

# “Disrupted Girls and Disturbed Girlhoods in Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* and *Beloved*”

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**Abstract:** The purpose of this research is to study “Disrupted girls and disturbed girlhoods” in Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* and *Beloved*.” Toni Morrison is known for her exploring of black female experience. By virtue of being black, young girls had to experience their girlhoods entangled in “psychological abuse, physical abuse and sexual abuse”(qtd. Susmita 212). The struggle by young black girls for their existence snatched away their girlhoods from them. The care about this issue is to highlight how young black girls were marginalised, raped, murdered, oppressed etc. in the African-American society and how they undergo such painful situations. The objective of this study is to highlight how the girlhoods of young black girls are disrupted and disturbed due to sexist bias of society and to bring out the plight of being black girls in African-American society. This adds more to the study of black literature and the experience of being black by the black writers.

**Key words:** Disrupted, disturbed, girlhoods, black girls, sexist bias, African- American society etc.

## INRODUCTION:

Toni Morrison originally called as Chloe Anthony had done a great job in pushing African- American literature into the centre. Toni Morrison was an African- American writer and she has a different perspective of African- American literature. According to her, Afro–American literature is the literature created in United States by the writers of African origin. African- American literature has composed by, about, and sometimes particularly for African- Americans. African- American literature deals with the themes of slavery, oppression, racism, sexism, class, etc. Toni Morrison is the first black woman writer who got Nobel Prize in Literature in 1993. She has produced characters which can never be forgotten and has examined racism, injustice, oppression, sexism and slavery as originators of psychological trauma in her novels..Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* is published in 1970. This novel centralizes around a black young girl whose name is Pecola Breedlove. Pecola is consumed by all white standards of beauty and longs for blue eyes which she corresponds with whiteness as a mean to get away from the hardships which are the results of her black skin she has. She is consumed by white standards of beauty and longs for blue eyes which she corresponds with whiteness as a

mean to get away from the hardships which are the results of her black skin she has. Because of her dark skin and rough features she is consistently called ugly and as a result she grows inferiority complex and this encouraged her desire of having the blue coloured eyes because Pecola believes that when she will have blue eyes everything evil in her life will convert into the good. The story was set in Lorain, Ohio, at the time of Great Depression. She was of a perspective to examine the African American experience. This book is based on prejudice, incest, and child molestation. Morrison's most celebrated novel, *Beloved*, was published in 1987 analyzes love and supernatural. *Beloved* is influenced by the real tale of an enslaved Afro-American woman named 'Margaret Garner.' Garner left slavery by running away to Ohio, a free state but was chased by the slave-catchers. During her retaken by the slave owners, Margaret Garner murdered her daughter of 2 years old and before she was able to kill her, she was caught. Her novel created the dead baby who returns as ghost of *Beloved* to terrify her own family and mother. Not all critics praised *Beloved*. A critic Stanley Crouch, for example stated in *The New Republic* that *Beloved* "reads largely like a melodrama lashed to the structural conceits of the miniseries."<sup>1</sup> Toni won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction for *Beloved*. This novel also won an Anisfield-Wolf Book Award. The protagonist, Sethe, a slave, was frightened by her act of killing her own daughters and sons as it was not acceptable for her to see her children as slaves. Her three of the four children lived but her 2-years old younger daughter died in her own hand. Toni Morrison mainly focuses upon the black American experience and her characters struggle for their survival and their own cultural identity. Girls of African descent have suffered a double problem because of their race and gender and Morrison examines in her novels that how racism and sexism can have a destroyable consequences.

### RESEARCH METHODOLOGY:

The study makes an in-depth textual analysis to show Double Consciousness in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and *The Bluest Eye*. Double consciousness is term explaining the inner conflict faced by submissive groups in a dominating society. W.E.B. Du Bois invented this term and he published and introduced this concept in the book titled *The Souls of Black Folk* written in 1903. It refers to the psychological challenges of seeing oneself by the eyes of dominating white society and estimating oneself by ways of a nation that looked back in dishonor. This term has been applied to numerous circumstances of social unfairness, especially to women living male-dominating society.

