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Dilemma of the Displaced: A Study of Toni Morrison's Select Novels

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Abstract: *The society today, though has achieved improvements in the status of women, violence against women continues to develop. Women, even in their early years of age are tortured and tormented by their peer groups and family members. Toni Morrison is an African American writer who is internationally acclaimed as a novelist for voicing out the sufferings of the African American women in the dominant American society. Her debut novel, The Bluest Eye (1970) portrays the problem of color discrimination. As W.E.B Du Bois puts forth, "The problem of twentieth century is the problem of color-line". Her novel Beloved (1987) showcases the African American women as victims of slavery. The paper focuses on the discrimination of the Black women in the white society. The plight of these women has become like a broken winged bird that cannot fly. The paper is an attempt to highlight the violence perpetuated to the marginalized women in terms of physical, psychological, and sexual abuse. The paper also emphasizes the importance of communal strength in order to prevent the oppression of the dislocated women.*

Dilemma of the Displaced

The Society today, though has achieved improvements in the status of women, violence against women continues to prevail. The problems and exploitation of women is prevalent largely among the Black society. Women, even in their early years of age are tortured and tormented by their peer groups or family members. Thus the condition is worse in the society, within the family itself, and also outside them. The major cause for this kind of discrimination is their color complexion that gave rise to what is called racial discrimination, thereby the problem of discrimination between the Whites and the Blacks.

Toni Morrison is an African American writer who is internationally acclaimed as a novelist for voicing out the sufferings of the African American women in the dominant American society. The paper focuses on the discrimination of the African American women in the American society, with respect to the novels *The Bluest Eye* (1970), and *Beloved* (1987). *The Bluest Eye* portrays the problem of color discrimination. *Beloved* showcases the African American women as victims of slavery. A closer analysis of both the novels reveals that violence is perpetuated to the Blacks in terms of physical, psychological, and sexual abuse. Orient Blackswan's WordMaster defines the term 'displaced' as "to make someone move out of their usual place" (157). The novels show how the African Americans were brought to America against their will. They were brought as slaves to America, and *Beloved* painfully portrays the pangs of slavery.

The aspects of racial, social, and domestic violence against Black women reflect the degrees of power and powerlessness. After their displacement from their native Africa, the sufferings that they undergo almost reduce them to lesser humans. They have no other option but to endure and exist in their new land which is for them, marked by power and dominance. The paper analyses the life of two black girls Pecola Breedlove and Beloved. Morrison's debut novel *The Bluest Eye* portrays the sufferings undergone by a black girl. It shows how the whites gain an upper hand in almost every little thing just because they are white, and that means they are beautiful.

Beauty is the term that was given more importance in the American society. This consideration of beauty leads to the misery of Pecola.

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Pecola is a young, poor, black girl. The people around her called her ugly. She was repeatedly called ugly by her school mates and also by her own mother. She was constantly mocked and criticized by her peers and also by her parents. This caused the mental torment and inferiority complex in her. Her name was Pecola Breedlove, but did she hardly receive love from others. Everyone around her was meant not to show their love and compassion for her, but only to mock and insult her.

A woman's life is largely dependent on her surroundings. Her behaviour is connected to her inner feelings that are greatly affected by the kind of people around her and their attitudes. In such a case, for young girls like Pecola who was repeatedly criticized for her ugliness life would become a mere existence that is full of sorrows and sufferings. Toni Morrison's characterization of Pecola is a way to bring in to light how the attitude of the people about beauty is illusory. This illusion tends to make Pecola yearn for beauty.

Pecola's longing for beauty shows how a woman's life is influenced by the society. She starts dreaming about possessing blue eyes and she starts thinking that whiteness is superior everywhere. Her being mindful of her beauty is brought out in the lines, "Long hours she sat looking in the mirror, trying to discover the secret of her ugliness, the ugliness that made her ignored or despised at school, by teachers and classmates alike" (TBE: 34). She thinks that only those who are white would be respected and regarded, but those like Pecola who were black and ugly, were of least consideration.

This kind of understanding that Pecola derives from the outside world makes her to believe that, the blue eyes would change her life, and that she would be loved and her life would be transformed. "The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the colour-line" (189), says W.E.B. Du Bois. The novel shows how even a doll, a plaything, was preferred to be in white. This shows how the whites are color-conscious and such an attitude is not just within their minds, but is also implicated in the black people around. This kind of implication becomes the reason for Pecola's longing for the blue eyes. Her longing is revealed in the lines, "A little girl who wanted to rise up out of the pit of her blackness and see the world with blue eyes" (TBE: 138).

