

**The Outcast of Black Women from the Ideal
Womanhood in *Sula*, *The Bluest Eye*, *The Color
Purple*, and *Possessing the Secret of Joy***

Selma CHOUCANE

Department of English, Faculty of Letters and Languages, Frères
Mentouri University, Constantine, Algeria
choucheneselma@yahoo.fr

Rec. Day : 15/09/2018

Acc.day: 13/05/2019

Pub.day: 15/07/2019

Summary:

This article discusses the role of racism, sexism and classism in the outcast of black women from the hegemonic concept of womanhood in Toni Morrison's *Sula* and *The Bluest Eye* and Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* and *Possessing the Secret of Joy*. Through the lens of black feminism, this paper explores black females' gender performances, which are mainly related to their roles as wives and mothers, their purity and their beauty, and the extent to which these performances fall outside the traditional standards of womanhood.

Keywords: racism; sexism; classism; black womanhood; stereotypes.

Introduction

The concept of womanhood is related to a set of characteristics and roles a female should have and perform as she grows from a girl to a woman. These characteristics and roles are set by the intersection of biological, social, cultural and ideological factors. In other words, the concept of womanhood is related to both sex and gender. The ideal womanhood is shaped through the socially expected traits and performances by which a female is declared as a woman. These performances are mainly related to women's traditional roles as wives and mothers, their purity and beauty. In Toni Morrison's *Sula*¹ and *The Bluest Eye*² and Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*³ and *Possessing the Secret of Joy*⁴, black women face the intersecting oppressions of race, class and gender, which discard them from the frames of the ideal womanhood.

Hence, falling outside the norms has deep effects on both the individual and the community.

1- The Domestic Wife vs. The Black Matriarch

Within the discourse of the ideal woman, wifedom and motherhood are glorified as the purpose of a woman's being. The main objective of every woman is to obtain a husband and, then, to keep him pleased. Both Morrison and Walker highlight unhealthy marital relationships in black communities. Black women in their households find themselves obliged to submit to one of the two imposed roles; either to play a secondary role in a patriarchal family or to become the head of the household, when black men abandon their duties. The latter is directly linked to the racist stereotypical image of the black matriarch. According to Patricia Hill Collins, "the image of the matriarch is central to intersecting oppressions of class, gender, and race. It is important in explaining the persistence of black social class outcomes."⁵

The paradoxical images of black women as either domestic good wives or head of the households is central in *Sula*. The images of the ideal woman and the nuclear family strongly influence the black community. Morrison creates Nel Wright's traditional and conservative family in contrast to Sula Peace's matriarchal one. The Wright family inherited the traditional gender roles from one generation to another. Nel's mother Helene is the daughter of a prostitute. However, she has been raised by her strict religious grandmother, Cecile, who makes of her a very traditional and conservative woman. Cecile plans Helene's marriage to her grand-nephew because she believes in the necessity of marriage to preserve women's virtue. In the same way, Helene raises Nel on the two traditional women's jobs; wifedom and motherhood.

Sula has been raised in a household headed by her grandmother Eva. In contrast to Helene, Eva is the breadwinner. She is the authoritative figure and the one who names things and persons. Eva's non-traditional gender roles make her labeled the black matriarch. Collins claims that the: "[a]ggressive, assertive women are penalized—they are abandoned by their men, end up

impoverished, and are stigmatized as being unfeminine”.⁶ Yet, it is important to notice that the image of the matriarch rises primarily a response to black men’s failure in performing the traditional gender roles. Morrison describes Eva’s husband as the one who “was very much preoccupied with other women and not home much. He did whatever he could that he liked, and he liked womanizing best, drinking second, and abusing Eva third” (*Sula* 32).

Eva’s assertive behavior rises when her husband BoyBoy left the household and she finds herself in front of big responsibilities towards her children. He leaves her with only “\$1.65, five eggs, three beets and no idea of what or how to feel” (*Sula* 32). Eva starts working because her “children needed her; she needed money, and needed to get on with her life. But the demands of feeding her three children were so acute she had to postpone her anger for two years until she had both the time and the energy for it” (*Sula* 32). Morrison describes Eva’s different and difficult responsibilities.

The oldest child, Hannah, was five and too young to take care of the baby alone, and any housework Eva could find would keep her away from them from five thirty or earlier in the morning until dark—way past eight. The white people in the valley weren’t rich enough then to want maids; they were small farmers and tradesmen and wanted hard-labor help if anything. She thought also of returning to some of her people in Virginia, but to come home dragging three young ones would have to be a step one rung before death for Eva. She would have to scrounge around and beg through the winter, until her baby was at least nine months old, then she could plant and maybe hire herself out to valley farms to weed or sow or feed stock until something steadier came along at harvest time.” (*Sula* 32-3)

Due to her husband’s absence, Eva has to play a dual role; that of the mother and the breadwinner. Linda Lindsey argues: “[r]ooted in a tradition valuing economic opportunities for women, African American middle-class women moved into the

professions earlier than white women. Like white women, they are steered into traditionally female occupations, but they have an added race liability.”⁷ Morrison clearly describes the effects of racism on black manhood. Black men throughout *Sula* are portrayed as selfish, irresponsible, and emasculated because of their inability to perform the traditional gender roles. Therefore, both their presence and absence fill women’s lives with sadness.

