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The Root of Black Degeneracy in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* & *Sula*: Collective Unconscious or Perceptions?

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ABSTRACT

The black characters' degenerative behaviours in Toni Morrison's first two novels *The Bluest Eye* (1970) and *Sula* (1973) can be attributed either to their collective unconscious or to their perceptions of the socio-economic reality characterized by white supremacy, racial discrimination, abusive parenting and several other human depravities. Following previous research on these issues, this paper examines whether the characters of the two novels as victims and/or victimizers should be subjected to archetypal interpretation or to the black Americans' negating reality that instilled in them notions of inferiority, ugliness and self-loathing and that put their existence in a binary contrast with their white counterparts. In order to determine the main factor for black degeneracy in the two novels, this paper firstly postulates that the characters are driven by a self-imposed belief system that spurs certain behavioral traits singular to or rarely reactive to the community's conventions. However, the findings of this research do not support the prevailing ontological or psychoanalytic approaches to the black characters in the novels. Finally, this paper calls for a phenomenological analysis of the black characters and establishes that the ubiquitous perceptual influence that leaves deep negative impressions on their self-image and collective identity significantly accounts for the root of black degeneracy in the novels.

Keywords: Collective Unconscious, Perception, American Black Community, Degeneracy.

JEL Classification Codes: A, A1, A2, A3, A4.

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1. Introduction

The opening of *The Bluest Eye* (1970) in autumn with a monologue by Claudia, who narrates the story both from her childhood point of view and from her adult perspective in the late 1960s, makes it clear that the loss of innocence, of marigolds, and of Pecola's baby does not call for why these things happened: "But since why is difficult to handle, one must take refuge in how" (p. 4). Evincing from a little girl's perspective, this apparent convenience of "how" over "why" features an indulgent self-

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containing psychic schemata of the black communities in Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* and *Sula* that divests them of a disposition to subvert their constricted view on life and that is tantamount to their nihilistic suspension of hope to eliminate degenerative traits in what West (1994) terms as "self-destructive inhumane actions" (p. 30). It seems that the characters (except *Sula*) in both the novels are preoccupied with events per se as a process determined and manipulated by a force beyond their comprehensibility and/or authority; that they are more prone to events than they can exercise their libertarian free will in their most convenient moments; and that under circumstances they are not given alternatives for asserting their normalcy (of which they hardly have a clear-headed notion, for, to most of them, degeneracy has become a kind of normalcy).

The key motivation of this research springs from the need to understand Morrison's politics of representation of black degeneracy—a politics which she claims to have developed out of her disappointment at the absence of "some intimacy, some direction, some voice" in the works of black authors like Ralph Ellison and Richard Wright, whose books "were saying something about it or us that revealed something about us to you, to others, to white people, to men" (*Italic, orig.* Interview by Ruas, 1981, p. 96). With a grit to delve deeper into the black reality, she approaches it like an explorer:

There is a mask that sometimes exists when black people talk to white people. Somehow it seems to me that it spilled over into the fiction. I never thought that when I was reading black poetry, but when I began to write...When the locality is clear, fully realized, then it becomes universal. I knew there was something I wanted to clear away in writing, so I used the geography of my childhood, the imagined characters based on bits and pieces of people. (Interview by Ruas, 1981, p. 96)

Morrison's fictional representation of black characters in *The Bluest Eye* and *Sula*, besides making her exceptional among Black American writers, poses two questions: Is degeneracy an essential attribute of black characters or Is it superimposed on them by their perceptions? With regard to the binary integration of *Nel-Sula* characters, Morrison views evil on the relativity ground:

I started by thinking that one can never really define good and evil. Sometimes good looks like evil; sometimes evil looks like good—you never really know what it is. It depends on what uses you put it to. Evil is as useful as good is, although good is generally more interesting; it's more complicated. I mean, living a good life is more complicated than living an evil life. (Morrison, qtd. interviewed by Stepto, 1994, p. 13-14)

Morrison's view is intriguing and does not clearly vouch for black degeneracy in the two novels. The inviolable cycle of black life entrapped in decadence, which both makes the characters morally inferior and presents them as a victimized class in the broader white-dominated socio-political suppressive reality of America, should be studied from a phenomenological perspective.

In the first novel, the identical behavioural pattern of black characters is suggested by individual deviations: Pecola's impossible wish for a pair of blue eyes as the only way for her presumptuous escape from the curse of ugliness culminates in her being raped by her father who perpetrates this event in a blurred consciousness as if it were not an act of free will or there was not an alternative to express his blend of hatred and tenderness towards his daughter; Claudia's jealous abhorrence towards white hegemony proves futile when her deduction grasps the ubiquity or rootedness of white admiration in the community's psyche; Mr. Henry's affection for Claudia and Frieda turns lusty as he touches Frieda—an act which Claudia conceives of making one "[f]eel good" (*BE*, p. 77); Pauline and Cholly's love-marriage comes to a mutually inflicting phenomenon leading to a disintegrated relationship with their children; and the misanthropic revulsion of the mixed-descent Elihue Micah Whitcomb who publicly renames himself Soaphead Church for his deceptive impersonation of a true Spiritualist and Psychic Reader in Lorain turns him into a speculative villain. Focusing on the female characters' plight in *The Bluest Eye*, Kuenz (1993) makes a broad observation which implies Morrison's motive behind the representation of black characters in a degenerative form:

With these characters, Morrison literalizes the novel's overall conflation of black female bodies as the sites of fascist invasions of one kind or another, as the terrain on which is mapped the encroachment and colonization of African-American experiences, particularly those of its women, by a seemingly hegemonic white culture. *The Bluest Eye* as a whole documents this invasion—and its concomitant erasure of specific local bodies, histories, and cultural productions—in terms of sexuality as it intersects with commodity culture. Furthermore, this mass culture and, more generally, the

commodity capitalism that gave rise to it, is in large part responsible—through its capacity to efface history—for the "disinterestedness" that Morrison condemns throughout the novel. Beyond exemplifying this, Morrison's project is to rewrite the specific bodies and histories of the black Americans whose positive images and stories have been eradicated by commodity culture. She does this formally by shifting the novel's perspective and point of view, a narrative tactic that enables her, in the process, to represent black female subjectivity as a layered, shifting, and complex reality. (421)

Morrison brings out what tends to be veiled by the dominant culture of denying the obvious. In *Sula*, black life is equally manipulated by evil: Shadrack's morbid custom of celebrating National Suicide Day developed as a means of coping with his own fear of death as a victim of World War I shell shock is effected through the deaths of the marchers, men and women in the tunnel; Rochelle's living a Creole whore's life makes her stoically apathetic towards her mother and daughter; Eva Peace's abandonment by BoyBoy in a dire challenge forcing her to amputate her leg for an insurance and her burning of war-traumatized Ralph to death consolidates the anti-humane part of Sula's character; Hannah's addiction to male company flares up Sula's primordial craving; and above all, Sula's capricious killing of Chicken little and her exploitation of womanhood through unfettered experimentation of sensuality with men.

If the characters in both the novels share a proclivity towards the immoral, doesn't it follow that their ethnicity needs to be exorcised from evil? To approach this question, this research initially maintain that the black characters in both the novels inhabit a world which is dictated much less by a religious belief system than by a collective, convoluted notion of existence germinated by some external stimuli, e.g. trauma. Alexander asserts:

In Morrison's fictional world, God's characteristics are not limited to those represented by the traditional Western notion of the Trinity: Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. Instead, God possesses a fourth face, one that is an explanation for all those things – the existence of evil, the suffering of the innocent and just – that seem so inexplicable in the face of a religious tradition that preaches the omnipotence of a benevolent God. (293)

The "fourth face" can be interpreted as the process of dehumanization that characters like Cholly go through from the very first moment of life in God's world which also accounts for the perpetuation of the unacceptable. Apparently, the individual cases of evil imply a kind of commonness which can be interpreted by Jung's unconscious. Jung found that the personal unconscious "rests upon a deeper layer, which does not derive from personal experience and is not a personal acquisition but is inborn" (Jung, 1959, 1968, p. 3). This "deeper layer" is Jung's collective unconscious. Jung explains:

I have chosen term "collective" because this part of the unconscious is not individual but universal; in contrast to the personal psyche, it has contents and modes of behaviour that are more or less everywhere and in all individuals. It is, in other words, identical in all men and thus constitutes a common psychic substance of a suprapersonal nature which is present in every one of us. (pp. 3-4)

However, the "common psychic substance of a suprapersonal nature" of Jung's "unconscious" defines the commonness of the black characters within the texts so intrinsically that it does not incriminate the conscious subjugation and relegation of the black communities in the socio-economic meta-system to "the inferior other" that affects how an individual or community responds to the vicariously acquired self as well as to the condescending reality. Hence, while probing into the genesis of the commonness and singularity of degenerative behaviours of the black characters, we cannot rule out the perceptual impact on their social knowledge of identity and behaviour.

This paper investigates whether the root of black degeneracy lies in the collective unconscious of the black communities living respectively in Lorain and in the Bottom or is generated by their individual and collective perceptions as vulnerable entities in Morrison's first two novels *The Bluest Eye* and *Sula*. Using Jung's theory of the unconscious, it firstly probes into the black psyche for understanding the proclivity towards evil. Then it aims to undermine the common approaches to black life, e.g., feminism, psychoanalysis, archetypal criticism, in Morrison's novels in favour of a more phenomenological analysis of the black characters as Morrison actually created them in the light of her experience in America. The findings of this paper reach a conclusion that it is perceptions of the reality that account for the prevalence of degenerate behaviours in the two novels. In the second section, the paper shows the black community's view on evil and its repercussions that makes up the apparent collectivity of living. The findings of this paper will contribute to understanding the world of Morrison's

black characters in terms of socio-political implications, not ignoring the fact that perception precedes the unconscious.

