Concept of Family and Love in Toni Morrison: A Study of the Bluest Eye and Beloved

Dr. Sunil Garg
Assistant Professor Of English
Dr. Br Ambedkar Govt College Jagdishpura, Kaithal

Abstract

The writings of Toni Morrison have given a worldwide identity to the Black people and their culture. She has been on the forefront to give a literary portrayal to the complex stereotypical image of black woman and their sufferings under male dominated society. In the nineteenth century folklore tales where the white women have been shown as angels, the black women have been merely as sexual animals. But Morrison's novels worked to make both woman and black woman more visible and comprehensible to the audience by portraying their socio-psychological wreckage under cultural hegemony. Her prime interest lies in probing her characters' relationship to the earth, to the community, to their fellow-beings and to themselves with their duties and responsibilities. She states that her characters are not bigger than life as some critics propose it to be but as big as life. Her novels often read traumatized black characters, who moved to northern American cities to escape from the hardships of south but there too they were subjected to an existence of alienation and abnegation but Morrison's mission as a writer is to take over this tradition of isolation and resistance through love.

Like other African-American writers, Morrison too writes for and from within the black community. While handling the issues of barbaric slavery, race and class discrimination, white oppression, dysfunctional families she also chooses love as the central trope in all her novels. Of all forms of love she shows a consistent preoccupation with mother's love so much so that Andrea O'Reilly in her article ***—Maternal Resistance and Redemption in Toni Morrison's Paradise*** has described mother's love in Morrison as the heart of the matter. Describing Morrison's belief she writes, ―mothering is essential for the emotional well-being of children because it is the mother who first loves the child and gives to that child a loved sense of self. Morrison's children thus move from mother-love to self-love to selfhood (188-189).

Her first novel, *The Bluest Eye,* demonstrates that love is a vital signifier, a mirror of selfhood. Perhaps it is the principal perspective worked upon by Morrison. As having initiated it substantially in her first novel she has persistently labored to express it with little bit variations as the determining theme of her all subsequent works. Love is never any better than the lover. Wicked people love wickedly, violent people love violently, weak people love weakly, stupid people love stupidly, but the love of a free man is never safe. There is no gift for the beloved. The lover alone possesses his gift of love. The loved one is shorn, neutralized, frozen in the glare of the lover‘s inward eye. (163)

The Bluest Eye is a study in self-loathing. It is the story of black families modeled after whites nuclear standard in an industrial town but Morrison instead of homogenizing them as nurturing entities, investigates the factors that distinguish and disorient them. In the onset of the novel Mrs. MacTeer‘s tough and rough nurturance of her sick daughter Claudia is suggestive of the strong motherly/familial love. In contrast to this, the main family which is central to the story lacks this traditional cardinal family value. The family‘s name Breedlove connotes promotion of love, warmth and care but ironically it negates love at every stance of life and merely breeds self-hatred. As the inheritors of damaged legacies, Cholly and Pauline are those unsuccessful parental figures who owing to lack of love and protection in their own lives not only fail to ameliorate their own and their children‘s plight but also aggravate their crisis. Jane Bakerman writes about their failed parenthood: ―They can not give their children a sense of self for they have none of their own‖ (qtd. in Gosavi 58). Their implicit self-loathing expressed in incessant familial abusing transforms their daughter into the essence of negative selfhood of the mother and it teaches their son, Sammy, the abandonment, abscondment and irresponsibility of his father. Morrison is clearly making an inverted statement that it is neither the four walls that make a home nor living together of parents and children. It is love which homes a family.

Pecola‘s traumatic journey serves as a statement on the hegemonic equations of love, beauty and happiness and how in the absence of love the mechanism of human mind creates a state of self induced illusion of self love and happiness in madness. Her madness begins when having experienced psychological and emotional deprivation in their own childhood Pauline and Cholly throw her into the quagmire of lovelessness. Though, Pauline is not as unlovable and

forsaken child of her family, her minor crippling at the age of two, instills in her a sense of inferiority and dismantles her familial attachment. Her exclusion from the tradition of nicknaming, a ritual expressing love and fondness, is also largely responsible for her unclaimed and loveless state. She is anguished to feel why no one ever bothered to meet her separate wishes or tease her amusingly. What exaggerates it more is her detachment from oral folktales; the knowledgeable source of black culture and their inborn solidarity. Therefore as soon as marriage with Cholly drives her out of Georgia and its warm environs, she simultaneously gives up whatever congenial connections she had.

