
Parental Hunger and Alienation in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*

Dr. Shabbir Ahmad¹, Dr. Fariha Chaudhary², Dr. Ghulam Murtaza³

Abstract

The 20th century African Americans, especially the black females, who had neglectful parents, aftereffects of past slavery, were unable to show any kind of belonging to the contemporary American society. They found their souls and minds fettered in the dark dungeon of alienation which means a sense of detachment from the people around as well as from their inner selves. This sense of alienation created in them the feelings of irreparable loss and everlasting despair which is being discussed in this study of Toni Morrison's fiction. It is an attempt to have deep journey into the alienated and disturbed worlds of the characters that are in constant quest for parental love in Toni Morrison's first novel *The Bluest Eye* (1970). It displays the tragic plight of alienated, motherless/fatherless characters by presenting an irreparable loss in their lives because of parental hunger.

Keywords: Alienation; Parental hunger; Neurotic need of love; Slavery; Loss

¹ (Assistant Professor of English, The University of Sahiwal, Pakistan) Email: shabbirahmad@uosahiwal.edu.pk

² (Assistant Professor of English, Bahauddin Zakaryia University Multan, Pakistan. Email: drfarihach@bzu.edu.pk

³ (Associate Professor of English, Government College University Faisalabad, Pakistan) Email: gmaatir@gmail.com

*Corresponding author Email: shabbirahmad@uosahiwal.edu.pk

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Introduction

Alienation, which means a withdrawal from others and a loss of any human connection, is not an unfamiliar topic when it comes to the discussion of modernist/ postmodernist literature. When we look the term alienation in different dictionaries, its synonyms are estrangement, isolation and separation. Similarly, when philosophers define this term they use alienation and estrangement alternately: “the person experiences himself as alien, one might say, estranged” (Fromm 1990: 120-21). Harold Bloom declares it to be a universal literary theme running through different ages in his edited book *Bloom’s Literary Themes: Alienation (2009)* where he analyses novels, plays and poetry to illustrate its use in literature. The most important writers of alienation include Thomas Mann, Marcel Proust, Franz Kafka, Joseph Conrad, James Joyce, T. S. Eliot and Samuel Beckett.

The notion of alienation has mainly prospered in philosophy, psychology, sociology, art and literature. In the 19th century it was explicitly “noticed by philosophers” (Murchland 1969: 432). Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770-1831) is declared as the first to use and develop a philosophical explanation of this term as “a separation of the mind from its essence into an alienated spirit” (Overend 1975: 307). After Hegel, comes Karl Marx. Differing from Hegel’s idealistic explanation of the term, alienation for Marx emerges from the economic base of society: an alienation of the worker from the process of work, from the product of work, from himself, and from others (Marx 1844: 106-120). Thus, Marx sees alienation as both a sociological process and a psychological state as alienation is created, sociologically, in the activity of working together in a work place and this alienation affects one mentally by pushing him into a continuous painful realization that the things he is producing do not belong to him but to others.

For the use of Marx’s economic theory in literary analysis, Charles Reitz refers to Marcuse’s works. Marcuse shifts alienation from the Marxist focus on economic effects to an analysis of human factors, as for Marcuse it is not only an economic matter. “It is a matter of man as man”. (Reitz 2000: 7-8). Hence any activity or a relationship in which subject remains no longer a subject but becomes an object, makes one alienated from that activity or relationship. Furthermore, another type of alienation in Marx is self-alienation which is defined by Fromm too in which one is “estranged from himself” (Fromm 1990: 120-21). The concept of self- alienation is also elaborated by Karen Horney.