2. How the collective unconscious interprets black characters' psyche

In their remarks on the rape and men's victimization of women in *The Bluest Eye*, feminist critics often interpret such human misdeeds in terms of archetypes; vices like Pecola's rape are aligned with the myth of Philomela's brutal rape by her sister's husband, Tereus (Surányi 2007; Miner, 2005; O'Reilly, 2004; & Pozorski, 2003). However, mythologizing evil reverts to the process dismissing the understanding of its precedents in reality, as Claudia the narrator's preference implies.

The commonness of behaviours may be accounted for the deep-rooted notion of fate. In Part Two of *Sula* that opens in 1937, the black community's eccentric definition of anomalies is outlined analogically in connection with incongruous phenomena—a definition which also explains their belief system:

What was taken by outsiders to be slackness, slovenliness or even generosity was in fact a full recognition of the legitimacy of forces other than good ones. They did not believe doctors could heal—for them, none ever had done so. They did not believe death was accidental—life might be, but death was deliberate. They did not believe Nature was ever askew—only inconvenient. Plague and drought were as “natural” as springtime. If milk could curdle, God knows robins could fall. The purpose of evil was to survive it and they determined (without ever knowing they had made up their minds to do it) to survive floods, white people, tuberculosis, famine and ignorance. They knew anger well but not despair, and they didn't stone sinners for the same reason they didn't commit suicide—it was beneath them. (S, p. 90)

Considered logically, the way the black people synchronize unconnected events (e.g. plague and drought are comparable to springtime; milk curdling is like robins falling) suggests their insensibility to rational phenomenal processes and their fallibility of thought. Moreover, the self-justified credo of the dwellers of the Bottom regarding fate and evil, which Christian (1999) terms a “specific belief system” (p. 28), implies their collective unconscious, their repose to the inevitable and their susceptibility to the external world—not less to themselves—which is dominated by the white community. If beliefs are taken “as cognitions that structure outcome expectancies for actions by the actor (Bond, 2005, p. 43),” then the black characters, particularly Cholly Breedlove, lack awareness of the direct consequences of their actions only because of their incongruous connection of ideas in their belief system. Sometimes the survival-first concern overweighs the sense of guilt, an instance of which is found in *Sula* and Nel's tension after they unintentionally kill Chicken Little and only apprehend witness by Shadrack from the other side of the river. This concern manifests a tendency to feign passivity when evil materializes in action—be the evil related or unrelated to the characters. In *The Bluest Eye* the black community pretends to have no part in the evil of Cholly's incest with their self-defensive treatment of it through mere remarks which Claudia discovers:

And I believe our sorrow was the more intense because nobody else seemed to share it. They were disgusted, amused, shocked, outraged, or even excited by the story. But we listened for the one who would say, “Poor little girl,” or “Poor baby,” but there was only head-wagging where those words should have been. We looked for eyes creased with concern, but saw only veils. (BE, p. 149)

To suppress due reactions is to normalize evil. Restricting their response to evil merely to verbal expressions, they let “run its course, fulfill itself, and never invented ways either to alter it, to annihilate it or to prevent its happening again” (*Sula*, pp. 89-90). What remains for the weak is to survive evil in the most expedient way. Claudia considers this communal mechanism of surviving an evil as a kind of finding a scapegoat for their collective flaws, their human weaknesses, of finding a diametric other among themselves against which they can deem themselves to be free of evil:

All of our waste which we dumped on her and which she absorbed. And all of our beauty, which was hers 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. And she let us, and thereby

deserved our contempt. We honed our egos on her, padded our characters with her frailty, and yawned in the fantasy of our strength. (BE, p. 162-3)

The collective feeling of contempt towards evil is actually the reflection of their self-loathing which is connected to their inferiority complex. Smith (2012) opines that “the roots of their self-disgust lie so deep, that they do not recognize them for what they are ... they project those feelings upon the most vulnerable members of their community, in this case the young Pecola [...] has been destroyed not only by her rape at the hands of her father, but by the abuse that members of her community heap upon her” (p. 20). The blacks of the Bottom in *Sula* exhibit a similar disposition in their collective hatred for Sula’s cruelty with Eva Peace, and her indiscriminate sex adventures with married men as well as white men. In a way, Sula becomes a social scapegoat like Pecola; in Nigro’s (1999) words: “After the death of Sula—the pariah, the devil, the outcast—the community’s role of defining itself through acceptance and disapproval of one of its members shifts” (Marie Nigro, in Bloom’s *Sula* p. 23).

In *The Bluest Eye*, Soaphead Church interprets evil in an exceptional fashion which manifests his convoluted thought of using the concept of evil to his advantage; he boastfully considers human evil as a God’s flaw and hence an essential part of humanity: “Evil existed because God had created it” (BE, p. 137). Later shaken by the frailty of his pretension, he describes, in his letter to God, the tradition of degeneracy based on their sense of superiority over blacks for a white ancestor’s bloodline – the collective superciliousness:

In retaining the identity of our race, we held fast to those characteristics most gratifying to sustain and least troublesome to maintain. Consequently we were not royal but snobbish, not aristocratic but class-conscious; we believed authority was cruelty to our inferiors, and education was being at school. We mistook violence for passion, indolence for leisure, and thought recklessness was freedom... Our manhood was defined by acquisitions. Our womanhood by acquiescence. And the smell of your fruit and the labor of your days we abhorred (BE, p. 140-1).