Double consciousness has its origin from Du Bois's "Strivings of the Negro People" which is an Atlantic Monthly article. This was then again published and edited under chapter named "Of Our Spiritual Strivings" of the book titled *The Souls of Black Folk*. Du Bois explain this term as:

<sup>1</sup> Crouch Stanley, "Literary conjure woman," *The New Republic*, October 19, 1987, p-38.

it is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness,- an American , a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.<sup>2</sup>

In *The Bluest Eye*, Pecola experienced Double Consciousness. Pecola and her family completely accept the white standards of beauty. Pecola was influenced by her culture's perception that blond hair, white skin and blue eyes are real as well as only characteristics of beauty. She was manipulated by an aesthetics which increase European standards of beauty and decreases standards of beauty of African- American origin that made Pecola impossible to think of herself as beautiful. This shows that Pecola specifically desired to have blue eyes she equates with whiteness showing theory of "double consciousness" in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*: desired to eradicate African – American race. Pecola's mother Pauline's failure to accept that Pecola was her own daughter because she was black is an another example of her own problem with double consciousness. She thought that black girls were not significant to had love, a warm hug or recognition from her own mother. This can emphasize Pecola's sense of double consciousness. Thus Pecola's had inherited a sense of double consciousness from her mother herself to a maximum extent.

In *Beloved*, the protagonist Sethe and the black community became the victim of double consciousness. Sethe consider herself a slave of white slave owners. This lead her to kill her own daughter because she wanted to save her daughter's life form slavery and did not want her to become a victim of slavery in the hands of whites. The people of the black society were black but they lived by standards of white people. They were aware of the fact that why Sethe killed her daughter but they did not publicly approved of her act and thought that it would be better to keep themselves away from Sethe. They did so because they were afraid that they will be seen as uncivilised to the outside world if they accepted the killing of daughter by her own mother in their community. They did so in order to maintain their appearance up in front of white people. This shows that black community compromises to keep the regulating standards of white superiority.

This paper's objective is to highlight how the girlhoods of young black girls are 'disrupted' and 'disturbed' due to sexist bias of society and to bring out the plight of being black girls in African-American society in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* and *Beloved*. Black young girls are usually the very unnoticeable part of formerly ignored black community in a race-separated country due to their colour, gender and age. Therefore, *The Bluest Eye* and *Beloved* assures that Morrison talks about "all those peripheral little girls" who remains unnoticeable. These girls have to spend their girlhoods spoilt in "physical, psychological and sexual abuse" (qtd. in Susmita 212). In Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* and *Beloved*, black girls are 'disrupted' as they

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<sup>2</sup> W.E.B Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: : Gramercy Books; Avenel NJ,1994).

are in a confused state due to oppression and ignorance they face in racist society and this hampered growth and causes disturbance in their girlhood or an adolescent that can also be reflected in their womanhood as well.

### “Disrupted Girls and Disturbed Girlhoods in *The Bluest Eye*”

Toni Morrison in *The Bluest Eye*, highlights an experience of all those marginalised girls who remain invisible. Susmita Roye says: “Morrison’s mission is to cast the hitherto non-existence into a compelling existence, to bring the hitherto invisible into full view.”<sup>3</sup> Black girls are devoid of their girlhoods due to their struggle for existence in the Afro-American society where beauty is equated with whiteness and there is sexist biasness everywhere. The black community characters accept themselves as the Others, which white community has imposed upon them. And same is the case happening with Pecola Breedlove to whom has assigned the status of Other by the blacks within the black community. Shubhanku Khochar says: “*The Bluest Eye* truthfully examines the entire process of subjugation and suppression of black at the hands of the white. And the novel sets out to explore the way in which some Afro-Americans exploited the members of their own race under the impact of racial” hegemony.”<sup>4</sup>

*The Bluest Eye* deals with young girls who are black such as Pecola Breedlove, Claudia Macteer, Frieda Macteer etc. Claudia Macteer narrates the novel and Frieda is Claudia’s 10 years old younger sister. They both live with their parents in an “old, cold and green” house along with tenants named Mr. Henry and Pecola Breedlove. Pecola Breedlove is the central character of the story who longs for blue eyes as she equates these with the whiteness and beauty. She believes that there is a beauty in whiteness and her own blackness is inherently ugly. Pecola has given a very little love or affection whereas Claudia and Frieda gets little love and affection, but in rude manner, which is not worthy to desired and is not understandable to both to them at such a young age. These girls had a very tough life due to sexist biasness. They attended a school where priority was given to the white students. Even the educators, shopkeepers, family members and the so called respectable white people have disgusting behaviour towards blackness and ugliness.

