

***In The Name of God***

**بے پادشہ و بے یاریش**



**University of Isfahan  
Faculty of Foreign Languages  
Department of English Language**

## **M.A. Thesis**

**Julia Kristeva's Theorization of Subjectivity in *The Bluest Eye* and  
*Beloved* by Toni Morrison**

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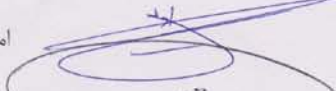
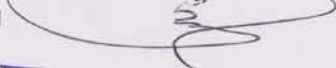
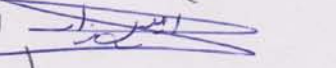

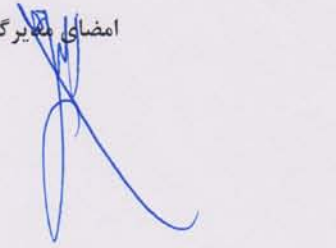
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## Abstract

One of the most important African-American female novelists of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is Toni Morrison. Her novels consider the blight of slaves, the traumatic effects of slavery. As the black people were invisible in American history, Morrison tries to give voice to them by writing novels about them. In her novels, they become speaking subjects. In *Beloved*, Seth starts to talk about her experience as a slave, and she uses language to express her inner feelings. As Julia Kristeva (1941,-), the French critic, maintains, the speaking subject (Sujet Parlant) is the one who uses language and gains a sense of identity through language. *Beloved* becomes a proper study case for this thesis. In *The Bluest Eye*, Pecola Breedlove is the subject of the culture's standards of beauty. As she cannot express herself through language, she becomes melancholic and is dominated by a sense of loss. This thesis intends to apply Kristeva's theories about the speaking subject, and melancholia to Morrison's *Beloved* and *The Bluest Eye*. It bears mentioning that Kristeva herself discusses how the writer's melancholia is reflected in her/his writings. These two novels, it is argued, reveal Morrison's own depression and melancholia. In addition, the objective is to show how the semiotic and the symbolic, in Kristeva's theorization, constructed Morrison's poetic-fictional text.

**Key Words:** Toni Morrison, *Beloved*, *The Bluest Eye*, Julia Kristeva, the speaking subject, melancholia, the semiotic and the symbolic.

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# Chapter ONE

## Introduction

### 1.1. Overview:

Julia Kristeva is a prominent theorist concerned with different disciplines such as feminism, linguistics, psychology, etc. Her works catch the eyes of many critics and many readers and each year new readers are fascinated by her revolutionary ideas. The same is true about Toni Morrison. As a novelist, she has been awarded many prizes of which the most important is the Noble Prize in literature. She gives voice to the invisible blacks and makes them visible in her novels. Unlike previous novelists, she treats the blacks as subjects, not as objects. This study aims to relate Julia Kristeva's theories of subjectivity to Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and *The Bluest Eye*.

### 1.2. Thesis Statement:

Homi Bhabha considers Morrison's *Beloved* as a literary work which revives the past of slavery and its murderous rituals of possession (Rivkin and Ryan 937). Morrison herself considers her novels as a manifestation of African-American

women in a genderized, sexualized, and racialized world (Rivkin and Ryan 923). Examples of such manifestations are *Beloved* and *The Bluest Eye*.

Julia Kristeva deals with two aspects of language which she calls the semiotic and the symbolic. In her theory, the semiotic displays the inner drives of the subject, whereas the symbolic emphasizes social and biological constraints. These two poles are inseparable and the subject's language should have these two poles to be meaningful.

