

**The Outcast of Black Women from the Ideal Womanhood in  
*Sula, The Bluest Eye, The Color Purple, and Possessing the  
Secret of Joy: A Comparative Analysis of Wifehood,  
Motherhood, Beauty, and Purity***

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**Summary:**

This article aims at exploring the role of racism, sexism, and classism in the outcast of black women from the ideal womanhood in Toni Morrison's *Sula* and *The Bluest Eye* and Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* and *Possessing the Secret of Joy*. Using Patricia Hill Collins' intersectionality and through a comparative analysis, this paper explores black females' gender roles in Morrison's and Walker's selected novels and the extent to which these roles fall outside the traditional standards of womanhood, which are mainly related to women's roles as wives and mothers and to their purity and beauty. The study concludes that racism, sexism, and classism make the black woman the antithesis of the ideal woman.

**Keywords:** racism; sexism; classism; black womanhood; stereotypes.

**Introduction**

Women's roles, throughout history, are related to a number of social expectations which shape their status as true women. From the Victoria concept of The Cult of True Womanhood to the post-WWII Ideal Womanhood, women's characteristics and roles remain tightly wedded to motherhood, wifehood, purity, and beauty. Toni Morrison and Alice Walker are among the pioneers of contemporary black women writers who seek to reclaim the

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African American identity in general and black womanhood in particular.

*Sula*,<sup>1</sup> *The Bluest Eye*,<sup>2</sup> *The Color Purple*,<sup>3</sup> and *Possessing the Secret of Joy*,<sup>4</sup> bring together the complex and difficult issue of black womanhood within the intersecting oppressions of race, class, and gender. The four novels illustrate the way the hegemonic meaning of womanhood and the negative images of black womanhood enhance black women's invisibility. Therefore, this paper aims at exploring the way racism, sexism and classism shape black women's gender roles and to what extent these roles fall outside the traditional meaning of womanhood.

Many studies have investigated the issue of black womanhood in Morrison's and Walker's selected novels. Some of them have relied mainly on exploring black females' negative images. For instance, in "Identity Crisis in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* and *Sula*", Chiara Cecchini describes Hannah and Sula as jezebels who use their sexuality to control men. She describes Eva as the communal matriarch with a focus on her egoism as both bloodmother and othermother. She has also depicted Pauline as the mammy who abandons her family and leaves her community for a white family.<sup>5</sup> Also, Jakira M. Davis has discussed the negative image of black girls' ugliness in *The Bluest Eye* by focusing on the damaging effects of colorism on Pecola.<sup>6</sup>

However, other studies have taken a different approach by looking at the ways Morrison's and Walker's black female characters challenge the negative images tightly linked to black womanhood. For instance, Khamsa Qasim et al. describe Eva as a strong mother, not a matriarch and Sula as an adventurer due to her rebellious behavior. They also describe Pauline as a strong woman not a breeder because she refuses to show pain when she gives birth to Pecola.<sup>7</sup> Likewise, Fardosa Abdalla claims that Pauline is neither the mammy nor the matriarch. She argues that Pauline is not happy and kind in the Fishers' house as the mammy and that her violence and aggressiveness with her family are justified by her ugliness which is unique and irresistible.<sup>8</sup>

The previous studies have relied mainly on racism and/or sexism as the main aspect(s) behind shaping black women's negative images. Also, they do not discuss the extent to which these images discard black women from the traditional gender roles. Hence, this paper seeks to provide a more understanding to the various forms of oppression that many black women still face. It also seeks to highlight the tension between the inability to follow the traditional gender roles and the pressure to submit to gender stereotypes in Morrison's and Walker's selected novels.

Therefore, the present study will shed light on the intersection of the different forms of oppression and mainly race, class, and gender as the main aspect behind shaping black womanhood. It will also explore, through a comparative analysis, the extent to which black women's gender performances in Morrison's and Walker's selected novels fall outside the traditional meaning of womanhood. Moreover, to our knowledge, no prior studies have investigated the paradoxical roles of wifehood and motherhood in *Possessing the Secret of Joy* or deeply discussed the image of the mule in *The Color Purple*.