Many incidents are there in *The Bluest Eye* to highlight how girls are ‘disrupted’ and their girlhoods are ‘disturbed’. Claudia faces many kinds of powerlessness. She faces the powerlessness of being black and as a female in a society where the situation of a female is insecure. She hates Shirley Temple and the blue eyed baby dolls with blonde hairs that was presented to her as a Christmas gift. Claudia wonders why everybody has an opinion that white- coloured dolls and girls are beautiful and not black ones and points that why she was never asked what she actually wants for the Christmas. The reason of her hatred for white dolls and girls is the

<sup>3</sup> Susmita Roye, “ Toni Morrison’s Disrupted girls and their Disturbed girlhoods: The Bluest Eye and A Mercy, ” *Callaloo* 35.1(2012):212, <http://about.jstor.org/terms>

<sup>4</sup> Shubhanku Khochar, “Treatment of violence: A study of Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* and *Beloved*.” M. Phil diss., M.D. University, Rohtak, 1 January 2013, 563.

ignorance of the black girls in a racist society. The pressure that she faces being a girl becoming a woman is may be more subtle than the pressure of race but is more superior in some ways. She experiences a pressure of such thing in such a young age that causes disruption in her state of being black girl. Once Frieda's breast was touched by Henry, the tenant at Macteer's house. She was ignored and confused of the experience of becoming a sexual being. She was unable to describe what happened to her. She only knows that he is doing something wrong but was not aware of what it means. She was more worried of what has been done to her and how her parents react. This was all because of her parent's ignorance who never provide her any kind of awareness or true education of such things. But still Frieda being angry by her experience was ready to take action rather than feeling any kind of shame of defeated. On the other hand, Pecola the protagonist had a difficult home life. Her father Cholly Breedlove drank alcohol and used to abuse her mother Pauline Breedlove and her parents used to fight constantly. Her father once burned down the family home due to which Pecola had to live as a tenant at Macteer's house in such a young age when she should spend her girlhood at her own parent's house with her own family. Duvall says: "life in the Breedlove households is anything but restrained. The ritual violence of Cholly and Mrs. Breedlove relation emotionally scars their children, who repeatedly witness parental fights"<sup>5</sup> She was devoid of the love she should get from her parents leading herself to the chaos and her disturbed girlhood. This made her to believe that if she were prettier, her parents would not fight and would be nicer and affectionate towards her. Every night she used to pray for "blue eyes". Pecola believes that when she have blue eyes, she will be very beautiful and her parents will not fight, her father will not drink and her brother will not stop run away from home. An inferiority complex was developed into herself, which fuelled Pecola's desire for the blue eyes she thought were equal to the whiteness and beauty. On one night Cholly Breedlove came home drunk and when on next morning Mrs Breedlove begins to pester Cholly about getting coal for the stove, he refuses to do so. They both started fighting with each other. Pecola being scared and lonely in the bed prays to God to make her invisible, "Please, God, she whispered into the palm of her hand. Please make me disappears"(The Bluest Eye,p.45). She thought how ugly she is. She thought that if she would have different eyes, she would be a changed personality too. She was in such a disturbed condition that she was unable to enjoy her girlhood. The fights between her parents had destructive psychological effects on her. Wilfred D. Samuels and Clenora Hudson Weems states: " Set in a small Midwest town in Lorain, Ohio, during the Depression. *The Bluest Eye*, tells the story of Pecola Breedlove, who, hating her black self, yearns for blue eyes she believes will make her white, extinguish her position as pariah, and give her the love and security that are desperately missing from her life."<sup>6</sup>Pecola represents all other black girls who prays for the same things.

