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Mentor: doc. dr. sc. Biljana Oklopčić

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Abstract

This paper examines the position of African American women in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* and Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*. By focusing on the characters such as Morrison's Celie Harris Johnson and Walker's Pecola Breedlove, it pays special attention to the suffering and abuse black women had to endure. The authors' knowledge about the pain inflicted on black women is connected to their own personal history in the black community. Morrison and Walker also use their knowledge, inspiration, and amazing writing skill to show women who resist the traditional gender roles and refuse to accept the strictures of oppression. Such characters are Shug Avery and Sofia Butler from *The Color Purple* and Claudia and Frieda MacTeer from *The Bluest Eye*.

Keywords: African American women, female writers, abuse, *The Color Purple, The Bluest Eye*

Introduction

With “Bars Fight,” the oldest known African American poem composed in 1746, Lucy Terry has established an integral and dynamic literary tradition – African American women’s literature. “Once marginalized, if not ignored, by mainstream America, African American women writers are now central, indeed essential, to American letters and culture” (Mitchell and Taylor 1). African American women writers first used oral forms, such as sermons, spirituals, gospel music, and blues in order to illustrate their culture and state of mind. Later they used written forms such as slave narratives, novels, poems, and plays to address racism, social inequality, slavery, abuse, and incest in order to change white people’s attitude toward black people. Among the most important contributions to contemporary African American women literature stand out Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple* and Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*.

Both Walker and Morrison, as female writers of African descent, portray what it means to be a woman of color in American, mostly white, society and use their brilliant writing skills and personal experience to introduce women who resist the traditional gender roles and refuse to accept the strictures of oppression. Being twice oppressed as they are black and women, they are forced to endure not only the violence and racist conduct of both white men and women but also the abuse of black men.

The novels *The Color Purple* and *The Bluest Eye* examine various female characters trying to resist the white society’s oppression and standards of beauty. In search for their own identity, some succeed to find their true selves but are left with deep wounds of oppression; some, less fortunate, succumb to the white society ideals of beauty and abuse. This paper will attempt to illustrate black women’s struggles and to offer an insight into their lives.

1. On African American Women Writing

African American literature can be defined as the writings by people of African descent living in the United States. In the beginning, African American writers used oral forms, such as sermons, spirituals, gospel music, and blues in order to illustrate their culture and state of mind. They were explored later in written forms of slave narratives, novels, poems, and plays. Themes and motifs explored in African American literature such as racism, social inequality, slavery, abuse and incest demonstrate the difficult position of black people in mainly white American society and are mostly used to change white people's attitude toward black people.

When it comes to African American women writing, its roots can be traced to Lucy Terry who "inaugurated a vital and vibrant literary tradition" (Mitchell and Taylor 1) when she composed the oldest known poem "Bars Fight" in 1746. This is a ballad about the attack of Native Americans on August 25, 1746 near Deerfield; the ballad was preserved orally until it was published in 1855. Terry helped "establish the known beginnings of African American literature both as a poet and as historian" (Foster and Davis 16).

It can be said that the early era of African American women literature began in the late 18th century with the publication of *Poems on Various Subjects* in 1773. This collection of poems written by Phillis Wheatley (1753–84) encountered fierce criticism, skepticism and disapproval because Wheatley was not only a black woman but also a slave and people found it hard to believe that someone with that kind of background could produce such a work. However, she was praised by some of the most important figures of the American Revolution such as George Washington.

According to Mitchell and Taylor, even though ignored, early African American women writers were creative in a variety of genres such as poetry, fiction, non-fiction, autobiography and journalism (7). As Foster and Davis explain in *Early African American Literature*, "were it not for the scraps of manuscript, brief mentions in histories and diaries, a few books and pamphlets saved and later revealed, the absence of texts by African American women could lead the unimaginative and ungenerous to believe that before the Civil War, African American culture was oral only" (qtd. in Mitchell and Taylor 7).

In the first decades of the nineteenth century, literature by African American women was influenced by the struggle for political, social and civic equality, dealing with the themes including citizenship, motherhood, sexuality, religion, which sets the thematic concerns for

many later writers (Mitchell and Taylor 7). Mitchell and Taylor also argue that "once marginalized, if not ignored, by mainstream America, African American women writers are now central, indeed essential, to American letters and culture" (1).

The middle of the nineteenth century produced the integral part of African American literature. Slave narrative, the genre written by fugitive slaves after escaping to freedom, provides detailed insight into the lives of African American people in bondage. "The origins, development, generic conventions and major themes of the slave narrative are fundamental to understanding" (Moody 109) African American literature as a whole. Women's slave narratives are stories about injustice, atrocity and unimaginable pain but also exceptional triumph (Moody 110).

The end of the American Civil War and slavery marked the beginning of the post-slavery era when most of African American writers produced nonfiction works describing the situation of black people in the United States. "African American women's literature reflects this national preoccupation with defining freedom and citizenship and the connections between these ideas of the burgeoning American identity shaping those definitions in relation to African American identity" (Foster and Davis 29).

The period from the 1920s to the 1940s was a high point of African American literature and art called *the Harlem Renaissance*. It was the most influential black literature and art movement with an aim to break free from the white-constructed stereotypes imposed on black people and to promote African American culture and literature. "The Harlem Renaissance, characterized by the growing diversity of African Americans and their interests, is considered one of the most vibrant of artistic movements in American history" (Mitchell and Taylor 7). Cheryl A. Wall thus asserts that the term Harlem Renaissance is most often used to identify the cultural awakening of African Americans (32).

During the 1940s, '50s and '60s, the Great Migration and the American Civil Rights movement made a great impact on African American writers. In attempt to end segregation and racism and to support Black Nationalism, African American writers used these issues in their literature. Black Arts movement project emphasized the idea that "there is no American literature; there are American literatures…" (Traylor 50). As Gwendolyn Brooks reminds us, "women writers of the BAM entered every literary genre and constructed a language that took poetry to taverns, streets, bars, housing projects, libraries, prisons, parks, newly founded theaters and time-honored churches…" (qtd. in Traylor 51).

According to Dana A. Williams, "contemporary African American literature by African American women writers offers full expressions of the complexity of contemporary African American life, particularly as this life relates to the black woman" (71). In the 1970s African American women writings, one of the dominant issues is a "suggestion that the community is a major threat to the survival an empowerment of women" (Christian qtd. in Williams 73).

After the American Civil Rights movement, African American literature becomes a part of the mainstream as literary works by African American writers constantly attain the best-selling and award-winning status. African American literature has begun to be defined, analyzed and accepted by the academic world as an acclaimed genre of American literature. That period has introduced many prolific authors and their multiple award-winning works, which has had a great impact not only on American society but worldwide.

1.1. Representatives of African American Women Writing

The period of early African American literature produced few significant African American female writers. As it has been said earlier, Lucy Terry and Phillis Wheatley are among the first African American women who wrote and published their works. Another important female writer is Harriet Wilson whose novel *Our Nig*, published in 1859, was the first African American novel published in the United States. The novel depicts a difficult life of free blacks as indentured servants in the North.

Many African American women wrote religious literature. For example, Maria W. Stewart wrote a collection of religious writings, Jarena Lee and Nancy Prince, who called themselves "Doers of the word," wrote spiritual narratives, etc. The most prominent female African American was Sojourner Truth (1797–1883) who was a leading abolitionist and women's rights activist of the time. Although she never learned to read or write, *The Narrative of Sojourner Truth* (1850) was written in her name to contribute to both spiritual and slave narratives.

Other notable female writer is Harriet Jacobs who wrote *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* published in 1861. This autobiography by a fugitive slave and a young mother depicts her life as a slave and how she and her children became free of slavery. Jacobs

analyzes the ventures and sexual abuse female slaves encounter on plantations. She addresses the book to the white women in the North who do not understand the harms of slavery and pleads to their humanity in order to develop their knowledge and influence their opinion about slavery.

The post-slavery era introduced several important women writers like Elizabeth Keckley, a former slave who was working for George Washington and his followers as a dressmaker; Josephine Brown, the youngest child of author and abolitionist William Wells Brown, wrote a biography of her father, *Biography of an American Bondman, By His Daughter*; Frances E. W. Harper (1825–1911) who wrote four novels: *Iola Leroy; or, Shadows Uplifted*, *Minnie's Sacrifice*, *Sowing and Reaping*, and *Trial and Triumph* as well as several volumes of poetry, numerous stories, poems, essays and letters.