Those with husbands had folded themselves into starched coffins, their sides bursting with other people’s skinned dreams and bony regrets. Those without men were like sour-tipped needles featuring one constant empty eye. Those with men had had the sweetness sucked from their breath by ovens and steam kettles. Their children were like distant but exposed wounds whose aches were no less intimate because separate from their flesh. They had looked at the world and back at their children, back at the world and back again at their children, and Sula knew that one clear young eye was all that kept the knife away from the throat’s curve. (*Sula* 122)

Nel also is a victim of the emasculated manhood. Her husband Jude works as a waiter at the Medaillon hotel. Since the job of the waiter is genderless, Jude’s weak maleness makes him wish to get a male-specific job. When he learns about the new project of building a new road to the river, he strongly longs to work in the project. Unfortunately, he finds that only white men can get the job. Strongly affected by the news, Jude wants to accomplish any male duty to satisfy his manhood and, thus, he proposes to Nel.

So it was rage, rage and a determination to take on a man’s role anyhow that made him press Nel about settling down. He needed some of his appetites filled, some posture of adulthood recognized, but mostly he wanted someone to care about his hurt, to care very deeply. Deep enough to hold him, deep enough to rock him, deep enough to ask, “How you feel? You all right? Want some coffee?” And if he were to be a man, that someone could no longer be his mother. He chose the girl who had always been kind, who

had never seemed hell-bent to marry, who made the whole venture seem like his idea, his conquest. (*Sula* 82-3)

Jude cannot feel his manhood only in the presence of a submissive woman, who can fill and complement his weaknesses. Morrison writes that Jude needs: “a someone sweet, industrious and loyal to shore him up. And in return he would shelter her, love her, grow old with her. Without that someone he was a waiter hanging around a kitchen like a woman. With her he was head of a household pinned to an unsatisfactory job out of necessity. The two of them together would make one Jude.” (*Sula* 83)

When Jude leaves the house, Nel, like Eva, is obliged to give up the image of the traditional domestic wife and play the head of the household’s role. Morrison writes: “[b]ecause Jude’s leaving was so complete, the full responsibility of the household was Nel’s. There were no more fifty dollars in brown envelopes to count on, so she took to cleaning rather than fret away the tiny seaman’s pension her parents lived on. And just this past year she got a better job working as a chambermaid in the same hotel Jude had worked in” (*Sula* 138-9). Thus, black men’s failure in performing their traditional duties constructs the black matriarch. Although Nel is far from Eva’s authoritative and strong personality, she is also a matriarch due to her position as the breadwinner. Daniel Patrick Moynihan explains how black women’s financial contributions to the black family’s well-being support the matriarchy thesis.⁸

Therefore, the black woman is forced to fulfill the head of the household’s role, even though she can enjoy her freedom within it. This controversial feeling is illustrated when BoyBoy comes back to town and visits Eva. At first, she does not know what she wants from him, “[w]ould she cries, cut his throat, beg him to *make love to her?*” (*Sula* 35. The emphasis in the original) Eva’s controversial feelings show that she is not enjoying her role as the black matriarch.

For instance, her advice for Sula to marry and have kids is very surprising. She claims: “[w]hen you gone to get married? You

need to have some babies. It'll settle you.' [...] 'Ain't no woman got no business floatin' around without no man'" (*Sula* 92). When Sula replies that she [Eva] and her mother lives without men, Eva argues: "[n]ot by choice [...]. It ain't right for you to want to stay off by yourself. You need . . . I'm a tell you what you need" (*Sula* 92). Thus, Eva regrets her status as the black matriarch and she, as Helen, supports the traditional view of women as wives and mothers. According to Collins, "[m]any U.S. Black women who find themselves maintaining families by themselves often feel that they have done something wrong. If only they were not so strong, some reason, they might have found a male partner."⁹

However, although Eva shows controversial feelings before BoyBoy's coming, she ends up realizing that she hates him and she is happy for that feeling.

Knowing that she would hate him long and well filled her with pleasant anticipation, like when you know you are going to fall in love with someone and you wait for the happy signs. Hating BoyBoy, she could get on with it, and have the safety, the thrill, the consistency of that hatred as long as she wanted or needed it to define and strengthen her or protect her from routine vulnerabilities. (Once when Hannah accused her of hating colored people, Eva said she only hated one, Hannah's father BoyBoy, and it was hating him that kept her alive and happy.) (*Sula* 37)

Eva hates BoyBoy because he abandons his duties as husband and father, which obliges her to perform the dual role of the bread winner and the mother. She loses her leg in a mysterious accident, "[s]omebody said Eva stuck it under a train and made them pay off. Another said she sold it to a hospital for \$10,000" (*Sula* 31). Angela Davis argues that: "[t]he designation of the black woman as a matriarch is a cruel misnomer. It is a misnomer because it implies stable kinship structures within which the mother exercises decisive authority. It is cruel because it ignores the profound traumas the black woman must have experienced when she had to surrender her child-bearing to alien and predatory economic interests."¹⁰

Although the black matriarch is stigmatized as the bad image of the mother, she is still a powerful image for women's independence. Eva Peace shows her ability in filling the head of the household's role. She supports her family financially. She even devotes herself for the well being of her children. Collins argues that "the image of the Black matriarch serves as a powerful symbol for both Black and White women of what can go wrong if White patriarchal power is challenged [...]. The matriarch or overly strong Black woman has also been used to influence Black men's understandings of Black masculinity."¹¹ Nevertheless, the presence of black men in the Peace women's lives is still important. Morrison claims: "[w]ith the exception of BoyBoy, those Peace women loved all men. It was man love that Eva bequeathed to her daughters. Probably, people said, because there were no men in the house, no men to run it. But actually that was not true. The Peace women simply loved maleness, for its own sake" (*Sula* 41).

2- The Good Wife vs. The Mule

Besides the image of the matriarch, the white hegemonic masculinity creates the mule stereotype. Collins defines the mule as the woman "whose back is bent from a lifetime of hard work".¹² She introduces the origins of the word "mule" which is "mules uh de world". The term has been first used in Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. It defines black women as the lowest creatures in the world. It is mainly related to black women's labor market and their victimization as dehumanized objects and living machines.¹³ In *The Color Purple*, Walker presents Celie as "the mule uh de world", because her husband, whom she called Mr. _____, forces her to work hard and exploits her labor.

