

An Analysis of Voicelessness of Black African American Women in Toni Morrison's Work

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Abstract

*The chief aim of this research paper is to focus on African American women characters in *The Bluest Eye* and *The God Help the Child*, who could not articulate their ideas properly. Morrison has portrayed such character for whom it is challenging to make their space amongst the dominant white groups and patriarchal system. This research uses the theoretical lens of muted group theory, formulated by Edwin and Shirley Ardener. Through the lens of this theory, Black African American women's silence is explored. Due to segregation based on gender, class and race, they remain mute. It makes them the "other", so they cannot speak for their rights. Toni Morrison's black women characters are voiceless as the dominant groups keep them marginalized and under suppression. The methodology adopted was textual analysis to collect data and analyse whether the muted groups exist in texts. The results have a strong link to reality. In both novels, *The Bluest Eye* and *The God Help the child*, the dominant misogynist groups prohibit women from articulating their ideas.*

Keywords: African American women, Muted group theory, Patriarchy, Intersectionality, marginalized groups

1. Introduction

Toni Morrison wrote about different aspects of marginalization and suppression of the minority groups. The dominant groups do not allow the inferior groups to raise their voice because they consider it a threat to their authority. Morrison's writings provide a voice to minority groups and do not leave them under suppression. Morrison delineates the aspect of racism in her texts, as the writer's personal experience reflects in his work (Morrison, 1994). Morrison herself belonged to the Afro-American minority groups, so in her writings, she represents the racially segregated American

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society and its threatening impacts on the life of Afro-American people. Once Morrison said in an interview,

“I am not sure what the word “Negro” means, which is why I write books. What is black child/woman/friend/ mother? What is a black person? It seems to me that there are so many that inform blackness. One of the modern qualities of being an Afro-American is the flux, is the fluidity, the contradictions” (Ahmad Dar et al., 2018, p. 942).

Morrison wrote on child abuse, rape, slavery, and the Afro-American people's struggles. She critiques the American substructure that is based on the classism and racism. Morrison illustrates that the groups of African American women are more marginalized and suppressed. These women have to endure prejudice against colour and gender biasness, thus, are prone to intersectionality of race and gender (Morrison, 1994). Morrison, in her interview, said, “There is no pain in being Black. But there was a pain in being Black next to racist systems and assumption” (Maria Faris, 1994, p. 275).

Morrison's first novel, *The Bluest Eye* is about a black girl Pecola. Voicelessness and silence was the product of societal rejection she felt. The obsession and yearning for blue eyes and white colour was on her mind most of time. She anticipated that her blue eyes would increase her beauty and make her notable in society. Morrison's text illustrates the racially segregated society; Afro-American people are vulnerable to white gaze, hatred, and devastation (Panther, 2021). Mckittrick (2000, p.127) wrote that;

“Contained in these places – communities, homes, bodies, nations, and so on – are the ways in which bodies and homes are gendered and racialised further because they are shaped by national and/or hegemonic discourses. Beauty expectations, the built landscapes, and community all contribute to the ways each character copes and understands their specially racialised place”

In her other novel, *The God Help the Child*, Morrison writes about the loss of identity of black women; her protagonist bride was not able to survive

because of her skin colour. She was voiceless and was suppressed due to her inferior race. Morrison's female characters are hushed and muted in patriarchal society. Barkman wrote; "unconsciously or consciously, the dominant group is susceptible to create segregation in the society. Thus, abandoning the right of the subordinate group which is the minor group" (2018, p. 3). The dominant group is supposedly susceptible to a hidden threat that the subordinate or minority group would take the maximum advantage of raising or expressing the voices or ideas against supremacist group. Meares (2017, p.4) states,

"While muted group theory has been used most frequently to analyse gender, in recent years it has been utilized as a foundation to analyse the experience of other groups, including those based on race and ethnicity. The four basic tenets of muted group theory can be seen in many movements for racial equality; in the United States we can see this from the civil rights movement to "Black Lives Matter."

