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IDENTITY IN TONI MORRISON'S BELOVED AND THE BLUEST EYE

TONI MORRISON'IN BELOVED VE THE BLUEST EYE ESERLERİNDE KİMLİK

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Abstract

Toni Morrison as an African American novelist, throughout her works, portrays the trials and tribulations of the black community in the United States. In her novels, Morrison pays attention to the issues, which has related to the black community such as slavery, racial discrimination, marginalization, racism, and identity. Among these issues, the identity issue has been one of the major problems that African-Americans have encountered. Some white Americans regard Blackness as a state of poverty and ugliness. Morrison is an African-American. Therefore, most of the works in these issues always has intrigued the attention of her. In *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison depicts the life of an African-American family. She mainly focuses on a young girl of a family named Pecola Breedlove. Pecola constantly called ugly and mocked due to the color of her skin. Therefore, she feels frustrated and neglected by her surroundings. Therefore, she desires to have blue eyes and searches for her identity. Because she believes that getting, blue-eyes would make her more beautiful. On the other hand, in *Beloved*, Morrison portrays the life of a female slave named Sethe. After many sacrifices, Sethe manages to escape slavery but it leaves horrific impacts on her. Throughout the novel, Morrison uses different characters to demonstrate the hardships of the black community in the United States. In addition to this, she criticizes slavery system as it has affected the identity of the black community. This article aims to investigate the life of the main characters in the aforementioned novels and discuss their quest for identity due to the white dominant culture that surrounds them. It will also portray the devastating consequences of slavery on the black community.

Keywords: black literature, slavery, identity, *Beloved*, *The Bluest Eye*, Toni Morrison

Öz

Afrikalı Amerikalı romancı olan Toni Morrison, tüm çalışmalarında siyahilerin Birleşik Devletler’de yaşadığı çileleri anlatmaktadır. Morrison romanlarında kölelik, ırk ayrımcılığı, marjinalleşme, ırkçılık ve kimlik gibi konulara dikkat çekmektedir. Kimlik sorunu, Afrikalı-Amerikalılar’ın karşılaştığı en büyük sorunlardan biri olmuştur. Bazı Beyaz-Amerikalılar Siyah tenliği yoksulluk ve çirkinlik olarak görürler. Morrison’un Afrikalı-Amerikalı yazar olması sebebiyle eserlerinin çoğunda bu konulara ilgi göstermiştir. *The Bluest Eye*’de Morrison, bir Afro-Amerikan ailesinin hayatını tasvir etmektedir. Morrison eserde, ailenin Pecola Breedlove adlı genç kızına odaklanmaktadır. Pecola ile çirkinliğinden ve derisinin renginden dolayı alay edilir. Bunun neticesi olarak, sınırlıdır ve kendisini ihmal edilmiş hisseder. Bu sebeple, mavi gözlere sahip olmayı ve gerçek kimliğini aramayı istemektedir. Çünkü mavi gözlere sahip olmanın onu daha güzel yapacağına inanmaktadır. Öte yandan, *Beloved*’de Morrison, Sethe adında bir dişi kölenin hayatını anlatır. Birçok fedakarlıktan sonra, Sethe kölelikten kaçmayı başarır ama bu kaçış onun üzerinde korkunç etkiler yaratır. Roman boyunca, Morrison, Birleşik Devletler’deki siyah topluluğun yaşadığı zorlukları anlatmak için farklı karakterler kullanır. Buna ilave olarak, siyah topluluğun kimliğini etkilediği için kölelik sistemini eleştirmektedir. Bu makale, söz konusu romanlardaki ana karakterlerin hayatlarını incelemeyi ve onları çevreleyen beyaz baskın kültür nedeniyle kimlik arayışlarını tartışmayı amaçlamaktadır. Ayrıca köleliğin siyah toplumdaki yıkıcı sonuçlarını da tartışacaktır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: siyah edebiyat, kölelik, kimlik, *Beloved*, *The Bluest Eye*, Toni Morrison

Toni Morrison’s Bioraphy

Toni Morrison is a brilliant and outstanding African American writer, editor, novelist and literary critic. She was born in 1933 in Lorain, Ohio, United States. Her original name was Chloe Anthony Wofford, but while she was at university, she changed her name to Toni Morrison due to having some problems with the mispronunciation of her name. She was educated at Cornell University and Howard University. After graduation, she worked as an English professor at Texas Southern University and Howard University. In 1962, she got married to Harold Morrison and it only lasted four years. Morrison has an outstanding career; she has won many prestigious awards including Noble Prize for Literature in 1993 and the Pulitzer Prize for fiction in 1988. Most of her works demonstrate the problems and hardships of the black community in the United States. Racism, discrimination, injustice, oppression, and slavery are key themes in her novels. Some of her notable works include *The Bluest Eye*, *Sula*, *Song of Solomon*, *Tar Baby*, *Beloved*, *A Mercy*, *Love, Jazz*, and *Paradise*. Most of these novels portray the struggles of the black community due to the social, political and the dominant culture of the white community in the United States.

