOVELY PROFESSIONALUNIVERSITY

ID 20487

*The modern feminists such as Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigaray and Irigaray have expressed their opinions on the negative impact of objectification of the female body. It is unfortunate that in the traditional male dominated society the female body is closely objectified. Fredrickson and Roberts (1997) explored the detrimental effects of objectification on the mind and psyche of women. Toni Morrison is prominent Afro-American novelist who raised the cry of black women sexually oppressed and psychologically tormented by the whites. Her novels The Bluest Eye (1970) and Beloved (1987) deal with the aesthetics of sexuality and violence perpetrated on the*

*black women. Morrison wrote her novels to depict the themes of sexual oppression of women and their marginalization. The plots of her novels depict the eternal struggle and conflicts of black women to survive in the white dominated society. Morrison uses sexuality to show what is “wrong” with society; each of her novels depicts the anguish of the black women victimized by the whites. All her women characters, Sethe, Pecola and Denver are trapped in a situation leading them to dehumanization and degradation. No wonder, in her novels sexuality is a result of social and cultural construction.*

**KEY WORDS:** Objectification, perpetrated, tormented, anxiety, postulated, perspective, revealed

Bartky in her essay *Psychological Oppression* (2006) observes that female body determines the identity of a woman in society. The whites never regarded black women as women but objects of sexual pleasures. They were masters and the black women were treated as slaves. The whites argued that the white man enjoys absolute rights to colonize the body of the black women. Women suffer from internal mental disorders because of objectification of female body. The female body is the basis for the distinction between the sexes. Interestingly, The biologists are of the opinion that “sexuality” refers to a person's sexual activities and sexual feelings. Sigmund Freud also expressed his innovative ideas on the sexuality and the abuse of female body. Freud says in his book *The Basic*

*Writings of Sigmund Freud*, (1938)

observes thus:

Freud also makes the point that people who are behaviorally abnormal are always sexually abnormal in his experience but that many people who are normal behaviorally otherwise are sexually abnormal also (562–563).

In the traditional debate between biological and sociologists, the female body has often been explored in terms of its anatomical, hormonal influences on personality, experience and behaviour. Feminists aver that gender differences are problematic in a society. Feminists maintain that the body conveys social meaning and how these meanings shape gendered experience. Women who suffer objectification encounter mental health risks, depression, alienation and sexual violence. The common thread running through the novels *The Bluest Eye* (1970)

and *Beloved* is the experience of being treated as a body. Sexuality is considered to be as the crucial theme in *Beloved*. The fear of sexual abuse, rape has haunted each of the female characters in Morrison novels. In *Beloved* there are the traces of rape, sexuality and white's domination. The black women are oppressed and tortured by white men who regard them as their personal property. They enjoy absolute liberty in exploiting and dehumanizing them to derive sadistic pleasures. The blacks are treated worse than animals.

Going through the history of Afro-American we tend to discover the horrifying, terrific and traumatic experience of African-American folks. The historical incidence has totally changed the form and lives of Afro-Americans. Blacks remained as the object of oppression, violence, and racism. All of them were subjected to different sort of injustice and discrimination. They experience the

immorality of white race. Suppression of black race, giving them medication scars, wounds, abusing them and sexual oppression., all these purpose shows that white had always thought blacks as their piece of property. They think that black people are in their hands and they would do anything with black people. Blacks were treated as chattels, animals, losing all their human rights and dignity. Moreover, the black ladies had no position, standing, status in society. Since the days of slavery, black women have been exploited, persecuted, and tortured physically and psychologically by white men. They lost their real self, certainty and womanhood. In the white dominated society the black women are just treated as the objects of sexual desires. No wonder, women always become the victims of men's gaze and are sexually oppressed. Their whole self and identity is lost. They become so much depressed with atrocities that it causes a neurotic disorder in their mind. Fear and

anxiety are engraving in their sensitive mind. In the novels of Toni Morrison the component of sex is profusely found within the women protagonists. Toni Morrison has realistically depicted the struggle and trauma experienced by African American women in *The Bluest Eye* (1970) and *Beloved*. Morrison got Nobel Prize for her serious feminism. In 1993, upon receiving the Nobel Prize, Toni Morrison exclaims:

So I've just insisted – insisted! – upon being called a black woman novelist, and I decided what that meant, because I have claimed it. I have claimed what I know. As a black and a woman, I have had access to a range of emotions and perceptions that were unavailable to people who were neither (Archives 4).