In order to approach the concept of womanhood in Morrison's and Walker's novels, Patricia Hill Collins' intersectionality is used as the main theoretical background. Collins considers the way oppressions related mainly to race, class, and gender operate simultaneously to shape the identities of individuals. She claims that the white dominant group controls dominant definitions of gender for the white women, the black women, and even the black men. In shaping conceptions of femininity, the black women's situation is different from the white women. Black women are typically dominated on the basis of gender, race, and class, while white women suffer from gender domination but are privileged by their race and often by their class as well.

Collins' intersectionality gives greater recognition to black women's controlling images that help in distorting black womanhood. She claims: "intersecting oppressions of race, class, gender, and sexuality could not continue without powerful ideological justifications for their existence [which make them]

appear to be natural, normal, and inevitable parts of everyday life".<sup>9</sup> Intersectionality may for instance help shed light on black female characters' gender identity in Toni Morrison's and Alice Walker's selected novels as it looks at the way the different forms of oppression intersect to distort black womanhood.

In order to assess the extent to which black womanhood falls outside the meaning of the ideal womanhood, the present paper compares the traditional meaning of wifehood, motherhood, purity and beauty with black women's gender performances in Morrison's *Sula* and *The Bluest Eye* and Walker's *The Color Purple* and *Possessing the Secret Joy*.

## 1- Wifehood

### 1-1- The Domestic Wife vs. The Black Matriarch

Within the discourse of the ideal womanhood, wifehood and motherhood are glorified as the purpose of a woman's being. The ideal woman should be domestic. She has to remain within her proper sphere, where she can play her ultimate roles as a good wife and a glorified mother. The ideal woman should also accept male dominance. She has to be submissive and show her dependence and need for protection.

Both Morrison and Walker highlight the unhealthy marital relationships in black communities. Black women in their households find themselves obliged to submit to one of the two imposed roles; either to play a secondary role in a patriarchal family or to become the head of the household, when black men abandon their duties. The latter is directly linked to the stereotypical image of the black matriarch. According to Patricia Hill Collins, the image of the matriarch is central to intersecting oppressions of class, gender, and race. It is important in explaining the persistence of black social class outcomes.<sup>10</sup>

The paradoxical images of black women as either domestic good wives or head of the households is central in *Sula*. The images of the ideal woman and the nuclear family strongly influence the black community. Morrison creates Nel Wright's traditional and conservative family in contrast to Sula Peace's matriarchal one. The Wright family inherited the traditional

gender roles from one generation to another. Nel's mother Helene is the daughter of a prostitute. However, she has been raised by her strict religious grandmother, Cecile, who makes of her a very traditional woman. Cecile plans Helene's marriage to her grandnephew because she believes in the necessity of marriage to preserve women's virtue. In the same way, Helene raises Nel on the two traditional women's jobs; wifedom and motherhood.

Sula, however, has been raised in a household headed by her grandmother Eva. In contrast to Helene, Eva is the breadwinner. She is the authoritative figure and the one who names things and persons. Eva's non-traditional gender roles make her labeled the black matriarch. Collins claims that the: "[a]ggressive, assertive women are penalized—they are abandoned by their men, end up impoverished, and are stigmatized as being unfeminine".<sup>11</sup> Yet, it is important to notice that Eva's assertive behavior rises when her husband BoyBoy left the household and she finds herself in front of big responsibilities towards her children. Thus, the image of the matriarch rises primarily as a response to black men's failure in performing the traditional gender roles. Morrison describes Eva's husband as the one who "liked womanizing best, drinking second, and abusing Eva third" (*Sula* 32).

Although the image of the matriarch is the outcome of the intersecting oppressions of race, class, and gender, the black man's role in constructing the matriarchy thesis should not be reduced. For instance, when Jude leaves the house, Nel, like Eva, is obliged to give up the image of the traditional domestic wife and play the head of the household's role. Although Nel is far from Eva's authoritative personality, she is also a matriarch due to her position as the breadwinner.

