

## Chapter Three

### Black Victims

Her (Black Woman) physical image has been maliciously maligned; she has been sexually molested and abused by the white coloniser... she... has been forced to serve as the white woman's maid and wet nurse for white children while her own children were more often than not starving and neglected.

- Frances Beal

It is to be stressed that any discussion about black female's body, historically, refers to black slavery. Slavery was the first abuse against the black women. Black females historically suffered oppression, abuse, misery, and oppression because of race and gender. They were victims of both sexist and racist oppression. They were exploited of their self. Black females were never supported and protected by their males, unlike the white females who were protected by their males and cultural standards to facilitate them to comfortably reach adulthood. This was not the case for the black women in America. They were physically raped in a social setting controlled by white community standards. The black women, under these terrible and awful conditions, struggled and lost their hold on life. Violence against Afro-American women had a significant influence on American society, which had been significantly unjust and unreasonable towards the black community in general, and towards the black females in particular. In this era of sexual abuse of black women, both white male and black male threatened the female body. They were raped by their masters as well as by the black male members of their family.

In any society, women and children are victims during the time of war, protest, movement and in the guise of development and civilization. Thus, Pecola and Sethe are victims. They are black and that is why they are victims. These victims suffer for no reason and they are not responsible for their suffering. They are females and thus they are prone to victimization. Women have always been marginalized in the western society. The patriarchal creed has always subordinated them and has stifled their individuality. Subjugation, social discrimination and torments have been the providence of women for ages. In America, to be a black woman is very different from being a mere woman. When a black is the victim, there will be no accusation against the state, nor can anyone be pointed out to be the cause. Many times the reason for becoming victims is just being a black woman. While Sethe is a victim of brutal slavery, Pecola is one of white idealization.

Sethe, the protagonist in *Beloved* is psychically ravaged due to the cruelty of the society. Pecola, of *The Bluest Eye*, is driven into madness because of the crass attitude of the society. Sethe's life represents the age of inhuman slavery that existed after the disastrous Atlantic Slave trade. Similarly, Pecola is brought up in an age where there is "White Idealism." That is after the age of American Civil War. *Beloved* is a poignant depiction of poor victims of blatant slavery. *The Bluest Eye* is a touching portrayal of a black girl trapped by white society's ideals. The life of both the characters in these novels is dismissed, trivialized, misread. "Innocent victims" is the apt description of these two characters. Both of them are innocent and cruel predators such as "Slavery" and "Racism" readily victimize them. They are the Morrison's exploited black women.

The problems faced by black women were due to the highly prevalent racism and slavery before the American Civil War. At the time of the Atlantic slave trade, both

black men and women were treated brutally. Women suffered the maximum and were helpless. Black men could not extend any form of support to these victims, as they themselves were in a pathetic position. The slaves and their families were exploited by their masters. After a few decades, the aftermaths of slavery were racism, classism and broken families with formless individuals that still threatened the existence of healthy black life. There was discrimination among the black families now. The white people subjected them to all kinds of degradation. Black women in America being black, female and poor, they were persecuted by racism, sexism, and classism, not only from the white world, but also from their own men.

Both *Beloved* and *The Bluest Eye* have grown out of the historical context of American slavery and reconstruction. *Beloved* is based on the real story of Margaret Garner. The novel represents the response of a slave to the Fugitive Slave Law. The fugitive slaves were those who had run away from slave masters in the south and found refuge in the northern and border states. The Fugitive Slave Law, enacted by the Congress, empowered the slave masters to reclaim their property. Their property was nothing but the runaways. Sethe, a runaway slave, who is the chief female protagonist in *Beloved*, is the fictional representation of Margaret Garner. Margaret Garner was a fugitive slave of the pre-civil era. She was a mulatto. She was born to Priscilla, who was a house slave in the Gaines family. They lived on a farm called Maplewood in Boone County, Kentucky. In January 1856, she fled with her husband and four children from her owner in Kentucky. The Garners successfully crossed the Ohio River near Cincinnati, but a group of slave owners found the family shortly thereafter. As the slaveholders advanced to capture the fugitive slaves, Margaret Garner killed her young daughter with a butcher knife. Garner hurried and attempted to kill her other children. However, she was caught and was unsuccessful in her attempt. The reason for such an

act of Garner was simply that she did not want her children to be returned to a life of slavery. In *Beloved*, Morrison addresses the issue of slavery and she wants people to be able to feel at a personal level what it means to be a slave and what slavery did to people.

Graham Thompson in his *American Culture in the 1980s*, points out that Morrison changes the known details of Garner's life in several ways but, rather than just investigating the events of Garner's escape and return, projects Garner's life into the future to imagine the undocumented legacy of these events and, most hauntingly, the return of the murdered child, Beloved, to Sethe's house at 124 Bluestone Road, Cincinnati (Thompson 56). In the novel *Beloved*, Sethe, a black woman of extraordinary power, is the heroine of this novel who is willing to sacrifice not only to gain her own emancipation, but also to prevent her children from falling under the yoke of forced servitude. Sethe kills her own daughter to free herself from the bonds of slavery. Slavery definitely is perceived as hell and has de-rooted the ability and willingness of the slaves to survive in an awful environment. According to Dolan Hubbard, the novel *Beloved* is centered on "the historical fact that there were Black women during slavery that terminated their babies' lives rather than allow them to be offered up to the destruction of slavery" (138).

In *Beloved* (*BD*), Sethe is a fugitive slave. Though she is freed from the bonds, she could not live a productive life due to the damage that slavery has already done to her mind. Sethe is victimized physically and mentally as well. When Sethe is pregnant, the nephews of the Schoolteacher rape her. The Schoolteacher is the brother of Mrs. Garner. Mrs. Garner has to give away all her slaves for the debts she owes him. Though the Garners treat their slaves a lot better than the other white masters do, they could not

be in control until the end. Schoolteacher is totally the opposite of the Garner family. He operates the plantation and treats the slaves differently from Mr. Garner. It becomes a very agonizing situation for the slaves. They feel dehumanized by him, so Sethe and Halle make plans to flee from the plantation in order to be free. Before their escape, Halle and Sethe have secretly planned to meet at the barn. However, the nephews of Schoolteacher track Sethe, catch her and sexually abuse her:

... they held me down and took it. Milk that belonged to my baby. Nan had to nurse white babies and me too because Ma'am was in the rice. The little white babies got it first and I got what was left. Or none. There was no nursing milk to call my own. I know what it was like to be without milk that belongs to you. (*BD* 236)

This is the kind of trauma, blacks were undergoing during slavery. Moreover, for young black girls the trauma was sexual and it endangered their lives emotionally. When Sethe tells Mrs. Garner what has happened to her, she sympathizes for her, though she could do nothing to protect her. When the Schoolteacher knows what she has done, he takes Sethe and whips her over her back so badly that her skin is burnt and loses sensation. Through all these torments, Sethe survives, preserves her sanity, but is psychically damaged enough to be living in bonds even after she is freed later.

