

# The Clash Of Culture In The Literary Works Of Toni Morrison An Analysis: With Reference To The Novel The Bluest Eyes

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## Abstract

From 1950 to late 70s, the situation of Afro-American people in USA was not very good rather it was worst. The black people were having their own culture and heritage to be preserved but they were suppressed to follow the social norms as stated by the whites. As a matter of fact it was not easy for them to do so but then again in order to ensure their own survival and hope of good days, kept the system running. Toni Morrison considered this situation as an alarming one and wrote the novel *The Bluest Eyes*. For the readers it was just a novel but for the people who could understand it was like a historical proof of events that actually happened. The novel states the life and issues of black people in terms of a character named as Pecola, she faced a number of tragedies in her life, even her father raped her. This was something that normally do not happen with other people. The author tried to represent the state of black people from the prospect of this character and any reader can feel the pain and suffering of black people in that time period. This present evaluation of Morrison's literature will present a better insight of events that had happened and also the situation wise analysis of the same for better understanding and related options.

**Keywords:** Apartheid, Discrimination, cultural clashes, survival.

## 1. Introduction and Background

Toni Morrison is one of the most renowned and sophisticated novelist who had marked their presence in the Afro-American literature. The world has recognized her work of highest literary order. Being a female, she was criticized in the initial phase of her literary work because the issues like apartheid and prejudice against the black people pertaining in the society and on the other hand 'Blacks' were even not considered as human beings. In such a scenario she went a step further and portrayed the various aspects of the life of 'Blacks', also the kind of people they are.

There were many parallel authors who had presented the ugliness of the world they are lining in and presented them in even more uglier from but Toni Morrison presented a beautiful ray of hope under the surface of black America. She has not only presented the positive sides of the lives of 'Blacks' but also she combined the cause of black freedom movement and liberation of women. She looked forward to present her literature in the form that is irrevocable and undisputed in the terms of cultural clashes. She had always tried to maintain a balance between creating authentic literature and acceptance of the same at global level.

Stationed in United States, Toni Morrison is the only Afro-American writer who had presented the clash between black culture and the so called mainstream white culture; in the same line she also presented the marginalized existence of black people. She was from some of those geniuses who attained international acceptance and also raised the voice of 'Blacks' at international fronts. As far as Afro-American literature is concerned, it was originated from cultural clashes and recognition of individuals, a whole lot of literature was developed for portraying the tension and plea of separation of black people from mainstream social setup. Even the people were struggling to maintain their cultural identification. In early 70s, the Afro-American literature was at its highest level of recognition and the authors were facing the cultural apartheid and their own survival in the mainstream society. In such a scenario, it was very difficult for a female author to sustain and maintain her presence. Toni Morrison was one of such authors, but she characterized her work and maintained the visionary effect and poetic impact in her writings, it took almost 20 years to get recognized as a genuine author and finally won the Nobel Prize for literature in 1993.

Toni Morrison started her journey at the time when a number of male Afro-American authors were setting the trends and at the same time the overall society was divided in black and white i.e. converted in dichotomies like good vs. bad, me vs. others and even male vs. female; this division of society were acting like a paradigm shift in the society. Male authors were taking their inspirations from local events and trying to present a real life structure of the same in their respective literature. Morrison as an author, started with exploration of historical events, study of traditions and effect of the same on the fate of black people. Moreover, she, different from many other major Afro-American writers, does not adopt the common implicit/explicit method of social protest, but instead makes a thorough exploration of the meaning and value of sustaining black tradition and culture. Most part of her writings were related to the life events of black women and generally these characters marginalized, ignored and even left out at times. The work of Morrison, as an author, started along

with legendary author like Jan Furman in late 60s and early 70s.

The *Bluest Eye* was the first novel of Toni Morrison and the same remained her best work for ages because this novel explains her as a person and also her attitude as a Afro-American author, then on the other hand she also explained about the status of women in Afro-American societal set up along with the mainstream society in United States. This novel portrays the character of Pecola who was a marginalized black female victimized who was oppressed by white people who present themselves as trend setters and even by the blacks who blindly follow mainstream culture of whites and that too at the cost their own racial identity. Morrison just not portrayed the tragic story of this character but also presented the mental disintegration of people originating from the rejection of white society. Then on the other hand novels also presented the dilemma of black people in terms of losing their identity at the cost of their survival i.e. either they must carry their own heritage or follow the social rules laid down by the whites. After every painful event that Pecola came across, Morrison presented a ray of hope for black people i.e. exploration of chances to survive along with soliciting their culture and heritage.

