

# 'The River that Dies Thirsty': Murdering Black Womanhood in Toni Morrison's *Bluest Eye*

*Dr. Amal Galal Mohammad Morsy*

Department of English Language and Literature, Faculty of Arts, Fayoum University, Egypt

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## Abstract

Since their arrival at the colonial American society, Black females started their journey of suffering. They used to be perceived within this oppressive racial and capitalistic society as an item of commodity whose basic function is to reproduce as many black bodies as possible to increase the capital of their white masters. However, in spite of the bitterness of slavery and its consequent troubles such as poverty, illiteracy, self-split, violence, oppression and exploitation - which continued even after the emancipation - Black women were able to adjust to these surrounding conditions because they were accompanied by another partner in such journey of suffering, namely Black man. Indeed Black woman suffered physical and psychological violence at the hands of the Whites, but her exploitation by the Black man was more torturous. Tyranny and dominance of the White society was so clear and obvious for the Black women and thus some of them decided to challenge it while others felt that the best way is to adapt the Whites' values in order to ensure their survival. In this regard, this paper is devoted to shed the light on black women who fell victims of their racist and sexist society. It is an attempt to examine the factors that prevented black women from self-recognition and led to the murdering of their womanhood. Adopting the psycho-analytical technique, one of Toni Morrison's novels, *The Bluest Eye*, was selected to demonstrate how black womanhood was lost in such context of social injustice.

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**Keywords:** Racism, Toni Morrison, Zero-image, *The Bluest Eye*, Black women.

## Introduction

At a time when the American society is guided by the norms of whiteness and maleness White women have to fight for their feminism, Black men for their blackness but Black women have to fight their battle on two

fronts because the Black woman suffers both racial and sexual invisibility. (Juneja 79).

Since their arrival at the British colony of Virginia, Black females started their journey of suffering. They were separated from their spouses, children, and their families at their homelands and came to this New Land to find all forms of violence, oppression, as well as physical and psychological exploitation. Some of these black women were brought from rich societies in which women were traders, agriculturalists, and leaders. However, they were perceived within this oppressive capitalistic society of America as an item of commodity whose basic function is to reproduce as many black bodies as possible to increase the capital of their white masters. Thus, they were exposed to rape and sexual exploitation by their white masters, and were forced to have children earlier and regularly.

In spite of the bitterness of slavery and its consequent troubles such as poverty, illiteracy, self-split, violence, oppression and exploitation, which continued even after the emancipation, Black women were able to adjust to these surrounding conditions because they were accompanied by another partner in such journey of suffering, namely Black man. Indeed Black woman suffered physical and psychological violence at the hands of the Whites, but her exploitation by the Black man was more torturous. Tyranny and dominance of the White society was so clear and obvious for the Black women and thus some of them decided to challenge it while others felt that the best way is to adapt the Whites' values in order to ensure their survival. In this regard, this paper is devoted to shed the light on black women who fell victims of racism, gender, economic oppression, sexism and other forms of violence practiced by both white and black men within the American society, adopting the psycho-analytical approach to explain one of Toni Morrison's masterpieces, *The Bluest Eye*. The current research tends to demonstrate how "black women can never become fully empowered in a context of social injustice" (Collins, 3).

### **Black Woman's Identity and the 'Zero Image'**

Tyranny and violence practiced by Black men over their black female partners were much bitter and had stronger impact rather than that of the Whites. The black woman shared the black man in his feeling of isolation within the colonial American society and hence she considered him a partner in her quest for freedom and self-recognition, but she, unfortunately, discovered that she got deceived and that she was a victim of both White and black males. Now, she has to confront two oppressors, White and Black men, in order to assert her being.

