

## **Dicing with Class, Race and Gender: Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye***

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**ABSTRACT:** *The most disappointing aspect of human progress and our civilization is that some of us cannot accept others as our fellow human beings. Class, colour and culture always differentiate the human society. Instead of relishing the differences to our advantage, we struggle to suppress and destroy others. Caucasians despised Negroids and the Mongoloids are always in arms against Caucasians. We lost our sense of fraternity. The void between the rich and the poor, the gulf between blacks and whites and the drift between man and woman is keenly palpable. In the name of this class, race and gender some invisible hand is always playing the dice. Ever since human society emerged from its primitive state it has remained fundamentally divided between classes. Focusing on this aspect this paper attempts to critically analyze how classism marginalizes the poor, make them collect self-contempt by heaps and often degrade them to animal plane in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*.*

**KEY WORDS:** *gender, race, class, victim, life*

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### **I. INTRODUCTION**

The most disappointing aspect of human progress and our civilization is that some of us cannot accept others as our fellow human beings. Class, colour and culture always differentiate the human society. Instead of relishing the differences to our advantage, we struggle to suppress and destroy others. Caucasians despised Negroids and the Mongoloids are always in arms against Caucasians. We lost our sense of fraternity. The void between the rich and the poor, the gulf between blacks and whites and the drift between man and woman is keenly palpable. In the name of this class, race and gender some invisible hand is always playing the dice. Toni Morrison, the first black woman Nobel laureate, 1993, started exploring and expressing her protest against the class compulsion, racial prejudice and gender discrimination. Her scrapbook which she diligently maintained is full of the unspoken truths of this set of humanity. This paper focuses on her first novel *The Bluest Eye* which is a testament of her concerns for the blacks, for the poor and for the women. As a book heralded for its richness of language and boldness of vision it is featured in Oprah's Book Club 2000 with a description that it remains one of Toni Morrison's most powerful, unforgettable novels- and a significant work of American fiction.'

In life and fiction undoubtedly it is the interaction of individuals and their conflicts and conflates which is the focus of either a creative writer or a behavioural scientist. As a novelist and above all as a woman that too being an African American writer, Toni Morrison is privileged to watch these intrapersonal relationships from close quarters. As stated in the Communist Manifesto, "The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles ... Freeman and slave, patrician and plebeian, lord and serf, guild-master and journeyman, in a word, oppressor and oppressed, stood in constant opposition to one another, carried on an uninterrupted, now hidden, now open fight, a fight that each time ended, either in a revolutionary reconstruction of society at large, or in the common ruin of the contending class..."

Classism is a social phenomenon that depends upon exploitation of the given opportunities. Those who exploit most will become rich and those who fail are poor. White society gives ample opportunities for white people so they become rich and the blacks remain underdogs. Male gender bulldozes the meek women, exploit and become authoritative. The class, color and gender are one way inseparable and synonymous. Concerned with and committed to African people, Morrison uses each of her novels as a framework for investigating various solutions to the African's class exploitation, race and gender oppression. The interest of her works lies in how she constructs them.

## II. PLIGHT OF PECOLA BREEDLOVE

Morrison's first novel *The Bluest Eye* explores the extremity of black poverty in the urban slums and rural America. It chronicles the tragic, torn lives of Breedloves, a poor black family in 1940s in Ohio. Pecola Breedlove, unlovely and unloved, prays each night for blue eyes like those of her privileged blond, white school fellows. She becomes the focus of the mingled love and hatred engendered by her family's frailty and the world's cruelty as the novel moves towards a savage but poignant resolution. The plot of the novel is simple. Pecola Breedlove, an eleven year old black innocent girl, considers herself to be ugly. She cherishes the illusion that blue eyes would make her beautiful. But she is brutally raped by her father, bears a child that dies and retreats into madness believing that her eyes are not simply blue but the bluest of all. Dicing with class, race and gender, Pecola encounters no ladders but only snakes in her life. Left in the spring with the burden of rape, Pecola resorts to madness, the only refuge available to her. The drama of psycho-dynamics startles and shocks the reader and Morrison wants the reader not to question 'why' but to explore 'how.'

