

**ETHICAL LEARNING IN TONI MORRISON'S
*THE BLUEST EYE AND SULA***

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Abstract

Toni Morrison, the recipient of Nobel Prize is a giant literary figure in the field of African American literature today. Her work is full of varied themes such as race, gender and class exploitation, feminism, quest for identity, female solidarity, and etc. She has succinctly explored the vulnerable condition of women under male patriarchy. The attempt of this paper is to study the element of unethical issues like adultery, domestic violence, racism, classism and sexism. etc, in Morrison's **The Bluest Eye** and **Sula**. The paper highlights the idea of ethics and promotes ethical learning. It shows that how Morrison in the respective novels wants to provide ethical learning.

Key Words: adultery, racism, marriage, relationship, sexism, victimization, etc.

Toni Morrison, a significant voice from the literary tradition African American women highlights the issue of adultery in her *The Bluest Eye* and *Sula*. *The Bluest Eye* talks about the ugly reality in the life of the blacks in general and the black women in particular on the account of racism whereas *Sula* exhibits female individuality. Both of the novels throw light upon the man woman relationship. She has shown the failure of husband wife relationship in both of the novels on the ground of falsehood of racism in white dominated America. The lack of strong bonding between husband and wife takes a form of adultery in *The Bluest Eye* and *Sula*. Ethics is a branch of knowledge that studies the human behavior whether it is morally good or bad. Cambridge dictionary defines ethics "as a system of accepted beliefs that control behavior, especially such a system based on morals." Unethical means the person who is engaged in wrong doings. The people who don't follow the moral code of behavior such as truth and non violence, brotherhood, equality, honesty, sincerity, compassion, etc.

The opening pages of *The Bluest Eye* make it clear that the novel has unethical issues. Pecola, a girl child is impregnated and later it is disclosed by the narrator that the father of Pecola's child is no one but her own father, Cholly. The novel discusses the horror of racism in American society and its evil impact upon the blacks. Cholly is a male patriarch in the novel who does not care for his family members. He puts the family outdoors since he is not able to fulfill the needs of the family on the account of the class exploitation in racist America. The reality of the blacks is exposed in the novel through the authentic details of the place where the Breedloves live. Cholly's past is revealed in the novel with his incestuous relationship with one country girl Darlene. Being unmarried he has an affair with the girl and once they both are caught by two white men. The scene clearly indicates Cholly's unethical behavior. "get on wid it nigger" said the flashlight one. "Sir?" said Cholly trying to find buttonhole. I said 'get on wid it And 'make it good, nigger make it good.'"(116) Cholly faced the racial discrimination of the whites. The whites made the blacks to look down upon. Cholly's character stands for the marginalization of the blacks on the account of their race and color. Later since Cholly is humiliated by the whites frees his tension and anxiety by raping her own daughter Pecola. Being black Pecola leads a marginal existence throughout the novel because Cholly and her mother Pauline are not ethical. The study of the novel shows that Cholly and Pauline faced the heavy burden of racism and class exploitation. The continuous humiliation has crippled their psyche and consequently they were not able to understand the worth of their family. Pauline who does not know the importance of moral behavior does not care her daughter Pecola. Being mother even on the birth of her daughter she calls her 'ugly'. She is portrayed as a woman who showers all her love upon the children of the white employer and hates her daughter Pecola as well as the family. She does not care the family members. Due to her negligence towards her daughter Pecola feels insecure at home. Already she faces racial discrimination by the people in the society on the account of her black skin. The idea of white standard of beauty has created horror in the lives of blacks in general and black women in particular. Pauline of *The Bluest Eye* in order to attain the white values joins white Fisher family and neglects her own house. Isn't it unethical? Pecola, a girl child is raped in the absence of her mother by her own father. Isn't Cholly unethical here? Morrison has shown the worst side of unethical behavior that has destroyed the life of the female child. Racism, the ideology which is unethical has corrupted the life of the blacks. Pecola, Pauline and Cholly are the victims of this unethical practice in American society which has divided the society into two the lower class and the higher class. The blacks on the account of their color are considered inferior and the whites took undue advantage of this man made ideology. To mention but a few Pecola is humiliated by the white shopkeeper Yakobowsky who even does not want to look at Pecola when she asks for the candies: "As the novelist writes: "At some fixed point in time and space he senses that he need not waste the effort of a glance. He does not see her, because for him there is nothing to see." (36) In another episode a group of black boys too humiliates her saying "Black e mo Black e mo."(50) She is humiliated by one of the black lady namely Geraldine. She is Pecola's schoolmate Junior's mother. In one of the incidents of the novel she shows her supremacy over the blacks. She assures her son not to associate with the common black children. As the novelist writes: "She had explained to him the difference between colored people and niggers...Colored people were neat and quiet; niggers were dirty and loud."(87)