They adopted one of the defense mechanisms to challenge both oppressors through initiating another cycle of violence in order to assert her

existence. Exploring the motive of such struggle, Houston Baker writes, "Black woman's struggle for identity is originated by the black person's sudden awareness that she represents what Fowler calls a 'zero image'" (152). For this reason, the Black woman struggles to defy her "zero image" within this patriarchal society where men dominate everything and women's voices are excluded or silenced. Thus, in her struggle to defy this "zero image" Black woman started another cycle of violence that is "violence- revenge-violence", or as Martha J. Cutter describes, "a reciprocal violence"(162). This new cycle is masterly depicted in Morrison's novels.

### **Morrison's *Bluest Eye*: A try to hear the silenced**

In her masterpiece *The Bluest Eye*, Toni Morrison criticizes "the dominant ideology, [the] system of thought that establishes masculinity and whiteness as culturally central and normative by constructing femininity and blackness as Other" (Parker 4). Through her novels, Morrison is known by her interest in giving a voice to her female characters to defy their imposed silence. However, this does not mean that all her female characters are resisting characters or that all of them have that ability to achieve wholeness and self-recognition. In contrast, some of these female characters are characterized by their passivity and lack the ability to resist or to change their humiliating conditions.

Pecola Breedlove and her mother, Pauline, belong to this category of the Blacks who accept the white standards of beauty unquestionably and are, accordingly, convinced that they are ugly. Pecola, for example, "represents the most powerless and the most dispossessed character in the novel. She is situated on the lowest rung of society; she is 'black' in a racist society, she is female in a sexist society, and she is a child in a world of adults" (Koo 97). The "scapegoat" and the "victim" are other descriptive titles suggested by Royster and Cynthia A. Davis about Pecola. For Royster, Pecola is "the novel's central scapegoat" made by the society, the Black community, and her parents (Samuels and Hudson-Weems 14). In a similar context, Cynthia A. Davis views Pecola as "the epitome of the victim in a world that reduces persons to objects and then makes them feel inferior as objects. In this world, light-skinned women can feel superior to dark ones, married women to whores, and so on and on" (Davis 14).

Indeed Koo, Royster, and Davis may be right in their claim that Pecola is a victim of the dominant culture of the whites, her Black community and her family, but it is also clear that she herself shares in her victimization. Pecola's failure in her journey for selfhood lies also in her inability "to recognize that she is responsible for defining a life for herself" (Samuels and Hudson-Weems 14). Because she lacks the ability to realize this responsibility, Pecola builds her life on illusion. In addition to the external factors (racism,

black community, and Pecola's parents) that lead to her victimization, Pecola is also responsible for what happens to her. Thus, these external factors shall not be explained in isolation from Pecola's "Bad Faith" or her inability to change the oppressive reality around her (as her friend Claudia does). Together, both (external factors and her passivity) lead to her destruction and her insanity at the end of the novel.

As for the first factor (i.e. racism) that cripples Pecola's quest of selfhood, it is clear throughout the novel that Pecola "suffers an identity crisis when she falls victim to the standard set by an American society that ascribes what is beautiful to a certain image of white women" (11). The hegemony of these standards deprives her of discovering her own beauty. She is invisible and neglected by her peers and "Her teachers [who] always treated her this way. They tried never to glance at her" (*Bluest Eye* 45). If she leaves this humiliating gaze at the school, she faces the same gaze in the outer society as if she escapes the fire into the hell. This is very clear in Mr. Yacobowski's, the storekeeper, attitude towards Pecola when she goes to buy Mary Janes, her favorite candy:

She looks up at him and sees the vacuum where curiosity ought to lodge. [...] The total absence of human recognition--the glazed separateness. She does not know what keeps his glance suspended. [...]. But she has seen interest, disgust, even anger in grown male eyes. Yet this vacuum is not new to her. [...]. She has seen it lurking in the eyes of all white people. So, the distaste must be for her, her blackness. All things in her are flux and anticipation. But her blackness is static and dread. And it is the blackness that accounts for, that creates, the vacuum edged with distaste in white eyes. (*BE* 44)

Pecola is neglected by Mr. Yacobowski and "all white people" because "for [them] there is nothing to see" (44; 48). She is always invisible for the white eyes, and when she is seen she is met by a hostile gaze. "Because of the completeness of this hostile gaze, Pecola would never know her own beauty. She would see only what there was to see: the eyes of other people," as Leger points out (9). Pecola is now sure that she is valued based on the racist standards of beauty and thus she has no place in this society. Wherever she turns, she is neglected or degraded by the whites for something she has no control on, her blackness.