Zora Neale Hurston, the author of the classic novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, was one of the representatives of the Harlem Renaissance. She also wrote 14 books that ranged from anthropological studies to short stories and novel-length fiction. Dorothy West, whose novel *The Living is Easy* observes the life of an upper-class black family, is another important writer in the period from the 1920s to 1940s.

The Civil Rights time period introduced Gwendolyn Brooks, who became the first African American to win the Pulitzer Prize for her 1949 book of poetry, *Annie Allen*. Nikki Giovanni and Sonia Sanchez contributed to that era with their poetry as well.

Toni Morrison and Alice Walker are the most popular and the most notable writers of the period from the 1970s to today. Both awarded with the Pulitzer Prize, Morrison and Walker influenced not only American but the world's literature. Their works have been made into movies and were consolation and inspiration for many women around the globe. Morrison is also the first African American who won the Nobel Prize in Literature.

2. Features of African American Women's Writings

Most of African American women authors have written about more or less similar experiences and ways of life. Frances Smith Foster claims that "African American women writers have used the Word as both a tool and a weapon to correct, to create, and to confirm their visions of life as it was and as it could become" (qtd. in Mitchell and Taylor 1). That is why their writings are almost stereotypical, with the same features such as the issue of class and gender, women friendship, religion, moral and pathology of African American society. Thus, "spirituality, religion, and morality are recurring themes in antebellum and postbellum African American women's literature" (Foster and Davis 25). The importance of communication is another significant characteristic of African American female writing.

In addition to the afore-mentioned themes, freedom – in its many and varied forms – is a persistent concern for African American women writers. This freedom is desired and reflected in the issues ranging from familial life and constructions to religion, spirituality, and morality, from the issues of race to those of class and gender, in the issues concerning the fight for educational, economic, legal, and social equality both in the United States and abroad (Foster and Davis 26).

3. The Portrayal of African American Women in *The Color Purple*

She is the one
who warms your
home
with her fragrance;

the one who brings
music, magic & joy.

She is the one
speaking
the truth
from her heart.
(Walker, Alice. "She")[1]

Alice Walker, the best known African American writer of the second half of the twentieth century, wrote *The Color Purple* in 1982. "A landmark in African American women's fiction and a turning point in Walker's career as a writer" (Anjali Abraham 275), *The Color Purple* is "the triumph of one woman's crusade against racism, sexism and socially imposed traditions" (Anjali Abraham, 275). This epistolary novel, in which "the readers mostly witness women characters that increase their power or sense of self through the opportunity to write their own truths" (Bower qtd. in Tanritanir and Boynukara 280), rapidly became an international bestselling novel and won the Pulitzer Prize for Literature in 1983.

The story puts an end to the conventional picture of the male-dominated southern community with the absolute transformation of the main character Celie, "one of the most fragmented and oppressed women in literature" (Martin 27) as she "grows from a shy young woman to one who has the confidence to stand up for herself, eventually becoming one of those women whose tongue hurls words of self-defense" (Tanritanir and Boynukara 289). Through her plight, "she begins to write letters to God, asking for a sign because she is unable to comprehend what is happening to her or the reason why" (Gregory 364): "Dear God, I am fourteen years old. I have always been a good girl. Maybe you can give me a sign letting me know what is happening to me" (Walker 1).

[1] The poem can be found in *Predicament of Women in The Color Purple: A Critical Study.*

3.1. Themes, Motifs, and Symbols

The Color Purple is a work of literary value because of the way the characters transform throughout the novel, which effectively uses literary devices such as symbols, motifs, and themes to express deeper meanings into real life. In it, Walker brings out the "themes like estrangement and reconciliation, redemption through love, sisterhood, racism and sexism, oppression and suppression, political and economical emancipation of women, relation between men and women, gender discrimination, lesbianism etc." (Hajare 14).

Along with the afore-mentioned themes, *The Color Purple* introduces quite a few motifs. One of the most important motifs is expressing thoughts and feelings through letter writing. Ruth Perry claims that "the feeling of aloneness is necessary for one to write letters" (qtd. in Tanritanir and Boynukara 280). As *The Color Purple* is an epistolary novel, the protagonist Celie achieves liberation through letter writing, which allows the reader to enter her inner world (McKever-Floyd 427). According to Tanritanir and Boynukara, to express herself Celie is driven into writing, which is just a replacement for speaking (284). She "writes letters that illustrate her poignant attempt to make sense of her oppressed life" (Ottoh-Agede 24). The reader finds out that the main character "is so cut off from everyone and her experience is so horrifying even to herself that she can only write it in the form of letters to God" (Anjali 278). Celie experiences emotional traumas caused by her stepfather's rape at the age of only 14, separation from her children, mother's death, devastating marriage with an abusive husband and separation from her sister Nettie. "This cruel treatment further shatters her image of herself and her life becomes pieces of experiences that she must endure" (Martin 30). Celie's only way out of this horrific emotional and physical experience is through writing letters – first to God then to her sister Nettie. Goda Baltrušaityte thus asserts that "Celie's letters to God serve as a cry for help and comfort not only for her, but for all the coloured women who lived in the southern states after the Civil War and were treated as animals by their husbands and fathers" (25).

The next symbol Walker introduces is a tree. The tree symbolizes, among other things, bearing what was inflicted upon the main protagonist: "It all I can do not to cry. I make myself wood. I say to myself, Celie you a tree. That's how come I know trees fear men" (Walker 22). Hajare asserts that "Celie like a tree sustains all external abuses, aggression and

blows but remains steadfast, dreaming of better season. Thus tree becomes a symbol of hope, optimism, emancipation and endurance" (19).

Another major symbol in *The Color Purple* is God. Norma J. Gregory states that "due to loneliness juxtaposed with the destructive experiences of inequality, Celie writes fifty-six letters to God, spanning over thirty-one years" (365). As mentioned before, the main character's emotional, sexual, and physical abuse led to writing letters to God, especially after her stepfather told her: "You better not never tell nobody but God. It'd kill your mammy" (Walker 1). In the beginning, Celie perceives God as someone who listens and helps her, but she does not quite understand who God is: "When I think about it, it don't seem quite right (….) He big and old and tall and gray bearded and white. He wear white robes and go barefoot. Sort of bluish-grey [eyes]. Cool. Big though. White lashes" (Walker 194). According to Celie, God is the only one left by her side and the one she can confide in: "But I say, Never mine, never mine, long as I can spell G-o-d I got somebody along" (Walker 17). Her image of God as a white-bearded, blue-eyed man is changed in one of Celie's conversation with Shug Avery:

> Yeah, It. God ain't a he or a she, but a It. But what do it look like? I ast. Don't look like nothing, she say. It ain't a picture show. It ain't something you can look at apart from anything else, including yourself. I believe God is in everything, say Shug. Everything that is or ever was or ever will be. And when you can feel that, and be happy to feel that, you've found it. (Walker 195)

Shug also thinks that "Celie has been 'blinded' by men and in order for Celie to see God she has to demythologize or 'git man off her eyeball' to see clearly" (Gregory 369).

After realizing the truth about her family – that Pa was not her real father, that her real father has been lynched and that her mother was crazy, Celie is in doubt about God's presence in her life: "What God do for me? I ast… Yeah, I say, and he give me a lynched daddy, a crazy mama, a lowdown dog of a step pa and a sister I probably won't ever see again" (Walker 192). The turning point of Celie's image of God is when she declares that God must be sleeping when she needs him. (Walker 177). She realizes that besides her stepfather and husband, God is another man figure that oppresses her and from that point on she starts writing letters to her sister Nettie: "Dear Nettie… the God I been praying and writing to is a man. And act just like all the other mens I know. Trifling, forgetful and lowdown" (Walker 192). Another reason why Celie stopped writing letters to God is because "if he listened to

poor colored women the world would be a different place" (Walker 192). In spite of Celie's changed view of God, Shug "tries to explain to Celie how God accepts human nature and the emotions that go with humanity" (Gregory 370):

> Oh, she say. God love all them feelings. That's some of the best stuff God did. And when you know God loves 'em you enjoys 'em a lot more. You can just relax, go with everything that's going, and praise God by liking what you like. (Walker, 196)

After acquiring a new perception of God and life at the end of the novel, Celie is able to write the last letter to God: "Dear God. Dear stars, dear trees, dear sky, dear peoples. Dear Everything. Dear God" (Walker 285). She also declares: "I smoke when I want to talk to God. I smoke when I want to make love. Lately I feel like me and God make love just fine anyhow" (Walker 220).