<sup>5</sup> John Duvall, Invisible Name and Complex Authority in *The Bluest Eye: Morrison's covert Letter to Ralph Ellison, The Identifying Fictions of Toni Morrison: Modernist Authenticity and Post modern Blackness*( New York: Palgrave, 2000),p.44.

<sup>6</sup> Wilfred. D. Samuel and Clenora Hudson Weems, *The Damaging look: The Search for Authentic Existence in Bluest eye*(New York: Twayne Publisher,1990)p.11



The black colour of girls shows otherness and ugliness of these girls. When Pecola visits to purchase candy from a shop of white shopkeeper whose name is Mr. Yacobowski, she becomes scare of purchasing candy from Mr. Yacobowski who's white because she feels that he did not even see her. " At some fixed point in time and space he senses that he need not waste the effort of a glance. He doesn't see her, because for him there is nothing to see"(The Bluest Eye p.48). Mr. Yacobowski expressed indignation for touching her hand to collect money from her hands because she was black as shown in the lines: "He hesitates, not wanting to touch her hand... Finally he reaches over and takes the pennies from her hand. His nails graze her damp palm"(The Bluest Eye p.49-50). Nothing can make sure to such little girls of becoming other greater than this failing of true acceptance of their being human in the minds of white people.

These black girls leads a hard life of negligence. These all attended school in which black girls are oppressed and faces psychological and verbal abuse. Even in the school the priority is given to whites. The school boys who themselves are black teases Pecola as she is a black girl. Woodrow Cain, Junie Bug, Buddy Wilson, Bay Boy are black boys who surrounded Pecola as well as joyfully harass her. They calls Pecola "Black e mo" and says that Pecola's father sleeps naked. Claudia shouts at Bay Boy and Frieda hits Woodrow Cain with her schoolbooks. Pecola was even teased by the new, light-skinned girl, Maureen. Claudia becomes sad that she tried to punch Maureen but was unable to do so and in spite of that she hit Pecola's face . Maureen runs away and call girls, " Black e mos." After this both Claudia and Frieda shouts at Maureen but Pecola stands guilty showing her emotional pain and sadness. Claudia feels to shout and fight back and enrages with Pecola for not fighting back. Jill Matus clearly says Pecola ignores and feels sad about an incident for which Claudia shows annoyance.

These little black girls are used as an instrument by the people of their society to accomplish their motives. For instance, one winter day, Junior, a light- skinned child of Geraldine who is a light-skinned woman lived in Lorain and is more affectionate towards her cat. Junior was Jealous of the cat and when he saw Pecola walking past the playground. He asked her to come to his house for playing with some kittens. He blocked Pecola into his house and attacked her with a cat. Cat scratched Pecola on the face. Pecola cried and tried to leave the house but Junior blocked her exit and told her that she was his prisoner now. When he finds that cat is getting attention, he get angry and picks the cat up and throws it hardly due to which cat becomes dead. When Geraldine came home , Junior told her that the cat was killed by Pecola. Geraldine yelled at Pecola as, " You nasty little black bitch. Get out of my house"(The Bluest Eye.p.92). She kicked her out of the house. Pecola walks outside, sad and embarrassed. Similarly, when Pecola visits a psychic faith healer named Elihue MicahWhitcomb, known as Soaphead Church and ask him to give her blue eyes. Soaphead advised her to present meat to his landlady's pet dog and in case dog acts abnormally then her wish for blue eyes will be fulfilled. Pecola didn't realise that he hates the dog and has used her as an instrument to kill the dog with the

feeding of poison. When she gives meat to dog the dog dies and she runs away being horrified and believes that she will receive her blue eyes. This shows a tragic effect of racism.