In an attempt to transcend such predicament and find herself a place in this oppressive world, Pecola "internalize[s] white supremacist values and aesthetics, a way of looking and seeing the world that negates her value" (Fulton 26). She spends hours and hours looking in the mirror to discover the reason of her ugliness but all she can see are her eyes. Thus, she prays day and night for "big blue pretty eyes, storybook eyes. Morning glory eyes" (*BE* 40). She also becomes loyal to everything associated with the world of the whites;

prefers candies of Mary Jane and drinks milk in Shirley Temple's cup. Being loyal to the norms and standards of the white society does not, however, protect Pecola or provide her with the honorable place she dreams of. Instead, she falls a victim of this society "which deliberately deprives her of her personhood through its material and psychological conditions" (Davis 14). As a result, her misery is intensified and her psyche is devastated.

It has been possible for Pecola to overcome the injury of the first factor (racism) if she finds any support from her community. Disappointedly, her community shares in her trauma the same as the whites have done. She is thus a victim of both racial and interracial violence. In other words, it is both the "racist and sexist society [that] is to [be] blame[d] for her situation" (Humann 109). Pecola is avoided and neglected by her black community not for anything but for being black and ugly. This is clear in the humiliating behavior of the black boys who make a circle around Pecola and begin singing: "Black e mo. Black e mo. Yadadsleepnekked" (*BE* 55). This humiliating behavior makes "Pecola edged around the circle crying. She had dropped her notebook, and covered her eyes with her hands" (59). She is blamed and degraded for things that she does not have a hand in and cannot even change or control, namely the color of her skin and her father's sleeping habits. It is Pecola's black skin and the ugliness of her family that determine the shape of her life, a practice that implies a kind of social injustice.

This communal abandonment, represented in the behavior of the black boys, has become a fertile incident for critical analysis. Fulton examines this humiliating behavior psychologically and concludes that it is a kind of projecting one's feeling of self-hatred onto another person: "The intense self-hatred the black community feels toward its blackness is both self-perpetuating and self-regulating within a white supremacist society" (27). Pecola is thus a victim of a community that takes her as a scapegoat to project their feelings of failure and worthlessness. Claudia, the narrator, herself admits after Pecola goes insane that "we honed our egos on her" (*BE* 185).

Not only does the black community was unable to support Pecola in her dilemma, but it also increases her self-destruction. Pecola's community finds in her a prey to project their feelings of degradation and weakness, the feelings that had been initiated within the Blacks' psyche since slavery and never stopped agonizing them. Instead of revenging the hunter- the white racists- the black community chooses an easy prey to satisfy their thirst for pride and dignity. They hate Pecola for being a personification of their ugliness. For them, she is a living testimony of their funkiness, and that is why the adults in her community believe that she would "be better off in the ground" (*BE* 189-90). They neglect her presence and if they communicate with her they shoot her with shower of humiliating words.

Psychologically, when a person is avoided and neglected by others, he/she usually finds in isolation a refuge from the hostility of the outer world. This is true with Pecola. The shameful attitude of Pecola's community instills in her feelings of shame and a desire for isolation. Pecola tries to escape her oppressive reality but, unfortunately, she becomes "schizophrenic" (Bump 162). It is psychologically known that in schizophrenia the person escapes his/her reality into an imaginative world in order to fulfill his/her suppressed desires. In Pecola's case, she escapes her oppressive world where she is unwelcomed and rejected by everyone into her dreams of possessing blue eyes. Unable to achieve her dream and deprived of any help, Pecola's tragedy is worsened more and more.

