

## Disconnection in Connection: A Study of Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye & Beloved*

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### ABSTRACT

Toni Morrison is possibly the most highly proficient novelist in the history of African-American literature who astutely describes various aspects of human life. Many writers are eager to convey the world's brutality, but Morrison distinguishes herself and her exquisiteness by conveying the hope and beauty underlying this brutality. *The Bluest Eye* and *Beloved* are Morrison's remarkable novels in which she portrays how personal and communal relationships are shaped by historical trauma, systemic racism, and societal expectations. In *The Bluest Eye*, the disconnection stems from internalized racism and the longing for an unattainable ideal of beauty, leading to the protagonist's tragic alienation. Meanwhile, *Beloved* explores the haunting effects of slavery, where connections are both a source of survival and pain, manifesting in complex familial bonds and the lingering presence of the past. By juxtaposing these novels, this study reveals Morrison's profound commentary on the paradox of disconnection in connection, illustrating the multifaceted impact of historical and cultural forces on individual identity and relationships within the African-American community.

**Keywords:** Toni Morrison, Disconnection, African-American, Slavery, Memory

Toni Morrison's works have made an indelible mark on the literary landscape. Born in Ohio in 1931, Morrison grew up in a family that valued education and storytelling, which would later influence her writing. Her novels explore the experiences of African Americans, particularly black women, in a society marked by systemic racism, inequality, and violence. Two of her most notable works, *The Bluest Eye* and *Beloved*, have become iconic texts that resonate with readers worldwide. *The Bluest Eye* was Morrison's first novel, published in 1970, telling the story of Pecola Breedlove, a young black girl who longs to have blue eyes, believing they will make her beautiful and desirable. The novel takes place in the 1940s in Ohio and explores the impact of racism, poverty, and abuse on Pecola and her family. Through Pecola's narrative, Morrison examines the destructive effects of internalized racism and the search for connection in a world that constantly devalues and marginalizes black individuals. The novel is structured as a series of interconnected stories, with multiple narrators offering different perspectives on Pecola's life.

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Received: June 22, 2024; Revision Received: July 20, 2024; Accepted: July 24, 2024

## Disconnection in Connection: A Study of Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* & *Beloved*

*Beloved* was published in 1987 and is set in the aftermath of slavery in America and centers on Sethe, a former slave who escaped to Ohio with her children. Sethe's home is haunted by the ghost of her infant daughter, whom she killed in a moment of desperation to prevent her from being returned to slavery. *Beloved* explores the enduring trauma of slavery and its impact on black families, particularly black women. Through Sethe's narrative, Morrison portrays how trauma can create disconnection and alienation from oneself and others.

Both *The Bluest Eye* and *Beloved* address psychological disconnection, highlighting how societal forces can erode individual and community bonds. In *The Bluest Eye*, Pecola's desire for blue eyes represents her longing for acceptance and validation in a world that values whiteness and devalues blackness. This desire for assimilation creates a disconnection between Pecola and her own identity, as she internalizes the message that her blackness is undesirable: "Each night, without fail, she prayed for blue eyes. Fervently, for a year she had prayed. Although somewhat discouraged, she was not without hope. To have something as wonderful as that happen would take a long, long time" (Morrison 46). Similarly, in *Beloved*, Sethe's trauma creates a disconnection between her and her family, as she struggles to reconcile her past with her present. Her guilt and shame prevent her from fully connecting with her children, and her haunted home represents the lingering effects of slavery on black families:

I got a tree on my back and a haint in my house, and nothing in between but the daughter I am holding in my arms. No more running—from nothing, I will never run from another thing on this earth. I took one journey and I paid for the ticket, but let me tell you something, Paul D Garner; it cost too much!  
(Morrison 15)

Morrison's use of language, symbolism, and narrative structure in both novels underscores the emotional detachment. In *The Bluest Eye*, the fragmented narrative structure and multiple narrators create a sense of disorientation and confusion, highlighting how societal forces beyond her control shape Pecola's experiences. In *Beloved*, the ghost of Sethe's daughter represents the specter of slavery that continues to haunt black families, and the use of repetition and ambiguity in the narrative underscores the ongoing impact of this trauma.

### LITERATURE REVIEW

Serap Saribas demonstrates the chaotic psychological state of the characters of *The Bluest Eye* and *Beloved* in his article "Unhomeliness, Hybridization, and Ambivalence in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* and *Beloved*". He portrays their tendency of lurking unhomeliness in their own home, practicing plural identity, avoiding their utmost insular identity, and their ultimate imprisonment in their own prison by applying some of the theories and ideas of Homi K Bhabha. While illustrating the miserable condition of the two protagonists, Sethe and Pecola, Serap states: "Pecola's unhomeliness is not attached to geographical location but is internal. Her poor sense of identity makes her condition even worse than the residents of "124" because it requires a complete transformation of self and perception to rectify" (47). Sethe and Pecola's mental detachment from their closest ones reminds us of the horror of African-American slavery and its effect on the lives of African-Americans.