## III. CLASS

Ever since human society emerged from its primitive state it has remained fundamentally divided between classes. Hence, the aspect of classism is ingrained in the narrations of writers in general and black writers in particular. How classism marginalizes the poor, make them collect self-contempt by heaps and often degrade them to animal plane is evident in *The Bluest Eye*. Morrison's characters act, interact, suffer, alleviate or dominate in tune with their economic status. It is the economic status of Pauline Breedlove and her limited options in life that prompt her to slap her own child to please her white master's child. It is their financial status that pushed Breedloves to outdoors. It is not Pecola's ugliness but her poverty that makes her accept meekly the disgrace from a petty shopkeeper to that of Geraldine, the rich black woman who treats her like an untouchable animal. The insecurity of the female gender in this story and its degrading effects on the tender mind and resultant tragic insanity is more economic oriented rather than societal conditioning. Unlike Pauline, Eva Peace in *Sula* never surrenders to meekness and self-hatredness but like a tigress sacrifices her leg for the economic support of the family after her husband BoyBoy abandoned her without a penny to live. Pauline's daughter Pecola, deprived of money and identity, dreams of white beauty and Eva's granddaughter Sula without such deprivation makes an attempt to imitate the white world and both girls fail like a fledgling.

Since father is a missing figure in black community mother became the head and their relationship with their sons and daughters are always puzzling. As a reason that blacks came from abysmal poverty, though fathers dominate, their primary preoccupation is economics rather than family. In this light only one can understand Morrison's creation and expression of characters. Though the people of the community have felt the effect of classism and racism in varying degrees, the worst victim is the Breedloves' family. The world in which they live, maintains not only Anglo-Saxon standards of physical beauty but also middle class life style as a norm. It sprouted the hunger for property and for ownership and thus the rented blacks are like weeds and amidst row of weeds the propertied blacks' houses are like hothouse sunflowers. And they are always the poor neighbours' envy. This economic marginalization drives Cholly to put fire to his own home and eventually his family is put out doors.

"Cholly Breedlove, then, a renting black, having put his family outdoors, had catapulted himself beyond the reaches of human consideration. He had joined the animals; was, indeed, an old dog, a snake, a ratty nigger." (BE 12)

As Claudia says, to be put outdoors by a landlord was unfortunate but to be put oneself outdoors or to put one's own kin outdoors was criminal. Unlike Breedloves the McTeers raise their daughters who, 'guiltless and without vanity,' love themselves and withstand the pangs of social alienation. They live without illusion as much as possible. They too are victims of poverty. They whip their children, complain about the burden of life and struggle only semi successfully to acquire the necessities for survival. Describing their lives Claudia says, 'being a minority in both caste and class, we moved about on the hem of life, struggling to consolidate our weaknesses and hang on, or to creep singly up into the major folds of the garment.'(BE 17) However they cordially accept Pecola into their house and share everything with her. But unlike Pecola, Claudia and Frieda accept their difference from whites as it is given of their existence, not as deprivation to be evaded or mourned. However the love of two young sisters, towards an orphaned friend may not be successful but reflects their nobility. When Claudia and Frieda try to hide Pecola's menstruation, as they are curious and puzzled by their sexuality, Mrs McTeer takes care of Pecola. She tends and treats Pecola like her own child. However despite their poverty McTeers family succeeds in sharing love and warmth. Brought up in such a family Claudia, unlike Frieda, picks up some rebellious views against racism and classism. She hates the way the whole world has

agreed that a blue-eyed, yellow-haired, pink-skinned doll is a treasure to every girls child. She almost ritualistically destroys the white dolls that she receives for Christmas.

“I destroyed white baby dolls.

But the dismembering of dolls was not the true horror. The truly horrifying thing was the transference of the same impulses to little white girls. ... What made people look at them and say, “Awwwww,” but not for me? (BE 22)

Claudia herself confuses between illusion and reality when she does violence to real white girls who seems to her, the imitations of the doll. Claudia ultimately comes to terms with her demystified knowledge and continues the struggle for her existence. She learns to worship Shirley Temple knowing that the change was mere adjustment without improvement. But for Pecola nothing could brace against classism and racism – neither parental care nor her self-understanding. Pecola finds temporary respite with three prostitutes namely Poland, China and Maginot Line. Though they are called ‘nasty’ in the community, they succeed in giving maternal care and love to Pecola which even her own mother fails to give and stands superior to Pauline in their moral heights. They are similar to that of McTeers in this regard. They both live on the principle that life is a matter of adaptation and survival rather than resignation and death.