## 2. Discussion on Cultural Variations

The *Bluest Eye* portrays the character of Pecola who is a teen age 'Black' girl and represents a society where the norms laid down by 'Whites' were given importance above all other rules. In the novel, character of Pecola is discriminated on the basis of characters like skin color, color of eyes, etc. and on these grounds she faces cruelty, racial discrimination, social distance and apartheid of her parents. In totality it can be state Pecola and her parents were neglected from the community and society. Then the novel also presents the situational analysis of three adjacent families and their real life situations i.e. one is white family (named as Geraldines') then the second black family (named as M'Dears') then the third common family (named as Breedlove's) which is the representation of true neutral family meeting the ends of both the sections of the society i.e. black and white. The cultural conflict is portrayed in the beginning itself where

Morrison explained the ideology and belief of black people i.e. some were following mainstream society norms laid down by whites and kept their own traditions aside on the other hand some of the blacks were still hopeful that the situation will change and they will get a chance to follow their own culture openly. It is not so that the present state of black had appeared out of the blue rather the impact of whites was so gruesome that they started to look their lives from the perspective of whites and this led to change of opinion against their own class. If the scenario stated simply, then it can be said that blacks were experiencing their own lives from the perspective of whites and feel awkward for the people who were not doing so as a matter of fact this was the basis of tragedy happened with Pecola.

The character of Pecola is having a devastating childhood in terms of her relation to others, her life started with an end of her social life and recognition as a person; this can be explained in terms of the thought process of Breedlovers who pose that the blacks were ugly and being ugly is just like a new dimension of belief, to a certain

“Long hours she sat looking in the mirror, trying to discover the secret of the ugliness,” and she “each night, without fail, prayed for blue eyes,”

**(Morrison, p. 40)**

The character of Pecola states the rejection of black people from the mainstream society and they were dragged away long from their roots. The loss was not just physical rather their minds and souls even wounded forever and in near future there was no way that this situation is revoked. The suppressed perspective of whites was so strong that they started to feel and believe

“She looks up at him and sees the vacuum where curiosity ought to lodge.... The total absence of human recognition—the glazed separateness.... It has an edge; somewhere in the bottom lid is the distaste.... The distaste must be for her, for her ugliness...and it is the blackness that accounts for, that creates, the vacuum edged with distance in white eyes”.

**(Morrison, p. 42)**

The character of Pecola, as portrayed by Tomi Morrison is a clear example of the sufferings of all the black people and the overall suppression as lodged by the whites. The social norms laid down by the whites are so strong that no black

extent blacks had accepted this aspect whole heartedly and this also reflects in their behaviors as well. What happened with Pecola can be considered as happened with the Black community, may they were not allegedly raped or molested by their own family members but then again they were harassed by whites at some point of time or the other. Then on the other hand some of them were still having the dream of returning to their homes with all respect along with their own culture and heritage. The character of Pecola always desired blue eyes, as she had experienced that the white girls with blue eyes were treated well in the society and everyone loves them, maybe she had reached this desire of hers as a way to establish herself back in the society and gain the attention of other people. On the other hand it can also be stated that in a way she has accepted her ugliness and this was like a remedy to get rid of this ugliness. She actually do not understand the social norms laid down by the whites and place of black people in the same, but then again she was somewhere sure in her heart that she was ugly enough to be neglected.

themselves according to the whites and even behaved in the same manner.

As a child Pecola never gained attention, even in the schools neither teachers nor her classmates acknowledged her as a companion or student. Even the teacher were not willing to touch her, whatever the case may be:

ever thought of breaking or avoiding the same. The author had tried to present a mirror image of all the suffering and oppression faced by the black people.

