

Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and *The Bluest Eye*: A Cultural Materialistic Approach

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ABSTRACT

This article aims to investigate two novels of Toni Morrison, *Beloved* and *The Bluest Eye*, by a cultural materialistic approach. Cultural materialists emphasize on the cultural aspects and elements of literary texts. They study issues such as race, gender, sexuality, social class, and slavery. In other words, they put under investigation the marginalized people of society, like black people, females, and slaves. In this regard, Toni Morrison is a great writer whose writings are replete with cultural issues. As most of the main characters of Toni Morrison's novels are black people, so it can be concluded that for her, marginalized people of society and minorities especially females, are at center. Therefore, in this paper, it is aimed to emphasize on cultural elements of Morrison's novels, *Beloved* and *The Bluest Eye*, and determine what stance she takes toward such minorities.

Keywords: cultural materialism; race; slavery; social class; gender

1. INTRODUCTION

As a newly-founded discipline, cultural materialism refers to two separate scholarly endeavors: One is in the field of anthropology and the other in cultural studies. Cultural materialism has had a significant impact on the field of literary studies, especially in Britain. Its emphasis is on the importance of the attention to the issues of race, sexuality, gender, social classes, and slavery. In contrast to the traditional humanist readings that often neglected such issues and did not pay attention to the oppressed and the marginalized, cultural materialists consider these groups in their engagement with literary texts, thus opening a new approach to reading literary texts and literary criticism. Therefore, the focus of cultural materialists is on issues that have been disregarded for years.

Toni Morrison is a great twentieth-century writer to whose writings we can apply matters of race, gender, sexuality, social class and rape. As a celebrated American writer, she is greatly concerned with the life and problems of African Americans. She won the Pulitzer Prize in 1988 for *Beloved* and the Nobel Prize in 1993. Morrison gave inspiration to black women writers and generated a new kind of readership that was more alert about issues of race and gender and also more eager to achieve a fuller understanding of these matters. The central motif of most of Morrison's works is the role that race plays in American life. Among the issues she addresses

are the victimization of blacks, racial discrimination, motherhood, and the emotional and psychological problems posed to African Americans in a dominantly white society.

Although there has been a great deal of research on matters of racism, slavery, African-American culture and Toni Morrison's works in recent years, there are still important issues that require further investigation. As for the available literature review, one may refer to Jennifer L. Pierce, in "Racing for Innocence: Whiteness, Corporate Culture, and the Backlash against Affirmative Action" (2003), who argues that racing for innocence is a discursive practice which shows that racism still exists despite some practices that are supposed to deny racism and prove that it has disappeared. In *Toni Morrison's Developing Class Consciousness* (1991), Doreatha Drummond Mbalia works on some of Morrison's novels and emphasizes on the struggle against race and racial problems. In addition, in "Figurations of Rape and the Supernatural in *Beloved*" (1997), Pamela E. Barnett states that *Beloved* is haunted by the history and memory of rape specifically. Her emphasis falls on the depictions and allusions to rape that, according to her, are of greater importance than other signs of slavery like beating the slaves, which Morrison illustrates.

Besides sociological points of view applied to the study of *The Bluest Eye*, recently some critics have attempted to employ psychoanalytical theories. For example, in "Probing Racial Dilemmas in *the Bluest Eye* with the Spyglass of Psychology" (2009), Anna Zebialowicz and Marek Palasinski use psychology as a tool to show and interpret the racial dilemmas of female characters in this novel.

2. DISCUSSION

The two works that this study aims to investigate are *Beloved* and *The Bluest Eye*. *Beloved* contains many cultural materialist concerns such as race, gender, slavery, and rape. Encapsulating the problems and pressures of African Americans, *Beloved* is a kind of reminiscence of slavery in the twentieth-century American literature. Written in 1970 when the new movement of 'Black is Beautiful' was at its peak, *The Bluest Eye* stimulated new critical discussions about racism and sexism, as well as social, ethical and psychological issues about race, the female body, and black femininity (Zebialowicz and Palasinski 221). Although all of Morrison's novels can be good representatives of marginalized people, this study will investigate only *Beloved* and *The Bluest Eye*.

