THEOLOGICAL MODELS OF BLACK MIDDLE-CLASS PERFORMANCE IN TONI MORRISON’S NOVELS

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this article is to present an analysis of colorism and classism, which engender conflicts between the Black middle class and the mainstream Black community. The approach is by way of a political and socio-historical interpretation of the novels of Nobel Laureate Toni Morrison. Therefore, references to historical and sociological studies of existing conflicts within the Black community by Franklin Frazier and Harold Cruse will precede an analysis of the behaviors, attitudes and worldviews of the fictional characters. Moreover, Black theological paradigms will be employed in suggestion of possible conflict resolution. The characters from Morrison’s novels to be analyzed are Macon Dead from Song of Solomon, Helene Wright from Sula and Geraldine Junior and Maureen Peal from The Bluest Eye. The characters will be representative of those persons who erroneously internalize Black middle-class values and manifest discriminatory practices towards others. In contrast to the aforementioned, a group of characters that contribute to the empowerment of the Black community will also be discussed: Pilate from Song of Solomon, Eva Peace from Sula, Claudia MacTeer from The Bluest Eye, Baby Suggs from Beloved and Bill Cosey from Love.

Keywords: Black community, Black theology, classism, colorism, Toni Morrison.

I choose to identify with the underprivileged. I choose to identify with the poor. I choose to give my life for the hungry. I choose to give my life for those who have been left out of the sunlight of opportunity. I choose to live for and with those who find themselves seeing life as a long and desolate corridor with no exit sign. This is the way I’m going. If it means suffering a little bit, I’m going that way. If it means sacrificing, I’m going that way. If it means dying for
Toni Morrison’s literary works as well as Black theology express a critique of pervasive beliefs and behaviors that constitute contemporary Black middle-class ideology and performance. The Black middle class encompasses a stratum of the broader Black community that evolved historically as a more economically privileged group. Through this critique, Morrison and Black theologians provide members of the Black middle class with more effective frames for understanding themselves as part of the larger Black community, and also offer them potentially more useful ways of agency, within that community.

As a result of the observable interconnectedness between Morrison’s and Black systematic theological assumptions, I will utilize Black theological critiques in my analysis of Toni Morrison’s fiction. Her novels bear witness to the truth of this theological critique in the way her middle-class characters behave. My thematic approach, which is primarily sociological and theological in focus, may seem to be reductive regarding the complex nature of Morrison’s art. Her multidimensional novels can be analyzed from many approaches be they aesthetic, formalist, philosophical, psychological and more. Black theology is but one of these.

Theologian Gayraud S. Wilmore proclaims to other Black theologians that they should focus on the Black community, especially its underprivileged class, as a source for Black theology. He contends:

Their ideological roots…must go down into the soil of the folk community if they are to maintain their credibility. That is why the lower-class black community must be considered one of the primary sources for the development of a black Christian theology.\(^2\)

Wilmore’s advice may be interpreted by some as monolithic; an attempt to make all Black people the same. But it can, and I think more rightfully, be interpreted as ethnographic, a means of exploring the cultural ways of the underclass and their relationship to the middle class and not looking at them as an exotic other. In Wilmore’s ethnographic vision he sees the Black folk community as the preserver of core Black American values, spirituality and tradition. As a less privileged social class more exposed to oppression, the Black poor are more likely than the profit-oriented middle class to struggle for empowerment and affirmation of their humanity. In so doing, they demonstrate the rejection of

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their supposed inferiority through the search for an interconnectedness between their existence and the gospel. This connection is one way to engage the Church in racial politics and the empowerment of the Black community.

Following this tradition, Toni Morrison, not as a theologian but as a writer with religious sensibility, artistically reveals a commitment to the Black community, which makes her novels political in nature. In one of her interviews Toni Morrison states:

I think all good art has always been political. None of the best writing, the best thoughts have been anything other than that… I don’t believe any real artists have ever been non-political. They may have been insensitive to this particular plight or insensitive to that, but they were political because that’s what an artist is—a politician.³

Morrison, as does Wilmore, locates the Black folk community as the main source of inspiration and focus of her work. She also rejects the position that says a writer “has no responsibility to the community.”⁴ Indeed, Morrison assumes the role of a political activist, whose purpose is to raise the readers’ awareness of social conflicts in the real world, with the hope of motivating readers to contribute to the Black community’s spiritual and social transformation. Class stratification within the Black community is one of the socio-political aspects that Morrison presents in her literary works. Her novels offer a critique of middle-class performances that are detrimental to the community. The concept of performance is applied here as a particular behavior and moral standpoint executed by literary characters. Moreover, performance involves not only an act on stage or in literary fiction, but also an audience/reader response. Therefore, as stated earlier, the analysis of the characters’ performances may bring about increased reader consciousness of interracial conflicts, such as internal color prejudice, familial dysfunction and classicism, engendered and stimulated by class stratification and the pursuance of privilege.

