

The Dysfunctional Family in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*

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Abstract

As the marginalized and minority group in America, Black people's lives were under the control and influence of White hegemony. This condition affected their social, economic, and cultural activities. This study aims to identify the form of dysfunction in the family, the cause of dysfunction in the family, and the effect on children's psychology. This study uses a descriptive qualitative method. The researchers use a novel written by Toni Morrison entitled *The Bluest Eye* as the primary source of data. Additionally, some books, journal articles, and relevant internet sources use as secondary sources. Then, the data was collected and analyzed in several steps. The result shows that the dysfunction in the family is in the form of maltreatment of the family members that are influenced by the pain of the parent's childhood. It eventually leads to the way how they treat or build relationships with their children and others. The impact of this dysfunctional family on the children is that they become malicious and impulsive, and suffer from a mental disorder or schizophrenia.

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INTRODUCTION

The Bluest Eye is Toni Morrison's first novel published in 1970. The story in *The Bluest Eye* is set in Lorain, Ohio, and depicts the Black community's life around the 1940s (Kappke, 2018; Gillespie, 2008). The 1940s was a gloomy decade for African Americans (Roynon, 2013). In those decades, the United States was facing the turbulence of democracy, racial clash, and a crisis of identity (Suranyi, 2007). According to Dana Paramita, the novel relates the life of a young Black woman and her family that was influenced by White hegemony (Paramita, 2015). The story in the novel deals with the dominant cultural power which constructs the true meaning of normality, family, sensuality, and beauty (Gillespie, 2008). Morrison through *The Bluest Eye* conveys some

messages that race and gender are likely to cause a harmful deformation of this visual balance (Miner, 2005). The novel also portrays the devastating effect of social order and social obscurity (Gillespie, 2008). According to J. Brooks Bouson, most of Morrison's novels emphasize the destructive effect of White racism and the humiliation on Afro-Americans to the point that Blacks were stigmatized as an inferior race (Bouson, 2005).

In the opening of the novel, Morrison epitomizes the picture of a perfect home, family life, and the ideal beauty with the story of Dick and Jane which is full of love and cheerfulness (Paramita, 2015). The problem is that the story of Dick and Jane does not represent the plurality of the United States which consist of multiple races and identities. The story of two White children is

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unable to cover that plurality. Consequently, it influenced society with a different standard of family life (Kappke, 2018). Due to the complex problems in the plural society in the novel, this study aims to identify the form of dysfunction in the family, the cause of dysfunction in the family, and its effect on children's psychology in *The Bluest Eye*. The scope of this study is the problems in Black families' life as a marginalized society amid White dominant culture.

Many studies in *The Bluest Eye* had been conducted with different topics and methods. For example, Vásquez, (2014) focused on the characterization, and then Khan and Rahman, (2014); Tahir (2014); Valarmathi & Muthukumar (2016) raised the issue of racism and sexism against Black women. While Ahlawat (2013) and Hayes (2015) focused on feminism and psychoanalysis. There is also a study that focuses on the readers' response to the racism topic in the novel which was conducted by Wijaya (2019). Therefore, the researchers decided to take the topic of a dysfunctional family from *The Bluest Eye*. The significance of this study is to provide readers with an understanding of the implication of maltreatment and negligence of parents on children's psychological development.

The Bluest Eye relates the story of Black families who live amid the pressure of the White dominant culture. As a marginalized community, Black people are overlooked, and their rights are amputated. Unfair treatment and policies imposed by White people do more harm to Black people. Trying to release themselves from the terrible effect of racism and White oppression often cause conflict. In this novel, Morrison also presents the class conflict, where in the story, we can find some Blacks attempt to internalize the White values that make them lose their root which finally causes them to antagonize their fellow Blacks for not being like them. Okonofua (2013) highlights that the inter-racial conflict between Black African Americans is triggered by racial framing constructed by White as a way to divide and bring the Blacks into conflict.