Karen Horney (1885-1952), a famous US psychoanalyst, proposes a psychological theory of alienation based on neurosis. Horney takes neurosis to be mental imbalance that causes distress, though it does not prevent rational thought and proper function in daily life. Horney thinks neurosis is caused by an outgrowth of disturbed human relationships in childhood: “Early environmental influences and the changes they effected in the child’s personality are the factors under which neurotic conflicts develop. The fundamental characteristics that evolve in this way may be summarized as an alienation from the self and others” (Horney 1945: 219). Karen Horney means that a crisis is experienced when a child has emotionally neglectful parents in the growing up stage. Then, a distressing mental imbalance develops, called as neurosis, to cope with fears of abandonment; helplessness and imperfection, caused by those parents who have made him/her feel unwanted as a child. Horney names ten patterns of neurotic needs based upon things which she thinks all humans require in life. An important pattern is the need for affection and it includes two very important needs: The neurotic need for a partner and the neurotic need for love. The best source of this neurotic need of love is mother or father but if it is missing or negligent then neurosis develops which in turn creates alienation. (Horney 1945: 48-73) What Horney has explained, does happen with most of Morrison’s characters that are fatherless/motherless, a condition that makes them neurotic and creates alienation in them from self and from others.

Toni Morrison’s interest in alienation may be traced back to her MA thesis at Cornell University, *Virginia Woolf’s and William Faulkner’s Treatment of the Alienated (1955)*. In this thesis, she argues that a defining characteristic of the twentieth century literary subject is alienation. The modern character in literature is, Morrison says, “a man apart,” (Morrison 1955: 1.) More than sixty years later, after a successful career as a novelist in America, with an oeuvre of ten novels, Morrison continues dealing with the issue of alienation and it is the focus of her latest novels, *A Mercy (2008)* and *God Help the Child (2015)*. To a large extent, Morrison’s MA thesis paves the way for her oeuvre, as John. N Duvall has said: “Morrison’s master thesis stands as a piece of intellectual autobiography

that provides a glimpse onto the development of her novelistic imagination” (Duvall 1991:114). The researcher of the present analysis holds the same belief and uses her MA thesis as a template for the current study. It is contended here that Morrison applies the idea of alienation in her fiction, discussed in her master’s thesis, in specific ways to highlight certain crucial issues of African Americans.

This essay examines the historical implications of alienation in Morrison as many of her characters seem to be alienated from family, cut off from society and detached from others. In fact, this study aims to find out the answers to the following research questions: How does alienation work on Morrison’s characters, individually as human beings and collectively as community members, and how does it affect their lives, choices and their future? Is alienation a matter of choice or an integral condition of colonial black American subjects and their descendants? Whether Morrison’s characters struggle to overcome alienation, and if they do, whether they succeed in that struggle. And if they do not succeed in de-alienation, what are its implications? It tries to trace the factors behind alienation and analyze their effects on the alienated characters. The factor to be investigated here is mother/father hunger in African Americans.

The lives of African Americans in early decades of the twentieth century had been in the severe grip of their troublesome past slave history that exerted un-healable scars on them such as growing without one or both parents. Therefore, this paper investigates how and why motherlessness/fatherlessness activates a parental hunger that has no replacement or alternative so it creates a gap that can never be fulfilled. This chapter elaborates that “parental hunger” shows seeds of self-alienation and this self-alienation ultimately leads to other forms of alienation such as those from spouse and community in the long run. This article also probes into the possibility of whether the alienated individuals would succeed in creating kinship bonds that could soothe their mother hunger and restore their normal sense of self. This paper also discusses how the alienated parent-child relation of one generation creates alienation in parent-child relation of the next generation and the cycle continues. Furthermore, the effects of alienated gender relations of parents on their children are discussed. This paper analyses alienated relations in Morrison’s first novel: *The Bluest Eye*, since the issue of alienated relations rooted in parental hunger is the major focus in this novel.

Discussion (Analysis)

The Bluest Eye (1970), Morrison’s first novel, is an account of devastating effects of alienation on motherless/fatherless characters. Shelley Wong talks about alienation of Breedloves’ family in this novel: “The pathos of the Breedloves’ lives lies in their complete alienation from each other” (Wong 1990: 476). In fact, abnormalities in the upbringing of children by parents give rise to alienation experienced by Breedlove family in this novel. Its roots go back to slavery plus poverty in black family histories. Swarm Kumari. K also highlights the significance of childhood experiences in one’s adult life, “Many of Ms. Morrison’s narrations of the Black women strongly recall Nikki Giovanni’s arguments in the poem “*Nikki-Rosa*”: Childhood experiences are always a drag, if you’re black” (Kumari 2003: 3). This is what happens in *The Bluest Eye*. Morrison highlights the miserable condition of the alienated character Pecola who retreats into a world of her own and her parents re-enforce her alienation.

