

Identity Confirmation in Tony Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*

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Abstract—How to rebuild black women's identity and dignity under the multiple oppression of classism, sexism and racism has always been Toni Morrison's major concern. The paper analyzes three solutions to the problem of identity crisis in her first novel *The Bluest Eye*. Loving one's black image, loving one's black family and loving one's black culture are the essential ways. By doing so can black women retain their authentic identities.

Keywords—Tony Morrison; identity confirmation; multiple oppression; *The Bluest Eye*

I. INTRODUCTION

Toni Morrison, the first black woman writer to be awarded the Nobel Prize for literature, is one of the most remarkable and influential novelists in the contemporary literary circle. Her novels have always been mainly focusing on such problems as black women's identity crisis, the quest for cultural independence and identity confirmation under the multiple oppressions of classism, sexism and racism. To Morrison, she is more concerned about the ways to preserve black women's identity and dignity in face of multiple oppressions. Black Feminist Patricia Hill Collins argues that "black women's efforts to grapple with the effects of domination in everyday life are evident in the creation of safe spaces that enable us to resist oppression, and in our struggles to form fully human love relations with one another." (Collins, 274)

While Morrison depicts Pecola who eventually became insane as the victim of the multiple oppressions, she also presents Claudia as the central character who successfully retains her identity and continue to live healthily both physically and ideologically. As far as Morrison is concerned, love of one's black image, love of one's black family and black culture are the three important solutions concerning the significance of preserving black women's identities in *The Bluest Eye*.

II. IDENTITY CONFIRMATION

As a black feminist writer, Morrison, first and foremost, declares the visibility of black women. Then she challenges the multiple oppressions of racism, sexism, and classism and asserts the positive self-definition as essential. Finally, she presumes an image of black women as powerful and independent subjects.

A. *The Love of one's black image*

The love of one's black image is one of the essential ways to preserve black women's identities. It is dangerous to encourage racial solidarity by denying one's individuality. Morrison points out in one of her articles "Behind the Making of *The Black Book*" "when the strength of a race depends on its beauty, when the focus is turned to how one looks as opposed to what one is, we are in trouble". (Morrison, 89)

To her, considering "[the] concept of physical beauty as a virtue is one of the dumbest, most pernicious and destructive ideas of the western world and we should have nothing to do with it". (Morrison, 89)

Like Pecola, Claudia also suffers from the oppressions of racism, sexism and classism, typically the white beauty standards and material insecurity, but she loves her black image and her own culture, which makes all the difference for her. She feels comfortable in her skin, enjoys the news that the senses released to her, admires her dirt, and cultivates her scars. She puts high premium on blackness. In her eyes, to be black is to be beautiful. That's why she strongly believes that Pecola's black baby must be beautiful.

One objective of black feminist ideology is to demonstrate "an image of black women as powerful, independent subjects." (King, Signs, 1998) "As subjects, people have the right to define their own reality, establish their own identities, name their history", proclaims bell hooks (1989, 42) Claudia is one of such subjects whom Morrison makes efforts to

celebrate. She refuses to be controlled by the dominant culture and relentlessly rejects a white baby doll, although “adults, older girls, shops, magazines, newspapers, window signs--- all the world had agreed that a blue-eyed, yellow-haired, pink-skinned doll was what every girl child treasured”. (20) She questions the basis for white cultural domination and its manipulating power over black. In order to investigate what makes the doll “lovable” and black girls such as Pecola and herself unlovable, to “see of what it was made, to discover the dearness, to find the beauty”(20), Claudia dismembers a white baby doll given by her parents as a Christmas present. She just wants to “examine it to see what it was that all the world said was lovable” (21)

Instinctively Claudia understands that there is an enormous invisible white cultural force that diminishes black presence and insists that “Maureen Peal was not the Enemy and not worthy of such intense hatred. The Thing to fear was the Thing that made her beautiful”(74). She alone realizes that the events which occurred in her community are part of a larger, social structure of violence. While not negating her own personal responsibility, Claudia blames “the earth, the land...the entire country” (160). When she learns that Pecola is pregnant, she challenges this invisible power, wishing well for Pecola and her unborn baby: “More strongly than my fondness for Pecola, I felt a need for someone to want the black baby to live just to counteract the universal love of white baby doll, Shirley Temples, and Mau seen Peals”(190). She also plants marigold seeds, praying that the health of seeds will assure the health of the baby, which for her represents the collective survival of her race. Yet the seeds die, and so does Pecola’s baby. Claudia feels responsible for the death and regrets not having planted the seeds deeply enough in the earth, but later she realizes that “the earth itself might have been unyielding”(7) and “the land of the entire country was hostile to marigold that year. This soil is bad for certain kinds of flowers. Certain seeds it will not nurture, certain fruit it will not bear”(206) . She is able to articulate the cause which leads inevitably to Pecola’s madness: society’s destructive victimization of a defenseless little girl. Although it is “much, much too late for Pecola,” who never planted anything in the unyielding earth, it is not too late for Claudia, who continues to grow, through her assessments, questions, actions and choices.