Another example of how both the master and mistress let a slave woman suffer is in the autobiography of Julia A. J. Foote. Foote had never been a slave. However, she remembers how it was for her parents. She says,

[My mother] had one very cruel master and mistress. This man, whom she was obliged to call master, tied her up and whipped her because she refused to submit herself to him, and reported his conduct to her

mistress. After the whipping, he himself washed her quivering back with strong salt water. At the expiration of a week she was sent to change her clothing which stuck fast to her back. Her mistress, seeing that she could not remove it, took hold of the rough tow-linen under-garment and pulled it off over her head with a jerk, which took the skin with it, leaving her back all raw and sore. (9)

Frederick Douglass, who was a slave in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, wrote a narrative after he escaped slavery. The narrative is about his life and it describes in detail the atrocities the slaves went through in the southern states. He talks about his aunt being whipped by his master in the first chapter. His aunt is found to be disobeying his orders by going out. He says,

... Before he commenced whipping Aunt Hester, he took her into the kitchen, and stripped her from neck to waist, leaving her neck, shoulders, and back, entirely naked. He then told her to cross her hands, calling her at the same time a d----d b---h. After crossing her hands, he tied them with a strong rope, and led her to a stool under a large hook in the joist, put in for the purpose. He made her get upon the stool, and tied her hands to the hook. She now stood fair for his infernal purpose. Her arms were stretched up at their full length, so that she stood upon the ends of her toes. He then said to her, 'Now, you d----d b---h, I'll learn you how to disobey my orders!' and after rolling up his sleeves, he commenced to lay on the heavy cowskin, and soon the warm, red blood (amid heart-rending shrieks from her, and horrid oaths from him) came dripping to the floor. (5)

This is the same whipping Sethe has spoken about to Paul D. Sethe could not forget the scars of the past. She is haunted by the sufferings in the past. When she thinks of the sufferings, her grief multiplies and stops her from going on with life. For Sethe, the past is a shackle that tethers her to her own personal slavery in her free life. Sethe seeks to find what remains of her true self once the veil of slavery is peeled away. The tree on Sethe's back symbolizes the emotional, psychological, as well as physical pain that Sethe has to go through. It also symbolizes the burden Sethe has to carry on her back. Sethe's physical reminders of the brutality she suffered as a slave permeates her whole being and leads her to maintain that the past trauma can never really be eradicated and that she somehow continues to exist in the present. Sethe could not erase the cruelty of her enslaved past and the pain continues to expand and disturb her. She understands the horrors of the institution and the scars on her back are the physical representations of the site of trauma and brutality. Hence, Sethe is a victim of a domineering cultural and social system where she is prevented from being cared for or taking care of others.

The emotional distress Sethe suffered in the prejudiced society justifies her complicated thoughts as an adult and as a mother. Sethe's mother is unable to care for Sethe in the slave environment, which instills miserable bits and pieces of memory that Sethe carries with her all through her life. Sethe has seen her mother suffer in the clutches of slavery. She is not able to be with her mother most of the time. She says,

I didn't see her but a few times out in the fields and once when she was working indigo. By the time I woke up in the morning, she was in line. If the moon was bright they worked by its light. Sunday she slept like a stick. She must of nursed me two or three weeks – that's the way the

other did it. Then she went back in rice and I sucked from another woman whose job it was... (*BD* 72)

Then Sethe witnesses the death of her own mother. Her master hangs her mother when Sethe is still very young, so she never really experiences much love from her mother. This is the reason why her love for her children is so thick. Sethe eventually comprehends her mother's powerlessness is constrained by slavery; the feelings of desertion and neglect she felt still haunts her as she becomes a mother herself. In order to compensate for the lack of love she felt as a child, Sethe desires to be a reliable and nurturing mother herself. Unfortunately, slavery definitely would not allow her to be a mother. She realizes that she could not raise her children as infants and could only watch her loved ones being taken away from her. She reckons that death is better than living through slavery. Ultimately, unwilling to surrender her children to the torment she endures as a slave at Sweet Home, she tries to murder them in an act of motherly love and protection. Having realized the misunderstanding and intolerance Sethe would receive from her action, she asserts the strong, unreciprocated love she has held for her children by ridding them of the potential sufferings she bore as a slave.

In the novel *Beloved* are also other victims in the novel, who are also tormented because of slavery. Even the men in Sweet Home endure misery from the Schoolteacher. Halle has to work on all Sundays, the only rest day for him, in order to buy his mother's freedom. The slaves are whipped on their back and the iron bit is used on them for any small mistake they make.

Sethe's mother and Nan come as slaves from Africa. Sethe's mother is also sexually abused; however, this is on a ship during the Middle Passage. Both of them are raped by the personnel on the ship just for their own pleasure, and by the merchants,

who figures they could benefit again from the children they would bear. However, Sethe's mother "threw them all away... 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" (*BD* 74). She saves Sethe whose father is a black and Sethe is named after him. It is Nan who nurses Sethe when Sethe's mother is busy with work. Nan takes care of Sethe after her mother's death.

Once, Sethe's mother takes her behind the smokehouse and shows her a mark burnt into her skin above her ribs. She tells Sethe that this is how she could recognize her mother. This is the custom of branding the slaves in order to identify them and catch them if they try to escape. Sethe then says that her mother was hanged along with many other slaves. However, she could not identify the body, even though she looks for her mother's mark. Once, Denver asks why Sethe's mother was hanged, and Sethe says that she does not know. Perhaps her mother would have attempted to run away, but without Sethe. Sethe believes her mother would never have abandoned her. Sethe affirms that, her mother is as dedicated a mother as Sethe herself is. After killing Beloved, Sethe wants to die and lie down in the grave with her dead daughter. Yet she knows she could not give up. She has to keep going for the sake of her three living children.