It is possible for a person to suffer marginalization and oppression in the outer society but when he returns home, he finds the required support to transcend his/her ordeal. In Pecola's case the opposite is her reality. Indeed Pecola encounters various forms of violence and degradation within her society, but her feelings of self-contempt and defectiveness are mainly intensified due to her parents' abusive treatment. Pecola does not find at her home the refuge that helps her transcend her plight. She belongs to a family that is completely defeated by severe economic conditions and poverty. The father is one of the sharecroppers who suffer oppressive economic conditions and injustice. This leads the mother, Pauline, to work in order to help her husband provide the family with food and life necessities.

However, it is not only poverty that controls the life of the Breedloves, but also the dominant ideology plays an important role in their devastation. The Breedloves are described, even by their community members, as ugly. Strangely, the Breedloves themselves have adopted these dominant standards of beauty and have accordingly believed that they are ugly and unworthy. They accept to be an easy prey for the judgment of their unjust society; a judgment that totally devastates their lives, especially that of Pecola. These "dangerous and terrifying conditions of Pecola's household" fuels her desire "to be everything she is not," as Humann states (71; 112). Pecola's parents share in her psychic devastation the same as the society and the black community have done.

Violence is a routine in the daily life of the Breedloves as it is clear in the permanent fights between her parents. It can be said that Pecola's home life plays an important role in her destruction. Explaining the destructive nature of Pecola's family, Morrison writes, "Love is never any better than the lover. Wicked People love wickedly, violent people love violently, weak people love weakly, stupid people love stupidly" (*BE* 206). Psychologically, "many psychotherapists believe that those who did not feel enough love and acceptance in the family of origin experience ... fear of nothingness on some

level" and Pecola experiences this fear at the hand of her parents, especially her mother Pauline (Bump 155).

Pauline Williams Breedlove belongs to this category of Black women who adopt norms of the whites to ensure their safety; that is why she is never satisfied with her husband or her ugly children (Sammy and Pecola). She always feels ashamed and this feeling makes her "bent [her children] toward respectability, and in so doing taught them fear: fear of being clumsy, fear of being like their father, fear of not being loved by God, fear of madness [...] fear of other people, fear of life" (*BE* 116). As a result, Pauline's children learn from their mother that fear and surrender to the dominant culture are the best strategies for survival and respectability.

It can be said then that Pecola's sense of defectiveness is basically instilled and strengthened by the passive model of her mother. Pecola has acquired from her mother a "general feeling of separateness and unworthiness" which, inevitably, produces Pecola's feeling of "self-contempt" (*BE* 111; 122). From the first moment the reader meets Pauline he feels that she is totally damaged by such sense of defectiveness due to her ugliness and her deformed foot. To escape her feelings of inferiority and her pains for being neglected by her community members, Pauline throws herself into the world of the whites until she is entirely absorbed by its norms and its standards of beauty.

Pauline is depicted throughout the novel as an aggressive wife and a careless mother. She is a woman of many contrasts. While she is described as an "ideal servant" (100) in her employer's house, she is a hostile woman within her own home. She devotes all her time and her love for her master's family, the Fishers, especially his little blue-eyed and blond-haired daughter, and deprives her own children of her love. She is called by the Fishers as "Polly" and is the "black mammy" for the Fisher's little girl. In contrast, she forces her children to call her Mrs. Breedlove. But a genius writer like Morrison is not to leave her reader with such "unsympathetic portrait" of one of her characters without justifying this portrayal. Thus, she enables her reader to delve into past memories of Pauline's childhood through Pauline's own words in order to understand the circumstances that produced such "tragic figure" (Fulton 35).