Other survivals such as the three whores are also the good examples to retain their identities by valuing their individuality. Though traditionally labeled victims themselves, China, Poland and Miss Marie do not fit the stereotype of the fallen images. The name of the three prostitutes, China, Poland, and Miss Marie evoke people to remember the dauntless effort against invasions of China, Poland and France in the face of more powerful forces during World War II, the history setting of *The Bluest Eye*. They are self-employed people who control their business; they are independent and reliant. Although not accepted by the society, the three whores are not devoid of self-confidence, arranging their lives according to their own ways, which is different from Pecola whose life is arranged and controlled by the outside world.

B. *The Love of Black Family*

As an important unit of the society, family provides safety and peace for people particularly for the children. The MacTeers’s love of family protect their daughters Claudia and Frieda from going insane. Contrary to the name MacTeer, they do not “make tears” to any members of the family and their community. They represent the mainstream black family in Lorain, Ohio: the mother stays at home and takes care of the children; the father is breadwinner and protector. Even while the parents seem to be quite troubled by poverty, they retain their duty to their home. Unlike Pecola who has a quarrelsome and violent family, Claudia has a loving and stable family, which safeguards her moral growth. Contrasted with Pecola’s distant and indifferent mother Pauline, Mrs. MacTeer is the one who exhibits the traditional values of black woman. She takes care of her families, loves her husband, children and the family, and is not preoccupied with physical standards of beauty as a measurement of self worth. She also takes in boarder, Mr. Henry, and the homeless Pecola. Morally upright, she is a good example for her children.

Mrs. MacTeer is subject to the same victimization as Pauline Breedlove and Geraldine because she is black. Her life could be viewed as dull and uneventful, but she never takes refuge in the cinema like Pauline. Resisting the temptation to retreat into the movie theaters, she survives with a sense of self and culture that stands in striking oppositions to the black community. Unlike Pauline and Geraldine, Mrs. MacTeer rises above the conditions of her self in order to fulfill her duty as a loving mother. Sometimes her “fussing soliloquies” (24) irritates and depresses her children, however, she really love them. Claudia once recalls Mrs. MacTeer’s care for her illness passionately. “Love, thick and dark Alaga syrup, eased up into that cracked window. I could smell t-taste it-sweet, musty, with an edge of wintergreen in its base-everywhere in that house. It stuck, along with my tongue, to the frosted windowpanes. It coated my chest, along with the salve, and when the flannel cane undone in my sleep, the clear, sharp curves of air outlined its presence on my throat. And in the night, when my coughing was dry and tough, feet padded into the room, hands repined the flannel, readjusted the quilt, and rested a moment on my forehead. So when I think of autumn, I think of somebody with hands who does not want me to die.”(12)

Although Mr. MacTeer has a less conspicuous place in the novel than his wife his concern for his daughters equals hers. Contrary to Pecola’s irresponsible and alcoholic father Cholly, Mr. MacTeer is a responsible father. He works day and night to keep the family fed and clothed. Like “a Vulcan guarding the flames”, he gives his children “instructions about which doors to keep closed or opened for proper distribution of heat, lays kindling by, discusses qualities of coal, and teaches [them] how to rake, feed, and bank the fire”(61). Provider, loving parent, protector, Mr. MacTeer is angry when Mr. Henry fondles Frieda. He throws the old tricycle at Mr. Henry’s head and knocks him “off the porch”. Moreover, he cusses and grabs a gun from a neighbour with the intension of shooting Mr. Henry at the risk of being put into jail. It is their selfless, pure love that keeps their children’s spiritual and moral integrity.

C. *The Love of Black Culture*

Culture, just like race, has no distinction of being good or bad. When two cultures meet against the same social background, however, owing to the differences of their economy, politics and influence, the dominant culture will strengthen its value system and way of life etc. and transfer them to the weak culture. Gradually it will influence, weaken and devour the weak culture eventually. At the same time, the mass media, as part of the dominant culture and the chief vehicles by which ideology is transmitted through information and images, such as baby dolls, food and movies, play an important role in setting the standards for what defines beauty and anything straying from these standards is viewed as ugly.