Yet, the matriarch is a powerful image for women's independence. Collins argues that "the image of the Black matriarch serves as a powerful symbol for both Black and White women of what can go wrong if White patriarchal power is challenged [...]. The matriarch or overly strong Black woman has also been used to influence Black men's understandings of Black masculinity."<sup>12</sup> Eva Peace shows her ability in filling the head of

the household's role. She supports her family financially. She even devotes herself for the well being of her children.

However, when BoyBoy comes back to town and visits her. She does not know what she wants from him, "[w]ould she cry, cut his throat, beg him to *make love to her*" (*Sula* 35. Emphasis in the original). Eva's controversial feelings show that she is not enjoying her role as the black matriarch. For instance, her advice for Sula to marry and have kids is very surprising. She claims: "[w]hen you gone to get married? You need to have some babies. It'll settle you.' [...] 'Ain't no woman got no business floatin' around without no man'" (*Sula* 92). When Sula replies that she [Eva] and her mother live without men, Eva argues: "[n]ot by choice" (*Sula* 92).

Eva regrets her status as the black matriarch and she, as Helen, supports the traditional view of women's domesticity. According to Collins, "[m]any U.S. Black women who find themselves maintaining families by themselves often feel that they have done something wrong. If only they were not so strong, some reason, they might have found a male partner."<sup>13</sup> Therefore, although the black woman can enjoy her freedom within the head of the household's role, the image of the ideal woman remains so powerful that black women could not escape.

#### 1-2- Female Fragility vs. The Mule

Besides the image of the matriarch, the white upper-class dominant group creates the mule stereotype. Collins defines the mule as the woman "whose back is bent from a lifetime of hard work".<sup>14</sup> She introduces the origins of the word "mule" which is "mules uh de world". The term has been first used in Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. It defines black women as the lowest creatures in the world. It is mainly related to black women's labor market and their victimization as dehumanized objects and living machines.<sup>15</sup>

In *The Color Purple*, Walker presents Celie as "the mule of the world", because her husband, whom she called Mr. \_\_\_\_\_, forces her to work hard and exploits her labor. At first, Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ wants to marry her sister Nettie, but their father Pa refuses his offer.

Instead, Pa proposes him Celie. Choked when seeing Celie, Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ says: “I ain’t never really look at that one” (*The Color 8*). Pa tries to convince him: “she ain’t no stranger to hard work. And she clean. And God done fixed her. You can do everything just like you want to and she ain’t gonna make you feed it or clothe it” (*The Color 8*). Surprisingly, Pa informs Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ that “[s]he ugly [...] she a bad influence on my other girls [...] She ain’t smart either [...] she’ll give away everything you own [...] She tell lies” (*The Color 8*). Nevertheless, he concludes with “she’ll make the better wife” (*The Color 8*).

Although Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ spends the whole spring thinking about Pa’s offer, he ends up accepting Celie as a wife. Despite Celie’s negative features, as described by Pa, Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ marries her for two important features; she is not demanding and “she can work like a man” (*The Color 8*). Collins discusses the way race, class and gender enhance the contradictions between the dominant ideology of womanhood and black women’s objectification. She claims: “[i]f women are allegedly passive and fragile, then why are Black women treated as ‘mules’”.<sup>16</sup>

Mr. \_\_\_\_\_’s/Celie’s relationship is similar to that of a master/slave. Celie has to work inside and outside the house, while Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ does not work at all. Harpo inherited these paradoxical gender roles from his father. When Mr. \_\_\_\_\_’s sister asks him to help Celie in bringing water, he replies: “[w]omen work. I’m a man” (*The Color 22*). Later, Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ obliges him to work with Celie in the fields, and due to his continuous complaining about his hard work, Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ gives him wages. Yet, Celie works hard and without any wages.

Hence, the image of the mule in *The Color Purple* is another example of black men’s role in black women’s subordination. In other words, by making Celie a mule, Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ not only embraces the white ideology that seeks to subordinate black women by discarding them from white women’s fragility but also justifies their labor market victimization.