For instance, characters in The Bluest Eye and Paradise demonstrate how interrelatedness between the yearning for social advancement and privilege associated with light skin complexion engenders the internal color prejudice, known as “colorism.” Moreover, the performances of Geraldine Junior also from The Bluest Eye and Helene Wright from Sula caution against dysfunctional motherhood brought on by a forced conformity to middle-class norms. Finally, the stance of Macon Dead Jr. from Song of Solomon exemplifies classicism, which leads to disunity within the broader Black community.

⁴. Taylor-Guthrie, Conversations with Toni Morrison, 231.
Toni Morrison creates powerful Black characters who struggle against prejudice despite their experience of humiliation, poverty, abuse and discrimination. They are spotlighted as guides to conflict resolution. In *Beloved*, Baby Suggs preaches self-worth to all, and light-skinned Lady Jones educates the poor regardless of complexion. In *The Bluest Eye* Mrs. MacTeer, a caring and loving mother, concerns herself with her children’s needs and not with the imitation of middle-class lifestyle. Bill Cosey from *Love* evidences the possibility of the middle class’s involvement in the Black community’s empowerment.

Following an analysis of literary portrayals of Black middle-class performances, the final part of the paper constitutes a reference to actual Black experience, which evidences correspondences between Toni Morrison’s literary works and external reality.

**Internal Color Prejudice**

[U]nless the question of Colorism…is addressed in our communities and definitely in our black “sisterhoods” we cannot, as a people, progress. For colorism, like colonialism, sexism, and racism, impedes us.5

Alice Walker defines colorism as a “prejudicial or preferential treatment of same-race people based solely on their color.”6 Colorism is also referred to as pigmentocracy, a belief that light skin is superior to dark skin; juxtaposed alongside the comparative concept of physiognomy, a theory holding that Caucasian features relate to a higher level of personal and intellectual capacities.7

From the perspective of Black theology, colorism might be interpreted as a denial of the will of God. God created every human being according to God’s will and God affirms a man or a woman just as they are. If a person disapproves of or demeans Blackness, that individual does not accept God’s image. Black theologians maintain that the affirmation of Blackness does not only have an aesthetic dimension, but it also testifies to varied facets of the Black experience such as culture, sense of power, self-acceptance and self-determination. Therefore, Blackness is an integral aspect of Black people’s humanity guaranteed by God. Colorism, then, is a sinister denial of Blackness.

Although Morrison’s works encompass fiction that exhibits an artful fusion of varied narrative techniques and richness of stylistic devices, her novels are also didactic. For instance, Toni Morrison analyzes the origin of colorism and

discloses its detrimental impact. Moreover, she portrays characters who act as guides to colorism resolution.

In Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*, the character Soaphead Church, whose real name is Elihue Micah Whitcomb, exhibits colorist attitudes and violates Black theological premises as a preacher. As the presumed spiritual counselor of the Black poor he takes advantage of them using Black “well-phrased, well-placed, well-faced lies,”8 to collect the last money from his unfortunate clients. The only thing he leaves with them is a ray of hope in lives full of despair, hunger, defeat, loneliness and misery.

The most extreme manifestation of Soaphead Church’s colorism is portrayed in his mistreatment of Pecola Breedlove, a poor Black girl who asks him for blue eyes. In contrast to the Black theological paradigm of self-love and affirmation of Blackness, he perceives Pecola as “pitifully unattractive.”9 Deceptively, he convinces the girl that she has attained the desired blue eyes. In doing so, he contravenes Black theology’s affirmation of the Black body as sacred, as God’s divine creation. He does not proclaim the beauty of the Black body as God’s gift. Engaging in such thinking is a rejection of the image of God, because every person is a reflection of God’s image since He is believed to have created Black people according to his likeness. Instead of promoting the beauty of Blackness and instilling this aesthetic viewpoint within his community, he leads the poor, self-deprecating Pecola towards insanity.

Soaphead Church’s colorism is rooted in a family history that mirrors the development of intra-racial color prejudice in real life. The origins of colorism are believed to have begun in the antebellum South, where slave owners held to the so-called mulatto hypotheses, which stated that an infusion of White blood would better the Black race. Light skin became a factor in the higher pricing of the Black enslaved and as a measurement of greater intellectual ability. Skin complexion was decisive in determining educational attainment and work status on and off the plantation. Eventually, some Black people began to internalize this color-based hierarchical view and light complexion as it “became [their] most precious possession.”10 Varied fields of life were in conformity to the color caste system. After the Civil War, the members of the light-complexioned elite endeavored to maintain their superior position within Black society by establishing educational institutions that refused to admit darker-skinned Black people. They also sought a lighter-complexioned spouse in order to lighten the family line.