Finally, there is the color purple. The symbol of the color purple is mentioned several times throughout the novel. It is

> continually equated with suffering and pain. Sophia's swollen, beaten face is described as the color of eggplant. Purple is the color of Celie's private parts: the site of her sexual violation. Nettie's description of Africans as "blue-black" suggests that suffering is already marked on the flesh of a historically oppressed race. (Fiske 153)

It is also present in Shug's explanations: "I think it pisses God off if you walk by the color purple in a field somewhere and don't notice it" (Walker 196). In all these examples, it is "possible to identify Celie with the color purple by realizing that she has gone unnoticed and is finally being noticed as she asserts her existence" (Hajare 42). In addition, the color purple "is a symbol of royalty and wisdom; a symbol of the beauty in the fields and the color of the trousers Celie sews, earning enough money to secure her financial independence" (Gregory 371).

3.2. The Power of Sisterhood

The term sisterhood

> is used among feminists to express the connection of women who are not biologically related but are bonded in solidarity. The sisterhood of women often refers to their feminism, their participation in the women's movement, their support of other women or their recognition of female qualities that are unique to women's nature. (Anjali 275)

Throughout the novel, Walker describes female friendships as a method of liberation from ugliness and oppression in the lives of female characters. The relationships between women form a place of safety, providing mutual love in a world filled with male cruelty and abuse. Female relationships acquire many shapes: some are between mothers and daughters or between sisters, some are sexual, and some are just friendships. Singh and Gupta claim that sisterhood plays a significant role in *The Color Purple*: it ensures Celie's awakening as she gains spiritual support from her sister Nettie, her husband's lover Shug Avery and her stepson's wife Sofia (218).

3.2.1. Celie and Shug

The Color Purple is, maybe, one of the most famous epistolary novel written by an African American female writer whose theme of the homosexual relationship between Celie and Shug Avery is essential to the development of the plot and the main protagonist's way to independence. "Lesbianism, rather than heterosexual love, is rite of passage to selfhood, sisterhood, and brotherhood for Celie" (Bell 17). Celie's fascination with Shug Avery begins when Celie is shown her picture:

> Shug Avery was a woman. The most beautiful woman I ever saw. She more pretty then my mama. She bout ten thousand times more prettier then me. I see her there in furs. Her face rogue. Her hair like something tail. She grinning with her foot up on somebody motorcar. Her eyes serious tho. Sad some. I ast her to give me the picture. All night long I stare at it. And now when I dream, I dream of Shug Avery. She be dress to kill, whirling and laughin. (Walker 6)

Shug Avery is "the blues/Jazz singer articulating the sorrows, brutalities, endurances and love-fleeting moments of all those women, who, like Celie, are shackled down and rendered inarticulate in this woman-hating world" (Anjali 278). The reader's first impression of Shug Avery is rather negative. She has a status of a woman of questionable morals who

dresses inadequately, has some sort of "nasty woman disease," and is despised by her own parents (Walker 43). Celie instantly sees Shug in a different light. When Celie comes across Shug's photo, not only does Shug's fascinating looks amaze her, but she is also reminded of her "mama" (Walker 6). "Shug Avery is the embodiment of paradox. She's loved and hated equally, she is bisexual, she's displays moments of immense sacredness matched by an equal force of profanity" (McKever-Floyd 429). Being a "vivacious and determinedly independent blues singer, whose pride, independence and appetite for living" mesmerize Celie, Shug Avery becomes a medium for Celie's transformation (Hajare 39).

They first met when Celie's husband brought Shug to their home. Shug was seriously ill: "Ain't nothing wrong with Shug Avery. She just sick. Sicker than anybody I ever seen. She sicker than my mama was when she die" (Walker 47). Although the two women did not get along at first, it was Celie's unswerving nursing of Shug Avery that brought them closer. Shug was touched by Celie's kindness and care and to show her appreciation, Shug created "Miss Celie's Song." That was the first time Celie felt respected (Singh and Gupta 219): "She say this song I'm bout to sing is call *Miss Celie's Song.* Cause she scratched it out of my head when I was sick… First time somebody made something and name it after me" (Walker 73).

Ottoh-Agede claims that from that point on Shug Avery becomes "the most significant catalyst" or "mechanism in Celie's transformation" following "a long time of being insecure" which apparently exhibits "her negative self-evaluation and self-rejection" (27). Spending time together, Shug teaches Celie about God, spirituality, sexuality, and many other things. "Celie gives of herself to heal the sick and exhausted Shug, and Shug reciprocates patiently and lovingly teaching Celie to know the joys of her own body and to follow the intuition of her mind" (Anjali 280). Since Celie was "the object of repeating rapes and beatings," she feels "impossible to experience sexual pleasure" even though she gave birth to two children (Singh and Gupta 219). It is Shug who taught Celie to love her body and set free her homosexual aspirations in pursuing sexual pleasure: "Us kiss and kiss till us can't hardly kiss no more. Then us touch each other" (Walker 113). According to Singh and Gupta, Shug's and Celie's homosexual relationship "appears not to be indecent but natural and affectionate" (219). Through their bond, "Celie becomes aware of her sexuality" and "finds her identity – a real woman with dignity" (Singh and Gupta 219). The lesbian relationship between Shug and Celie "evokes so profound an erotic awakening" that it is believed that Celie was "still a virgin prior to it" (Hankinson 326): "Why Miss Celie, she say, you still a virgin" (Walker 77). Since Shug is Celie's complete opposite in terms of freedom and beauty, she becomes "the

heroine in Celie's life as she admires her as a woman and as a person" thus causing "Celie's personal awakening as a woman and a free person" (Tanritanir and Boyunkara 285).

Besides sexuality, Shug teaches Celie about God and helps her create a new perception of spirituality:

> Well, us talk and talk bout God, but I'm still adrift. Trying to chase that old white men out of my head. I been so busy thinking bout him I never truly notice nothing God make. Not a blade of corn (how it do that?) not the color purple (where it come from?). Not the little wildflowers. Nothing. Now that my eyes opening, I feels like a fool. (Walker 197)

According to Shug, "God ain't he or she, but It. Don't look like nothing, she say. It ain't a picture show. I believe God is everything, say Shug" (Walker 195). She continues by claiming that her "first step from the old white man was trees. Then air. Then birds. Then other people" and it came to her "that feeling of being part of everything, not separate at all" (Walker 195-196). That new philosophy makes Celie stronger and "leads her to reject male mastery" (Hankinson 325).

Shug also helps Celie adopt "the new meaning to life and the approach to overcome the stereotypes accorded her by patriarchy" (Ottoh-Agede 27): "Man corrupt everything, say Shug. He on your box of grits, in your head, and all over the radio. He try to make you think he everywhere. Soon as you think he everywhere, you think he God. But he ain't" (Walker 197). With Shug's guidance, Celie is finally able to break free from male oppression: "Whenever you trying to pray, a man plop himself on the other end of it, tell him to git lost" (Walker 197).

Shug's love, help and encouragement contribute to the gradual development of Celie's self-consciousness. She finally "resurrects from a silent, dominated, abusive and passive life into an active, industrious and independent life" and "is able to break away from the oppression of her life and leaves her husband" (Anjali 279). Celie recognizes that "she is not a subject or a tool any more, but a real woman" and that "only spiritual and economic independence can liberate her from the patriarchal bondage thoroughly" (Singh and Gupta 220). After finding her sister Nettie's letter that her husband kept away from her, Celie is determined to leave her husband and is ready to fight back at last: "You a lowdown dog is what's wrong, I say. It's time to leave you and enter the Creation. And your dead body just the welcome mat I need" (Walker 199). For the first time, Celie "affirms that although she

does not fulfill the standards set by male-dominated world which surrounds her, her existence matters" (Hankinson 325): "I'm poor, I'm black, I may be ugly and I can't cook… But I'm here" (Walker 207). After moving to Memphis with Shug and starting her own sewing company, Celie's recently discovered optimism makes her write: "Dear Nettie, I am so happy. I got love, I got work, I got money, friends and time. And you alive and be home soon. With our children" (Walker 215).