The whites for their own pleasure also have victimized Baby Suggs. Sethe is lucky in a way that she has Halle and he has fathered all her four children. Baby Suggs has had eight children fathered by six men. This is the atrocity of slavery, which these women faced. Baby Suggs also encounters many losses. She has lost all of her children, besides Halle. Her children are taken away from her when they are very young, so she could not really remember them any longer. Morrison says,

The last of her children, whom she barely glanced at when he was born because it wasn't worth the trouble to try to learn features you would never see change into adulthood anyway. Seven times she had done that: held a little foot; would never saw become the male or female hands a mother would recognize anywhere. She didn't know to this day what their permanent teeth looked like; or how they held their heads when they walked. (*BD* 163-164)

Morrison has started writing *The Bluest Eye (TBE)* based on a conversation she had with her childhood friend. Morrison has said in the foreword of the novel,

The origin of the novel lay in a conversation I had with a childhood friend. We had just started elementary school. She said she wanted blue eyes. I looked around to picture her with them and was violently repelled by what I imagined she would look like if she had her wish. The sorrow in her voice seemed to call for sympathy, and I faked it for her, but, astonished by the desecration she proposed, I "got mad" at her instead (*TBE* Foreword X).

In addition, Morrison says,

... With language that replicated the agency I discovered in my first experience of beauty. Because that moment was so racially infused (my revulsion at what my school friend wanted: very blue eyes in a very black skin, the harm she was doing to my concept of beautiful)... Implicit her desire was racial self-loathing and twenty years later I was still wondering about how one learns that, and who told her? Who made

her feel that it was better to be a freak than what she was? Who had looked at her and found her so wanting, so small a weight on the beauty scale?" (*TBE* Foreword XI)

Morrison uses Pecola in the place of her school friend. Just as her school friend yearned for blue eyes, Morrison crafts Pecola to be madly yearning for blue eyes. Morrison hates the white idealism for beauty and hence blue eyes. Notably, *The Bluest Eye* is set in Morrison's birthplace of Lorain, Ohio. Hence, the novel focuses on the tragic psychological devastation of Pecola Breedlove, the young Afro-American girl who seeks to attain the ideal American standard of feminine beauty as is reflected in the popular American culture of the time. The author explores the lingering effects of racism by exploring and commenting on black self-hatred.

In the early mid-twentieth century, many black women and men migrated to the North in order to escape the severe racist living conditions in the South. They anticipated better conditions of life in the North and hope was the only expectation and possibility for which black women liked to continue living. However, the urban centers within North were hardly what black women expected it to be. Barbara Christian quoted Florette Henri's statement as follows,

Black women, of course, had made that migration to the city looking for a new life and found that the substance remained the same, though the apparel looked different. Instead of being house-keepers, cooks, and cotton pickers, they became domestics, garment factory workers, prostitutes — the hard bottom of the labor market. (8)

The Black Power Movement of the 1960s in the United States had a lot of influence on Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*. Morrison discloses in this novel that blackness

is not only the sole problem for the black girls and women. There were also equally imperative problems such as black poverty, powerlessness and loss of self-respect. They were the major hindrances for the development of black community and especially more so for black female. Actually, in this novel, Morrison concentrates on the encounter between black identity and white cultural values in American society.

It is in *The Bluest Eye* that Pecola's parents, like millions of other blacks, also travelled to the North in search of better living conditions and job opportunities. The novel analyzes the main theme of the black feminist literature of the 1960s and 1970s, which was the black woman's body as a center of the black feminist discourse. The novel opens in a situation that looks like an instruction given to children and it is also a model of the idyllic —Dick and Jane Primer. It is written in the schoolbooks style. It also introduces the Breedlove family to the readers as,

Hereisthehouseitisgreenandwhiteithasareddooritisveryprettyhereisthefamilymotherfatherdickandjaneliveinthegreenandwhitehousetheyareeveryhappyseejanesheshasareddressshewantstoplaywhowillplaywithjaneseethecatitgoesmeowmeowcomeandplaycomeplaywithjanethekittenwillnotplay.  
(TBE 2)

Morrison underscores the fact of common notion that the house of white people is always unified and happy. However, Pecola's family is inundated by the tragedy of losing their house when her father, in a drunken mood, burns it down and forces everyone to live outdoors. Marc C. Conner criticizes the house of Pecola, "... The house is simultaneously a respite and a jail; like the community, for which it stands as synecdoche, the house seems to promise rest and comfort, but it provides neither, especially for Pecola" (13).

Morrison makes the readers understand the disastrous aftermath of slavery in her novels. The chain of evil started from slavery. Blacks were victims of slavery and then racism was widespread. Discrimination and denial of rights were consequences of racism. White idealism was the heir of racism. Hence, to come across a child or girl yearning for blue eyes is not at all surprising. The psychic changes and burden that came to ruin the lives of individuals because of these untoward circumstances are miserable and unacceptable. In the novel, Pecola, from her birth itself, is suppressed and has a bad coming of age experience. Cholly, her father is a cruel man. Pauline is indifferent to the problems her children come across. There is no peace, but continuous disharmony at home. Apart from this, Pecola experiences in school and neighborhood prevent her from living an open content life. Nearly everyone around her repeatedly calls her “ugly” in her life, from the mean kids at school to her own mother. This constant criticism, the inexorable bullying she has got at school and her rough family life leads Pecola to seek escape from her misery by fantasizing about becoming beautiful. Pecola begins to believe that if she could just achieve physical beauty her life would automatically improve.