Morrison places Soaphead Church’s family within this historical context. White blood invaded his family in the early 1800s, when a British “nobleman,”

Sir Whitcomb, impregnated an enslaved Black woman, who hoped for social advancement after birthing a lighter-skinned child. Moreover, succeeding generations attempted to “better the race” by choosing a White or lighter-skinned spouse, which supposedly would bring about a more privileged social status. Soaphead Church’s family history is a reminder of the actual situation of so-called “high yellers.” One of their privileges was in education. Soaphead’s forebears “studied medicine, law, theology,” which augmented their sense of superiority. Succumbing to the British colonizers’ “miseducation,” these misguided souls hoped “to prove beyond a doubt DeGobineau’s hypothesis that ‘all civilizations derive from the white race, that none can exist without its help, and that a society is great and brilliant only so far as it preserves the blood of the noble group that created it’.”

Joseph Arthur Comte de Gobineau was the nineteenth-century French novelist and intellectual who presented his racialist theory and belief in the supremacy of the White race in the book *An Essay on the Inequality of the Human Races.* In terms of Soaphead Church, however, his vast and varied education imbues him with a feeling of being Godlike. As a result of this confusion, Soaphead Church even emulates God when he describes the “miracle” he performed through “giving” Pecola blue eyes. He says: “I weep for you, Lord. And it is because I weep for You that I had to do your work for You.” Further he rebukes God: “You forgot, Lord. You forgot how and when to be God.”

As far as the service of the Black Church to the broader community is concerned, according to Black theology, the Black pastor’s role is to advance the empowerment and liberation of the Black oppressed. Conversely, Soaphead Church opportunistically abuses the tribulations of “the least of these” and he admits to God: “I played You.”

Another character from *The Bluest Eye* that outwardly manifests a colorist stance is Maureen Peal. She is a light-complexioned Black girl who is exceptionally favored by her teachers and other schoolchildren. Another Black girl, Claudia MacTeer, wonders what is “the Thing that made her beautiful.” White aesthetic propaganda in the movies reinforces Maureen’s colorism. She admires a white actress Betty Grable and is impressed by the plot of the movie *Imitation of Life* from 1934, which recounts the story of a phenotypically White, Black girl who denies her Black mother. Maureen identifies the movie

character’s name Peola with that of Pecola Breedlove probably because she projects onto Pecola her own desire to pass as Peola does.

Maureen’s case also reveals the relatedness of skin tone and opportunity. Already as a young girl she understands the advantage of being able to imitate affluent White girls. She becomes “a high-yellow dream child with long brown hair braided into two lynch ropes that hung down her back. She was rich…as rich as the richest of the white girls, swaddled in comfort and care.” 17 In order to impress her peers, Maureen wears fashionable clothes. Due to her immersion in a community where White middle-class aesthetic standards prevail, and Blackness is perceived as a badge of inferiority, colorist Maureen assails darker-skinned children. She exclaims: “I am cute! And you ugly! Black and ugly black e mos! I am cute!” 18

In The Bluest Eye Toni Morrison also appears to underline the significance of the contribution of all members, regardless of their social background and complexion, to the empowerment of the Black community. She accomplishes this by highlighting the victimization of Pecola Breedlove. The young Black girl’s lack of positive self-esteem that leads to her insanity evidences community failure. At school, teachers ignore her and a light-complexioned schoolmate, Maureen Peal, insults her. Outside of school Pecola is also afflicted by the prejudice of Geraldine Junior, a light-skinned middle-class Black woman and by the deception of Soaphead Church. But prosperous and educated middle-class members are not the only ones that lead to her tragedy. At home, Pecola’s mother Pauline neglects her, attending more to the upkeep and well-being of the White household she works for as a domestic, and her father Cholly rapes her. When she wants to buy sweets, an arrogant racist Polish immigrant shop owner, Mr. Yacobowsky, demeans her. Her peer, Claudia MacTeer, openly admits the community’s abandonment when she says: “We tried to see her without looking at her, and never, never went near. Not because she was absurd, or repulsive, or because we were frightened, but because we had failed her.” 19

Morrison’s novel Paradise in part deals with the origin of colorism. Its victims are the predecessors of the residents of the fictional all-Black town, Ruby. In 1890 formerly enslaved Black people embarked on a journey from Louisiana and Mississippi to the Oklahoma Territory under the leadership of men from “nine large intact families.” 20 Their passage symbolized their hope to find a Promised Land and to settle down as one community. They expected to receive assistance from the Black residents of established Black communities in the North.

One day they reached Fairly, Oklahoma, where they quickly found themselves unwelcome because of their poverty and Blackness. The town was inhabited by self-sufficient light-complexioned Blacks who introduced the newcomers from the South to “a new separation: light-skinned against black.”21 The Black, poor, formerly enslaved people were not admitted to the community of the well-off, middle-class “fair-skinned colored men. Blue-eyed, gray-eyed yellow-men in good suits.”22 Their racial purity embodied an undesirable stain and an impediment to the lightening up of subsequent middle-class generations.

