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Representation of Women in Toni Morrison's Novels

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To the memory of my father who would have been proud.

Abstract

Gender has always been defined by men and consequently women have been defined as the “other”. Feminist critics argue that literary works by male writers have reproduced male defined gender ideology. Poststructural feminism is a related feminist theory that argues men have put all concepts in pairs of polar opposites. They assert that one way to resist the oppressive ideology is to expose the phallogocentric nature of Western culture and revalue femininity through creative writing. Thus, new images of womanhood have to be offered by women themselves to defy male defined gender ideology. This thesis attempts to examine how Morrison subverts male defined gender ideologies in *The Blues Eye*, *Sula*, and *Tar Baby* by applying poststructural feminism, particularly theories of Helene Cixous. Cixous argues that feminine writing is capable of exposing the phallogocentric nature of Western culture and consequently, liberating women from patriarchal system. Toni Morrison, Nobel Prize winner author, is one of the world’s most influential writers. The present thesis attempts to answer the following questions: how does Morrison expose the destructive effects of binary thinking inherent in Western culture in *The Bluest Eye* and *Sula*? In what ways Morrison challenges and deconstructs the binary thinking in *Tar Baby*? The findings of this these underscores that first, Morrison challenges binary thinking second, she deconstructs hierarchies in the male defined gender ideology by reversing the hierarchies. Thus, she liberates the female characters to exist in a non-dualistic space. The main conclusion that can be drawn from this study is that Morrison’s writing could be seen as feminine writing which has the capability to offer a positive image of womanhood.

Key Words: Toni Morrison, feminine, binary thinking, phallogocentrism

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The historical development of representation of women in literary works has contributed to subordination of women in the society. The image of women reflected in literary works has often been associated with gender biased. Therefore, women have been defined as “other” in most literary works. Feminist critics assert that the social construct of woman is defined in a way that it relegates women to men and consequently, prevents women from realizing their potential. They argue that the definition of woman in patriarchal societies is restricting. They assert that gender has nothing to do with one’s sex and it is a social construct. As Simone de Beauvoir puts it, “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman” (qtd. in Abrams 94).

In the sixteenth century when women began to have a voice in the debate, the ideal view of a woman was chaste, silent and obedient. Therefore, the very act of publishing works by women was a threat to patriarchal standards (Gamble 5). Hence, feminine creation was associated with madness and freakishness, and inherently monstrous.

In a brilliant article entitled “Is Female to Male as Culture to Nature,” Sherry Ortner points out to the binary system that causes women to be seen as “Other”. She notes that women are associated with either evil or angelic images. Ortner studies the image of women in Western culture and contends that “the psychic mode associated with women seems to stand at both the bottom and the top of the scale of human modes of relating” (qtd. in Gilbert and Gubar 598). She maintains that “both subversive feminine symbols (witches, evil eyes, menstrual pollution, [and] castrating mothers) and the feminine symbols of transcendence (mother goddess, merciful dispenser of salvation, [and] female symbol of justice) . . . can appear from certain points of view to stand both under and over (but really simply outside of) the sphere of culture’s hegemony” (Ibid.). Thus,

woman becomes the embodiment of the extremes of Otherness which culture defines to worship, fear, love, or hate. In fact, the image of the angel in the house enshrines a woman within the home, turning her to a “living memento of the otherness of the divine” (Ibid. 601). Hence, this image of woman makes her an inhabitant of the world of the dead and a messenger of the otherness of death.

In an outstanding article entitled “The Madwoman in the Attic,” Gilbert and Gubar offer a brilliant analysis of the image of women in Western literary canon. Through their analysis of representation of women in Western literary tradition, they point out to the phallogocentric nature of Western literary tradition.

