

RACE MOTIF AND SOCIAL VISION IN TONI MORRISON'S *SULA AND THE BLUEST EYES*

BY

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**Abstract**

*There is no doubt that racial issues at one pint or the other occupied a central position in African-American Literature. To be precise, the blacks are at the center of discrimination, brutality, oppression and complete servitude. The objective of the research work is to examine an environment of racism and its attendant effects. In a bid to achieve this, attention was focused specifically on two novels namely Sula and The Bluest Eyes by Toni Morison. New historicism has been adopted as the theoretical guide on the analysis of the historical and aesthetic features of the selected novels. The application of the theory for the study is to look: (a) into the social, political, economic structure of the environment, (b) into the cultural formation of the author; (c) into the historicity of the author as a reflection of her immediate environment. From the findings of the study; it is observed that the blacks especially the females are able to survive inspite of the fact that they live in perpetual fear and molestation arising from horrible social trends of their immediate environment. The study concludes that literature has undergone a metamorphosis from a vehicle of Art for act sake to social mediation in terms of awareness. Toni Morison therefore, succeeds in contributing to the crusade against racial discrimination, oppression and subjugation in the creative work.*

**Keywords:** Race, Motif, Social vision and Blacks

**Introduction**

The plight of the black American began with the enslavement of Africans, which took place in the late 15th century. In 1619, the first blacks arrived in the English colonies, which later formed the United States of America. Twenty Africans were said to have been brought to James Town and treated as indentured servants. That is, they were servants who owed a five-to-seven years' labour obligation in exchange for food and lodging. African slaves were forced to work in tobacco plantations. No slave married at will or made his own choice or even divorced if he wanted. Slave trade is as terrible as hell, one need to consider the fact that people were packed like "sardines" in the most inhuman condition possible to another man's land against their wishes. The plight of the blacks in the white plantations was very miserable and full of suffering. Their lives could be distinguished by the oppressive relationship between slaves and masters. The slaves were often punished and subjected to series of whipping, even for the least 'offence' committed. The slave's family system was under the control of the white masters.

To (Nkosi 102):

*The Negro had never forgotten that he had not come to America like other emigrants who came out of their own free will, looking for fame and fortunes; the Negro was wrenched from his homeland and carried into slavery in the most shameful way possible.*

The black have severally been discriminated against in such areas as housing, education, and employment. (Nkosi 25) asserts that:

*Blacks are subjected to various prohibitive laws, the law creates a pent-hatred and frustration among non-white and when such hatred and frustration are ventilated, the victims instantly become criminal.*

The Whiteman shows no remorse for gracefully taking the black into slavery even the white justified their humiliation and exploitation of the blacks. One of the Renaissance essayist and writer, (Baldwin 46) says:

*When I was growing up, Negro in this country was taught to be ashamed of Africa. They were taught bluntly, as I was, for example, by being told that Africa, had never contributed anything to civilisation.*

In 1790, the first census put the population of blacks at 750,000. Not only had the population grown rapidly with an average increase of six percent each year, but the colonies had established a system of slavery such that fewer than ten percent of the nation's blacks were free at the time of the Revolution. The Negroes were sources of labour and they quickly became the most popular race in America, simply because of the kind of work their masters used them for. By the end of the 17th century, colonial courts established that blacks could be held as slaves for the duration of their lives. Slaves became the preferred source of labour since they were held in perpetuity; they had no legal rights and they reproduced their kinds.

### **Historical Background of Racism**

Racism has existed throughout human history, during the last 500 – 1000 years; racism on the part of Western powers toward non-westerners has had a far more impact on history than any other form of racism (such as racism among Western groups or among Easterners, such as Asians, Africans, and others). The most notorious example of racism by the West has been slavery, particularly the enslavement of Africans in the New World. This enslavement was accomplished because of the racist belief that Black Africans were less fully human than white Europeans and their descendants. This belief was not “automatic”; that is, Africans were not originally considered inferior. When Portuguese sailors first explored Africa in the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries, they came upon empires and cities as advanced as their own, and they considered Africans to be serious rivals. Over time, though, as African civilizations failed to match the technological advances of Europe, and the major European powers began to plunder the continent and forcibly remove its inhabitants to work as slave labourers in new colonies across the Atlantic. Africans came to be seen as a deficient “species,” and as “savages”. To an important extent, this view was necessary to justify the slave trade at a time when Western culture had begun to promote individual rights and human equality.