Pecola prays for blue eyes every night. Pecola believes that if she has blue eyes, it will make her look beautiful and she believes that if she looks beautiful, someone will love her and the behavior of others towards her will change. Life will also change and be different, and be more favorable. She also believes her parents will also behave in an acceptable and kind manner. They will be different with her in particular and with everybody in general. She thinks they may not fight with each other and in front of her. Pecola has done this earnestly and she has prayed sincerely for one year. She prays enthusiastically without losing her hope. She sits for a long time in front of a mirror and looks in the mirror to understand the secret of ugliness, which made her different from

others and the whites. She is on a mission of finding out what makes her teachers and classmates scorn her. Unfortunately, she lives in a situation where love is an adjustment affected by money, violence, dishonesty, psychological disturbances and societal disaffection:

Long hours she sat looking in the mirror, trying to discover the secret of the ugliness, the ugliness that made her ignored or despised at school, by teachers and classmates alike. She was the only member of her class who sat alone at a double desk. The first letter of her last name forced her to sit in the front of the room always... She also knew that when one of the girls at school wanted to be particularly insulting to a boy, or wanted to get an immediate response from him, she could say, Bobby loves Pecola Breedlove! Bobby loves Pecola Breedlove! and never fail to get peals of laughter from those in earshot, and mock anger from the accuse. (*TBE* 45-46)

This false belief turns out to be utterly destructive to Pecola, consuming her whole life and, eventually, her sanity. Morrison examines how black females react to the so-called white standards of beauty prevalent in the American society. Ron David in his study of Morrison's stance on the issue of beauty, states,

Every black person in America is forced to struggle against a standard of beauty — and by implication (beauty is never just beauty), everything else, from goodness to worthiness of love — that is almost exactly the opposite of what they are... and the consequences can be deadly. The novel suggests that the oppressive standard of beauty peddled by movies and advertisements ravages white self-esteem as well... but it isn't just a

matter of degree. Low self-esteem is an entirely different creature than self-hate. (43)

Many works of American literature deal directly with the legacy of slavery and the years of deeply entrenched racism that followed slavery. However, the general storyline of *The Bluest Eye* does not connect directly with such events, but it explores the haunting effects by exploring and remarking on black self-hatred. The main characters in the novel, who are Afro-Americans, are consumed with the constant culturally enacted notions of white beauty, cleanliness, and sanitation to the point where they have detached with themselves. Then they get a ruinous inclination to act out their feelings of self-loathing on other members of the black community subconsciously. Morrison makes the readers sympathize with these characters who should have known ways to overcome these hindrances to have a healthy relationship with self-images and interpersonal relationships. Morrison presents the various modes of escape and retreat into hollow notions of whiteness by the poor black characters in the novel.

The focus of the book *The Bluest Eye* is more complicated and it intensely portrays the effects of racism using an emphasis on the way self-hatred plagues the black characters. Morrison says in *The Bluest Eye* about the Breedloves,

You looked at them and wondered why they were so ugly; you looked closely and could not find the source. Then you realized that it came from conviction, their conviction. It was as though some mysterious and all-knowing master had given each one of them a cloak of ugliness to wear and they had each accepted it without question. (*TBE* 39)

Morrison gives emphasis to the feeling of low self-worth after years of being put down is still perpetuating and is resulting in an ugliness that is constantly felt and it is not directly seen. The blacks accept this imposed feeling of ugliness and lack of self-worth without questioning its source. The hatred that comes from outside the family is one of the biggest problems faced by the family. Patrice Cormier Hamilton in “Black Naturalism and Toni Morrison: The Journey away from self-love in ‘*The Bluest Eye*’” talks about the same issue (111).

It is annoying that the family that suffers most from this feeling of polarity caused by black self-hatred. The entire community also suffers from this problem. In *The Bluest Eye*, it is the Breedlove family, which is the focus of the novel as the one that suffers in the community of many similar ones. Morrison presents characters who hate themselves because of what they are told that they are and this reinforces racism and the social hierarchy. Morrison works through this self-hatred and evaluates its nature, its origin and its devastating influence on the lives of people who, even after being physically free, are still bound by the society that keeps them hating themselves.

In one incident, Pecola walks to the grocery store to buy candy. She wonders why people consider dandelions ugly. She decides to buy Mary Janes, but she has difficulty in communicating with Mr. Yacobowski, the storeowner, who seems to look right through her. He does not understand what she is pointing at and speaks harshly to her. He does not want to touch her hand when she passes over her money. Walking home, Pecola is angry, but most of all ashamed. She decides dandelions are ugly, whereas blonde, blue-eyed Mary Jane, pictured on the candy wrapper, is beautiful. This is an example of the evil of white idealism creeping into the mind of Pecola through the community. If there is equality in the society, she will not have had any time to think

about dandelions or the Mary Jane. She is not mature enough to be angrier towards the shopkeeper than being ashamed of herself. The young, immature mind is victimized by the structure of the society and makes her believe that she is inferior and have less value for her own “self.”

Self-hatred is not because of poverty or hardship, but because of a cyclical and historically based tendency of white culture to promote its own superiority. Many of the black characters in the novel and especially those who fare the worst by the end, including the two women members of the Breedlove family, profoundly internalize the powerful images of white superiority. In this society, white is seen as the only thing worth offering credence, watching, idolizing, and respecting and this is devastating to the black characters in the novel, especially those who are poor and completely unable to live up to the cultural images of white perfection.

Pauline is just as a much of a victim of these notions of white superiority as her daughter is, although to slightly less tragic ends. Like many other black female characters in the novel who attempt to deny themselves an identity apart from white society and race issues, Pauline greedily devours these messages in culture through film. Morrison says of Pauline in the novel, “She was never able, after her education in the movies, to look a face and assign it some category in the scale of absolute beauty, and the scale was one she absorbed in full from the silver screen” (*TBE* 122).

The images on the silver screen are those of whites, Clark Gabel and Jean Harlow. Pauline tries to make herself look like Harlow but is crushed when, despite her best efforts at mimicking her hair and grace, her tooth suddenly falls out, reminding her that she is not a beautiful white woman and making her hate herself even more. Of these films, “Pauline kept this order, this beauty, for herself, a private world and never

introduced it to her storefront, or to her children. Then she bent toward respectability” (*TBE* 128). Her self-hatred is enacted on her children and this cycle of violence and self-hatred is perpetuated and is evidenced in situations such as when Pauline chooses to comfort her employer’s white child as opposed to the burnt Pecola. Pauline works as a housekeeper at the Fishers' house. One day Frieda and Claudia pay a visit to Pecola at the Fisher’s home. Pecola happens to spill a pan of hot blueberry cobbler over herself and the dress of the little Fisher girl, and over the clean white floor. Pecola’s mother then viciously abuses Pecola for the mess. She goes all the way to comfort the little white girl. There is no sign or thought to forgive or accept Pecola. Through these passages, Morrison shows the roots from where these issues of black inferiority in the mind of Afro-Americans stems from and how, because of frustration with being unable to live up to such standards, hatred is born and cycled on husbands and children.

