

Original Article

## TRAVERSING IDENTITY: COGITATING TONI MORRISON'S THE BLUEST EYE AND SONG OF SOLOMON IN THE DIGITAL SPHERE

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### ABSTRACT

Toni Morrison is an excellent American novelist known for her portrayal of African American experience, particularly Black women's experiences, struggles and triumphs. She became the first Black woman in history to be conferred with the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1993. Morrison learned the rich history of the Black people through various stories narrated to her by her parents and grandparents. Her novels delved into the complexities of identity formation, notably individual, communal and racial identity. Morrison, in her fiction, tries to call for all the African Americans to return to their traditional culture, for this is the way that can prevent them from being completely evanished by the white culture and create an identity of their own. In the digital era, various digital platforms have turned out to be an important tool for digital archiving and online storytelling within Black communities. These platforms help in preserving and reinterpreting cultural narratives and reclaiming identities in Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* and *Song of Solomon*, thereby making Black stories, histories, and experiences more reachable for upcoming progeny.

**Keywords:** Identity, Eye and Song, Morrison

### INTRODUCTION

Toni Morrison is an excellent American novelist known for her portrayal of African American experience, particularly Black women's experiences, struggles and triumphs. She became the first Black woman in history to be conferred with the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1993. Morrison learned the rich history of the Black people through various stories narrated to her by her parents and grandparents. Her novels delved into the complexities of identity formation, notably individual, communal and racial identity. Morrison, in her fiction, tries to call for all the African Americans to return to their traditional culture, for this is the way that can prevent them from being completely evanished by the white culture and create an identity of their own. In the digital era, various digital platforms have turned out to be an important tool for digital archiving and online storytelling within Black communities. These platforms help in preserving and reinterpreting cultural narratives and reclaiming identities in Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* and *Song of Solomon*, thereby making Black stories, histories, and experiences more reachable for upcoming progeny.

### THE WHITE DOMINANT CULTURE

The selfhood of a man is his culture. Culture embodies the mode of behavior, ethics, morals, values, customs, traditions, religious beliefs and norms passed down from generation to generation through socialization. People in a community pass on their cultural

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Received: 20 November 2025; Accepted: 13 January 2026; Published 05 February 2026

DOI: [10.29121/granthaalayah.v14.i2SE.2026.6605](https://doi.org/10.29121/granthaalayah.v14.i2SE.2026.6605)

Page Number: 46-49

Journal Title: International Journal of Research -GRANTHAALAYAH

Journal Abbreviation: Int. J. Res. Granthaalayah

Online ISSN: 2350-0530, Print ISSN: 2394-3629

Publisher: Granthaalayah Publications and Printers, India

Conflict of Interests: The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

Funding: This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Authors' Contributions: Each author made an equal contribution to the conception and design of the study. All authors have reviewed and approved the final version of the manuscript for publication.

Transparency: The authors affirm that this manuscript presents an honest, accurate, and transparent account of the study. All essential aspects have been included, and any deviations from the original study plan have been clearly explained. The writing process strictly adhered to established ethical standards.

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heritage, which individual receives from the group. Culture is a dynamic force for oppression and domination, yet at the same time, it can also be a force for resistance and freedom. It plays a pivotal role in every sphere of social life and social institutions. In the absence of it, there would be no connection in society. It is essential to human survival and civilization, encapsulating a people's entire response to the difficulties of living in any living environment. The socio-economic, political and artistic ethos of society is given meaning, purpose and value through culture.

A dominant culture is a cultural practice that enforces its own cultural traits, values and norms on subordinate cultures through social, economic and political strength. The dominant culture imposed standards that are normalized in due course of time and thereby influence every walk of life. In society, a powerful and influential group of people becomes the authority that shapes the very fabric of society. The prominent and dominant group of people may or may not hold a measurable majority of the population. Throughout history, the most common reason for establishing a dominant culture can be traced back to colonialism and race. Colonialism involves dominating over a colonized colony by forcefully imposing the colonizer's language, culture and values upon another nation.

White dominant culture ascribes to the practices, beliefs, interests and culture that benefit white people while disregarding other racial groups. The supremacy of white racial selfhood throughout America's history has generated a culture where people belonging to other racial groups are treated as inferior. People of colour often faced incivility from the white aggressors. The attitudes, traditions and ways of life of the dominant culture have penetrated every aspect of American life, making it a standard practice in America. The dominant culture provides a framework for social interactions that eschew minority voices and flaunt their experiences that reinforce the dominant culture's norms and values.

