



# MARGINALIZATION IN TONI MORRISON'S *BELOVED AND THE BLUEST EYE*

1. Thejani-i Pohen & 2. Dr. Sivasish Biswas

1. Ph.D Research Scholar, Department of English, Assam University, Diphu Campus, Diphu, Assam.
2. Professor, Department of English, Assam University, Diphu Campus, Diphu, Assam.

*Abstract:* Marginalization is an ordeal that affects millions of people. Such marginalized group of people have little control over their lives and are subjected to the risk of exclusion. This study is undertaken to discuss the issue of marginalization and its consequences on the African American people, a race who have been uprooted from their homeland by the superior whites and in the process denying them of their home and identity and being put through slavery, in selected fictional works of Toni Morrison.

*Key words:* marginalization, racism, slavery, periphery, the other

Marginalization is the social process of becoming or being made marginal or being relegated to the fringe of the society. The term 'marginality' implies exclusion from the centre and it creates a liminal space where the marginalized are voiceless subalterns dispossessed of history and identity. Based on the perception of difference, the 'self' privileges itself over the 'other' who is then forced to inhabit the peripheral space. Marginalization is a product of the power relationship which operates at different levels.

The representation of the position of the marginalized in a given set up is of utmost importance as it is concerned with the question of identity. Such marginalized group of people have little control over their lives and are subjected to the risk of exclusion which leads to unfavourable effects for individuals and communities alike. Marginalization in general term narrates the tendency of human societies, where less desirable people are excluded and in the process limiting the opportunities of survival of those who are pushed to the periphery.

Marginalization takes place at different levels in the society and one such example is the marginalization of women. Women are excluded from decision making in the society and their work at home is under-valued. Even today women are excluded and continue to be paid less. Marginality is a

social phenomenon where a minority is looked upon as less important and are thus excluded from the centre.

The term 'marginalization' can also be associated with the 'Other', a term which has been popularized and defined by Edward Said as 'being anyone that is not me' in *Orientalism* (1978). Otherness as such has been associated with marginalized people; those because of their difference from the superior group have been dispossessed of their voice socially and economically.

Toni Morrison writes about the restoration of race and Black marginality in literature. Morrison through her work narrates the dislocated and marginalized African American culture. Through her works she reclaims the historical experiences of African Americans. Morrison in her novels humanizes characters in fictions that try to reclaim the history of the African Americans. As Morrison writes in *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and Literary Imagination*, "what I propose here is to examine the impact of notions of racial hierarchy, racial exclusion and racial vulnerability on non-blacks who held, resisted, explored, and altered those notions" (11). Morrison argues that American culture is built on and always includes the presence of Blacks as slaves and outsiders. Morrison de-centres the Whiteness and its domination over Blackness in America.

*Beloved* (1987) narrates the traumatic past of the African Americans. This novel deals with not only 'reconstructed memory' but also deconstructed history. *Beloved* has come to be seen as the defining treatment of slavery. Morrison gave voice to the "disremembered and unaccounted for" through the narrative of Sethe. The novel explores the experience of slavery and its aftermath from the perspective of those who were enslaved. It is a book about memory, both individual and collective. Morrison in giving voice to "the Black and angry dead" (234) who Stamp Paid hears "roaring" (213) around Sethe and Denver's home, the text also brings out a collective desire for vengeance and validates a process of atonement for the whole people. Though the novel centres on the murder of a baby, an act of infanticide by a mother, *Beloved* speaks the unspeakable. Morrison in *What Moves at the Margins* describes the matrix of her work as, "the wish to extend, fill in and complement slave autobiographical narratives" (77). We are shown the working of Sethe's mind so that we can understand her tragic dilemma i.e. whether to allow her children's return to slavery or to end their lives herself "put my babies where they'd be safe" (193) which like Baby Suggs we "could not approve or condemn Sethe's rough choice" (212) for she was trying to out hurt the hurter. The way Morrison combines the psychology of individuals with wide-reaching political and historical interventions is one of the most striking aspect of her work and this is true in *Beloved*. The futility of Sethe's efforts to beat back the past is immediately apparent, every event or conversation opens the floodgates of memory. Sethe's recollection stretch back to those of her own mother, whose name she never knew but who has survived the Middle Passage, who had loved Sethe but "threw away" (74) the children fathered by the crew of the slave ship, "she threw them all away but you. The one from the crew she threw away on the island. The others from more Whites she also threw away. Without names, she threw them" (74). Sethe was taught by a field labourer to recognize her mother by the cross and circle branded under one breast, who was later killed in a group

