Family and Space in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*: A Black Feminist Reading

Sameer Abd AL- Hussein Hassan
Education Directorate of Thi-Qar . Ministry of Education , Iraq
sameerabdhassan@utq.edu.iq

Abstract:

The paper explores the suppression of African-American cultures and histories, particularly in relation to black women, due to the dominance of white culture as well as patriarchal and industrialized environments. Through the perspective of black American feminism, this paper delves into Morrison's depiction of family and space, analyzing the reasoning behind character and spatial choices, and examining how these elements contribute to the protagonist's complex oppression. Toni Morrison intertwines these themes to highlight the intricacies of interracial and intraracial dynamics within the various spheres of individuals, families, and communities. The breakdown of the family experienced by black women, as seen in Pecola's family in the novel, is the result of both external cultural pressures—such as mainstream acculturation—and internal psychological pressures inflicted by parental influences. The paper concludes that Morrison depicts the domestic sphere as a product of racism, sexism, and classism. The familial space of black women is plagued by a hegemonized, sexualized, and focalized identity, manifested through domestic violence familial disintegration.

Keywords: *Toni Morrison, black feminism, patriarchy, racism, sexism, classicism, sexualized space.*

Introduction

In *The Bluest Eye* (1970), Toni Morrison challenges traditional notions of family and space, presenting a complex and nuanced portrayal of the ways in which these forces intersect and shape individual experience. Through Pecola's story, Morrison offers a powerful critique of the ways in which societal expectations and systemic inequalities impact the lives of marginalized individuals, underscoring the importance of empathy, compassion, and understanding in creating a more inclusive and equitable society.

Before venturing into the main discussion of the topic, it is appropriate to mention some of the definitions of the concept of "family" and its associations. In the *American Heritage Dictionary*, the term "family" comes to mean: "A fundamental social group in society typically consisting of one or two parents and their children; two or more people who share goals and values, have long-term commitments to one another, and reside usually in the same dwelling place; a group of persons sharing common ancestry."

Merriam Webster Dictionary defines family as "the basic unit in society traditionally consisting of two parents rearing their children". In *Cambridge Dictionary*, family is defined as 'a group of people who are related to each other, such as a mother, a father, and their children; a group of people who care about each other because they have a close relationship or shared interests.' A family is a group of individuals connected by love, loyalty, living together, having kids, ancestry, memories, and future plans, among other things. It is about being connected to one another, to a common past and future, and to generations past and present (Veciana-Suarez, 1996). *The World Health Organization* defines family as "two or more persons related by birth, marriage, adoption, or choice who have emotional ties and responsibilities to each other."

Obviously, this concept is not restricted by age cohort (generation) or place of residence (household). As a result, 'family' can apply to both close friends and one's broader family of origin. By defining the family system broadly, the family system is liberated from artificial legal or residential borders, allowing it to function as a dynamic and interconnected idea. (Bomar, 1996, p.17)

In *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison redefines the notion of family and redraws its space and impact on personal identity and self-worth. Through the experiences of the main character, Pecola Breedlove, Morrison delves into the complex relationships within Pecola's family, including her abusive father and neglectful mother, and how these dynamics shape her perceptions of herself and her place in society. The concept of space is significantly revisited in the novel, as the characters navigate physical, emotional, and social spaces that are often restrictive and oppressive. Through a close analysis of the family dynamics and spatial representations in *The Bluest Eye*, this paper aims to highlight the ways in which these factors contribute to Pecola's tragic descent into madness and self-destruction.

The novel follows the story of a young African American girl named Pecola Breedlove, who wishes for blue eyes in order to conform to societal standards of beauty. The idea of space, both physical and emotional, influences the characters' experiences and relationships. The novel begins with a description of Pecola's fractured family life, which is characterized by poverty, abuse, and neglect. Pecola's parents, Cholly and Pauline Breedlove, are unable to provide her with the stability and support she needs, leaving her feeling isolated and unloved. This sense of alienation is further reinforced by the physical spaces in which Pecola and her family live - cramped and dilapidated apartments that offer little respite from the harsh realities of their lives.