As mentioned above, race and the issues concerning racism are significant in both *Beloved* and *The Bluest eye*. According to Winant, the significance of race does not decline. On the contrary, race continues to operate as an important and fundamental factor in culture and politics all around the world. He mentions that race is a way to know and interpret the social world (1). Therefore, matters of race and racism are always crucial topics of discussion not only in literature, but also in politics, economics, etc.

In " Probing Racial Dilemmas in the Bluest Eye with the Spyglass of Psychology", Zebialowicz and Palasinsk state that according to McKittrick, since blacks have been denied equality and inclusion by imposing unfair and subjective views of race and place, they feel a great sense of discomfort and otherness in a society that is dominated by white people. She makes a comparison between Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* and Du Bois's *The Quest of the Silver Fleece*. She mentions that both writers are preoccupied with the ways to overcome the premises of white ethnocentrism and shake the foundations of white supremacy, casting doubt on the long-established concepts of race and culture (222).

In "Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature", Toni Morrison argues that

For three hundred years black Americans insisted that 'race' was no usefully distinguishing factor in human relationships. During those same three centuries every academic discipline, including theology, history and natural science, insisted 'race' was the determining factor in human development. When blacks discovered they had shaped or become a culturally formed race ... suddenly they were told there is no such thing as 'race', biological or cultural, that matters and that genuinely intellectual exchange cannot accommodate it. It always seemed to me that the people who invented the hierarchy of 'race' when it was convenient for them ought not to be the ones to explain it away, now that it does not suit their purposes for it to exist. But there is culture and both gender and race inform and are informed by it (3).

In Morrison's novels, it is realized that the character's self-esteem and self-worth have been denigrated or even eliminated by racism, marginalization and oppression. Their skin color, or more clearly, their degree of blackness shows their value. For instance, the light skinned blacks had a better position in society than darker ones. It was not an idea just among the white majority, but even blacks treated one another differently based on the degree of their blackness. These opinions were transferred from one generation to the next. Therefore, considering Morrison's characters, it becomes clear that racism and oppression are not limited to an individual's life, but also influence other generations.

For cultural materialists, slavery is an important issue to be considered carefully in literary texts. According to Nieboer, "A slave is the property of another, politically and socially [a slave is] at a lower level than the mass of people, and [performs] compulsory labour" (4). The situation of African American people in the USA has always been problematic and disputable. Although abolition of slavery somehow improved hard conditions of slaves, they were not accepted in the society. Since in most situations African Americans did not possess an equal status like other members of society, they always had a feeling of being excluded and separated while fighting for equality. Although there are different kinds of slavery, when we think of it, the figure of black people comes to our mind unconsciously. But here the focus of our attention is on female slaves, whose suffering is twofold in Morrison's fiction. Not only does their skin color push them toward the margin, but also their gender causes their being doubly marginalized. Therefore, it seems that female slaves, throughout history, have become somehow invisible and mute.

The life experiences of marginalized groups such as African Americans were highlighted in the works of both black and white writers. *Beloved* is an example of slave post-narrative works (contemporary literary works based on slaves' experiences). According to Chabot Davis, Morrison's text suggests that 'a fictional account of the interior life of a slave might be more historically "real" than actual documents, which were often written from the perspective of the dominant culture' (248).

One point about female slaves frequently appearing in many slave narratives is the vulnerability of their bodies. They cannot protect themselves. In addition to the severe and hard work that exceeded the physical ability of female slaves, black women were also slaves to the whims of their owners. Their bodies did not belong to themselves; they were forced to grant it to their owner whenever he wanted it. They were regarded as the property of their masters, which indicates female slaves' powerlessness. We can say that they were viewed and treated

like sexual objects by their white masters and, even sometimes, by their family members. Therefore, many instances of rape and sexual abuse appear in literary works about slavery.