The early life of African-American

From the slavery era until the 20th century, African-Americans have been considered a marginalized group in the United States. Their marginalization is caused by their race as well as their gender (Jordan-Zachery, 2009). Looking back at history, since the White people occupied the American continent, many African-Americans and indigenous people died at the hands of White people. Feagin (2006) states that having felt superior made White people feel that they have the privilege to kill and control others. In addition, Black people were seen as nonhuman that can be preyed on and subjugated (Feagin, 2006). Originally, the subjugation involved people of color comprised of Black men, women, and their offspring in plantations and households. additionally, Black women were exploited to be breeders (Feagin, 2006). During the 19 century, Black females seemed to be valueless things or animal-like in White people's eyes (hooks, 2015). Moreover, slavery and segregation were supported by religious groups that disseminated a concept of racist ideology which stipulated that Whites are superior and Blacks are an inferior race (Feagin, 2006). Whites controlled and repressed the Blacks by imposing the rules where the Blacks should behave and follow what Whites want unless Blacks will be reduced from their access to subsistence (Feagin, 2006). Slavery has built a negative stereotype of Black females, for instance, Black females are labeled as the Mammy, Matriarch, Sapphire, Jezebel, Welfare Queen, and Urban Teen Mother (Jordan-Zachery, 2009). The oppression also encompasses other parts of their lives. Feagin states that ethnic suppression toward Blacks encompasses several aspects, such as health, education, politic, houses, public policy, and settlement (Feagin, 2006). Further, the long period of slavery which was undertaken has created institutionalized racism that brought a serious impact on various aspects of African-American lives e.g. jobs, housing, education, parenting, and imprisonment (Wilson & Thompson, 2020).

Black families life

Family is the main foundation for the resilience of society. According to McMillen, the family provides a source of power for both Black and White women. However, the family also drains their health, mental, and emotional (McMillen, 2018). Family for the bondage of women as an institution that provides them with protection against the savage and repression of slavery; however, it was in the family as well, they were susceptible to their master's wants (McMillen, 2018). In the early era of slavery, it was easy for slave men and women who lived on plantations to construct a small family by finding a partner to be a husband or a wife (McMillen, 2018). For slave women, the family offered them a sense of pleasure amid the exploitation (McMillen, 2018).

The prosperity between Black and White families is far different. Whites as the dominant society control the source over Blacks, besides that, through policies that regulate the economic system, prevalent segregation has deteriorated the condition of the Blacks. Ruggles (1994) argues that the "condition of extreme poverty destabilized the Black family" (p. 147). The accumulation of policies and rules impartially to the Blacks resulted in inequality in all aspects of life. Many divorces occur in Black families frequently because of this economic problem. It is stated that the availability of job vacancies for women is greater than for men, insufficient job vacancies for men, and the narrow disparity of wages between men and women have caused instability in family life (Morgan et al. 1983; Rolison 1992; Sanderson 1979, as cited in Ruggles, 1994). In family life, Ruggles states that the number of Black people is likely much greater than White people to be single parents and live in large families (Ruggles, 1994).

Father and mother roles in Black families

Historically, White fathers were portrayed as serious, emotionally stable, moral controllers that governed the family firmly (Connor & White, 2006). Black fathers' roles; however, were imperceptible and were often typified as negative figures such as *deadbeat dads* and neglectful of both financial and emotional to their children (Coley,

2001 as cited in Connor & White, 2006). According to Wilson and Thomson, *Deadbeat Dads* refer to Black fathers who devote little time to their children (Wilson & Thompson, 2020). Also, the men who cannot fulfill their parental role (Pleck & Pleck, 1997, as cited in Marks & Palkovitz, 2004). It was not something easy to become a father, especially for Black men. McAdoo (1993) as cited in Connor & White (2006) states that there are some aspects of prerequisites that should be fulfilled by Black fathers to be considered as a father, such as being breadwinners, decision-makers, being couples, and being involved in child-rearing. Glazer and Moynihan (1963) as cited in Jordan-Zachery (2009) argue that Black fathers were irresponsible and hate their children, their failure was a result of a broken home, unlawful marriage, social structure, low income, and criminality. However, the failure of Black fathers to fulfill their responsibilities are not without any factors; the main factor was the perpetuation of racism as a result of slavery which impact on various arenas of Black men's daily life. Allen & Connor (1997) as cited in Marks & Palkovitz (2004), note that bigotry, segregation in education, and unemployment become the major barriers to Black men fulfilling their responsibilities. Caldwell and White as cited in Connor & White (2006) state that condition changes the people's perception of Black fathers; therefore, in general, Black fathers are seen as irresponsible and neglected men who are frequently absent in their children's life.

Generally, the notion of motherhood has become the philosophy of African descent. It has become the norm that mothers should sacrifice for their children's well-being (Christian, 1985, as cited in Collins, 2002). However, it was not easy for Black women to undertake their roles as parents. Negative stereotypes and false myths about Black women were spread which aimed to devalue Black womanhood. According to Jordan-Zachery (2009, p. 6), there are five dominant stereotypes tagged to Black women such as, "*Mammy, Jezebel, Sapphire, Welfare Queen, and Urban Teen Mother*". The *mammy* refers to Black women who work as servants and take care of the White children, *Jezebel* refers to bad and

promiscuous Black girls, and *Sapphire* refers to evil and rebellious Black women. Sapphire is the opposite of the mammy figure (hooks, 2015). The welfare Queen refers to the figure of Black women who think of their advantages and materialism, while the *Urban Teen Mother* refers to youthful and foolish Black girls (Jordan-Zachery, 2009). The massive widespread of these controlling images made it difficult for Black women to establish their positive self-images (hooks, 2015).