The self-awareness Celie develops "transforms her into a happy, successful, independent woman" who, "after being voiceless for so many years, is finally content, fulfilled and self-sufficient" (Tanritanir and Boyunkara 295). Thus, her relationship with Shug "is totally redemptive, leading to a thorough reconstitution of her society" (Brogan 193). Shug indeed is a catalyst that makes Celie free from male dominance and their love paves the way "to the horizon of sisterhood and their empowerment" (Anjali 278).

3.2.2. Celie and Nettie

Celie and Nettie have depended on each other "for survival since their childhood because of their natural father's death and their mother's weak-mindedness" and because of "the absence of parental protection, Celie actually plays the role of mother for Nettie" (Singh and Gupta 219). Celie promises to help and take care of Nettie so she would not experience abuse and rape by their father: "I see him looking at my little sister. She scared. But I say I'll take care of you. With God help" (Walker 3).

Despite the fact that Nettie is younger than Celie, "she is brave and bold" and she often acts as her guardian trying "to put some courage into Celie" (Hajare 44): "Don't let them run over you, Nettie say. You got to let them know who got the upper hand… You got to fight" (Walker 17). Being an ambitious learner, Nettie always shared her newfound knowledge with Celie when she was unable to go to school anymore due to her pregnancy: "Helping me with spelling and everything else she think I need to know. No matter what happen, Nettie steady try to teach me what go on in the world" (Walker 16). On one occasion, Celie described Nettie:

> Smart as anything. Read the newspaper when she was little more than talking. Did figures like they was nothing. Talked real well too. And sweet. There

> never was a sweeter girl, I say. Eyes just brimming over with it. She love me too, I say to Shug. (Walker 118)

After running away from her home because she was scared of what their father might do to her, Nettie stays with Celie. Their happiness was not very long: "Well, us done help Nettie all we can. Now she got to go. Where she gon go? I ast. I don't care, he say" (Walker 17). Leaving Celie's house, Nettie vowed to write to her sister: "Nothing but death can keep me from it" (Walker 18). She went to the town and met the Reverend Samuel, finding out that he is raising Celie's lost children. The Reverend and his wife were the missionaries and were preparing for the trip to Africa. Nettie ended up working for the family as a maid and accepted family's invitation to go along:

> Dear Celie…The reason I am in Africa is because one of the missionaries that was supposed to go with Corrine and Samuel to help with the children and with setting up a school suddenly married a man who was afraid to let her go, and refused to come to Africa with her. So there they were, all set to go, with a ticket suddenly available and no missionary to give it to. At the time, I wasn't able to find a job anywhere around the town. But I never dreamed of going to Africa!" (Walker 130-131)

Despite "the long period of absence of Celie's not receiving her sister's letter, in spite of the rift that Celie's husband had created to destroy the closeness of the two sisters" it was "a sisterhood that was so deep" that helped Celie "to sustain through the period of abuse by her husband" (Tanritanir and Boynukara 289).

Nettie uses her experiences to broaden Celie's view of the world through her letters, which narrate the troubles Nettie confronts in Africa. They develop the storyline and illustrate that oppression of women by men, of blacks by whites, and even of blacks by blacks is universal. Elliott Butler-Evans claims that "Nettie's descriptions of the experiences of African women argue that Black women's oppression is transcultural" (190) – it happens everywhere.

The racial and cultural struggle and oppression Nettie comes across in Africa are equivalent to the abuses and adversity that Celie encounters in Georgia. Nettie also reveals that her missionary work does not please her anymore. She finds out that Samuel and Corrine adopted Celie's children and that their father Alphonso is not their real father: "Pa is not our pa!" (Walker 176). Their biological father owned a store which white men burned because it was too successful and lynched their father. Due to the circumstances, their mother suffered a

mental break-down and Alphonso has taken the advantage of situation and married their mother so he could take control of her substantial wealth. Here, Nettie's letters "reveal the truth of Celie's parentage and help her turn her passive shame into active anger against her stepfather's injustice" (Fiske 152).

Following Corrine's illness and her suspicions of Nettie being the children's mother, Corrine's deteriorating health made Nettie to confess her relationship with Adam and Olivia: "Corrine, I said. I'm the children's aunt. Their mother is my older sister, Celie" (Walker 185). Corrine did not believe the story, which made Nettie write to Celie: "Oh, Celie, unbelief is a terrible thing. And so is the hurt we cause others unknowingly. Pray for us" (Walker 185). After finally accepting that Adam and Olivia are Celie's children, Corrine dies.

As an educated, smart woman, Nettie is rather independent in contrast to Celie. She never judges her personal value in relation to men, although the Olinka tribe in Africa thinks very little of her because she is not married: "Do not be offended, Sister Nettie, but our people pity women such as you who are cast out, we know not from where, into a world unknown to you, where you must struggle all alone, for yourself" (Walker 161). She also writes about her loneliness: "Oh, Celie! My life here is nothing but work, work, work and worry. What girlhood I might have had passed me by. And I have nothing of my own. No man. No children, no close friend, except for Samuel" (Walker 189). Rather than appreciating her value and meaning through marriage, Nettie marries only after she felt that she is a complete and whole human being herself: "We love each other dearly, Samuel told them, with his arm around me. We intend to marry… The children stood up with us in a simple church ceremony in London" (Walker 239). At the end of the novel, two sisters are finally brought together, which was the end of Celie's transformation from a poor, oppressed and miserable to a fulfilled, successful, independent and self-sufficient woman.

3.2.3. Celie and Sofia

The characters in *The Color Purple* are united by "a shared experience of suffering and a common struggle to survive in the face of oppression, violence and abuse" (Fiske 151). Such a union is a union that forms between Celie and Sofia Butler. Sofia Butler is "a sturdy young village girl" who "teaches Celie to stop being afraid and stand up for herself" thus having "a significant impact upon Celie's life" (Baltrušaityte 11). Being Celie's "polar opposite," Sofia

is forceful and outspoken. She has a realistic viewpoint of the world and "is not afraid to counter the oppressive patriarchy to achieve her own goals" (Martin 30). Even in their first encounter when Harpo brings Sofia home to meet his father, it is obvious that Sofia is a strong and dauntless person: "I see 'em coming way off up the road. They be just marching, hand in hand, like going to war. She in front a little" (Walker 30). Sofia is not afraid of Harpo's father and she speaks her own mind:

> No need to think I'm gon let my boy marry you just cause you in the family way. He young and limited. Pretty gal like you could put anything over him… She say, What I need to marry Harpo for? He still living here with you. What food and clothes he git, you buy… Well, nice visiting. I'm going home. (Walker 31)

Since Sofia was pregnant by that time, Harpo married her and eventually brought her and the baby to his home. Harpo could not bear his father's mocking about his marriage and his position in the family so he wanted to dominate his wife by beating her. Yet, being "strong enough to fight back," Sofia usually inflicts Harpo "more hurt than he does" (Hajare 48):

> Just when I was bout to call out that I was coming in the yard, I hear something crash. It come from inside the house, so I run up on the porch… I open the door cautious, thinking bout robbers and murderers. Horsethieves and hants. But it Harpo and Sofia. They fighting like two mens. (Walker 37)

Sofia loves her husband, yet she demands "equality and love" from him. She is ready to "fight for herself and not meekly follow her oppressors" thus possessing "a power that Celie cannot fathom" (Martin 31). Sofia and Celie confront after Celie gave advice to Harpo to beat Sofia to make her do what he says. Although being enraged, Sofia "shares wisdom with Celie that is so fresh and innovative to Celie that she cannot immediately comprehend the implications" (Martin 31):

> All my life I had to fight. I had to fight my daddy. I had to fight my brothers. I had to fight my cousins and my uncles. A girl child ain't safe in a family of men. But I never thought I'd have to fight in my own house. She let out her breath. I loves Harpo, she say. God knows I do. But I'll kill him dead before I let him beat me. (Walker 40)

By measuring "Sophia's audacity against her own submissiveness… Celie begins to question her own passivity and recognizes the irrepressible force of her emotions hidden

behind her letters to God" (Fiske 152): "I say it cause I'm a fool, I say. I say it cause I'm jealous of you. I say it cause you do what I can't" (Walker 40). Comprehending Celie's weak-mindedness and lack of courage to fight for herself, Sofia subconsciously searches for a way to share power with her: "I say, You feels sorry for me, don't you? She think a minute. Yes ma'am, she say slow, I do" (Walker 41). Suggesting that they make a quilt together, Celie and Sofia become friends and through their sisterhood Celie "begins to understand Sofia's strength and to adopt parts of Sofia's ideology as her own" (Martin 32).

