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On the African-American Maternal Love in *The Bluest Eye*

论《最蓝的眼睛》中的黑人母爱

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Abstract

Toni Morrison is one of the most prominent black writers in African-American literature whose novels dedicate to depicting the sufferings of the African-American people, especially the miserable life of African-American women as an inferior group. Therefore, the African-American maternal love is a significant theme worthy of consideration in Toni Morrison's works. On *The Bluest Eye*, most critics explore the racism, feminism, the narrative strategies, the characters, the structure or the themes of the novel. However, almost none have studied the maternal love in *The Bluest Eye* from the perspective of the effects of African-American motherhood on the growth of the children.

This M.A. thesis intends to analyze the causes of the two disparate prototypes of maternal love of Pauline and Mrs. MacTeer and the effects of the loss of Pauline's maternal love and the persistence of that of Mrs. MacTeer's on the growth of their children--Pecola and Claudia under the racial discrimination and white culture oppression. Pecola was born in an incomplete and abnormal family and received distorted and destructive maternal love which results in her insanity, while Claudia was born in an integral and normal family and received positive and instructive maternal love which ensures her healthy growth. The thesis analyzes how the African-American maternal love influences the growth of children and finds out how to fulfill the commitments of African-American maternal love and how to develop the wholesome African-American maternal love under the racial discrimination and white oppression.

In the eyes of Morrison, the special historical background of slavery has determined the special commitments of African-American women's maternal love, that is, physical preservation, spiritual nurturance and cultural inheritance. The African-American maternal love is the crucial source of the survival for generations of the blacks in the circumstances of racial discrimination and white cultural hegemony, the root of power to build up black self identity and black racial pride and an important

means to inherit the black cultural heritages and maintain the black racial identity.

The thesis consists of four chapters apart from the introduction and the conclusion. Chapter One explores the causes of the loss of maternal love, taking the example of Pauline's deformed maternal love. Chapter Two shows the persistence of maternal love by analyzing the causes of the persistent maternal love of Mrs. MacTeer; Chapter Three concentrates on the effects of two disparate African-American motherhoods on children by contrasting the destiny of Pecola and that of Claudia; Chapter Four dwells on the roles of African-American mothers under the racial discrimination and white cultural oppression and the three important aspects to develop wholesome African-American maternal love, that is, firmly pursuing the black self identity, deeply rooting in the African-American community and highly maintaining the black traditional cultural heritages.

Key Words: African-American maternal love, self identity, the black traditional cultural heritages, African-American community

摘要

莫里森是美国黑人文学史上最著名的黑人作家之一，其作品描写了黑人的痛苦遭遇，特别是作为劣势群体的黑人女性的悲惨生活。因此，在莫里森的著作中，非裔美国人的母爱是个值得探讨的重要主题。对于《最蓝的眼睛》，大多数评论家关注的角度是该小说的种族歧视，女性主义，叙述策略，人物塑造，结构或主题研究。然而，很少人从黑人的母爱对孩子成长的影响的角度来分析该小说。

本文分析《最蓝的眼睛》中两种不同原型的黑人母爱：波林遗失的扭曲的母爱和麦克蒂亚太太持有的坚定的母爱及其各自产生的原因，讨论在种族歧视和白人文化压迫下，两种不同母爱对她们孩子佩科拉和克劳蒂亚的命运产生的不同影响。佩科拉出生在一个残缺、不正常的家庭，她妈妈具有毁灭性的畸形的母爱，最终导致了她的悲惨命运；而克劳蒂亚出生在一个完整友爱的家庭，她妈妈具有引导意义的深深的母爱，让她能够健康地成长。本文致力于分析在种族歧视和白色文化霸权中，黑人母爱如何影响孩子们，总结出黑人母亲要履行的职责以及如何培养健全的黑人母爱。

根据莫里森的观点，奴隶制的特殊历史背景决定了黑人母爱的特殊使命：即生命的养育，精神的滋养和文化的传承。母爱是一代代黑人在种族歧视的白人文化霸权中得以生存的重要源泉，是黑人们形成黑人自我身份认同和民族自豪感的力量根源，更是黑人母亲传承黑人历史文化传统和保持黑人种族特性的重要途径。

除了绪论和结论，本论文共分为四章。第一章以波林畸形的母爱为例讨论母爱遗失的原因；第二章分析麦克蒂亚太太坚定的母爱及原因；第三章通过对佩科拉和克劳蒂亚不同命运的对比，论述两种不同母爱对孩子的命运产生的不同影响；第四章研究种族歧视和白人文化压迫下，黑人母亲所扮演的角色以及如何从三个层面去培养健全的黑人母爱，即坚定地追求黑人自我身份，深深地扎根于非裔美国人的社区和高度地维护黑人传统文化遗产。

关键词：黑人母爱，自我身份，黑人文化遗产，黑人社区

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Introduction

Maternal love, the most sacred and wonderful love in the world, plays an essential part in the life of every child. The African-American maternal love, which is fully and vividly depicted in Toni Morrison's novels, is an eternal theme for us to explore.