The theoretical framework of muted group theory does not leave the muted groups under suppression and in a subaltern state; rather it vociferates the muted group, especially Afro-American women. This research is significant because it strongly relates to the feminist standpoint theory. "The muted group theory has been influential in the feminist movement, being drawn upon and modified by several theorists, especially Dale Spender and Cheri Kramarae" (Wall & Leary, 1999, p.24). This research aims to explore the reasons responsible for suppressing black African American women's voice in *The Bluest Eye* and *The God Help The Child* through the framework of the muted group theory.

The Afro American women's struggle, their quest for their true identity and their life in tenebrosity appear various times in Morrison's work. Morrison's texts manifest its intentions of putting into light the marginalized Afro American women characters. American society is segregated on the basis of

class, race, economic status and gender. Afro-Americans are the victim of intersectional discrimination. Afro American women suffered in racially segregated society; they feel reluctant to speak or articulate their ideas. The intersectional discrimination and other factors lead them towards voicelessness.

Various critics have approached Morrison's texts through different aspects. They talk about racism and feminism in *The Bluest Eye*. Gomes (2016) discuss concept of white beauty in white culture. The research claims that this white beauty culture is misguiding us. It does not have any specific value. It is also written that black culture is enriched, and Claudia learns a lot about her traditions through her mother's traditional songs. The research shows that *The Bluest Eye* is an action against the white beauty culture, and blackness of skin colour should be appreciated and considered beautiful. Similarly, Hassan and Rahman (2014) delineate that American society is under the influence of racism. These critics unearthed the harsh impacts of racism in this novel. They both talk about racism through the Marxist and psychological points of view.

In American society, the pressure groups suppress the minority groups and keep them under their authority. The pressure groups do not give space to minority groups to raise their voice for their rights. Afro-Americans remained subaltern and marginalized throughout history. The institutionalized white supremacist system did not accord them their fundamental rights. Morrison demonstrates the phenomenon of “othering” in the white dominant society. Jerome Bump (2010) and Zanyar Kareem Abdul (2020) both talk about the psychological conditions and themes in *The Bluest Eye*. Pecola was experiencing otherness in this society and yearned for beauty as per the white beauty standards. Her society neglected her due to her being of her own colour and considered her not according to beauty standards of white society. Most psychologists believe that when we ignore someone due to their skin colour, they develop a sense of nothingness. Similarly, Breedlove's ugliness contaminated his family. The social rejection and abhor lead her to voicelessness, and the mental and emotional abuse left her in eternal abyss. Another research (Mapathi, 2020) discusses power of colour discourse in *The Bluest Eye*. It illustrates that African American

women are marginalized and considered inferior in a white supremacist misogynist society.

Manuela López Ramírez (2016) examines the concept of child abuse and maltreatment of children in the novel *The God Help the Child*. In this, he claims that children face trouble in this novel. They are victims of child abuse, psychological and mental abuse. The characters in the novel went through self-rejection due to the pressure of the society. However later on, they went through self-transformation. Shaifali (2019) explores *The God Help the Child* through white beauty culture. They focused on Bride, who was in a constant self-identity crisis. In these novels, Morrison pays attention to childhood trauma. This research focused on reasons responsible for the trauma of childhood on the characters' psyche. They suffer badly due to this trauma, not only in their childhood but also in their present age. While Mashaqi (2017) studied the novel *The God Help the Child* under the aspect of the subalterns. All the Afro-American female characters are prone to social exclusion and stigmatization. Therefore, she was the victim of social exclusion as well. White supremacist society keeps the bride in underprivileged conditions due to her inferior race; Morrison's protagonists and other African American females were the victims of suppression.

Paula Martín-Salván (2018) analyses Bride's identity crisis. This trauma makes her identity problematized, and identity crisis leads her towards child trauma. Her body was moving psychologically towards her past. Moreover, her body was transforming into a child's body. In this manner, she was moving towards her past. In her article, Soon (2019) throws light on the issue of silencing the minority in Toni Morrison's work *The Bluest Eye*. She focuses on the corrupt system to analyse this issue. The black community is constantly fighting against racism and the white community tries to oppress the black community based on their dominance. Pecola's survival was quite difficult in the racially segregated society. She could not utter even a single word in the white dominant society due to her inferiority complex. Nefnou (2021) describes that the Afro-American people carry the burden of intersectionality. The American system considers white people as

worthwhile, while on the other hand, they consider black people as ugly and inferior groups. Institutionalized society's so-called dominant traditions forced marginalized groups to remain silent. Afro-American's race, gender, class, economic status caused to become the big hurdle of their path towards emancipation; the strict and rigid norms confined them to stay in devastation.