One important feature of racism, especially toward Blacks and immigrant groups, is slavery. Jews are usually seen by anti-Semites as subhuman but also superhuman: devilishly cunning, skilled, and powerful. Black and others are seen by racists as merely subhuman, more like beasts than men. If the focus of anti-Semitism is evil, the focus of racism is inferiority directed toward those who have sometimes been considered to lack even the ability to be evil. In the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Darwinism, the decline of Christian belief, and growing immigration were all perceived by many white westerners as a threat to their cultural control. European and, to a lesser degree, American scientists and philosophers devised a false racial “science” to “prove” the supremacy of non-Jewish whites. While the Nazi annihilation of Jews discredited most of these supposedly scientific efforts to elevate one race over another, small numbers of scientists and social scientists have continued throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century to argue the inborn shortcomings of certain races, especially Blacks. At the same time, some public figures in the American Black community have championed the supremacy of their own race and the inferiority of whites – using nearly the identical language of white racists.

All of these arguments are based on a false understanding of race; in fact, contemporary scientists do not agree on whether race is a valid way to classify people. What may seem to be significant “racial” differences to some people skin color, hair, facial shape are not of much scientific significance. In fact, genetic differences within a so-called race may be greater than those between races. Maulana (2002) writes that, “there are few genetic characteristics to be found in the population of England that are not found in similar proportions in Zaire or in China, those differences that most deeply affect us in our dealings with each other are not to any significant degree biologically determined”. In the United States in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, the American Colonization Society was established as the primary vehicle for proposal to return black Americans to greater freedom and equality in Africa. The colonization effort resulted from a mixture of motives with its founder Henry Clay stating; “unconquerable prejudice resulting from their colour, they never could amalgamate with the free whites of this country. It was

desirable, therefore, as it respected them and the residue of the population of the country, to drain them off" (Maggie, 1997).

Racism spread throughout the "New World" in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Whitecapping which started in Indiana in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century spread throughout all of North America, causing many African laborers to flee from the land they worked on. In one of these racist posters, a black man is depicted lounging idly in the foreground as one white man ploughs his field and another chops wood. Accompanying labels are: "In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat thy bread," and "The white man must work to keep his children and pay his taxes." The black man wonders, "What is the use for me to work as long as they make these appropriations." Above in a cloud is an image of the "Freedman's Bureau! Negro Estimate of Freedom!" The Bureau is pictured as a large domed building resembling the U.S. Capital and is inscribed "Freedom and No Work." Its columns and walls are labeled, "Candy", "Rum, Gin, Whiskey", "Sugar Plums", "Indolence", "White Women", "Apathy", "White Sugar", "Idleness", and so on.

On June 5, 1873, Sir Francis Galton, distinguished English explorer and cousin of Charles Darwin, wrote in a letter to *The Times*:

*My proposal is to make the encouragement of Chinese settlements of Africa a part of our national policy, in the belief that the Chinese immigrants would not only maintain their position, but that they would multiply and their descendants supplant the interior Negro race. I should expect that the African seaboard, now sparsely occupied by lazy, palavering savages, might in a few years be tenanted by industrious, order-loving Chinese, living either as a semidetached dependency of China, or else in perfect freedom under their own law.*

From the foregoing discussion, it can be seen that racism is not a new historical phenomenon though the way it is being seen today is new.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Literature is a cultural creation constructed by more than one consciousness; man therefore is a social construct. Therefore, social, political, religious, and economic factors of a given society determine the literature it produces. These elements circulate in society through "social energy," which is encoded in the works of art, which trespasses its historicity and becomes the means to represent the ideology of the culture through resonant texts.