As Gilbert and Gubar assert, genteel women in the Victorian period metaphorically killed themselves to become an object of art “slim, pale, passive beings whose ‘charms’ eerily recalled the snowy porcelain of the dead” (Ibid.). The only beautiful act of an angel in the house, Gilbert and Gubar maintain, is to sacrifice her comfort and her personal desires which doom her to death-in-life. They point out that the religious image of Virgin Mary and the secular image of the angel in the house are almost identical, since both images are constructed by men to maintain their power in the society. Gubar and Gilbert bring numerous examples of such view from Western literary canon. In *Vanity Fair*, for instance, Thackeray presents such image of women. Amelia Sedley, a submissive woman, is contrasted to Becky Sharp, an independent “charmer”. While depicting Sharp, Thackeray implies that within every angel in the house resides a monster, “diabolically hideous and slimy” (Ibid. 605).

Whether depicted as angel or monster, women are condemned to Otherness by patriarchal male writers. The sole difference between the image of angel and monster,

Gilbert and Gubar believe, is in the kind of otherness. While the monster is condemned to the damning otherness of the flesh, the angel is doomed to the inspiring otherness of the spirit. Gilbert and Gubar assert that in order to have literary autonomy, female writers should transcend the extreme images of angel and monster. In Mary Elizabeth Coleridge's words, "for the female artist the essential process of self-definition is complicated by all those patriarchal definitions that intervene between herself and herself" (qtd. in Gilbert and Gubar 596). Gilbert and Gubar suggest that female writers should murder both angel and monster in order to be able to define themselves as creative artists.

The gender biased view of male authors toward women affects the female readers. The recurrence of such pattern in literature leads to women's exclusion and affects women's self image. In her in-depth article entitled "On the Politics of Literature," Judith Fetterley examines the effects of American fiction on women. She asserts that American fiction is essentially male dominated while claiming to be universal. Hence, it defines universality in male terms. She goes on to say that American fiction excludes women from the experience of being American. She points out,

To be excluded from a literature that claims to define one's identity is to experience a peculiar form of powerlessness . . . which results from the endless division of self against self, the consequences of invocation to identify as male while being reminded that to be male-[sic] to be universal, to be American-[sic] is to be *not female*" [author's emphasis].

(Fetterley 564)

When women imagine themselves male, they attempt to create a male self image, which leads to self hatred and self doubt. Fetterley suggests that women should be

resisting readers rather than assenting readers in order to “begin the process of exorcising the male mind that has been implanted in us” which she believes would lead to “the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction” in order to “change literary criticism from a closed conversation to an active dialogue” (Fetterley 568).

In the field of creative writing, many female writers have made an effort to reconstruct the image of womanhood. For instance, in her works Virginia Woolf, the immensely influential feminist writer, shows women enjoying much greater freedom of intuitive sympathy than men (Ousby 325). Although reversing the hierarchy of man/woman is part of the process of subverting dualistic system of thinking inherent in patriarchal ideology, it is not an end. Substituting patriarchy with matriarchy traps us in the binary thinking which leads to an oppressive hierarchal system. Instead of trying to put men and women in hierarchal systems, alternative images have to be offered to replace the oppositional images of woman and man. Thereby, man and woman could be seen in terms of their differences and their capabilities in a non-hierarchal frame.

In order to achieve such a goal, one way is to develop such space within creative writing. According to Hélène Cixous there are two types of writing: “militant discourse which has a prompt and short lived effect; creative writing which has a delayed but enduring effect” (Cixous 22). She asserts that women should undertake “a work of reflection upon and re-appropriation of femininity”. She asserts that “writing is the possibility of change itself” (Ibid.).

Toni Morrison is an immensely influential writer who has undertaken such a responsibility through creative writing. Through her fiction, Morrison has given voice to

women. In Justine Tally's words, "Morrison was hardly the first non-white, non-male author to challenge the hegemony of the white-male center canon" (Introduction i). Morrison has involved herself with revaluing femininity and subverting the foundations of patriarchy through creative writing. Although the experiences of women are the central theme of her works, Morrison does not exclude men from her fiction. For instance, in *Song of Solomon*, she gives an image of a man that is complex and multidimensional. Susan Neal Mayberry argues that Toni Morrison's fictional depiction of black men is "engendered by love and understanding of these men's daily battles that have less to do with the men themselves and more to do with forces contributable to Western values and racial oppression"(Fultz). Thus, through her portrayal of male characters, she examines the plight of the black males in American society. In *Song of Solomon*, she examines the development of black masculinity through the depiction of both male and female characters. Thus, Morrison examines relationships among black men and studies the impact of violence on black men as well as women in her novels (Beaulieu 35).