The treatment of these girls in a family plays a great role in becoming what they want to be. But without the love and affection, the girlhood of these girls is un nourished. Shubhanku kochar says: “one expects emotional comfort from one’s parents, but when parents are bent on destroying their children, there can be no worse enemy.”<sup>7</sup> And the same thing happens with Pecola. Pecola’s parents destroys her more than by the others. For example, when Pecola at the workplace of her mother finds a berry cobbler and that berry cobbler containing the boiled berries, accidently tilted on the floor and all the berries spreader on the floor. Instead of being worried about her daughter who has been burned by the hot berries, Pauline started beating her violently. Morrison described the entire scene in the manner: “in one gallop she was on Pecola , and with the back on her hand knocked her to the floor.. Mrs. Breedlove yanked her up by the arm, slapped her again and in a voice thin with anger abused Pecola directly.”(*The Bluest Eye*,p.109) This shows her ignorance for her own daughter for the daughter of whites. In the similar manner her father doesn’t take care of her and ends up rapping her. Once Pecola was in the kitchen washing the dishes, Cholly came home drunk and with the mixed feeling of concern and anger he raped his 11 years old daughter and left her unconscious on the floor and when Pecola told to her mother about an incident, she didn’t trust her and hits Pecola only. So disrupting girlhoods is very much reflected in Pecola’s case. Besides the fact Pecola is having family, she is still solitude. Her mother offers more care and affection towards her employer’s child than her own daughter. His brother never bothers of including his only sister in his plan of running away from the home environment full of claustrophobia. Sammy his brother being a male is successful in running away from home but it’s not possible for a Pecola who is female and desires to become disappear. And certainly, rape of Pecola by her father is the utmost outrageous example of “disrupted girlhood” in this novel. But the unappetizing reality is both the parents raped Pecola. Cholly raped her daughter physically and Pauline, as stated by Furman, “ravishes the child’s self-worth.”<sup>8</sup> In spite of showing love and affection towards this girl, her family leads to her psychological breakdown. Pecola discovers her happiness only when she became mad. Mistreated by the mother and raped by the father, ignored by the friends and isolated by the community, she starts living and talking to an imaginary friend..Pecola says that she no longer goes to school because people are jealous of her blue eye and discusses always about her wish of blue eyes and this was the greatest satisfaction for Pecola who was once an ugly girl and now has become beautiful for her own self, in her own world of isolation. S.P. Swain and Sarabjit Das see Pecola as a girl who “suffers from agonizing alienation and remain fragmented and disintegrated at the outset but attain integration and

<sup>7</sup> Shubhanku Kochar,p.574.

<sup>8</sup> Jan Furnan, Toni Morrison’s Fiction(Columbia: University of South Carolina P,1999)p.18.

wholeness at the end”<sup>9</sup> this depicts the conclusiveness of Pecola’s insanity. Pecola walks up and down the street and spend her days, waving her arms as birds but bird of such kind cannot enjoy the flight of fulfillment.

### “Disrupted Girls and Disturbed Girlhoods in *Beloved*”

Black girls in *Beloved* had to face atrocities like slavery, exploitation etc. and were abused physically, mentally, psychologically and emotionally. Black girls were not only the victim of racist or class biasness but also sexist biasness. There are many instances in *Beloved* where young girls by virtue of being black had to face negligence, rape, murder, isolation, sexual abuse in their lives and this causes disruption and disturbance in the growth of their girlhoods. Dr. M. Latha, Raj Yalaxmi Yesireddy says: “Adolescent girls have no choice but to accept some trauma instead of possessing the happiness of their youth. One of the feature of Morrison’s adolescent girls is that they get hurt and enter the adult worlds early.”<sup>10</sup>

These girls, at such a young age of their life, should be offered with love and affections of their family rather than being devoid of such things as a consequence of slavery. For instance, Sethe, the protagonist, was born to an African mother she never knew because she at the age of 13 years old was sold to slave owner Garners who own Sweet Home. Sethe feels that her mother abandoned her at the age when she should get her love and care. Thus she hardly knew her name. She was hurt because she believed that her mother never cared for her. She comments: “she never fixed my hair nor nothing. She didn’t even sleep in the same cabin most nights” (*Beloved*,60-61). The reverberations of being divested of maternal care is awful for her. Manuela Lopez Ramirez says “Morrison tries to show both mother’s and daughter’s stories, while highlighting the mother’s absence in her daughter’s life as a consequence of the slavery system.”<sup>11</sup>