Sometimes Sofia acts not like a woman but like a man, which was a strange thing to Celie. That is visible on a few occasions. The first occurs when she mentioned Celie the distribution of housework between her and Harpo: "I rather be out in the fields or fooling with the animals. Even chopping wood. But he love cooking and cleaning and doing little things round the house" (Walker 59). Another is "her fighting scene at the bar" that showed "how surprisingly sturdy and masculine Sofia is" (Baltrušaityte 32): "Sofia don't even deal in little ladyfish things such as slaps. She ball upher fist, draw back, and knock two of Squeak's teef out. Squeak hit the floor. One toof hanging on her lip, the other one upside my cold drink glass" (Walker 83). By depicting "the female members of the family as more masculine than the male ones," Alice Walker departs from "the model of the traditional patriarchal family" and "reveals her optimistic approach towards the future family, where a woman can take a leading role" (Baltrušaityte 33).

Yet, not all of Sofia's life has been easy. Sofia got herself in trouble just by saying "Hell no" (Walker 85) to a wrong person, a mayor's wife and the mayor himself:

> Sofia knock the man down. The polices come, start slinging the children off the mayor, bang their heads together. Sofia really start to fight. They drag her to ground… They crack her skull, they crack her ribs. They tear her nose loose on one side. They blind her in one eye. She swole from head to foot. Her tongue the size of my arm, it stick out tween her teel like a piece of rubber. She can't talk. And she just about the color of a eggplant. (Walker 85-87)

The adversities Sofia bears are a reminder of the costs of confrontation and the difficulties of fighting cultural and institutional racism. Sofia stays in prison for three years and after being mentally and spiritually crushed, her family intervenes and she is transferred to the mayor's house to be their maid, after all. Undergoing serious discrimination, not able to see her family and children, Sofia has changed through "those hard twelve years" of her sentence. "But they have really made her matured, thoughtful and wise. She now does not want to be crazy any

way" (Hajare 50). Sofia is not a tragic woman; she is much more a symbol – the symbol of resistance to any kind of oppression. She had the courage to fight against the known odds.

4. The Portrayal of African American Women in *The Bluest Eye*

> "A little black girl yearns for the blue eyes of a little white girl, and the horror at the heart of her yearning is exceeded only by the evil of fulfillment." (Morrison 162)

Published at the turn of the new decade in 1970, *The Bluest Eye*, the novel written by an African American female writer Toni Morrison, one of the most prominent contemporary black female writers, is a portrayal of black families in the first half of the twentieth century in the United States. The novel displays "the result of white presence in society on African-Americans" and how that presence inflicts "difficulty on the individual to form an identity" (Day 1). Morrison emphasizes "the importance of identity, the formation of the 'self,' and influence of the environment and society on that development" (Day 1). Not only "does Morrison's novel deal with the complexities of the tormented black self, but it also demonstrates the destructive steps black young girls and women can take to conform to the idealizes uniform image of white beauty" (Zebialowicz and Palasinski 222). Black women are "excluded from a universe of love and understanding where only madness and silence are present" (Fonseca Dias 1). Morrison also "challenges Western standards of beauty and demonstrates that the concept of beauty is socially constructed" (Sugiharti).

Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* introduces a variety of thematic subjects such as "dealing with or repressing guilt, shame and violence; coming to terms with society's image of ideal beauty and racial self-loathing" (Mayo 231). In addition to Morrison's criticism of racism, "her extraordinary intelligence, and her Shakespearean gift of language, it is her ability to convey this 'truth in timbre' that earned her the Nobel Prize for Literature" (Bump 149).

4.1. Themes, Motifs, and Symbols

In *The Bluest Eye*, themes, motifs, and symbols contribute to the development of the novel. The novel shows how the internalized white beauty ideals distort the lives of black girls and women. The theme of white beauty plays a great role in the development of the characters, especially young Pecola Breedlove. "Her devotion to whiteness, in particular, becomes more and more resolute; she believes that if she could only have blue eyes, she'd be seen" (Young 61). Pecola is obsessed with Shirley Temple and other blue-eyed, pale-skinned white cinematic icons:

> The characters – especially children – suffer the prejudice of the white ruling class and also feel the uncomfortable feeling of invisibility imposed upon the black people reducing them to the condition of failures and outsiders so that they lose the sense of respect for themselves and for their own color, since they can never satisfy neither society nor themselves. (Fonseca Dias 2)

Another character, although not child, experiencing the same frustrations as Pecola, is her mother Pauline. She visits the movie theatres because she is lonely and falls into the fantasy world she sees on movie screens: "I 'member one time I went to see Clark Gable and Jean Harlow. I fixed my hair up like I'd seen hers on a magazine" (Morrison 96). Not being able to reach the standards of white beauty, she blames her deformity for it: "Her general feeling of separateness and unworthiness she blamed on her foot" (Morrison 86).

Geraldine is another character who does not appreciate the idea that black is beautiful, just like Pecola and Pauline. "Geraldine isn't really culturally white, though she practices whiteness, but is sort of racially black, though she tries not to be" (Douglas 161). She is what Morrison calls "they" – black women succumbed to the ideals of the white beauty:

> These particular brown girls from Mobile and Aiken are not like some of their sisters… These sugar-brown Mobile girls move through the streets without a stir. They are as sweet and plain as buttercake. Slim ankles; long, narrow feet. They wash themselves with orange-colored Lifebuoy soap, dust themselves with Cashmere Bouquet talc, clean their teeth with salt on a piece of rag, soften their skin with Jergens Lotion. They smell like wood, newspapers, and vanilla. They straighten their hair with Dixie Peach, and part it on the side. (Morrison 64)

The implicit statements that whiteness is superior are everywhere, including the white baby doll Claudia received as a Christmas present, the excitement over Shirley Temple and other white icons, the general agreement that light-skinned Maureen Peal is prettier than the other black girls, the fascination over white beauty in the movies, and Pauline's fondness for the little white girl she works for over her daughter.

The blue eyes represent the cultural beauty of the white society. Pecola believes that acquiring blue eyes will change the way others see her and the way she sees the world: "It had occurred to Pecola some time ago that if her eyes, those eyes that held the pictures, and knew the sights – if those eyes of hers were different, that is to say, beautiful, she herself would be different" (Morrison 34). Pecola's desire for blue eyes is based on her view of the world. She thinks that the brutality she experiences and witnesses is connected to how she is seen. Pecola imagines that if she had beautiful blue eyes people would not want to do ugly things to her or in front of her. The correlation between what one sees and how one is seen has a tragic result for her.

One of the recurring structures in the novel is the *Dick-and-Jane* reading primer: "Here is the house. It is green and white. It has red doors. It is very pretty. Here is the family. Mother, Father, Dick and Jane live in the green-and-white house. They are very happy" (Morrison 1). *The Bluest Eye* "deconstructs this myth by showing that a family so perfect exists for no one" (Walters 117). Morrison repeats the primer lines three times at the end of the novel, without punctuation, capitalization and spacing. The *Dick-and-Jane* primer thus "provides a contrast between Pecola's experience of oppression and abuse with the national ideal of white middle class childhood" (Sande 3) and symbolizes a traditional white middle-class American family in contrast to the families depicted in the novel one of them being the poor, marginalized and oppressed black Breedlove family. As Donald B. Gibson states, the primer denotes "one of the primary and most insidious ways that dominant culture exercises its hegemony, through educational system," and it acknowledge the task "of education in both oppressing the victim – and more to the point – teaching the victim how to oppress her own black self by internalizing the values that dictate standards of beauty" (qtd. in Sugiharti).

Another symbol associated with the Dick-*and-Jane* primer is the symbol of the house. While the house in the primer is pretty, green and white, the houses of the Breedlove and MacTeer families are quite opposite. The Breedlove home is described as "irritating and melancholy," suffering from Pauline Breedlove's inclination for her white employer's home

over hers and symbolizing the depression of the Breedlove family (Morrison 24). The MacTeer home is “old, cold and green” with one room that is lighted by a kerosene lamp, “the others are braced in darkness, peopled by roaches and mice,” but it is carefully looked after by Mrs. MacTeer and, as Claudia remembers, filled with love (Morrison 5).