In Soaphead’s mixed-blood community, degeneracy has a distinct dimension and mainly spawns from his early exposure to superficial egoism and its contrariness complacently endured under his father’s “controlled violence” that generated in him “hard habits and a soft imagination” (BE, p. 134). His admittance destabilizes the ground of the unconscious to the extent that being liability to evil become cross-ethnic.

3. Why the collective unconscious is not the primary cause

In her conversation with *Black Creation Annual* about the thematic trends in the writing of the 1970s, Morrison (1974) clarifies on the Black people’s perception of evil “as a fourth dimension in their lives” and their mechanism “to protect themselves from evil” unlike “that puritannical thing which says if you see a witch, then burn it, or if you see something, then kill it.” (p. 8) Morrison continues:

I’m not saying that Black people don’t kill each other. I’m talking about the way they perceive evil and how they act upon that perception. They don’t destroy evil. It’s as though God has four faces for them – not just the Trinity, but four. I know instinctly that we do not regard evil the same way as white people do. We have never done that. White people’s reaction to something that is alien to them is to destroy it. That’s why they have to say Black people are worthless and ugly. They need all the psychological “do” in order to do something simple like ripping some people off. That’s why they behave the way they do. (Morrison, qtd. in Taylor-Gurthrie, 1994, p. 8)

The social imagination of the black individual as lacking violence against evil epitomizing ugliness proves caustic to the black self. It caters to the black characters’ inability to resist the imposition of inferior racial identity and hereditary inferiority complex in times of America’s white supremacy. Almost all the characters foster an inextricable blackness-ugliness analogy generated by the dominant white aesthetics. The Breedloves in *The Bluest Eye* believe that “they were ugly” (p. 28) enough to be considered inferior, and are destined to be so in thoughts and behavior. This belief is so deep-rooted that no one within and outside the community “could convince them that they were not relentlessly and aggressively ugly” (p. 28), and defines them or they define themselves with this ugliness that springs from their conviction:

It was as though some mysterious all-knowing master had given each one a cloak of ugliness to wear, and they had each accepted it without question. The master had said, "You are ugly people." They had looked about themselves and saw nothing to contradict the statement. (BE, p. 28)

This conviction takes the most ironical toll on Pecola who is "firmly entrenched in the ugly reality of her surroundings" and "develops a precarious sense of selfhood" (Pal, 1994, p. 2440). Mckenzie (2004) thinks that reading Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* is "an exploration of the psychic consequences, particularly for black girls, of being marginalized, not only in the earliest textbooks used in elementary schools, but also in their everyday lives both in and outside school. (Mckenzie, 2004, p. 222) Mckenzie's view testifies to the susceptibility of black girls to the perceived conviction of beauty and ugliness. In her 1995 book, Peach outlines the approaches and perspectives of the novel for its "exploration of the impact of prevailing white ideologies on the black community" (p. 22). From this socio-psychological point, Pecola's fear for being seen ugly and her desire for white beauty suggests her wish to view her society as an outsider, an exceptional observer, so "her prayer for new eyes symbolizes a desire for perception outside the culturally iterated messages of white superiority" (Duvall, 2000, p. 27). Though the youngest character in *The Bluest Eye*, Claudia deductively fathoms black people's collective self-image from their fascination towards the white figured dolls: "Adults, older girls, shops, magazines, newspapers, window sings—all the world had agreed that a blue-eyed, yellow-haired, pink-skinned doll was what every girl child treasured" (BE, p. 14). She finds that in the face of white people's hegemonic self-elevation, the blacks are given to playing the weaker selves. This hegemony gets socio-psychologically ingrained early in Claudia's white peers like Maureen Peal who slights Pecola's parentage and, when challenged by Claudia, reveals that hegemonic which lies in the collective unconscious of the white community: "I am cute! And you ugly! Black and ugly black e mos. I am cute!" (BE, p. 56) In *Sula*, the binary of two contrary positions—one giving in to the imposed belief and the other resisting this hegemonic imposition while affirming selfhood—strikes Nel on the Cincinnati-bound train incident where she becomes oriented with hegemonic hatred and self-hatred at the same moment of her perception. She feels that these black people who "worshipped" graceful and beautiful Helene are now "bubbling with a hatred for her mother that had not been there in the beginning but had been born with the dazzling smile." (S, p. 22) The aftermath of this experience makes Nel like Pecola who, in the grip of shame and anger at the dismissive behaviour of Mr. Yacobowski, wishes to become Mary Jane with blond hair, blue petulant and mischievous eyes looking at her from the pale yellow wrapper of her candy: "To eat the candy is somehow to eat the eyes, eat Mary Jane. Love Mary Jane. Be Mary Jane." (BE, p. 38) In a similar Shock, Nel imagines herself alienated from the black community: "I'm me. I'm not their daughter. I'm not Nel. I'm me. Me." (S, p. 28), and hears herself expressing her wish against ugliness: "I want ... I want to be ... wonderful. Oh, Jesus, make me wonderful" (S, p. 29). The social imposition of the notion of black-ugly symbiosis formulates the black characters' collective view on evil, collective pain and collective self-image as ugly all of which are passed down as if these things are indispensably hereditary and hence should be possessed. This is what purports to make the collective unconscious in Morrison's first two novels. The cycle of inheritance that seems to be a genetic code can be understood in Jung's words:

Just as the sun, guided by its own Internal laws, ascends from morn till noon, and passing beyond the noon descends towards evening, leaving behind Its splendor, and then sinks completely Into the all-enveloping night, thus, too, does mankind follow his course according to Immutable laws, and also sinks, after his course Is completed, into night, in order to rise again In the morning to a new cycle In his children. (Jung, 1916, p. 191)

What Cholly's father did gets reflected in Cholly's behaviour which is again absorbed his son, Sammy. The passing down of cognitive and behavioural traits is truer in black women's case. The repetitiveness of women's condition can be construed from the identicalness of their subjection to pain as they occasionally raise a "threnody of nostalgia about pain" which all of them more or less share in their collective memory:

Rising and falling, complex in harmony, uncertain in pitch, but constant in the recitative of pain. They hugged the memories of illnesses to their bosoms. They licked their lips and clucked their tongues in fond remembrance of pains they had endured—childbirth, rheumatism, croup, sprains, backaches,

piles. All of the bruises they had collected from moving about the earth—harvesting, cleaning, hoisting, pitching, stooping, kneeling, picking—always with young ones underfoot. (BE, p. 107).

4. Perceptions as the root of degeneracy

Morrison's concern in writing *Sula* and *The Bluest Eye*, as she discloses it in the respective novels' Foreword and Afterword, evolves American black people's subjection to a suppressed, negating reality, so mere psychoanalysis is a tortuous process to get at the points Morrison aimed to make—the unveiling of the stimuli behind black people's oddities:

Because so much in public and scholarly life forbids us to take seriously the milieu of buried stimuli, it is often extremely hard to seek out both the stimulus and its galaxy and to recognize their value when they arrive. Memory is for me always fresh, in spite of the fact that the object being remembered is done and past. (Morrison, 1984, p. 385)

It should be noted that the black characters in both the novels do not commit evil collectively; rather they get differently oriented with evil in the first place through their perceptions of some racist phenomena which leave deeper impressions on their psyche. So, the collective unconscious aside, the black degeneracy in both the novels can largely be accounted for by how reality exposes itself to the black characters or how they perceive reality for that matter—both individually and collectively—and how this perception gradually makes them evil-prone. Davis (1982) thinks that Morrison's "world and characters are inescapably involved with problems of perception, definition, and meaning, they direct attention to Morrison's own ordering view and its implications" (p. 323). Out of their perceptions, the characters develop a personal unconscious within which, Peters thinks, Jung incorporated the family collective as "closest to consciousness" and as "indivisible from the remoter collectivities of the unconscious, which naturally flow through it in such a way that the influence of the archetypes can almost be perceived in the material of the personal unconscious." (Peters, 1998, pp. 133-4) The self-image of ugliness that exists as a black archetype in their collective unconscious is actually individuated in a variety of consequences; Michael Wood says:

Each member of the family interprets and acts out of his or her ugliness, but none of them understands that the all-knowing master is not God but only history and habit; the projection of their own numbed collusion with the mythology of beauty and ugliness that oppresses them beyond their already grim social oppression. (Wood, qtd. in Bloom, 2007, p. 1)

The individuality and diversity of perceptions create what Badt call "the lack of a true sense of centeredness—a core self" as Morrison's novels "begin with individuals who have an unsatisfactory relation to themselves and others" (Badt, 1995, p. 568). That the adult black characters "carry deep wounds from their earlier lives, and [...] take out their frustrations on their children and on each other" (Smith, 2012, p. 24) can be causally interpreted by their perceptions, not by the black collective unconscious.

Brought up in a poverty-stricken, loveless environment where he was abandoned and left on a junk heap by his own mother when he was only four days old and even before his birth by his father whom he met in his adolescence only to be swatted away, Cholly Breedlove grows to imagine himself as "Dangerously free". He was

[f]ree to feel whatever he felt—fear, guilt, shame, love, grief, pity...to be tender or violent, to whistle or weep...to sleep in doorways or between the white sheets of a singing woman...to take a job...to leave it...go to jail and not feel imprisoned...to take a woman's insults, for his body had already conquered hers...even to knock her in the head, for he had already cradled that head in his arms...to be gentle when she was sick, or mop her floor, for she knew what and where his maleness was...free to drink himself into a silly helplessness...to live his fantasies...even to die. (pp. 125-26)