Young black girls were even the victims of both sexist and racist oppression. Sethe being a young black girl have to suffer slavery badly and was often rapped and brutally treated by white men such as schoolteacher and his nephew who seized in the barn and suck milk from her breast and when she tried to take action against this brutal act by telling to Mrs. Garner, the owner of farm, schoolmaster and her nephew whipped Sethe so badly that her back was permanently scarred. Because of her social status, Sethe had to face the exploitation by her master as he wishes and she had no right to defend her. This shows the extreme pain of black female agony. The ramification of this physical damage ends in psychological eruption. Sethe being a victim of molestation, was psychologically affected and as a result of this she murdered her own daughter in order to spare her life from the slavery and it’s brutal consequences as stated by Fuston White that “It was not madness

<sup>9</sup> S .P. Swain and Sarabjit Das, *The Alienated Self: Searching for Space in Morrison’s The Bluest Eye and Sula.* Modern American Literature. Ed. Rajeshwar Mittapalli and Claudio Gorlier( New Delhi: Atlantic,2001) 90.

<sup>10</sup> Dr. M. Latha and Rajyalaxmi Yesireddy, “Psychological Disintegration of Female in the Novels of Toni Morrison, English Studies International Research Journal:no.3 spl issue( 2015): 59, <http://www.imrfjournals.in/pdf/MATHS/ENIRJ-VOLUME-3-SPECIAL>.

<sup>11</sup> Manuela Lopez Ramirez, *The Pattern of Severed Mother-Daughter Bond in Toni Morrison’s Beloved and A Mercy* ,ES. Revista de Filologia Inglesa 35(2014),152.



but the reality of slavery, that drove Sethe to kill her child, fully aware of the act and it's brutality, as well as it's compassion."<sup>12</sup> Even in her girlhood, she became mother. She thought that she has a right to decide the fate of her children and consider the act of murdering her daughter a mercy killing which in a true sense is a brutal act. Because this not only made a beloved dead but also robbed her of her girlhood. She must be handed over to someone rather than being murdered at such a young age.

The young black girls even have to suffer isolation in their girlhoods as a punishment of sins of their adults. Denver, Sethe's daughter have to live the life of isolation in a lonely environment that is detached from the rest of the world because of the mother's sin of killing her own daughter. Denver even shows her dissatisfaction by saying, " I can't live here. I don't know where to go or what to do, but I can't live here. Nobody speaks to us. Nobody comes by. Boy's don't like me. Girls don't either" (Morrison, *Beloved* 9). She was living a life of super solitude and this was makes her being devoid of enjoying her girlhood. And being a girl she even can't run away from her home as her brother Howard and Buglar does when the house was haunted by the ghost of Beloved. Thus being a young black girl she had to restrict herself to the isolated world at her home and this caused disruption and disturbance in her girlhood. Thus the "girlhood" in these situations is dazed excellently and suppressed badly.

## CONCLUSION:

Toni Morrison's firm responsibility towards "disrupted girls and their disturbed girlhoods" is very much mirrored in her both the works, *The Bluest Eye* and *Beloved*. Be it Pecola, Claudia, Frieda, Beloved, Sethe or Denver, all these girls have to face strange and chaotic girlhoods due to sexist biasness. Along with sexist biasness, other factors like race, poverty, slavery and most important family's love and affection plays an essential part in hindering the growth of such girls. Morrison's every "disrupted girl" is a clear result of the community that stays sightless to the effect of bias. By mentioning these girls in her works, Morrison is bringing these young black girls from the periphery to centre of attention to provide them relief from interruption of their lives. Morrison has been appraised for showing the plight of being black girls and bringing these black girlhoods to the limelight. Be it brown or black girls, if these are ruled or restricted through the racist society of their times, then each and every girl in that society becomes a victim of the sexist bias.

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<sup>12</sup> Fuston-White Jeanna, *African American Review* 36(3)(2002), 464.

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