At first, Mr. _____ wants to marry her sister Nettie, but their father Pa refuses his offer. He says: "I can't let you have Nettie. She too young. Don't know anything but what you tell her. Sides, I want her to get some more schooling. Make a schoolteacher out of her" (*The Color* 7). Yet, Pa proposes him Celie. Choked when seeing Celie, Mr. _____ does not say any word. When he finally

speaks, he says: "I ain't never really look at that one" (*The Color* 8). Pa tries to convince him: "she ain't no stranger to hard work. And she clean. And God done fixed her. You can do everything just like you want to and she ain't gonna make you feed it or clothe it" (*The Color* 8). Surprisingly, Pa informs Mr. _____ that "[s]he ugly [...] she a bad influence on my other girls [...] She ain't smart either [...] she'll give away everything you own [...] She tell lies" (*The Color* 8). Nevertheless, he concludes with "she'll make the better wife" (*The Color* 8). Although Mr. _____ spends the whole spring thinking about Pa's offer, he ends up accepting Celie as a wife. Despite Celie's negative features, as described by Pa, Mr. _____ marries her for two important features; she is not demanding and "she can work like a man" (*The Color* 8).

Mr. _____'s/Celie's relationship is similar to that of master/slave. Celie has to work inside and outside the house. Despite the fact that he is the black patriarch, Mr. _____ does not work at all. Harpo notes how "[e]very day his daddy git up, sit on the porch, look out at nothing. Sometimes look at the trees out front the house. Look at a butterfly if it lights on the rail. Drink a little water in the day. A little wine in the evening. But mostly never move" (*The Color* 28). Harpo inherited these paradoxical gender roles from his father. Celie describes him as "strong in body but weak in will" (*The Color* 28). When Mr. _____'s sister asks him to help Celie in bringing water, he replies: "[w]omen work. I'm a man" (*The Color* 22). Later, Mr. _____ obliges him to work with Celie in the fields. She recounts: "[m]e and him out in the field all day. Us sweat, chopping and plowing. I'm roasted coffee bean color now. He black as the inside of a chimney. His eyes are sad and thoughtful. His face begins to look like a woman face" (*The Color* 28).

Due to Harpo's continuous complaining about his hard work, Mr. _____ gives him wages to "goose his interest" (*The Color* 34). Yet, Celie works hard and without any wages. Collins argues that: "[m]aking Black women work as if they were animals or 'mules uh de world' represents one form of objectification.

Deference rituals such as calling Black domestic workers ‘girls’ enable employers to treat their employees like children, as less capable human beings”.¹⁴ Despite the fact that Mr. _____ is the black patriarch, due to his authoritative personality and his over use of violence, he is not the breadwinner since he does not work at all. Celie claims: “[o]ne good thing about the way he never does any work around the place, us never miss him when he gone.” (*The Color* 44)

3- Female Purity vs. The Black Jezebel

Purity is an essential component of true womanhood. Barbara Welter explains how the absence of purity makes a woman "unnatural and unfeminine".¹⁵ Although it creates rigid boundaries, a woman within the boundaries gains the highest status possible for a woman in society. To preserve women’s purity, hegemonic masculinity enhances the importance of marriage and domesticity. Female purity is also an important aspect of womanhood in the black community. Black women’s lack of purity makes them labeled Jezebels. According to Collins, the jezebel is the antithesis of the true woman, who should repress her sexuality. She states:

Heterosexuality itself is constructed via binary thinking that juxtaposes male and female sexuality, with male and female gender roles pivoting on perceptions of appropriate male and female sexual expression. Men are active, and women should be passive. [...] Black people and other racialized groups simultaneously stand outside these definitions of normality and mark their boundaries. In this context of a gender-specific, White, heterosexual normality, the jezebel or hoochie becomes a racialized, gendered symbol of deviant female sexuality.¹⁶

In *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison stresses the importance of purity in the black community’s view of the three prostitutes living above Pecola’s house. One day when Claudia and Frieda go in search for Pecola and they don’t find her, Maginot Line, one of the three prostitutes, asks them to wait for her in her house. The two girls’ reaction shows society’s conventions. They reply: “No,

ma'am, we ain't allowed." [...] My mama said so. My mama said you ruined" (*The Bluest* 102). Although the three prostitutes are considered by both the white and the black communities as ruined women, they still the only mother figure for Pecola. In contrast to her real mother Pauline who treats her badly and can provide her with neither love nor protection, the three prostitutes nurture Pecola with mother/daughter conversations about love and relationships.

Morrison introduces them as the most confident characters in the novel. They are strong and self-possessed. Unlike Pauline Breedlove, who succumbs to the traditional concept of beauty and finds herself trapped in a vicious circle of self-hatred, Miss Marie, China and Poland challenge the traditional gender roles. On the one hand, they challenge patriarchy through their job as prostitutes. On the other hand, they challenge the image of the good mother which has been always linked to female purity. They show their ability to nurture Pecola and provide her with maternal love despite their position as ruined women.

Sula's mother, Hannah, is also the prototype of the black jezebel. Nevertheless, she does not use her sexuality for money, but "simply refused to live without the attention of a man, and after Rekus' death had a steady sequence of lovers, mostly the husbands of her friends and neighbors" (*Sula* 42). In contrast to the three prostitutes who hate all men, Hannah "rubbed no edges, made no demands, made the man feel as though he were complete and wonderful just as he was—he didn't need fixing—and so he relaxed and swooned in the Hannah-light that shone on him simply because he was" (*Sula* 43).