In her "The Maternal Space as Boundless: Finding Liberation through Child Preservation in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, *Sula*, and *The Bluest Eye*" Olivia claims, "black feminist scholars and writers such as Patricia Hill Collins and Toni Morrison have shown that African American culture defines motherhood as a site of black female empowerment with its primary objective to raise empowered children" (01). Sethe, the protagonist of *Beloved*, kills

## Disconnection in Connection: A Study of Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* & *Beloved*

her own child out of maternal love because she may think that it is better to be a mother of a dead child than an enslaved child.

Virginia Costello's "Creation of Self and Personalism in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* and *Beloved*" claims "in *The Bluest Eye* and *Beloved*, several characters make attempts to care for others; some characters eventually succeed (Denver), whereas others fail (Pecola). Under closer examination, we see and understand the reasons characters do or do not care for themselves" (03). A clear image can be seen through this statement that each individual tries to be careful with each other. However, they ultimately fail to do that because of the devastating mental disconnection.

### *Disconnection in Connection*

In *The Bluest Eye*, emotional disconnection is pervasive throughout the novel. Many of the characters experience a sense of isolation and disconnection from others, which originate from the set beauty standards and racism that devalue blackness and prioritize whiteness. The Breedlove family is the prime example of this emotional disconnection. The surname 'Breedlove' is an ironic representation of the Breedlove family's dysfunctional expression of love towards one another, which originates from their self-loathing caused by internalized racism. All the members of this family are unable to breed love. "What did love feel like? She wondered. How do grown-ups act when they love each other? Eat fish together?" (Morrison 57) The only act of love that remains in Pecola's mind is eating fish together because one of the prostitutes has told her so.

Pauline Breedlove, mother of Pecola Breedlove, has internalized society's stereotypes about blacks. Pauline considers Pecola ugly, dark-skinned, and hence unsuitable in society. She treats her daughter with disgust and rejects everything about Pecola. The woman is unable to show motherly love to her daughter due to the historical perception of childbirth among black women. It was seen more as a process of breeding rather than giving birth. Pauline considers Pecola a mirror image of herself, someone who was born to suffer. As a result, she shows maternal affection to the little white girl for whom she serves as a nanny. Due to internalized racism, Pauline has been taught to presume that the little girl in her care is more deserving of love. One of the terrifying scenes in the book is when Pauline slaps Pecola and ignores her little girl's presence in favor of comforting the young white girl:

The little girl in pink started to cry. Mrs. Breedlove turned to her. "Hush, baby, hush. Come here. Oh, Lord, look at your dress. Don't cry no more. Polly will change it." She went to the sink and turned tap water on a fresh towel. Over her shoulder she spit out words to us like rotten pieces of apple. "Pick up that wash and get on out of here, so I can get this mess cleaned up" (Morrison 109).

This is because Pauline explicitly resents Pecola, whom she ought to love naturally, and implicitly rejects her own self, which Pecola is a reflection of. Pauline escapes the adversity of her existence and seeks comfort in her work as a housemaid, where she may indulge in fantasies of luxury and white beauty. Her preoccupation with such fantasies separates her from her family and causes her marriage to fall apart. A feeling of loss, trauma, and emotional detachment characterizes Cholly and Pauline's relationship. They are unable to establish a strong and loving connection since they are both confronting their anguish and trauma. The breakdown of their marriage and their mutual discontent is eventually caused by their failure to connect and communicate with each other. Their sad connection serves as a stark reminder of the harm caused by trauma and the need for reconciliation and open

## Disconnection in Connection: A Study of Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* & *Beloved*

communication in creating healthy relationships. The love that Cholly and Pauline had when they first met has now changed into something gloomy and even terrifying. Morrison's firm narrative expresses how lovey-dovey couple they used to be once:

Pauline and Cholly loved each other. He seemed to relish her company and even to enjoy her country ways and lack of knowledge about city things. He talked with her about her foot and asked, when they walked through the town or in the fields, if she were tired. Instead of ignoring her infirmity, pretending it was not there, he made it seem like something special and endearing. For the first time Pauline felt that her bad foot was an asset (115-116).

However, that lovely bond between them becomes extremely resentful due to their traumatic upbringing. Although they share a wedding knot, internalized racism, self-loathing, and many other elements have caused them to lose that emotional connection.

When Cholly was young, his parents abandoned him. He goes to see his father, but it is not a pleasant experience at all, and he sees the real side of his father there. Cholly's emotional detachment from his parents causes him to be a violent and abusive husband and father. The act of Cholly raping his daughter might be seen as a manifestation of his own self-loathing. He has never been taught to see himself as more than just a man. Because of this, the only way he knows to express love is through sex. Morrison explores how black males are objectified in a culture that is obsessed with their sexuality by portraying Cholly's character:

The sequence of his emotions was revulsion, guilt, pity, then love. His revulsion was a reaction to her young, helpless, hopeless presence. .. He wanted to break her neck—but tenderly. Guilt and impotence rose in a bilious duet. What could he do for her—ever? What give her? What say to her? What could a burned-out black man say to the hunched back of his eleven-year-old daughter? If he looked into her face, he would see those haunted, loving eyes. .. What of his knowledge of the world and of life could be useful to her? What could his heavy arms and befuddled brain accomplish that would earn him his own respect, that would in turn allow him to accept her love? . . . He wanted to fuck her--tenderly (161-163).