Introduction

Toni Morrison's first novel, *The Bluest Eye*, was published in 1970. *The Bluest Eye* was set in a place called Ohio, which is Toni Morrison's birthplace. In the novel, Morrison depicts the life of the black community. A young girl named Pecola Breedlove yearns to have blue eyes. She believes that having blue eyes would make her life better. So Morrison scrutinizes the outlook of African Americans toward the standards of beauty and its devastating impact on the black community. In that case; the dominance of white culture creates physiological impacts on the blacks and it threatens Black's real identity.

Beloved is considered as a masterpiece of Toni Morrison. It was published in 1987 and won Pulitzer Prize for fiction. The story was set after the American Civil war (1861-1865). The book follows an African American mother and daughter, who are slaves and want to escape slavery. Sethe is the protagonist of the story who lives with her daughter and her mother-in-law in Cincinnati. Throughout the novel, Morrison uses different characters to showcase the horrific consequences of slavery system on the black community. The novel is inspired by a true story of Margaret Garner who is the victim of the slavery system in the white community. Garner victimizes one of her kids so as not to live under slavery. Meanwhile, in *Beloved* the same scenario repeats as Sethe; the protagonist of the story sacrifices one of her kids to save her children from the dreadful system of slavery.

The Quest for Identity in *Beloved*

Literature has always been an effective factor in growing awareness about the contemporary issues that face human beings around the world. Throughout their writings, authors highlight the problems of their society and sometimes provide a solution to them. Toni Morrison as one of the outstanding writers has used her writings to portray the circumstance of the marginalized and oppressed people in The United States. Morrison as an African American writer pays attention to the problems of the black community. In general "African American protest novels are primarily knocking the matter of social injustice, slavery, identity crisis, and racial segregation problems" (Görmez & Mohammad, 2018: 15). Likewise, in Morrison novels racism, marginalization, discrimination, slavery, and identity are seminal themes. In *Beloved*, Morrison portrays the life of a family who suffers from slavery. And the devastating effects of slavery constitute other problems for the characters including identity problems.

In Oxford Dictionary, an identity crisis is defined as "A period of uncertainty and confusion in which a person's sense of identity becomes

insecure, typically due to a change in their expected aims or role in society". (Murray, 1884) As far as I am concerned, identity can also mean to have a decent life, rights, equality, education, and health system. Therefore, whenever individuals of a society do not have all these basic needs, it means that their identity is at stake. And in *Beloved*, Morrison portrays that her characters are looked upon as inferiors due to being black and they mainly suffer from these issues including slavery as William L. observes "She wanted to explore the nature of slavery, not from an intellectual or slave narrative perspective, but from within the day-to-day lived experiences of the slaves themselves". (Andrews, 1999: 7)

The opening chapter in *Beloved* starts with a description of the house. So home can be regarded as a resolution for the quest for identity "124 was spiteful. Full of baby's venom. The women in the house knew it and so did the children". (Morrison, 1987: 3) This refers to the place in which Sethe and her family live in and the place is located in Ohio. Morrison underscores the importance of home for Sethe, as the protagonist of the story and for her family as well. Throughout the story, the reader comes across other descriptions of the home which Sethe and her family are resided in. In other words, the reappearance of the description of Sethe's home is essential. Because through this, the author wants to emphasize the importance of having a place or a home to live in. Therefore, home is regarded as a resolution for the identity issue.

Black Americans have suffered so much pain due to the slavery system and other racial discriminations in the United States. Morrison tries to bring slavery to light throughout *Beloved*. And she acutely epitomizes the effects of slavery on the life of the characters to display its horrific consequences. In addition to this, Morrison demonstrates how slavery has put the identity of the black people in jeopardy. *Beloved* provides enough examples of the dreadful system of slavery. One of the powerful examples is that the main character; Sethe kills one of her children to escape her children from slavery. She thought that killing her is much better than the life of slaves. In an interview with Alan Benson, Morrison comments on the act of killing the baby and states "For me, it was the ultimate gesture of a loving mother. It was also the outrageous claim of a slave. The last thing a slave woman owns is her children". (Parini, 2003: 174) So by killing the baby, Sethe prevents them from being slaves. To put it another way, Sethe was a former slave and she knows the hardships and difficulties of slavery. Therefore, she commits the crime to save her children from the horrors of slavery. Cornel as an author comments on *Beloved* and states:

Challenging basic social assumptions about women's reality, and

making possible a more adequate understanding of the tragedy of slavery. Sethe's understanding of her own situation and the reader's understanding of Sethe's situation are explained in part in terms of identity – especially, of possibilities for genuinely human identities (Babbitt, 1994: 10).