New historicism is a school of literary criticism that is concerned with the historical, social and cultural contexts of the author in the period of time his literary work is produced. It believes that literature should be considered as a product of the time, place and historical circumstances of the author. Therefore, a literary work should be looked at as a reflection of the life and the time of its author. Guerin and others (2005) see a literary text chiefly, if not exclusively, as a reflection of its author's life and times. In addition, this school of criticism assumes that the main task of a critic is to understand the history of the writer in addition to analyzing the literary text, since history is an integral part of the text. Advocates of new historicism believe that themes and characterizations developed in any text are those which were common in that given society in a given period of time. Moreover, it is said that because literature is the creation of man as well as history, it is no more objective but subjective.

### **Features of New Historicism**

- New historicism considers works of literature as historical texts.
- New Historicism suggests a subjective approach to literature and was practiced mostly in Renaissance studies.
- New historicism identity is fashioned by social institutions.
- They are more in to aesthetics and painting.
- Every expressive act is embedded in a network of material practices.
- The literary and non-literary texts circulated inseparably.

- That literature should be studied and interpreted within the context of both the history of the author and the history of the critic.
- They emphasize the cultural context in which text is produced rather than focusing exclusively on formal structure of the text itself.

Literature, for new historicism, is a social and cultural creation constructed by more than one consciousness, and it cannot be diminished to a product of a single mind. Therefore, the best way of analysis is achieved through the lens of the culture that produced it. Literature is a specific vision of history and not a distinct category of human activity. Man himself is a social construct; there is no such thing as a universal human nature that surpasses history: history is a series of "raptures" between ages and man. As a consequence, the critic is trapped in his/her own historicity. No one can rise above their own cultural formations, their own ideological upbringing in order to understand the past in its own terms. Therefore, it is impossible for a modern reader to appreciate a literary work as its contemporaries. The life and times of the author plays a significant role as it was reflected in *Sula* and *The Bluest Eyes*. The history of the black race reflects in the two texts. In *Sula* we noticed the theme of discrimination segregation, oppression and displacement like wise in *The Bluest Eyes*. African-American Literature therefore talks about the historical circumstance of the author.

**Racism:** Racism in America could be best described as the division/classification of human as regard to skin colour. This emanated from slavery, the enslavement of Americans into the new-world, the racist belief that Black Africans were fully sub-human. Slave narratives emerged and slavery was abolished but was being replaced by the Jim Crow Law-which was another form of racism.

### Characteristics of Racism

Characteristics of racisms include the following: personal attacks of any kind, including violence, written or verbal threats or insults; damage to property, etc. Unfortunately racism can exist in all races and culture. Racist feels threatened by anyone who is from a different race or culture. Our views and beliefs develop as we grow up. If a child or young person grows within a racist community, or has friends who are racists, he or she may believe that racism is normal and acceptable. Prejudice, segregation or discrimination is based upon race. One can be discriminated and also segregated in a race base country. He or she is subjugated to inferiority. Racism can be caused by one or two of the followings:

- Fear
- Assumption based on hear-say
- Ignorance
- The hierarchy of the society
- Economic division in society
- Hard to associate with the unfamiliar.
- Statistics (crime rate, rape rate, poverty rate, education rate, STD's rate etc all these statistics make people feel more superior or inferior somehow).
- Family beliefs.

### *Sula* and Bottom Symbolism

African-American writers have always catered their work on racism due to their historical antecedents. Toni Morrison's novels have always been centred around the themes of racism, violence, sexual abuse, child abuse, slavery and especially on oppression. This trend is also present in *Sula*. The beginning of the novel opens readers to a glimpse of oppression which progresses through to the end of the novel. Page one of *Sula* starts with class segregation, exploitation and oppression. The whites who had previously rejected the hilly lands (which the blacks called Bottom town) now see the Bottom as a lucrative golf course and because they had the money, they bought the lands of the Bottom without thinking of the displacement of a whole community:

*In that place, where they tore the nightshade and blackberry patches from the roots to make room of the Madallion City Golf Course, there was once a neighbourhood. It stood in the hills above the valley town of Medallion and spread all the way to the river. It is called the suburbs now, but when black people lived there it was called the Bottom...Generous funds have been allotted to level the stripped and faded buildings that clutter the road from Madallion up to the golf course.*

From Nel's narration about the Bottom, this clearly shows how class segregation can change, displace and destroy a whole community and especially when the people who are being oppressed can do nothing to stop the oppression.