Notably, Pauline's family of origin did not protect her from other people's disgraceful reactions to her physical deformity, which is caused by the penetration of a rusty nail into her foot at the age of two. The ninth of eleven children of Ada and Fowler Williams, Pauline is treated differently from her brothers and sisters and is neglected by everyone around her due to her limp. This creates within her a "general feeling of separateness and unworthiness" (*BE* 111). She spends her childhood mostly at her home separated from any form of friendship or communal communication. This,

accordingly, affects her psychological growth, as Morrison describes: “Restricted, as a child, to this cocoon of her family’s spinning, she cultivated quiet and private pleasures. She liked most of all, to arrange things. To line things up in rows-jars on shelves at canning, peach pits on the step, sticks, stoned leaves- and the members of her family let these arrangements to be” (88).

Moving from this restricted stage of childhood into adulthood, Pauline dreams of love and a man to provide her with “tenderness with strength and a promise of rest” (90). She wants an ideal man to rescue her from her oppressive reality. When she meets Cholly for the first time she loves him for his tenderness and his physical strength (things that she dreams of). Admitting the magic effect of Cholly’s appearance on her life, Pauline states that “she had not known there was so much laughter in the world” (116), and that he adds to her life the lost colors that she has been deprived of since her childhood.

In pursuit of the dream of finding in each other things that they lack, Pauline and Cholly marry and spend a normal type of marital life before their move to the north where there are promises of adequate life and plenty of jobs for the blacks in steel mills. Unfortunately, Cholly and Pauline face many hardships and various forms of oppression and injustice in that North. Thus, they discover that the North is not the paradise they once dreamed of and that it is not more than T.S. Elliot’s wasteland. In other words, the north is found to be a lie that they naively believed. Cholly and Pauline suffer from poverty and oppressive economic conditions that pervade the forties at that time. Pauline suffers from isolation and loneliness as she is separated from her family in the south. In addition, she finds that black people in Ohio are “no better than whites for meanness. They could make you feel just as no-count” (93).

Instead of being supportive for one of their kinsfolk, some of the black women in Pauline’s community start to ridicule Pauline for her way of talking (saying *chi’ren*) and dressing. This, of course, intensifies Pauline’s feeling of loneliness and creates a sense of self-contempt inside her. As a result, she decides to make her own life and her husband’s absence at work for long time besides her feeling of loneliness support this decision. She finally finds in going to the movies her solace. Movies for Pauline seem to be like the river that could satisfy her thirst for love and tenderness. However, this river is found to be a mirage and will later destroy her life. The more Pauline goes to the movies and watch Hollywood films, the more her sense of self-hatred increases and the crack in her marital relationship with Cholly is deepened.

She imitates fashions and hairstyles of white actresses, especially the hairstyle of the American film actress Jean Harlow who was known as the Blonde Bombshell of the thirties. She becomes totally absorbed and obsessed

by white standards of beauty displayed through the Hollywood films. This fascination with the American movies may signify her desire to escape her severe reality. She is fond of going to the cinema because “in the dark her memory was refreshed, and she succumbed to her earlier dreams. Along with the idea of romantic to another-physical beauty” (BE 122). She seeks love and physical beauty in these movies, things that she lacks in her real life. She tries to fulfill her *self* through these movies, but, unfortunately, these movies destroy her life. Pauline starts to hate everything that is black and, therefore, she hates her own daughter for being a living reminder of her blackness or the ugliness that she constantly tends to escape.

It is difficult then for a mother like Pauline with such sense of self-hatred to become a nurturing mother for her daughter. Adrienne Rich tries to depict the devastating effect of a mother’s self-contempt on a daughter that “A mother’s victimization does not merely humiliate her, it mutilates the daughter who watches her for clues as to what it means to be a woman. Like the traditional foot-bound Chinese woman, she passes on her own affliction. The mother’s self-hatred and low expectations are the binding-rags for the psyche of the daughter (Koo 114). In a similar context, Koo believes that “the cruelty and hate expressed in Mrs. Breedlove’s physical violence towards her daughter suggests the total estrangement between mother and daughter” (115).