*Paradise* also uncovers the danger of such rejection, the response to which might be an extreme form of Black nationalism. In the novel, the successors to the Old Fathers named themselves the New Fathers and founded a new town, Ruby, based on the principles of racial purity, community self-sufficiency and patriarchy, which fomented Black separatism. The men, in particular, expressed overtly their disapproval of intra-racial relations between Ruby’s residents and light-skinned partners. They had no respect for the character Patricia’s parents, Roger Best and Delia, who transgressed Ruby’s regulations. As Patricia wrote: “they looked down on you, Mama, I know it, and despised Daddy for marrying a wife with no last name, a wife without people, a wife of sunlight skin, a wife of racial tampering.”23 Another subject of this form of separatism was Menus, who fell in love with the “pretty sandy-haired girl from Virginia.”24 He was forced to cancel his marriage plans and surrender his property, which led, in turn, to drunken despair. The community, however, mistakenly attributed his alcoholism to post-Vietnam traumatic syndrome. Eventually, Ruby became a sort of enclave, where racial purity was based on the politics of exclusion.

Through the characters in *Paradise* Toni Morrison shows that neither colorism nor separatism leads to the wholeness of the Black community. In fact, it leads to just the opposite; colorism has a detrimental impact on intra-racial relationships, affecting succeeding generations. The memory of past discrimination practiced by the Old Fathers is the catalyst for the extreme Black separatism of the New Fathers.

In her novel *Beloved*, Toni Morrison creates characters, Baby Suggs and Lady Jones, who resist the alienating force of colorism. *Beloved* offers an artistic reconstruction of the ignominy of slavery, under which Black enslaved people were treated as a subhuman labor force. Their dehumanization is exemplified in the brutal stories of particular characters. For instance, Sethe remembers being treated like an animal by White men who forcefully took her baby’s milk from her and by a teacher who ordered his student to list her features. Another

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character, Paul D, remembers having a horse bit placed in his mouth. In the process of being downtrodden, Black people were often challenged, regarding their sense of self-worth and in the recognition of their human beauty. A character who inspired them to love their Blackness is Baby Suggs, a poor elderly woman who survived slavery and devoted the rest of her life in service to her community as its spiritual counselor. The novel states:

In winter and fall she carried [her heart] to AME’s [sic] and Baptists, Holinesses and Sanctifieds, the Church of the Redeemer and the Redeemed… When warm weather came, Baby Suggs, holy, followed by every black man, woman, and child who could make it through, took her great heart to the Clearing—a wide-open place cut deep in the woods nobody knew for what at the end of a path known only to deer and whoever cleared the land in the first place.25

In the forest clearing she preached a gospel of self-love to Black enslaved people, whose bodies were dehumanized and whose spirits were assaulted by White oppressors. When Baby Suggs shouted: “Love your hands!,…mouth…, neck…or beating heart,” she not only advocated self-love but also a concomitant love of other Black selves. Having been uplifted by Baby Suggs’s sermon of love, the gathered community members were elevated to spiritual oneness.

It started that way: laughing children, dancing men, crying women and then it got mixed up. Women stopped crying and danced; men sat down and cried; children danced, women laughed, children cried until, exhausted and riven, all and each lay about the Clearing damp and gasping for breath. In the silence that followed, Baby Suggs, holy, offered up to them her great big heart.27

These characters were spiritually unified by reciprocal affirmations of their own beauty. Black love embraced all, regardless of skin complexion. Lady Jones also contributes to the Black community’s unity. She “mixed”-raced with “gray eyes and yellow woolly hair.”28 As a result of her light complexion, as a young girl, she was “picked for a coloredgirls’ [sic] normal school in Pennsylvania.”29

Since she looked almost like a White girl, she had the opportunity to attain to the form of education that was denied to dark-skinned children. Such privilege, according to Hopkins, “could have jettisoned her into the black bourgeoisie or the white middle class.”30 However, she chose to act in opposition to the hierarchical system and devoted her life to “teaching the unpicked. The children

27. Morrison, Beloved, 88.
who played in dirt until they were old enough for chores.” These children came from poor Black families who resided in Cincinnati, where there are only two graveyards and six churches and “no school or hospital [is] obliged to serve them.” Therefore, Lady Jones sets up a small classroom at her home, where the Bible is a textbook.

She is also aware of the potent value of loving Blackness so she marries “the blackest man she could find.” She hates “every strand” of her hair, “though whether it was the color or the texture even she didn’t know.” In slavery’s aftermath, the hair that contributed to educational privilege actually was a source of despair because it was a reminder of the rape and abuse Black enslaved women endured from the assault of White slave masters. “She believed in her heart that, except for her husband, the whole world (including her children) despised her and her hair. She had been listening to ‘all that yellow gone to waste’ and ‘white nigger’.”

Nevertheless, Lady Jones transforms the disgraceful and negative into a positive of which not only she herself but also other members of the community benefit. She uses her privilege to liberate others from illiteracy. Dwight Hopkins sees a theological dimension in her devotion. He writes that Lady Jones “undertakes a seemingly holy crusade of emptying her privileged energies onto youth cast aside to society’s extreme margins.”

The Black Family and Class Stratification

Family is also a foremost issue in Black theological considerations. Contemporary Black theologians advocate the development of a discipline that focuses on the advancement of the Black family, which should be the Black church’s major priority. In the 1980s Deotis Roberts described the Black church as a sacred extended family. In consideration of this sacredness, in his book *Liberation and Reconciliation* he instructs theologians to take an interest in church images that convey a sense of family unity, a project that would assist the church in combating family disorganization.