Dysfunctional family

Normally, each family wants a family life that is full of love, cheerfulness, and harmony. Children grow well, parents provide the children with sufficient material and emotional needs that support healthy. However, some families have to face the reality that they fail to provide what the other member need which caused an imbalance in family life. Moreover, miscommunication between parents and children leads to children growing up with low self-confidence. As the consequence, children might grow dysfunctional relationships in their adolescence (Brown University, 2023). Stiver (1990) argues that due to the limitation of chance for their self-actualization, children are incapable of collaborating with others to grow well. Luepnitz (1988) as cited in Stiver (1990) claims some key indicators prove a family is dysfunctional, such as the children are split up from their family, unable to be self-supporting, and cannot be intact individuals. This defect may be brought and impact their relationship with their family member and this disorientation is categorized as a dysfunctional family. A dysfunctional family is generally signaled by “conflict, misbehavior, or abuse” (Supportiv, 2023). Further, it is explained that several “signs of a dysfunctional family, including addiction, perfectionism, abuse or neglect, unpredictability and fear, lack of intimacy, and poor communication” (Supportiv, 2020). Nevertheless, not all families that are distinguished as dysfunctional families undergo all the signs above. It is noted that some patterns that may commonly appear in dysfunctional families. For example, both parents or one of them may be addicted to drugs, alcohol, or debauchery and

place a wager that has a significant impact on the family members. Consequently, children are often treated badly by physical punishment as the main way to rule out their behavior (Brown University, 2022). Besides that, typical dysfunctional families are “the incest survivor family, the schizophrenic family, and the like” (Stiver, 1990, p. 2).

METHODS

This study uses the Descriptive Qualitative method to find the sort of dysfunction in the family, the cause, and its effect on children in *The Bluest Eye*. In Descriptive Qualitative, the data which represent who, what, and where of the events are precipitated from an individual or personal viewpoint (Kim et al., 2017, as cited in Doyle et al., 2020). The data is collected from a certain source that is related to the topic of study to answer the research questions. Marshal and Rossman (2011) as cited in Taylor, et al. (2016) state that in this method researchers can apply an adjustable strategy in answering the research questions. In this study, the researchers use a novel written by Toni Morrison entitled *The Bluest Eye* as the primary source of data, some books, journal articles, and relevant internet sources as the secondary source of data. Then, the data was collected and analyzed in several steps. Firstly, the researchers comprehended the main characters' backgrounds in the novel that lead to the maltreatment of their family. Secondly, the researchers described the impact of the backgrounds on the way they treat their family. Finally, the researchers analyzed the impact of maltreatment on children who live in dysfunctional families. In this section, the researcher focused on analyzing the impact of maltreatment on Junior and Pecolas's psychology as the main character in the novel.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Background of families

The story in *The Bluest Eye* is divided into four chapters. Every chapter is entitled with four seasons, namely Autumn, Winter, Spring, and

Summer. The events in this novel are not introduced chronologically but are connected with the memories of omniscient narrators (James & Nye, 2023). The first fragments introduce the main characters and background events that shape the life of the main character Pecola. The plot is then followed by the section entitled Autumn. This section portrays Pecola's teenage, how she experiences her first menstrual and the portrayal of her family background. The drunken father and temperamental mother frequently instigate quarrels and conflicts between her father Cholly and her mother Pauline. Then, it comes to the Winter section, this section most relates to the hard life of Pecola, various verbal and physical abuse experienced both from the Blacks and White due to her ugliness and poverty. The following section is entitled Spring, where this section tells much about Cholly and Pauline's family background and some tragic events in the past that have shaped their traits. Finally, Summer is the title of the last section of the novel which spins the Pecola madness as a result of family dysfunctionality, and her unfulfilled hopes to have the bluest eye.