Even Shadrack who fought for the country in World War II was also humiliated by a white policeman:

*...They took him to jail, booked him for vagrancy and intoxication, and locked him in cell...the Sheriff looked through the bars at the young man with the matted hair. He had read through his prisoner's papers and hailed a farmer. When Shadrack awoke, the sheriff handed him back his papers and escorted him to the back of a wagon.*

Because Shadrack is black and seen in the street looking unkempt, the first conception by the policemen is to react negatively. They quickly booked him even though he had not done anything to warrant his arrest. He is further humiliated in the prison by allocating a cot for him to sleep and by the time he was released; he was made to take a ride back to medallion in the back of a wagon stacked with "sacks of squash and hills of pumpkins".

Also, the ability to get a job often depends on one's race. The white would get a job at ease while the blacks would work hard before they could get a job. And if eventually, they get the job. The money paid them is not always enough to take care of their family, most of the time they are always humiliated. The men who are unable to get jobs to meet their family needs transform into irresponsible men, uncaring, violent and eventually abandoned their homes. This is what we see happening to Jude who though very strong could not get a job after several attempts. Because of this, his ego is crushed and for him to be a man, he decides to marry hence taking solace in the fact that he is going to be the head of a family (at least he will be in full control of everything happening to his family members):

*Along with a few other young black men, Jude had gone down to the shack where they are hiring...Jude himself longed more than anybody else to be taken...It was after he stood in lines for six days running and saw the gang boss pick out thin-armed white boys from Virginia hills and the bull-necked Greeks and Italians over and over...so it was rage, rage and determination to take on a man's role anyhow that made him press Nel about settling down.*

But from the above, Jude loses his will to a man except when he decides to marry Nel. Jude believes getting married will relieve him of the psychological disorder he is going through. The state of one's feeling of having been deracinated and displaced is called "unhomeness, a term coined by Homi Bhabha and other theorists of post-colonialism. An unhomed person does not have the feeling of belonging since he/she is in a psychological limbo which generally ends in some psychological disorders and cultural displacement. Here, being "unhomed" does not mean being homeless. "is to feel not at home even in one's own home because you are not at home in yourself; that is, your cultural identity crisis has made you a psychological refugee".

Despite Sula going to school feels out of place in her new environment. Having been schooled in the way of life of white people, Sula feels constrict and depreciated by a people she hardly knows. She therefore longed to go home to the place where she can be at home with her new identity of an independent woman and not feeling oppressed:

*Nel was one of the reasons she had drifted back to Medallion, that and the boredom she found in Nashville, Detroit, New Orleans, New York, Philadelphia, Macon and San Diego. All these cities held the same people, working the same mouths, sweating the same sweat. The men who took her to one or another of these places had merged into one large personality: the same language of love, same entertainments of love, the same cooling of love. Whenever she introduced her private thoughts into their rubbings or goings, they hooded their eyes...She had been looking all along for a friend, and it took her a while to discover that a lover was not a comrade and could never be- for a woman.*

Racism and oppression was seen at various levels, the bottom was a symbol of fear of uncertainty, violence, intimidation, oppression, exploitation and segregation to virtually all the black characters. The white initially rejected the hilly lands which the blacks call Bottom town because of the fact that they feel they are superior to the black. This was reflected in the way and manner a whole community was displaced, without considering the negative effect / psychological disorder.

### **Pecola and the American Instinct**

Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eyes*, tells the story of Pecola – a poor, black, lonely little girl who embraces the beauty standard. She sees and believes in the super writing of the white race over the black race. She believes that getting the blue eyes will make her equate herself with the white race. The more she tries, the more she put herself into confusion within her environment. She lacks confidence in herself and even her race. She sees herself as a second class citizen and eventually she was caught up in between the two culture 'black' and 'white'. The white beauty standard imposed on African-American girls can cause severe entrapment and displacement for people of colour due to pervasive prejudice against her blackness, Pecola's mother, Pauline Breedlove, has difficulty adjusting to her place and position in the northern city because she was underpaid and undervalued due to her class and race. Pauline Breedlove, works for the Fisher family and with time she adjusts to their house and lifestyle at the expense of her own family.