Like the African wilderness that continuously encroach the human settlements, the window shops of the world’s richest nation that prides in its beauty and wealth smothered the saplings of the black culture. Thus Pecola’s baby withered as everyone wished. Community aspires that there should be a law to punish when two ugly people make something more ugly. But it is Claudia alone who felt “a need for someone to want the black baby to live – just to counteract the universal love of white baby dolls, Shirley Temples and Maureen Peals.”(BE 190) Certainly Morrison uses Claudia as an oppositional voice in this novel and makes her identify the injustice at work and elicit some understanding for Pecola’s cause.

#### IV. RACE

In the words of Wilfred Samuels, “the poignancy of Pecola’s victimization arises not only from the racism but also from the intraracial conflicts related to colour, firmly rooted in white racist myths subscribed to by the white culture.” Unconsciously the black person distrusts what is black in himself / herself and desires what belongs to the white person. *The Bluest Eye* deals in this unconscious desire and shows, in a manner reminiscent of Fanon’s *Black skin, White masks*, how under severe white cultural imposition the black person can undergo, in Fanon’s words, ‘a kind of scission, a fracture of consciousness.’ Black culture, helplessly isolated by economic deprivation, is infringed by dominant white culture. This cultural hegemony on uneducated helpless human beings naturally creates identity crisis. The crisis degrades to such an abysmal point that they doubt whether they are alive or dead. Morrison’s characters Pecola, Cholly, Sethe, Son are only a few to name. These represent the extremity of cultural bankruptcy. The Breedloves lived in a house which is nothing but a shabby abandoned storefront. They virtually share a common bedroom and Pecola witnesses her parents fighting “each other with a darkly brutal formalism that is paralleled only by their love making.”(BE 43) Pecola being a girl prays to God to make her disappear whereas her twin brother Sammy takes every possible opportunity to run away from home not once but twenty seven times. Whenever Pecola’s parents fight, she thinks that if she had blue eyes her parents would do lovely things for her. She consoles herself with buying and eating her favourite candy with Mary Jane’s picture on the wrapper. Even there she experiences apathy in the eyes of the shopkeeper. The neglect and despisement of shopkeeper is not because she is ugly but because she is poor. For a fifty-two-year-old white immigrant storekeeper whose mind is ‘honed on the doe-eyed Virgin Mary,’ the sight of a poor black girl is nothing but disgust. When Pecola looks at him for a candy she sees not only vacuum in his eyes but much more.

“The total absence of human recognition – the glazed separateness. ... She has seen it lurking in the eyes of all white people. But her blackness is static and dread. And it is the blackness that accounts for, that creates, the vacuum edged with distaste in white eyes.”(BE 48-49)

She knew that the distaste is for her, her blackness and feels the inexplicable shame. She expresses her anger by meekly eating the candy. For her, “to eat the candy is somehow to eat the eyes, eat Mary Jane, love Mary Jane, be Mary Jane.”(BE 50) This symbolic cannibalism is a sign of Pecola’s instability. Jacqueline de Weever rightly says, “The desire for blue eyes is part of the inverted quality of her world; in wanting blue eyes Pecola wants, in fact, to be white.”The episodes of Maureen Peal and Geraldine reinforce Pecola’s sense that she is ugly. Claudia describes the new girl in school named Maureen Peal as the disrupter of seasons. She was

‘as rich as the richest of the white girls, swaddled in comfort and care.’ Her richness demarcated the other poor black girls in the school and made her the cynosure of the entire school.

“Black boys didn’t trip her in the halls; white boys didn’t stone her, white girls didn’t suck their teeth when she was assigned to be their work partners; black girls stepped aside when she wanted to use the sink in the girls’ toilet, and their eyes genuflected under sliding lids.”(BE 62)