Physical Space and Psychological Distance

The representation of family and spatial identity in *The Bluest Eye* illuminates the interconnectedness of personal and collective histories, shedding light on the ways in which race, class, and gender intersect to shape individual experiences and relationships. Through the characters' struggles to find belonging and self-acceptance, Morrison's novel challenges readers to confront the legacy of systemic oppression and the enduring impact of trauma on familial and personal identity.

The dysfunctional dynamics within the Breedlove family, characterized by abuse, neglect, and self-hatred, serve as a microcosm of the broader societal structures that perpetuate racial and gender inequalities. Through the struggles of characters like Pecola, who longs for acceptance and validation in a world that devalues her blackness, Morrison highlights the ways in which familial relationships can both reinforce and challenge the oppressive systems that individuals navigate.

Morrison uses the concept of space as a metaphor for the characters' inner struggles and emotional burdens. The limitations of their physical environment reflect the constraints placed upon them by societal expectations and prejudices. The Breedloves' home is a small, crowded, and dilapidated space that reflects their internal struggles and broken relationships. The lack of a stable family environment contributes to Pecola's sense of isolation and self-hatred, as she internalizes the racial and societal prejudices that surround her.

In their struggle to establish their spatial identity in the novel, the characters navigate physical and psychological spaces that shape their understanding of themselves and their place in the world. Pecola's desire for blue eyes, inspired by the white beauty standards perpetuated in popular culture, reflects her internalized racism and feelings of inadequacy. This desire for physical transformation reflects a broader theme of displacement and longing for acceptance within a racist society. Furthermore, the spatial identity of the characters is reflected in the settings of the novel, including the urban landscape of Lorain, Ohio, and the rural South where Cholly grew up. These settings serve as symbols of the characters' cultural and historical identities, highlighting the ways in which their experiences are shaped by their environments and the societal forces that surround them. Pecola's desire for blue eyes, for example, is a manifestation of her longing to transcend the constraints of her race and socioeconomic status, to be accepted and valued in a world that devalues her humanity.

Moreover, Pecola's internalized feelings of inadequacy and worthlessness are a direct result of her dysfunctional family dynamics. Cholly and Pauline's troubled relationship is a microcosm of the larger societal forces that oppress and marginalize black

families, reinforcing a cycle of abuse and trauma that is passed down through generations. Pecola's parents' inability to create a nurturing and supportive home environment leaves her vulnerable to external influences that perpetuate her sense of worthlessness.

The novel also explores the ways in which family can serve as a source of strength and resilience in the face of adversity. Claudia MacTeer, Pecola's friend and narrator of the story, comes from a loving and supportive family that provides her with a sense of belonging and security. Claudia's strong sense of self-worth and self-acceptance stand in stark contrast to Pecola's self-loathing and longing for validation, highlighting the importance of family in shaping one's identity and sense of self.

The central question of the novel is how to be loved? Which simply means how to be recognized and be accepted in the community? This question takes us from the very tiny unit in the society to the largest space of it and from the young innocent child to the most sophisticated adult. Between these two spaces the reader is vitally involved to fill the gap. Within these spaces, Morrison dwells and anxiously explores the multiple oppression of the black American woman in the 1960s. Hence, Pecola is a collective, type character and a whole race meanwhile. Morrison's strong adherence to her cause appears in her statement that "writing blackness into being, narrating pains and raptures of black identity through story" (Foster, 2004).

Morrison is aesthetically an innovative writer who believes that the form is no less than the content and the structure is not separated from the text. As a result, the child primer at the beginning of the novel is a cohesive and symbolic form of the whole story. It represents the different kinds of communal and spatial structures as well. The different formats, spaces and punctuation in those passages suggest the order and stability of the white family and the chaos and disturbance of the black family due to the inflected, imposed and internalized standards of the dominating community. The incidents are juxtaposed and projected in various spaces at home, at school, in the shop, in the street, in the country in the city, in the south or in the north etc. Likewise, the rich and luxurious house is juxtaposed with the poor gloomy flat, the fantastic silver screen with the dirty dark room, the joyful company of the people with one's lonely shadow. After pointing out the failure of the black American pursuit of white standards through internalizing them, Morrison tries to recreate, re-shape and reconstruct an image of black American woman proud of her own identity and culture living in an integrated society.