*More and more she neglected her house, her children, her man, they were like afterthoughts one has just before sleep.... The dark edges that made the daily life with the Fishers lighter, more delicate, more lovely. Here she could arrange things, clean things, line things up in neat rows... Here she found beauty, order, cleanliness and praise.*

In the above works of Toni Morrison, Pecola sees the world of the black as ugly, dirty and with violence. She goes through a mental and physical violence. The internal violence in the family and the lack of love destroys Pecola making her a victim. She was emotionally and physically abused on several occasions by the entire community around her even by her family. From Pecola we could see the menace of white beauty standard and the lost of one's self. Morrison describes the protagonist (Pecola) to have fall in between the past and present, visible and invisible, private and public, and the homely and the unhomely.

*Here was an ugly little girl asking for beauty... A little black girl who wanted to rise up out of the pit of her blackness and see the world with blue eyes. His outrage grew and felt like power, for the first time she honestly wished he could work miracle.*

Pecola could not strike a balance, this act led (Pecola) to her madness and ended up in living in homelessness and in the "unhormely". She demonstrates in this novel the damage caused by internalized racism and what happens when African American people begin to believe the stereotypes of themselves, when they, with the idea that white is most lofy and beautiful and black is most degraded and ugly. Morrison demonstrates this phenomenon in a most divesting way as it affects children. Another instant of humiliation in the novel, another instant was at Aunt Jimmy's funeral where Cholly met a girl and they took off into a nearby field, their kissing which was interrupted by two white hunters who order Cholly to make love to the girl while they watch them. Cholly was humiliated and transferred this anger to the girl.

Toni Morrison explored the distortion of black reality by the dominant group for its vested interest. She refused the hierarchical order shaped by the concepts of centre and periphery and questions the ideology on which the order is based. Blues Eyes become for her a symbol of pride and dignity. She seeks the glory of blue eyes through prayer.

... and eventually through madness when, believing that Blue Eyes have, finally been granted her, she walks about flapping her arms like wings convinced that she can fly. Secure in her madness, she has no knowledge that she has become the town pariah.

The instinct of admiring and embracing the white man's way of life was right in the attitude of Pecola. Right from the beginning of the novel, Pecola admires the white ways of life. She sees herself as being inferior to the white race. She believes once she can have the blue eyes, she can be equal to a white man in all ramifications. She lacks the confidence in herself and even the black race. She sees herself as a second class citizen eventually she was caught up in between the two cultures - 'black' and 'white'. Throughout the novel, Toni Morrison adds to our understanding about why each member of the family has acquired a destructive and self-sabotaging attitude, but it is Pecola she chooses as her focus. She has been explicit about her reasons for concentrating on the character of Pecola.

### Conclusion

Most of the characters in *Sula* and *The Bluest Eyes* are either oppressed because they are considered less than the whites. Sula is oppressed via so many terms likewise Pecola. But Sula acquired value that transposes her into an independent woman who is self actualized and confident despite the oppressive life she finds herself while Pecola suffers madness based on the fact that she embraces the white man culture and she believes that she is ugly. She equally believes that getting blue eyes will qualify her to attain some quality of the white counter part. She forces herself into what she is actually not. From the aforementioned, Toni Morrison's work is deeply rooted in history and mythology; her works resonate with mixtures of pleasure and pain, wonder and horror. Primal in their essence, her characters come at you with the force of gushing water, seemingly fantastic but basic as the earth they stand on. They erupt out of the world, sometimes gently, often with force and terror. She is also an African-American writer rooted for the examination of black experience (particularly) Black female experience within the black community. Her writing style is easily distinguishable due to her unique set of language. Her works are praised for addressing the harsh consequence of racism in the United state.

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