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Absurdism in Toni Morrison's the Bluest Eye and Sula

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Abstract:

Toni Morrison, the Nobel Prize winning woman novelist on the canon of African American literature poignantly, shows the terrible reality in the lives of the blacks in general and black women in particular. The present paper detects the element of absurdism in her novels The Bluest Eye and Sula. Both of these novels delineates the suffering, humiliation and exploitation of the blacks in general and black women in particular. The blacks either males or females face the absurdity of life. They don't find any meaning in their lives. Being black their life is absurd. The paper shows the meaningless existence of the blacks portrayed in the respected novels.

Keywords: Absurdism, existence, survival, exploitation, inferior etc.

Toni Morrison, one of the most celebrated woman novelist in the field of African American literature exposes the ill effects of racism upon the psyche of the blacks in her novel The Bluest Eye. She focuses upon the racial discrimination of the blacks in white dominated America in this novel. While her next novel Sula gives voice to the voiceless.

The theme of the novel The Bluest Eye centers around the black female protagonist Pecola Breedlove, who is crazy for getting the blue eyes. Her existence is meaningless being black in the white dominated racist society. As a black child, she is humiliated, exploited and marginalized not only in the society, but also at home due to her black color. K.Sumana asserts: "Constant racism forms a continuity in the cycle of frustration from which the town folk cannot easily escape. The hostile environment that surrounds the blacks makes them 'helpless scapegoats of subservient acceptance of everything white.'"(76) Thus racism is observed in The Bluest Eye as well as in Sula. The only difference is that racism is at the root of The Bluest Eye whereas in Sula it has a secondary concern. In both of the novels it has made the lives of the blacks absurd and meaningless. The white masters have used this tool of racism to make the life of the blacks more vulnerable, meaningless and completely absurd.

Her mother Pauline does not love her. She considers her ugly. Her father too does not pay any attention to her. At school also Pecola is alienated. There are many incidents in the novel which shows the blacks' existence meaningless and particularly Pecola. At the school she sits alone on the bench. The black boys too harass her calling as, "Black e mo. Black e mo. Yadaddsleepsnekked. Black e mo black e mo ya dadd sleeps nekked. Black e mo..."(50) She feels very helpless. She is neglected even by a shopkeeper when she demands the candies. He doesn't even look at her. It shows Pecola's meaningless and absurd existence. There is no any meaning in her life being black. She understands that one of the school girl namely Maureen Peal is respected due to her color. So She too wants to become white. She is attracted towards the blue eyes of the doll. She is seen completely victim of this white standard of beauty. She is humiliated by one female character in the novel, namely, Geraldine who does not accept Pecola's existence. She considers her absurd. She had seen this little girl all of her life...hair uncombed, dresses falling apart, shoes untied and caked with dirt. They had stared at her with great uncomprehending eyes. Eye that questioned nothing and ask everything." (72) Without fail, she prays to God for the blue eyes daily. Pecola hopes that the blue eyes would give her new existence and her humiliation will stop not only in society but also at home. As the novelist writes: "If she looked different, beautiful, maybe Cholly would be different, and Mrs. Breedlove too. Maybe they'd say, "Why, look at pretty-eyed Pecola. We mustn't do bad things in front of those pretty eyes." (34) Being black the Breedloves live on the periphery of the society. They live in a very uncomfortable house.

The novel shows the lives of the blacks in 1920s when there was economic depression. So the blacks faced the both dilemmas of racism and classism. They are considered as ugly because of their black skin. The ugliness that makes the Blacks' existence more awful in a racist America is not inborn in them. They were just slaves of their masters. As Linden writes: "Slavery was an old institution. It was in part justified by the white supremacists. White considered slaves inferior due to their race." They deliberately put out at such a situation where they are unable to think about their past. As Morrison writes: "The eyes, the small eyes set closely together...couldn't find the source." (28) In The Bluest Eye the economic poverty of the Breedloves don't allow them to live a happy life. Domestic violence takes place at home. Both Cholly and Pauline fight with each other in front of Pecola. Cholly's life is also meaningless since he does not find any better opportunity in the white society. His past is vulnerable. As the novelist writes: "When Cholly was four days old his mother wrapped him into blankets and one newspaper and placed him on a junk heap by the railroad." (103) In the novel he is observed as a victim of racism. He was caught by two white men while doing intercourse with one country girl and was humiliated for his act. It was a very shameful experience for him. He was bullied and humiliated when he was caught with one