Throughout *The Bluest Eye*, there is proof of the existence and impact of this erasure and replacement process. According to Jane Kuenz *"The Bluest Eye* as a whole, documents this invasion-and its concomitant erasure of specific local bodies, histories, and

cultural productions-in terms of sexuality as it intersects with commodity culture" (1989, p.421). Since Dick and Jane's lifestyle is the only apparent example of happiness and is therefore perceived as commodified living, it subtly criticizes people whose lives do not align. The most prominent and widespread example of this in the novel is the seemingly endless replication of images of feminine beauty in commonplace items and consumer goods: Shirley Temple cups, Mary Jane candies, white baby dolls with their uncanny blue eyes and inhumanly hard bodies, even the stylish clothes of Maureen Peal, the "dream child," (p.62) which are fashionable precisely because they allude to Shirley Temple's cuteness and because Claudia and Frieda acknowledge them as such. However, Claudia and her sibling. But only in terms of its impact on other people can Claudia and her sister identify "the Thing that made [Maureen] beautiful and not [them]" (p.74). The way that "the honey voices of parents and aunts, the obedience in the eyes of [their] peers, the slippery light in the eyes of [their] teachers" (p.74) all pour out to the Maureen Peals of the world and not to them, even though they know they are "nicer, brighter," is something they cannot ignore. The sisters discover the truth of their own inadequacy—variously labeled as ugly or "unworthiness"—from other people's reactions to girls like Maureen and those who look up to Shirley Temple. "What was the secret?" (p.76) Claudia queries, "What were we missing? Why was it important? And so what?" (p.74)

According to Marilyn Mobley Mckenzie (2004, p.222), Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* actually focuses the reader on domestic space as represented in an elementary school primer. The meanings of house and home circulate throughout all of her novels, but in the first novel of her literary career, the house has some particular meanings that foreshadow the story inside the body of the novel.

The story illustrates how racial differences impact the social interactions within the MacTeers' and Breedloves' community. Many readers remember Dick and Jane primers that depicted only blond-haired white individuals, with no representation of people of color. In this sense, the novel can be read as an "exploration of the psychic consequences particularly for black girls, of being marginalized, not only in the earliest textbooks used in elementary schools, but also in their everyday lives both in and outside school" (Mckenzie, 2004, p.222). The home provided a potential sanctuary for its residents, unless they had adopted society's racial biases, like the Breedloves. The use of words like house and home in the beginning of the passage demonstrates how language reflects and challenges reality. In the novel, discussions of house and home highlight the setting where a young black girl's sense of self begins to form.

In his comment on the novel, Mckenzie (2004), points out that, paradoxically, *The Bluest Eye* draws attention to the act of reading itself. He notes that the elementary primer highlights the schoolhouse as a significant space where language acquires meaning, emphasizing the need for a child to make connections between signs and symbols and their relevance to her own life. As the text progresses, the transition from a structured, grammatically correct passage with appropriate spacing and punctuation gives way to a lack of spacing and appropriate punctuation, ultimately descending into a complete lack of structure and coherence. This shift symbolizes the chaos and loss of meaning that mirror Pecola Breedlove's own descent into madness following her experiences of abuse and trauma. Hence, Pecola embodies the struggles faced by African Americans in broken families plagued by psychological issues.

Morrison deliberately chooses her characters to be young children to show the deep rooted and painful experience of the black American girl. The young Pecola does not know what love means, why her father and mother reject her. She has learnt only to be silent, afraid, "ugly black emo" (p.73). She has been made to internalize her ugliness from the very moment of her birth. That is to say she has been condemned as ugly unworthy girl by her own mother. Later she has been brutally victimized by her own father. She has been abused by her own race - her own father left her unconscious, her mother cries " Lord she was ugly" (p.126), the black boys call her "black emo", Geraldine shouts "nasty little black bitch get out" (p.62) and the white man does not "look" at her. In short, Pecola's identity is constructed by her internal and external traumatic space.