As speaking beings, subjects are constituted through language. Conversely, language is not simply denotative. Words do not simply refer to ready-made objects; nor are they simply *used* by separate, detached pre-linguistic subjects. Kristeva's theory of the signifying process abandons received conceptions of subjectivity and language that treat them as passive, disembodied, asocial, ahistorical things and instead examines the material, social, and historical conditions and dynamics of meaning production. (Keltner22)

The subject makes herself/himself through using language; moreover, s/he expresses her/his inner drives either directly or indirectly in language. As these drives are unstable, the subject's identity is not fixed and one can observe that the subject is not only influenced by her/his drives, but also by other people's drives and speeches. Sometimes the subject is able to speak, but s/he does not want to speak, as s/he cannot express her /his sense of loss via language. In Kristeva's terms, s/he is melancholic and the melancholic subject should use language to express her/his feeling. One should notice that Morrison's novels deal with subject formation and melancholic subjects. Morrison believes that

Even when permitted conceptually to enter the kingdom of Homo sapiens, blacks have historically been viewed as either submissive children, violent ones, or both at once... From this reductive viewpoint blacks are seen to live outside “reason” in a world of phenomenon in which motive or its absence is sheltered from debate. Or, as William Faulkner’s characters put it, “a nigger is not a person so much as a form of behavior.” (Morrison, *Birth XI*)

Through her novels, Morrison intends to remind blacks of their past. She emphasizes that unlike the common opinion, blacks are as human as whites; in addition, they have human feelings and intelligence.

In *Beloved*, Morrison deals with the effects of the plight of slavery on black people. They use language and interact with each other in order to come to terms with their past. In this novel, Morrison presents the moments of mourning and their treatment. *Beloved* is not only an embodiment of Sethe’s guilt complex, but also of the black community’s trauma of slavery. In this novel, the characters speak and express their inner feelings. Moreover, they reunite to come to terms with the pain of their slavery.

In addition, in *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison depicts the influence of white beauty standards on blacks’ psyche. Not only the whites, but also the blacks accept that blonde hair and blue eyes are attractive; thus, the blacks consider themselves inferior to whites. Moreover, the novel emphasizes the influence of the eye of others on subject formation. As a result of racial discrimination, blacks hate themselves and lose their identity.

In these two novels, Morrison deals with her trauma and cures herself through writing. She has also experience of racism. She admits that the “slave trade was like cocaine is now—even though it was against the law, that didn’t stop anybody” (Angelo 1). Therefore, in her novels, Morrison emphasizes the pain of being black. This study will answer the following questions:

How do Julia Kristeva's the speaking subject, the melancholic subject, the semiotic and the symbolic manifest themselves in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and *The Bluest Eye*? How do characters figure as speaking subjects? How do people show their feelings by the use of language? "What happens to identity when the spaces we occupy are determined by factors such as gender, race, social class, or any number of arbitrary classifications" (West-Pavlov 1)? "Is" Toni Morrison "creating a text, broadly defined, that is visual, aural and tactile, even though linguistic" (Sieck 182)?

### **1.3. Organization of the Thesis:**

The present study consists of five chapters and generally speaking is a study of Julia Kristeva's theories of subjectivity in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and *The Bluest Eye*. The current chapter draws an outline of the whole thesis project. As such, the thesis would practically begin with the second chapter, which presents the study of Julia Kristeva's theories. The third chapter follows up Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* in the light of Julia Kristeva's theories. The fourth chapter is devoted to Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and the application of Kristeva's theories to it. And finally, the last chapter sums up the whole discussion.

### **1.4. Definition of Key Terms:**

#### **Subjectivity:**

Atkins defines "subjectivity as the expression of the human body enmeshed in a social matrix", i.e. "personal identity shaped around" social interactions and social-self (2).

