

Strategic Madness: Critiquing Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* from the perspectives of Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic*

Ms. Sharifa Akter*
University of Asia Pacific

Abstract

To deconstruct the cultural perversion of the African-American ethnicity, Toni Morrison deploys "madness" as grand metaphor in *The Bluest Eye*. The "mad-self" metaphorically liberates the hidden oppressed self to be expressed which can be explained as a resistance. In comparison to black male characters in *The Bluest Eye*, the ideologically problematic stereotyping of female characters 'triple nonentities – that is, "being black," "being woman," and "being mad" will be criticized in this study. Toni Morrison's strategy in using madness to argue if and how female madness questions or strengthens patriarchal and racial representational politics is also examined. In *The Madwoman in the Attic*, Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar imply that a woman writer must examine, assimilate, and transcend the images of male authors generated for her. Women must deconstruct the aesthetic ideal that patriarchy has trapped them in art. From this perspective, despite the use of madness as a liberating agent, "madness" in *The Bluest Eye* appears to be an extension of the female characters' marginality, patriarchal domination, intra-racial status, and being the "other" among the others.

Keywords: Patriarchy, racism, madness, stereotype

Toni Morrison's endeavor to demonstrate the proper scenario of African-American slavery-affected women might enlarge the dominance of patriarchy that stereotypes women as irrational and lead the mad self from existence to non-existence. Pecola in *The Bluest Eye* always "experimented with methods of endurance" (*The Bluest Eye* 32). She wishes "Please, God, Please make me disappear" (*The*

* Lecturer, Department of English, University of Asia Pacific

Bluest Eye 33). She even regrets that her imaginary friend is not recognized by people. Morrison focuses on the fact that the black women characters suffer through the patriarchal construction in a radicalized society. Apart from the madness, Toni Morrison sketches all the exercises of patriarchy in *The Bluest Eye*. But this representation can be counted as diseased and infected by the sentences of patriarchy where John Ruskin affirmed in 1865 that the woman's "Power is not for rule, not for battle, and her intellect is not for invention and creation, but for sweet orderings" of domesticity (qtd. in *The Madwoman in the Attic* 24). We see this reflection in economically independent woman Pauline who "liked, most of all, to arrange things" (*The Bluest Eye* 86). The socially constructed looking glass makes her concerned about physical beauty and even she denies the motherly affection to her little, "ugly" child Pecola. She beats Pecola severely for being raped by her father. Pauline as a "mother" or "woman" does not show any sympathy to Pecola. She behaves in the same way that the patriarchal society judges women and punishes them. Through this attitude, Pauline herself becomes the tool of patriarchy. Another character, Geraldine, "had made soufflés in the Home Economics Department, moved with her husband, Louis, to Lorain, Ohio. There she built her nest, ironed shirts, potted bleeding hearts, played with her cat, and birthed Louis Junior" (*The Bluest Eye* 67). She is also corrupted by the idea of "cleanliness" and insulted Pecola as she is disgusted by her own skin color. She discriminates between colored people and niggers. She hates blacks as the whites do. She does not allow her son Junior to play with niggers: "She had explained to him the difference between colored people and niggers. They were easily identifiable. Colored people were neat and quiet; niggers were dirty and loud" (*The Bluest Eye* 67). As she is obsessed with the idea of "cleanliness," she prefers the clean, blue-eyed cat to her son Junior: "It was not long before the child discovered the difference in his mother's behavior to himself and the cat. As he grew older, he learned how to direct his hatred of his mother to the cat, and spent some happy moments watching it suffer" (*The Bluest Eye* 67). By denying her motherly affection to her son, she is denying her own color and her belong in her own race.

Toni Morrison tries to project her voice for the exploited who are suffering from the complexities and stereotyped roles against their own will within the context of the African-American slavery and reconstruction periods. Morrison posits Claudia to voice against society's idealization about beauty and the role playing of the "mother." In a patriarchal society, this is the only role that a woman can play. She destroys all the white, blue-eyed dolls and questions "what was I supposed to do with it? Pretend I was its mother? I had no interest in babies or the concept of motherhood" (*The Bluest Eye* 13). Women always perform the way society wants them to. Women's voices or opinions have no validity. As Claudia says, "I did know that nobody ever asked me what I wanted for Christmas" (*The Bluest Eye* 14). But still Morrison challenges the complexities and stereotyped roles imposed by the society. When Pauline was hospitalized for delivery, the doctor commented that

"They deliver right away and with no pain. Just like horses" (*The Bluest Eye* 97). This dehumanization hurts Pauline a lot and she stares back at that male doctor who was compelled to drop "his eyes and turned red" (*The Bluest Eye* 97).