Pecola lives in a small family consisting of a father, Cholly Breedlove, a mother Pauline Breedlove, Pecola, and her brother, Sammy. She is the oldest daughter in the family. The relationships between the family members are not harmonious and Pecola never calls daddy or mama to her father and mother (Gillespie, 2008). Living in a family that is unconducive has shaped Pecola into unstable in personality. Her father is an alcohol addict while her mother provides more attention to her self-happiness and fantasy. Looking at Pecola's father's background, Cholly was born without a father, and when he was four days old, he was thrown to the dump site due to her mother's mental illness and depression then he was saved and raised by his Aunt Jimmy until he was thirteen when his aunt was dead. His gloomy fate continued when the first time he tasted the feeling of falling in love with a woman, Darlene. They were found in the wood by hunters who forced them to have sexual intercourse in front of them. He was too young and weak; unable to defend himself, he blamed Darlene for that incident. Feeling guilty for what he had

done to Darlene, he tried to escape from the reality and tried to find his biological father. Having known that his biological father is Sampson Fuller, he tried to meet him; however, Sampson's rejection was a hard slap for him. It ruined him psychologically and turned him into a beast man. He lives and stays on street. He was a free man, he feels like a god (James & Nye, 2023). It seems that his bleak background has shaped him into a cruel man.

Pauline also has a terrible story in her past. She was born into eleven siblings. She was lucky, she was treated specially by her father who provided her many spare time to do what she likes. She loves music and films, she grows up full of fantasy about being like White people in Hollywood movies which have directed her into imitating the White standard of beauty. Besides, she rarely interacts with others; therefore, her introversion made it difficult for her in finding fellows after she moved to Lorain. She begins to behave like White people in the sense of appearance while her husband begins to be a drunken man. Living with parents who were unable to provide her with a worthwhile life tended to degrade her self-actualization. Pecola lives under the shadow of physical and mental assault. Additionally, her brother escapes from the family and lives alone in the street to free himself from the psychological oppression in his family.

Negative stereotypes, such as ugly and poor addressed to her make Pecola surrender and voluntarily accept those tags. Pecola gained double oppression from both the family and the community around her and the peak was she was raped several times by her father then was pregnant, but finally miscarriage her fetus. Mrazek & Kempe (1987) claim that societal exclusion is regarded as the fundamental aspect that contributes to incest. It can be seen from the story how the communities isolated her and were indifferent to Pecola. Pecola was vulnerable to sexual crime and father-daughter incest in her family. Mrazek & Kempe (1987) argue that some factors that give rise to father-daughter incest or rape, for instance, the father has a history of emotional deprivation, having been rejected by his

mother and abandoned. Moreover, the absence of a mother from the home because of a death, single parenthood, separation, diseases, long hours at work, or unwillingness to assume the role of parent or spouse raises the risk of a sexual relationship between Fathers and daughters (Mrazek & Kempe, 1987). What has been stated by Mrazek and Kempe almost all can be found in Pecola's family. His father is a heavy drinker and incest occurs only during times of high stress for some fathers, and incest may be triggered by excessive drinking (Mrazek & Kempe, 1987). Moreover; her father has undergone refusal by his biological father and her mother is absent from home due to her job as a servant in a White family. It is widely accepted that Black mothers are good at taking care of their master children but neglect theirs (Jordan-Zachery, 2009). In addition, Pecola is the oldest child that makes her position getting more and more susceptible to rape. Friel & Friel (1988) state that children between the ages of 9 and 12 are most and often vulnerable to sexual crime.

The impact of a dysfunctional family on children

A dysfunctional family brings a detrimental effect on children's emotions (Irawati et al., 2021). Children who experience traumatic events in the past would be traumatized by those events which eventually influence the way they interact and build relationships with others in their adulthood. This phenomenon can be seen in the way Cholly addresses his social problem and domestic problems. Rather than strengthen the family intact and focused on a better future for his children, he was entrapped in liquor and idleness. As a result, he is incapable of running his role as a good father and the consequences are his son, Sammy escapes from him while Pecola who stays in the family becomes the casualty of his father's sexual craving.

Another family in the novel with its bleak backdrop that eventually has an impact on the way of caring for and raising children which finally shapes the character and the way the children behave toward others is Geraldine's family. Geraldine is typical of a Black woman who dissociates herself from her identity as a member of a marginalized culture (Gillespie, 2008). Further,

Gillespie said that Geraldine is obsessed with the idea that "appearance" is the most important because it could reflect the type of one's social status. Her house, outfits, hairstyle, and value that practice at home reflects her social status. She limits access of her son to interact with other children, and as a consequence, her son grows with a deficiency in building good relationships and appreciating others. Junior lacks sympathy and is emotionally weak. He expresses his frustration with giving maltreatment of others whom he sees as inferior (Gillespie, 2008). The story reveals how Junior treats Pecola badly, he throws a cat at Pecola. Gillespie (2008) concludes that Junior's malicious and abusive acts are caused by the way his mother treats him. The physical and verbal violence inflicted on Pecola has encouraged her to dream of pursuing Black eyes and White skin, so people will love and accept her as a member of them.