In her works, Morrison depicts lives of women who live in a patriarchal society which is poisoned by racism. In her first novel, *The Bluest Eyes*, she traces the story of the 11-year old Pecola Breedlove's desire to be seen and loved by a world in which only little white girls with blue eyes are lovable. Her assumption that blue eyes could save her from the ugliness all around leads her to madness after being raped by her father and losing her baby (Bennett 66). Racism and poverty aggravates Pecola's condition. The full horror of Pecola's violation is linked to the creeping violence of racism.

Morrison's *Sula* explores the condition of women in a patriarchal society. It follows the lives of two girls, Nel and Sula, from childhood to adulthood. While Sula leaves her town to go to college, Nel chooses to stay and lead a conventional life. Although their different reaction to patriarchal norms leaves scars on their friendship, their strong bond draws them together at the end of the novel.

Tar Baby portrays the lives of people on a small Caribbean Island. Valerian and Margaret Street are a white couple who live in a house on an island, with their black servants, Ondine and Sydney. Jadine and Son, two black characters are drawn together. The novel explores their relationship which involves the clash between two different identities, one formed by white defined values, the other by black folk values.

According to what have been suggested about the theory of feminism, female writers have tried to understand the place of women in the society and analyze every aspect that affects women in a male-dominated world. In her novels, Morrison shows the experience of women who live in a patriarchal society. Furthermore, she creates space for women to exist, liberated from binary system of thought operating in the society. Thus, it is crucial to examine the representation of these women in Morrison's novels.

The present research aims to study Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eyes*, *Sula*, and *Tar Baby* under the light of poststructural feminism. I contend that Morrison's writing is an example of feminine writing and thus it has the capability to subvert phallogocentrism which causes gender and racial oppression. Therefore, I will offer a reading of Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eyes*, *Sula*, and *Tar Baby* in the light of poststructural feminism to delineate how Morrison subverts the foundations of phallogocentrism through her representation of female characters.

The present study is significant, since Toni Morrison is one of the most prominent contemporary female writers. Her work as author, playwright, librettist, and lyricist is remarkable. She won the Pulitzer Prize in 1988 and the Nobel Prize in 1993.

Her novels have received a wide range of criticism. Yet, most critics have focused solely on her depiction of racial oppression. In the present research I intend to illustrate how Morrison exposes patriarchal Western gender definitions by subverting dualistic thinking. Furthermore, I will attempt to delineate how Morrison revalues femininity through representation of female characters.

Critics have expressed widely different views on Morrison's novels. Her novels are always controversial as their broken narrative structure continues to perplex many critics and readers. Therefore, they have inspired a wide range of criticism.

Many critics have paid attention to the importance of Morrison's literary writing. Khililah Tyri Watson, for instance, argues that Morrison is a modern prophetic figure. In her doctoral thesis entitled "Literature as Prophecy: Toni Morrison as Prophetic Writer," (2009) Watson discusses the theme of prophetic nature of Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*. She asserts that Morrison is a modern-day literary prophet that through what she terms as "re-memory" reinterprets past in order to guide her readers, and her society, to a greater understanding of the consequences of slavery and racism in America and to prompt both races to escape the destructive effects of this heritage. Watson concludes that in creating this dysfunctional black American family, Morrison endeavors to stir the "conscience of an American culture that has been lulled to sleep by the acceptance and indoctrination of racist ideologies" (42). She asserts that *The Bluest Eye* depicts a kind of reverse vanity that leads to the destruction of an individual's concept of self-beauty. In *The Bluest Eye*,

the unconscious vanity of white society leads to a vanity that causes insanity in an innocent woman. Pecola's victimization acts as a mirror to show how over time, blacks in America have been victimized, and often abused, just because of their skin color.