Although the image of the jezebel challenges the traditional gender roles that cast purity as an important virtue for true womanhood, in Hannah's case it is much more a glorification of patriarchy. On the one hand, she loves men and makes them assert their manhood in her companionship. Thus, she enhances their patriarchal attitudes. On the other hand, she fails in her mother duties and, thus, she proves that the jezebel is the antithesis of the good mother.

4- The Good Mother vs. The Black Mammy

Both Morrison and Walker show the impossibility of motherhood in a racist and sexist society. The image of the good mother has always been related to true womanhood. The good mother should be caring, protective and nurturing. According to Johnnie M. Stover, “‘mother’ is a feminine force that traditionally represents creation, birthing, and nurturing”.¹⁷ However, black women lack the two most important skills in motherhood which are love and protection. Thus, the path towards the ideal womanhood becomes more and more complicated. Jeffner Allen claims:

Motherhood is dangerous to women because it continues the structure within which females must be women and mothers and, conversely, because it denies to females the creation of subjectivity and world that is open and free. An active rejection of motherhood entails the development and enactment of a *philosophy of evacuation*. Identification and analysis of the multiple aspects of motherhood not only show what is wrong with motherhood, but also the way out. A philosophy of evacuation proposes women’s collective removal of themselves from all forms of motherhood. Freedom is never achieved by the mere inversion of an oppressive construct, that is, by seeing motherhood in a “new” light. Freedom is achieved when an oppressive construct, motherhood, is vacated by its members and thereby rendered null and void. (Emphasis in the original)¹⁸

In *Sula*, the difficulty of motherhood is described not only in Sula’s family but in the whole community. Motherhood is considered as an important if not a necessary aspect for a female to be seen as a woman. It is significant to highlight Morrison’s depiction of the character Betty as “an indifferent mother, all of whose interests sat around the door of the Time and a Half Pool Hall” (*Sula* 113-4). The community calls Betty Teapot’s Mamma because “being his mamma was precisely her major failure” (*Sula* 113-4). Through Teapot’s Mamma, the black community shows

the importance and the necessity for black females to be good mothers.

Among the different stereotypical images of black women, the image of the mammy is the closest one to the image of the good mother. While the matriarch is the authoritative, aggressive female and the jezebel is the overt representation of female sexuality, the mammy is the one who has both virtue and mother love. Collins argues that: “[w]hile the mammy typifies the Black mother figure in White homes, the matriarch symbolizes the mother figure in Black homes. Just as the mammy represents the ‘good’ Black mother, the matriarch symbolizes the ‘bad’ Black mother”.¹⁹ However, the mammy’s feelings are primarily directed towards the white family for whom she works.

In *The Bluest Eye*, Pauline Breedlove represents the mammy figure. She is obliged to work for the Fishers, because her alcoholic husband, Cholly, abandons his duties. Pauline’s duality is very significant in the novel. She is a good mother only in the Fishers’ house. With her children, Pauline shows a totally different image. She fails in providing neither love nor protection to her children and specifically to her daughter. Collins claims that the creation of the mammy figure is primarily to represent “the normative yardstick used to evaluate all Black women’s behavior. By loving, nurturing, and caring for her White children and ‘family’ better than her own, the mammy symbolizes the dominant group’s perceptions of the ideal Black female relationship to elite White male power”.²⁰

Pauline treats her daughter badly unlike the way she treats the small white girl for whom she works. The white girl calls Pecola’s mother Polly, while Pecola calls her Mrs. Breedlove. Pauline’s failed motherhood leads to the devastation of her two children. Sammy runs away many times and Pecola is trapped in a vicious circle of self-hatred and ends up raped and impregnated by her father. Collins argues:

The mammy image is central to intersecting oppressions of race, gender, sexuality, and class. Regarding racial oppression, controlling images like the mammy aim to

influence Black maternal behavior. As the members of African-American families who are most familiar with the skills needed for Black accommodation, Black mothers are encouraged to transmit to their own children the deference behavior that many are forced to exhibit in their mummified jobs. By teaching Black children their assigned place in White power structures, Black women who internalize the mammy image potentially become effective conduits for perpetuating racial oppression.²¹

The most significant example of Pauline's duality is when Pecola accidentally topples the cobbler in the Fishers' kitchen. Pauline quickly punishes and beats her harshly. Then, she starts comforting the little white girl with her lovable words. She says: "[h]ush, baby, hush. Come here. Oh, Lord, look at your dress. Don't cry any more. Polly will change it" (*The Bluest* 107). Pauline proves that she is the ideal servant, "[a]ll the meaningfulness of her life was in her work" (*The Bluest* 126). She rejects her blackness and her duties as a wife and a mother and lives in fantasy. She claims:

The onliest time I be happy seem like was when I was in the picture show. Every time I got, I went. I'd go early, before the show started. They'd cut off the lights, and everything be black. Then the screen would light up, and I'd move right on in them pictures. White men taking such good care of they women, and they all dressed up in big clean houses with the bathtubs right in the same room with the toilet. Them pictures gave me a lot of pleasure, but it made coming home hard, and looking at Cholly hard. (The Bluest 121. Emphasis in the original)

Pauline creates a different world for herself, in which she experiences what is impossible to experience in real life. According to Collins, the mammy is the "surrogate mother in blackface whose historical devotion to her White family is now giving way to new expectations. Contemporary mammies should be completely committed to their jobs".²² Therefore, the mammy figure is another example of failed black motherhood.