There were some reactions against Sethe's murdering her daughter. Paul D. who is a previous slave from Sweet Home Plantation criticizes Sethe and tells her not to return to Sweet Home but Sethe tells him "It ain't my job to know what's worse. It is my job to know what is and to keep them away from what I know is terrible, I did that". (Morrison, 1987: 165) Sethe tells Paul D. that she understands her own situation better than him and she knows why she has done it. She has already experienced the hardships of slavery and she does not want her children to go through the same circumstance. What she did was an effort just to protect her children. On the other hand, she reaffirms her love for her children especially for Beloved; who was victimized "Beloved, you are my sister. You are my daughter. You are my face; you are me". (Morrison, 1987: 214) In this quote, she confirms her love for Beloved. She expresses her real motherhood feelings for her baby. And it can be understood that what she did was just to save her. Sethe's actions throughout the story could be interpreted as attempting to reconstruct her identity because slavery has affected her life and it also has endangered the identity of her children as well.

Furthermore, throughout reading the book, the reader comes to terms such as present past, time and memory. Therefore, this gives a second thought to the readers to question the identity of the protagonist of the story. Sethe mentions time and memory and says "I was talking about time. It's so hard for me to believe in it. Some things go, pass on. Some things just stay. I used to think it was my memory. You know. Some things you forget. Other things you never do". (Morrison, 1987: 35) As it is clear, Sethe talks about time, as there are things or events that stay longer. Things like slavery and other bad events could stay longer and their effects could last for a quite long time. Meanwhile, there are other things that pass on; it could be the happy moments in her life that stay shorter but the bad things such as slavery stay forever in the mind of her and other peoples who have endured it .

Sethe suffers so much from what she did, she claims that she killed Beloved to protect her and save her from slavery. But as the story revolves, the reader realizes that Sethe has been in pain and sorrow all the moments and it has mentally and psychologically affected her self-identity:

“What, baby?”

“She left me.”

“Aw, girl. Don’t cry.”

“She was my best thing” (Morrison, 1987: 272).

On the other hand, there are other characters who suffer from slavery. So, most of the characters have suffered from the trials and tribulations of slavery and it has affected the lives of the characters. Morrison constantly tries to stress on the circumstances of the black community as she says “There is no bad luck in the world but white folks”. (Morrison, 1987: 89) She claims that what happens in the world is not due to something which we call it bad luck but it is due to the white community. They are responsible for the hardships and difficulties of black people. Toni Morrison criticizes the way the white community treats the black people:

That anybody white could take your whole self. For anything that came to mind. Not just work, kill or maim but dirty you. Dirty you so bad you could not like yourself anymore. Dirty you so bad you forget who you were and couldn’t think it up (Morrison, 1987: 295).

In this quote, Morrison demonstrates the dominance of the white community over the black community. It is a matter of being superior and inferior; the whites have been superior to the black community. Furthermore, Morrison states that the black people have suffered a lot “Dirty you so bad you forget who you were” in this quote, Toni Morrison refers to something which is worse than the mental and physical pain. In other words, she states that living as a slave makes you even to forget yourself and lose your identity. It has been due to the slavery that the characters have even forgotten their identity. Throughout the novel, Morrison reminds the readers of the devastating consequences of slavery in the United States and argues that the black community has been discriminated and slavery has affected them to such a great degree that slavery threatens their real identity.

The Quest for Identity in *the Bluest Eye*

The *Bluest Eye* has considered as one of the notable works of Toni Morrison. The book was published in 1970 and is regarded as the author’s first major work. The story focuses on the life of a young African American girl named Pecola Breedlove. She grows up in a place, which is surrounded by white dominant culture. She faces physical and emotional sufferings. Breedlove, as the protagonist of the novel thinks that she is ugly; there-

fore, she believes that having blue eyes would make her beautiful “it had occurred to Pecola some time ago, that if her eyes, those eye that held the picture, and knew the sights—if those eye of hers were different, that is to say, beautiful, she herself would be beautiful”. (Morrison, 1970: 46) In this quote, Morrison informs the readers about the mindset of Pecola Breedlove as the main character of the novel. She informs us that Breedlove longs to have blue eyes. She feels that she is ugly and unloved by her community; therefore, having blue eyes would make her beautiful. So Pecola is only eleven years and she feels that she is ugly and unwanted. It shows the negative consequences of racism and other sorts of discrimination in the United States. Furthermore, the quote also implies that Breedlove feels neglected and mocked by her surroundings; therefore, she tries to restore her beauty and attempts to find her real identity by acquiring blue eyes.