Similarly, Toni Morrison focuses on family life and the way it is affected by the internalization of middle-class values. This is especially evident in *Sula* and

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*The Bluest Eye*, where Helene Wright and Geraldine Junior rear their children according to White middle-class norms of behavior.

*Sula’s* leitmotif is the friendship between the characters Sula and Nel. Although the girls have different family backgrounds, they, nevertheless, build a strong relationship. However, upon reaching adulthood, they separate as Sula transgresses community’s norms and Nel acquiesces to them. Nel’s conformity develops, in large part, as a result of being brought up by her dominant mother, Helene.

Helene’s performance of motherhood does not present a good role model. She conforms to middle-class standards of behavior and aesthetics in order to gain prestige within the community and to elevate her own sense of self-worth, while suppressing her motherly emotions and sensibilities. She is disappointed with her daughter’s outward appearance because “the child had not inherited the great beauty that was hers: that her skin had dusk in it, that her lashes were substantial but not undignified in their length, that she had taken the broad flat nose of Wiley [and] his generous lips.” Helene dismisses the difficulty the child has in breathing, when a clothespin is placed on her nose, a practice that is supposed to make the nose narrower and more synonymous with the features of White girls. Helene’s overbearing attempt to alter her daughter’s natural physical attributes is in contravention of the Black theological tenet that posits the sacredness of every Black human being, whose body is a creation of God.

Helene’s emotional depravity is also evidenced on a trip to New Orleans to visit her gravely ill grandmother. She focuses on her own outward appearance rather than on her grandmother’s suffering. When the elderly woman dies, Helene does not mourn. She rushes home to bring her house back to order instead of expressing compassion and sorrow over the loss of the elderly woman.

As a result of her focus on the performance of White middle-class standards she fails to build a loving household with close spiritual and familial bonds.

In *The Bluest Eye*, the character Geraldine also teaches her son, Junior, White middle-class mannerisms. She forces the young boy to wear white shirts and blue trousers. She brushes his hair fastidiously, bathes him and oils his skin. She is convinced she meets all his needs. However, she does not exhibit affectionate motherly love. Paradoxically, she seems to be more emotionally involved with her cat than with her son, who subsequently discerns this and becomes morbidly jealous. Resentfully, he transfers his hatred of his mother to the animal and tortures it.

Geraldine’s middle-class performance is accompanied by her adoption of colorism. Morrison presents her as one of the “thin brown girls,” who “live in

quiet black neighborhoods where everybody is gainfully employed.” 40 As a light-skinned woman she gains admittance to respectable educational institutions. Geraldine consciously classifies Black people according to the shade of their complexion. She divides them into “colored people,” i.e. the lighter skinned, and “niggers,” i.e. those who are of darker complexions. Moreover, she ascribes particular qualities to these groups. She instructs her son: “Colored people were neat and quiet; niggers were dirty and loud.” 41 She identifies with the former. What is more, Geraldine does not permit her son “to play with niggers,” 42 because they are not “good enough for him.” 43

Geraldine sees herself as a true Christian. There is “a big red-and-gold Bible on [her] dining-room table” and a “color picture of Jesus Christ [hangs] on a wall with the prettiest paper flowers fastened on the frame.” 44 However, her house is closed to the Black poor. From a Black theological perspective, she is neither capable of establishing spiritual connectedness within her household nor with the broader Black community. Her discriminatory stance carries over to her son, thereby afflicting the next generation and the future advancement and liberation of the Black community.

Through the characters Helene and Geraldine, Toni Morrison critiques middle-class performances that represent dysfunctional Black motherhood. The characters’ concern with altering their children’s Black looks, over attendance to orderliness within sterile households, and focus on fashionable clothes diminish the emotional and spiritual connections to their children. In response, the children adopt a distant attitude towards their mothers and the community.

Toni Morrison’s The Bluest Eye also provides a guidepost for functional motherhood that spiritually strengthens the Black family in the face of the omnipresent “Thing,” defined by Dwight Hopkins as “the evil and damning forces of gender, racial, and economic discrimination.” 45 Through the character Mrs. MacTeer, Morrison portrays a loving mother who sincerely cares for her children. When she shouts in tiredness at her daughter Claudia, she confirms her deep concern for her child’s health.

Although Claudia occasionally does not understand her mother’s anger, rapprochements, and harsh movements, she knows she has a loving and committed mother whose emotionalism does not render her an icon of ideal mothering. Nevertheless, the spiritual dimension of the relationship between Claudia and her mother is of the foremost value, as Hopkins elucidates: “The closeness

40. Morrison, The Bluest Eye, 82.
42. Morrison, The Bluest Eye, 87.
44. Morrison, The Bluest Eye, 89.
45. Hopkins, Shoes That Fit Our Feet, 64.
of the mother-daughter spiritual touch during sickness sketched such a graphic and indelible imprint on Claudia’s consciousness that the coming and going of the seasons now correlate with the medicinal hands of her mother. \(^{46}\) Claudia, thereafter, associates the season of fall with her mother’s warmth and empowering touch.