country girl. "There stood two white men. One with spirit lamp the other with flashlight. There was no mistake about their being white he could smell it Cholly jumped trying to kneed stand and get his pants up all in one motion .The men had long guns. "Hee hee hee hee" The snicker was a long asthmatic cough. The other reached the flashlight all over cholly and Darlene. " gel on wid it nigger" said the flashlight one. "Sir?" said Cholly trying to find buttonhole. I said 'get on wid it And 'make it good, nigger make it good.'"(110) Cholly faced the racial discrimination of the whites. The whites made the blacks to look down upon. Cholly's character stands for the marginalization of the blacks on the account of their race and color. Since Cholly is unable to fulfill the basic requirements of the family. The Breedloves live in a very uncomfortable place which shows their meaningless existence. As the novelist writes: "The Breedloves did not live in a storefront because they were having temporary difficulty adjusting to cutbacks at the plant. They lived there because they were poor and black, and they stayed there because they believed they were ugly." (28)

Cholly's wife Pauline seeks a job of the maid servant in one white Fisher family. Pauline does not find any meaning in her own house, but on the contrary, she feels proud to work for a white family. Pauline puts the family 'outdoors', which is a terror in the lives of black family. Therefore Pauline tries to imitate the ways of the whites with the hope to get some meaning in her life. Pauline tries to assert her identity by accepting the White standards in order to avoid victimization. As Shelby Steel puts it: "To be a black was to be a victim, therefore, not to be a victim was not to be a black." (58) But when her husband comes to her employer and asks for money the white employer asks Pauline to leave the job. She cannot leave her husband at any cost. Here she is a victim of triple jeopardy of race ,class and gender.

Pecola too, like her mother gets attracted towards the white culture. She absorbs the extra quantities of milk from a Shirley Temple glass with the hope that she too will achieve the blue eyes like her. But her desire is not fulfilled. However ,she comes to know about one fortune teller namely Soap Head Church .He is actually portrayed as a man who deceives people. His existence is also meaningless since he does not have any idea about her goal in life. He just deceives Pecola by telling her to give a bit of food to one dog he detests. He tells her that if the dog behaves strangely, then her wish of getting the blue eyes will be fulfilled. Pecola does the same. The food was actually poison and the dog just moved horribly and died at once. Pecola thinks that she has got the blue eyes. Later in the novel Pecola is raped and becomes mad. Her desire of obtaining the blue eyes fulfills only in madness. Claudia MacTeer, The narrator of the novel narrates Pecola's tragedy in the following words: "We are wrong, of course, but it doesn't matter. It's too late."(164) Pecola's character exposes the absurdity in the lives of the blacks in general and black female child in particular. She is obsessed with the idea of white standard of beauty which is unattainable for her. She does not have any solution to do away with her ugliness. At last, in the pursuit of the bluest eyes, she goes mad. Her madness shows the failure of the blacks to achieve the white standard. As Cynthia Davies points out the absurd existence of Pecola: " Pecola is the epitome of the victim in a world that reduces persons to objects and then makes them feel inferior as objects." (330) The novel shows the meaninglessness in the lives of the blacks and how their attempt of acquiring the white standard of beauty, is failed. Cholly, Pauline, Pecola and lead a meaningless existence. Besides Breedloves there is another family that is Macteer family. Claudia and Frieda are Pecola's friends. When Pecola has been put outdoors, then it is the only Mac Teer family which helps her. Being black they anyhow try to find solace in the white racist society. Claudia narrates the absurd existence of the blacks: "Being a minority in both caste and class, we moved about anyway on the hem of life, struggling to consolidate our weaknesses and hang on, or to creep singly up into the major folds of the garment"(11) Thus, the life of the blacks observed in *The Bluest Eye* is meaningless and absurd and their attempt of making their life meaningful is failed on the account of race, class and gender discrimination. They find themselves totally helpless and not able to survive under the burden of social laws and customs of race and class.

Similarly Morrison's *Sula* depicts the meaningless existence of the blacks in white America. The novel, particularly focuses upon the black woman's attempt to establish her own identity. At the same time class exploitation of the blacks is also reflected in the novel. As the narrator writes: The slave blinked and said he thought the valley land was bottomland. The master said, "oh, no! See those hills? That's bottom land rich and fertile." "But it is high up in the hills," said the slave. (128) The class exploitation of the blacks by the whites makes the existence of the blacks absurd in the novel *Sula*. The whites are the dominant ones in the society and the blacks are weaker. The blacks are seen as inferior subjected to humiliation by the white masters.(164)