Pecola tells about the rape to her mother but she doesn't believe her. On the contrary she only beats her to death and hates her. Thus, Pecola has no one to share her tragedy she tells about her rape to her imaginary friend when she has gone mad. As the narrator writes: "I wonder what it

would be like. Horrible. Really? Yes. Horrible. Then why didn't you tell Mrs. Breedlove? I did tell her! I don't mean the first time. I mean the second time when you were sleeping on the couch. I wasn't sleeping! I was reading! You don't have to shout. You don't understand anything do you? She didn't even believe me when I told her. So why didn't you tell her about the second time? She wouldn't have believed me then either. You are right. No use in telling her when she wouldn't believe you." (158) The above lines clearly exposes Pecola's sufferings and shows her as a victim and a sufferer in the male dominated society. Pecola is the product of unethical behavior of her parents as well as the irresponsible society that is not sensitive enough to care her. As Gillespie observes Pecola's existence in the family and writes: "The two major deterministic forces in Pecola's young life are her mother and father, Cholly and Pauline Breedlove. Significantly, Pecola never calls either of her parents' mom or dad, demonstrating the psychological and emotional distance between the young girl and her parents."(52)

Violence which is unethical finds its place in Breedlove's family. Morrison has exposed female victimization due to domestic violence in the society. The males who try to control their wives and become the oppressors. Such unethical oppressor is Cholly in *The Bluest Eye* who does not care her wife as well as the family members. Pauline even helps the family expenditure by working at the Fisher family. However he does not understand her worth. Pauline is a woman who though does not understand the value of her daughter respects Cholly which shows the ill effects of unethical practice of male patriarchy in African American society. When Pauline's lady employer puts an option in front of her that either she has to work or leave her husband, Cholly. Pauline has to leave her job helplessly. She is a woman who cannot imagine about her existence without man.

Morrison's *Sula* too highlights the need for ethical behavior. The whites being unethical exploited the poor blacks. In the beginning of the novel Morrison has shown that how the white people have exploited the blacks systematically. The black slaves are too helpless to do anything against the craftiness of the white masters. Morrison narrates:

A good white farmer promised freedom and a piece of Bottom land to his slaves he would perform some very difficult chores. When the slave completed the work, he asked the farmer to keep his end of the bargain. Freedom was easy- the farmer had no objection to that. But he didn't want to give up any land. So he told the slave that he was very sorry that he had to give him valley land. He had hoped to give him a piece of bottom. The slave blinked and said he thought valley land was bottom land. The master said, "oh, no! See those hills? That's bottom land rich and fertile." "But it is high up in the hills," said the slave. (128)

The novel *Sula* concentrates upon the idea of female autonomy. At the same time it discusses the race and class and gender marginalization. The black males namely Shadrack, Plum who are the war veterans are the victims of age old slavery. The age old racism does not recognize their worth that fought for the nation. The whites being unethical just exploited and oppressed the poor blacks under the name of racism. The other blacks Rekus, Boy Boy, Ajax and Jude don't find any meaning in their life. Racism and classism don't provide them any opportunity to do anything meaningful. As Usha Jain and Gazi Muzamil rightly asserts about black's existence in their article Re-Defining the Status of Black Women in *Sula* by Morrison: "Blacks are mentally, socially, and economically paralyzed by the centuries of slavery."(173) The relationship of Nel and Sula with their husbands is also one of the most important issues in the novel. Nel's sexuality is not expressed in itself. She does sex not for her own pleasure but for the

pleasure of her husband, Jude. She becomes a good wife in the novel who follows all the social conducts set for women. Her sexuality is measured within the institution that sanctions sexuality for women –marriage and family. It is impossible for her to imagine sex without Jude. On the other hand Sula “went to bed with man as frequently as she could.”(122) Sula’s grandmother Eva is seen engaged with men and seeking pleasure in their company. As the novelist writes: “the Peace women simply loved maleness, for its own sake. Eva, old as she was, and with one leg, had a regular flock of gentleman callers and although she did not participate in the act of love, there was a good deal of teasing and laughter. The men wanted to see her lovely calf, that neat shoe, and watch the focusing that sometimes swept down out of the distances in her eyes.” (41)