### **IMPACT OF SLAVERY**

Million of slaves were brought to the American South from African continent during the era of the Atlantic slave trade to work in the plantation. The enslavement of the African Americans in America formally started during the seventeenth century. The African slaves served their white masters for life and their slave status would be bequeathed by their children. African slaves faced untold miseries and harsh living conditions in the hands of their slave masters. Throughout the slavery era, the standardization of white supremacy in every aspects of life was made legal and normalized.

Accounts of slave narratives became important tools in the study of American history and literature as it describes the first hand narratives and experiences of African American who were enslaved. The culture of slavery brought radical changes in the history of America. Slave trade was one of the greatest crimes against humanity as it destroyed the very essence of humankind.

People of African descent in America had to struggle for their political rights. Even though they fought hard for their constitutional rights, the racial attitude of the White administration did not take into consideration the consents of the Blacks while farming the government policies. The voice of the Black representatives were totally suppressed and ignored. The impact of slavery on African American communities has been intense and lifelong, upsetting the very fabric of societies and the rich cultures of the Blacks. The African slaves brought to America were forbidden to talk in their native languages and practice their religion which led to a privation of their identity. The degradation of the incarcerated slaves left a deep traumatic scar on the lives of the African American which has been handed down through generation.

The Emancipation Proclamation issued in 1862 by Abraham Lincoln resulted in the freedom of all the enslaved people. The Civil War which erupted in 1861 ended with war to abolish slavery. Though the Black slaves were literally free, they continue to suffer both in law and custom as they were constrained and harshly discriminated in the public domain.

### **FORCED ABSORPTION OF AFRICAN AMERICANS**

People are born into an existing culture, which must be learned and influences how a person lives. The shared beliefs, values and norms are the key factor of culture that aids to bind culture together. When Africans slaves were brought to America, they were enforced to discard their culture and language by the dominant white culture. White slave master forced their indentured slaves to give up everything related to Africa. The original African names were removed and new name were imposed on the slaves. This was a total infringement on the part of the white masters to completely erase the rich culture of the Blacks. The Blacks were coerced to abandon their culture and identity and adopt the new culture of the White master. They were kept in ignorance and not allowed to read and write which in turn allowed the white masters to exploit and dominate over the enslaved Africans. African Americans were totally banned to mingle with the conventional society and forced to conform to white customs, leading to cultural suppression. In spite of the strong opposition from the white masters, the enslaved Africans were in some way able to retain some of their rich heritage brought from their ancestral land, Africa. But this forced absorption of African Americans has resulted in losing their rich cultural heritage and identity perversion.

## INTERNALIZED RACISM

The descendants of African American have a tendency to believe that their culture is inferior to that of the white culture because of the mentality the white masters embedded on them. African American Communities have internal conflicts among themselves regarding their racial identity because they have been westernized and are unendingly pining to be westernized by white culture. Du Bois points out that this double consciousness; make the Blacks to look at themselves through the lens of the white man. The Blacks had a double consciousness of themselves both as an individual and as a racial group which created a conflict in the African American society. They created a division among themselves where they are both disliked by the whites and by their own race. Even though the Blacks were severely ill treated by the whites, they still yearn to emulate their white oppressors. Toni Morrison throughout her works project how white values are inapt for black people and internalizing them, in compliance to them only results in unhappiness and distorted life.

## RESISTANCE IN TONI MORRISON'S THE BLUEST EYE AND SONG OF SOLOMON

Morrison's works are deeply entrenched in her black folk roots and the society in which she grew up. Her novels became a voice for the voiceless people of Afro-Americans. Her works itself is a testament of resilience and a voice of resistance against the white supremacy culture. Black women writers and Toni Morrison rightly argued that black literature in general did not genuinely portray the real essence of African American people and their culture. Through her novels, Toni Morrison strongly fought against the internalized racism, discrimination, historical and psychological trauma and whiteness as the standard of beauty, imposed by the dominant culture.

