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The Depiction of Soaphead Church's character in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* – A Paradox

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Abstract:

The objective of the research study on the topic, *The Depiction of Soaphead Church's character in Toni Morrison's The Bluest Eye – A Paradox*, is to throw light on the crisis of African American people through the portrayal of Soaphead Church's character. The African American literature has been a major field of study for decades because of its dealing with the saddest part of their life. The black writers take literature not just as a medium of entertainment which brings out the talents of the authors, rather they take it as a responsibility to express the pathetic condition of their people by means of which they try to draw attention of the people across the world. The bitter feelings expressed in their works of art have brought so many positive changes in African American people and so the African American literature is considered a powerful medium to express the suppressed condition of life under the clutches of whites.

The present study is focused on the portrayal of Soaphead Church whom Morrison uses as a mouth piece to express the misery of her people caused by the social and religious system. The profound reading of Morrison's novels helps the readers to find many common aspects such as slavery, struggle for survival, racism, sexism, and search for identity and thirst for freedom. And also many powerful characters such as Eva Peace in *Sula*, Pilate Dead in *Song of Solomon* and Sethe in *Beloved*. Each novel deals with different social issues which influence characters of the novels aforementioned. *The Bluest Eye* takes up the concept of treating the colour black as ugly by the white society. The role of Soaphead Church is very significant in this novel. His three confessions reveal that though he is called as misanthropist, he treated black people well. His questions to God serve as another kind of prayer to Him to redeem them from the miseries of life.

Keywords: oppression – sufferings – slavery – racism and sexism – struggle – misanthropist – confession – discrimination – harassment.

The second largest ethnic minority, next to Hispanic, in the United States is African Americans whose history begins in the sixteenth century, 1526. Normally, a country's history records its periods based on the political changes and developments such as old age,

middle age and modern age, or Stone Age, Iron Age, Bronze Age and Golden Age, or the ages of the kings who ruled the country. But the African American's history records their savage, slavery, racial discrimination, gender discrimination, ethnicity, brutality, cruelty, injustice, sexual harassment and other strifes that became a threat to their life. The tropical condition of Africa shaded their skin colour black, and the trading community from Europe made their life dark. The uncivilized condition of African people, divisions in their tribal group, lack of unity, lack of administrative skill, colour complex, diseases, domestic disputes, and internal slave trades gave loopholes to the whites to get them under their control very easily. The traders started trading on Africans. The black people's life under slavery is crueler than any other disaster in the world.

During the course of slavery, the women were tortured more than men, they were twice cursed; they were not only physically tortured but also sexually harassed. Michele Wallace expresses her hurt feelings as:

What most people see of the black woman is a void, a black hole that appears empty, not full. The outsider sees black feminist creativity as a dark hole from which nothing worth-while can emerge and in which everything is forced to assume the zero volume of nothingness, the invisibility, that results from the intense pressure of race, class, and sex (55).

Despite all brutality, the slave population was gradually increasing; it became a threat to the whites. The updated slave codes further restricted the black people. When they disobey their masters, they were punished severely irrespective of their age and gender. The slave masters punished them by whipping, shocking, hanging, beating, burning, mutilating, branding and imprisoning and in the case of women, raping.

Like the black people, their literature also struggled a lot to come out. The African American voices were heard through the civil rights movements in the early stage, and then they started writing small piece of brochures to inform the world about the condition of African American slaves, then through magazines, they published their articles. Since it was not widely read by people, they distributed their writings to people free of cost. Slowly, they started spreading the message about the sufferings of their people. The freed slaves from North started raising voice against slavery; it was first in the form of lecture, next in the form of small piece of brochures and then in the form of articles in magazines.

The major themes of African American literature have been the exposition of their life under slavery, exploitation of labour, punishments, and also how their gender is treated, how their future is decided by slave masters and how their generation is affected, and in addition to that, racial discrimination, search for identity, fight for equal rights and political participation. Since their literature was born during the civil rights period, it got a rebellious opening; it expressed their protest to slavery.

Toni Morrison, one of the most significant African American novelists emerged during the twentieth century, is distinctly known for creating a new language style for her

people 'to speak the unspeakable'. Her subject matters deal with the feelings of the most oppressed women in the world, namely the African American women whose life is engulfed by countless sufferings caused by slavery, racism and sexism. Her pieces of works are treated as a hue and cry of her people. The present study makes an attempt to go beyond the peripheral level to explore.