When Pauline goes to deliver Pecola, she suffers humiliation and mistreatment at every moment she spends at the hospital. Overhearing the white doctors’ description of black women as animals as “they deliver right away and with no pain, just like horses”, Pauline starts to groan “something awful” to prove to the white doctors that delivering a baby is “more than a bowel movement” and that black women suffer like all other women (BE 124-25). It is inevitable then for Pauline to project her feeling of self-contempt onto her baby daughter, and to see her newborn baby through a white- gaze not a motherly gaze. From the first moment she sees her daughter she describes her as ugly “head full of pretty hair, but Lord she was ugly” (126). It can be said that from the first moment of Pecola’s existence in life she is unwelcomed by her mother. Because of Pecola’s ugliness Pauline sees her as a living reminder of her own ugliness; that is why she (Pauline) attempts to detach herself from such reminder and dives more and more into the world of the whites searching for security and self-fulfillment.

Unfortunately, this absorption within the world of the whites does not provide Pauline with safety and happiness that she seeks. Her feeling of self-contempt is stronger. That is why when she loses her front tooth (during her pregnancy with her second child, Sammy), she disappointedly feels that “Everything went then” and resigns herself “to just being ugly”. Commenting on this incident of Pauline’s loss of her front tooth, Lara Fulton argues, “the loss of Pauline’s tooth is one of Morrison’s clearest metaphors for the

insidious effect of white ideology on black identity” (36). This incident leaves Pauline with a sense of self-fragmentation. It might be possible for Pauline to transcend such psychological ordeal if she found support from the members of her black community, but, unfortunately, they disappoint her with their shameful treatment with her and her family. She and her family are avoided and neglected for being black and ugly.

Now identified as ugly and inferior based on the norms of the dominant culture of the whites and degraded by her community, Pauline pursues her journey for self-fulfillment. Again, she seeks self-completion in the realm of the whites, but this time will be at the Fisher’s house instead of the Hollywood films. Working as a servant for the Fishers, Pauline devotes all her time and efforts for the Fisher’s “perfect world and their perfect little girl” at the expense of her own family (*BE* 101). “She neglected her house, her children, her man... they were after thoughts” (101). At this stage, Pauline is considered a perfect personification of the negative image of the black mothers who fail to nurture their own children for the favor of their masters.

Pauline totally neglects her own children, especially her daughter Pecola, while dedicating her efforts and her love for the little daughter of her master’s family. For Carolyn Ann Wayne, “[Pauline’s] negative feelings toward her children are a result of her inability to adequately provide for them. [She] feels more comfortable in the luxurious home of her white employer, so she rejects her own culture of poverty and everyone associated with that culture” (3). At the Fisher’s house Pauline finds the home she dreams with for her own home. She admires the luxury of the house, its fine kitchen, its fully-stocked pantry and its clean plush white towels. Another important thing that Pauline is deprived of and finds at the Fisher’s house is respect. At the Fisher’s Pauline is given a nickname (“Polly”) and she becomes “what was known as an ideal servant, for such a role filled practically all her needs” (*BE* 100).

Pauline duly loves her employer’s house more than hers and his blue-eyed and blonde-haired daughter more than her own daughter. At the time that she is considered “the black mammy” to the blond girl, who is also permitted and welcomed by Pauline to call her “Polly,” Pauline’s children, Pecola and Sammy, are forced to call her Mrs. Breedlove. A perfect example of Pauline’s loyalty to the Fishers at the expense of her children is very clear through her shameful and unexpected behavior towards her daughter Pecola when she spills the blueberry juice on the Fisher’s kitchen’s floor.