Pecola thought that if her eyes were blue, she would have different view of the things around her. This seriousness is seen in the lines, "Each night, without fail, she prayed for blue eyes" (TBE: 35). In addition to this, she would be viewed by the world differently. She believed that the blue eyes would bring about a change in the way she sees the world, and the way in which she is seen by the world. Pecola's world was confined to her own family, her school, and the vicinity. "She was the only member of her class who sat alone at a double desk" (TBE: 34). She felt lonely because of her isolation. She was also a victim of sexual violence because she was sexually abused by her own father, Cholly Breedlove.

Women especially are often exposed to experience such exploitations at home, at school, and in the society, at large. Some women are very much vulnerable like Pecola that they can be attacked easily, and they do not fight back. Women in general are often quoted as weaker sex and become an object of victim for the subjects who are inhuman. Being psychologically emotional and tender they lose to possess the inner strength and become submissive. Also, most of the incidents in the novel show the way how women are subjugated in all possible ways. This treatment of Pecola lacks the sense of humanity.

Beloved portrays the displaced Africans as the victims of slavery who had to undergo pain, captivity, and horror. The extent to which the black women in American society were tortured made them to wonder if they had to live. Sethe and Beloved are the displaced black women who struggle towards liberation and self-hood. Their displacement has caused specific contradictions in the social order of their life. Beloved is a girl who was killed by her mother Sethe. It is an act of mercy killing performed by a mother just for the sake of safeguarding her daughter from the pangs of slavery. Sethe had no freedom even to feed her baby. This is evident from Harrison's words in *Sethe a Slave to her Past*, "the inhumanity ... robbed her of the only pleasure a ... woman is given, the gift of nursing her child". (qtd. in Dhanasekaran 188). This shows how Motherhood is being trampled on by the white masters.

Speech is a quality that distinguishes humans from animals. Maya Angelou, in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* reminds the importance of language in the lines, "language is man's way of communicating with his fellow man and it is language alone which separates him from the lower animals" (98). Sethe uses artistic expressions such as songs and metaphors to voice out her thoughts and feelings. Denver suffered from isolation which added to her loneliness. Her pain is revealed when she says, "I can't live here. I don't know where to go or what to do, but I can't live here. Nobody speaks to us. Nobody comes by. Boys don't like me. Girls don't either" (BD: 17).

Sethe and other slave women were denied of the rights to speak out anything they wanted. Girls were denied the privilege of education. These uneducated girls were forcefully employed in poorly paid menial jobs. Denver worked in the house of the Garners when Sethe was sick. Thomas Sowell, in his book *Ethnic America: A History* says that,

The overwhelming majority of slaves (women) could neither read nor write, and most Southern states made it a crime to teach them. Because slaves (women) were kept in captivity by ignorance rather than by physical restraints. (187)

A Black woman's work was also limited to sewing, cooking and cleaning either in their home or of the whites. Even if men were allowed to get education, women were not free enough to even think of it. Even if there was a narrow opportunity for the black girls

to go to school, they were troubled and treated inhumanly. This is how violence is perpetuated to the African American women physically, psychologically, and economically as well.

The novel *Beloved* gives a detailed account of various forms of oppression that victimized the black American women. The brutal treatment of these women was worse than the animals. This shows how they were dehumanized. It also gives us painfully exact impressions of the female blacks who lead a walk-on-water life. It records the cruelty, violence and degradation of black slave women, through the lives of the characters-Sethe, Denver, and Beloved. These women characters are emblematic of the agony and abandonment.

Life is the greatest opportunity. But the value of a person's life is dependent on how well he or she lives. A Woman's life is so complex and complicated that she is chained by many social upheavals. Every day is a test and a trial for them. The victimization implicated on them has made their condition worse, which is revealed in the lines, "Nothing could be counted on in a world where even when you were a solution you were a problem" (BD: 302). In such a situation, the displaced women develop a kind of dilemma and tend to lose their sense of belonging.

A woman's life is largely shaped by the community. The society should definitely change its attitude and lend a hand in order to safeguard those who are suffering. People in a community should be generous, benevolent, sympathetic and merciful. Thus each individual should be merciful to every other individual. In doing so, women can be protected from oppression and their mental dilemma can be transformed, paving way for their meaningful living.

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