In *The Bluest Eye* Pauline repeatedly is engaged with the notion of white superiority and she ends up neglecting herself and her daughter. Pecola represents the most complex case of the destructive idealization of white culture and subsequent denial and obliteration of black identity and is the tragic symbol in Morrison’s attempt to detail this legacy of racism. At the end of the novel, she exchanges, her mind for the blue eyes that she has thought would make her loved. The community that fails to see its part in what has happened further detests her. The inherent sense of being ugly and unworthy is a main part of Pecola’s character. Aside from her good treatment by Claudia and Frieda, Pecola is ostracized in her community and even by her mother. Pauline prefers cleanliness and the orderly life of the white family she works for or the simplicity of beautiful women and men on film to her real life in the storefront. By thinking that having blue eyes will make people love her, Pecola is expressing a wish that has double-significance to the main ideas that, Morrison presents for readers. On

the one hand, there is the more obvious idea that blue eyes, which are associated with whiteness means that she will be racially accepted. On another level, by wishing to change her eyes and thinking that this change will allow her to see things differently, Pecola is wishing that she could blind herself from the self-hatred in her family and community. Morrison offers her readers a complex understanding of this self-hatred, which perpetuates many of the problems that the characters have, by first offering a solution by non-color, only to show that this leads to blindness and insanity as in itself, it is nothingness. She is working through the culturally confirmed ideas of white superiority, as it exists in images of blond, blue-eyed, and white-skinned people as lacking substance.

According to Lisa William, it is the “internalized self-hatred” that silences and destroys the eleven years old Pecola Breedlove. Pecola hates her blackness and yearns for white skin and blue eyes. She believes that white features like white skin and blue eyes will help her gain entry to all that has excluded her. Furthermore, this self-hating poor girl is silenced by sexual abuse and racial self-hatred. Pecola finally retreats into a world of insanity and cannot express her muted anger. In *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison examines the very conditions that become the cause of Pecola’s demolition. Her blackness becomes the cause of her ostracism. Morrison establishes her own identity as a writer by giving voice to the “erased presence” of a poor black girl. She is “the ultimate other, the most outsider member” (William 54) of the community in which she lives.

Akin to Pecola, Ernest Day, protagonist of *The Myth Maker* by Frank London Brown suffers from the haunting self-hatred, but at a different level. He has the capacity to analyze this problem of self-hatred. Ernest Day feels that blackness is the reason for his entrapment in a racialized society. *The Myth Maker* analyses self-hatred as the reason for mental degeneration and crime. His hunger, changes into anger because of self-hatred. He sees a black boy begging for a nickel. He walks away from the boy as he sees a bad reflection of himself in the image of the famished black boy. Frank says,

Ernest walked away from the child, glancing at himself in the mirror of the storefront windows. The light of the sun upon his dark skin made him seem shiny, and he hated himself when he was shiny. He turned away from himself... Once he asked himself, what was it all for—this walking and reading and looking at people and hating his darkness. (*The Myth Maker* 14)

The novel depicts racism as a monster thrown away on people of the society. Racism turns Ernest into a skeptic. Moreover, according to Morrison, any young girl is vulnerable to such kinds of destruction. She also points out that the demonization of a race starts from such kinds of problems. In the Afterword of *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison says,

I focused, therefore, on how something as grotesque as the demonization of an entire race could take roots inside the most delicate member of the society: a child, the most vulnerable member: a female. In trying to dramatize the devastation that even casual racial contempt can cause, I chose a unique situation, not a representative one. The extremity of

Pecola's case stemmed largely from a crippled and crippling family unlike the average black family and unlike the narrator's. But singular as Pecola's life was, I believed aspects of her woundability were lodged in all young girls. (*TBE* Foreword XI)

Claudia, particularly a child and narrator in *The Bluest Eye* is relatively unconcerned about adult interactions. More importantly, she is not yet a part of the incensed self-hatred that has crept into the lives of older girls. In her revelations, particularly when she reminisces, she offers a shining ray of hope in an otherwise bleak novel as far as the topic of festering black self-hatred is concerned. She is such a beacon of hope because she is able to cast aside the notion of self-hatred, although this seems to be more because it is in her character to do so than for any other reason. For instance, the reader is offered a clear distinction between Claudia and the other women when Pecola first moves in with the family and gazes adoringly at Shirley Temple on the milk cup. Upon seeing this, Claudia launches into a stream of thoughts that probe her feelings that are so opposite to Pecola's thoughts. Not only does she despise Shirley Temple, she is unable to see the beauty in the white and blue-eyed dolls she is given at Christmas. Claudia does not see the point of being a mother to it or finding it fun to sleep with. She says, "I could not love it. But I could examine it to see what it was that all the world said was lovable" (*TBE* 21).

Unlike other black women in the novel, particularly Pecola and her mother, even if it is indirectly and partially because of childish disinterest, Claudia is able to see past culturally confirmed notions of what is beautiful. She dissects and then examines what lies behind the "round moronic eyes" only to find sawdust and hollowness. The adults around her are unable to comprehend her reaction to the doll, "The emotion of

years of unfulfilled longing preened in their voices” (*TBE* 21) and the connection between adulthood and indoctrination into what is desirable becomes clear. Through Pecola’s childhood rejection and childish inquest into the beauty of something that is only such because people say it is, Morrison probes and questions the theme of notions of whiteness early in the novel. Through her narrator, Claudia, Morrison does this in a simple and symbolic manner.

Unlike Pecola, Claudia escapes victimization partially because she resists the racial ideology of white physical supremacy. Next, Claudia has great support from her family. Her parents and sister prevent her from being victimized. She enjoys harmony with her parents and sister. Unlike Pecola’s nonexistent brother, Claudia is closely bonded with Frieda. Together, the MacTeer sisters combat adversity. They always do their Candy Dance to make their white neighbor jealous. Claudia even starts her storytelling with a plural “we” to signify the experiences she and her sister have shared together. Therefore, when Frieda is molested, Claudia is empathic to her fear of being ruined. Frieda’s molestation puts the MacTeer girls in the similar position with Pecola as potential victims. What differentiates Claudia’s from Pecola’s narrative of victimization, however, is the father’s protection and Claudia’s resistance. Nevertheless, before Claudia’s racial innocence is “ruined” by commodified racial ideology, she feels closely connected to her blackness. For example, her simple wish for Christmas is to indulge her senses in Big Mama’s kitchen with Big Papa playing the violin. Claudia’s says, “I could have spoken up, “I want to sit on the low stool in Big Mama’s kitchen with my lap full of lilacs and listen to Big Papa play his violin for me alone.” (*TBE* 21). That is, Claudia would rather have close bonding to her own cultural community on the most special day of the year. Unlike Pecola, who is practically an outsider, Claudia is rooted within the context of her Afro-American community.