Morrison wrote *The Bluest Eye* and *Beloved* to depict the themes of sexual oppression and traumatic experiences of the blacks in the white dominated society. The blacks lead a life of depression and experience disorientation of mind; their future is bleak and their children suffer different kinds of oppression and lack of love from their parents. The story of the three girls illustrates how children who live in an environment of subjugation and are forced to survive in the society.

Morrison's novel *The Bluest Eye* (1970) deals with the traumatic journey of Pecola. The plot of the novel is set in Lorain, Ohio. Claudia is a female child. Incest is sexual activity between family members or close relatives. This typically includes sexual activity between people blood relations. Cholly rapes his own daughter in a fit of frustration. He is so much disturbed that he fails to comprehend the nature of moral transgression. The episode of Pecola is heart rending

revealing that the black women were used as objects of sexual pleasures. *The Bluest Eye* is the story of two sisters, and particularly of Pecola who thinks that if she only had blue eyes, people would be nice to her. Pecola is a twelve years old innocent black girl; she is a fragile and delicate child. Morrison has depicted her journey from innocence to her insanity in the most touching lyrical language. In many of her interviews, Morrison explains that she narrated the Pecola's story keeping her dignity intact despite her rape. Pecola's rape is symbolical and be understood in broader perspective. The incestuous rape is nearly impossible for a reader to comprehend. While literary critics have postulated that the rape is the soul product of Cholly's desolate past or an expression of his hatred of women. Pecola is depicted as a representative of black community suffering from poverty, fear and oppression. Pecola has often observed her parents fighting in a brutal

manner. She hates the disorderly environment and longs to disappear. She feels lonely and depressed. Claudia narrates parts of *The Bluest Eye* from a child's perspective and sometimes of an adult looking back. Like Pecola, she suffers from racist beauty standards, poverty and fear. Pecola is passive when she is abused but Claudia emerges as a fighter. When Claudia is given a white doll she does not want, she dissects and destroys it. When she finds a group of boys harassing Pecola, she attacks them. When she learns that Pecola is pregnant, she and her sister come with a plan to save Pecola's baby from the community's rejection. Morrison found a touching way to explore the damaging effect of notions of beauty in America. Claudia is the main narrator, her voice is touching; she is pure, innocent, and possessing beauty. It reinforces the reader's awareness of the tainted gaze of racism in American society. Pecola lives in a world of fantasy

and she believes that if she were blessed with bluest eyes the people would change their opinion about her. Pecola is a symbol of the black community's self hatred and belief in its own ugliness. Barbara Christian comments in her "A Promise Song" that Pecola's story does not follow "the usual mythic cycle of birth, death, and rebirth, from planting to harvest to planting. Hers will proceed from pathos to tragedy and finally madness" (140). In the first section "Autumn" Morrison tells the story of Pecola, Ferida's failure to plant marigold is mentioned thus:

We had dropped seeds in our own little plot of black dirt just as Pecola's father had dropped his seeds in his own plot of black dirt. Our innocence and faith were no more productive than his lust or despair. What is clear now is that of all that hope, fear, lust, love and grief, nothing remains but Pecola and the unyielding earth. Cholly

Breedlove is dead, our innocence too (9).

Pecola's tragedy and insanity are inevitable in the novel. The plot of the novel is loaded with illusions. Claudia provides the facts that the whole black community is in turmoil as she establishes the time, place and structure of the novel. There are so many hints given by Claudia suggesting the conflicts and confusions in the community. The readers are told that Mr. Henry "our roomer "has committed some unspeakable act. We are informed that " old Dog Breedlove has burned up his house, gone upside his wife's head, is now in the jail" (17) The Breedloves are victims of a racist, class-conscious society; they suffer extreme poverty and deprivation. Morrison has highlighted the most insidious effects of racism on those who are fear-ridden. Claudia explains that although "the poverty of Breedloves was traditional and stultifying, it was not

unique. But their ugliness was unique”

(17) Claudia observes thus:

The master has said,” You are ugly people”. They had looked at themselves and saw nothing to construct the statement; saw, in fact, support for it leaning at them from every billboard, every movie, every glance..” (34).