5- The Protective Mother vs. The Submissive Wife

As Morrison, Walker also deals with the theme of failed motherhood in *Possessing the Secret of Joy*. The novel turns around the African girl Tashi, who is a minor character in *The Color Purple*. Tashi lives in Olinka village with her sexist father, submissive mother and her sister Dura who bled to death because of genital circumcision. Tashi is described at the beginning of *Possessing the Secret of Joy* as a young girl with vivid a personality and cheerful face. She befriends Celie's children Adam and Olivia when they come to Africa with their family and Celie's sister Nettie as missionaries.

Tashi's rebellious behavior rises from childhood. She tries to enjoy independence and learn a new way of life, "Tashi's mother and father were just here. They are upset because she spends so much time with Olivia. She is changing, [...]. She is becoming someone else; her face is beginning to show the spirit of one of her aunts who was sold to the trader because she no longer fit into village life. This aunt refused to marry the man chosen for her. Refused to bow to the chief" (*The Color*, 161). Tashi tries to forge a new way of life which seems difficult to live in Olinka's patriarchal society.

Tashi's father is against girl's education. When Nettie tries to convince him that Tashi is very intelligent and that she can be a teacher or a nurse and, thus, helps the people in the village, he strictly responds that there is no place here for a woman to do those things and then he asks her to teach only the boys (*The Color* 162-3). Tashi's father knows that education is the proper way for young girls to develop their full potential as independent women. However, as a patriarch, he has to disapprove it. He tells Nettie that if Tashi comes to her house, she has to "send her straight home [... and] her Olivia can visit her, and learn what women are for" (*The Color* 163).

Tashi, also, shows her rebellious behavior in her lovemaking with Adam in the fields, which is considered a great sin. As Adam's description: "this way of loving, among her people, the greatest taboo of all (*Possessing* 28). Making love in the field is

prohibited because the crops would not grow. Adam, however, claims that “[n]o one ever saw us and the fields produced their harvest as before” (*Possessing* 27). Tashi and Adam experienced an intense feeling of pleasure. Adam states that: “[e]ach time we made love, she’d wanted me as much as I’d wanted her. She had engineered most of our meetings. Whenever we held each other she was breathless in anticipation. Once, she claimed her heart nearly stopped. Such pleasure as ours was difficult for us to believe. Was it a pleasure of which others knew? we often asked ourselves” (*Possessing* 32).

Despite Tashi’s strong rebellious behavior, she still has an internal conflict about her African identity. When the M’bele’s detained leader sends a message to his people to make them “return to the purity of [their] own culture and traditions” (*Possessing* 115), Tashi abides to the leader’s call and decides to stop the influence of both white imperialists and Christian Missionaries. The only way to do that is to come back to traditional rituals and specifically to female genital circumcision.

Tashi leaves the Olinka village and joins the Mbeles camp in order to undergo the surgery. Although the ritual causes the death of her sister Dura, Tashi shows great courage and determinism for her African identity. She tells her psychiatrist Raye that she gives up her sexual pleasure in order “to be accepted as a real woman by the Olinka people” (*Possessing* 120-1). Janine Lewis claims that: “[t]he confusion borne out of the clash between tradition and modernity is dealt with in various ways. Young black educated men and women, when faced with traditional circumcision and traditional menstrual rites, often choose to forego their knowledge of Western teachings about human rights and doggedly follow tradition, regardless of any questions they may have.”²³

The African patriarchal system plays a much more important role in the lives of Olinka women since it works directly on their bodies. Though female genital circumcision is a patriarchal tool used to control black women’s sexuality, Tashi assumes the responsibility when she succumbs to the illusion of the true African womanhood. M’Lissa, one of the village circumcisers,

describes female genital circumcision as “the only remaining definitive stamp of Olinka tradition” (*Possessing* 63). Therefore, women themselves take responsibility for their own mutilation. Awa Thiam argues: “[i]t would seem that males have forced women to become their own torturers, to butcher each other”.²⁴ For instance, Tashi’s mother plays the most important role in her two daughters’ devastation. Despite the fact that she converts to Christianity and shows her opposition to female genital mutilation, she cannot stop the ritual from reaching her daughters’ throats. Her first daughter Dura dies and her second daughter Tashi lives with complex trauma and ends up executed.

Tashi’s mother is the antithesis of the good mother because she lacks one of the most important virtues of motherhood which is protection. She proves her inability to protect her daughters from total devastation. Tashi recounts her mother’s ignorance: “[i]n truth, my mother was not equipped, there was not enough of her self left to her, to think about me. Or about my sister Dura, who bled to death after a botched circumcision or about any of her other children. She had just sunk into her role of ‘She Who Prepares the Lambs for Slaughter’” (*Possessing* 272-3). Nevertheless, she is the prototype of the good wife because of her domesticity, submission and dependency. She abides the patriarchal laws by allowing the continuity of the sexist ritual. Therefore, Walker contrasts wifedom and motherhood. In other words, to be good, obedient, submissive wives, women should forget their mother duties. Yet, if they choose to be nurturing, protective mothers, they will be bad, rebellious wives.

Hence, a healthy mother-daughter bond is crucial in challenging the racist and sexist concept of the ideal womanhood. The mother is the one who plays the most important role in her daughter’s strength. Through love and protection, the mother becomes the tutor and instructor for generations of daughters, which can challenge the intersecting oppressions of race, gender and class.