In her works, especially *Beloved* and *The Bluest Eye*, Toni Morrison intends to remind readers of the history of slavery and its horrible issues and effects, something that she thinks has been avoided and forgotten in traditional slave narratives. According to Holden-Kirwan's article, in an interview with Bonnie Angelo of *Time* magazine, Toni Morrison stated that the American nation tries to forget the memory and history of slavery. She mentions that even the characters in *Beloved* do not want to remember the history of enslavement in America. Furthermore, Morrison notes that, "I [Morrison] don't want to remember, black people don't want to remember, white people don't want to remember" (415). On the contrary, Morrison's novels remind readers of the crime of slavery preferred to be forgotten by some.

In these works, Morrison emphasizes the dehumanizing effects of slavery on slaves. Her focus is on the miserable condition of slaves, especially female ones, of whom Sethe is a perfect representative, since she is raped, mistreated, and violated. In *Beloved*, Sethe mentions that:

"After I left you, those boys came in there and took my milk. That's what they came in there for. Held me down and took it. I told Mrs. Garner on em. She had that lump and couldn't speak but her eyes rolled out tears. Them boys found out I told on em. Schoolteacher made one open up my back, and when it closed it made a tree. It grows there still." (Morrison, 1987: 16)

In *Beloved*, Morrison reinvents the past and wants the reader not to forget what happened in African American history: "Morrison's critically acclaimed novel *Beloved* probes the most painful part of the African American heritage, slavery, by way of what she has called "rememory" -- deliberately reconstructing what has been forgotten (Kubitschek 115).

The violators of slave women's bodies were not only their masters. In *Beloved*, even when Sethe was a free woman out of bondage, she experienced sexual abuse. Because she could not afford to pay for the engraving of her daughter's grave, she was forced to use her body as an object of commerce. The commercialization of the female body is quite obvious in the bargain the engraver proposes to Sethe, "you got ten minutes I'll do it for free" (5).

Throughout *Beloved* it becomes clear that Sethe has killed her daughter to keep her away from slavery and its consequences. Fuston-White stated that it was not Sethe that killed her child, but it was the effect of slavery that caused Sethe to commit the crime: "It was not madness, but the reality of slavery, that drove Sethe to kill her child, fully aware of the act and its brutality, as well as its compassion" (464).

Another example of infanticide is Charlotte Brooks' slave narrative in *American Slaves Tell Their Stories*. In this book, Rogers Albert makes six interviews with slaves. One of them is Charlotte Brooks. Like Sethe in *Beloved*, Aunt Charlotte kills her children. She thinks that it is better for them to die before becoming slaves. She mentions that: "They died for want of attention. I used to leave them alone half of the time. Sometimes old mistress would have someone to mind them till they got so they could walk, but after that they would have to paddle for themselves. I was glad the Lord took them, for I knowed they were better off with my blessed Jesus than with me" (8).

One of the experiences that most of the female slaves shared was being raped. In *Beloved* too, the main figure of the story, Sethe, was raped and her milk was stolen. Some poets, such as Jayne Cortez, Ntozake Shange, and June Jordan consider rape as a battle and women's bodies as a battleground. Black women as the second class citizens of America were forced to tolerate so many sufferings. Greatly vulnerable, their bodies were a site for white men's representation

of power and oppression. Unlike other people, black women could not think of freedom, let alone enjoying it.

In her autobiography, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), Linda Brent writes, "My master met me at every turn, reminding me that I belonged to him, and swearing by heaven and earth that he would compel me to submit to him" (33). Brent's book renders a vivid account of the miserable and intolerable life of female slaves. Female slaves fully recognized rape as a hazard in their life, but they could not avert it.

The theme of rape and child abuse that has been used by Morrison in her novels is a point that some writers have investigated. In *Toni Morrison* (1990), Wilfred D. Samuels and Clenora Hudson-Weems mention that although now child abuse, incest, and rape are highly publicized topics and people can speak about them, in the past they were not as today. These topics once were socially unmentionable and unaddressed though secretly known. It was Morrison who readily explored them in her pioneering first novel, *The Bluest Eye* (14).