Pecola Breedlove, the ultimate scapegoat of internalized racism, discovers that being black, particularly being a dark-skinned black girl, means that she has been seen as less worthy in a racist society, which stops her from breeding love for herself. She is constantly subjected to abuse and mistreatment from her family and peers, leading to a deep sense of worthlessness and alienation. Pecola longs for validation and acceptance from those around her but is ultimately rejected and abandoned by everyone. Raping by her father and carrying her father's child is the ultimate shock for her, which makes her an insane psyche and a tragic figure.

Morrison's another remarkable novel, *Beloved*, portrays characters' experiencing emotional disconnection. This disconnection demonstrates the profound impact of trauma on the human psyche and how the past can shape and affect one's present experiences. The haunted memory brings the traumatic past back and lets the victims suffer. According to Lacan, building an identity in one's mind involves three stages: the 'real,' the 'imaginary,' and the 'symbolic.' Lacan proposes that an individual enters the realm of reality as a "body in pieces or a fragmented self. But in this stage, the subject does not experience lack in the real" (61). The next stage, Lacan calls the "mirror stage," is when the subject imagines a perfect, united,

## Disconnection in Connection: A Study of Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* & *Beloved*

and entire self. However, the former slaves have a horrific past that makes it hard for them to open their hearts. They hide secrets and pain that they do not want to face again.

Sethe, the protagonist, is deeply scarred by her past experiences as a slave, particularly the trauma of killing her own child to prevent her from being enslaved. As a result, Sethe is emotionally withdrawn and struggles to connect with others. The memory of her past haunts her and, she is unable to move on from the traumatic events that have shaped her life. She has been beaten and whipped by the schoolteacher and his nephews, “they held me down and took it. Milk that belonged to my baby” (Morrison 200). *Beloved*, the ghost of Sethe’s deceased daughter, represents the unresolved traumas of the past and the destructive impact of slavery on Black families. Her return catalyzes Sethe’s emotional breakdown and forces the characters to confront their past to move forward. Sethe sees *Beloved* as a literal manifestation of her grief and a means of atoning for her past actions, which included killing her other child to prevent her from being taken back into slavery. Sethe becomes obsessed with *Beloved* and dedicates herself to fulfilling her every need and desire, regardless of the consequences.

However, as *Beloved*’s presence becomes more consuming and demanding, Sethe’s relationship with her becomes increasingly destructive. Sethe becomes emotionally and physically exhausted by *Beloved*’s demands and is forced to confront the unresolved traumas of her past that *Beloved* represents. Sethe and Denver’s relationship is complex and evolving. Initially, Denver is attached to Sethe and relies on her for emotional support and guidance. Later on, Denver starts to recognize how Sethe’s past experiences continue to shape her present, and she begins to develop a sense of independence and agency: “I’ve seen my mother in a dark place, with scratching noises. A smell coming from her dress... She cut my head off every night. Buglar and Howard told me she would and she did” (Morrison 206). Sethe and Denver’s relationship is a powerful exploration of how trauma can shape and transform familial bonds. Paul D and Sethe were slaves at Sweet Home plantation, and their shared experiences have created a strong bond between them. Their mutual traumas define their relationship and need for emotional support and understanding. Paul D confronts his past traumas. He has learned to shut down his emotions in order to survive as a slave, but this suppression of emotion has left him struggling to connect with others in a meaningful way, “in that tobacco tin buried in his chest where a red heart used to be. Its lid rusted shut” (Morrison 72-73).

## CONCLUSION

Morrison’s two notable works, *The Bluest Eye* and *Beloved*, underscore the paradox that connections, while essential for survival and identity, can also be the source of deep-seated disconnection when marred by systemic oppression and historical trauma. The examination of these novels reveals that the African-American community’s struggle for identity and belonging is intricately tied to the broader socio-cultural context, where the remnants of past injustices continue to shape present realities. Morrison vividly portrays the horrors of slavery and internalized racism, including whippings, sexual violence, and other forms of physical brutality. Character like Sethe bears physical scars from her past experiences, and Pecola bears her father’s child, symbolizing the lasting impact of the slavery and internalized racism. These disconnections and dislodgements kill all the emotional and spiritual well-being of the self from the center of their heart, and it seems they can never be amended. The circulatory system of the characters’ hearts is shattered, and their act of resistance fails to hold the center. W. B. Yeats’ words serve the best explanation of this inexplicable situation: “Things fall apart centre cannot hold” (Yeats 46).

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### **Acknowledgment**

The author(s) appreciates all those who participated in the study and helped to facilitate the research process.

### **Conflict of Interest**

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

**How to cite this article:** Safa, T.Z. (2024). Disconnection in Connection: A Study of Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye & Beloved*. *International Journal of Social Impact*, 9(3), 8-13. DIP: 18.02.002/20240903, DOI: 10.25215/2455/0903002