hanging. The author delegitimizes the “master’s voice” through dangerous clichés: the slave catcher sees “a crazy old nigger standing in the woodpile with an axe” (175) and the schoolteacher and the nephew depart with relief from “the damnedest bunch of coons you ever saw” (177). The author’s point is to emphasize both the universal nature of Sethe’s motherhood and the specific violation of that state that slavery entails. Sethe’s memory is an attempt to put her children where they would be safe, “collected every bit of life she had made, all the parts of her that were precious and fine and beautiful, and carried, pushed, dragged them through the veil, out, away, over there where no one could hurt them” (192). Meanwhile Paul D is scared by the wildness to which Sethe’s “too thick” (193) love had led to. He leaves her, pretending he will return but she is not deceived. *Beloved*’s dislocated memories voice both the specific experience of Sethe’s mother and the communal trauma of all the enslaved Africans transported to America, “whole towns wiped clean of Negroes; eighty-seven lynching in one year alone in Kentucky; four coloured schools burned to the ground; grown men whipped like children; children whipped like adults; black women raped by the crew; property taken, necks broken” (212). A sentence that provokes fruitful debate is the refrain “it is not a story to pass on” (323). Besides the paradoxical idea that this is not a story that should be shared, it may mean that the events or the experiences are not ones to repeat or to relive.

*The Bluest Eye* (1999) tells the agonizing story of Pecola Breedlove, an eleven year old African American girl from a poor and dysfunctional family. The novel is about racism, what it is like to grow up in a racist culture and about what Morrison terms the “racial self-loathing” that such culture endangers (Preface), racism’s damaging effects on the Black community at large and on Black families. The novel is about the causes and devastating consequences of intra-racial racism, of the ways in which some Americans of African descent grew to look down on others in accordance with the destructive value system in which categorization and discrimination, which are none other than strategies learned from the White’s oppression of the Blacks, are the key weapons. As the individual Black people absorb the wider culture’s racist pictures of themselves, they focus their self-hatred on the most vulnerable character, Pecola Breedlove who, “collapse, silently, anonymously, with no voice to express or acknowledge (Forward). Pecola’s tragedy is the culmination of many other tragedies. She was raped by none other than her father, Cholly Breedlove and abused in her own society, who themselves are victims, their actions reproducing the enemy who has humiliated them over and over. Pecola’s profound sense of worthlessness develops in response to dominant cultural notions of “romantic love” and “physical beauty”. Morrison writes, “along with the idea of romantic love, she was introduced to another-physical beauty, probably the most destructive idea in the history of human thought” (95). This concept of beauty is shaped by popular culture’s notion of beauty: blonde hair and blue eyes. Tessa Roynon states, the novel’s title refers to the fact that in the last stages of her sanity, or the beginning stages of her insanity, Pecola pays a visit to the healer Soaphead Church and begs him to give her blue eyes. The penultimate section of the book depicts the girl’s consciousness split into two voices that discuss the prettiness of the new eyes she believes to have acquired along with fragmented allusions to

the traumatic experiences she has gone through, “my eyes are bluer than Joanna’s and bluer than Michelena’s and bluer than that lady’s you saw” (160). The author through her novel brings out how the Black women characters despise their Blackness which in turn leads to self-hatred. They see themselves in the eyes of the White people and their notion of White beauty has destructive effects on their own community.

Morrison’s subjects are trauma, violence, pain and loss. Yet there is clearly a move away from the unrelenting bleakness of the end of *The Bluest Eye*, there is a repeated emphasis on survival and a hope for tomorrow for which Sethe and Paul D long. It may sound odd to say that Morrison, whose subject matter is so serious, is a profoundly humorous writer. The author suggests that humour is what makes endurance and survival possible, but at the same time it does not trivialize its subject.

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