When Claudia and Frieda go to Pecola at the place where her mother works and wait with her in the Kitchen, Pecola, unintentionally, spills the blueberry juice on “the floor, splattering blackish blue berries everywhere. Most of the juice splashed on Pecola’s legs, and the burn must have been painful, for she cried out and began hopping about just as Mrs. Breedlove entered” (108-09). Driven by maternal instinct any mother at Pauline’s

situation shall relieve her daughter and cures her pain. Shamefully and unexpectedly, Pauline does not pay any attention for her daughter's injury. In addition, she cruelly knocks "her to the floor" and, then, "yanked her up by the arm, slapped her again, and in a voice thin with anger, abused Pecola directly and Frieda and me [Claudia, narrator of the incident] by implication" (109). She thinks only of how to relieve and comfort the upset white girl with a soft and sweet voice.

This scene has drawn the attention of many critics and scholars for its strangeness and its powerful effect on the formation of Pecola's identity. For example, Barbara Frey Waxman sees in "Pauline's distaste for her pathetic daughter [an expression of] her embrace of the Master Narrative" (Humann 113). Relating this embracement of white norms by Pauline to Pecola's psychological death Margaret Delashmit writes, "when Pauline embraces the white family she works for, especially the little white girl with blue eyes, to the extent that she neglects her own family, blue eyes become for Pecola a metaphor for her mother's love" (113). Pauline thus plays an important role in Pecola's victimization and her failure to achieve self-completion.

Other critics such as Samuels and Hudson-Weems admit that "through her mother's blurred vision of the pink, white, and golden world of the Fishers, Pecola learns that she is ugly, unacceptable, and especially unloved", but at the same time they see Pauline's loyalty to the Fishers seems to Samuels and Hudson-Weems as a strategy adopted by a weak woman to acquire the "power" that she needs for her survival. Indeed Pauline's presence at the Fisher's home provides her with the power she lacks but it also teaches her the language of violence as a way of relieving her suppressed outrage. According to Fulton, "tragically, in succumbing to the anaesthetizing, sterilizing whiteness of the Fisher household, Pauline turns to violence to awaken her numbed senses and feel physically and spiritually alive" (38).

Strangely enough, both Cholly and Pauline fight severely and strongly as if each one is keen to kill the other, however, they had agreed not to kill each other. They love each other but their love is abused by their oppressive and frustrating economic conditions. These conditions nurture only destructive love. This is very clear in the following description of their fights:

Cholly and Mrs. Breedlove each other with a darkly brutal formalism that was paralleled only by their lovemaking. Tacitly they had agreed not to kill each other. He fought her the way a coward fights a man-with feet, the palms of his hands, and teeth. She, in turn, fought back in a purely feminine way-with frying pans and pokers, and occasionally a flatiron would sail toward his head. They did not talk, groan, or curse during these beatings. There was only the muted sound of falling things, and flesh on unsurprised flesh. (*BE* 38 )

In spite of the abusive manner of her husband Cholly and his constant fights and beatings, Pauline “needs him and his failings in order to feel righteously indignant” (Beckmann 416). This drives her to align with him and blame her daughter only for the vicious act of rape. In an attempt to examine such strange reaction by Pauline, Samuels and Hudson-Weems argue that, “both [Pauline and Cholly] ...have such split of the self or, in other words, unfulfilled self” (28). She sees in Cholly her fragmented self, and, in turn, transfers her feelings of self-contempt and defectiveness to her children, especially Pecola.

But if Pauline personifies a negative image of a black mother, she also symbolizes the “familiar role for African women”, as Beckmann puts it (416). She represents the hardships and sufferings that black women were burdened with throughout their history within the oppressive racist society of America. Indeed her work as a servant at the Fisher’s home is sometimes explained as a means to acquire power and to fulfill her self, but she, like many black women, is forced to work in order to help her husband and to provide her family with food and necessities of life. In addition, she faces the same destiny that other black women faced when her husband, Cholly, leaves her by the end of the novel to deal with a pregnant daughter who has lost her mind in the illusion that she has the bluest eyes.