Pecola’s mother Pauline gives her love and affection not to her own daughter but to her employer’s daughters Claudia and Frieda, that becomes one of the reasons of Pecola’s self-hatred and then self-alienation. Once it happens that Pecola descends a pot of blue berry pie on the floor when she comes to kitchen with Claudia and Frieda. Pauline takes the side of the employer’s daughters instead of her own daughter’s and relaxes the tears of “the little pink and yellow girl” (Morrison 1970: 22). Chollybreedlove quenches the thirst for his mother, under the grip of alienation, by raping his daughter Pecola. His detachment from the people around and the rape of his own daughter is an evidence of the damaging effect of alienation. After getting hatred from her parents, Pecola wishes to have blue eyes and white beauty to be accepted in the society around. This compulsive but unfulfilled desire to have the blue eyes decays her personality into self-hatred and self-alienation. Her rape by her own father Chollybreedlove intensifies her alienation, alienation from her own self and from the people around her, including her parents. Her parents, because of their alienated gender relation,

cannot form a stable family structure and thus fail to nurture her properly and so she undergoes such a state of alienation that remains forever for her.

Pecola's mother, Pauline, often speaks about the alienation prevalent in her relation with her husband: "That was the loneliest time of my life" (Morrison 1970: 107). In her loneliness, she turns to her husband but he is not responsive: "Their marriage was shredded with quarrels" (ibid.108). Pauline does never receive the warmth or love she craves from her husband: "Cholly commenced to getting meaner and meaner and wanted to fight me all of the time" (ibid.108) But "the loneliness in those two rooms had not gone away" (ibid.108). These details show it is Cholly/Breedlove who has major share in making their relation alienated and if the factors behind his behavior are traced, it becomes clear that it is his mother/father hunger that makes his relation with his wife alienated. Toni Morrison, through this novel, explains that the children with deprived parental care carry with them an unquenched parental hunger throughout their lives which makes them alienated from their own selves and from others.

Cholly has seen a cold attitude from his parents in his childhood. Rejected by his parents, Cholly displays the same callousness towards his daughter. The story reveals that Cholly's father had rejected him and refused to admit him as his son. Then, he was forsaken and abandoned by his mother too. Thus, Cholly is both an abuser as well as an abused. Suffering from the deprivations of parental care plus racial abuse, he shifts his anger towards his wife and daughter. In fact, Cholly's vicious act of raping his own daughter is the result of his alienation from his self as well as from others, as he, "poured out on her the sum of all his inarticulate fury" (Morrison 1970:40). And the desire that Cholly has most longed for is desire of love from his mother/father and according to Karen Horney, "The best source of the neurotic need of love is mother or father but if it is missing or negligent then neurosis develops which in turn creates alienation from self and from others". (Horney 1945: 48-73). Thus, Cholly's brutal act of rape is a way to discharge his deprivations, particularly the lack of parental love in his own childhood.

Alienation in the context of this novel signifies a separation of one character from one's self and from other members of his family as well as society, and this separation minimizes their capacity to think properly and act normally. Father, who is considered to be a protector, his protection turns into an illicit thirst and he rapes his daughter twice. Cholly's inability to connect with black and white community, results in hysteria of freedom, the freedom of an isolated man with dangerous consequences, and he uses that freedom negatively to torture brutally his own wife Pauline and then his daughter Pecola: "Cholly was free. Dangerously free" (Morrison 1970: 125). Cholly was free in such a way that he was not under any responsibility to anyone and not even to himself. His alienation from others and even from his own self destroys his life fabric and his family. For Cholly, the inability to adjust himself in a world around results in despair, frustration and a sense of loss. Mainly unfitted, by way of race and class, and then by thirst of mother/father love, Cholly is suffocated by his own "inarticulate fury and aborted desires" ((Morrison 1970: 37). "Only in drink was there some break" (ibid.126) from the restlessness of body and soul. The thirst for mother/father love destroys for him the sense of life as a growing, forwarding process. The destruction begins much earlier --his abandonment by his parents.