In the novel, Morrison also presents a Black family which is inversely proportional to Cholly's family. Mr. MacTeer is in contrast to Cholly Breedlove in terms of dedication to family. He works hard to support his family's economy, he works tirelessly to ensure the family's safety and financial security (James & Nye, 2023). His strong protection and responsibility to his family are shown when his daughter Frieda was molested by Mr. Henry, he expelled him from the boarding that he rents in MacTeer's house. He is not typical of a boasting man, he shows a real effort to assure his daughters Claudia and Frieda grow well and secure (Gillespie, 2008). Mrs. MacTeer is also an important figure in the family, she is firm and strict with her children which shaped her daughters into strong women under the attack of the White dominant culture. Both Mr. and Mrs. MacTeer are devout to their family's welfare (Gillespie, 2008); therefore, their daughters grow with high self-esteem. Claudia and Frieda are capable of handling problems like racist acts from the community around them, are able to establish a good relationship with others, and very helpful when Pecola is miscarriage.

The last section of the novel reveals the 'ruin' of Pecola as the casualty of her family's

dysfunction. “Pecola has drawn in madness” (James & Nye, 2023). Her mental disorder is the implication of both sexual assault and societal exclusion to her misery. “ Perhaps, most significantly, Pecola is in the space between the Black and White communities that surround her, unaccepted by and alienated from both” (Gillespie, 2008, p. 53). She lives in her hallucination. Morrison says, “the heart of her yearning is exceeded only by the evil of fulfillment” (Morrison, 2007, p. 204). James & Nye (2023) say that Pecola suffers from schizophrenia which allows her to speak to an imaginary mate. According to Gillespie (2008), Pecola’s personality disorder is her attempt to overcome her terrible fate as the impact of rape.

CONCLUSION

In *The Bluest Eye* Morrison presents several Black families and their backgrounds. The families’ backgrounds define how the family members, such as father, mother, and children handle the problems, either the problems caused by the society around the families or the problems from the internal families themselves. The story reveals how the Breedlove family becomes dysfunctional as a result of the traumatic events experienced by the members of the family. Cholly Breedlove was born into a poor family then expelled by his mother, raised by his aunt, and rejected by his biological father. When he was in his teenage, he was coerced to have sexual intercourse by White hunters. All of his past experiences had established him into a low self-esteem man and then force him to plunge into street life and become a beast man. Similarly, his wife Pauline was born among 11 siblings making her lack the affection of her parents, and then she expected that she would be like the movie stars that she frequently watches to be accepted in her community. Both Mr. and Mrs. Breedlove come from broken families where their background affects the way they manage the family and build relationships with their children. As consequence, their children grow up with low self-esteem, lack the capability to build a relationship, and handle

attacks from the White dominant culture and Black society around them. The children are not ready to face the racist practice, in addition, their parents are unable to defend and protect them. Moreover, they become the casualty of their parents’ abusive acts. Pecola was particularly sexually abused by her own father which led her to be deeply mad while his brother escape from home to find free life. Furthermore, in coping with the physical and verbal violence from the community around her, Pecola dreams of having the bluest eye and white skin in order not to look ugly and be accepted as a member of society.

Another Black family that is unable to treat their family member well is Geraldine’s family. Geraldine is a Black mother. When she was young, she has a hard life; therefore, she praises the White value much so that she protects her children from the negative effect of Blacks. She controls her son’s interaction with other children which makes her son frustrated, as a result, Junior is malicious and treats others badly. Unlike, the Breedlove family and Geraldine, the MacTeer family is responsible for the family, Mr. and Mrs. MacTeer devote themselves to their family, and they work hard to provide for their children’s needs. They fulfill their children’s needs both physical and psychological. They prove their love to their children when Frieda is molested, they repel Mr. Hendry who abuses Frieda, and they also solace their daughter when the community perceives that Freida has been “ruined”. They try to encourage Frieda and reassure her that everything would be fine, unlike what was perceived by society. It can be concluded that personal background plays an important role in shaping a person’s character when he is in adolescence. The painful childhood of children will affect the way they behave and treat others in their adulthood. It can be seen from the novel, some figures with bitter childhood affect the way they manage their family, educate their children, and build relationships with their children. A family in which parents cannot carry out their duties properly gives rise to disruptive influence on their children both physically and mentally. It can be said that it is a symptom of a dysfunctional family.

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