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CHILD ABUSE IN TONY MORRISON'S "THE BLUEST EYE"

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ABSTRACT

Child abuse is an important theme which Toni Morrison discusses in the novel. Child sexual abuse was a topic which was not discussed in public in the early twenties. Morrison began her first novel *The Bluest Eye*, with the rape of Pecola the adolescent child by her father. Pecola is an easy prey because she is a child and has no power over her adults. She is a female and has never been taught to oppose any oppression. Physical abuse results in psychological abuse. Pecola is emotionally abused by her classmates who call her black. Her mother Pauline does not care for her and neglects her. Morrison tries to show that all her black characters who act as oppressors were themselves oppressed during childhood. Cholly, Pecola's father was abandoned by his mother and father both soon after birth. He was forcefully made to have sex in the torch light by two white hunters, which perverts his sense of sex. Cholly is an alcoholic so he abuses his wife and children whenever he gets drunk. Soaphead abuses Pecola emotionally by making her believe that he has given her blue eyes and leads to her final doom and downfall.

Key Words- Oppression, Abuse, Psychological, Sexual, Emotional

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Child Abuse

Child sexual abuse before the 1970s was secretive and socially unspeakable. It was only after 1970s that it became legally punishable. Toni Morrison raised this issue in her novel *"The Bluest Eye"* speaking about the unspeakable. Second wave feminism brought sexual abuse and violence against women to the forefront making them public and political issues.

Child abuse is a complex phenomenon with multiple causes and occurs in a range of situations and circumstances. Children are abused by people in a position of power above them. Child abuse is nothing but the oppression of the weak by the powerful. Children are weaker physically than their oppressors and so can be overpowered easily. If they are bold enough to raise their voice they are subjugated by physical force. Child abuse is any recent act or failure to act on the part of a parent or caretaker which results in death, serious physical or emotional harm, sexual abuse or exploitation, an act of failure to act which presents an imminent risk of serious harm.

Oppression and violation of children especially poor children is a systematic phenomenon. Children are granted no voice, no bodily integrity, and no inherent world by the adults who are their caretakers. If they

are lucky like Claudia and Frieda Mac Teer, they learn resistance strategies. If they are unlucky like Pecola Breedlove they learn various kinds of disempowered responses. They internalize their oppression than identify with their oppressors and they begin to believe that their oppression is just and proper.

Emotional abuse results in psychological and social defects in the growth of a child and results in behaviour which is coarse and rude. Cholly behaves exactly in this manner.

It is easy to oppress a child because he or she is unable to resist, oppress or combat his oppression. In an oppressive environment a child reacts to the injustices against him with disempowered responses like silence, self abuse, depression, rage etc. The child knows that he has no power over his oppressors and cannot harm him, so the child finds out ways to escape from this oppression by changing himself, or accepting his oppression. Toni Morrison has assigned reasons to all child oppressors in the novel. She writes that Cholly, and Pauline had been abused during childhood. Earlier it was believed that when a child grows up in an oppressive system, his or her own position changes and he or she assumes the role of the oppressor, but studies have now proved that even those who have not faced oppression during childhood can become oppressors. "There is a slight tendency for children who have been abused to become child abusers themselves"(Finkelman).

The cycle of oppression is believed to be a complex phenomenon that affects all people who are affected by these oppressive systems, whether they play the roles of oppressor or oppressed. This cycle is clearly observed in the oppression of children, and is also visible in the oppression based on ethnic identity of groups of people. Pecola is a child, and it is very easy to abuse her. She is abused by her father, mother, Mr. Yocabuski, Soaphead Church, teachers and classmates because she is black. She knows she does not have the power to oppose or resist them. In this oppressive environment she reacts to these injustices with powerless responses like silence and self-abuse considering herself to be black and ugly. In order to escape from this oppression and end her sorrows she dreams of changing herself, also accepting, her oppression as just. She has idealized white symbols of beauty all around and she links them with happiness.