Through this character, Toni Morrison reiterates the importance of love and security as fundamental needs of children that parents must provide.

**The Need for Unity within the Black Community**

If our economic system is to survive, there has to be a better distribution of wealth...we can’t have a system where some people live in superfluous, inordinate wealth, while others live in abject, deadening poverty. \(^{47}\)

Martin Luther King, Jr.

Historians have surmised that the Black middle class began to evolve in the slavery era as a derivative of the “descendants of the original Black indentured servants and the mulatto offspring of slaveholders.” \(^{48}\) This group found the processes of assimilation, acculturation and socialization with the dominant White society less challenging because they found education, property, employment, and a relatively stable family life more attainable. These opportunities gradually engendered in them a sense of privilege and superiority to other Blacks, who were, for the most part, poor and enslaved. For example, during the post-emancipation period, up to and during the era of the Great Migration, from the oppressive southern agricultural areas to the allegedly less oppressive, urbanized North, the northern Black middle class resented the influx of Black Southerners. This resentment often found expression in the former limiting access to economic resources and employment of the latter.

Some historians make even stronger claims. Harold Cruse describes the Black middle class as

> an empty class that has flowered into social prominence without a clearly defined social mission in the United States... Lacking even a clear consensus of a social mission, except more of the same vague and evanescent idea of “civil rights,” the new middle-class is empty, it is an indulgent “Me” generation, a class that has ingrowing psychic troubles over portents of an uncertain future. \(^{49}\)

\(^{46}\) Hopkins, *Shoes That Fit Our Feet*, 76.


According to some, criticism of middle-class ideology and classism violates a human being’s sacred right to equality within the wider community. Since God regards all human beings as equal, they should be treated justly, and any form of discrimination, including that of prejudice engendered by one’s social status, is in disobedience to God’s will. Moreover, this division weakens the Black community.

Historically, the Black middle class has exhibited a certain nonchalance towards the broader Black community’s needs, as pointed out by E. Franklin Frazier in *Black Bourgeoisie* and by W. E. B. Du Bois, with his rejection of his earlier perspective regarding the “Talented Tenth.” Nevertheless, there have been some notable exceptions. Black progressive religious leaders, like Martin Luther King Jr. in particular, viewed social stratification within the Black community and within broader American society as unconscionable. King was a member of the Black middle class, who transformed his pastoral authority into social and political leadership, expressing the urgent necessity for the Black middle class’s economic contribution to the Black Freedom Struggle. He admonished:

> It is time for the Negro middle class to rise up from its stool of indifference, to retreat from its flight into unreality and to bring its full resources—its heart, its mind and its checkbook to the aid of the less fortunate brother.50

Martin Luther King sought social equality within the Black community and the wider American nation. He fostered the traditional role of the Black Church as an agent of liberation, teacher of mutual love, and an institution for empowerment of oppressed Black people. James Cone, who is the precursor of contemporary systematic Black liberation theology, disparages classism when he writes: “Black theology is not academic theology; it is not a theology of the dominant classes and racial majorities. It is a theology of the black poor, reconstructing their hopes and dreams of God’s coming liberated world.”51

Toni Morrison in her novel *Love* seems to suggest that belonging to the middle class does not necessarily make a person an opportunist. The character Bill Cosey is a Black man who exemplifies middle-class performance that to a certain degree might indicate a hopeful realization of Martin Luther King’s call to share resources within the beloved Black community, although he is not a saint without human shortcomings. Bill Cosey, as do Black theologians, recognizes the sacredness of every Black human being, a recognition that should be


expressed in agape. The character shows that a middle-class Black person might also practice the ethics of bread breaking.

Contrary to other middle-class folks, Bill Cosey uses his fortune and good reputation in acts of philanthropy towards the Black poor. He provides funds for the poor toward funeral costs, bail, medical care and education. Furthermore, he offers local people dignified jobs in his hotel that are valued as a “permanent leap out of the fish trough.” Here is a reversal of the crab in a barrel myth—instead of pulling other Blacks down—they pull them up and out! Vida, formerly employed as a receptionist in the hotel, recalls not only her sense of exhilaration upon being liberated from a laborious job in a stinking cannery, but notes, also, Bill Cosey’s exceptionally courteous and respectful treatment to his employees. She appreciated the decent work conditions and spare clean uniforms, the costs of which her employer did not deduct from her pay.

Bill Cosey is also aware of the obstructions that hinder Black people’s advancement, due to segregation. He questions Sandler: “Do you know that every law in this country is made to keep us back?” He knows that Black middle-class privileges are limited too, because a “Negro can have A-one credit, solid collateral, and not a hope in hell of a bank loan.” Nevertheless, despite his consciousness of social injustice and his ensuing acts of philanthropy, his response to the barriers faced by the broader Black community can be viewed as problematic.