#### **The Semiotic and symbolic.**

When we attend to language within the signifying process, Kristeva says, we may notice two ways or modes in which it operates: (1) as an expression of clear and orderly meaning; and (2) as an evocation of feeling or, more pointedly, a discharge of the

subject's energy and drives. The words she uses for these modes are, respectively, symbolic and semiotic. (McAfee 14)

**Speaking subject** defined as,

the process in which the subject is an effect of linguistic processes. In other words, we become who we are because of taking part in signifying processes. The subjectivity occurs in an open system. Instead of a model of the self that is stable and unified, Kristeva offers us a kind of self that is always in process and heterogeneous. One's affective energies continue to destabilize any given self-understanding. Moreover, people affect us, especially those we love the most. (McAfee 41)

**Melancholia** is the sense of

a mourning for something lost. The lost object is not an actual person but an "internal object." The subject feels both love and hate toward this object, love because he cannot do without it and hate because he has been undermined by its loss. (McAfee 60)

## **1.5. Review of Literature:**

In *Kristeva Thresholds* (2011), S. K. Keltner elaborates on Kristeva's theories over the course of her career. S. K. Keltner's book provides the first comprehensive introduction to the breadth of Kristeva's work. In an original and insightful analysis, Keltner presents Kristeva's thought as the coherent development and elaboration of a complex, multidimensional threshold constitutive of meaning and subjectivity.

*The Nature of Melancholy from Aristotle to Kristeva* (2002), by Jennifer Radden responds to a real need: the concept of melancholy has generated a tradition of writing at once coherent and diverse enough to reward comparative study, yet it has never been the subject of an anthology. The book interests many academic readers: psychoanalytic theorists whose expertise does not extend to how “theory” was practiced before the late nineteenth century, or analytic philosophers of mind interested in how subjective experience has been imagined outside their intellectual tradition.

*Abjection, Melancholia and Love* (1990), by John Fletcher and Andrew Benjamin explores the theme of abjection, melancholia, and love throughout major novels by different novelists. Although this book does not consider Morrison’s novels in its survey, it can help us to know how to apply Kristeva’s theories to different novels.

Maria Elena Iannetta, in her doctoral thesis, *Literary Melancholia, or the Refusal to Mourn: Amnesia and Anamnesis-Memories of Love, Loss, and Abjection in Feminine Writing* (2002), sketchily points to employing psychoanalytic concepts primarily from Sigmund Freud and Julia Kristeva. Her dissertation explores the psychic positions assumed by subjects “in process/on trial,” and what these mean to their role in the social contract. She exposes the interrelatedness of self and other, individual and communal crises.

Benjamin M. Sutcliffe’s “*Reading the Kristevan Semiotic and Symbolic: Nina Sardur’s ‘Kol’tsa’ and Marina Kulakova’s ‘Reka po imeni Master’*” (2003) seeks to unravel Kristeva’s two aspects of language in these two novels. In his article, he provides ample evidences for these aspects of Kristeva’s theories.

Lisa Stokes-King, in her master thesis, “*Lovely Shapes and Sound Intelligible: Kristevan Semiotic and Coleridge’s Language of the Unconscious*” (2006), argues that romantic literature’s preoccupation with subjectivity, and the nature of the self, is recognized as influential on modern conception of consciousness, and in particular as a precursor of psychoanalysis. This thesis examines Coleridge’s understanding of consciousness, as expressed in his prose, to demonstrate that he theorizes a language of the unconscious; a non-literary, authentic language that remains inaccessible. By comparing this idea with Julia Kristeva’s theory of semiotic language, the thesis shows that this language is indeed recognized in her psychoanalytic theory as a product of the unconscious.



Erin Wood Bodner, in his master thesis, "*Murmur It to the Mud*": *The Speaking Subject in Samuel Beckett's How It Is* (2003), emphasises the access to language of the subject in Samuel Beckett's *How It Is*. He interrogates multiple theories of the constitution of the subject, focusing on the linguistic theory of Julia Kristeva, and concludes that none of these theories adequately account for Beckett's speaker's language.

Rena Otsuka, in her master thesis, "*Subject in Process*": *Modernist Characterization in Virginia Woolf's Mrs. Dalloway and to the Light House* (2008), suggests that in Woolf's novels, a subject is not depicted as unitary or fixed, but as multiple and fluid. Julia Kristeva, in describing the formation of the subject, theorizes that the subject is always split between the symbolic and the semiotic, never having a consistent whole—"subject in process." Kristeva's theory is useful in explaining Woolf's effort to create a character with a fluid identity.