There are various attributes of American society that lead these minority groups towards mustism and do not grant them any space to raise their voice for their rights. White supremacist groups construct a specific road for Afro-American women; they have to walk on these roads to become a part of this society. Dominant misogynist groups compelled Afro-American women to remain silent; they compelled them towards linguistic and physical muteness; they adopted multiple tricks to enforce silence upon them, such as humiliation, mental, physical, and sexual abuse.

Researchers have approached Morrison's text through various aspects; for instance, they have touched the novels according to post-colonial problems, child abuse, race, black feminism, intersectionality, white beauty cultures. They have applied different feminist theories. However, this research looks at these novels through the lens of the Muted Group Theory. The research objective is to focus on the quietness and muteness of African American women characters in Morrison's work. This research will only focus upon African American women's oppression and why African American women are doubly marginalized as shown through Morrison's works.

African American women's voice is unheard. Dominant groups enforced mustism on marginalized groups. Machismo is prevalent in the society while marianismo is considered to be the less important, unheard group of the society. Also, dominant groups and repressive groups are different from each other; both groups perceive the world differently. There are more opportunities for the dominant group in this world while the repressive group faces different problems and issues throughout their lives.

2. Research Methodology

Cultural anthropologists Edwin and Shirley Ardener, in 1975 coined muted group theory for the first time. E. Ardener (1975, as cited in Wall&Leary, 1999, p.22) argued that “women as a human group that forms about half of any population and is even in a majority at certain ages were neglected in social anthropological studies”. “Muted groups” are related to the minority groups and the suppressed groups, and the supremacist groups keep pressurizing the repressive group under repression and exclusion.

The foundation of the American system is built on the notion of freedom of choice yet, racism and unjust system is prevailing since decades. However, the white supremacist groups do not allow equal distribution of power and authority. Therefore, the racism could be seen in the society affecting millions of people. Moreover, racism causes laceration in the soul of black African Americans. It is more like a rancid meat in a fresh food which causes poison in the food. The supremacist groups control cultural, political, economic, and social values. The dominant social values are under the control of supremacist groups and they do not allow the minority groups, especially Afro-American women, to speak for their rights.

The Muted group theory focuses on giving voice to muted groups, especially marginalized groups. And as it states that in every society there are cultural groups who are traditionally muted – given less access than members of the dominant groups to public discourse and to having their individual and community concerns heard – in this research, this theory would be used as theoretical lens for Morrison’s text of the Novel.

It explained that there are four basic characteristics of transforming the unheard into public discourse of the inferiority being faced by the sub-dominant groups or repressive group. The constrained voice of the marginalized group could be heard through four processes; (a) that identity and reality is relative and is socially established; (b) that communication is the key for establishment; (c) that members of muted groups must adjust to the dominant ways of communication to get their voices heard; and (d) that resistance and change are possible.

However, women supposedly are the subordinate class while male represents the dominant class of the society in the novel. This theory would analyse the absence of black woman's ideas from the front. There have been certain traits and rules set for women reframed by men. MGT is an excellent tool, and it provides hope and optimism to the muted group; it gives hope and support to the voice of the muted groups. This research will adopt textual analysis to collect data, and it is non-empirical research. The data results depend on the theory; through the study of text, the researchers extracted themes of study.

3. Discussion and Findings

Toni Morrison focuses on Black African American women in her texts. Toni Morrison's writings unearthed the devastated situation of Black Afro-American women; the texts help the black women to work on self-development and identity formation. The Afro-American women are mute and voiceless in white misogynist society; they could not raise their voices to unravel the unethical practices of dominant groups

This research explores the voicelessness and quietness of the black female characters through the muted group theory. Because of Morrison's admirable writing style, readers could easily experience the pain, trauma, and sufferings of Afro-American women. Her novels, *The God help the Child* and *The Bluest Eye* revolve around Afro-American women and their sufferings. Toni Morrison delineates that the key to these Black women's freedom is in the hands of Black men and white misogynist society. "Women's voices are "often more 'inarticulate' than men" (Barkman, 2019, p. 4). This research paper significantly focused on misogynist societal behaviour, certain cultural and social attributes contributing to Afro-American women character's silence in Morrison's texts. Women characters in these novels face suppression at the hands of both white and Black misogynist groups. As muted group theory claimed that, "males would, therefore, be viewed as more articulate than the females" (Wall & Leary, 1999, p. 22).