Moreover, Morrison constantly reveals more about the personal life of Breedlove. She highlights her real life and uncovers her fears and sufferance. It is because she is black and she believes that she is not accepted by her community:

The Breedloves did not live in a storefront because they were having temporary difficulty adjusting to cutbacks at the plant. They lived there because they were poor and black, and stayed there because they believed they were ugly. Although their poverty was traditional and stultifying, it was not unique. But their ugliness was unique. No one could have convinced them that they were not relentlessly and aggressively ugly (Morrison, 1970: 39).

Morrison reveals more about the life of Breedlove and her family. As they struggle to live in a world in where people judged them by the color of their skin. In every place, they were considered as inferiors. Therefore, these circumstances affect their entire life and they lose their confidence and believe that they are ugly “Pecola is obstructed and deflected from higher consciousness of self”. (Andrews, 1999: 40) In addition, it shows a bitter reality of slavery life as they struggle to discover their real identity. Because they feel that they are obstructed and neglected by the dominant white culture.

As the story progresses, Morrison provides the readers with more information about the life of Pecola Breedlove. Morrison’s focus remains on Pecola and she highlights every hardship she faced in her life. Even though she is only eleven years old but she feels ignored and she is frustrated. The outcome of the white dominant culture in *The Bluest Eye* demonstrates the fact that no one can escape from racism and other sorts of discrimination in the United States. Even nowadays, the problems still exist

as De Bois notes “The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color-line”. (Bois, 2016: Intr.) From this quotation, we can learn that our world still suffers due to these problems and they have negative impacts on children as Morrison displays it on Pecola Breedlove.

Throughout the novel, the reader comes to know that the characters in the novel especially Breedlove tries to see herself as what she is but defining herself is obstructed by the dominant culture of the white community. In other words, she tries to find out her real identity. However, it is ambiguous due to the local circumstance and the cultural impacts of the white community “Thrown, in this way, into the binding conviction that only a miracle could relieve her, she would never know her beauty. She would see only what there was to see”. (Morrison, 1970: 46-47) In this quote, the reader realizes that Pecola struggles to know or see her real identity. In other words, she struggles to see who she is. She believes that she to be defined by her surroundings or her society. Consequently, the white community dominates her society; therefore, she only sees herself through the eyes of white people. Moreover, some of her friends always reject and mock her. Some of her friends’ attitudes in society cause her to struggle or even fail to know herself as an individual of society.

On the other hand, Morrison portrays the life of another character; Claudia, who is the opposite of Pecola. Claudia’s mindsets and views are completely different from Pecola’s point of views. Unlike Pecola, Claudia knows her inner values and she does not care about what the blacks think of her. To put it another way, she is so confident that she does not fall under the influence of her society and surrounding; she proves her power. Throughout the novel, Claudia tries to resist the premise of white superiority:

But the dismembering of the dolls was not the true horror. The truly horrifying thing was the transference of the same impulses to little white girls. The indifference with which I could have axed them was shaken only by my desire to do so. To discover what eluded me: the secret of the magic they weaved on others. What made people look at them and say, “Awwwww,” but not for me? The eye slide of black women as they approached them on the street and the possessive gentleness of their touch as they handled them (Morrison, 1970: 43).

Morrison demonstrates that Claudia realizes that society treats the black community as inferiors to the whites. However, she declines to see herself the way the white society sees her. She tries to resist the premise of white beauty. In addition to this, Morrison tries to draw the readers’ at-

tention toward two different ways of thinking. Claudia and Pecola are both black, but unlike Pecola, Claudia does not give in to the white dominant culture around her. Even though, she knows the reality; she knows that the white community regards black girls as ugly and sometimes they are mocked. Claudia is aware that people admire the Whites' style more than the Blacks style but she still resists it. As the story ends, readers learn that Claudia stands against all racial problems that face her "We had defended against ourselves since memory against everything and everybody considered all speech a code to be broken by us". (Morrison, 1970: 150) In this quotes, Morrison informs the readers about Claudia's resistance against the white community. Claudia responses to the oppression that she faces in her life. On the contrary, Pecola surroundings completely affect her. She loses her self-confidence and she yearns to look like the white people by having blue eyes. As the story comes to an end, the reader realizes that beauty cannot hide the ugliness. There is always someone more beautiful than the other "Beauty is in the eyes of the beholder". (Drazen, 2000: 11) It implies that the perception of beauty is subjective. On the other hand, David Mue states that "Beauty is no quality in things themselves: it exists merely in the mind which contemplates them, and each mind perceives a different beauty". (Hume, 1757: 3)