The Bluest Eye which was written based on a hurriedly written story for her writers' group discussion. It mainly focuses on the contradictions fostered by racism, sexism and class distinctions that assail the black. The contradictions are too intense for Pecola to sustain her sense of worth. As a result she descends into madness. Jennifer Lee Jordan Heinert rightly says, "Pecola's story ends in madness and tragedy, while Claudia concludes that the only viable solution for her is to reject convention" (9).

The story is about a black girl who longs for blue eyes, by means of which, she believes that she can look beautiful as a result everyone will look up to her, she will be the centre of attraction, she can avoid young boys' mocking, coloured girls like Maureen's sarcastic sayings, and most importantly she believes that she could put an end to her parents' routine fights and also win the parental love, care and affection. But the protagonist's desire is portrayed as her weakness, and her life is tormented because of her strange ideas, ignited by her parents' dangerous fights. The novel, besides dealing with the theme of beauty consciousness of black people, it also tells about the poor husband and wife relationship that affect their own generation.

Like Morrison's other novels, also *The Bluest Eye* helps the readers to trace out many themes such as, identity crises, race, gender discrimination, ethnicity, sexual abuse and many others. And also there are many significant characters: Pecola, Pauline, Cholly, Claudia, Fieda and others of whom, Soaphead Church is yet another significant character.

When Pecola spurs her pursuit for blue eyes, she meets Soaphead Church, who is a "Reader, Adviser, and Interpreter of Dreams" (TBE 165). Before discussing about what he does to Pecola with respect to her thirst for blue eyes, it is important to have a brief character sketch about him. His real name is Eluhue Micah Whitcomb, he had a short-lived marital life lasted for two months.

Due to different taste and different opinion about their life, Velma left him in two months. There was a contradiction between the idea of melancholy life of Soaphead Church and the idea of delightful life of Velma, so that they got separated. After that, he didn't think of his second marriage. With the knowledge of some church activities, human psychology and the power of communication, he won the hope of people and started a new career as a philanthropist; Morrison terms it as 'misanthropist' as he uses the skills only for his survival. Amidst all weak characters, Morrison places one strong character in each of her novels, through whom she expresses her ideologies, as Susan Neal Mayberry rightly says, "Morrison includes in her depiction of Soaphead's insanity certain qualities characteristic of literary madmen. His letter to God juxtaposes fantastic delusions of grandeur and an inverted perception of reality"(49). In that line, Soaphead Church is introduced, as a realistic

character. Morrison has portrayed all characters with a defect in them, for instance, Pauline's deformity, Cholly's drinking habit, Pecola's longing for blue eyes, Claudia's non-menstruating and many more, on that way, Soaphead Church also has a weakness; his liking for little girls. In spite of having a weakness, when people read his chapter, they will ignore not only the defects of Soaphead Church but also others. Instead of commenting on their poor behaviour, they will understand them well, they will forgive them easily, in such a way Morrison has expressed her ideas through Soaphead Church. The chapter that deals with Soaphead Church's life acts like a treatise that thoroughly examines black people's problems. At first he confesses his crimes of pretending to be a mediator to God, using young girls to quench his sexual desire and cheating Pecola by involving her in killing the dog, Bob, so that she can get blue eyes.

Soaphead Church's letter puts forth many questions to God, "Did you forget? Did you forget about the children? Yes. You forgot. You let them go wanting, sit on road shoulders, crying next to their dead mothers. I've seen them charred, lame, halt. You forgot, Lord. You forgot how and when to be God." (TBE 181). Morrison questions through Soaphead Church's letter to God provokes God Himself involve in the argument whether he has done right to black people. Soaphead Church claims that he has done better deed than God, "I did what You did not, could not, would not do: I looked at that ugly little black girl, and I loved her. I played you. And it was a very good show." (TBE 182). It is not treated just a complaint on God for having given them such weaknesses that brings shamefulness to them. It is just another way of prayer through which she expresses that God has ignored the black people. He is the one Who is responsible for everything, "But you too are amiss here, Lord. How, why, did you allow it to happen?" (TBE 178).

Soaphead Church uses people's weakness just for survival, he does not want to rule or conquer anyone, he does not enslave anybody, he does not swindle money from others, acquire properties from them, above all, he doesn't give them any emotional disturbance, rather he gives counseling for emotionally disturbed people who sought his advice:

Singly they found their way to his door, wrapped each in a shroud stitched with anger, yearning, pride, vengeance, loneliness, misery, defeat, and hunger. They asked for the simplest of things: love, health, and money. Make him love me. Tell me what this dream means. Help me get rid of this woman. Make my mother give me back my clothes. Stop my left hand from shaking. Keep my baby's ghost off the stove. Break so-and-so's fix. To all of these requests he addresses himself. His practice was to do what he was bid- not to suggest to a party that perhaps the request was unfair, mean, or hopeless. (TBE 172).