## 2- Motherhood

### 2-1- The Good Mother vs. The Black Mammy

The image of the good mother has always been related to true womanhood. The good mother should be caring, protective and nurturing. Among the different stereotypical images of black women, the image of the mammy is the closest one to the image of the good mother. While the matriarch is the authoritative, aggressive female, the mammy is the one who has both virtue and mother love. However, the mammy's feelings are primarily directed towards the white family for whom she works. Collins argues:

The mammy image is central to intersecting oppressions of race, gender, sexuality, and class. Regarding racial oppression, controlling images like the mammy aim to influence Black maternal behavior. [...] Black mothers are encouraged to transmit to their own children [...] their assigned place in White power structures.<sup>17</sup>

In *The Bluest Eye*, Pauline Breedlove represents the mammy figure. She is obliged to work for the Fishers, because her alcoholic husband, Cholly, abandons his duties. Pauline's duality is very significant in the novel. She is a good mother only in the Fishers' house. With her children, Pauline shows a totally different image. She fails in providing neither love nor protection to her children and specifically to her daughter. Pauline treats her daughter badly unlike the way she treats the small white girl for whom she works. The white girl calls Pecola's mother Polly, while Pecola calls her Mrs. Breedlove. Pauline's failed motherhood leads to the devastation of her two children. Sammy runs away many times and Pecola is trapped in a vicious circle of self-hatred and ends up raped and impregnated by her father.

The most significant example of Pauline's duality is when Pecola accidentally topples the cobbler in the Fishers' kitchen. Pauline quickly punishes and beats her harshly. Then, she starts comforting the little white girl with her lovable words. Pauline internalizes the mammy image and proves that she is the obedient domestic servant, "[a]ll the meaningfulness of her life was in her work" (*The Bluest* 126). According to Collins, "[b]lack women



who internalize the mammy image potentially become effective conduits for perpetuating racial oppression”<sup>18</sup>.

The image of the mammy distorts black motherhood which has always been the site of black women’s resistance. Black mothers used to raise their children and mainly their daughters on the necessity of resisting the different forms of oppression. However, by shifting the black mother’s nurturing towards the white family, the dominant group does not only destruct the mother/daughter bond but also repress black people’s resistance.

## 2-2- The Protective Mother vs. The Submissive Wife

In *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, Walker presents a new meaning of the ideal womanhood which differs from the Western one. Though the two concepts of womanhood intertwine in many aspects as women’s submissiveness and domesticity, the ideal womanhood in Olinka village is directly related to black women’s bodies. In other words, the ideal womanhood is linked to the traditional ritual of female genital circumcision, which is used in order to remove what is considered masculine and, thus, preserve the full status of the African woman.

Yet, female genital circumcision is used in order to control black women’s sexuality. According to Collins, “efforts to control Black women’s sexuality lie at the heart of Black women’s oppression”<sup>19</sup>. The ritual is also regarded as a way for resisting the influence of white imperialists and Christian missionaries. Thus, ethnicity, nation, gender, and sexuality intersect to shape Olinka women’s lives.

For instance, Tashi’s transformation from a strong rebellious woman to a mutilated broken woman is very significant. In the beginning, Walker describes Tashi as a rebellious girl who tries to enjoy independence and learn a new way of life. Her rebellious behavior is clearly seen in her lovemaking with Adam in the fields, which is considered a great sin. However, when the Mbele’s detained leader sends a message to his people to make them “return to the purity of [their] own culture and traditions” (*Possessing* 115), Tashi abides to the leader’s call and joins the Mbeles camp in order to undergo the surgery. Although the ritual

causes the death of her sister Dura, Tashi shows great courage and determinism for her African womanhood. She tells her psychiatrist Raye that she gives up her sexual pleasure in order “to be accepted as a real woman by the Olinka people” (*Possessing* 120-1).