In Morrison’s world women are oppressed due to gender politics. The plot of *The Bluest Eye* depicts the insidious and destructive story effects of low self-esteem, violence, drinking, poverty, abuse, incest and shame. Morrison’s *Beloved* is packed up with the pictures of female molestation, sexual assault and murder. The plot of the novel depicts the picture of slavery, rape, sexual assault and violence. Whipping, shootings and other physical abuse dominate the scenes Paul D. and Sethe describe from their lives as slaves. All these traumatic experiences are common for blacks. Morrison gives a

factual story of Margaret Garner to deliver truths that even history fails to convey. Morrison reconstructs the complex psychological background that forced the woman to kill her own offspring. Andre Levy concedes that Morrison confronted the greatest challenge “because the institutionalized parameters of guilt and responsibility do not provide the vocabulary to ‘tell,’ legally or narratively, the anomalies of a slave mother’s infanticide” (Grewal 97). The novel presents very strong characters such as Baby Suggs, Paul D and Sethe find “definition of freedom, which becomes a practical tool to eliminate the suffering caused by repression” (Kella 142).

All the struggles of black women appear futile and absurd as they are confronted by the heartless patriarchal society and oppressive white culture. In *Beloved*, black women lose their identity, freedom, consciousness and self. Sethe undergoes through horrific sexual

oppression. She was viciously exploited by whites especially by school teacher and his nephews. The memories of sexual abuse and rape haunted Sethe. The plot depicts the heartrending scene of milk stealing from the breasts of Sethe. The school teacher acts as the master of slaves ordering the nephews to steal the milk from Sethe's breasts. Sethe labels it as: "They used cowhide on you? And they took my milk. They beat you and you was pregnant. And they took my milk" (*Beloved* 20) Sethe had saved her milk in her breasts for her infant daughter. They all were aware of the fact that Sethe is pregnant even though they performed such an awful act of stealing milk. The two boys with their mossy teeth sucked the milk from Sethe's breasts. One of the nephews beat Sethe and sucked the milk from her breasts while the other held her down. She dared to complaint about this inhuman act to Mrs Garner but the School Master again tortured her. The nephews

physically tortured Sethe mercilessly and ducked her "with cowhide, making psychic scars, wounds on her back which looks like a chock cheery tree." Sethe lost her consciousness and turned a neurotic. In desperation she killed her own daughter to save her sexual oppression from the whites. She doesn't want her daughter to suffer the same as she suffered as a slave. She was physically assaulted many times. She was always haunted by the scenes of assaults, sexual abuses, and white's domination. It was Sethe's love for her daughter that motivated her in killing her own child by saying: "I took and put my babies where they be safe" (118). The ghost's arrival marks a turning point in the protagonists' lives: Sethe is given a chance to revise her past and *reenact* it, whereas Denver is challenged to responsibility for her family, which results in her subsequent transformation from being a girl to becoming a woman. The appearance of Beloved, however, is both therapeutic and



destructive. Morrison's depiction of Sethe presumes an understanding that the black female body has been treated as the "Other", Sethe is viewed in terms of physical characteristics such as skin color, hair and facial features. For example, Schoolteacher tells his nephews to write down Sethe's "human characteristics on the left; her animal ones on the right. And don't forget to line them up" (193) Sethe gives vent to her inner trauma thus:

That anybody white could take your whole self for anything that came to mind. Not just work, kill, and maim you, but dirty you. Dirty you so bad you couldn't think it up. And though she and other lived through and got over it, she could never let it happen to her own. The best thing she was her children. Whites might dirty her all right, but not her best thing, her beautiful, magical best thing the part of her that was clean (251).

Toni Morrison's *Beloved* evaluates the inner self of the black women. The ghost was troubling everyone by creating different sorts of problems. The ghost was there to take revenge the injustices committed during their slavery. Nan tells that she and Sethe's mother "were taken up by the crew" during their journey (*Beloved* 62). Sethe's mother was mostly used for fulfilling of sexual desires of the crew. The mother of Sethe was so displeased and disgusted by the frightful experiences that she abandoned the child. Baby Suggs articulates her anguish thus:

.... Men and women were moved around like checkers....What [Baby Suggs] called the nastiness of life was the shock she received upon learning that nobody stopped playing checkers just because the pieces included her children (27-28).