Narrating the hazards of slave life, Morrison's novels illustrate the history of enslavement and the condition of slaves. Morrison uses marginalized characters as the protagonists of her novels. This attention to marginalized people, their problems in a white dominant society, racial discrimination, and issues of gender and sexuality has made Morrison's novels great sources for cultural materialist studies. Morrison in *The Bluest Eye* states that: "I focused, therefore, on how something as grotesque as the demonization of an entire race could take root inside the most delicate member of society: a child; the most vulnerable member: a female" (170).

Another focus of attention for cultural materialists is the social hierarchical system. Issues concerning social class and class distinction have always been important for cultural materialists and critics interested in cultural studies. Among many other definitions, social classes have been identified as "large groups among which unequal distribution of economic goods and/or preferential division of political prerogatives and/or discriminatory differentiation of cultural values result from economic exploitation or political oppression" (Outhwaite et al 81).

Many writers have considered these matters in their works. Having a glimpse at the large bulk of African American novels, we realize that their themes mainly revolve around class distinction and other issues related to cultural materialism. In *A Raisin in the Sun*, Lorraine Hansberry considers racial and gender issues and focuses on the class distinction between blacks and whites. It clearly shows the black Americans living condition under racial segregation. In this regard, Toni Morrison is one of the well-known writers accentuating class distinction and its effects on its members in many of her works, such as *The Bluest Eye* (1970), *Tar Baby* (1981) and *Song of Solomon* (1977).

In the two novels under investigation in this study, *Beloved* and *The Bluest Eye*, social class plays a very significant role. Besides other factors, like skin color, gender, ancestry, and wealth that create a kind of borderline between people, social class also generates some prejudices. In other words, for Morrison, the ancestry and history of characters are greatly significant, since they cause different social classes and unequal conditions. Morrison argues that a distinctive characteristic of African American writing is its focus on the ancestors. According to her, 'these ancestors are not just parents, they are sort of timeless people whose relationships to the characters are benevolent, instructive, and protective, and they provide a certain kind of wisdom' (Morrison, 1984:343).

Pecola, the little girl in *The Bluest Eye*, is a good example of class distinction. She yearns to have blue eyes to achieve an acceptable position in the community. She is a marginalized and oppressed character. Her skin color, social class, and ancestry do not allow her an equal status with other white girls. It seems that she has always been in periphery. This is clear in the

voice of the narrator in *The Bluest Eye*: "We had dropped our seeds in our own little plot of black dirt" (3). In both novels the ideology of the upper class is dominant and superior, and it is the lower class that must submit to their whims and wills.

In *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism*, Bell Hooks works on feminist history and various forms of oppression. He states that:

As far back as slavery, white people established a social hierarchy based on race and sex that ranked white men first, white women second, though sometimes equal to black men, who are ranked third, and black women last. What this means in terms of the sexual politics of rape is that if one white woman is raped by a black man, it is seen as more important, more significant than if thousands of black women are raped by one white man. (52)

According to this classification, black women are in the lowest status and inferior to other groups. They must try so hard to be accepted by society. In *Beloved* too, Sethe appears as an inferior black woman who greatly suffers mistreatment. Because of her social status, her white master exploits her as he wishes. Sethe seems to have no right to defend herself.

3. CONCLUSIONS

As the elements of race, social class, slavery, and sex are so significant in Toni Morrison's novels, cultural materialists and critics interested in cultural issues investigate her novels from several perspectives. Taking advantage of the above mentioned issues in her fiction, Morrison has made readers aware of the calamities that African Americans face in their life. Morrison has pierced into the minds of her characters, revealing their thoughts perfectly. Her works can be a great help to move the position of blacks and especially black females from margin to center. Furthermore, the significance of Morrison's fiction falls on its capacity to combine issues of race, gender, sexuality, and social class simultaneously. The point about her novels is that although matters of racism and slavery are central, she has not disregarded other issues. That is, Morrison's novels demonstrate universal truths about the human condition and that is why her fiction is appealing to both white and black audiences.

This study was an attempt to examine Morrison's *Beloved* and *The Bluest Eye* from cultural perspectives, and to indicate the great attention she paid to minorities. Morrison's writing back the history of the minorities and Afro Americans advances and strengthens the cause of her predecessors like James Baldwin, W.E.B Du Bois, and Zora Neale Hurston.

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