6- The Beauty Myth vs. Colorism

Female beauty is also an important component of the ideal womanhood. The white racist society set standards for beauty that only white and light skin women can achieve. In both *The Bluest Eye* and *Sula*, Morrison sets a hierarchy of skin color that works in opposite directions. In *Sula*, she describes the two friends Nel and Sula as:

Nel was the color of wet sandpaper—just dark enough to escape the blows of the pitch-black true bloods and the contempt of old women who worried about such things as bad blood mixtures and knew that the origins of a mule and a mulatto were one and the same. Had she been any lighter-skinned she would have needed either her mother’s protection on the way to school or a streak of mean to defend herself. Sula was a heavy brown with large quiet eyes, one of which featured a birthmark that spread from the middle of the lid toward the eyebrow, shaped something like a stemmed rose. (*Sula* 52)

The Bottom community sees the darkest skin as the manifesto of the true black blood. However, in *The Bluest Eye*, the black community adopts the white racist standards of beauty in which the lightest skin is the most beautiful. Morrison highlights the importance of beauty in the construction/destruction of black womanhood. One of the most important examples of color hierarchy is when the character Geraldine instructs her son to distinguish between colored and black people. She claims: “[c]olored people were neat and quiet; niggers were dirty and loud” (*The Bluest* 85). Collins claims:

White skin and straight hair simultaneously privilege (white women) in a system that elevates whiteness over blackness. In contrast, African-American women experience the pain of never being able to live up to prevailing standards of beauty—standards used by White men, White women, Black men, and, most painfully, one another. Regardless of any individual woman’s subjective reality, this is the system of ideas that she encounters. Because controlling images are

hegemonic and taken for granted, they become virtually impossible to escape.²⁵

The white racist standards of beauty cast the Breedloves at the bottom of ugliness. The Breedloves not only accept their ugliness but also wear it as a guilt that should be confessed throughout their lives. Morrison describes how the binary beauty/ugliness is constructed by the white racist society, in order to preserve its superiority, to divide the black community and to destruct the black womanhood.

You looked at them and wondered why they were so ugly; you looked closely and could not find the source. Then you realized that it came from conviction, 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; saw, in fact, support for it leaning at them from every billboard, every movie, every glance. "Yes," they had said. "You are right." And they took the ugliness in their hands, threw it as a mantle over them, and went about the world with it. (*The Bluest* 37)

She also explains how every one of the Breedloves deals with his/her ugliness in his own way. Mrs. Breedloves uses it to support a role she always prefers to play, that of martyrdom. Sammy uses it to intimidate his friends and to cause them pain. However, Pecola hides behind her ugliness, "[s]he hid behind hers. Concealed, veiled, eclipsed—peeping out from behind the shroud very seldom, and then only to yearn for the return of her mask." (*The Bluest* 37)

The black community's adoption of the white definitions of beauty is clearly illustrated in the gifts that parents give to their daughters in Christmas; "[a]dults, older girls, shops, magazines, newspapers, window signs--all the world had agreed that a blue-eyed, yellow-haired, pink skinned doll was what every girl child treasured" (*The Bluest* 18). The different messages sent through

the toys have deep effects on young black girl's construction/destruction of womanhood. According to Lindsey, "[b]oth parents and children express clear preferences for gender-typed toys. These preferences reinforce the persistent gender-related messages that are sent to children through the toys".²⁶ She also claims that: "[d]olls for girls, especially Barbies [...] are standard gifts to children from parents. Not only are messages about beauty, clothing, and weight sent to girls via Barbie, but girls also learn about options and preferences in life".²⁷

By offering black girls white blue-eyed dolls, black parents not only legitimize the traditional racist standards of beauty, but also legitimize their daughters' ugliness. Morrison describes how such messages of beauty affect females' lives and can even devastate them. Although black women could not fit that image of beauty, they see in Pecola's dark skin a scapegoat in front of which they feel themselves beautiful. Collins argues:

Colorism in the U.S. context operates the way that it does because it is deeply embedded in a distinctly American form of racism grounded in Black/White oppositional differences. Other groups "of color" must negotiate the meanings attached to their "color." All must position themselves within a continually renegotiated color hierarchy where, because they define the top and the bottom, the meanings attached to Whiteness and Blackness change much less than we think. Linked in a symbiotic relationship, White and Black gain meaning only in relation to one another. However well-meaning conversations among "women of color" concerning the meaning of color in the United States may be, such conversations require an analysis of how institutionalized racism produces color hierarchies among U.S. women.²⁸

Colorism is explicitly manifested in the geographical division of the black society. The Breedloves did not live in the storefront because of their ugliness. Morrison claims: "[t]hey lived there because they were poor and black, and they stayed there because they believed they were ugly. Although their poverty was

traditional and stultifying, it was not unique. But their ugliness was unique” (*The Bluest* 36).

Nevertheless, the Breedloves respond differently to their ugliness. Morrison writes: “[n]o one could have convinced them that they were not relentlessly and aggressively ugly. Except for the father, Cholly, whose ugliness (the result of despair, dissipation, and violence directed toward petty things and weak people) was behavior, the rest of the family—Mrs. Breedlove, Sammy Breedlove, and Pecola Breedlove—wore their ugliness, put it on, so to speak, although it did not belong to them” (*The Bluest* 36). According to Collins, “[r]ace, gender, and sexuality converge on this issue of evaluating beauty. Black men’s blackness penalizes them. But because they are not women, valuations of their self-worth do not depend as heavily on their physical attractiveness. In contrast, part of the objectification of all women lies in evaluating how they look.”²⁹

The beauty myth violently victimizes the young Pecola. Her suffering starts from her domestic sphere. Her mother Pauline dislikes her blackness and hates her ugliness. She internalizes the white racist ideology of beauty that results in her self-hatred and, then, transmits it to her daughter. The day of Pecola’s birth, Pauline describes her: “a right smart baby. [...] But I knowed she was ugly. Head full of pretty hair, but Lord she was ugly” (*The Bluest* 124).

