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EXISTENTIALISM: ANALYTICAL STUDY OF TONI MORRISON'S THE BLUEST EYE

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ABSTRACT

*This paper aims to analyze the devastating impacts of the beauty myth on the existential freedom of Pecola, the protagonist of Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, a young, poor, black girl. This analysis will be done through the concept of Existentialism. According to Sartre's theory, that "Existentialism is a Humanism", to be human is characterized by an existence that precedes its essence. His belief is "that human beings live in constant anguish, not solely because life is miserable, but because we are condemned to be free" (Traun Mittal : 21st June 2017). The pivotal idea of "The Bluest Eye" is the domination of Blacks by existing American standards of beauty blue eyes, blond-hair, and white skin, and how this idea drives the protagonist of this novel 'Pecola' to the brink of insanity. This novel throws open to the world how aesthetic standards derived from white culture can be devastated to the Blacks*

1. INTRODUCTION

Toni Morrison is an African-American novelist, essayist, emeritus teacher and professor at Princeton University. She is considered one of the most brilliant authors in the genre of African-American Literature. She was awarded of the Noble Prize in literature in 1993, and the Pulitzer prize among many other awards. Many of her novels show the influence of the existentialist thinking. However, *Beloved* and *The Bluest Eye*, both strongly illustrate all of the major existential themes. She was born named as Chloe Ardelia Wofford, in February 18, 1931, and the second of four children in black working class family. She has southern roots from the sides of both of her parents, who participated in the great wave of migration from the south in the early 1900s. Her mother's parents, looking for a better education for

their children and fearing white sexual violence from Alabama (Matus 4-5); her grandparents from her father's side came from Georgia, a state where racial violence was omnipresent. "*The confrontation with this racism heavily influenced Morrison's fathers, and consequently indirectly also Morrison's vision on white America*" (McKay 414). Morrison's early life was richly infused with elements of black culture. Her family life thrived on a long storytelling tradition, which stimulated her rich imagination and which left her, later on, in life, with the will to evoke an oral quality, proper to this ancestral tradition in her novels. She considers her novels as substitutes for "*those classical, mythological, archetypal stories that we heard years ago*" (qtd. in Furman 4), and which are meant to transmit a cultural legacy. Morrison's grandmother, who fled from the South in order to give her children more opportunities

and to save her daughters from sexual harassment, and her mother, who provided money for her daughters education by taking "*humiliating jobs*" (McKay 413), formed strong female role models for Morrison. They were the ones, who transmitted those ancient black stories to her. Doing so, they provide her with a "*distinctive and powerful artistic heritage*" (McKay 416), that would be decisive for and her characteristic of her writing. Primarily, a professor by profession, she joined an informal group of writers and poets, who held meetings, where they discussed their work . She wrote a short story for one such discussion, that revolved around black girl who wished to have blue eyes. She expanded this story into her debut novel, and published her first novel *The Bluest Eye* in 1970. *Song of Solomon*, was the first novel to be chosen the main selection of the *Book of the Month Club* by, a black writer, in almost four decades. By the time, she became famous and won the American Book Award in 1988 for her novel, *Beloved*. This novel took her popularity to greater heights . It was inspired by the life of the escaped slave Margret Garner. Later on, it was adapted into a film of the same name starring Oprah Winfrey and Danny Glover in 1998. In Morrison's *Developing Class Consciousness* (1991), Doreatha Drummond Mbalia works on some of Morrison's novels and emphasize on the struggle against race and racial problems. In addition, in "*Figuration of Rape and the Supernatural in Beloved*" (1997), Pamela E. Barnett states that *Beloved* is haunted by the history and memory of rape specifically. Her emphasis falls on the depictions and allusions to rape that, according to her, are of greater importance than other signs of slavery like beating the slaves, Morrison illustrates. Besides sociological point of view applied to the study of *The Bluest Eye*, some critics have attempted to employ psychoanalytical theories. For example, in "*Probing Racial Dilemmas in The Bluest Eye with Spyglass of Psychology*".(2009), Anna Zebialowicz and Mark Palasinski use psychology as a tool to show and interpret the racial dilemmas of female characters in this novel. Thus, freedom is often obtained at the expense of safety, and safety at the expense of freedom. The ideal home is not plagued by the multiple jeopardy and still offer its inhabitants security; the ideal reconciles safety and freedom.

2. BLACK EXISTENTIALISM IN TONI MORRISON'S *THE BLUEST EYE*

The Bluest Eye is one of the famous novels written by Toni Morrison. It includes major characters like Mr. and Mrs. Breedlove, Pecola Breedlove, Mr. and Mrs. MacTeer, Claudia, Frieda and Mr. Henry. Pecola is the protagonist of the novel, who lives with her father, mother and brother. Her mother gives more importance, only to White children than her, whereas