He opens a quality holiday resort catering only for wealthy Black people because in any other place in segregated America they would most likely come across a “White Only” sign. Although the music at the parties seems to have a unifying power, since less advantaged workers can hear it, “dance to it in the dark, the deep dark, between their own houses, in shadow underneath their own windowsills,” the Black underprivileged finds the luxurious parties inaccessible. Bill Cosey’s resort only subliminally unites the two social classes. The affluent middle-class guests not only entertain themselves, but also discuss matters beyond the resort such as “death in the cities, murder in Mississippi, and what they planned to do about it other than grieve and stare at their children.”

Finally, the most questionable facet of his posture is his treatment of women. He marries Heed, a girl from a poor family, young enough to be his granddaughter. He interferes in the childhood of two girl friends, Heed, and Christine, his granddaughter. His domineering attitudes and his family’s disapproval of his

53. Morrison, Love, 44.
54. Morrison, Love, 44.
56. Morrison, Love, 35.
marital decision engender a lifelong conflict between Heed, Christine, and the family. Even after his death, the former friends secretly plot against each other to obtain the right to inherit the property because Bill Cosey left an ambiguous will. Paradoxically, while within his household he was a source of conflict, outside, the community gave him considerable recognition as a problem solver or a salvific figure.

Despite his faults, Bill Cosey at least partly fulfills Martin Luther King’s call to share one’s resources with others and the theological ethic of “bread breaking.” The character suggests that the Black middle class can and should respond to need through their performance, in providing uplifting employment and financial support, thereby demonstrating identification with the vision of the beloved Black community. With his many acts of benevolence, Bill Cosey makes amends for the harm perpetrated by his father who was a traitorous courthouse informer against the community, who had attained his position by way of Black middle-class corruption and opportunism.

The attitude of the classist character Macon Dead Jr. from *Song of Solomon* is in contrast to Bill Cosey. *Song of Solomon* primarily portrays the protagonist Milkman’s search for his roots and identity in a gradual departure from his Northern hometown to the Southern town of Shalimar. Milkman is Macon Dead Jr.’s son. The young man’s spiritual and self-discovering odyssey begins with the development of a critical stance toward his family, especially the dominance and possessiveness of his father.

Unlike Cosey, Macon Dead Jr.’s middle-class performance is antagonistic toward the Black community. His primary concern with property acquisition leads to estrangement from the community. He uses his bourgeois status to justify his hostility toward the poor. He is merciless toward his impoverished tenants, who try to postpone rent payment for the substandard housing he lets them.

Because his black middle-class privilege depends on a lifeline connection to White mainstream society, Macon secures favorable treatment from law enforcement officers, when his son is apprehended by the police after attempting to steal Pilate’s alleged gold. Knowing the system and its corrupt nature, Macon bribes the police to get his son released. He also courts White bankers. Should the situation require it, he would have willingly incarcerated his sister Pilate for selling illegal alcohol, because she might “loudmouth him and make him seem trashy in the eyes of the law—and the banks.”

Macon also exemplifies the practices of bourgeois parents, who exhibit their children in a show of superiority to poor Black families. His daughter Magdalene remembers being literally put on display together with her sister when they

were wearing “white stockings, ribbons, and gloves” in front of needy, “barefoot, naked to the waist, dirty”\(^{58}\) Black children.

Morrison’s critique of middle-class performance that is based on prioritizing profiteering and indifference to the plight of the Black poor is consonant with several Black theological assumptions. For example, biblical scholar, Cain Hope Felder, offers an interesting interpretation of the apostle Paul, exhortation against classism. Paul is seen as one who emphasizes the essence of the spiritual freedom given by God to every human being through Jesus Christ. Paul broadens the notion of free spirit as a quality that liberates the body and rejects all discrimination, for in his words “God shows no partiality.”\(^{59}\) Felder also illuminates the imperative to challenge class discrimination presented in James 2:1–7. He cites the contrast between an enriched and an impoverished member of the local community. The former is characterized by “the gold ring and lavish clothing”\(^{60}\) and the latter by “shabby clothing.”\(^{61}\) In verse 4 the question is: “Have you not made distinctions among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?” In contrast to these biblical guideposts, Macon Dead Jr. makes distinctions among the members of his community, focusing on property acquisition and conspicuous consumption.