The female protagonist Sula is an iconoclast who does not follow any social norms and custom of the society. She is portrayed as a woman who wants to establish her own identity and does not believe the roles of woman as a daughter, a wife and a mother. The absurdity of Sula's life lies in her relationship with the different men. She learns this behaviour from her mother Hannah and grandmother Eva. As the novelist writes: "the Peace women simply loved maleness, for its own sake. Eva, old as she was, and with one leg, had a regular flock of gentleman callers and although she did not participate in the act of love, there was a good deal of teasing and laughter..." (41) Sula's mother Hannah earlier confirms to the tradition of marriage and child-bearing. Later she like her mother Eva ends the traditional behavior whenever she gets the change. After the death of her husband Rekus, she doesn't remarry .Eva's influence is clearly seen on Hannah. As Morrison writes: "Hannah simply refused to live without the attention of a man... Her flirting was sweet, low and guileless. Without ever a part of the hair, with no gesture whatsoever, she rippled with sex." (42) Like them she is a free woman and sleeps with anyone. So the people of the Bottom call her whore. Her ideology of life is very different than those black women who settle family and nourish children. The people of the condemn her for her such behavior. Her close friend Nel is seen as a woman who follows traditions and customs. She gets married to Jude but she is betrayed by him. He sleeps with Sula without considering her faithfulness towards him. Though Nel is Sula's best friend, Sula does not hesitate to sleep with her husband. This is Sula's act which make the lives of both Sula and Nel absurd and meaningless. Sula though tries to live her life in her own manner, she is not accepted by the people in the community. She too, like her friend Nel becomes a victim of male patriarchy. Nel being faithful to jude gets nothing but betrayal from him. And Sula too does not have a better fate than Sula. She is rejected not only by the society, but also by her lover Ajax. Thus Pecola in *The Bluest Eye* and Sula and Nel and Sula have the same fate. Kavta Arya

writes about the tragedy and meaningless existence of Pecola and Sula: "There are similarities between Pecola Breedlove and Sula Peace. Both yearn to have their own identity. Pecola goes mad while Sula becomes a recluse and pariah. Pecola mentally dies while Sula physically dies. Toni Morrison once again has presented in the novels the hapless lot of African American women." (51)

Like Cholly in *Sula*, there are Shadrak, Jude, Ajax and Plum whose existence is meaningless. They don't have any plan to do. Their life is shattered under the burden of racism and class exploitation. Shadrack, Jude, Ajax and Plum of *Sula* resemble Cholly of *The Bluest Eye*. Like Cholly their life is also absurd due to the race and class exploitation. Ajax and Jude are the unemployed youth and like Cholly they can't fulfill the requirements of the family. So Ajax does not like to settle with Sula and Jude, who is already married with Nel betrays her due to the frustration he goes through. Jude is seen as a victim in the aftermath of World War I. He was one of those, "young black men who could tear that road up. The men like Jude, who could do real work...his feet wanted the heavy work shoes... I built that road, he could say." (81- 82) Jude is a man who faced the unemployment at the earlier stage of his life. His dream of doing something worth was shattered and it made a terrible impact on him. He, too, like Cholly in *The Bluest Eye* became the victim of racism "It was after he stood in line for six days running and saw the gang boss pick out thin armed white boys...and heard over and over' nothing else today, come back tomorrow, he got the message." (82-82)

He does not get any employment and in order to show his manhood he marries Nel which shows the absurdity of his life. Though his wife Nel is faithful towards him, he does not care her and betrays her. Sula's relationship with Ajax also shows nothing but meaninglessness. Both just share body with each other. They don't feel any love or bonding towards each other. Eventually, when Sula sees him as her life partner at the same moment he deserts her. Ajax's behavior makes a terrible impact upon the mind of Sula. She starts living a solitary life and eventually dies. Nel, her best friend regrets for Sula at last for her miserable death: "O Lord Sula, she cried, girl, girl, girl girlgirl." (174) The incident shows the loss of the friendship under the burden of male patriarchy and the falsehood of societal norms which make the life of the black women absurd. The other characters Shadrack and Plum who are the war veterans are portrayed as helpless and devoid of any meaning in their life. Though they fought for the nation in a war their attempt is not counted. Therefore, they feel neglected so they too lead an absurd existence.

Thus Pecola, Pauline, Cholly, Soaphead Church in *The Bluest Eye* and Sula, Nel, Hannah, Eva, Jude, Ajax, Shadrack and Plum in *Sula* lead a meaningless existence. They live an absurd life. They try to find meaning in their lives, but their attempt is failed on the account of race, class and gender exploitation in the African American society.

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