her father is drunkard, and he misbehaved with her own daughter. As Pecola's father burnt their house, Pecola is made to live with MacTeer's family. Claudia and Frieda take care of Pecola well. The novel moves like this; but unfortunately, Pecola becomes pregnant because of her father. Though, the others hate the child, Claudia and Frieda expect the child to be born. However, the child dies at the end, and Pecola becomes insane longing for *Bluest eye*. In this novel, Morrison has included Black existentialist views. She deals with lives of Afro-American people and their suffering under the hands of Whites. It talks about the Blacks and emerges them how to fight to get their freedom, and should not feel inferiority because of their color and race. This novel is written in first narrative person, in which, Claudia who narrates the story. The two sisters, Claudia and Frieda, are only the ones , whom strongly support the protagonist of the novel. Though, these two girls are Blacks, but they are not victimized for it. Pecola was the only one who suffers a lot from the beginning to the end of the novel, because of her color and race. The story begins with Rose Mary's dialogue, a neighbor to Claudia, who does not allow the two sisters to enter into her car as they are Black. This shows how Blacks are suppressed for being Blacks, and they don't have even basic liberty. This action is against Black existentialism, as they want equality and liberty to Afro-Americans. Claudia and Frieda suffer for being Black, but not much as Pecola, because they have a lovable family, whereas Pecola's mother does not show any affection on her, and her own father seduced her. In fact, Life without love is to destroy the person and the others surrounding him, and that what is happened to Pecola and the members of her family through this novel. They lived without love, and so, they spoiled themselves and their whole family. Pecola, also, doesn't have home, because her father burnt it, and she is made to live with MacTeers family, which shows the footlessness of her life. Claudia has a white doll, she hates it as it resembles white woman, while Pecola loves it for its beauty, and she believes that its beauty lies in its blue eyes. Therefore, she believes if she has such blue eyes, she could come out of her suffering. So, she always prays to God for getting blue eyes. "*Long hours she sat looking in the mirror, trying to discover the secret of the ugliness, the ugliness that made her ignored or despised at school, by finally, becomes lunatic, and this shows her loss of her memory. Pecola mother's watching romantic films, and thinking that romance is for white and beauty, proves her lack of self-worthiness. Pecola father's behavior with her, shows that Pecola suffers both, as a black and as a black woman. This shows Anna Julia Cooper's idea of black feminist existential philosophy, that's woman has to suffer black population in general, and black woman in particular. According to Behavior " To will oneself free is to will others free"*(P-382). Freedom cannot be considers the freedom of one's own, but the freedom

of others, in that way Claudia and Frieda tried to free Pecola.

According to an existentialist everyone must be free and have an individual freedom, but black people are treated as slaves. The survival of black people in the white society depends on them. They should prove their identity and

individuality. But, Pecola's own mother Breedlove hates her daughter and loves white children, which shows her alienation in their own land. Everyone, in this novel, longs for White; it goes to such extent of hating oneself. Women start to hate themselves, and they even hate their children and loves only white children. Pauline Breedlove hates her daughter Pecola, and she curses her for her ugliness. Claudia is only exception, who loves black and the unborn child of Pecola.

Claudia and Frieda even tried to change the story, by being a savior, but all the other characters run towards self-destructive. Black men have suffered only as Blacks, but the Black women suffered a lot. Pecola was seduced by her own father, and she became pregnant because of him, which is a very strange case; one could also find Mr. Henry's misbehavior towards Frieda. All these, show how Black women suffered both, as Black and as Women, in the hands of White and Black men. Through this article, one could know of Existentialism, Black existentialism and Black feminist existentialism in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*.

3. CONCLUSION

This paper was an attempt to examine the Black existentialism in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* from cultural perspectives, and to indicate the great attention she paid to minorities. Morrison's writing back the history of the minorities and Afro-American advances, and strengthens the cause of her predecessors like James Baldwin, W.E.B Du Bois, and Zora Neale Hurston. In *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison has presented the influences of white culture on the Black people. Pecola, the protagonist of the novel, is a symbol of utter dissolution as she faces both, inter-racism and intra-racism. Also, deprivation of her mother's affection, raped by her father, living a homeless rootless existence, are led to believe that, there is only one way to get rid of these problems - that is to have blue eyes. Having blue eyes, is portrayed as a profoundly socially desirable trait. The society shows in the novel, that *Whiteness Values* above all else, and blue eyes are a symbol of that whiteness. In *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison succeeds in displaying the suffering of colored women. The characters in this novel, try to endure gender discrimination, violence, racial attitudes and sexual abuse. Morrison, in *The Bluest Eye*, focuses on the suffering of black women in a white society. This novel "...shows racism's damaging effects on the black community at large

and on black families" (Kubitscheck, 27). In *the Bluest Eye*, a black girl, Pecola Breedlove realizes the supremacy of white society, and longs to have the features of white females. She starts her desires by praying to have the bluest eye in the world. The superlative form of this word is used to demonstrate the willingness, to have even more superior features than white race. It's obvious that Morrison's novels, especially, *Beloved* and *The Bluest Eye*, portray the suffering of black women of violence, rape and motherhood, and the most reason that causes this racism, is their color. In her novels, some black women have an opportunity to find their identity, and survive in the hard atmosphere of racial society. The realization of self-identity is, the main carving of feminist, and it becomes their predicament in societies, where women are taken as an inferior being, as commodities with a prize tags. In order to come to terms with them, black women fight for their rights, and are cherished member of the black societies. Her novels are meant to celebrate a sense of a black womanhood, and to create awareness for the honor, and dignity of Black women in the society.

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