Morrison's focus in this novel is more on the collective space of the identity of the Afro-American woman identity. It is a story of a reckless mother, a ruthless father, lost children, a fragmented family and oppressive society. "Toni Morrison literalizes the overall conflation of black female bodies as the sites of fascist invasions of one kind or another, as the terrain on which is mapped the encroachment and colonization of African-American experiences, particularly those of its women, by a seemingly hegemonic white culture" (Kuenz, 1989, p.421). in line with this thought, Pecola is the ultimate output of the fragmented family and depraved society. Cholly's father has rejected him, his mother abandoned him and his 'aunt' dies in his adolescence. The factor of his blackness becomes critical to each of the traumas because it mixes itself into the disturbing events. (Holloway et al., 1995, p.161)

This constructed familial space is the result of cultural infliction of racial discrimination, patriarchal domination and class division. Cholly learns that the only identity he fully carries with him is his color and his body. These factors seem to victimize

him just as the situation of his environment. The only image he has kept in his mind is that he "is small, black, helpless" boy while they were "big, white armed men" (p.150). All sort of oppression he has transformed it to his children. His failure and impotence in his adolescence to fight back the white boys who insistently cry “Get on wid it, nigger,” (p.148) has raised in him a hatred of his blackness. The lack of family, the rejection of the society leads ultimately to the isolation of the individual or the internalization of the imposed values. Due to these factors, he grows to be homeless, irresponsible father and "dangerously free" figure (p.159). He sees life as dangerously free space for him, to drink, to hate, and to quarrel. The only love he can give for his daughter is that "gift" of raping because he himself does not see love at all.

On the other hand, Pecola is not the first victim of oppression. "She is" according to Holloway, "the veiled violence of her father's life, the was in which he was black and lost, black and a lone, black and abandoned, black and abusively potent that made him the first victim in that godforsaken family" (1995, p.162). Pecola is the victim of the spaces of family and community. She lacks the minimal human need, the least point in the human instinct, parental love. When she does not find it at home, she searches for it in the outer space. But, the outside is no better than the inside. There is only one space where she can find it possible. It is the space of fantasy. Within all the models of white mass cultural representation around her, Pecola appear as a replicant "devoid of cultural integrity" (Willis, 1989, p.184). In short, there is no space for her to live in the real world. It is the question of to be or not to be. To exist is to be loved and to be loved is to be beautiful and to be beautiful you should have the blue eye and the blonde hair.

Morrison argues that love serves as a lasting influence that lends meaning to the unique experiences of African Americans. It represents a search for unity both within the community and at a personal level. She further asserts that choosing to love means choosing to forge connections and recognize oneself in others. This concept encapsulates the challenges faced by black American women in confronting racism, classism, and sexism, as depicted in *The Bluest Eye*. It is apt here to quote Bell Hooks (2001, p.93):

> Cultures of domination rely on the cultivation of fear as a way to ensure obedience . . . Fear is the primary force upholding structures of domination. It promotes the desire for separation, the desire not to be known . . . When we choose to love we choose to move against fear—against alienation and separation. The choice to love is a choice to connect—to find ourselves in the other.

Morrison chooses her protagonist to be a young school girl in order to present to the reader how the innocent children are made to suffer the imposition of the values in an

institutional upbringing. It also offers to the author another space for her characters as well as the readers. It is also a place for the meeting of cultures. On the other hand, Pauline is "the ideal servant" (p.127) in the white man's house. But the unwanted mother in the black man's room. She was the quite stable and content in her own village, but lost and reckless in the north. She grows fond of movies and start neglecting "her house" and children. It is not the better soil for her though she attempts it feverishly. The physical distance and space of class and race has been reflected in the several and various encounters in the novel. It can be traced through Pauline's desire to have a white baby or in Pecola's crazy search for blue eyes or in Geraldine's ceaseless efforts to get rid of her "funkiness" (p.83) to numerate but a few. The three whores have cut themselves from any sphere and have created their own world and space.