Claudia's rootedness is represented by the MacTeer girls' sifting through the gossip they overheard to learn practical, though often discredited, wisdom.

In the novel, *The Bluest Eye*, the theme of black sisterhood role is found weak or absent. Pauline does not like relating with the Mac Teers' family. On the contrary, Pecola's friends Claudia and Frieda are important in the way they try to console and provide kindness to the dejected life of Pecola. As the girls are too young, they are not able to prevent the misery from happening in the life of Pecola. Claudia's anger at the images of the dominant values in material culture translates to the world around her. Claudia describes this as the transference of the same impulses to little white girls. One example of Claudia's anger is when she hears the child of Mrs. Breedlove's employers call her "Polly," "the familiar violence rose in me. Her calling Mrs. Breedlove Polly, when even Pecola called her mother Mrs. Breedlove seemed reason enough to scratch her" (*TBE* 108). Gina Hausknecht particularly argues, "Claudia survives precisely because she does learn to interpret signs produced by a hostile culture" (33). Rather than submitting to those "signs," Claudia fervently rejects them. She hates everything white culture represents. She has enough strength to believe in herself. Michael Awkward comments on Claudia's ability to understand her life in context of the dominant culture, "Claudia's achievement of a positive reading of her childhood, however, is not unproblematic, to be sure... the incidents that result in her ability to reread her own life is her attempt to understand the rationale for standards that insist on white physical superiority" (59).

Black women in American society, besides experiencing discrimination at the hands of white people, are also the victims of their own black men. Black women are forced to live in misery by both the white men and black men. Pecola in *The Bluest Eye* is rejected not only by white society, but is also rejected by her own family and the black society in which she lives. In Pecola's family, sexual abuse and menace come from inside the family itself. Black men emotionally and sometimes physically abuse black women and even black children. Sadly, black women and black children get no protection from their own community. The critic L.E. Sissman has written a review about the novel *The Bluest Eye* in *The New Yorker* published in January 23, 1971. He says, "Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* couldn't be more different. She is dealing with children, not men; she is dealing with the forties, not the present; she is dealing with the black subculture, not the military one. But the biggest difference is that she is dealing with people to whom no ultimate glory is possible" (qtd. in Gates, 1993, 4).

In Pecola's case, the dreadful destiny results after the incest and rape by her own father Cholly. Rape, incest, violence are common themes that resonates in the novels of the writers of Morrison's time besides racism and slavery. Slavery had not only demolished the structure of black families, it also demolished the structure of one's mind and moral thinking. Cholly Breedlove himself has been victimized, in terms of sexuality, by the same whiteness that destroyed his daughter. Abandoned by his father and mother, Cholly has no opportunity to develop any self-esteem. His life is negatively impacted by his inability to identify with his ancestral past. Cholly is abandoned by his father before his birth and abandoned by his mother nine days after birth. Then later he is rescued and raised by his aunt. She shows no hesitation to remind Cholly that he owes her his life. Part of Cholly's difficulty with the formation of his own identity stems from a lack of ancestral past and failure to progress during the early

stages of life. According to Erik Erikson's psychosocial theory, psychosocial development includes eight stages. Each stage is marked by a conflict or crisis between the person and his or her environment. During each of these conflicts, the individual is "vulnerable and moving toward increased potential; [each conflict is] a moment to decide between progress and regression" (qtd. in Newman 178). The first of Erikson's eight stages is referred to as "Trust Versus Mistrust." This stage is characterized by "the development (or lack of development) of a trust for others and the self, or a sense of confidence in infancy" (qtd. in Newman 179). Cholly does not experience any confidence during infancy because he is unable to bond with his parents, and his aunt, even though she takes it upon herself to save Cholly and raise him, remains at an emotional distance. The failure to progress beyond the first stage of development is the main reason for Cholly's broken identity. Cholly is further disturbed by the fact that he is not his father's namesake. When Cholly asks his aunt why he is not named after his own father, his aunt replies:

He wasn't nowhere around when you was born. Your mama didn't name you nothing. The nine days wasn't up before she throwed you on the junk heap. When I got you I named you myself on the ninth day. You named after my dead brother. Charles Breedlove. A good man. Ain't no Samson never come to no good end. (*TBE* 133)

His low self-esteem is further destroyed during his first attempt at lovemaking, which is interrupted by white men who ridicules him. This assault on his inner "self," weakens him of his manhood, both physically and psychologically. He turns his anger against himself and the black girl with him since there is nothing he can do to the men who caused the trauma. Such a feeling of powerlessness only reinforces his self-hatred.

Thus, Morrison emphasizes how racism distorts the sensibilities of this black man, which explains his demoralizing attack on his child.

Keith Byerman in "Untold Stories," explains how "the black father himself is not permitted a human identity. It is symbolic white father, through his control of the sign system of the society, and in particular the emblem of the white daughter, who determines the fates of black daughters and their black fathers" (134). Such black men are victims of the uncertain white society in which they live. They are constructed against and respond to hundreds of years of racial and cultural oppression, and in some ways do not know how to be a man. They lose their identity and forget how to be a black man in particular. Black men having taken many cues from the white men, who ruled over them, execute authority in their homes through rigor, violence and unfaithfulness. The whites rob the blacks of each other and they take the blacks away from their family, their culture and their minds. Cholly is one such unfortunate victim.

By the incest that happens to Pecola where the predator is her own family member, Morrison portrays that the patriarchal domination of the society is the final destructive cause for an innocent female mind. Women are passive to patriarchal oppression and subjected to sexual exploitation by the whites as well as by their own family members. Cholly is symbolic of the cruel patriarchal hegemony, which exploits innocent women and makes use of their pitiable status of dependence. Morrison rightly reflects the assertion of the Marxist Feminism in Marxism, Feminism and Women Liberation, which says that, "Capitalist class relationships are the root cause of female oppression, exploitation and discrimination. Men are socialized into exploitative relationships in relation to work and they carry this socialization over into the home and their relationships to women" (1).