Eventually, as Pecola have no friends to talk to, spend her times with, she talks with an imaginary friend, or voice because she is completely ignored by her society and even by her family. It is the consequence of being ignored and mocked by her society and friends that she resorts to have an imaginary friend. Furthermore, she realizes that she cannot get blue eyes; her obsession with blue eyes fades away because she realizes that everyone will not look at her in the eyes. Ultimately, she believes that she has got blue eyes "just because I got blue eyes, bluer than theirs, they are prejudiced". (Morrison, 1970: 197) However, it is only through her imagination that she gets blue eyes.

Toni Morrison is regarded as one of the greatest African American novelists. She is believed that she has given a rebirth to black literature. Throughout her works, she does not only demonstrate the hardships of the black community. Further, she uses a language which is different from the Standard Language of the United States. To put it another way, she challenges the traditional language, as it can be obviously noticed in her Pulitzer Prize-winning novel; *Beloved* and some of her other notable works. David L. comments on *Beloved* and argues, "One of the main issues of *Beloved* is the way in which Morrison shows the readers that the so-called "master tongue" is very much subverted because of its potential for domination and degradation". (Middleton, 2015: 16) Throughout reading her

novels, readers can notice that Morrison employs African American English (AAE) in most of her works. Some vivid examples could be found in *Beloved*, *The Bluest Eye*, *Jazz*, songs of Solomon and so forth.

In *Beloved* Morrison from time to time employs vernacular black language “A man ain’t nothing but a man”. (Morrison, 1987: 39) In this quote, Toni Morrison uses ‘ain’t nothing’, which is not a Standard English, but Morrison uses it to characterize the African American community. Furthermore, in *The Bluest Eye*, readers can also observe the use of black language; a firm quote could be “what you crying for”. (Morrison, 1970: 29) One can see the omission of ‘are’ in the quote. We can see the use of African American English in her other works; as in *Song of Solomon* “I ain’t the one with the wants. You the one want something”. (Morrison, 1977: 36) In addition, in *Jazz*, Morrison employs the same technique “The children is miserable as me the money you senting can not keeping all us afloat”. (Morrison, 1992: 56) As it is clear, one can notice the vernacular black language in this quote: using ‘is’ instead of ‘are’ in ‘Children is’. In ‘you senting’ we see the omission of ‘are’ and adding ‘ing’ to past form of the word ‘send’, adding ‘ing’ to the word ‘keep’ and also the omission of ‘of’ in ‘all us’ these are clear indications of the use of black language by Toni Morrison. The reader can clearly notice the ignorance of grammatical rules by Morrison. Through her works, Morrison tries to restore the language of black people and their culture.

Conclusion

To sum up, Toni Morrison in *Beloved* and *The Bluest Eye* portrays the hardships of African Americans. Morrison demonstrates how black people struggle to cope with the white dominant culture in the United States. Morrison uses different ways to familiarize readers with the struggles and difficulties of black people. In *Beloved*, Morrison mainly focuses on the slavery system. And she elucidates how slavery has affected the lives of the black people. Morrison uses the protagonist of the novel; Sethe, to showcase the magnitude of slavery on African Americans. Throughout the novel, Morrison displays the consequences of slavery on the life of Sethe. So, Sethe makes sacrifices to escape slavery. As she murders one of her own children to save them from slavery. Morrison reminds the readers that slavery does not only leave mental, physical and psychological impacts on the black people. But it causes the black people to question their real identity. Because due to slavery black people have been deprived of the basic needs of life. So they struggle to find their real identity. On the other hand, in *The Bluest Eye* Morrison continues to uncover the bitter experiences of the black community in the United States. Morrison’s main focus remains on another black girl. Again, just like in *Beloved*, Morrison

uses her main character to show another dreadful experience of the black people in the United States due to racism. Pecola Breedlove realizes that she is neglected and mocked by her community. So, Morrison unearths the horrific consequences of racism and other sorts of discrimination on black people. Just like in *Beloved*, racism hugely affects the black people to such a degree that they question their identity. Pecola feels lost and has lost her self-confidence. Therefore, she longs to get blue eyes just to look like white people. She believes that getting blue eyes would make her more beautiful. All in all, in both novels Morrison brings to light the trials and tribulations of African Americans. In addition to this, she explores the horrific consequences of racism and slavery on African-Americans as it has put their identity at stake.

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