Racism, sexism, classism creates the binary for the center and marginal self of African-American black women. They are broken and lose their selves amongst the oppressive mesh of race, gender, and class. The full version of submissiveness is sketched by making the protagonist Pecola "mad." Nobody likes Pecola at school. The white immigrant storekeeper, Mr. Yacobowski, shows his disgust of Pecola: "She holds the money towards him. He hesitates, not wanting to touch her hand" (*The Bluest Eye* 37). She is also denied by her mother. When the pink little white baby asked Pauline "Who were they, Polly?" she said, "Don't worry none, baby" (*The Bluest Eye* 85). Her own father raped her twice. Even little Junior trapped her: "You can't get out. You're my prisoner" (*The Bluest Eye* 70). Geraldine, instead of blaming Junior, blames Pecola for the death of the cat. She rebuked her by saying "You nasty little black bitch. Get out of my house" (*The Bluest Eye* 72). And finally, Soaphead Church cheats her. He uses Pecola to poison the dog, Bob. This is how Toni Morrison reveals each and every stage of marginalization that makes Pecola vulnerable for "being black," "being woman," and "being mad." But the lost self is a matter of debate to understand the redefinition of the mad self as it is presented, the notions behind this presentation of the disordered self, and the long-term effects of this traumatic female black self as an extension of marginality.

Published in 1970, *The Bluest Eye* reveals the African-American cultural perversion through the story of Pecola Breedlove, an impoverished little African-American girl raised in the physical, sexual, and emotional abuse of her parents' turbulent household in Lorain, Ohio. Pecola obsessively measures her distance from the white standards, ultimately reinforcing her own self-perceived ugliness. The catastrophic story of Pecola explores notions of gender identity in the context of crafting a self within a marginalized racial minority. She is powerless to reject the unachievable values esteemed by those around her and finally descends into insanity. If it is racial and social class conflict, then the question is why Pecola? Why not Cholly? Or Pecola's brother? Or Soaphead Church who are in the same position? Cholly is presented as a sympathetic character allowed to show his emotions through his actions. Pecola's brother runs away several times. But Pecola is destined to be mad. But the question remains: Why does Morrison imply strength in the self "that is no self"? Why can't repressed desire be expressed without madness? Why girls only? Why are girls abandoned? Why do they fail to flee? These are the boundaries that are still to be addressed and transgressed.

In case of female madness, it is more crucial. In a society with a traumatic experience and memory of slavery, "madwomen" are categorically and characteristically different from "madmen." Gendering makes mad women more vulnerable to ridicule and destruction than men. As Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar explain it, "The distinction

between male and female images of imprisonment is – and always has been – a distinction between, on the one hand, that which is both metaphysical and metaphorical, and on the other hand, that which is social and actual” (86). The meaning of madness or sanity varies for women in different historical, political, and cultural contexts. Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, for instance, “explores the tension between parlor and attic, the psychic split between the lady who submits to male dicta and the lunatic who rebels” (*The Madwoman in the Attic* 86). In *The Bluest Eye*, Pecola is shown to be submissive to the social standards of beauty and her mad, silent, dissatisfied self as expressive and satisfied by mimicking the society. The search for identity, equality, and authority by maintaining a large and serious audience, Morrison tries to deal with the menace of contemporary reality and portray the collective psyche.

In fact, *The Bluest Eye* interrogates preconceived notions of racism and the construction of identity. Pecola seems to perpetuate the white dominance by submitting to their conception of beauty. Subsequently, by mimicking their standards and expectations, Pecola becomes part of the society that is rejecting her. Pecola's story illustrates the aggressive and devastating effects of rejection as an African-American, as a female, as a member of the supposed “lower classes.” But Gilbert and Gubar earnestly mention that “For the female artist the essential process of self-definition is complicated by all those patriarchal definitions that intervene between herself and herself” (17).