Cholly's abandonment by his parents drastically disconnects him from any sense of family. He loses all familial concepts as a result of this parental desertion. His motherlessness/fatherlessness deprives him of any concept of motherhood/fatherhood. Its foundation is in slave trade that had disrupted family life by breaking up families and by assigning family members the status of commodities. According to Malin, "One of the central concerns throughout Morrison's work is colonization"(Malin 1997: 72) And one major factor of colonization is motherlessness/fatherlessness in black families. According to Shelley Wong the title of the family name "Breedlove" is ironic (476) as this family has neither love nor connection but the disfigurement of human relationships. Pecola's rape is, in one concrete sense, the disfigurement of human relationships. Pecola's splitting up of her psyche and then splitting up of herself from the world is the indictment of a social order which fosters such alienation. When Pecola receives cruel treatment from her own father, she alienates herself from her family, society and even from her own self (self-hatred). Her mother and

society cannot protect her while she is raped by her own father who commits this act under mental distress when he undergoes useless searches for his lost mother /father.

He goes in search of a job and mistakes a man for his father -- a man in a light-brown jacket. He is quarrelling in an agitated manner with another man. He is staring at a balding spot on that man's head. That man turns a hard face to him.

What you want, boy?" "Uh. I mean...is you Samson Fuller?" "Who sent you?" "Huh?" "You Melba's boy?" "No, sir, I'm..." Cholly says with blinking eyes. He hears the female name Melba and begins wondering as he cannot remember his mother's name. "Had he ever known it? What could he say? Whose boy was he? (Morrison, 1970: 142)

This conversation, first about Cholly's father and then of his mother, shows Cholly's preoccupation with the thoughts of his father and mother. The text reports his desertion by his parents: "Abandoned in a junk heap by his mother, rejected for a crap game by his father" (ibid.145). It is his thirst for his father / mother that makes him imagine his parents everywhere from whom he never receives the desired love and care.

When he receives this callous and harsh response from the man whom he thinks his father, he is mentally upset so much so that he runs down the street in bewilderment, aware only of silence. The next details are indicative of Cholly's disturbed mental state: "He rubbed handfuls of dirt on his shoes; then he crawled to the river edge." (143). Then he thinks of his Aunt Jimmy. With a longing that almost splits him open, he thinks of her handing him a bit of food out of her dish. He remembers just how she holds it — clumsy-like, in three fingers, but with so much affection. And then the tears rush down his cheeks. His tears show his frustration at being deprived of mother love and father care. Cholly starts to move to the city. And the tragic aspect is that he has become "directionless" like Morrison's another alienated character Sula. Morrison's text informs further about the condition of Cholly; "Cholly was truly free" (ibid.145)

The description of Cholly of being absolutely and dangerously free is similar to Sula's rebellious freedom in Morrison's second novel, *Sula*. Sula Peace is a girl without a way to perform herself in the world: "And like any artist with no art form, she became dangerous" (Morrison 1973: 121). Similarly, for Chollybreedlove, the inability to articulate the disparate moments of a life results in hysteria of freedom -- a dangerous freedom in full alienation from all sort of personal connections and social norms. It is in this free state that he meets Pauline Williams whom he marries. Pauline is herself an alienated character, considered a worthless creature in her own society. As a black woman beaten by her husband, Pauline does not have any appropriate authority to turn to for a change of her situation. Everybody in the world, Morrison states, is in a position to give black women like her orders. Pauline bears sexist oppression by her husband Cholly as one of the few things he could touch and therefore hurt in the form of beating and violence. "He put his foot on her chest...He struck her several times in the face" (Morrison 1970: 43). Nothing interests him now. Not himself, not other people.

So once, he comes home drunk to find his daughter alone in the kitchen. The following questions from the narrator highlight Chollybreedlove's inability to handle a child's sensibility and love as he himself has never received such a love.