**Toni Morrison’s Literature and the Black Community**

In summary, the content of Toni Morrison’s novels discussed in this paper evidenced the interconnectedness between Morrison’s world of fiction and actual Black experience. As seen in her novels, classism seems to be omnipresent today within many Black communities. For instance, the columnists of *The Black Commentator* magazine coined the concept of “Bill Cosbyism,” based on the entrepreneur’s public criticism of the Black poor at a gala celebration of the fiftieth anniversary of the *Brown* desegregation decision. In the article “Bill Cosby’s Confused Notions of Responsibility” aspects of “Bill Cosbyism” are analyzed. As a result of Cosby’s perceived malicious and discriminatory comments relating to the Black poor, civil rights, illiteracy, impoverished black women, out-of-wedlock births and police shootings, the authors conclude: “Dr. King and Malcolm X and Fred Hampton died in a social struggle to empower Black people. Cosby demonizes these same people, employing the enemy’s language, like some vengeful, spurned benefactor.”\(^{62}\)

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59. Rom. 2:11.
Those who read Toni Morrison’s novels might find symmetry between Bill Cosby’s stance and attitudes of Morrison’s characters, Macon Dead Jr., Geraldine Junior and Maureen Peal, who openly repudiate and humiliate the Black underprivileged. Although the historical context in the novels is fictional 1930s in *Song of Solomon* and 1940s in *The Bluest Eye*, the ethical import seems to be contemporary and relevant and, therefore, most applicable to the interpretation of certain middle-class attitudes at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

Classism is also proliferating within the Black Church in the manifestation of prosperity gospel. This gospel is particularly promoted within a number of Black mega-churches where affluent ministers preach financial salvation as God’s blessing. These preachers encourage prayer for individual material accumulation and not for effecting justice for the Black masses through “a radical redistribution of wealth” for the benefit of the Beloved community as a whole. Such a deviation from the social justice dimension of scripture has led to the exploitation of believers.

Such a conflict seems to have been heralded in Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*, where the character Soaphead Church takes advantage of the poor members of his community, who seemingly regard him as a preacher practicing “conjure.” He fails to contribute to their spiritual empowerment. He seems only to pretend to follow the ancestral tradition of Black enslaved people’s healing practices through the “use of the Bible and supernatural power to counteract the willpower of their oppressors.”

Yvonne P. Chireau elucidates different observations of early Black spiritual expressions, when she writes:

> the folklorist William Owens corroborated the appearance of a strange admixture of Christianity and supernaturalism, remarking that black “American-born superstitions” were “interwoven with so-called religious beliefs” and represented “a horrible debasement of some of the highest and noblest doctrines of the Christian faith.” Others would note that African American practitioners of Christianity often mingled unusual practices with their traditions. As stated by one elder, an ex-slave commenting on the eclecticism of black spiritual beliefs: “Our religion and superstition was all mixed up!”

Seen as men of extraordinary faith, knowledge and powers, religious leaders and conjurers among the enslaved offered consolation in the midst of slavery’s ignominy. In contradistinction, the character Soaphead Church denigrates God and abuses those in need.

Colorism is not receding either. In actual practice, colorism, unfortunately, prevails among Black people. Preference for a light-complexioned partner

conditions the marital choices of some. Moreover, the first concern of many parents at the moment of a baby’s birth is skin color, which is believed to determine the child’s future. Colorism continues to live in slogans and clichés such as the well-known “if you were light you were all right, if you were brown stick around, if you were black get back.” Alice Walker elucidates several standardized epithets used to describe women of particular complexions. Lighter-skinned Black women are “high yellow,” brown women in the fifties and earlier sixties could only be complimented as “good-looking” or “fine,” and the adjective “beautiful” was used in reference to White or almost white-looking women. To infuse White blood meant to “lighten up” or to improve one’s race.

Furthermore, colorism pervades workplaces, universities, student dormitories and households, often resulting frequently in the attitudes of self-contempt among dark-complexioned Black people. For example, in 2003 a case of colorism was reported in an Applebee’s restaurant in Jonesboro, Georgia, where Dwight Burch, a darker-complexioned Black waiter, testified that his light-skinned manager humiliated him because of his darker skin, telling him to bleach himself. When Burch threatened to report the incident to a higher authority, he was dismissed.

Moreover, because of deepening chasm class division, many sociologists are engaging forms of research to better understand this phenomenon. For example, Skin Deep: How Race and Complexion Matter in the “Color-Blind” Era attempts to explain why lighter complexion is still a decisive quality in many marital choices and why Michael Jackson underwent so many skin-lightening operations or why Halle Berry is considered a beauty symbol, while Whoopi Goldberg is not. Scientists were even forced to invent the notion of the “bleaching syndrome,” upon their observation of some Black people’s obsession with turning themselves White. Scientific studies show that lighter-skinned blacks are more educated and earn more than darker-skinned blacks. And as reflected in a Newsweek cover story last year, top black CEOs are mostly light-skinned. Lighter-skinned black women also marry earlier than their darker-toned sisters, more often than not to spouses with high incomes.

Lastly, reading Toni Morrison’s novels can raise the awareness of the social situation of the Black community because they portray the social conflicts of

classism and colorism, which are observable phenomena in many Black communities today. The discriminatory attitudes of the characters Macon Dead Jr., Maureen Peal, Geraldine Junior, Helene Wright, Soaphead Church, and the Ruby community members, may serve as caution against a value system that severs unity within Black communities. Other characters such as Bill Cosey, Pilate, Mrs. MacTeer, Baby Suggs, and Lady Jones may offer role models for individuals desirous of contributing to the Black communities’ empowerment through loving households and inspirational pastoring that promotes a sense of “Sombodiness” and a collective sharing of knowledge and financial resources.

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