In stark contrast to Pecola, who views her descent into madness as a liberation, Claudia observes the fate of Pecola and the community and, based on her enlightened perspective, creates a new space for her to continue living. Pecola is required to envision herself as a white young girl in a recurring pattern depicted in the novel. Essentially, she is unable to perceive herself at all. "The damaging results of it are illustrated typographically in the repetition of the Dick-and-Janes tory first without punctuation or capitalization, and then without punctuation, capitalization, or spacing" (Kuenz, 1993, p.422). Mckenzie (2004, p.223) argues that Pecola's descent into madness is "a tragic enclosure inside the narrow spaces of disconnection from community and the larger society forever." (Kuenz, 1993, p.422) remarks:

> Pecola's "breakdown at the end of the novel is the last in a series of instances in which boundaries marking the space between inside and outside, self and other, sense and nonsense are broken, removed, or simply no longer perform their tasks. As the novel's prefatory Dick-and-Jane story turns from order to chaos with the gradual removal of punctuation and spacing, so too does the erasure of Pecola's body and sexuality lead to her mad-ness and isolation.

By the time readers finish the book, they will have traveled to domestic settings where people's ability to imagine themselves as whole, acceptable human beings is constrained by racism in the larger world, where taboos surrounding rape and incest traumatize and undermine black girlhood, and where economic depravity determines when and how people love.

Hence, we come to understand why Morrison discusses two black families, the MacTeens and the Breedloves. The former strives to maintain its connection to its roots and culture, as symbolized by the blues, in order to survive and exist as a cohesive unit

without interference. The MacTeens preserve the cultural space, but they still face societal rejection and have withdrawn into self-alienation and isolation. In contrast, the Breedloves seek to conform to the imposed standards of mainstream culture, leading to a loss of identity and psychological disintegration. By accepting the imposed images of ugliness, filth, and worthlessness, they internalize self-hatred.

In order to escape the double oppression and face multiple forms of oppression, both families are confronted with discrimination in various settings such as family, home, school, and the city. The ultimate message is conveyed through the character of Pecola. Escaping to a fantasy world is not the solution - do not internalize the negative words and perceptions of others. Embrace your own culture and nurture your sense of self-worth.

Conclusion

Throughout the novel, space plays a crucial role in shaping the dynamics of the families depicted in the novel. The Breedlove and MacTeer families, for example, have contrasting relationships with their environment, which in turn affects their sense of belonging and support systems. The influence of setting on family interactions and conflicts highlights how physical and symbolic spaces can reflect and impact family relationships. The characters' desires for space are closely tied to their relationships with family members, emphasizing the interconnectedness of family dynamics and the spaces they inhabit.

The novel explores the intricate relationship between family dynamics and physical spaces, which reveal the impact of the socio-cultural space on the characters' desires and their relationships with family members. Throughout the story, the influence of setting on family interactions and conflicts is evident, demonstrating how the environment can shape the characters' experiences and interactions. The symbolism of physical and symbolic spaces further reflects the complex nature of family relationships, emphasizing the impact of space on characters' identities and experiences.

In *The Bluest Eye*, Toni Morrison uses the concepts of family and space as a powerful lens through which to explore the complexities of personal and collective histories, shedding light on the ways in which race, class, and gender intersect to shape individual experiences and relationships within a context of systemic oppression. Through the struggles of characters like Pecola, Morrison confronts readers with the enduring impact of trauma on familial and personal identity, challenging readers to reckon with the legacy of historical injustices and the resilience of individuals navigating environments that seek to erase their identities. By reflecting on the interconnectedness of family and spatial identity in the novel, Morrison prompts us to consider the ways in which these

themes continue to resonate in our society today, urging us to engage in critical conversations about systemic inequalities and the possibilities for healing and transformation.

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