

**OPTIMISM IN TONI MORRISON'S *THE BLUEST EYE* AND ALICE  
WALKER'S *MERIDIAN***

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**Abstract**

The Nobel prize winner Toni Morrison and the winner of the Pulitzer prize, Alice Walker are the dominant figures from the African American women's literary tradition who illuminate the sufferings and humiliation of the blacks in general and black women in particular. Both have exposed the evils of race , class and gender discrimination in their novels. These novelists have some similarities as well as dissimilarities in their work. The objective of this paper is to study Morrison's **The Bluest Eye** and Walker's **Meridian** with the attempt to find out the element of optimism in their respected novels. The paper throws light upon the similar theme of optimism used by the respected novelists. It shows how they similarly portray optimism in their respected novels to survive against all the odds .

**Keywords** : optimism,exploitation,humiliation,sexism,castiesm,racism., etc.

Both Morrison and Alice walker expose the inferior status of the blacks in the white dominated African American society in their novels. Morrison's novel *The Bluest Eye* basically talks about the myth of racism. It shows the victimization of the blacks in general and a female child in particular on the account of race and class. Whereas Walker's *Meridian* too portrays blacks' humiliation and oppression on the account of race and gender. Gerri Bates asserts about this novel: " African American women's struggle to cope in life is a central theme in the novel ." (82) Morrison's major focus in *The Bluest Eye* is on the evil effects of racism and the gender issues are secondary whereas Walker highlights gender discrimination in her novel *Meridian* as a primary concern and race is the secondary one.

Pecola, the female protagonist of *The Bluest Eye* is an adolescent child. She is deprived of parental love and care. Her mother Pauline does not care her. Even at the time of Pecola's

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birth she considers her ugly. Pecola is neglected and humiliated at the hands of negligent parents. As J. Salve asserts:

In the process of imitating the ways of the white woman, Pauline, Pecola's mother, neglects Pecola. She, at the birth of Pecola, declares that she is an ugly child. Pauline showers her love and affection on her white employer's child whereas she scolds and slaps her own child. (138)

Her father Cholly, a male patriarch in the novel is an insensitive and emotionless husband as well as a cruel father. He puts the family 'outdoors'. Therefore Pecola and her mother Pauline are suffered. Anyhow Pecola takes shelter in one of the black families namely, Mac Teer family. Pecola is neglected not only at home but also in the society. She sits alone on the bench in the class. She is humiliated by the black boys at school. One shopkeeper Yakobowsky even does not want to look at her when she asks for candies. All these humiliating experiences makes Pecola realize her own inferior status in the white society. Pecola anyhow wants to wipe this blackness, which is considered as ugly. Pecola is though a victim of the racial ideology in America does not lose her hope. Her optimism is reflected very well in the novel in her act of drinking extra quantities of milk from the Shirley Temple glass. She hopes that if she drinks extra milk using the glass she will look like a beautiful Shirley Temple doll. She consumes enormous quantities of milk so that she can hold the cups and gazes the image of Shirley Temple. She even eats Mary Jane candies because she believes that by ingesting them she has somehow ingested beauty. "To eat the candy is somehow to eat the eyes. Eat Mary Jane, Love Mary Jane, Be Mary Jane" (43)

Pecola by eating Mary Jane candies tries to acquire those standard of beauty by which White women are judged in America. Pecola's mother Pauline's attempt to be and behave like the Whites throws light upon the dominance of White culture. Pecola's mother Pauline too is observed as a woman who imitates the ways of the whites. Gradually she ignores her own house, her husband, and children and lavishes all her love upon her White employer's children. In her, one observes an attempt of a Black woman to alienate herself from her own community. A self-conscious rebel is seen in Pauline who tries to assert her identity by accepting the White standards in order to avoid victimization. She is also a victim of male patriarchy as well as classism. Cholly does not care for her. He is not able to fulfill the requirements of the family. The continuous discrimination compels Pauline to find a way out from her family where she does not find mental peace. She feels better at Fisher family, her white employer. Her role as a maid at the white fisher family is a result of optimism. She is an optimistic woman who wants to survive herself from the physical as well as mental torture of her husband. Like her mother Pecola is also an optimistic female who tries to achieve the white standards of beauty in order to survive in the white dominated American society. Even she eats candies with the same hope to look beautiful. At last she develops a strong desire to obtain the blue eyes and start praying to God every night without fail. Pecola hopes that the blue eyes would give her new existence and her humiliation will stop not only in society but also at home. As Kavita Arya rightly asserts: "She lacks self esteem, and she thinks that she can win love and respect of people only if she could become pretty and beautiful." (30) As the novelist writes: "If she looked different, beautiful, maybe Cholly would be different, and Mrs. Breedlove too. Maybe they'd say, "Why, look at pretty-eyed Pecola. We mustn't do bad things in front of those pretty eyes." (34) besides Pecola and Pauline The Mac Teers family stands for optimism in the novel. Both Frieda and

Claudia are from the Mac Teers family. When Pecola is put ‘outdoors’ this is the only family that gives shelter to Pecola. When Pecola is raped by her father in the novel there are only Claudia and Frieda who sympathize with her. They sow the seeds of marigold in the courtyard of the garden with the hope that if the seeds are grown then something good will happen with Pecola. The seeds sown by Claudia and Frieda symbolize their optimism.