Morrison unravels the different controlling methods used by men to suppress women; Men use harassment, control, pressure, ridiculous rituals,

sexual exploitation, and abusive language to keep them mute. According to a study by Ardener (1975, as cited in Wall & Leary, 1999, p. 22),

To be understood, the would-be communicator must suppress her own mode of expression in favour of the dominant mode and thus she is 'muted'. Muted does not necessarily mean silent: the important issue is whether they are able to say all they would wish to say, where and when they wish to say it.

The protagonist of *The Bluest Eye* Pecola Breedlove is deprived of the true love of her family. Due to Pecola's blackness and her gender, she faced abhor and ignorance from her society and her family. Her mother remained harsh and strict towards her daughter Pecola. Cholly Breedlove hated his daughter and his wife. He did not give them, i.e. Pauline, Pecola, and Darlene any importance. In *The God helps the child*, the Black female protagonist Bride faces a similar situation.

In *The Bluest Eye*, no doubt Cholly Breedlove was the victim of subordination from society. Nevertheless, he was suppressing his daughter and wife. His wife and daughter were both not allowed to speak for their rights. Pecola, Pauline and Darlene were all the victims in the hands of Cholly Breedlove. He was searching for his identity and his true self. However, he used all these women to reduce his frustration. They all silently tolerated his torture open-heartedly and silently. As muted group theory claims that "To be heard and heeded an individual must use this dominant mode of expression" (Wall & Leary, 1999, p 22). Pecola, Pauline and Darlene were the victim of inarticulateness.

Morrison explains his situation in these words, "No less did Cholly need her. She was one of few things abhorrent to him that he could touch and therefore hurt. He poured out on her the sum of all his inarticulate fury and aborted desires" (Morrison, p. 42). Compared to Pecola and Pauline, Cholly was not strong, but instead, he exploited these females to get rid of his perplexity.

One by one, he seduced them mentally, sexually, emotionally, and physically. He made them mute, and he did not allow them to speak for their rights.

Morrison explains the drastic situation of Darlene in *The Bluest Eye*. She was a sweet girl who became attracted to him. She wanted Cholly's attention and romantic love from him. However, white men cops caught them, and they humiliated Cholly. They made fun of his race. So, he got his revenge on Darlene; "Cholly has been surprised in some bushes by two white meanwhile he was newly but earnestly engaged in eliciting sexual pleasure from a little country girl" (Morrison, p. 42). He physically seduced her in front of these white cops, and he took his humiliation's revenge on this innocent girl. "For some reasons Cholly had not hated the white men; he hated, despised, the girl" (Morrison, p. 42). He used her as a pinching cushion. She remained silent and mute and could not defend herself from these men. Cholly and the other two police officers surrounded her; they all were there to molest her. The muted group theory argued that; "men were the exploiting or dominant class and women the exploited or suppressed- in other words, the muted-class" (Wall & Leary, 1999, p. 23).

Pauline also suffered at his hands. Cholly just used her as a sexual object. She was taking care of his children, and she was earning bread and butter for her family's well-being. Cholly spend his time drinking and once, he burnt his own home. Cholly was not ready to take responsibility for his wife and his children. However, he was creating troubles and pathetic situations for them.

Similarly, in *The God Help the Child*, Bride's mother, Sweetness, suffered a lot. After the birth of Bride, Sweetness's husband abandoned her. He left his family. He even accused his wife, and he said this baby girl is the product of an illegitimate relationship. Sweetness and her husband were both light-skinned, but Bride was black. All the responsibilities of Bride were on Sweetness. She was mute in this society. This misogynist society does not allow her to speak for her fundamental rights and males run from their responsibilities. Misogynist groups determine the social and cultural trends and supremacist groups force the subdominant groups to follow these traditions silently.