Marxist Feminist discovered that the economic dependency on men is the cause for women's subjugation. Marxist (socialist) School of Feminism improved intellectual understanding of the relation between class and sex. Marxist Feminism analyzed women's oppression exclusively from the economic point of view. Women's struggle was seen as part of a large class struggle against an exploitative capitalist system. Moreover, the exploitative capitalist system was the forerunner of colonialism and slavery in America. Morrison's feminist consciousness is revealed in her creation of Pecola's story, which conforms to the conceptualization of the Marxist Feminism. The Marxist School of Feminism also views that women are often "looked at and treated as the property of men. As such, a woman's position is reduced to that of a commodity meant to be used and disposed" (Tandon 46). Morrison's portrayal of Pecola's unfortunate end closely resembles the above Marxist Feminist observation on patriarchy. Morrison's picture of Pecola is fully in agreement with the assertion made in the Redstockings Manifesto. Redstockings, also known as "Redstockings of the Women's Liberation Movement," is a radical feminist group that was founded in January 1969. A part of the manifesto says,

Women are an oppressed class. Our oppression is total, affecting every facet of our lives. We are exploited as sex objects, breeders, domestic servants, and cheap labor. We are considered inferior beings, whose only purpose is to enhance men's lives. Our humanity is denied. Our prescribed behavior is enforced by the threat of physical violence. . . . We identify the agents of our oppression as men. Male supremacy is the oldest, most basic form of domination. All other forms of exploitation and oppression (racism, capitalism, imperialism, etc.) are extensions of male supremacy: men dominate women; a few men dominate the rest.

All power structures throughout history have been male-dominated and male-oriented. Men have controlled all political, economic and cultural institutions and backed up this control with physical force. They have used their power to keep women in an inferior position. All men receive economic, sexual, and psychological benefits from male supremacy. (Wayne 348)

Through Cholly and Pauline, Morrison makes it clear that parents who come from histories of oppression might reproduce that degradation within the family unit. Instead of providing for and guarding his family, Cholly burns down the insular home space that should have represented not only his family's, but the nation's prosperity and safety. Likewise, Pauline feels no devoted responsibility to nurture her own offspring. This to her, reflects her own spitefulness. She has wrongly learnt that a white family's servant exerts far more power than a black family's mother does. Hence, she spends all of her time working as a domestic caregiver for the Fishers, where "power, praise, and luxury were hers" (*TBE* 128). Morrison connects the lives of children to the joy, grief, and coping of their parents. Morrison demonstrates a gendered response to Pauline's abandonment when she pairs Pecola with her brother Sammy. In the post-slavery tradition of his wandering father and grandfather, Sammy runs away at least twenty-seven times by the age of fourteen. On the contrary, "restricted by youth and sex," Pecola stays home and "experimented with methods of endurance" (*TBE* 43). This response from Pecola eventually ruins her life. It endangers her existence as a whole self and "sane" in this world.

The torment that has incapacitated the parents of Pecola definitely speaks about the psychologically injured mind of the characters, in the post-structuralist tradition.

Their injured minds have become the “site” of conveying sub-conscious and unconscious cultural constructions. They have been silenced and nullified for so long a period that the Afro-Americans find themselves dumb to speak against the oppression they have been experiencing. The blacks need to address the fact that the long “othering” of the subjugated ethnicity on account of their difference is a characteristic feature in America. Morrison, in her narratives, exposes the pseudo-intellectual background of white America and challenges, though implicitly, the stance that the marginalized communities adopt in America.

Pecola does not experience slavery. Instead, she suffers as a young girl from white idealism. White idealism is the result of racism. Though she is not a slave, she is victimized in many ways. Morrison’s depiction of Pecola as a victim of patriarchy as well as white idealism has undoubtedly made her a black feminist. To quote The Second Wave Feminist’s observation,

The nature of women, like that of slaves, is depicted as dependent, incapable of reasoned thought, childlike in its simplicity and warmth, martyred in the role of mother, and mystical in the role of sexual partner. In its benevolent form, the inferior position of women results in paternalism; in its malevolent form, a domestic tyranny which can be unbelievably brutal. (Dixon 2)

In relation to the ideas about Claudia being a ray of hope in the novel, it should also be noted that despite the black community’s rejection of the pregnant Pecola, Claudia and her sister are the only two people not to see ugliness in the situation. They try to magically plant the marigold seeds deep into the black earth in the hope of resurrecting something to flower in the future. What Morrison reveals by this is that

adults have been far too scarred by self-hatred, culturally and historically imposed or otherwise, to see anything black as beautiful, even an unborn child. While it is true that the child is conceived in the most dreadful way, the complete disregard the community has for its own is softened by the kindness of the sisters who are still untouched by this deep, relentless and cyclical hatred of all that is black or, more specifically, all that is not white, clean or sanitary. This gives a sense that Claudia represents perfect hope for a foreseeable future.

The constant desire for whiteness at the sake of all that is real and present and good in the lives of black people is shattered when Claudia reveals that eventually she too would learn to love Shirley Temple and cleanliness. She says that this “learning” to appreciate white as right in society’s mind is an “adjustment without improvement” (*TBE* 23). It is disappointing that she eventually turns to the same standards as those she criticizes, but this nonetheless allows Morrison to reinforce how strong and powerful of an enemy these cultural icons of what is right are, even for the strongest minded girls. Morrison points out the atrocity of growing older. Children lose the capacity to separate images from larger ideals and standards. Morrison demonstrates how Pecola is an extreme case and a representation of an entire culture of Afro-Americans who have been misled by the cultivated notion of white superiority long after slavery and as a result, forced to look beyond their own lives for fulfillment.

Most of the black characters in the novel *The Bluest Eye* suffer from some degree of displacement, not only in terms of being poor and black in a white-dominated society, but more importantly, the displacement by culture and its images of whiteness. These images of white as superior to the characters who are Afro-American, both in physical and other terms, is the focus of Morrison’s message. She is attempting to show

readers how hollow the cultural images that have such an influence on everyone's lives are with particular emphasis on the devastating impact these have on those who have little else to help guide them in terms of social icons.