Pauline hates her daughter in the same way she hates herself. Moreover, she plays an important role in her daughter’s weakness. Their relationship was so distant to the point that Pecola calls her Mrs. Breedlove. Thus, Pauline’s self-hatred and failing motherhood makes it impossible for Pecola to love her blackness. Tracey L. Walters claims: “Pecola is literally born into a hellish existence. Her domestic environment is toxic and her parents perpetuate an attitude of internalized racism that teaches Pecola that like her parents she is ugly”.³⁰

Pecola stands long hours looking in the mirror and trying to understand the secret of her ugliness which make her teachers and classmates despise her. Morrison recounts how Pecola sits in the

back, despite the fact that “[t]he first letter of her last name forced her to sit in the front of the room always” (*The Bluest* 43). Also, she is “the only member of her class who [sits] alone at a double desk” (*The Bluest* 43). Moreover, she is reduced to a taunting expression. When one of the girls wants to insult a boy, she accuses him of loving Pecola and she “never fail[s] to get peals of laughter from those in earshot, and mock anger from the accused.” (*The Bluest* 44)

Pecola hides behind her ugliness. She accepts the white racist and sexist ideology of beauty, which has been legitimized by her black community, the black family and particularly her black mother. Lindsey argues that the “acceptance of stereotypes is consistent with cognitive development theory by suggesting that the development of gender role identity is linked to children’s perception of adult behavior”.³¹ Pecola strictly rejects her blackness to the point that she begs God to “make [her] disappear” (*The Bluest* 43). She closes her eyes and imagines that the different parts of her body are slowly disappearing, except her eyes. She tries as she could to make them disappear but she fails because “[t]hey were everything” (*The Bluest* 43).

Pecola’s eyes work as memory which gathers people’s admiration of Mary Jane, Shirley Temple and her classmate Maureen Peel; and their disgust when they see her ugliness. Her eyes will always remind her of Mr. Yacobowski, the store owner, who hesitates to touch her hand when she gives him money. Pecola has seen “interest, disgust, even anger in grown male eyes” (*The Bluest* 47). Collins claims that: “[a]lthough most Black women typically resist being objectified as the Other, these controlling images remain powerful influences on our relationships with Whites, Black men, other racial/ethnic groups, and one another. Dealing with prevailing standards of beauty—particularly skin color, facial features, and hair texture—is one specific example of how controlling images derogate African-American women”.³²

Instead of loving herself, Pecola loves the white Shirley Temple. Shirley is known as the first child-star who becomes

famous internationally. She has white skin, blue eyes and golden curls. Ara Osterweil argues: “[f]or a generation of children and adolescents growing up during the Great Depression, Temple was indeed the primary ego ideal”.³³ Pecola’s friend Frieda also loves the young white star Shirley Temple. Frieda’s sister, Claudia, recounts how both Pecola and Frieda have loving conversations about how “cu-ute Shirley Temple was” (*The Bluest* 17). The two girls cannot resist the white beauty and find it difficult to affirm their own. However, Frieda could accept her blackness whereas Pecola could not.

Pecola not only loves the white beauty, but also digests it. She drinks a lot of milk from a Shirley Temple’s cup and eats a lot of Mary Jane’s candies, where Mary Jane’s picture appears on the wrappers with her pretty, blue-eyed face. Pecola “eats the candy, and its sweetness is good. To eat the candy is somehow to eat the eyes, eat Mary Jane. Love Mary Jane. Be Mary Jane” (*The Bluest* 48). Tracey L. Walters points out that:

[T]he Mary Jane candies are another example of the subtle way white aesthetic values infiltrate Pecola’s psyche in particular and American culture in general: From candy wrappers, to movie stars and dolls Pecola cannot escape the culturally promoted image of blonde hair and blue eyes. Without the money to purchase skin-bleaching creams or to access colored contact lenses that allow today’s Black girls to buy into the fantasy of whiteness, Pecola must find other ways to make the transition from Black to White. Pecola’s resolve is to digest whiteness. She achieves this by eating Mary Jane candy ... and drinking from a [Shirley Temple cup].³⁴

Both Shirley Temple and Mary Jane symbolize the white/black beauty discrimination. Nevertheless, the character Maureen Peal illustrates the concept of Colorism in the black community. Morrison describes Maureen as “[a] high-yellow dream child with long brown hair braided into two lynch ropes that hung down her back. She was rich, at least by our standards, as rich as the richest of the white girls [...]. There was a hint of spring in her sloe green

eyes, something summery in her complexion, and a rich autumn ripeness in her walk” (*The Bluest* 60). Maureen’s light skin privileges her in both white and black communities. Claudia describes how Maureen is treated in school. She claims:

When teachers called on her, they smiled encouragingly. Black boys didn’t trip her in the halls; white boys didn’t stone her, white girls didn’t suck their teeth when she was assigned to be their work partners; black girls stepped aside when she wanted to use the sink in the girls’ toilet, and their eyes genuflected under sliding lids. She never had to search for anybody to eat within the cafeteria—they flocked to the table of her choice, where she opened fastidious lunches” (*The Bluest* 60-1).