Though Tashi and her sister Dura assume the responsibility of following the illusion of the true African womanhood, their mother plays the most important role in their devastation. Despite the fact that she converts to Christianity and shows her opposition to female genital circumcision, she cannot stop the ritual from reaching her daughters’ throats. Her first daughter Dura dies, and her second daughter Tashi lives with complex trauma and ends up executed.

Within the context of the ideal womanhood in Olinka society, Tashi’s mother finds herself in a controversial situation in which motherhood and wifehood stand paradoxically. In other words, to be good, obedient, submissive wife, Tashi’s mother should forget her mother duties. Yet, if she chooses to be a nurturing, protective mother, she will be a bad, rebellious wife. Tashi’ mother abides the patriarchal laws, by allowing the continuity of the sexist ritual. Thus, she proves her status as a good wife.

However, she is the antithesis of the good mother because she lacks one of the most important virtues of motherhood which is protection. Tashi recounts her mother’s ignorance: “[i]n truth, my mother was not equipped, there was not enough of her self left to her, to think about me. Or about my sister Dura, who bled to death after a botched circumcision or about any of her other children. She had just sunk into her role of ‘She Who Prepares the Lambs for Slaughter’” (*Possessing* 272-3). Therefore, the dominant group in Olinka village does not only control black women’s sexuality but also breaks the mother-daughter bond by making mothers maintain their own daughters’ devastation.

### **3- Female Purity vs. The Black Jezebel**

Purity is also an essential component of the ideal womanhood. Barbara Welter claims that the absence of purity makes a woman “unnatural and unfeminine”.<sup>20</sup> Purity creates rigid boundaries but

a woman within the boundaries gains the highest status possible for a woman in society. It also manifests itself in the proper piety and maternal love, which a woman imparts to her domestic sphere.

Yet, the intersection of race, class, gender, and sexuality subordinates black women and degrades them to the symbol of deviant female sexuality. Collins states:

Heterosexuality itself is constructed via binary thinking that juxtaposes male and female sexuality [...] Men are active, and women should be passive. [...] Black people and other racialized groups simultaneously stand outside these definitions of normality and mark their boundaries. In this context of a gender-specific, White, heterosexual normality, the jezebel or hoochie becomes a racialized, gendered symbol of deviant female sexuality.<sup>21</sup>

Unlike the ideal woman who should repress her sexuality, the image of the jezebel casts black women as either sexually aggressive or having excessive sexual desire. In both cases, the jezebel remains central in black women's controlling images because it discards black women from white women's purity.

In *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison stresses the importance of purity in the black community's view of the three prostitutes living above Pecola's house. One day when Claudia and Frieda go in search for Pecola and they don't find her, Maginot Line, one of the three prostitutes, asks them to wait for her in her house. The two girls' reaction shows the society's conventions. They reply: "[n]o, ma'am, we ain't allowed." [...] My mama said you ruined" (*The Bluest* 102).

Although the three prostitutes are considered by both the white and the black communities as ruined women, they still the only mother figure for Pecola. Morrison introduces them as the most confident characters in the novel. They are strong and self-possessed. Unlike Pauline who fails in her mother duties, Miss Marie, China, and Poland nurture Pecola with mother/daughter conversations about love and relationships. Hence, they challenge

the traditional image of the good mother which has always been linked to female purity.

Sula's mother, Hannah, is also a black jezebel. Yet, she does not use her sexuality for money, but simply refuses to live without the attention of a man. Hannah "made the man feel as though he were complete and wonderful just as he was" (*Sula* 43). In contrast to the three prostitutes who hate all men, Hannah glorifies patriarchy. On the one hand, she loves men and makes them assert their manhood in her companionship. Thus, she enhances their patriarchal attitudes. On the other hand, she fails in her mother duties and, thus, she proves that the jezebel is the antithesis of the good mother.