In *Beloved* Sethe discovers that she has a marginalized status. She was not valued as a woman owing to her black skin which signifies darkness and immortality. She

wants *Beloved* to understand why she took this monstrous act. Sethe recollects her sweet home but white hegemony ruined her domestic happiness. Barnett argues that home is a predominant metaphor in *Beloved* for resolution of the tension between self identity and self-exile. The end of slavery for Morrison means the recovery of home. The School master destroyed all the slaves in sweet home plantation. In her article, “figurations of rape and the supernatural in *Beloved*,” Pamela E. Barnett argues that “Morrison revises the standard slave narrative by insisting on the importance of sexual assault over other experiences of brutality” (Barnett 420). Paul D explains it as: “The box had done what sweet home had not, what working like an ass and living like a dog had not: drove him crazy so he would not lose his mind” (*Beloved*, 49). The traumatic experiences of rape were hidden under Paul D’s “tobacco tin” buried inside his chest. Sethe’s body narrates the history

of slavery and her scarred body is depicted as a site of pleasure. Her body is activated when it is desired maternally or sexually. When Sethe’s body is touched attentively or lovingly, she speaks about her past rather than just remembering it silently. Sethe’s relationship with Paul D., “the kind of man who could walk into a house and make the women cry” (17) re-establishes her body as a site of pleasure. Sethe narrates her horrifying experiences thus:

His body an arc of kindness, he held her breasts in the palm of his hands. He rubbed his cheek on her back and learned that way her sorrow, the roots of it; its wide trunk and intricate branches (17)

Sethe’s infanticide is symbolical in the novel; in destroying her child, she also maims her own body and suffers physical and psychological agony. *Beloved* becomes a ghost symbolic of the death of

the millions of African slaves. She stands for every daughter and sister - and relation of every kind - that was lost because of slavery. The supernatural intensifies the tragedy of Sethe:

Shivering, Denver approached the house, regarding it, as she always did, as a person rather than a structure. A person that wept, sighed, trembled and fell into fits. Her steps and her gaze were the cautious ones of a child approaching a nervous, idle relative . . . . (29)

Sethe's daughter Denver too is captive in her own home and had a fear of sexual violence always haunted her. Ella is a black woman sexually molested by her father and son. Ella cried out in anguish thus: "You couldn't think up..." What them two done to me (119). Beloved cries out expressing her desire to unite with Sethe: "She is the one. She is the one I need. You can go but she is the one I have to have" (76).

To conclude, Morrison has depicted the traumatic experiences of the blacks in her novels *The Bluest Eye* and *Beloved* using the images of folk lore; historical myths and images of violence and hatred deeply rooted in the minds of the whites. Barbara Christian (1993), calls *Beloved* "not just a novel, but a prayer, a healing ritual for our country's holocaust of slavery" (364)

### Work Cited

Bjork, Patrick Bryce. *The Novels of Toni Morrison: The Search for Self and Place Within the Community*. New York: Peter Lang, 1992. Print.

Braidotti, Rosi. *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory*. New York: Columbia University Press. 1994. Print.

Bouson, J Brooks. *Quiet as it's Kept: Shame, Trauma, and Race in the Novels of*

Toni Morrison. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000. Print.

Butler-Evans, Elliott. *Race, Gender and Desire: Narrative Strategies in the Fiction of Toni Cade Bambara, Toni Morrison, and Alice Walker*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.1989. Print.

Elizabeth Kella, Elizabeth. *Beloved Communities: Solidarity and Difference in Fiction* by Gates, 2000. Print.

HenryLouis Jr & Appiah, KA. *Toni Morrison, Critical Perspectives Past and Present*. New York: Amistad Press Inc.1993. Print.

Grewal, Gurleen. *Circles of Pain, Lines of Struggle: The Novels of Toni Morrison*, Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1998. Print.

Harris, Trudier. 1991. *Fiction and Folklore: The Novels of Toni Morrison*. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press.1991. Print.

Heinze, Denise and Lewis, Catherine E. 'Toni Morrison'. *Dictionary of Literary*

*Biography, Volume 143: American Novelists Since World War II, Third Series*. The Gale Group. Brucoli Clark Layman.1944. Print.

Morrison, Toni. *Beloved*. New York: Penguin, 1999. Print.

---. *The Bluest Eye*, New York Penguin, 1969. Print.

Primlyn, A.Linda. "The Concept of blackness in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*".IRWLE (2012). Print