4.2. Claudia and Frieda MacTeer

The Bluest Eye is the story of a young black girl in 1941 “who is all but destroyed by her desire for white beauty and by the other African Americans acting in response to the oppression of white cultural normativity” (Douglas 142). Set in the Midwest, the novel brings “to the fore the predicament of being a black female in the predominantly white America in the 1930’s and 1940’s, the times that were certainly characterized by much greater overt racial tensions” (Zebialowicz and Palasinski 221). The novel begins with Claudia MacTeer, “the partial narrator of the story, who dismisses the standards of beauty that traumatizes Pecola” (Vasquez 67). Claudia looks back at one summer of her childhood, “relating to readers her sense of shame and guilt over the incestuous rape of eleven years old Pecola Breedlove” (Mayo 232). She describes

> a society where whiteness is the yardstick of personal worth, where Shirley Temple and Jeanne Harlow set standards for beauty and *Dick and Jane* readers prescribe an oppressive notion of normalcy, where Pecola’s shame at her mother’s race serves as a model for self-empowerment, where fathers deny their sons, mothers deny their daughters, and God denies the communal prayer for the privilege of blue eyes. (Dittmar 140)

Claudia remembers those few days that Pecola stayed in their home because she and Frieda stopped fighting: “We had fun in those few days Pecola was with us. Frieda and I stopped fighting each other and concentrated on our guest, trying hard to keep her from feeling outdoors” (Morrison 12). Whereas Pecola and Frieda had “a loving conversation about how cu-te Shirley Temple was,” Claudia “couldn’t join them in their adoration” because she hated Shirley Temple (Morrison 13). She also declares:

> Younger than both Frieda and Pecola, I had not yet arrived at the turning point in the development of my psyche which would allow me to love her. What I felt at that time was unsullied hatred. But before that I had felt a stranger, more frightening thing than hatred for all the Shirley Temples of the word. (Morrison 13)

Using the dash in the word "cute," Morrison "is undoubtedly sarcastic" and shows "language's inability to fully articulate Claudia's emotions" as well (Vasquez 78). Vasquez also states that "despite Western preoccupations with Temple's features, for Claudia, the child actress holds no physical advantage" (78). Even at the age of nine, Claudia notices "the diversity of feelings of herself and of her world" which is only based on white ideals that "are emphasized by repetitive references to white dolls, children and movie stars" (Fonseca Dias 5). Claudia remembers one Christmas and the gift she received: "The big, the special, the loving gift was always a big, blue-eyed Baby Doll. From the clucking sounds of adults I knew that the doll represented what they thought was my fondest wish" (Morrison 13). She also recalls that the doll which was supposed to bring her great pleasure did just the opposite, as she could not sleep with it for its coldness and hard limbs and she did not like to hold it either: "I had only one desire: to dismember it. To see of what it was made, to discover the dearness, to find the beauty, the desirability that had escaped me, but apparently only me" (Morrison 14). By wishing to dismember them, Claudia "disrupts the obsessive desire to worship white/light attributes, rejecting them for her own blackness. She rebels against white oppression, forcing others to see her and not a reflection of whiteness" (Putnam qtd in Abdalla 23). The reader also learns that Claudia is repulsed by white dolls: "I was physically revolted by and secretly frightened of those round moronic eyes, the pancake face, and orangeworms hair" (Morrison 13). Claudia thus "attempts to fathom why black Americans are in awe of white patterns of aesthetics and adore little white dolls" (Zebialowicz and Palainski 224). Yet, Claudia cannot make herself love white dolls:

> I fingered the face, wondering at the single-stroke eyebrows; picked at the pearly teeth stuck like two piano keys between red bowline lips. Traced the turned-up nose, poked glassy blue eyeball, twisted the yellow hair. I could not love it. But I could examine it to see what it was that all the world said was lovable. (Morrison 14)

She cannot grasp why people admire white dolls and white girls:

> But dismembering of dolls was not the true horror. The truly horrifying thing was the transference of the same impulses to little white girls. The indifference with which I could have axed them was shaken only by my desire to do so. To discover what eluded me: the secret of the magic they weaved on others. What made people look at them and say, "Awwww," but not for me? The eye slide of black women as they approach them on the street, and the possessive gentleness of their touch as they handled them. (Morrison 15)

Her resentment of little white girls can be seen when a new girl arrived to their school. She was "a high-yellow dream child with long brown hair braided into two lynch ropes that hung down her back," and "as rich as the richest of the white girls, swaddled in comfort and care" (Morrison 47). Maureen Peal is described as a "part of the idyllic White world that is juxtaposed against the painful Black world inhabited by Pecola and her friends" (Walters 120). With her features, Maureen Peal "enchanted the entire school" (Morrison 48). The teachers "smiled encouragingly," the boys did not "trip her in the halls" or "stone her," the girls "didn't suck their teeth when she was assigned to be their work partners" and they "stepped aside when she wanted to use the sink" (Morrison 48). "The favoritism toward girls with lighter complexions, such as Maureen Peal," make children with darker complexions believe "that lighter skin affords one the privilege of respect and love" (Walters 119). Only Claudia and Frieda were "bemused, irritated and fascinated by her" and "looked hard for flaws to restore their equilibrium" (Morrison 48). At first, they started to call her Meringue Pie and later found out that she has a dog tooth and was born with six fingers on each hand: "They were small triumphs, but we took what we could get – snickering behind her back and calling her Six-finger-dog-tooth-meringue-pie" (Morrison 48).

When Maureen Peal tried to defend Pecola from bullies along with Claudia and Frieda, the three girls got temporarily connected as they "join forces to protect Pecola from a group of boys who tease he about her dark skin and taunt her about her father's sleeping habits" (Smith 28). The very next moment they had a fight which resulted in Maureen screaming "I am cute! And you ugly! Black and ugly black ... I am cute!" (Morrison 56) and girls' shouting "the most powerful of our arsenal of insults: Six-finger-dog-tooth-meringue-pie" (Morrison 57).

Despite the fact that Claudia and Frieda "felt comfortable in [their] skins, enjoyed the news that [their] senses released to [them], admired [their] dirt, cultivated [their] scars," they

could not “comprehend this unworthiness” (Morrison 57). They were jealous of Maureen Peal but envy “was a strange, new feeling for [them]” (Morrison 58). Claudia remembers saying:

> Dolls we could destroy, but we could not destroy the honey voices of parents and aunts, the obedience in the eyes of our peers, the slippery light in the eyes of our teachers when they encountered the Maureen Peals of the world. What was the secret? What did we lack? Why was it important? And so what? (Morrison 57)

She also realizes that “all the time we knew that Maureen Peal was not the Enemy and not worthy of such intense hatred. The *Thing* to fear was the *Thing* that made *her* beautiful, and not us” (Morrison 58). As Bouson claims:

> the “Thing” Claudia learns to fear is the white standard of beauty that members of the African American community have internalized, a standard that favours the “high-yellow” Maureen Peal and denigrades the “black and ugly” Pecola Breedlove. (qtd in Sugiharti)

Claudia and Frieda are cautious to the white standards of beauty. “They do not yield to the white models and are proud to be black” and “they have no respect for them and demonstrate their anger on actions” (Nosková 30).

Finding out that Pecola was raped by her father fell hard on the girls. Hearing the conversations about the baby and that “it be a miracle if it live,” Claudia and Frieda agreed that they will make one: “So let’s make it a miracle… We could give up the bicycle. Bury the money and…plant the seeds” (Morrison 151). “The marigolds that they plant for Pecola become a metaphor for Pecola’s unborn child” (Sande 12). Yet, as Claudia reminisces, “there were no marigolds in the fall of 1941” (Morrison 3). Pecola’s baby died and, somehow, Claudia felt responsible for that: “Our flowers never grew. I was convinced that Frieda was right, that I had planted them too deeply. How could I have been so sloven? So we avoided Pecola Breedlove – forever” (Morrison 162).