Society allows men to run from their responsibilities, but society does not allow women to run from their responsibilities. Male chauvinist society persuades women to bear this attitude and struggle silently. So, Pauline and Sweetness, both mothers, shared the same fate. Pauline and Sweetness were voiceless, and they silently bore this burden. Their culture did not permit them to speak or raise voice for their rights. Both these women unintentionally fell in the hands of institutionalized society.

According to Ardener (1975, as cited in Wall & Leary, 1999, p. 23) as he writes about the muted group theory, "it is muted simply because it does not form part of dominant communication system of the society, expressed as it must be through the dominant ideology." Pauline and Sweetness did not belong to the dominant group that is why their opinion or ideas did not prefer in society.

Pecola and Bride both were the victims of ignorance, abhor, and mental abuse. Both girls belonged to the subordinate, inferior and marginalized groups; they both perceive the world differently. Their childhood experiences were brutal, and their voices were absent from the front page of the book. They were flowing with the tides of the sea. Pecola could not get the attention of her mother and her father; her mother did not like her due to her ugliness. She bore this trauma silently. Afro-American women are the victim of anti-narcissism and anti-love. Patriarchal system contracted the traps for women and women fall in to this trap unintentionally "Men have committed greatest crime against women. Insidiously, violently, they have led them to hate women, to be their own enemies" (Cixous, 1976, p. 878). Pecola and Bride's mothers did not love them because their mother was suffering with the trauma of anti-love; the feeling of anti-love made their life devastated.

Muted group theory has a strong relation with Feminist standpoint theory. Both theories provide a voice to subordinate groups. These subordinate groups do not follow the track of muteness intentionally, but they are mute because they are unaware of their voice. Due to the lack of emancipation to

speak, they are mute. Kramarae contributed in the muted group theory as she claimed that “females will have more difficulty than males, expressing themselves seems implicit in the muted group theory” (Wall & Leary, 1999, p. 25).

Pauline got rid of her frustration while ignoring her daughter Pecola and negating her. Similarly, Bride was under constant mental trauma. Even her mother did not touch her due to her ugliness. Bride and Pecola shared the same fate. Not only their community, but the white gaze was also torturing them. They all were bearing this silently because their voices were in the control of the men. This constant muteness causes frustration in Sweetness and Pauline. Sweetness was preparing her daughter for the cruelty of this society. Pauline and Sweetness both set an example of weak women for their daughters (Camille, 2018). They indirectly teach their daughter to keep their mouth shut in the sexist and gender-conscious society of America. But both mothers were the victim of anti-love.

According to Ardener's theory, men try to control women in different ways as they control them through harassment, power, sexual abuse, and different other methods (Papanek, 2019). Even the male patriarchal system does not allow females to connect to God directly. For instance, in *The Bluest Eye*, Mr. Witchcomb was a priest. Pecola asked him to grant her the blue eyes; her action depicted that she could not talk to God independently. The dominant male groups arranged the religious traditions according to their advantage.

So, this stance proved that Pecola was not allowed to contact God. She needs a male's assistance. The male-dominant religious groups keep women mute and voiceless; the institutionalized culture keeps Afro-American women in strict chains.

Sweetness and Pauline both were serving not only their families but they were also serving white families for their earning. They do not have any other option. Because it is customary in society that males have authority over females.

Morrison's black protagonists tried to objectify themselves. They tried to speak through different body language; tried to exhibit their bodies and objectify themselves. They thought that would increase their worth in

society. For example, Bride wore an all-white dress to increase her worth in this society. She focused too much on her body and made her complexion prominent. Ardener claimed that "Women's models often take a non-verbal, inarticulate, veiled form in contrast to the male discourse, which is more verbal and explicit," (Wall & Leary, 1999, p. 23).