Toni Morrison first novel *The Bluest Eye* enumerates the influences of the white aesthetics on the Black culture and how Claudia strongly tries to resist such influence. Internalized racism is graphically depicted in the characters of Pauline Breedlove, Pecola, Geraldine, Soaphead Church and Maureen Peal. The characters in this novel are projected as people who want to deny their racial identity as they considered their own Black race as inferior. Pecola Breedlove acceptance of someone else definition of beauty are deeply rooted in white American racism and in African American self-hatred. But unlike Pecola, Claudia considers it as her moral duty to resist whiteness as the standard of beauty. Claudia stood her moral ground by not conforming to the societal pressure of what standard of beauty should be. The novel vehemently exposes the established white standard of beauty and its negative impact on African Americans in order to retrieve their unique cultural identity.

In *The Bluest Eye* one can see how the Black society play a major role in blaming Pecola Breedlove and making her the scapegoat where the whole neighborhood could use to get free of their self hatred by voicing out that hatred towards the main protagonist, Pecola:

"All of our waste which we dumped on her and which she absorbed. And all of our beauty, which was hers first and which she gave to us. All of us-all who knew her- felt so wholesome after we cleaned ourselves on her. We were so beautiful when we stood astride her ugliness."

[Morrison \(1998\)](#)

*Song of Solomon* depicts the story of the pursuit of cultural identity by Macon (Milkman) Dead 111. The protagonist under the watchful eye of his Aunt Pilate steer him on his path toward reclaiming his cultural identity and personal fulfillment. Milkman's journey of self-exploration to understand his family roots and heritage profited both his family and the community in general. Milkman's awareness of his cultural roots makes him a reliable man which also benefitted others though his journey of self-discovery. Morrison incorporated magic materials in her works by enabling the readers to delve into the Black cultural life which has been suppressed for a lengthy span by the dominant white culture. Milkman in his quest of self-discovery understood the real meaning of names of places, people and things. He discerns that name along with the myth of the flying African help him to find his authentic self and freedom. Milkman finally acknowledged the song of his family history:

"Jake the only son of Solomon

Come booba yalle, come booba tambee ...

O Solomon don't leave me here

cotton balls to choke me here

Buckra's arms to yoke me

Solomon done fly, Solomon done gone

Solomon cut across the sky, Solomon gone home." [Morrison \(1999\)](#)

Through the character of Milkman, Morrison demonstrated that Black people are damned to spiritual death and inauthentic self unless they discover their cultural heritage.

## THE ROLE OF STORYTELLING IN PRESERVING CULTURAL IDENTITY

Story making has been an integral part of human traditions from the beginning of civilization. All the important values, beliefs, social norms, historical knowledge and culture have been passed down from generation to generation through the art of storytelling. It paved the way and forged relationships that unite an individual with communities.

Storytelling plays an important role in preserving the rich heritage and identity alive. Toni Morrison incorporates storytelling in *The Bluest Eye* and *Song of Solomon* to regain the rich cultural identities of her people. The characters in her novels celebrate African American cultural identity by conserving solid knowledge, shaping cultural identity, magnifying disempowered voices, and promoting cultural awareness.

## ROLE OF DIGITAL PLATFORM FOR ARCHIVING AND STORYTELLING IN BLACK COMMUNITIES

Channeling the power of digital technology has made Morrison's novels more reachable than ever through various digital platforms. Digital storytelling on Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* and *Song of Solomon* on platforms such as academic forums and podcasts like 'Literate Podcast' empowers Black communities to understand the collective narratives and augment the need to preserve and propagate the cultural identity of their people. Online platforms have remarkably enriched the textual analysis of Morrison's works by providing access to various online resources, enhancing critical outlook, and thus assisting academic research and engaging in community discourse. Online academic libraries, namely Google Scholar, JSTOR, Project Gutenberg, and Project Muse, have opened new doors for scholars to access peer-reviewed articles and critical essays for in-depth learning of Morrison's novels. YouTube have surfaced as an alternative repository, allowing readers to redefine and examine Morrison's novels in the digital sphere.

## CONCLUSION

Toni Morrison has boldly portrayed the inner lives of the Black community struggling to survive amid the onslaught of the dominant culture, which tries to erase the unique cultural identities of African Americans. Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* and *Song of Solomon* disclose how forced absorption of White cultural values, internalized racism and disintegration of the family can either disrupt identity or awaken the self. In the digital environment, Morrison's novels find a new space that continues to preserve Black experiences, cinching that Morrison's work remains relevant in modern colloquy.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

None.

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