In the house of Mac Teers, Pecola Breedlove is introduced as a girl without a voice or desire and without a will of her own. She cannot fight back her oppression. When the Mac Teer sisters ask her what they should do to pass their time, she keeps dumb, she has no ideas, while Frieda and Claudia always come up with ideas like going somewhere or doing something. Claudia and Frieda can give suggestions because they have parental support but Pecola does not so she maintains her silence. Pecola is made dumb by her past and present surroundings and environment. She accepts what other girls give her and suggest her without raising any questions. She goes where they lead her, without expressing her will.

Toni Morrison writes about the coming of age of a black girl Pecola in the absence of parental support and education. The terror of the beginning of her first menstruation is symptomatic of the traumatic experience she has in life. When Pecola has her first periods she is alarmed and screams. Suddenly Pecola bolted straight up, her eyes wide with terror. A whinnying sound came from her mouth. "What's the matter with you?" Frieda stood up too. Then we both looked where Pecola was staring. Blood was running down her legs. Soon drops were on the steps. I leaped up. "Hey, you cut yourself? Look. It's all over your dress". A brownish red stain discolored the back of her dress. She kept whinnying standing with her legs far apart. Frieda said, "Oh Lordy! I know. What that is!". (19)

There is no one to guide her or groom her. Her mother does not care for her, and neglects her because she is black and ugly. Frieda tells her that she will not die, she can have a baby now. That night Pecola asks Frieda if it is true, how she can have a baby, to which Frieda answers that somebody has to love her. Pecola again enquires how a person can get somebody to love himself, but she does not get an answer. Pecola remembers all white children who are loved by their parents, but there is no one to love her. She remembers white dolls who are loved by children and Shirley Temple who is the white icon of beauty.

Pecola has never been taught anything about her body by her mother, neither does she have any liberty to ask any personal questions to her. Thus her transition to adulthood becomes difficult and traumatic. Infact Pecola's mother has never treated her as a human being and loved her to teach her womanhood. Claudia says "Adults do not talk to us - they give us directions. They issue orders without providing information". (13) Children do not have the courage to question the adults. Claudia further writes about her

mother that "It was certainly not for us to dispute her. We didn't initiate talk with grownups; we answered their questions (23). These lines of Claudia clearly reveal the relationship between parents and children.

Mother-daughter relationship today is considered to be a most friendly relationship, but during those times mothers especially black mothers who were themselves victims of racialism conformed to white ideals of beauty. They hated themselves for being black so they hated their daughters too for being black and considered them to be ugly. Daughters learned from their mothers that being black means being ugly and to be accepted they had to follow the white ideals of beauty. They could not question their parents. Claudia is the only character in the novel who does not accept the white ideals of beauty. She dismembers the white doll given to her as a gift. She does not understand why white is beautiful and why black is ugly, she tries to find this out by dismembering the doll, but she cannot question about this to her mother. She says that adults only dictate their terms and conditions. She further says that they cannot start a discussion with their parents, they could only answer the questions of their parents.

Morrison has raised the issues of gender and sexuality drawing our attention towards the hardships and sufferings of the black people especially female children. Morrison in the *Bluest Eye* states that: "I focused therefore on how something as grotesque as the demonization of an entire race could take root inside the most delicate member of society; a child; the most vulnerable member: a female". (170)

The novel shows the psychological devastation of a Pecola a Black girl whose search for love and acceptance in the white world that only accepts and loves white people and denies and devalues the black people or people of Pecola's race. Pecola does not find love in her black community too. Afro-American females neither have an identity in the world, of whites, nor in the world of blacks.

Toni Morrison points out that no one is born with the tendency to hurt others. People hurt others when they themselves are hurt. In the *Bluest Eye* there are rare instances of the direct oppression of Pecola by the whites. She is oppressed more by the people of her own community. We notice that the oppressors of Pecola have been hurt by oppressive adults believing in a racist ideology.

Child abuse occurs in a range of situations for a range of reasons, rarely it occurs in one form of abuse at a time. These children when grow up face a range of psychological, emotional and social problems. Child abuse can take place in different forms like sexual abuse, emotional or physical abuse, neglect and family violence. Pecola's parents have faced these abuses, and Pecola is facing them too.