Similarly, Alice Walker’s *Meridian* too shows the element of optimism. *Meridian* is a novel which discusses the themes such as the civil rights movement, gender discrimination, quest for identity, womanism etc. The female protagonist Meridian Hill is similarly a neglected individual at home. Her mother Mrs.Hill dies not educate her about sex. She as an adolescent girl falls in love with a boy Eddie. Due to her ignorance about sex she faces pregnancy at the stage of adolescence.

Meridian in the beginning is humiliated and exploited on the account of gender. One white man namely Dexter takes sexually advancement upon Meridian when she is just an adolescent girl. Later she is sexually harassed by Dexter’s assistant too. But anyhow she tries to survive in such hostile environment. When she finds herself dissatisfied in marriage with Eddie she doesn’t remain silent like her mother Mrs.Hill who is one of the sufferers in the novel. She tries to find out her own path. Meridian is one of the most optimistic characters in walker’s fictional world. As Pifer rightly observes : “At age seventeen, Meridian is left on her own to consider what to do with her life and her child’s. When Meridian says no to motherhood, she offends and loses her own mother, her family, and her community. She feels guilty for leaving her baby and can not adequately explain why she must. But by shedding her prescribed ‘happy mother’ role and standing up for her own needs, Meridian takes the first step towards becoming ‘a revolutionary petunia’. She stops living by others’ standards, learns to bloom for herself, as she must in order to survive, since her rebellious acts will alienate her from the rest of the society..” (60-61) Though Meridian is suffered on the account of gender at the very early stage of her life she does not lose her hope. She is ready to fight against all the odds in the society .She emerge as a political activist in the civil rights movement in the novel. She participates in the civil rights movement. Her role in the movement clearly shows her optimism in the bright future of the humanity. She is observed as a brave woman who hopes for the betterment of people. In the very first episode, “The Last Return” the element of optimism is strongly observed in the novel when Meridian faces a tank. As the novelist writes: “Meridian did not look to the right or to the left. She passed the people watching her as if she did not know it was on her account they were there. As she approached the tank the blast of its engine starting sent a cloud of pigeons fluttering...” (7) In this scene Meridian’s brave attempt to save the children is observed. This is her spirit that survived her instead of all the obstacles in her life and shows her as a ‘survivor’ in the novel. Further in the novel her role is reflected as a caretaker, a friend, a lover ,a civil right activist and in each of these role her optimistic spirit is unveiled. While pursuing her further education at Saxon college Meridian meets a girl namely Wile Child. She is a town girl who is neglected at the campus and not allowed at the campus. However, Meridian dares to bring her at the campus and feeds her like a mother. Here it is worthwhile to mention that Meridian a woman who abandons her own baby child as well as her husband feeds later to a girl Wile Child, an outcaste in the society, which is contradictory. But the minute study of the novel makes it clear that Meridian leaves home in order to find her ultimate goal. She does not want to limit her role just as a mother of one child and an ideal wife of a husband. Being helpful to Wile Child

Meridian becomes a universal figure who struggles hard for the betterment of the downtrodden people. Meridian actually wants to help her. As the narrator writes: “With beads of cake and colored beads and unblemished cigarettes she tempted Wile Chile and finally captured her. She brought her into the campus with a catgut string around her arm.” (25) Though Wile Chile is not seen as a normal girl like others Meridian wants to help her in her difficulties because she was pregnant. Meridian even helps to the white girl Lynne with whom Truman was in love. Because of Lynne Meridian and Truman’s relation was destroyed. Still Meridian doesn’t keep any hatred towards her. Instead, when Lynne is in trouble she is always there to help Lynne. This is Meridian’s sisterly love as well as her optimism in human relationship highlighted here in the novel. Till the end of the novel Meridian’s optimism is revealed. As at last she says to Truman: “ Besides all the people who are as alone as I am will one day gather at the river. We will watch the evening sun go down. And in the darkness maybe we will know the truth.” (242)

Thus, Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* and Walker’s *Meridian* render the theme of optimism. Both of the novels expose the inferior status of the blacks in general and black women in particular and their struggle against the white hegemony. Morrison’s Pecola, Pauline, Mac Teer family and Walker’s Meridian and the white girl Lynne stand for optimism. They believe in the survival as well as the betterment of humanity. They look at the bright aspect of life and keep struggling against all the obstacles in their life. They put forth a good example for the mankind to achieve redemption.

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