Although Maureen has “both an unattractive canine tooth and signs of an early disfigurement on her hands”³⁵, she is still considered beautiful. Collins argues: “[t]his division of African-Americans into two categories—the ‘Brights’ and the ‘Lesser Blacks’—affects dark-skinned and light-skinned women differently. Darker women face being judged inferior [...]. Institutions controlled by Whites clearly show a preference for lighter-skinned Blacks, discriminating against darker ones or against any African-Americans who appear to reject White images of beauty.”³⁶

Maureen sympathizes with Pecola and even expresses her wish to befriend her. However, she quickly begins to tease her. Claudia tries to defend Pecola by punching Maureen in the face with her notebook. Maureen benefits from the skin color hierarchy and stresses her racial superiority. She claims: “I *am* cute! And you ugly! Black and ugly” (*The Bluest* 71). Maureen’s words illustrate the often sung children’s rhyme in black communities, which improves Colorism:

Now, if you’re white you’re all right,
If you’re brown, stick around,
But if you’re black, Git back! Git back! Git back!³⁷

Claudia and Frieda quickly respond to Maureen’s racist words by an insult of their own; “six-finger-dog-tooth-meringue-pie”

(*The Bluest* 71). However, Pecola responds quite differently. Claudia claims: “[she] stood a little apart from us, her eyes hinged in the direction in which Maureen had fled. She seemed to fold into herself, like a pleated wing. Her pain antagonized me. I wanted to open her up, crisp her edges, ram a stick down that hunched and curving spine, force her to stand erect and spit the misery out on the streets. But she held it in where it could lap up into her eyes” (*The Bluest*, 71-2). Collins explains that “no matter how intelligent, educated, or ‘beautiful’ a Black woman may be, those Black women whose features and skin color are most African must ‘git back.’ Within the binary thinking that underpins intersecting oppressions, blue-eyed, blond, thin White women could not be considered beautiful without the Other—Black women with African features of dark skin, broad noses, full lips, and kinky hair.”³⁸

Pecola’s obsession with the white standards of beauty is not bizarre. Rather, it has been experienced by the majority of, if not all, black women. Yet, they respond to it differently. For instance, Maya Angelou records her painful realization that the only way she could become truly beautiful was to become white: “[w]ouldn’t they be surprised when one day I woke out of my black ugly dream, and my real hair, which was long and blond, would take the place of the kinky mass that Momma wouldn’t let me straighten? . . . Then they would understand why I had never picked up a Southern accent, or spoke the common slang, [...]. Because I was really white and because of a cruel fairy stepmother . . . had turned me into a too-big Negro girl, with nappy black hair.”³⁹

Being ostracized by the prejudiced beauty, Pecola’s longing for blue eyes becomes an obsession. She thinks that “[i]f she looked different, beautiful, maybe Cholly would be different, and Mrs. Breedlove too” (*The Bluest* 44). In fact, if Pecola has white skin and blue eyes, her mother would certainly love her, her father would protect her and her classmates would admire her. Nevertheless, the beauty myth destructs young Pecola.

Conclusion

Racism, sexism and classism make of black women the antithesis of the ideal woman. Black women are obliged to financially support their families and, thus, labeled as black matriarchs or black mammies. In both cases, they fail in their duties as wives and mothers. Also, they are accused of being ruined woman in contrast to the white woman's purity. Moreover, the beauty myth, which is related to color hierarchy victimizes and excludes them from the frames of the ideal womanhood. Thus, racism, sexism and classism make the path towards womanhood difficult if not impossible.

References

- ¹ Morrison, Toni. *Sula*. London: vintage Books, 2005.
(All quotations are from this edition)
- ² ---. *The Bluest Eye*. London: vintage Books, 1999.
(All quotations are from this edition)
- ³ Walker, Alice. *The Color Purple*. New York: Harcourt Publishing Company, 1992.
(All quotations are from this edition)
- ⁴ ---. *Possessing the Secret of Joy*. Florida: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1992.
(All quotations are from this edition)
- ⁵ Collins, Patricia Hill. *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. 2nd ed. New York: Routledge, 2000, p. 76.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 77.
- ⁷ Lindsey, Linda. L. *Gender roles: A Sociological Perspective*. 6th ed. USA: Routledge, 2016, p. 339.
- ⁸ Collins, *op. cit.*, p. 78.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 77.
- ¹⁰ James, Joy. Ed. *The Angela Y. Davis Reader*. Massachusetts: Blackwell, 1998, p. 113.
- ¹¹ Collins, *op. cit.*, p. 77.
- ¹² *Ibid.*, p. 113.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 45.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 71.
- ¹⁵ Welter, Barbara. "The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860," *American Quarterly* 18.2 (Summer 1966). pp: 151-174. *Colorado.edu*. Web. 20 Apr. 2017, p.154.
- ¹⁶ Collins., *op. cit.*, p. 83.
- ¹⁷ Beaulieu, Elizabeth Ann, Ed. *The Toni Morrison Encyclopedia*. Westport: Greenwood Press, 2003, p. 15.
- ¹⁸ Nnaemeka, Obioma. Ed. *The Politics of Mothering: Womanhood, identity, and resistance in African literature*. New York: Routledge, 2005, p. 5.
- ¹⁹ Collins, *op. cit.*, p. 75.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 72.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 73.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 74.

²³ Browdy de Hernandez, Jennifer, Pauline Dongala, Omotayo Jolaosho, and Anne Serafin. Eds. *African Women Writing Resistance: An Anthology of Contemporary Voices*. London: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2010, p. 174.

²⁴ Shell-Duncan, Bettina, Ylva Hernlund. *Female "circumcision" in Africa: Culture, Controversy, and Change*. Colorado: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2000, p. 28.

²⁵ Collins, *op. cit.*, p. 89.

²⁶ Lindsey, *op. cit.*, p. 81.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 80.

²⁸ Collins, *op. cit.*, p. 90.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 89.

³⁰ Bloom, Harold. Ed. *Toni Morrison's The Bluest Eye*. New York: Infobase Publishing, 2010, p.108.

³¹ Lindsey, *op. cit.*, p. 81.

³² Collins, *op. cit.*, p. 89.

³³ Osterweil, Ara. "Reconstructing Shirley: Pedophilia and Interracial Romance in Hollywood's Age of Innocence." *Camera Obscura*. 24.3. (2009). pp: 1-39. Print. p. 4.

³⁴ Bloom, *op. cit.*, p. 41.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 43.

³⁶ Collins, *op. cit.*, p. 91.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 89.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 90.