Pecola being poor and ugly is gaily harassed by boys at school. They composed even a verse made up of two insults: the color of her skin and speculations on her father’s habit of sleeping naked. Their gender superiority made the fact “that they themselves were black or that their own father had similarly relaxed habits” (BE 65) totally irrelevant. It was their self-loathing that prompted them to dance a macabre ballet around Pecola whom “they were prepared to sacrifice to the flaming pit.”(BE 65) Though Claudia and Frieda come in rescue of her, it is the appearance of affluent Maureen Peal that actually makes the boys turn away from the three poor black girls. Later Pecola is demoralized when Maureen accuses her by saying ‘her old black daddy’ naked. Maureen claims her dominance by shouting ‘I am cute, And you ugly! Black and ugly black e mos. I am cute.’(BE 73) But unlike Pecola, Claudia realizes that Maureen is not the enemy but ‘the thing to fear is the thing that make her beautiful and not us.’ However, Maureen is beautiful not because of her appearance but because she is rich and they are ugly because they are poor. Pecola’s encounter with Geraldine intensifies her self-hatred. Geraldine, being the daughter of propertied blacks, lost her funkiness by adopting white, middle class values. Accordingly she raises a monster son, Louis Junior, who lures the love starved Pecola into his ‘clean’ and ‘Christian’ home with a promise to show some kitten. He beats her with his mother’s cat and gets the sadistic pleasure. But when Geraldine enters the room he throws the cat into the radiator and accuses Pecola of killing it. Irritated more by the presence of a poor black girl, Geraldine expels the innocent Pecola with words that cut deeper than the cat’s claws. Humiliated and injured, Pecola runs down seeing the statue of Christ who stood helpless with his head down.

## V. GENDER

Pecola experiences even more humiliation at the hands of her own abusive, negligent parents and struggles like a sick fledgling. It is evident that Pauline, at the time of Pecola’s birth declares that she is an ugly child. Lack of love, socialization, identity and security from her own family and the surrounding community drives Pecola into negativity and eventually she gets deprived of healthy growth and development. The emptiness of her parents’ lives and their own negative self-images are particularly hurting. Their socioeconomic status not only throws them to the periphery of society, but also their perception of themselves as ugly isolates them further offering evidence of self-hatred. Without the question of being beautiful or ugly, Pecola’s twin brother, escapes into wilderness of human society as his gender camouflages him but Pecola becomes not just a witness but a victim. Claudia narrates that it is not Breedloves’ ugliness but their ‘conviction’ of their ugliness that makes the difference. “It was as though some mysterious all-knowing master had given each one a cloak of ugliness to wear, and they had each accepted in without question.” (BE 39) Evidently with such vision Pecola’s parents can only fashion a childhood world of limited possibilities particularly to a girl. Thus, Pecola is carefully taught that there is no one to love her, the whites do not see her and the blacks scorn her. When someone does see her as lovable, it is her father and he rapes her. Pecola’s struggle towards self-hood takes place in infertile soil and the consequence is a life of sterility. Like the marigolds planted by Claudia, she too could not grow.

In the story of the ironically named Cholly Breedlove, Morrison characterizes a quest for love malformed and wrenched by the viciousness of a white-dominated culture that perverts its every expression. Abandoned by his unmarried mother “on a junk heap by the railroad” when he is four days old, Cholly learns only to misbehave and without any choice his aunt Jimmy took a whip to speak to him. The explosions of hostilities between them have no limits. When this unprotected and unloved child wanted to share his love in the willing company of one of his cousins, on the day of his aunt Jimmy’s funeral, it becomes a play thing for whites. After the funeral he runs away to Macon, Georgia, in search of his anonymous father and experiences rejection from him. Nothing to lose, Cholly becomes dangerously free.

“Free to be tender or violent, to whistle or weep. ... He was free to live his fantasies and free even to die, the how and the when of which held no interest for him.” ( BE 125-126)

He meets Pauline Williams in this ‘godlike state.’ For Pauline he is the ‘Stranger’ in her dreams who came big, came strong, and came with his own music. They get married and achieve some sense of domestic tranquility. But, later when they moved to Lorain, Ohio, where Cholly works for a period in the steel plant, the

relationship dissolves and both experience alienation. Cholly seeks escape from industrial life through alcohol and in a community of comrades. The marriage becomes 'shredded with quarrel' and neither can experience pleasure in the other as they once do. Sigmund Freud clearly insisted that since mothers indulgently protect their off-springs any slightest deviation could ignite hostility between mother and child.