Like a psychologist Morrison investigates the individual malaise in their life to expose how these could be corrected. Morrison through Pauline castigates the dangerous association of beauty with love. Pauline fosters her children but with little love and care of a mother because they are ugly: ―But I knowed she was ugly. Head full of pretty hair, but lord she was ugly‖ (*TBE* 98).

Unloving Pauline rather becomes a destructive mother as she herself impairs her children by feeding them with fear, frustration and self-hatred: ―Into her son she beat a loud desire to run away, and into her daughter she beat a fear of growing up, fear of other people, fear of life‖ (100). Undoubtedly, it is her emotionally divorced stance that compels Pecola to avoid calling her mama. This morbid mother seeks alternative love objects. She loves affluence and seeks satisfaction as ―an ideal servant, for such a role filled practically all of her needs‖ (98). Her masters‘ family becomes her alternative family as its advantageous belonging serves her with social respect and provides her a nickname, Polly also. Consequently the realization of adoration leaves her with no love for her family. Loving and caring for the daughter of white family she neglects and even acts cruelly to her own daughter.

Thus pining for the love of parents, she remains unaware of the fundamental need of mother-love in physical and psychological growth of her child. Thereby Pauline not only damages the emotional orientation needed in relationships but also practices to evoke abuse and violence within family. Unsocialized, unfathered, uncultivated and with no experience or awareness of child-rearing, Cholly, too has no idea of carrying out such responsibilities. Morrison says, if ―He had not been alone in the world since he was thirteen, knowing only a dying old woman who felt responsible for him, but whose age, sex, and interest were so remote from his own, he might have felt a stable connection between himself and the children‖ (*TBE* 126-7).

By distorting the naturally loving alliances, the novel persistently keeps the reader on an edge to navigate the complexities of love and hate. The complexity of survival disorients the boundaries of selfhood and disrupts the bonds of love and affection inflicting serious emotional wounds. It seems that the emotional and physical violence imposed by parents upon children is a primal part of this novel. Survival has always been the fundamental concern for African-American people and to achieve it each had to make some sacrifices of love and emotions in some ways. But Morrison presenting love as a natural and strong life force shows how love is problematic and turns pathologic even in its slightest disruption.

Morrison‘s investigation into a mother‘s love for her child and its intensities, complexities, morbidities and distortions continues in *Beloved* also. Different from the pathologic love of Margaret, here Morrison makes Sethe, a black mother the archetype of motherhood. However, besides presenting Sethe‘s abyssal capacity to love the emphasis is laid upon the archetype‘s power to love as well as the propensity of love to raze. *Beloved* is the portrayal of the problematics imposed upon familial love under the duress of slavery, which never allowed women to nurture their children or love their partners. Situated in 1870s in the final years of Afro-American slavery and its aftermath, *Beloved* is a heart-rending depiction of a slave mother‘s love. The narrative is the recreation of memory of those hostile circumstances under which to guard their children against physical and psychological ravages black slave mothers took to killing them with their own hands. Otten has pointed out how ―infanticide was a common experience among slave mothers, at time in rage against malefic white fathers, at times in paradoxical acts of mercy directed toward their children‖ (qtd. in O‘Donnell and Peterson 657).

Morrison dedicates the story to the terrible love of a mother starting it from an epigraph, taken from the New Testament book of Romans: ―*I will call them my people, which were not my people; and her beloved, which was not beloved*‖ (*B*). In an interview she said, it strongly propelled her to feel that ―a woman loved something other than herself so much. She had placed all the value of her life in something outside herself‖ (qtd. in Tally 59). The inspiration of the story is the real tale of a fugitive slave Margaret Garner who maimed her girl for precluding her retreat into slavery. She did it for she couldn‘t see her under the institutionalized dehumanization. Thus the novel is the testimonial account of strong and dangerous love of what Barbara Schapiro calls, an ―intimacy of destructive rage . . . incited by feelings of love‖ (qtd. in

O'Donnell and Peterson 659), of what Ashraf Rushdy sees as ―scarred and dismembered by slavery and then salvaged and remembered in the acts of free love‖ (qtd. in Nweke).