1. Toni Morrison and Her Writing

Toni Morrison, the only black woman writer awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature, is one of the most outstanding novelists in the second half of the 20th century. She was born in Lorain, Ohio, in a working-class family in 1931. Her parents had moved to the north to escape the problems of southern racism. Her family has a profound influence on her development as a writer. Morrison's father, George Wofford, was a welder and told her numerous folktales of the black history and community; her grandmother who was talented in telling black folklores and her mother who sang in the choir built up a great sense of pride in her black identity, transferring the African-American heritages to her. She was greatly influenced by the black blues songs and folktales. In her works, Morrison describes the experiences of African-American women in a racist culture. When speaking of the purpose of creation, Morrison says she is stimulated to write about black people. The blacks are people, not aliens. They live, they love and they die. (Ruas 118) Being an African-American herself, it is the deep-rooted traditional black culture and her ability to reflect an essential aspect of African-American reality that make her into a successful writer. According to Morrison, a novel should be both beautiful, powerful and effective and disclose the conflicts and problems, which is an indication of the purpose of her writing. Haskel Frankel briefly comments on Morrison's works as follows: she "reveals herself when she shucks the fuzziness born of flights and poetic imagery, as a writer of considerable power and tenderness, someone who can cast back to the living, bleeding heart of childhood and

capture it on paper” (Frankel 3-4). In her works, Morrison successfully presents us the problem that the white cultural hegemony leads to the loss of self identity, the loss of community sense, the loss of black cultural heritages of some African-American mothers which causes the suffering and destruction of their children, and dedicates to solving the problem.

2. Black Motherhood in the Novels of Toni Morrison

Reading her novels, we can easily find that most African-American mothers fail to offer a wholesome love to their children, hence the children are not able to defeat the racial discrimination and the white culture oppression. As she told Nellie McKey, “What is uppermost in my mind [...] is that my life seems to be dominated by information about black women. They were the culture bearers, and they told us what to do” (Taylor-Guthrie 160). According to Morrison, the most significant commitment of the African-American maternal love is bearing culture and inheritance in the community which offers directions as to what to do for the next generation. It is the mothers who bear and communicate the history and life experiences to the children. As culture bearers and inheritors, the African-American mothers must have the capabilities to survive in a society hostile to them and must fight to offer the material preservation, spiritual nurturance and cultural inheritance necessary for the healthy growth of their children. Whether regarded as mentors, advisors or advocates, African-American mothers, shouldering the commitment of cultural inheritance, teach the children about the African-American traditional culture and enlighten them to take pride in it.

Throughout the history of American society, maternal perspectives have always been neglected and the voices of the mothers are silenced. The presentation of pregnancy, childbirth, education and the experience of motherhood from the mother's, especially the African-American mother's perspective has not been expressed in written culture. Hence, more substantial attention to the African-American maternal experiences has been given in Toni Morrison's novels from the physical, psychological, social and cultural dimensions. Her fiction reflects a profound concern for African-American mothers.

Morrison has referred to the loss of the African-American maternal love in her works: “I think, all the time I write, I’m writing about love or its absence, although I

don't start out that way" (Taylor-Guthrie 40). Her first novel *The Bluest Eye*, which tells a heartbreaking story of the black girl Pecola, whose beauty dream is to have white skin and a pair of blue eyes, depicts the disastrous fate of the poor girl due to the deformed maternal love of Pauline. In the novel *Sula*, Morrison describes the fettered maternal love of Sula who is disconnected from her own maternal love and fails to turn to the black maternal love due to slavery in the white dominant society. In *Beloved*, Morrison presents us a horrid form of maternal love--infanticide. Sethe, a slave mother, whose love has been called "too thick", kills her own daughter. In the novel *Song of Solomon*, the broken maternal love of Ruth, Milkman's blood mother, is destroyed by the patriarchal society. Living in the white dominant society, for those African-Americans, the pursuit of the white acceptance is at the cost of their black features and their self identities. The tragedies of those African-American mothers and their distorted maternal love are the outcomes of the cost.

Through her works, Morrison tries her best to remind the African-American mothers of the importance of their self identity and cultural heritages and lead her people to the black community and traditional culture to have the protection for the younger generations to survive whole and complete in the dominant white culture.