Although Watson's work sheds light on how victimization of Pecola contributes to the social change, it fails to consider the ways in which those ideologies work on different characters and how different characters react to such an ideology. In the present research I intend to examine how white defined aesthetic values oppress female characters.

David E. Magill studies Morrison's works in the light of intertextual criticism. He believes that Morrison's novels exist in an intertextual relationship with Faulkner's work that "allows us to move beyond a linear notion of influence to a more complicated understanding of the interplay between the two authors' works" (Beaulieu 119). He claims that Morrison's treatment of such themes engages with Faulkner's novels and rewrites them in productive ways. He believes that her connection to Faulkner is active incorporation, not passive reception. He concludes that Faulkner's and Morrison's novels speak to one another across time, providing an ongoing critique of U.S. culture and its anxieties, fears, hopes, and dreams (Ibid. 119).

Holly Hanna focuses on Morrison's language and believes that Morrison wants to bring readers to awareness about the social norms by using intentional black language. In her thesis entitled "Collective Trauma and Narrative Working Through Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*," (2011) Hanna analyzes the novel through trauma theory, arguing that *The Bluest Eye*'s multi-textual form, multiple narrators, and intentional black language challenge the very ideologies that oppress black people. She contends that the novel acts

as a catalyst to social change and defies white norms. She takes the view that Morrison criticizes the white gaze that has derived a little girl to self-loath and desire for blue eyes. She thinks that Morrison generates an awareness to reveal a black community aspiring to be white. Hanna claims that Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* is "not about the act of survival within a dysfunctional family but about the act of survival within a dysfunctional system" (28). She concludes that Morrison was aware of the unconscious repetitive behaviors, thus she felt an ethical responsibility to bring a level of awareness to the cyclical social norms. Therefore, Morrison "attempts to jolt readers into a state of consciousness concerning the ways we participate in white dominance without even realizing it" (29).

Naomi Rokotnitz draws attention to the ways strong female characters like Claudia defy social norms. In her article entitled "Constructing Cognitive Scaffolding through Embodied Receptiveness: Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*," (2007) Rokotnitz examines the characters of Claudia and Pecola in the light of recent neuropsychological studies and theories of mind, embodiment, and cognition. She suggests that *The Bluest Eye* gives profound insights into human processes of intersubjective communication. She asserts that Morrison's depiction of the emotional histories of her characters sheds light on an examination of the role of "cognitive scaffolding" in the construction of self. She argues that Claudia's powerful attraction to the body, which is in contrast to the accepted norms of the dominant white-Christian culture of her time, allows her to gain entrance to "a primal form of understanding that ought to be available to all humans through motor equivalence". She finally asserts that Claudia both embraces the body and enhances its

multiple means of knowledge acquisition, and that her keen attunement to emotional cadence generate both self-empowerment and productive socialization.

Although Rokotnitz's analysis gave me an understanding of how Claudia resists dominant white ideology, she focuses her study solely on Claudia and she overlooks other characters in the novel. In my thesis, I attempt to explore how other characters in the novel respond to white ideology and why they fail to achieve self empowerment.

Similar to Rokotnitz, Patrice Cormier Hamilton points out to the importance of self-love in African Americans' quest for wholeness. Morrison's characters, particularly female characters, are constantly encountering challenges on their journey. In her articles entitled "The Journey away from Self-Love in *The Bluest Eye*" (1994) Hamilton, argues Morrison has adapted and altered naturalism in African American fiction to portray this quest for wholeness. She analyzes Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* by applying Showalter's three phases of development of female literary subcultures. Showalter describes the first phase as a subculture or minority experiences as an extended period of "imitation of the prevailing modes of the dominant tradition, and internalization of its standards of art and its views on social roles" (114).