Morrison proclaims that the purpose of writing *The Bluest Eye* is to show "how to survive whole in a world where we are all of us, in some measure, victims of something" (Jane Bakerman, 60). Besides three whores and the MacTeers discussed above, black women of Aunt Jimmy's community are those people who do not follow the standard of white aesthetics and retain their identities by transmitting the traditional values of black culture, consciously or unconsciously.

The first black cultural tradition those black women transmit is the community commitment. Because the MacTeers are not obsessed with the need to be beautiful, wealthy, or white, they concentrate their efforts on family community. Even though they are tortured by the multiple oppressions, they care if someone is "put out" or "put outdoors", for "there is difference between being put out and being put outdoors. If you are put out, you go somewhere else; if you are outdoors, there is no place to go. The distinction was subtle but final. Outdoors was the end of something, an irrevocable, physical fact, defining and complementing our metaphysical condition." (17) When Pecola's father burns down the house, putting the family "outdoors", Mrs. MacTeer takes the homeless Pecola. Her teachings about sexuality is clear in her response to the assumption that the girls have been "playing nasty." She tenderly guides Pecola into the bathroom for care at the onset of her menstrual cycle. For an impoverished family, one more mouth is a great burden. From MacTeer's "fussing soliloquy", readers listen to her voice and know that her anger is not referred to Pecola, but to her irresponsible parents. "I don't mind folks coming in and getting what they want...Folks just dump they children off on you and go on about they business. Ain't nobody even peeped in here o see whether that child has a loaf of bread. Look like they would just peep in to see whether I had a loaf of bread to give her" (25). Obviously the MacTeers do not have the time, energy and money to adopt all the Pecolas in the world. But even when the poverty has deprived them of much happiness, it is really a miracle that they still share the responsibilities of their community. It is they that convince Morrison that there are no boring black people and interest her in "scratching the surface" to discover the complexity and subtlety in their lives.

The most significant cluster of women who sincerely transmit the black cultural values are those who come together at the time of Aunt Jimmy's death. Being keepers of tradition, they survive the multiple oppressions. Upon hearing about Aunt Jimmy's illness, they come to see her. "Some made

camomile tea; others rubbed her with liniment" (136). When they hear the remedy is to "drink pot liquor and nothing else" (137), the women "brought bowls of pot liquor from black-eyed peas, from mustards, from cabbage, from kale, from collards, from turnips, from beets, from green beans. Even the juice from a boiling hog jowl" (137). When Aunt Jimmy dies, they unite to oversee and conduct the appropriate ritual of departure for one of their members. They "cleaned the house, aired everything out, notified everybody, and stitched together what looked like a white wedding dress for Aunt Jinuny, a maiden lady, to wear when she met Jesus" (140) Those women represent the quintessential neighbourhood. They come at the moment when they should arrive.

The second black cultural tradition those black women transmit is their black music. Black music as art is one of the black traditions that have been transmitted to provide a safe location where black women have come to voice. "Art is special because of its ability to influence feelings as well as knowledge," suggests Angela Davis, "black people were able to create with their music an aesthetic community of resistance, which in turn encouraged and nurtured a political community of active struggle for freedom." (1989, 201)

Since blacks were sold to be slaves, their songs have always been heard on the American continent. The white can confine the black physical body but they cannot prohibit their music, for music can be heard and spread without permission. "There's something about music that is so penetrating that your soul gets the message. No matter what trouble comes to a person, music can help him face it", claims Mahalia Jackson (1985, 454). Music has occupied a special place in black women's expression of their self-definitions. Through the music, Morrison lets the marginalized group utter their voices.

When the poverty and oppression silence many people, MacTeer still remembers the healing and restorative black songs. Claudia recalls that her mother will "sing about hard times, bad times times" (25). Her mother's music is so sweet that Claudia finds herself longing for those hard times, yearning to be grown and leaves her with a conviction that "pain was not only endurable, it was sweet" (26). Even the prostitute Polina in her sweet strawberry voice expresses her desire to be recognized.

III. CONCLUSION

Though The Civil Rights Movement caused people to think deeply about the question of the black, feminist movement made people turn their attention to women, the problem of black women does not arouse people's adequate concern. Black women have been frequently undervalued and relegated to a marginal place within American culture and the American literary tradition. As a black woman writer, Morrison refuses to be influenced by the mainstream culture and rather attempts to depict the black women as subjects such as Claudia in *The Bluest Eye*.

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