While Emily Dickinson knew that “Infection in the sentence breeds,” she also knew that the cure for female despair must be spiritual as well as physical, aesthetic as well as social (*The Madwoman in the Attic* 92). Toni Morrison succeeds in getting out of this infection by creating another black female character, Claudia, who is the only one in the novel that consciously makes an attempt at deconstructing the ideology of the dominant society, seen through her dismembering of the dolls. And it can be said that “Her battle, however is not against her (male) precursor's reading of the world but against his reading of her” (*The Madwoman in the Attic* 49).

Thematically, stylistically, aesthetically, and conceptually, Black women writers manifest common approaches to the act of creating literature as a direct result of the specific political, social, and economic experience they have been obliged to share. Toni Morrison's strategic implication of madness reflects the acceptance rather than construction of practice. She defines her practices by thinking of a new self-expression for women. The representational dimension of women as mad in the socio-political pressure of identity crisis, moreover doubly marginalized as non-existent without self-recognition of them, is a matter of concern. Morrison must obviously focus her efforts upon chronicling the doings of white men and the mishandling of Black women writers by whites. Through her black female characters, Morrison portrays the collective experience of black women in America as shaped by the past experience of slavery and by the patriarchal capitalist American society.

For Morrison, “all good art has been political” (qtd. in Irfan 10) and the black artist has a responsibility to the black community. She thinks that one characteristic of black writers is “a quality of hunger and disturbance that never ends” (10). Her novels “bear witness” to the experience of the black community. Her work suggests who the outlaws were, who survived under what circumstances and why, what was legal in the community as opposed to what was legal outside it.

For literary recognition, Black women have been defined and categorized in dehumanizing terms employed to attack the essence of black women's sense of personal integrity and self-worth. Dr. Jenifer Maher in her essay, “The History of Black Feminism and Womanism” focused on various writers' arguments that historically black women have been stereotyped as sex objects and breeders, and that black women's personal growth has been impeded by the continuing myths of the black matriarchy, a myth accusing black women of emasculating black men.

Black women are powerless to alter either their political or their cultural oppression. The intra and interracial conflict destroys the most vulnerable mind of a young black female character, Pecola, who is the bearer of the mass hysterical insight of her community, whose madness in this novel is the capital to show the intensity of oppression. But the traumatized Cholly, who lost his manhood when two white forced him to make love with Darlane, regained his manhood through the rape of his own daughter. At the end of the novel he liberated himself from all binding not through madness but by leaving or abandoning all the social and family bonds. He frees himself by running away from home. On the other hand, Pecola who is portrayed as the mad self, is shown to be liberated when she becomes insane. She has already lost her value or social position in her community as an ugly, black, raped woman who reaches the existential death through insanity.

If we unearth the deep tendency behind this representation of her writing, we will find her efforts actually redefine American history and identity through a multiplicity of voices and cultures. Morrison, without vacillation, defines herself as a black woman writer. And for this reason, her exercise of presenting the protagonist in *The Bluest Eye* as mad connotes her own background, female position in that time and the representational room they received and exercised, and the possible reasons behind the continuity of this exercise that Morrison extends in her novels.

In the African-American slave-oriented society, Pecola's attitude may be the normal reaction to an abnormal society. Self-sufficiency and independent of hysteria, Pecola overcomes the social pressure and leaves as sufferer. Toni Morrison's revisionary struggle, therefore, often becomes a struggle for what Adrienne Rich has called “Re-vision – the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction ... an act of survival” (*The Madwoman in the Attic* 49) So, Pecola's madness may be identified as the means of rescue and alternative means of re-living the pain. That is, madness is shown as the solution. In *The Bluest Eye*, Pecola is the mirror against whom others define their beauty. The

ironical ugliness that separates her from others shows the ugliness of the society. As Claudia marks, all the waste of society has been dumped on her and she has absorbed it; and all of our beauty, which was hers (Pecola) first, she has given to us.

Pecola in *The Bluest Eye* emancipates herself from fantasy and trapping by over fantasizing: it happens when she goes beyond social control by creating an imaginary self. When madness is voiced, that is, when a mad woman speaks, it reveals the dominant inside of the social structures. The hidden, suppressed, inexpressible self is expressed, laid bare. A mad woman can be seen as a de-centered subject that mimics the fixed or unified identity that mocks at the hegemonic modes of behavior. What can be explained as madness *undoes* patriarchal discourse by *overdoing* it.