What of his knowledge of the world and of life could be useful to her? What could his heavy arms and befuddled brain accomplish that would earn him his own respect, that would in turn allow him to accept her love? (Morrison 1970: 121).

His directionless freedom makes him act recklessly to find an outlet for the deprivations he has been experiencing. During the act of raping his own daughter Pecola, the text registers blending and blurring of Pecola's identity with that of his wife Pauline. "The confused mixture of his memories of Pauline and the doing of a wild and forbidden thing excited him" (ibid.122) . The textual details explain his alienated relation with his wife and the resultant rape of his own daughter pushes his young daughter to be alienated from her parents and then all the world around her. It may be right

what Cormier says, “one’s social and physical environments can drastically affect one's nature”(Cormier 1990: 110). But what Pecola suffers is not only her environment, where white people have been discriminating against blacks, it is her hunger for motherly and fatherly love that is not provided to her by her both parents. This parental hunger has shattered her belief in anything trustworthy. She starts hating herself when neither her parents nor her society provide her emotional support and rather weaken her sense of self. She starts hating her own self and develops a feeling of self-alienation. This self-hatred, self-alienation, makes her oblivious to the world around. Her self-alienating introspective thoughts start intensifying her alienation. She loses any sense of self or even being a human subject.

The narrator’s words, at the end of the novel, point out the implication of the alienated condition for Pecola like black girls in that time’s America: “Certain seeds it will not nurture, certain fruit it will not bear,” (Morrison 1970: 186). The alienation of black girls, like Pecola, in America is permanent, and de-alienation is not an easy task. Like the alienated gender relation of her parents, Pecola’s gender relation, if available to her, will have the same estrangement and distortion.

Into her eyes came the picture of Cholly and Mrs. Breedlove in bed. He making sounds as though he were in pain, as though something had him by the throat and wouldn’t let go. ... Maybe that was love. Choking sounds and silences (Morrison 1970: 57-58).

Thus Pecola has a model of love, ironically, of his father and mother who are alienated from each other. Thus alienation in gender relation for African Americans, in social life or in domestic life, is unavoidable, as the narrator says: “So we avoided Pecola Breedlove — forever” (Morrison 1970: 185). The little black girl Pecola faces unquenched mother hunger and permanent alienation just like her parents and grandparents. In the words of Kumari, “both Pecola and her father Cholly breedlove are the vanquished characters - those who have completely succumbed to the atrocious effects of alienation, and who bear the stamp of alienation in their self and psyche” (Kumari 2003: 54)

Toni Morrison in her discussion with Gloria Naylor connects the action of her writing with a little black girl: “It wasn’t that easy being a little black girl....And I wanted to explore it myself” (Morrison 1994: 577). Morrison explains how slavery and parental desertion can create the situations of invisibility and alienation, with the metaphor of a dead girl who is made speechless by aggressive gazes. Morrison associates her wish of writing with a desire to save the dead girl: “About the ‘dead girl.’ That bit by bit I had been rescuing her from the grave of time and inattention” (ibid.593). Morrison’s statement implies that the act of writing is an effort made to bring forth the pains of the alienated and marginalized black selves. They feel keenly the pains, while other may not share the same painful feelings. At the end of the text, the narrator reveals that neither she nor any of the other townspeople ever really feel empathy for Pecola. The society around cannot help Pecola overcoming her alienation and her situation of marginalization. Her isolation remains, similar to the permanent alienation and loneliness of many other characters of Morrison.

Conclusion

In this novel Morrison is emphasizing that the parents should not fail in fostering daughters like Pecola Breedlove. With the destruction of Pecola Breedlove, Morrison gives a clear message of the standing of parental love for African Americans. Furthermore, by bringing together the social and psychological factors, the study highlights the problematic nature of alienation for Afro-Americans in the twentieth century America. The significance of *The Bluest Eye* lies in the fact that it dramatizes the negative possibilities in the struggle for de-alienation in the sense that it foregrounds the emptiness and despair of the black characters.

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