Much like Hannah and Helen, in *Sula*, who have lost their parentages, Cholly only comes to know about his parental connectively vaguely in a state of despair. His inner faculty has gone awry not only because of his living on the periphery of society as other blacks are expected to but also because of his accommodation alienated from his fellowmen. So "trapped in his traumatic past; unable to make peace with his own suffering, he destroys his own life and the lives of those around him" (Smith, 2012, p. 25). He is seen as a punishment from God for Pauline, and "that old Dog" and "that dirty nigger" to his community. His wantonness as a family man is necessarily connected with his traumatic past: the nightmarish memory of his humiliation by the white hunters who made him make sex with Darlene

under flashlight and gun cuts a deep scar in his vulnerable personality, and his first feeling of destructive hatred, dawning in his personal unconscious and paradoxically directed towards Darlene, “who bore witness to his failure, his impotence” (p. 118), instead of the white men, surfaces in its convoluted form when he behaves with his daughter, Pecola. Aware of the inherited weakness of the blacks in the white dominated world, he is afraid to hate his victimizers because “[s]uch an emotion would have destroyed him.” He ponders:

They were big, white, armed men. He was small, black, helpless. His subconscious knew what his conscious mind did not guess—that hating them would have consumed him, burned him up like a piece of soft coal, leaving only flakes of ash and a question mark of smoke. (p. 118)

The flashlight trauma ingrained in him “constantness, varietylessness, the sheer weight of sameness” that “drove him to despair and froze his imagination (BE, p. 126).” So “it was Pauline, rather marrying her, that did for him what the flashlight did not do” (BE, p. 126). His irresponsibility towards his children is just the reflection his own parentless upbringing:

Having no idea of how to raise children, and having never watched any parent raise himself, he could not even comprehend what such a relationship should be. Had he been interested in the accumulation of things, he could have thought of them as his material heirs; had he needed to prove himself to some nameless “others,” he could have wanted them to excel in his own image and for his own sake. Had he not been alone in the world since he was thirteen, knowing only a dying old woman who felt responsible for him, but whose age, sex, and interests were so remote from his own, he might have felt a stable connection between himself and the children. As it was, he reacted to them, and his reactions were based on what he felt at the moment. (BE, pp. 126-27)

Cholly’s personality is partially taken over by BoyBoy, in Sula, who abandons Eva with three children causing her to do the unthinkable—the willful amputation of her leg under a train to collect insurance money for the sustenance of the family. Then BoyBoy is replicated by Jude who leaves Nel with three children to raise, after his bewildered tryst with Sula in whose comforting company he seeks cure for his disturbed self.

The black characters’ degenerative psycho-social self-actualization is consequential upon their encounters with the white people, as Davies (1982) explains in her comprehensive analysis of the external world’s negative reflection on the black people’s existence. Cholly “mired himself in ugly behavior and self-hatred when he started to see himself as negatively as whites viewed him” (Dixon, 2005, p. 28) In Sula, Helene endures humiliation at the white conductor’s unforgiving, rude behaviour for her mistakenly boarding into coach of some twenty white men and women follows her already acquired inferiority complex as a black woman: “All the old vulnerabilities, all the old fears of being somehow flowed gathered in her stomach and made her hands tremble” (S, p. 20). Her humiliation is augmented by the absence of compassion in the witnessing black passengers’ eyes, by Helene’s coquettish, foolish smile at the conductor, the black passengers’ conspicuous hatred at her—Nel, Helene’s little daughter, who is the more circumstantially affected one, perceives all these from her critical point of view. Sula and Nel’s compulsion by the four white teenagers to walk in roundabout circuitous routes home from school and Shadrack’s arrest by police for “wandering” in the white part of town leave remarkable impact on their lives. Jude, who is determined to quit his job as a waiter at the Hotel Medallion for a more assiduous, more rewarding job in the post-war New River Road construction, is disappointed by white recruiters who hired three old feeble colored men for small errands at the hiring shack. He feels “a shame to see those white men laughing with the grandfathers but shying away from the young black men who could tear that road up” (S, p. 81). This frustration generates a futile anger in Jude and significantly affects his married life with Nel all along. In *The Bluest Eye*, this kind of anger follows Pecola’s perception of the “total absence of human recognition” (p. 36), at Yacobowski’s Fresh Veg. Meat and Sundries Store, and the distaste “lurking in the eyes of all white people” (BE, p. 36-7) towards black people. Exiting the store, Pecola first feels an “inexplicable shame”, and then anger with the result that the same dandelions which were a moment ago “pretty” become “ugly”. This shift of perspectives caused external stimulus—Mr. Yacobowski’s hatred – implies the fragmentation of her personal conscious and “[h]er eventual retreat into insanity reveals her pathetic inability to cope with her hostile environment” (Pal, 1994, p. 2440).

Morrison brings out the Black Americans' perceptual consequences because she "refuses to accept the definition of the African American experience according to white standards." In her 2008 novel, *A Mercy*, Lina, whose experience makes her skeptic of European culture, systems, and people, says: "We never shape the world. . . . The world shapes us." (*A Mercy*, p. 71) According to M. D. Kubitschek (1998), Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* evidences the "destructive psychological effects of racism" (p. 30) on the black community. Dittmar (2007) emphasizes the study of this novel in the light of its social historical connection, because "it is a revolutionary novel in the ways its form assaults conventions and empowers normally disenfranchised speakers" (p. 83) The girls in these novels being the signature characters, Morrison "sheds light on a painful paradox: while they experience their girlhoods mired in physical, psychological, and sexual abuse, as well as neglect, these girls, more often than not, are robbed of their girlhoods in a struggle for survival" (Roye, 2012, p. 212).