Indeed the role of Pecola’s parents and her community in her victimization cannot be overlooked, but she herself is a participant and not simply a victim. In order for a person to realize self-completion, he/she shall accept his/her self and his/her own identity, a condition that Pecola fails to realize. She has participated in her plight “because she fails to recognize that she must define a life for herself” (Bouson 45).

Her flaws are that she does not have a resisting spirit to defy the norms around her, but she behaves as same as her community members who are totally absorbed by these norms. This may explain why she seeks survival and self-completion but in an opposite direction. She tends to detach herself from her African-American characteristics to survive within this racist society of America, the same attitude adopted by Pecola’s mother, Pauline. Pecola’s plight is initiated basically from “her inability to achieve a positive reading of blackness in an urban setting dominated by pervasive white standards” (Awkward 205).

A clear evidence of Pecola’s weakness and powerlessness is that she has not the ability or the voice to tell her own story. Her story is told by her friend Claudia. Pecola has no voice to tell her story, and this silence is “the void that is Pecola’s ‘unbeing’,” as Morrison states (Koo 122). Helen Cixous in “Castration or Decapitation” explains the symbolic meaning of female silence and hysteria: “Silence is the mark of hysteria. The great hysterics have lost speech, they are aphonic, and at times have lost more than speech: they

are pushed to the point of choking, nothing gets through. They are decapitated, their tongues are cut off” (Koo 122).

## Conclusion

Notably, Pecola and Pauline’s flaw lies in their defeated spirit. They have not the strength or courage to resist their oppressive reality. Pecola is completely defeated by her sense of shame and unworthiness for being black. She lacks the pride that Claudia and Frieda have; that is why passivity is always her response for any situation she encounters. For example, when Maureen insults her with her demoralizing words, Pecola’s sense of shame and inferiority silences her and makes her blame always confined to one reason, her blackness. It is also this sense of shame and inferiority that drives Pecola to be “backed out of the room [in Geraldine’s house] outside, the March wind blew into the rip in her dress. She held her head down against the cold” (BE 76). It is this lack of pride that enables others to victimize Pecola. When she looks for wholeness and tries to achieve her dream of the blue eyes, she consults the wrong person, Soaphead Church, who drives her into madness not happiness. At the end of the novel, Pecola “has no claim to an identity and wholeness but has instead been divided into two, inside and outside the mirror... There is no victory for Pecola, she is completely defeated” (Napieralski 61).

It can thus be said that Pecola, her parents and her community are all participants in her plight, and all of them are also victims of the dominant white culture “that reduces persons to objects and then makes them feel inferior as objects” (Bouson 44). At the end of the novel, Pecola goes insane and is silenced. She loses the ability to give a voice to tell her story till the reader knows her story through Claudia’s words “that *Pecola’s silence* was because *she* was having her father’s baby; *an incestuous act that prevents the marigolds’ growth*” (Italics added; BE 9).

Through the analysis of the characters of Pecola and her mother Pauline, it becomes clear that

Morrison reveals to us that insight without action is not transformative for those struggling against oppression. Without actively resisting ideological constructs of racial superiority and reworking racial representation, the “land” will; continue to kill ‘of its own volition’ and society will ‘acquiesce and say the victim had no right to live.’ (Fulton 52)

In a nutshell, this category of black women, Pauline and Pecola, fail to realize their dream of self-completion because [the] soil is bad for certain kinds of flowers. Certain seeds it will not nurture, certain fruit it will not bear, and when the land kills of it own violation, we acquiesce and say the victim had no right to live. We were wrong, of course, but it doesn't matter. It is too late. (BE 160)

Just as the land will not nurture certain seeds, American society under racism is hostile to the growth of this category of black women. Within this hostile society, black women have been burdened by many roles, which, in turn, result in black women's feelings of loss. Murdering their sense of identity and womanhood, some black women have failed to perform their assigned roles as mothers and daughters. It was such racial and sexist society in which black women are involved that actually led to the murdering of black womanhood.

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