Claudia blames the community for following “the white ideology of aesthetics” just so they “may gain beauty but only at the expense of others,” which made Pecola a scapegoat (Sugiharti). At the end of the novel, she states:

> All of our waste which we dumped on her and which she absorbed. And all of our beauty, which was hers first and which she gave to us. All of us – all who knew her – felt so wholesome after we cleaned ourselves on her. We were so beautiful when we stood astride her ugliness. Her simplicity decorated us, her guilt sanctified us, her pain made us glow with health, her awkwardness made us think we had a sense of humor. Her inarticulateness made us believe we were eloquent. Her poverty kept us generous. Even her waking dreams we used – to silence our own nightmares. (Morrison 162-163)

4.3. Pecola Breedlove

As already mentioned, *The Bluest Eye* is a story about an eleven-year-old girl Pecola Breedlove, who is destroyed by her desire for possessing blue eyes. "Her agony is further complicated as neighbors and other adults dismiss her, her peers bully her, and her family abuses her" (Young 61). At the end of the novel, Pecola gets impregnated by her father, loses her baby and eventually her mind. All her life everybody calls her ugly, including her own mother: "A right smart baby she was… But I knowed she was ugly. Head full of pretty hair, but Lord she was ugly" (Morrison 98). While Pecola "is the ultimate symbol of the black appearance, so rejected by white society," Morrison frequently repeats "how ugly she is, and that reinforces her desire to be beautiful, loved and accepted" (Fonseca Dias 4).

Pecola lives in an abandoned store with her mother, Mrs. Breedlove, her father Mr. Breedlove, and her brother Sammy: "The Breedloves did not live in a storefront because they were having temporary difficulty adjusting to the cutbacks at the plant. They lived there because they were poor and black, and they stayed there because they believed they were ugly" (Morrison 28). Pecola has often had to witness her parents' brutal fights, which made her desire to disappear more obvious: "Please God, she whispered into the palm of her hand. Please make me disappear" (Morrison 33). Her imagination is so powerful that she feels that the parts of her body are disappearing, except her eyes. "Since she cannot make her eyes disappear, she cannot eliminate her power of visual perception and thus she cannot believe herself to be invisible" (Smith 27). After her father accidentally burnt their house, Pecola was

temporarily fostered to the house of the family MacTeer. There she befriended two girls of her age, Claudia and Frieda, who were depicted as her guardians.

Pecola has been influenced "by the white models of beauty since her early childhood" (Nosková 27). Living with the MacTeers, she was even more influenced by the white models of beauty "as she drank vast quantities of milk out of the Shirley Temple cup… in hopes of becoming Shirley Temple" (Smith 27). Pecola and Frieda "had a loving conversation about how cu-te Shirley Temple was" (Morrison 13). Such glamorization "of the idol whose race is different to the adorer" can be connected to psychological and historical researches claiming that "African American children were convinced that it was not best to be black" (Zebialowicz and Palasinski 222). The scene in the candy store proves the statement mentioned above:

> Each pale yellow wrapper has a picture on it. A picture of little Mary Jane, for whom the candy is named. Smiling white face. Blond hair in gentle disarray, blue eyes looking at her out of a world of clean comfort. The eyes are petulant, mischievous. To Pecola they are simply pretty. She eats the candy, and its sweetness is good. To eat the candy is somehow to eat the eyes, eat Mary Jane. Love Mary Jane. Be Mary Jane. (Morrison 38)

Pecola grows up in humiliation because she is considered ugly but also because she is black and poor. She is "scorned by the children from school, by the owner of a market where she buys candies, by everyone…" (Fonseca Dias 4): "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. Perhaps because he is grown, or a man, and she a little girl" (Morrison 36).

As Pecola still cannot comprehend why she is ugly, she spends hours looking at the mirror "trying to discover the secret of the ugliness, the ugliness that made her ignored or despised at school, by teachers and classmates alike" (Morrison 34). To gain respect and to change how others see her, "it had occurred to Pecola some time ago that if her eyes, those eyes that held the pictures, and knew the sights – if those eyes of hers were different, that is to say, beautiful, she herself would be different" (Morrison 34). The last notion is, maybe, her "most powerful emotional response… the fear of being rejected because of [her] appearance, abandoned by the group, left homeless" (Bump 155).

As a result of "Pecola's desire for blue eyes and white beauty" which controls her life and "because she has been brought up in a family and a community that is content to completely ignore her existence," Pecola "does not know love, and she doesn't even care about the torment she receives from a cruel neighborhood boy" (Sande 7). After being lured to Junior's house with a promise she would get a real kitten, although sensing some kind of discomfort, "Pecola climbed the porch stairs and hesitated there, afraid to follow him." Pecola firstly admired beautiful house with "a big red-and-gold Bible," "potted plants on all the windowsills," "a color picture of Jesus Christ." In the midst of her admiration, Junior "threw a big black cat right in her face" (Morrison 69-70). After throwing the cat against the window, Junior accused Pecola of killing it when his mother Geraldine came back from the town. Geraldine chased off Pecola: "You nasty little black bitch. Get out of my house" (Morrison 72). Humiliated again, Pecola finds herself "outside, the March wind blew into the rip in her dress. She held her head down against the cold" (Morrison 72).

Pecola's confrontation with Geraldine and Junior, "like her relationship with her own parents," represents "a window into the roots of her racial self-loathing" (Smith 28). Pecola's life with her parents was not ideal. "The shame of sexual abuse in that family is central, but so is the fear of ugliness, an emotion that is more pervasive in our culture" (Bump 159). Her mother, often emphasizing Pecola's ugliness, was fonder of the little white girl for whose family she was working than of her own daughter. This can be seen in the scene when Pecola and the MacTeers girls came to visit Mrs. Breedlove at her work. Pecola accidentally knocked down the blueberry cobbler and made a mess in the Fisher's kitchen. When Mrs. Breedlove saw that, "in one gallop she was on Pecola, and with the back of her hand knocked her to the floor," "yanked her up by the arm, slapped her again, and in a voice thin whit anger, abused Pecola directly" (Morrison 84). Claudia remembers that "her words were hotter and darker than the smoking berries" whereas "the honey in her words complemented the sundown on the lake" when she addressed the little white girl (Morrison 85).

Pecola's father Cholly Breedlove was no better with Pecola than her mother. As he was abandoned by his mother and raised by an aunt, he could not project love to Pecola as he never felt it: "When Cholly was four days old, his mother wrapped him in two blankets and one newspaper and placed him on a junk heap by the railroad. His Great Aunt Jimmy, who had seen her niece carrying a bundle out of the back door, rescued him" (Morrison 103). He was, too, rejected by his father when he was a teenager and looked for him after Aunt Jimmy's death. Cholly's first sexual experience was "humiliating and dehumanizing" and it

created “a hatred for women” which was manifested by “his domestic violence toward his wife and the molestation of his daughter” (Day 9). The only way Cholly could express love to his daughter was by raping her. He was the only one who “loved her enough to touch her, envelop her, give something of himself to her. But his touch was fatal, and something he gave her filled the matrix of her agony with death” (Morrison 163). Pecola’s traumatic life full of rejection “reaches its peak when she is being raped by her father who ironically interprets his attitude as an act of love for his daughter, which contributes to her emotional disintegration” (Fonseca Dias 5).

Pecola’s eventual insanity “was, at least partly, brought about by her tragic inability to cope with her experiences, leading her to give in to the culturally imposed standards of acceptance and concepts of beauty” (Zebialowicz and Palasinski 228). When it seemed that her prayers to God would not give her the blue eyes, Pecola turned to Soaphead Church “who pities her and after pretending to speak with God, Pecola believes him that her eyes will be blue the next day” (Nosková 30): “I, I have caused a miracle. I gave her the eyes. I gave her the blue, blue, two blue eyes. Cobalt blue… No one else will see her blue eyes. But *she* will. And she will live happily ever after” (Morrison 144). Pecola’s “happily ever after” was in fact a mental breakdown. She is deluded into believing that her eyes really became blue:

> You’re looking drop-eyed like Mrs. Breedlove. *Mrs. Breedlove look drop-eyed at you?* Yes. Now she does. Ever since I got my blue eyes, she look away from me all of the time. Do you suppose she’s jealous too? *Could be. They are pretty, you know.* I know. He really did a good job. Everybody’s jealous. Every time I look at somebody, they look off. (Morrison 154)

When Pecola got her blue eyes, the whole community, even her mother, abandoned her. People would see her “walking up and down, her head jerking…elbows bent, hands on shoulder, she flailed her arms like a bird in an eternal, grotesquely futile effort to fly” (Morrison 162).