Madness is potential liberation and renewal as well as enslavement and existential death. In case of Pecola, in *The Bluest Eye*, her desire for “the Bluest Eye” becomes fulfilled with her imaginary friend. Her mad self in that sense turns into the healing potential of her disturbing sexual and cultural assault. The whole black community is diseased with the ideology of Pecola's pregnancy and she becomes the symbol of cultural discontent. The colonial and patriarchal overriding creates self-loathing among the black and female selves who have lost their possible strength of subverting all the symbolic structures that chained them.

Pecola's madness can be shown as the protest against the constraints of “the prescribed gender role of the female” (Caminero-Santangelo 3). Elaine Showalter describes Morrison's canonical incorporation as “Woman's escape from the bondage of femininity into an empowering and violent madness” (qtd. in McNeal 59). The gaze that makes Pecola the “other” as ugly, poor, black, and raped female makes her lose control over herself but she liberates her desires and aspirations with the imaginary second self.

Thus “madness” can be the difference, a sign of the creative, life-asserting female. Its enclosure, its silencing becomes the paranoid defense of a whole structure of domination. In *The Bluest Eye*, Pecola's mad self restores humanity to her African-American community people who are deprived from any sense of agency to rebel against and change the system that oppresses them. The intergenerational transmitted traumas of rebuff and racial self-loathing, the omnipresent internalized white gaze infects people and makes Pecola different from them. The mental-emotional state of Pecola now becomes blended with the definition of madness to keep the society safe from unmasking the repulsive face of it. The barren or “unyielding” soil (*The Bluest Eye* 77) hints at the outcome of prolonged oppression, the psychic barrenness of a community whose vitality and resourcefulness have been sapped by the constant pressure and stress of a hostile environment. But Pecola overcomes the pressure by liberating her thoughts, attitudes, and enormity that was obsessed with the intrusion, constriction, repetition, and disassociation of her surroundings. Especially for Pecola's parents,

this defensive splitting and dissociation of the self is what originally helps them to cope with the painful and frustrating life experiences.

To destabilize the dominant order and to highlight its constructed nature, madness may be a significant strategy but there must be a continuous employment of women as mad asserting itself against what patriarchy has relegated women to. With Julia Kristeva's sturdy view about female power, we would like that women should not invent a totally new discourse to liberate themselves. Instead they have to challenge those which already exist. In *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison admits that she wrote to hit the raw nerve of racial self-contempt. Morrison seems to highlight the unbridgeable gap between the socially validated reality of white families and the grim denigrated reality of black families neglected by society. Morrison does testify for Pecola as Jerome Bruner commented. Morrison seems to carry out her difficult mission of making language “speak the unspeakable” and capture “the uncapturability of the life it mourns” by avoiding a comforting sense of closure (qtd. in Irfan 32). Thus, on behalf of traumatized victims, she performs the important narrative function of testimony and defiance, which is necessary to claim and reconstruct their selves.

Madness, if presented as the weapon for political response, can be viewed as moving from silence into speech for the oppressed, the colonized, the exploited, and those who stand and struggle side by side, a gesture of defiance that heals, that makes new life, and new growth possible. It is that act of speech, of “talking back” that is no mere gesture of empty words, that is the expression of moving from object to subject, that is the liberated voice. But this liberated voice gets its voice when it has lost its normalcy. Instead of grounding the voice more strongly, the madness makes the position of women still seem defenseless.