Peter J. Sabo, in his master thesis, *Impossible Mourning: Lamentations As A Text of Melancholia* (2010), provides ample evidences for melancholia. He reads the text of lamentations as representing a melancholic who suffers from several of its symptoms. The second chapter of his thesis relates Julia Kristeva's theory of melancholia to lamentations.

In *Maternal Body and Voice* (2002), Paula Gallant Eckard explores the theme of motherhood throughout the major novels of Toni Morrison. She believes that maternal subjectivity and jussance (a term used by Kristeva) manifest themselves in the novels. Even she considers the silence in *Beloved* as a way that leads characters to become speaking subjects. By remembering the previous events, characters start to speak and come to the realm of the symbol.

Andrea O'Reilly's *Morrison and Motherhood, Politics of the Heart* (2004) offers a comprehensive reading of Morrison's novels. In the second chapter of the book, she focuses on *The Bluest Eye*. It elaborates on Pauline's identity and the way it is shaped. The third chapter of this book considers *Beloved* as manifestation of the slavery as a cultural institution that deprives the African-American people of their subjectivity and history.

*Between the Angle and the Curve: Mapping Gender, Race, Space, and Identity in Willa Cather and Toni Morrison (Literary Criticism and Cultural Theory)*

(2006), Russell explores the ways in which Willa Cather and Toni Morrison subvert the textual expectations of gendered geography and push against the boundaries of the official canon. As Russell demonstrates, the unique depictions Cather and Morrison create of the American landscape challenge existing assertions about American fiction. Specifically, Russell argues that looking at the intimate connections between space, gender, race, and identity as they play out in the fiction of Cather and Morrison refutes the myth of a unified American landscape and thus opens up the territory of American fiction.

Edwin Martin, in his master thesis, *The Recuperation of Beauty in the Novel, The Bluest Eye By Toni Morrison* (2009), emphasizes the effect of beauty in identity formation. The novel provides the necessary framework to clarify and understand the impact of white aesthetic standards on black awareness and identity. Morrison wants blacks to reclaim the physical identity of beauty regarding their physical appearance, because this affirmation is essential to their identity and self-esteem. Morrison uses a variety of techniques such as narrative technique and form. to convey the need for black Americans to recuperate beauty within the black community.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Julia Kristeva and Her Theories

#### 2.1. Overview:

In this chapter, a brief account of Kristeva's literary achievements would be presented. Moreover, the main tenets of her theory related to this study will be surveyed and elaborated.

#### 2.2. Julia Kristeva's Achievements:

Julia Kristeva (1941), Bulgarian-French, is a psychoanalyst, literary critic, linguist, socialist, feminist and recently novelist. She received her M.A. degree from the University of Sofia in 1966 and moved to France for her doctoral fellowship. In France, she worked with Lucien Goldmann, Roland Barthes and Claude Lévi-Strauss. Barthes describes Kristeva as the one who “always destroys the latest preconception, the one we thought we could be comforted by, the one we could be proud of” (Lodge 206). Then, she joined the *Tel Quel* group, founded by Philippe Sollers, and published her articles in scholarly journals.

Kristeva received her doctorate in linguistics in 1973 from Practical School of Advanced Studies. Then, she became a professor of linguistics at the University of Paris. *Revolution in Poetic Language* is her doctoral dissertation, which is famous for its application of psychoanalytic theory to language and literature.

Besides the *Revolution in Poetic Language*, she published *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*, which is important to this study. In *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*, Kristeva focuses on the melancholic subject and the way s/he expresses his/her sense of loss within language. This study will shed light on the terms used by Kristeva such as melancholia, speaking subject, abjection, the semiotic, and the symbolic.

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