Morrison herself talks about Pecola as a complete victim to Robert Stepto in an interview. She says, "Oh yes. Well, in *The Bluest Eye*, I try to show a little girl as a total and complete victim of whatever was around her. But black women have held, have been given, you know, the cross. They don't walk near it. They're often on it." (483). Morrison goes on to say that besides the role of the society in pushing Pecola into a complete victim, the roles of the black people around her are also very much responsible for the fatal ending. Morrison points at Pauline to have made the most negative impact on her child because of her own attitude in internalizing the white values. Morrison says,

... Now she [Pecola] was asking for something that was just awful- she wanted to have blue eyes and she wanted to be Shirley Temple, I mean she wanted to do that white trip because of the society in which she lived, and very importantly, because of the black people who helped her want to be that. (The responsibilities are ours. It's our responsibility for helping her believe, helping her come to the point where she wanted that.) I had to have someone--her mother, of course, made her want it in the first place--who would her the blue eyes. (Stepto 489)

In Claudia's words, Morrison makes it clear in *The Bluest Eye* that a victim such as Pecola, who represents "a poor black girl" does not have any right to live in the racist world. Their existence will readily be wiped out by the predators. The predators are the white world and patriarchal domination. White idealism works through the

society, environment and even through blood relatives to make a poor little black girl to get trapped and to lose life. Morrison, through Claudia's words says that, "This soil is bad for certain kind of flowers. Certain seeds it will not nurture, certain fruit it will not bear, and when the land kills its own volition, we acquiesce and say the victim had no right to live" (*TBE* 206).

Another vital issue Morrison addresses in her works is the neglect of blacks from their own fellow blacks. At the time of slavery, there was no discrimination among Africans. However, once slavery was abolished, some people from the black community earned a living to get a better status than the rest. In the process of getting a better status, they had lost the values an African should possess. Hence, the Afro-Americans themselves were also partly responsible for making many victims in their society by not taking care of them and failing to foresee the consequences. They failed to recognize the problem and its effects that shattered their own society in due course.

Morrison introduces another character named Geraldine in *The Bluest Eye*. She represents the blacks who desire to "move up" in the world and incorporate into white culture. They scour everything that reminds them they are black. Morrison has constantly introduced such characters in her other novels too. She has addressed the same subject in *Song of Solomon* and *Tar Baby*. Morrison has seen such sort of individuals as annoying problems in the wake of the Civil Rights Movement. This was the time when she wrote *The Bluest Eye*. In her essay "Rediscovering Black History," she writes, "In the push toward middle-class respectability, we wanted tongue depressors sticking from every black man's coat pocket and briefcases swinging from every Black Hand. In the legitimate and necessary drive for better jobs and housing, we abandoned the past and a lot of the truth and sustenance that went with it" (41).

Geraldine's family is precisely of the above-mentioned type. Morrison describes them in *The Bluest Eye* as "brown girls" who can go to any extent to abolish the "funkiness" in their lives. They correlate with "being black" to anything that reminds them of the dirt, poverty, and ignorance. Purposely, Geraldine prevents her son Junior from playing with "niggers" and she makes a division between "niggers" and "colored people." "They can be easily identified. Colored people were neat and quiet; niggers were dirty and loud" (*TBE* 87). Once Junior, Geraldine's son calls Pecola into his house and tortures her with his mother's cat. He kills the cat and blames it on her. Geraldine firmly believes and treats her as one of the little black girls she has seen all her life. These black girls are described in the novel as "Hanging out of windows over saloons in Mobile, crawling over the porches of shotgun houses on the edge of town... Hair uncombed, dresses falling apart, shoes untied and caked with dirt" (*TBE* 91). Geraldine, hence, readily develops hatred for Pecola. To her, Pecola is like a simple fly who has settled in her house and she forces her out with the words, "Get out... You nasty little black bitch. Get out of my house" (*TBE* 92). Pecola is discarded again because of what others perceive as ugliness.

Pecola's sufferings are psychological rather than physical. Sethe's sufferings are primarily physical which secondarily has a bad psychological effect on her. In the socio-historical context, both Sethe and Pecola are not responsible for what they have gone through. Both the characters in the novel are physically and psychically exploited. Morrison has created these two characters that are completely helpless of their subjugation. Pecola is exploited of her normal mind. Sethe is exploited sexually and physically. Talking in Eco-feministic sense, like the exploitation and neglect of nature, the victims of these two novels are exploited. After the abolition of the enslavement of the blacks by Abraham Lincoln in the American Parliament, the whites could no longer

torture them physically. However, there was profound discrimination seen in public places, institutions, companies and wherever possible. The prejudice was bad, affected the blacks, and hampered normal day-to-day life.

Morrison's focus is on the way in which society maintains its power by naming reality. When people believe that power belongs only to those the dominant culture has named as valuable, they accept that culture's right to define the values for all those living in it. Gurleen Grewal reflects, "Individuals collude in their own oppression by internalizing the dominant culture's values in the face of great material contradictions" (21). For those who cannot reclaim or maintain some positive sense of self, the consequences vary according to how they react to themselves and their racial community. Paul C. Taylor asserts that "the most prominent type of racialized ranking represents blackness as a condition to be despised, and most tokens of this type extend this attitude to cover the physical features that are central to the description of black identity" (16). Morrison's characters are primarily black women and often-black children. Society tells these characters in many different ways that what they value is not of value, or the way they want to live is the wrong way to live. Therefore, they begin to doubt their perception of reality and even themselves. This doubt leads to their madness, death or isolation from the community.

The period of emancipation followed slavery in America. Blacks were living in separate colonies. They were poor and marginalized. They earned their living by working for and in white families. They had a voice, which was louder than before. They were searching for an identity in the radicalized America. Some of them in the process forgot their ancestral values and importance of their culture. The rising of black

voice and the search for their identity is closely discussed in the next chapter with reference to the novels *Sula* and *Tar Baby*.

The emancipated women of Toni Morrison are the next generation girls. Morrison's victims and exploited women give birth to the emancipated generation. Though emancipated, they have not gone through the missions of empowering themselves. The failed mission and the incomplete metamorphosis of Morrison's women are because of the forgotten ancestral values and cultural heritage by this generation.