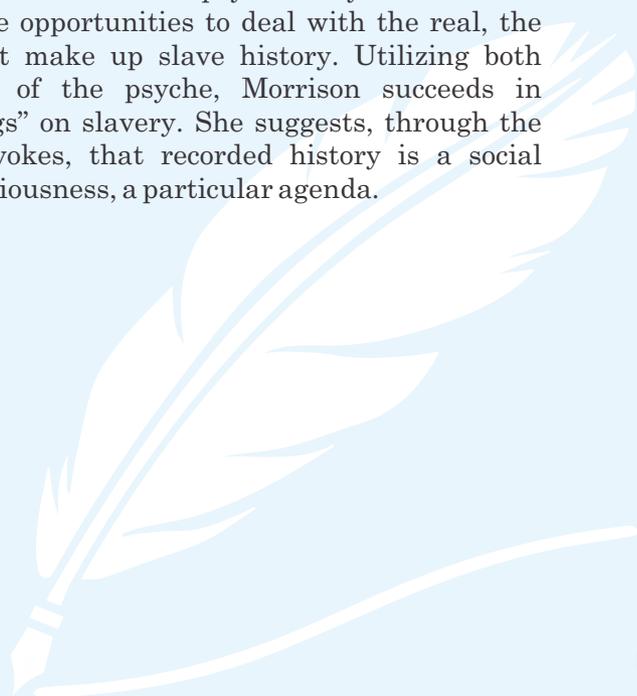
Some female writers and theorists rejected the notion that any power could be gained in assuming the façade of a madwoman. Show alter maintained that a faux power move such as becoming the madwoman could only lead to powerlessness – defeating the intended purpose suggested by other feminists. Assigning a diagnosis of madness to a woman as a means of controlling and forcing her to fit into a prescribed societal role is a practice traceable throughout several pieces of literature. Madness is capitalized. With the racial oppression, the dominance of the patriarchal society branded the chance for the “gaze” that reduces this female mad self from subject to object in order to sustain control over them. The possible manipulative potentiality expressed by the mad voice of Pecola threatens the society's horrible sores to be revealed. So, society, culture or politics will all be against the strength of it and happy to see the stereotyped condition of women as they were before.

Morrison scholar Laurie Vickery contends that Morrison is “concerned with the relation between social power and individual psychology” and works to “give voice to those who are traumatized by oppressive social and familial forces” (Davies 91). Within this prescribed configuration, the female is theoretically able to depend

upon her male counterpart for sanctuary, structure, and sustenance; the woman is to submit to and supply the progeny of that union. Mutual enslavement helped to destabilize the opposition between slaves and the free as reified categories.

Morrison arises from an erroneous assumption that to write about gender is to ignore race, or, in the words of some theorists, the discourse of race and the discourse of gender are mutually exclusive. All of Morrison's novels have been written for a culturally diverse audience. While each work is situated within the black American community (US or Caribbean) and focuses almost exclusively on African-American characters, her books seem to appeal to a wide spectrum of readers as evidenced by domesticity, submission, nurturance, and sexuality. In the female black experience, the rebellion is against these norms and the slave consciousness of maternal sacrifice and enslavement to the family. Furthermore, she limits herself only to the portrayal of experience and effects, not in the construction of the restoration of the strength without madness and cannot go beyond the stereotyped women as mad and the celebrations of the arts that show the confinement of women as abnormal or insane that even reduce them from double-nonentity to entity-less. If, indeed, African-American literature as a whole is to present a truthful, recuperative vision of black people, then surely the crazy-making circumstances and consequences of black life in America need to be represented. Yet the madwoman is “different” while mad. She enters an ontological state of being that is set apart from normalcy by more than an arbitrary set of medical definitions.

Morrison's narrative strategy that the structure of psychoanalysis acts as a conditional operative offers her creative opportunities to deal with the real, the fantastic, and the possible events that make up slave history. Utilizing both Western and African interpretations of the psyche, Morrison succeeds in destabilizing stereotypic “re-memberings” on slavery. She suggests, through the multiple meanings her narrative provokes, that recorded history is a social construction reflecting a particular consciousness, a particular agenda.



Works Cited

- Caminero-Santangelo, Marta. *The Madwoman Can't Speak: Or Why Insanity is Not Subversive*. NY: Cornell UP, 1998. *Google Books*. Web. 15 October 2014.
- Davies, Carole Boyce. *Black Women, Writing, and Identity: Migrations of the Subject*. NY: Routledge, 1994. *Google Books*. Web. 12 October 2014.
- Gilbert, Sandra M. and Gubar, Susan. *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Women Writers and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*. 2nd ed. New Haven: Yale UP, 1979. Print.
- Irfan, Ayesha. *Toni Morrison's Beloved*. New Delhi: Asia Book Club, 2002. Print.
- McNeal, Ebony O. *Sugarman Done Fly Away: Kindred Threads of Female Madness and Male Flight in the Novels of Toni Morrison and Classical Greek Myth*. GA: Georgia State University. 8 July 2010. Web. 4 October 2014.
- Morrison, Toni. *The Bluest Eye* (1979). London: Vintage, 1999. Print.