This is very much evident in the case of Pauline Breedlove and her daughter Pecola. When loneliness and boredom drives Pauline to frequent the movies, she allows herself to subscribe to the standard of beauty of the white actress, which eventually leads her to 'collect self-contempt.' Harlow, the white actress' penetrating glance from the silver screen confronts the unpolished, unsophisticated and partially disabled Pauline, reminding her of her unfinished self. Her lost front tooth increases the intensity of self-hatred. Unable to meet the required standards Pauline escapes into the scrupulously clean kitchen that she maintains for Fishers, a white family that employs her as a domestic. She thinks that happiness is only in the white homes. But when the scalding purple juice splashes on Pecola's legs and stains the gleaming floor of the kitchen, it becomes a projection of the blackness that she has passed on to her daughter and for which she has only disgust. She slaps her daughter to make a white child happy. Pauline comes to depend on Cholly's increasing drunkenness and ineffectuality to assure herself worth. "... she bore him like a crown of thorns, and her children like a cross." Cholly similarly comes to use Pauline to maintain his self-respect – "hating her, he could leave himself intact."(BE 31)

Cholly's marriage made him dumb and the appearance of his children made him totally dysfunctional. "Having no idea of how to raise children; and having never watched any parent raise himself, he could not even comprehend what such a relationship should be."(BE 160) The suppressed anger and the suppressed love even in his post marital days as his wife frequently indulges in dreams of white heroes and heroines, only Pecola, the meek, unprotected child becomes object to relieve himself. As missing parental care and love drives Cholly to desperate extremities, Pecola his daughter who is bestowed with the same predicament helplessly seeks respite in her insanity. Almost all the characters of Morrison have cultural uprootedness and the curse is omnipresent in the communities either Lorain or Bottom.

## **VI. PERVERSE ACT AND ENDLESS SUFFERING**

The most perverse act of Cholly's life, the rape of Pecola, is a product of his confusion of violence and love. Seeing Pecola dimly he could not understand what he felt:

"The confused mixture of his memories of Pauline and the doing of a wild and forbidden thing excited him ... Surrounding all of this lust was a border of politeness. He wanted to fuck her – tenderly. But the tenderness would not hold."(BE 162-163)

Cholly rapes Pecola, his daughter. Terry Otten in "Horrific Love in Toni Morrison's fiction" says that "it is an act of displaced love that Morrison asks not to forgive but to understand, insisting on its frightening ambivalence. Like a jazz musician caught up in the dynamic and amoral rhythms of his music Cholly possesses the capacity to express unmitigated love or hate." Pecola fails to get some solace even from her mother Pauline. She beats Pecola when she admits that it is her father who raped her. Pecola's humiliation is inexpressible and it is true when James Baldwin says in *The Fire Next Time* that there is almost no language to describe the 'horrors' of black life. No doubt, despite her obsession with so called fair complexion of white people and finery of their behavior, Pauline loves her daughter Pecola and protected her to the best of her ability. But when it comes to choose between her job and expression of love for her daughter, she prefers the former and that virtually orphaned Pecola. When her father raped her it is the last straw in her sanity. The end of realism leads Pecola to obsessive romancing for blue eyes, not mere blue eyes but the 'bluest.' Pauline's rejection of Pecola is as much as an act of love-hate as Cholly's tragic action is. Pauline and Pecola are the victims of both the sexist and racist oppression of an Anglo-Saxon standard of female beauty. The enemy of their oppression is not just me – black or white – but the entire majority culture that has perpetuated the standard in every channel available to them. According to Carolyn Denard, "the solution Morrison suggests is not a political feminism that alienates black women from black men but a more self-conscious appreciation of the particular beauty of black women by everyone in the society."

Claudia comments at the end that "the love of a free man is never free," and yet Claudia understands that Cholly loved Pecola. "He at any rate was the one who loved her enough to touch her, envelop her, give something of himself to her."(BE 206) Though 'the love of a freeman is never safe,' it is paradoxically absolute, unrestrained yet unconscionable. Left in the spring with the burden of rape, Pecola must find her way to a spiritual source. So she goes to Soaphead Church for reconciliation, for salvation and for rebirth. He is a

misanthrope and Morrison symbolically begins this section of story with “SEETHEDOGBOWBOWGOESTHEODOGDOYOUWANTTOPLAYWITHJANESEETHEDOGRUNR” (BE 164) for, Soaphead clearly associates with an old mangy dog which sleeps in front of his entrance and creates a great revulsion in him. His distorted view of life flows from the same causes that transform Pauline Breedlove into a cruel martyr of a mother, the same causes that impress upon Cholly Breedlove his own unworthiness, his own ugliness, the same causes that will inspire Pecola to ask the clean old man to give her blue eyes.