Pecola faces sexual abuse at the hands of her father Cholly. He rapes her twice. She is forced to participate in a sexual act which is aimed towards the physical gratification of her father. He pressurizes her to engage in a sexual act regardless of the outcome. He is more powerful than Pecola, so makes her his victim. She is weak and has never been taught to oppose any oppression. This is a form of incest too, which leaves Pecola in a psychological trauma. Cholly's rape results in impregnating Pecola. The whole community starts hating her more for carrying her father's baby. Social stigma of Pecola's sexual abuse compounds her psychological harm.

The adverse outcomes of this abuse would have been lessened if she had a supportive family environment, but Pecola does not have such a family. Her mother does not believe her when she informs her about the rape. In another instance of child abuse in the novel when Mr. Henry touches Frieda's breasts she runs out of the house and tells about it to her parents, her parents believe her and support her. Her father chases Mr. Henry out of their house protecting his daughter and strengthening family ties. Morrison compares and contrasts the behaviour of the parents of the two families. Frieda's parents' behaviour lessens the psychological damage caused to her by Mr. Henry's behaviour. Rape results in lowering Pecola's self esteem which was already very low. She is unable to understand the difference between love and lust and becomes insane in the end due to severe assimilatory pressure of the circumstances, by losing her identity believing that she has got blue eyes.

Physical or sexual abuse is invariably accompanied with emotional abuse. Pecola faces emotional abuse at home, in school and in community. She is emotionally abused by her classmates at school in the form of bullying. This chronic emotional abuse results in a serious psychological trauma. Many children face

emotional abuse by parents at home. The reasons behind this can be parental mental health, domestic violence, drug or alcohol misuse, being themselves abused or having been in care themselves as children.

Pecola's father Cholly does not have a sound mental health, indulges in domestic violence, is a drunkard, was in care of his grandmother, abandoned by his father before birth and sexually assaulted by two white men when he was young. Above all Cholly was himself a victim of the oppression by the whites. Adults who are emotionally abused as children experience mental health problems and difficulties in personal relationships. Emotionally abused children behave in an abnormal manner, as they withdraw themselves, and find it difficult to predict other people's behaviour and do not understand why people behave in the manner they do. Cholly is unhappy, frightened and distressed like Pecola. Some children react to their abuse by keeping quiet, others react by behaving aggressively and anti-socially and some become too mature for their age. Pecola withdraws herself from the outside world, Cholly becomes aggressive, fights with his wife and always remains drunk, while Claudia behaves too mature for her age, as she dismembers the white doll not accepting the white standards of beauty at such a young age.

Cholly being abused as a child finds it difficult to make relationships. His response to new social situations is influenced by his early relationships in childhood. Cholly cannot adjust with his wife and children because he has not received parental love and care. "Adults with abusive parents are at a disadvantage as they try to form personal professional and romantic relationships since they may easily misinterpret other people's behaviour and social cues, or misapply the rules that governed their abusive relationship with their parents to every day social situations." (Bernson)

Cholly physically abuse his wife Pauline. Pauline too indulges in physical conflict with Cholly. Both were abused during childhood, they are victims of racial discrimination, unhappy and dissatisfied with their childhood and adult life. They treat their children in the same manner in which they were treated. Substance abuse is a major contributing factor to child abuse. Studies have shown that parents who drink are much more likely to mistreat their children. Cholly consumes excess of alcohol and treats his children very badly. He stoops so low as to rape his own daughter. Cholly is abused during childhood and his inner anger has turned to outward frustration. He starts drinking and expressing others to numb his hurt feelings. He even burns his own house out of frustration, not caring for his family. Cholly's financial difficulties make his behaviour worse. The poverty of the Breedlove family does not allow them to breed either love or understanding. Anna Ferzoco says "The causes of child abuse seem to be deep rooted anger and frustration or emotional inadequacy. Anger most of all. They do not know how to control it" (Blankpied).

Soap head church who is a self declared reader, adviser and interpreter of dreams is a pedophile. He is a freak in the society and is known for showing public parts to people. He abuses Pecola emotionally by making her kill a dog he dislikes by poisoning it. He makes her believe that he has given her blue eyes. Pecola believes him and thus loses her sanity. Soap head Church's emotional abuse of Pecola results in her doom.

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