4.4. Mrs. MacTeer and Mrs. Breedlove

> "Here is the house. It is green and white. It has a red door. It is very pretty. Here is the family. Mother, Father, Dick and Jane live in the green-and-white house. They are very happy." (Morrison 1)

In contrast to the happy family from the *Dick and Jane* primer, the black families depicted in *The Bluest Eye* are not so happy. As some argue, the mother has always been the pillar of the family. The famous proverb "Happy wife, happy life" can also be taken as true. Yet, the black women in the novel "are portrayed in relation to the influence they suffer from the white ones and from society in their search for their own selves" (Fonseca Dias 2). They are also "excluded from a universe of love and tenderness where the figure of man is a key element for their imprisonment in madness, silence, sexual oppression and lack of hope" (Fonseca Dias 2). According to Patricia Hill Collins, "the cult of true womanhood emphasizes motherhood as a woman's highest calling. It stresses a motherhood that is confined to the home and children, under the protection of a husband" (qtd. in Day 4). Thus, a woman has no alternative but to determine her identity by motherhood.

Although the family MacTeer "may fail to fulfill mainstream ideals of a happy family, and they may succumb to the worship of white beauty, … they are able to create an undeniably loving home for their children" (Walters 117). Mrs. MacTeer is strident and adamant but evenly affectionate and protective. Claudia and Frieda MacTeer "are reared in a clean and comfortable home," yet "the stability of their lives is marred by poverty" (Walters 117). Morrison "verifies that with a strong support system like that offered by the MacTeer parents, who *act* when one of their children is abused" (Sande 5). Claudia's memory of her mother shows her toughness: "My mother's anger humiliates me; her words chafe my cheeks, and I am crying. I do not know that she is not angry at me, but at my sickness. I believe she despise my weakness for letting the sickness 'take holt'" (Morrison 7). She also thinks that it was not all that bad: "But was it really like that? As painful as I remember? Only mildly. Or rather, it was a productive and fructifying pain. Love, thick and dark like Alaga syrup…" (Morrison 7). Mrs. MacTeer also liked to sing while doing housework:

> If my mother was in a singing mood, it wasn't so bad. She would sing about hard times, good times, and somebody-gone-and-left-me times. But her voice was so sweet and her singing-eyes so melty I found myself longing for those hard times…Misery colored by the greens and blues in my mother's voice took

> all of the grief out of the words and left me with a conviction that pain was not only endurable, it was sweet. (Morrison 24)

The examples of Mrs. MacTeer's maternal instinct can be seen when she fosters Pecola to save her from her own family, or when Mrs. MacTeer "feels compelled to take over the situation and avoid Pecola being embarrassed when she begins menstruating, dismissing all the other girls so that she may comfort Pecola and explain to her what is happening" (Sande 6).

In contrast, the family Breedlove parents "carry deep wounds from their earlier lives, and they take out their frustrations on their children and on each other" (Smith 24). The Breedlove family is dysfunctional. Cholly Breedlove is an alcoholic and an abusive father while Pauline Breedlove, although devoted to religion, physically and emotionally abuses Pecola. Pecola's home "is devoid of love and fraught with abuse" and "is not a place of warmth or security" (Walters 118). Calling her mother Mrs. Breedlove further emphasizes Pecola's disconnection from Pauline.

Pauline Breedlove is one of the female characters influenced by the white standards of beauty that society placed on her. Pauline's deformed foot kept her from having a nickname among children, which troubled her for a long time, and as a result of her defect she is extremely concerned by her physical appearance: "Her general feeling of separateness and unworthiness she blamed on her foot" (Morrison 86). Pauline also "feels out of place in the Midwestern city to which they have come seeking opportunity. She feels alienated even from her black neighbors" (Wall 797). Pauline often visits the movie theater where "along with the idea of romantic love, she was introduced to another physical beauty… originated in envy, thrived in insecurity, and ended in disillusion" (Morrison 95). That is the reason why she "internalizes society's love of white beauty to such a degree that she views herself as worthless unless she can attain that standard" (Day 10). Pauline is preoccupied with "categorizing faces according to conventional beauty, which she learnt from the movies" (Abdalla 21): "She was never able, after her education in the movies, to look at a face and not assign it some category in the scale of absolute beauty, and the scale was one she absorbed in full from the silver screen" (Morrison 95). She associates physical appearance with a desirable quality. Pauline is a sharp contrast to Mrs. MacTeer as she is "either absent or silent" with her children and "barely interacts" with them especially when her son Sammy

runs away from home “countless time before he was a teenager” and “she refuses to acknowledge the situation when Pecola reports the rape to her” (Sande 6).

One of the reasons why the two mothers are so different is that “Mrs. MacTeer shares the burden of parenting with her husband, Mr. MacTeer, who is equally loving and protective towards his daughters” while Pauline “on the other hand, has to take the burden all alone, which in addition to her other social challenges, leads to her neglecting her responsibilities as a mother” (Abdalla 25). The contrast between Mrs. MacTeer’s and Mrs. Breedlove’s motherhood “serves to further emphasize Mrs. Breedlove’s obsession with whiteness, an obsession that becomes cyclical in her family and is passed down to her daughter” (Sande 5).

The different family stories show that the MacTeer family is the “one clearly based on caring, concern, and real connections to the other members” (Sande 9). On the other hand, while the Breedlove family “all imagine that some kind of communion exists between them, there is rarely actual communication of meaningful exchange. All that truly unites the Breedloves is a circle of violence, and oftentimes, complete neglect” (Sande 9).

4.5. Geraldine

> “These particular brown girls from Mobile and Aiken are not like some of their sisters. They are not fretful, nervous, or shrill; they do not have lovely black necks that stretch as though against an invisible collar; their eyes do not bite. These sugar-brown Mobile girls move through the streets without a stir. They are as sweet and plain like buttercake.”
> (Morrison 64)

Geraldine belongs to a group of black women whose desire for upward mobility and better life made them migrate to the North. Geraldine becomes accustomed to the standards of a fascinating white life, “setting herself apart from her African roots by giving her son a lesson in the social hierarchy,” by making an “effort to instill in her son, Louis, that there is a profound difference between colored people and niggers” (Zebialowitz and Palasinski 225): “Colored people were neat and quiet; niggers were dirty and loud” (Morrison 67).

Geraldine is well educated and adapted to the Western ways of life. She restrains her black uniqueness, which is not the quality of white femininity, as she attempts "to get rid of the funkiness" (Morrison 64). She tries to act like all the other sugar-brown girls from Mobile or Aiken: "They hold their behind in for fear of a sway too free; when they wear lipstick, they never cover the entire mouth for fear of lips too thick, and they worry, worry, worry about the edges of their hair" (Morrison 64). Geraldine pays great attention to her hair, "that part of appearance which, along with her fair skin, she can control and adapt most easily to standards of white beauty" (Kuenz). She has absorbed the white society's standards, "assuming its waspy, middle-class trappings… Her values, habits, and possessions signal a cultural membership that her race undercuts" (Douglas 145).

Geraldine eradicates from her present life many of the qualities she connects with her past – "the dreadful funkiness of passion, the funkiness of nature, the funkiness of the wide range of human emotions" (Morrison 64). Obsessed by cleanliness, discipline, and order, "Geraldine loves and receives more comfort from her cat than she does either from her husband or son" (Smith 29): "Geraldine did not allow her baby, Junior, to cry. As long as his needs were physical, she could meet them – comfort and safety… Geraldine did not talk to him, coo to him, or indulge him in kissing bouts" (Morrison 67).

Her attitude towards lower-class blacks is shown "in her brief encounter with Pecola when she permits her venom to erupt" (Ogunyemi 118). Geraldine associates deprived, dark-skinned Pecola "with the funk she so desperately needs to escape" (Smith 29). Pecola appears to represent all the negative features of Geraldine's views on black girls. Geraldine is thus not "really culturally white, though she practices whiteness, but is sort of racially black, though she tries not to be" (Douglas 161).

Conclusion

Through its chapters, this paper described the hardships in lives of African American women in Alice Walker's novel *The Color Purple* and *The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison. It showed how black women resisted the stereotypical images and standards of beauty of the white society and how they, in spite of their position in their communities and the abuse and oppression that was inflicted on them, reached self-consciousness. Through the power of sisterhood, some of the characters searched for self-definition, freed themselves from the abusive male characters, and discovered their true identity like Celie did in *The Color Purple*. Yet, the analysis showed that the others, such as Pecola Breedlove whose self-hatred was big enough to drive her mad and who was abandoned by the whole community in *The Bluest Eye*, succumbed to the destructive power of white culture and white beauty ideals.

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