#### 4- The Beauty Myth vs. Colorism

In both *The Bluest Eye* and *Sula*, Morrison sets a hierarchy of skin color that works in opposite directions. In *Sula*, The Bottom community sees the darkest skin as the manifesto of the true black blood. In her description of Nel, Morrison claims that she is "just dark enough to escape the blows of the pitch-black truebloods and the contempt of old women who worried about such things as bad blood mixtures" (*Sula* 52). However, in *The Bluest Eye*, the black community adopts the white racist standards of beauty in which the lightest skin is the most beautiful. This adoption is clearly illustrated in the gifts that parents give to their daughters in Christmas; "[a]dults, older girls, shops, magazines, newspapers, window signs--all the world had agreed that a blue-eyed, yellow-haired, pink skinned doll was what every girl child treasured" (*The Bluest* 18).

The different messages sent through the toys have deep effects on the young black girl's construction/destruction of womanhood. According to Lindsey, "[d]olls for girls, especially Barbies [...] are standard gifts to children from parents. Not only are messages about beauty, clothing, and weight sent to girls via Barbie, but girls also learn about options and preferences in life".<sup>22</sup> By offering black girls white blue-eyed dolls, black parents not only legitimize the traditional racist standards of beauty but also legitimize their daughters' ugliness.

In addition to the binary of white beauty/black ugliness that categorizes American society in general, Morrison describes the binary of light/dark skin within the black community itself. This color hierarchy is explicitly manifested in the geographical division of the black society. The Breedloves did not live in the storefront because they were poor, black and mainly because of their unique ugliness. Collins argues:

Colorism [...] is deeply embedded in a distinctly American form of racism grounded in Black/White oppositional differences. Other groups "of color" must negotiate the meanings attached to their "color." All must position themselves within a continually renegotiated color hierarchy where, because they define the top and the bottom, the meanings attached to Whiteness and Blackness change much less than we think.<sup>23</sup>

Nevertheless, though colorism is related to racism, it is deeply gendered. In other words, though it splits the black community according to skin color hierarchy, it exclusively subjugates black women. For instance, Cholly and Sammy could fit with their dark skin, but Pauline and Pecola are trapped into self-hatred. Collins argues: "[r]ace, gender, and sexuality converge on this issue of evaluating beauty. Black men's blackness penalizes them. But because they are not women, valuations of their self-worth do not depend as heavily on their physical attractiveness".<sup>24</sup>

Pecola strictly rejects her blackness to the point that she begs God to make her disappear. She closes her eyes and imagines that the different parts of her body are slowly disappearing, except her eyes. She tries as she could to make them disappear but she fails because "[t]hey were everything" (*The Bluest* 43). Pecola's eyes work as memory which gathers people's admiration of Mary Jane, Shirley Temple and Mr. Yacobowski, the store owner, who hesitates to touch her hand when she gives him money. Her eyes also remind her of the way her light-skinned classmate Maureen Peel is privileged in both white and black communities. Although Maureen's has "both an unattractive canine tooth and signs of an

early disfigurement on her hands”, she is still considered beautiful.<sup>25</sup>

The prejudiced beauty devastates Pauline, Pecola and many other girls and women whose physical appearance discards them from the ideal meaning of womanhood. Nevertheless, Morrison insists on the importance of the mother-daughter relationship in shaping young black girls’ self-esteem. In contrast to Pauline, Mrs. MacTeer implants in her two daughters the importance of self-worth to resist and challenge the different forms of oppression. Claudia and Frieda create their own model of beauty, which is primarily based on loving and accepting the self.

### Conclusion

The intersection of the different forms of oppression in Toni Morrison’s *Sula* and *The Bluest Eye* and Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple* and *Possessing the secret of Joy* discards black women from the ideal womanhood. Black women find themselves unable to follow the traditional meaning of wifedom which enhances women’s domesticity and fragility. They are obliged to financially support their families and, thus, labeled black matriarchs. They are also assigned to do heavy work which makes them regarded as mules or living machines. Moreover, they fail in their role as protective mothers and their caring and nurturing is directed towards the white family. They are also degraded into the symbol of deviant female sexuality in contrast to the white women’s purity. Finally, the beauty myth excludes them from the frames of the ideal beauty. Thus, racism, sexism, and classism make the black woman the antithesis of the ideal woman.

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