### 3. Clashes in Cultural Identities

A human being is not only identified by his or her name, but also with the surrounding he or she is living. But according to the author blacks were living the life on the rules and norms as laid down by the whites and they had lost their own identities as people or groups. There is an identification but it was on the mercy of white people i.e. slaves or clowns. The character of Pecola believed that being ugly is her only identity and she is liable to receive all the rejection and torture in her life. It is not the situation with Pecola only rather her parents had also accepted this situation in their times and somewhere down the line reason was the self-actualization of their ugliness as a black male and female.

Here it is important to mention that in the society there were some groups of blacks who were having a bit fairer complexion as compared to Pecola and they considered her as ugly and liable to be rejected from their surroundings. This shows that such people around her do not want to share the space with her and they use to do so in a manner to prove themselves better than the group of people to whom Pecola belongs to. This can be experienced by the behavior of boys in the community who consider themselves better than Pecola on the basis of their skin color; even the teacher in the school do lay eyes on her (as they cannot directly deny her presence in the class). Such people were also facing the same problem in a bigger perspective, as Pecola and her community was facing, but the collective effect was not that severe, so by suppressing Pecola they get rid of their own frustration and societal rejection. As in the next scene the girl named as Maureen states:

“I am cute! And you are ugly! Black and ugly black e mos. I am cute!”

(Morisson, p. 56)

The lady from the family of Geraldine considered herself and her family as ‘Clean People’ and the family of Pecola as ‘Dirty Niggers’. They use to do a lot of things to keep up with the color of their skins with a fear of being not recognized as niggers. The system of belief was so strong that blacks were ready to do anything to look like a

white, right from sacrifices the use of ointments and lotions. This aspects show the fear of black people being recognized as what they are and may undergo the same old process of disgust and rejection. Even the priest from the church also cheated Pecola by asking her to kill a dog by poisoning. This incident was no where related to upliftment of Blacks in te society but the priest asked her to do so, also Pecola killed the dog in the greed of having blue eyes.

To a certain extent her parents were responsible for her present state i.e. the family used to live in south and when the mother of Pecola got pregnant and gave birth to her, she was treated as an animal. This incident made the family to shift somewhere in the north. But here also the family was not able to change their way of speaking or dressing and soon here also they started to receive the same ridicule as they use to get in the olden times. Mother of Pecola use to watch movies in theatres and on screen she can fool the presence of black actors, but they were never being casted as white star actors, rather they were always shown as clowns or slaves/servants many such alike events gone into conformity that she and her family is inferior to others. Finally out of frustration and disappointment she left her family along with Pecola and started to impart her love to the children where she worked as a servant. When she left home, father of Pecola was under a great stress and negative state of mind because he was also left alone by his family and the people from white community humiliated and discriminated him. Out of all this mental disintegration he raped Pecola a number of times, according to him this was a kind of love that he has shown to her daughter.

Pecola and other girls like her were the victim of social disintegration i.e. they were not able to get shelter in their own houses and outside their houses white people were ready to humiliate them. In this process they lost their identities as human beings and abandoned as servants in the houses of white masters, where they were given new names and designations. Might be this identity last with them for the rest of their lives and they never get a chance to revoke their past lives.

### 4. Cultural Clashes and Survival

The author had not only presented the miserable life of Pecola but also she had portrayed the ways and means through which black people ensured their survivals. Like in an incident shown in the novel where Pecola met three black prostitutes, these girls have chosen this path out of their own wish and may be this was their way to symbolize protest against the norm of white community. Pecola was very close to them, she visits them often and spent great time, the love of these girls was true for her, the house of these prostitutes was the only place where she was not denoted as 'ugly'. Also she felt a sense of authority and self-belongingness at this place, she learned to live her life without giving a second thought to the opinion of others. All four of them use to laugh on stupid jokes, eat, drink and enjoy together. Author symbolizes this relationship in terms of maternal love and care from the side of Pecola and real human relation from the side of those prostitutes. Then on the other hand these prostitutes also presents the carrier of their own culture and heritage in a situation where every other black was ready to follow the path shown by whites and abandoned their own identities.