The second phase is that of protesting against these standards and values, and advocacy of minority rights and finally the third phase is a period of "self-discovery, a turning inward freed from some of the dependency of opposition, a search for identity" (114). Hamilton suggests that Pecola and much of her community are entrapped in Showalter's first phase of growth for a subculture "imitation of the prevailing modes of the dominant tradition, and internalization of its standards of art and its views on social roles" (114). She contends that Claudia has been equipped with "the shield of self-love to

combat negative influences from black and white society-Pecola has not” (121). She notes, for instance, the way Claudia destroys blue eyed dolls demonstrates her pride in her identity and the ability to understand the repressive values dominating her black community. She rightly points out that Claudia has been able to move beyond Showalter’s first stage into a protest against the mores of the dominant society. And through the adult Claudia we hear throughout the novel has progressed beyond second stage to the quest for identity indicated in the third stage. She concludes that Morrison issues a direct and clear warning of the importance of self-love for African Americans with the demise of Pecola Breedlove.

In analyzing *The Bluest Eye* most critics have focused on Pecola’s failure and Claudia’s survival. Yet, they have not delved into the ways in which white defined values and aesthetics are constructed and how such values affect black characters’ psychic health. In the present study I intend to examine how white culture constructs the aesthetic standards based on a binary system of thought. Furthermore, I will examine how Morrison subverts such a system through her novel.

While Rokotnitz and Hamilton find the source of resistance in Claudia’s character, Jennifer Matos Ayala believes that active love is what makes female characters resist oppression. In her thesis entitled “A Feeling or Something More: Love as a Liberating Force in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, *Sula* and *The Women of Brewster Place*,” (2011) Ayala draws attention to the relationship between Sula and Nel and explores the concept of active love as suggested by bell hooks (internationally uncapitalized) and Martin Luther King as a practice of freedom and as a force that gives strength to the individual and community. She states that unlike Freud who defines love as

“narcissistic”, “egocentric”, and “sentimental” hooks suggests that love can be a form of growth and a strategy for the liberation of individuals and the community at large. She argues that sisterly love between Sula and Nel in Toni Morrison’s *Sula* is so powerful that when it is broken it leads to the destruction of the characters. Ayala believes that love frees us of the constrictions of our bodies, mind, and society and it is used as a strategy for resistance and liberation in society. She observes that the novel evokes not only a bond between two lives, but also the harsh, loveless, and mad world in which that bond is destroyed. She concludes that the novel is Morrison’s act of love for a society that has been oppressed for a long time and has forgotten the active love needed to achieve true peace, growth, and freedom.

In his article “A Hateful Passion, a Lost Love,” (1983) Hortense Spillers analyzes *Sula* utilizing reader-oriented criticism to examine Sula and Nel’s friendship and multiplicity of feelings Sula evokes. He argues that like the community of the Bottom, the reader also loves and hates Sula because she forces the acceptance of the corruption of absolutes. He suggests that Sula forces the reader and the community to take a look at their realities and to be careful of judgments.

While some critics have wrongly accused Morrison of having depleted her works with uneducated and illiterate women, Andrea O’Reilly, correctly designates that Morrison represents mothering as public and political enterprise, merging social commentator and political theorist who “through her maternal philosophy, reworks, rethinks, and reconfigures the concerns and strategies of African American, and in particular black women’s, emancipation in America” (O’Reilly xi). She asserts that

Morrison appears as one of the most prominent and instructive voices in the contemporary discussions on race and gender (Ibid. xi).

In her article entitled “New World Woman: Toni Morrison’s *Sula*,” (1999) Maggie Galehouse points out that the character of Sula can be named as the New world black woman who dares to defy society’s restrictive traditions and concepts of female sexuality and motherhood in search of self. Through the new images of women, Morrison attempts to show the possibility of change in social condition of women. Galehouse is right in pointing out that Sula is Morrison’s image of new world woman. But she does not discuss how patriarchal norms act on female characters and how Sula defies those social norms.