3. A Brief Introduction to *The Bluest Eye*

The story is set in a time when white culture was dominant in American society and black people suffer from the racial discrimination and oppression. It recounts the tragic experiences of Pauline and Pecola Breedlove, a pair of black mother and daughter. Under the assimilation of the white dominant culture, Pauline not only loses her cultural roots, but the ability to love her children--her instinct of maternal love is deformed which results in the fatal destruction of her daughter--Pecola. In contrast to the Breedlove family, which is lost in the white culture, in the MacTeer family, Mrs. MacTeer strives for the well-being of her family and offers spiritual strength for her children--Claudia and Frieda. She successfully protects her children from the invasion of the white culture and fosters them to have love, dignity and self identity as African-Americans.

Pecola, the heroine of the novel, has been living in the violence of her parents, the mockery of her schoolmates and the indifference of her community. She attributes all her sufferings to her black identity, so she lives under the illusion that having a pair

of blue eyes, a noticeable sign of white beauty, can change the way she is treated and ensure her a happy life. However, this pair of blue eyes would not bring happiness to her, but total destruction of her. Contrary to Pecola, Claudia MacTeer, who is a rebel against the hegemonic white culture and a persistent advocate of the black cultural heritages, survives to narrate the story to us. In the afterword to the novel, Morrison writes:

Beauty was not simply something to behold, it was something one could do. *The Bluest Eye* was my effort to say something about that; to say something about why she had not, or possibly ever would have, the experience of what she possessed and also why she prayed for so radical an alteration. Implicit in her desire was racial self-loathing. (*The Bluest Eye* 209-210)

After reading the novel, we wonder about who told her the illusionary concept of beauty and what caused her tragedy. Through the depiction of the different fates of Pecola and Claudia in the novel, we are clear about the causes. Morrison tries to illuminate to us that the African-Americans who abandon their own black identities, who cut off from their families and communities and who desert their own cultural heritages shall be damaged by the dominant white culture, hence the African-Americans should fight against the racism and discrimination embracing their own blackness.

4. The Argument and Structure of the Thesis

According to Morrison, maternal love for the African-Americans means physical preservation, spiritual nurturance and cultural inheritance. The spiritual nurturance and cultural inheritance to help children develop self identity as black people, resist the assimilation of the dominant white culture and inherit the black cultural tradition are far more important than physical preservation for survival. Hence, the ideal African-American maternal love should cure the physical and emotional trauma inflicted by the racial discrimination and oppression, pass on African-American traditional culture and build up the true self identity and wholeness of the black race. The teachings of African-American mothers are to foster a meaningful racial identity

in children in a society that despises and repels peoples of color. The ethnic children must first be guided to survive in systems that discriminate against them. However, this survival must not be attained at the cost of black self identity. Patricia Hill regards that

Thus, a dialectal relationship exists between systems of racial oppression designed to strip a subordinated group of a sense of personal identity and a sense of collective peoplehood, and the cultures of resistance extant in various ethnic groups that resist the oppression. For women of color, teachings for identity occur at this juncture. (Collins 57)

The pursuit of black identity is the core for the African-Americans to survive the racial discrimination and oppression. So, there are some papers concentrating on the pursuit of identity of the African-Americans in Toni Morrison's novels. These papers regard that by exposing the loss of black women's identities which are caused by historic events and racial oppression and by providing the solutions to the black identity crisis, they come to the conclusion that Morrison presents her strong sense of black feminist consciousness in *The Bluest Eye*. According to Morrison, loving one's black self and loving one's black culture are the essential ways to solve the identity crisis. Only in doing so, can the black women retain their authentic black identities. Ruby Dee's "Black Family Search for Identity" and Richard L. Allen's *The Concept of Self: A Study of Black Identity and Self-Esteem* reflect this view.

There are also some studies on the maternal love of Toni Morrison's novels, which mainly deal with *Beloved* or *Song of Solomon*. These papers involve the black history, Morrison's feminist ideas and the mother-daughter relationships causing the suffering experiences of the African-American mothers. They conclude that the loss or distortion of mother-daughter relationships symbolizes the absence of black traditional culture. Only with the help of the sisterhood, brotherhood and community can the African-American mothers and daughters heal their sufferings, build up their black identities and maintain the African-American cultural heritages. Patricia Hill's *The Meaning of Motherhood in Black Culture and Black Mother-Daughter Relationships* and Zhu Rongjie's *Pain and Healing: A Study of Maternal Love in Toni Morrison's Fiction from a Cultural Perspective* reflect this view.

On *The Bluest Eye*, critics at home and abroad mainly study the racism, feminism,

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