The contrast of environmental settings of black and white communities is also significant to understand how perception generates feelings like jealousy, inferiority complex, self-loathing, fear of being observed etc. in the black individual's mind. Morrison "depict(s) individuals who are altered by the environments they experience" and maintains that "both natural and constructed, open and enclosed spaces are important factors in the shaping of identity" (Russell, 2006, p. 5, 14). In *The Bluest Eye*, the black community is constantly exposed to the dismal industrial activity – "the great cartloads of slag being dumped, red hot and smoking, into the ravine that skirts the steel mill"; the "old, cold, and green" house the MacTeers live in, lighting only one large room with a kerosene lamp at night and leaving the other rooms "braced in darkness, peopled by roaches and mice" (p. 5); the "background of leaden sky" (p. 24); the tiny town of the Breedloves which invariably makes visitors "wonder why it has not been torn down" and the Breedlove house of the long abandoned storefront gaudily furnished with bleak furniture pieces suggestive of utter negligence and thoughtlessness of the users. All these environmental features come in sharp contrast with the white people's lakefront houses with garden furniture, ornaments, windows like shiny eyeglasses, and, more remarkably, the "always blue" sky (p. 81). Claudia, the only inspective and introspective character in *The Bluest Eye* perceives this contrast of material and environmental features in the two neighbourhoods as she and Frieda head towards the Fisher house where Pecola assists her mother in housekeeping work. This contrast evidences the discriminations—social, economic and political—that the blacks begin to endure from their very childhood. In Claudia's case, she discerns this line of contrast pitifully, as she passes by Lake Shore Park reserved only for "clean, white, well-behaved children and parents who would play there above the lake in summer before half-running, half-stumbling down the slope to the welcoming water (pp. 81-82). Claudia's tacit despair represents the repressed wishes of the blacks for entitlements of the social mainstream: "Black people were not allowed in the park, and so it filled our dreams" (p. 82). As in McKenzie's (2004) words, Sula shows us "how space gets racialized and shapes our understanding of our identity and the options available to us" (p. 224).

In the hostile landscape, each black family – the MacTeers, the Breedloves, the Peaces – formulates their own world of micro-reality which is subject to the national meta-reality. In this restricted reality, they act on their personal unconscious which their experiences generated in them and epitomize all the degenerative modes of behaviour before their children. In *The Bluest Eye*, the possibility of normalcy within the family is denied to the black community in the primer. O'Reilly (2004) posits that the primer at the beginning of *The Bluest Eye* is "scripted as the normal family arrangement" and "serves to emphasize the inappropriateness of this ideal for black families and reminds us of the inevitable feelings of inferiority that come with not achieving what is presented as the ideal and normal way of being" (p. 48). According to Dixon (2005), it marks a "distance between their lives and the ideal American home or family" (p. 25). Toni Morrison, in a 1981 interview, also admits the primer's function "as a frame acknowledging the outer civilization" which boasts happy white children (Taylor-Guthrie 1994: 127). Once this acknowledgement is established in the reader's mind, he finds the black families in *The Bluest Eye* as a diametric other characterized by degenerate thoughts and deeds. McKenzie observes:

By the time readers finish the novel, they have ventured into domestic spaces where economic depravity dictates when and how people love, where taboos of rape and incest traumatize and sabotage black girlhood, where racism in the larger world shapes and constrains the options men and

women have to imagine themselves as whole, acceptable human beings, and where people both in and outside the community exploit the most vulnerable. (Mckenzie, 2004, p.223)

The life of unbridled relationships that Sula indulges in is the result of her perception of Eva and Hannah's male attraction in the family. Quite early in life, Sula gets exposed to Hannah's sexual stints with men and the pleasure they exude every time they finish:

Seeing her step so easily into the pantry and emerge looking precisely as she did when she entered, only happier, taught Sula that sex was pleasant and frequent, but otherwise unremarkable. Outside the house, where children giggle about underwear, the message was different. So she watched her mother's face and the face of the men when they opened the pantry door and made her own mind. (p.44)

This perception eliminates moral abstractions or marital legitimating of sex in Sula's mind so that she puts it in the realm of her sensory experience and in the service of the self-exploration that leads to self-intimacy (McDowell, 2005, p. 58). The impression that adult performances leave on children is also evident in Claudia's interpretation of the subject matter of her mother's songs "about hard times, bad times, and somebody-done-gone-and-left-me times." Claudia thinks: "Misery colored by the green 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 (BE, p. 18)." While Claudia's interpretation arises from a childish, innocent imagination, Sula's voyeuristic exposure defines womanhood (or black womanhood) to her so radically that she outdoes her mother, Hannah, in terms of sexuality, with no discrimination among the men she takes and no qualms for how she takes them. Her sexual orientation in the family arouses an abiding fancy about men quite early in her mind as she along with Nel feels the dawn of desire under male gaze on their way to Edna Finch's Mellow House, an ice-cream parlor:

The new theme they were now discovering were men. So they met regularly, without even planning it, to walk down the road to Edna Finch's Mellow House, even though it was too cool for ice cream. (S, pp. 55-56)

They, especially Sula, begin to inexpressively admire Ajax, "a twenty-one-year-old pool haunt of sinister beauty" (50), whose teasing phrase "pig meat" makes them avert "their eyes lest someone see their delight. The progression from perception to desire would make a nostalgic episode for them so that after years "their own eyes would glaze as they cupped their chins in remembrance of the inchworm smiles, the squatting haunches, the track-rail legs straddling broken chairs." Then they would recollect "[t]he cream-colored trousers marking with a mere seam the place where the mystery curled." They would also assume that "[t]hose smooth vanilla crotches invited them; those lemon-yellow gabardines beckoned to them." (50)

But it is the alienated selfhood and not just exposure to sexual activity that arouses the archetypal desire for male contact. In *The Bluest Eye*, Pauline in her fifteen, like Addie in Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* (1935), feels the grips of desire in her loneliest of moments: "Fantasies about men and love and touching were drawing her mind and away from her work. Changes in weather began to affect her, as did certain sights and sounds. These feelings translated themselves to her in extreme melancholy." (p. 88) She feels "a someone", a "simple Presence" who would allow her "lay her head on his chest" and who would "lead her away to the sea, to the city, to the woods ... forever." (p. 88)

On the positive side, the freedom of self that Sula develops from her close observation of Eva Peace and Hannah Peace's role play in actualizing a female dominated household easily accessible to desirous men makes her adult self confident – or sometimes arrogant – and assertive about her fluid existence between the two black-white cultural binaries. The threat posed by the Irish newcomers' gang to Sula and Nel "brings out Sula's reserves of strength and her unpredictability which help focus the novel's concern with these elements" (Peach, 1995, p. 39) Sula's perception of the cruel reality of black girls makes her what Bloom calls "a total rebel against all society, all conventions, and nearly all moralities." (Bloom, 1999, p. 1) In matters of sex, she transgresses black community's ingrained belief "that all unions between white men and black women be rape; for a black woman to be willing was literally unthinkable." (S, p. 113) In Barbara Christian's view, "[b]ecause of her drive for self-knowledge, and because of the imagination she brings to the memories of her ancestors and to her own experiences, Sula emerges as a unique woman" (Bloom, 1999, p. 39). The eccentricity, category-resistance against set norms in Sula's persona is the result of a kind of observation the effect of which

can be discerned from Claudia's decoding of the reality of individual black girls—a reality which affects every young individual in both *The Bluest Eye* and *Sula*:

We had defended ourselves since memory against everything and everybody, considered all speech a code to be broken by us, and all gestures subject to careful analysis; we had become headstrong, devious, and arrogant. Nobody paid us any attention, so we paid very good attention to ourselves. Our limitations were not known us—not then. Our only handicap was our size; people gave us orders because they were bigger and stronger. So it was with confidence, strengthened by pity and pride, that we decided to change the course of events and alter a human life. (BE, p. 150)

The acquired determination to veer into a new course of life marks a disconnection from the concept of womanhood as upheld by black girls' mothers. It also signifies the contradictory forces at work in Morrison's writing reflecting "the contradictions at work in the society out of which she writes" (Shan qtd. in Dittmar, 2007, p. 77). Ogunyemi (1979) argues that *Sula*'s insecurity and consequent neurosis result in her unstable relationship with her mother (130). O'Reilly (2004) says Pauline and *Sula* "become disconnected from their motherline and disregard, as a consequence, their ancient properties as a result of their internalization of a particular normative gender belief or behavior" (p. 47). In the light of Jung's concept of individuation, *Sula* undergoes a psychic transformation by integrating the personal and collective unconscious into the conscious.

Time and again Toni Morrison has stressed the political functionality of fiction which, as she explains in the Afterword to *The Bluest Eye*, works against "the demonization of an entire race" (p. 168) for "the public exposure of a private confidence" (p. 169). To her the writing and publication of her first novel, in the political climate of 1965-69, involved "the disclosure of secrets, secrets "we" shared and those withheld from us by ourselves and by the world outside the community" (p. 169). The outside world may mistakenly know that the commonality of depravity purports to interpret the black characters' being driven by the collective unconscious but the outside world should know that it is actually the commonality of the individual and collective perceptions of the external world that shape their individual self-perceptions within the confines of their collective identity in the white dominated society, for which the black characters in Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* and *Sula* miss a moral centrality to mould their personalities. This can be corroborated by Jefferson's (2014) assertion that Morrison, with the mimetic aspect of her novels, is "interested in changing how people think; and, in doing so, change how they act in the contemporary world" (p. 40). In fact, in the novels all the black characters are faced with a phenomenological crisis in their subjugated socio-economic status that does not allow them to develop a coherent cultural system with sound notions of selfhood and belongingness. Ultimately, research findings focusing on issues like identity crisis, inferiority complex, racism etc. in Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* and *Sula* converge on the point of perception that makes all the difference of black characters from the white community in the two novels.

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