Morrison’s *Sula* exhibits the elements of adultery. The novel is a story of the female protagonist Sula who struggles for her identity formation. Morrison has shown her as a taboo breaker woman who does not follow any codes and conducts of marriage and motherhood. The story of the novel develops with her relationship with the other characters like her female friend, Nel, her lover Ajax, and Jude. As a girl child she is neglected by her family. Her mother Hannah and Grandmother Eva teach her nothing but extra marital sex. Both Eva and Hannah are indulged in Adultery which is unethical. Morrison has shown them as dissatisfied individuals in their married life. Hannah’s husband Baba is died when Sula was a small child and Eva’s husband Boy Boy is not a responsible man. He deserts Eva in the novel. Being unethical like Cholly of *The Bluest Eye* does not care about her wife as well as family. Being fatherless children both Hannah and Sula develop interest in extra marital relationship. Sula is condemned in the novel and called as a ‘pariah’ by the community of Bottom. Her attempt to establish a sound and stable relationship with her lover Ajax is also failed on the ground of Adultery. Ajax, a jobless youth does not want to settle with Sula since he does not have any hope in the racial atmosphere of the African American society. Similarly Jude, another male character in the novel is indulged in adultery. He too like Ajax is a jobless person and he marries with Sula’s friend Nel for just a temporary settlement. When he meets Sula later in the novel he gets attracted towards her. Both are found naked by Nel. Sula here is seen as a woman who even betrays her close friend Nel by sleeping with her husband; Jude. Nel condemns Sula for her act. Jude deserts Nel and Ajax too deserts Sula in the novel. Thus, Hannah, Sula, Ajax and Jude are the adulterers in the novel who have extramarital relationships for the sake of enjoyment. Morrison has shown the failure of such relationships on the account of unethical behavior. At the same time she shows the victimization of women on the ground of adultery by men in Sula. She wants to assert the idea of true love and mutual understanding between the married couple and highlights the idea of learning ethics. She believes in morals and the behavior that is not harmful to anybody as well as in the society. The mutual understanding and the right conduct which is a part of ethics is strongly reflected through the portrayal of the Mac Teer family in *The Bluest Eye*. Mr. and Mrs. Mac Teer know their family responsibilities. Therefore their relationship is stable. On the contrary Cholly Breedlove who committed adultery when he was unmarried found his existence neither in family nor in society. Morrison does not inform more about him at the end of the novel. He dies eventually in a mine. Baba, Boy Boy, Jude and Ajax too does not have stability due to their wrong conduct. They don’t know the value of ethics. Sula too though stands for female empowerment Morrison wants to highlight community responsibility. Sula, a woman who believes in self fulfillment betrays her close friend, Nel. Later she too is deserted by her lover Ajax to whom she likes and wants to settle her life deserts her without any reason, “he dragged Sula under him and made love to her with the steadiness and the intensity of a man about to leave.” (134) Ajax’s behavior makes a

terrible impact upon Sula who becomes weak and finds herself bed-ridden. Sula is condemned for her illicit relationship with other men but when she wants to make a stable relationship with Ajax her attempt turns into a failure. In this case the community does not condemn Ajax. Nel's case is also not different. She remains faithful towards her husband Jude but she gets betrayal as her reward. Both Sula and Nel are the victims in both situation either they follow the codes and conducts of the society or not. The male power in the society never allows them to live a steady and peaceful life. Sula's selfish attitude does not help her to survive in the society. Therefore here Morrison wants to initiate the idea of learning ethics i.e. compassion. One has to understand the feelings of others. Being unethical Sula betrays her close friend as well as humiliates her grandmother Eva in her old age. Morrison has not shown her as a woman who fulfilled her goal. She finds herself frustrated when she is deserted by Ajax. Here the idea of ethics is highlighted through the character of Sula. It is true that Sula wants to assert herself but she does not have any right to harm other people while pursuing her objectives.

Thus, both of the novels preach ethics of intergrity, equality, brotherhood, and kindness etc. Morrison believes that if these ethics are followed human will live peacefully. Otherwise the people in the society will suffer conflict, anxieties, and sufferings endlessly. If the white people in the respective society had followed the principles of ethics the blacks would have not suffered. Being humanitarian, Morrison wants to establish a new social order based upon moral values.

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