Then there is another major character in the novel Claudia M'Dears, who is like a narrator and considers herself as a friend of Pecola. Readers use to experience the life of Pecola from the perspective of this girl. Claudia use to mention the love and affection of her mother in different terms and also imagine the same for Pecola as well. She knows that such thoughts are just like dreams and may be they never turn into reality. M'Dear is termed as a magician, who cures the Black people with her magic. Even her parents were shown as responsible human beings who never abandoned their families like others and they also hope that someday things will change to normal. As stated in the novel Claudia considers Pecola as her friend and wants to do something for the betterment of her life. She reaped the seeds of Marigold and imagined that one day these seeds will turn into plants and with the same something good will happen in the life of Pecola.

The incidents stated above can be related to survival instincts of black people and as a bridge between their own identities. Survival is very closely related to identity of a person and if the core identity of a person is lost then his or her

survival is at stake. The same happens in the novel, black people were losing their identities in the process of following social norms as laid down by the whites and even they were having conflicts within their own community. This explains the issues related to survival of black people in the society, may be the stakes of survival are high but then again they were trying to cope up with the personal and societal issues. Many of the blacks have accepted their stranded fates but still there are some people having belief that situation will change and good times will revert in short time.

Then on the other hand there are instances where the Black people exploited and humiliated their own kind and tried to molest them in order to gain the approval of whites as their well wishers. Although this was not a legitimate way to deal with their own kind but justified as per the norms of society as laid down by the white people. Some of the black people even survived on these lines but the duration was short i.e. finally they also got caught in the accrual process of whites. This means that they were also treated in the same way like others, same humiliation, same harassment and same nature of exploitation.

The author had tried to portray the cultural clashes in the form of two separate variants first was organized by whites and the second itself originated from the society of blacks. In first case the main villain was the norms laid down by whites, it was like a snake and goose situation i.e. one cannot swallow it and even cannot spit out. This means that if they accept the norms whole heartedly then they will lose their own culture and heritage and just remained the breed of servants for the whites. On the other hand to gain the acceptance of whites for mere survival creates the clash between their own kind and this was even more devastating because this was going to create conflict between black people and also there was a chance that criminal activities may increase in the neighborhood.

In this regard Morrison herself stated that:

"I'm interested in survival—who survives and who does not, and why—and I would like to chart a course that suggests where the

dangers and where the safety might be”

(Tate, P. 145)

In such a scenario it may be difficult for any individual to maintain his or her integrity and remain impartial and patient for a particular period of time. Many of the character in the novel gone through the process and faced a number of consequences like the parents of Pecola, her parents, the three prostitutes and many others. Though some of them denied to follow the common rule and find their individual way to lead their own life like the three prostitutes as they decided to follow this path on their own and the author portrayed the same as their little protest against the social norms laid down by the whites. The profession they had chosen was not good but then again the overall system of apartheid never humiliated them, later on Pecola also joined them and for some time she also lead a loving and peaceful life.

## 5. Conclusion

Toni Morrison written this novel in early 70s and this was the time when the Afro-American literature was in its brainchild. Also during this time period many of the authors were trying to present the true situation of blacks in front of the world they had experienced. Major issues which were raised in the literature were like fight for maintaining identity of black people, basic functions, overall system of discrimination and ugliness, etc. even some of the authors tried to suggest ways and means to deal with the situation. This was also the time when Afro-Americans were not having acceptance in the society i.e. they was looked upon as animals and their children were not even considered to be touched. Morrison was herself a Afro-American and was able to repaginate the overall scenario in her own perspective. She knew that self-confidence and differentiated way of living are the only ways that can preserve the integrity of cultural heritage of black people. The *Bluest Eye*, the title of the novel states the desire of Pecola to have blue eye so that she can mark her own presence in the society as she had experienced that white girls with blue eyes allowed standing in the society at large and they are recognized as

well. This was just the tagline but then again there were a number of people who try to appear as white people to gain their acceptance like wearing same type of clothes, behaving like them and even trying to follow the dialect. As per the author all this never resulted in a positive form and even the black people lost their own identity in the process. Then there was another important issue raised in the novel i.e. the cultural clashes and instinct of survival, although the author had taken the liberty to explore a number of ways for doing so but then again she portrayed that the third generation of Pecola was facing the same issues as her parents and their parents had faced. Every time the results were more devastating, like in the end Pecola’s father raped and her mother abandoned the family to work as a servant in a white family.

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