Soaphead Church’s former self, Elihue Micah Whitcomb, has come from a mulatto West Indian family dedicated to preserving and heightening its British blood, not only in terms of colour and shade but in the culture it represents. The failure of his marriage with Velma a lovely, laughing, big-legged girl forces him to leave not only the island but also his self. When he comes to Ohio the people find his English awe-inspiring; his lack of funkiness amazing and declare him supernatural, a perception that results in his decision to become a new self – a reader, adviser and interpreter of dreams. When Pecola comes to him with her logical request for blue eyes, he immediately understands her need. Her request makes total sense to him, for he intellectualizes the pain, the self-mutilation, inherent in that request. So he writes an arrogant and ironic letter to God, “TO HE WHO GREATLY ENOBLED HUMAN NATURE BY CREATING IT.”(BE 176) God has obviously made a mistake in creation of the world, which Soaphead, by granting Pecola’s request is trying to correct. He uses Pecola to get rid of the mangy dog that he hates so much and ‘gives’ her in a godlike manner blue eyes.

Pecola’s baby dies but Pecola lives, the victim of failed initiation. She makes one more attempt to come to terms with the world by seeking the aid of a magician to get blue eyes. The result is bitter and ironic. She finds that the only refuge available to her is madness. Her mental disability makes her to possess blue eyes. She says “Oh yes, My eyes, My blue eyes”; “Oh, yes. And bluer too.”(BE 159) Pecola through her false belief that she has, indeed, acquired blue eyes and beauty, she escapes to the deepest isolation of all. Perhaps Morrison may not suggest any solution in her novels but presents the bitter truths in a surrealistic way. The story runs parallel to T.S.Eliot’s *The Waste Land*. Pecola’s madness is justifiable because where even the ritualistic sowing fails to sprout; where mothers’ reciprocation to their natural children is cold; where priests exploit the innocent in the name of church; where fathers rape their daughters; where religion offers no solace to the innocent blacks; where even the savior who carried the burden of sin failed to rescue the poor black girls as a racist black writer said, “After all Christ is a white man” --- there madness could be a paradise, insanity would be a bliss.

For the community, Pecola’s madness, coupled with her family history, excites scorn rather than sympathy. She becomes the scapegoat not merely for frustrated children, but for all of the society. The hard theme of *The Bluest Eye* is the degradation and self-degradation of desperate people perpetuating their own misery while being abandoned by the rest of the society, including better-off blacks. Needless to say, the theme is timelier today than it is years ago. The impact of race, gender and class is clearly visible at every juncture of the story. The bankruptcy of warmth and love degrade human beings generation after generation. Cholly, as a victim of racism and classism is always deprived of love and identity. An emotionally bankrupt man expressing love, the only way he knows it may not be socially acceptable but inevitable. As Morrison puts in the ‘After Word’ to her novel, *The Bluest Eye* copes with ‘racial self-loathing.’ Not only is Pecola exposed to cultural stereotypes common in all multi-ethnic societies but also through her Morrison dramatizes “the damaging internalization of assumptions of immutable inferiority originating in an outside gaze.” Morrison’s persistent interest is in what she calls “unspeakable thoughts unspoken,” a phrase that resonates for her with the silence surrounding many things repressed in the African American unconsciousness, or distorted beyond recognition in the American Africanist discourse. The question becomes how to break off this silence and in what form.

## VII. CONCLUSION

African Americans might have failed on many fronts in American soil. The oppression, suffering and the resultant defeat as a race has epic dimensions. Their magnificent struggle to survive, to overcome the impediments imposed by an alien culture and their continuous effort to assert their self-identity brings serenity and nobility to their collective will and vision. Their tenacity in handling the dark truths about the ruthless racial suppression and marginalization by the wider world made them heroes in the modern fiction. Every great work of art espouses the magnitude of defeat and the glory of the vanquished. Toni Morrison’s achievement of high pedestal in the gallery of Nobel laureates is a fitting reward as she bravely stands up against the racist and sexist killer waves.

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