From Soaphead Church's hearing and counseling, one major point is observed; the reason for people's suffering is because of their uncontrollable emotions. It is very clear from the behaviour of Pauline, Cholly, Geraldine and all other major characters of the novel who are supposed to be responsible to take care of their family. The following statement from Soaphead church's letter to God appeals how their body, mind and soul are limited to live with such emotional struggles. It also gives an idea to suppose that most of the themes

and characters of Morrison's novels are born out of the above mentioned struggles, through which, Morrison attempts to express the sufferings of her people to the world, at the same time, to make those struggles as studies for her own people so as to avoid the mistakes of their ancestors. On that sense, Morrison's statements traced in *The Bluest Eye* through Soaphead Church 'returning our identity of our race' reminds the readers about Baby Shuggs and Sethe's struggle to free their generation from the slave house, Sweet Home in *Beloved*. Similarly, 'we were not royal; snobbish', 'violence for passion', 'recklessness was freedom', 'our manhood was defined by acquisitions' and 'womanhood by acquiescence' denote the characteristics cultivated by black people while living in the dominant society.

Apart from this, his confessions that he has limited his sexual desire to little girls discloses that he can be punished for, according to the people's accusation on him, but in reality, he says that he was so kind to them, if he dies, he will miss those little girls, the touch transmits his friendly feelings, he did not hurt them, he didn't kiss them, he treated them well, so they wanted to come again and again. At last he says "with little girls, it is all clean and good and friendly" (TBE 181). Second confession is killing the old dog, Bob, for which he deputed Pecola, he convinced her saying she would get blue eyes. But in his heart, for the first time, he appeals to God with an obligation which is not possible by him. He kills the dog not out of any personal dislike for animal, but he could not see the old dog suffering, to reduce its pain and to save its remaining life, he plans to kill. Since he is a good human being who has great concern for his people and loves other living beings, he hesitates to kill so he deploys Pecola. This reminds the readers about what Sethe did to her daughter, Beloved in *Beloved*, and why Shadrack instituted National Suicide Day and what was there in Eva's mind when she burnt her own son who suffered due to drug addiction. In the same way Soaphead Church planned to kill the dog.

He regarded this wish for the dog's death as humane, for he could not bear, he told himself, to see anything suffer. It did not occur to him that he was really concerned about his own suffering, since the dog had adjusted himself to frailty and old age. Soaphead finally determined to put an end to the animal's misery, and bought some poison with which to do it (TBE 171).

His third confession is choosing his career as a misanthropist for his survival, in which he counseled people with his own knowledge and experience about people but not with the consent of God. He made people believe that he is a mediator to God. He did his service with his clean hand; his intention is not for property acquisition, but for his survival. He understood that the problems of his people are out of uncontrollable emotions, he handled them very easily with the knowledge of psychiatry. People sought his counsel were cured and satisfied. Nobody is hurt and cheated. Citing the above points, his acquaintance with people was very good, he is the one who saw, felt, touched and soothed his people who came with problems.

The strange meeting with a strange girl with a strange obligation to get blue eyes makes him repent for her state of mind, as Rosalie Murphy Baum says, "Pecola is not simply injured by her fantasies of the white world and by the marital abuse which is a daily part of

her life, however. She, unlike the other children in Crane and Morrison, is also decisively assaulted psychologically by her mother and physically by her father.” (16). This incident brings out his incapability, so for the first time, he takes an obligation to God, he strongly pursues Him to bless her wishes, for which he sends the soul of the dog as an errand. Though it is all vain, the promise that he has given to Pecola and the reaction of the dog once it had the poisonous food give Pecola a hope that she has been blessed with the bluest eyes, when people look at her strange behaviour which she started practicing after visiting Soaphead Church, she believes that it is because of her Blue Eyes everybody looks at her. In reality, in her lunacy, she ignores her worries, thinks as if she has got blue eyes and feels proud at the success of getting blue eyes. She least bothers about what others say, she finds happiness in counting how many of them pay attention to her.

Finally, she says that Soaphead Church has done better deeds to his people which God failed to do. But the way Morrison has expressed her feelings through Soaphead Church's letter cannot merely be treated as a complaint but it is another way of prayer to redeem her people's life from the clutches of trouble. Hence, this paper concludes saying that the depiction of Soaphead Church's character is a paradox.

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