The love bonding between Beloved and Sethe has deep psychological implications. When Beloved was killed she was in the anal stage of psychological development in which the child feels symbiotic belonging with the mother. Thus having been killed before the phallic stage in which the child undergoing the shame of oedipal crisis or internalizing the societal values develops an individual identity, Beloved becomes a stunted psyche. The halt in her socialization or development of the separate self from the mother is obvious in the ways her reincarnated self seeks ridiculous dependence over Sethe. She is tenaciously attached to her mother. She rises early in the morning to be there where Sethe is, to watch her working and getting ready to go. She is a possessive and greedy ghost. Morrison has woven a unique love triangle between a mother and her two daughters, with fluid boundaries of self. Barbara Schapiro says that the series of monologue by Beloved, Sethe and Denver ―suggest something more extreme and dangerous than mere fluidity of boundaries: the monologue reveal an utter breakdown of the borders between self and other, a collapse that is bound up with incorporative fantasies (202). Their consecutive thoughts claiming identification, possession and reclamation/repossession underline their attempts to seek love of the other, besides oneness with one another: ―You are my sister‖, ―You are my daughter‖, ―You are my face; you are me‖. . . ―You are my face; I am you. Why did you leave me who am you?‖, ―I will never leave you again‖ . . . ―You are mine‖, ―You are mine‖, ―You are mine‖ (*B* 216-7).

This identification of the mother and child is a repetition of the previous identification of Sethe and her mother. According to Jessica Benjamin's ―inter-subjective theory, which is a modification of ―Object Relation Theory‖, a child develops through her relationship with the mother but the child needs to see the mother: ―as an independent subject, not simply as the _external world' or an adjunct of his ego‖ (qtd. in Schapiro 196). Schapiro describes that Benjamin's theory of ―inter-subjectivity is complementary to the theory of ―intra-psychic which defines self and the other ―as distinct but interrelated beings‖ where, though self and other are unified and attuned they maintain separation or distinction of boundaries: ―Intra-psychic theory projects that the prime necessity is for mutual recognition – ―the necessity of recognizing as well as being recognized by the other‖ (196). But in Beloved and Sethe's

interrelation is a blurring of boundaries between self and the other, which gives way to the formation of aggression and powerful possession. 65

Thus *Beloved* is a psychological tale of disrupted love relationship between a mother and daughter. The story has a number of such unusual mother-child relationships. Sister of Stamp Paid, an Underground Railroad agent, Ella‘s exposition to such mortifying circumstances completely enervate her maternal instincts. She has to endure ruthless treatment of having been locked in a room and exploited by a rapacious father and son for a full year. Having suffered sexual harassment, Ella refuses to savor any tenderness or love feelings. She does not kill her child like Sethe does but by denying to nurse it she ruthlessly relinquishes it to be dead. Incapable to feel love herself, she also admonishes Sethe when she sees her embracing Denver: ―Don‘t love nothing‖ (*B* 92).

Thus on the basis of an analysis of familial equations as presented in the fictional works of Morrison it becomes indisputably evident that Morrison takes familial love as the centripetal power that plays a seminal role in the evolution of one‘s personality, which in turn largely determines the individual‘s capacity to love. Her faith in traditional African extended kinship makes her deconstruct the western nuclear familial pattern. In the context of familial love, though Morrison has dealt with all familial dimensions such as mother-son, mother-daughter, father-son, father-daughter, grandparents and grandchildren, siblings and even alternative familial structures made of up non-kinship ties, it is mother-child relationship that attracts Morrison‘s attention the most. She deals with the psychological dimension of the mother-child bonding exploring it in a unique way by projecting the perspectives of both mother and child. Unlike Freudian‘s child fixation and negative consequences of it she presents both mother-fixation and child-fixation offering possible remedies to sort out the love riddles. Most of her mother characters are very complex but a few of them are exceptionally strong displaying a very possessive love that impels them to even kill and sell their children if circumstances demand it for what they think is their well being. But almost invariably such acts of mother‘s love generate in the child a sense of betrayal rendering them incapacitated to love healthily in return or return from the other world to claim it, which is Morrison‘s metaphorical representation of the child‘s right to mother‘s love. In most of the cases the alternate mothers try to compensate the loss but they fail to resolve these inner conflicts. Through some exceptional mothers Morrison has exhibited how these dilemmas can be resolved only with self-agency and self-determinism,

though as an exception she also exhibits the therapeutic power of mother‘s love leading to self-redemption. For some of her characters motherhood is burdensome and a hindrance in self-actualization making them resists it while for others it is fulfilling and even curative as well as a source of empowerment.

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