In *The Bluest Eye*, a boy named Junior abused Pecola mentally. He brings her to his home, played a trick with her. He killed his mother's lovely cat and accused Pecola of killing that cat. This incident destroyed her mental condition. A similar situation occurred in *The God Help the Child* when a group of boys harassed Bride in her childhood. These are strong evidence that institutionalized society programmed men from their early childhood that they are the master and have the right to molest females. However, in Morrison's texts, the white boys humiliate these girls based on their gender and skin colour both. Pecola and Bride both were bearing this torture silently. Society trains the males from childhood that they are the master and this world is for them. Mary Meares in her article "*Muted group theory*" claimed that, "girls and boys may be taught that they should behave in different ways; girls may be encouraged to be quieter and more polite, whereas boys are encouraged to speak up and share their ideas more freely" (Meares, 2017, p.1).

The textual analysis is the strong evidence that Afro-American women are vulnerable in white misogynist society. They behaved with them according to their own desire and will.

For instance, they gave Pecola different humiliating names like "black e mo. Black e mo" (Morrison, p. 65). Misogynist society introduced this vocabulary. When men introduced this type of vocabulary and names for women, society took it as a norm. Men gave women different humiliating names to mute them to feel inferior. Meares at another place claimed that "the dominant group control the cultural discourse through interpersonal societal norms as well mass media. They set agenda for not only what is discussed, but also how it is discussed" (Meares, 2017, p.2). Misoginist

groups make fun of them by using different names like whore, bitch, and different sexual names. A similar situation occurred when Bride witnessed Mr. Leigh was sexually abusing a child; she witnessed this incident. He gave her name like "Hey, little nigger cunt!" (Morrison). Bride's mother, Sweetness, forced her daughter to remain silent. She was training her child according to the principles of institutionalized society. In her twenties, Bride applied for jobs, but she got rejected due to her black skin. The incident tormented her badly.

On the other hand, Pecola faced the same situation as dominant groups called her black bitch thus gave her a similar name. Cholly Breedlove raped her daughter; he raped her not only once but several times. Even her mother does not support her, and Pecola remains mute till the end. There was no one to listen to her, and her muteness and silence destroyed her mind very deeply. Morrison described the experience of Pauline Breedlove of delivering her child. During her childbirth, a team of white doctors came, and senior said to juniors that these black females do not feel any pain; they deliver baby like a horse.

This kind of humiliation in front of other male doctors was quite heart-wrenching. This situation led Pauline to an inferiority complex, which forced her towards self-abhorrence. Pauline says that "I moaned something awful. The pain wasn't as bad as I let on, but I had to let them people know having a baby was more than a bowel movement" (Morrison, p. 125). These words depict her urge to shout for her rights. She wanted to speak for her rights and to describe her feelings. However, unfortunately, due to her inferiority complex, she remained mute. As muted group theory argued that "The dominant groups push other voices to the margins, allowing non-dominant group members fewer opportunities to express their ideas, opinions, perceptions, and aims in society. Alternative narratives and voices are muted or silenced" (Meares, 2017, p.2).

The marginalized Afro-American women find it inconvenient to speak in this male patriarchal world. The theoretical framework of muted group theory provides assistance to study the muted groups and the factors that lead them towards marginality. According to Arender's theory, the voice of females is absent, and they do not have any recognition in this world. The

textual examples of the texts delineate that muted groups exist in Morrison's texts. The muted group theory vouchsafed these muted groups' voices and did not leave them under the shadow. It plays a significant role of medicine in their life, and it accords them panacea that cures their laceration caused due to institutionalized society. The institutionalized society confines women in strict bondage and fences. The muted group theory unlocks the fences for these Afro-American women and gives them emancipation from eternal muteness.

4. Conclusion

Afro-American women yearn for independence and seek an existentialist approach. Morrison's writings are strong evidence of their quest for their true identity. The novel sheds light upon the social weaknesses of American society. This system is generated and developed by misogyny. Muted Undoubtedly, Afro-American women have to bear humiliations and torturous behaviour silently. In Morrison's work, all the women tried to copy white principles of white society. They observed that white women lived in a better situation than black women. Black African American women remain under constant struggle to prove themselves. Some incidents in the novel depict that society and its behaviour lead these women towards muteness. Throughout history, Black females remained under constant constraints, and they remained silent. Muted group theory highlighted their marginalized status and sheds light upon their dark appearances. Moreover, this theory traced them in Black African American society and brought their voices to light. Muted group theory is an optimistic tool, and it provides hope to the voiceless community (Barkman, 2018).

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