Similar to Galehouse, Kathryn Danielle Landi argues that Morrison presents new female characters in *Sula*. She believes that patriarchy has obliterated the goddess images and misrepresented it throughout our recorded patriarchal history. In her thesis entitled “Goddess Archetypes in Toni Morrison’s *Sula*,” (2006) she argues Morrison’s *Sula* employs goddess archetypes which defy patriarchal history of women and give back women’s dreams and strength. She concludes that Morrison attempts to restore the positive qualities associated with goddess in mythology and consequently her fiction emphasizes a female perspective.

Leilani Barnett Kesner emphasizes the role of female friendship in female characters’ emancipation from oppression. In her thesis entitled “Women Friends: Enabling Relationships in Emancipatory Novels by Contemporary Women Writers,” (1992) Kesner states that through female friendships female characters find a way for

freeing themselves from oppressive condition by sharing their experiences. She believes a female friendship is a source of strength, support, and comfort for women.

In her article entitled “Toni Morrison’s *Tar Baby*: A Resource for Feminist Theology,” (1989) Susan Corey Everson studies the novel under the light of feminist theories of theology. She argues that *Tar Baby* is significant resource for feminist theology. She states that the novel illustrates the tensions in women’s spiritual journey and celebrates the embodied nature of human life. Thus, Morrison defies the social values which control women’s bodies and supports identification of woman solely to her body. Therefore, the novel rejects the old form of domination and control. In Jadine’s character, she maintains, Morrison integrates body and sexuality with cultural heritage and openness to future. She concludes that Morrison interweaves body and spirit in Jadine’s self and recognizes her full humanity.

In her article entitled “Paradise Lost and Found: Dualism and Edenic Myth in Toni Morrison’s *Tar Baby*,” (1987) Lauren Lepow states Morrison’s *Tar Baby* retells the myth of Eden. She contends that Morrison deconstructs the myth of Eden and merges it with a folktale to upset moral absolutes in the myth of Eden. She concludes that by retelling the myth of Eden, Morrison presents a world where the original sin is dualistic thinking and the possibility of redemption lies in thinking beyond the dualistic system of thought.

Although Lepow’s article was insightful to me in understanding *Tar Baby*’s structure, she ceases to see how women go on the process of forming an authentic self after the power structure in Valerian’s house is dissolved. In my thesis, I will attempt examine how female characters set out to form an authentic self after they are liberated from Valerian’s oppressive power structure.

Elizabeth Ann Beaulieu asserts that Morrison's *Tar Baby* has intertextual links to Shakespeare's play *The Tempest*. She contends that both literary works are concerned with similar questions regarding colonialism, imperialism, and power. She notes the similarities between characters asserting that while in Shakespeare's *The Tempest* a real storm happens in the island, in Morrison's work, it is an emotional storm that sweeps Valerian's house. Thus, the storm cleanses everything and exposes all the secrets. She concludes that such a wide net of intertextual link in Morrison's works proves her capability to incorporate influences from Black and white culture.

Although the critics mentioned above are right in their views about Morrison's representation of women, they cease to give a bigger picture of Morrison's representation of women and her purpose in depicting a variety of female characters. In my thesis I intend to take a closer look at how Morrison weaves her gender politics to depict female characters.

The present research is a qualitative research based on theory of Feminism. Feminist theories are polyphonic and include a variety of textual analysis. Feminist critics assert that women cannot be simply depicted either as angels or demons. Such characterization has to be continually identified and challenged (Bressler 183). In this study I attempt to answer the following questions to arrive at a conclusion: How does Morrison expose the destructive effects of binary thinking inherent in Western culture in *The Bluest Eye*? How does gender oppression impact female characters in *Sula*? Does Morrison subvert oppositional thinking in presenting her female characters? In what ways does Morrison challenge and deconstruct binary thinking in *Tar Baby*? How does Morrison represent femininity in *Tar Baby*?