



## **Female Trauma in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* and Lynda Chouiten's *Une Valse***

### **Le traumatisme féminin dans *L'œil le plus bleu* de Toni Morrison et *Une valse* de Lynda Chouiten**

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#### **Abstract:**

African-American giant Toni Morrison and Algerian scholar and novelist Lynda Chouiten seem to be galaxies away but they happen to have so much in common. Both are feminist intellectuals who began as university teachers before embarking on a literary career. Storytelling, songs and folktales are similarly embedded in their lives and writings and both are concerned with issues of discrimination and violence. The present paper purports to focus on the issue of female trauma that pervades their novels *The Bluest Eye* (1970) and *Une Valse* (2019) respectively, and examine the two women authors' treatment of this theme. Drawing on a comparative approach and a psychoanalytical study of the two main female characters, it aims at exploring the numerous similarities and the few differences between Pecola, the victimized Black adolescent who is so conditioned by white standards of beauty that she obsessively yearns to have blue eyes and the mature Algerian seamstress Chahira who tries to cope with her mental distress and schizophrenic bouts in a frustrating patriarchal environment.

**Keywords:** Female trauma, novels, Toni Morrison, Lynda Chouiten

#### **Résumé:**

De prime abord, rien ne semble relier l'écrivaine noire-américaine Toni Morrison et l'universitaire et romancière algérienne Lynda Chouiten qui ont cependant bien des points communs. Toutes deux des féministes, elles ont commencé par enseigner à l'université avant d'entamer une carrière littéraire basée sur les récits, les chants et autres contes populaires tout en traitant de discrimination et de violence. Le présent article examine donc la question du trauma féminin dans leurs romans respectifs, *L'œil le plus bleu* (1970) et *Une Valse* (2019), en adoptant une approche comparative et une étude psychanalytique des deux principaux personnages féminins. Il met l'accent sur les innombrables similarités et les rares différences entre Pecola, l'adolescente noire victimisée dont l'obsession par les normes de beauté imposées par les blancs lui font halluciner d'avoir des yeux bleus, et Chahira, la couturière algérienne mure qui peine à s'accommoder de sa détresse mentale et de ses crises de schizophrénie dans son environnement patriarcal frustrant.

**Mots-clés :** Traumatisme féminin, romans, Toni Morrison, Lynda Chouiten

Nothing seems to relate African-American Toni Morrison, winner of the Nobel prize for literature in 1993, and Algerian recipient of the Assia Djebar literary prize for 2019 Lynda Chouiten. However, both are strong women who uphold the feminist ideal of female empowerment and chose to be outspoken advocates of the oppressed in their respective patriarchal societies. Their careers have known parallel trajectories, beginning as university teachers before embarking on novel writing. Chloe Anthony Wofford, known as Toni Morrison, taught at several US universities including the State University of New York and Princeton University and also worked as fiction editor at Random House for many years (Britannica 2022), reading and reviewing the works of fellow authors. Professor Lynda Chouiten teaches English literature at the University of Boumerdes, Algeria, after obtaining a PhD from the National University of Ireland, Galway, in 2013 (Sahoui 2020). She is also the Editor-in-Chief of the scholarly journal *In Passage: The International Journal of Writing and Mobility* published by the English Department of the University of Boumerdes. Her first novel, *Le Roman des Pôv' Cheveux* (2017), which can be translated as *The Novel of the Poo' Hair*, is a humorous allegory of the human condition where the main characters are hairs while Morrison's novels, especially her first one, *The Bluest Eye*, abound in allegories (Fick 1989).

Storytelling, songs and folktales similarly suffuse the lives and writings of the two novelists and both are concerned with issues of discrimination and violence. They wrote about post-slavery and post-colonial societies respectively and, amid the general violence generated by racism in the US and the dark decade of terrorism in Algeria, both women novelists focus on the private violence that results from the repeated and multi-faceted aggressions directed at Pecola and Chahira, the main characters of the selected novels *The Bluest Eye* (1970) and *Une Valse* (2019) as a case study of female trauma.

Comparison and interconnection are inescapable in literary study for, as T. S. Eliot affirms in "Tradition and the Individual Talent" (1919), "no poet, no artist of any art has his complete meaning alone... You cannot value him alone; you must set him, for contrast and comparison, among the dead" (p.38). It is therefore convenient to rely on a comparative approach to unravel the dense network of similarities rather than differences even between works that seem so widely-set apart. Indeed, as aptly defined by Haun Saussy (2011), the aim of "the comparatist is to invent new relations among literary works" (p.60) and thus to show how they converge in unprecedented ways found in both *The Bluest Eye* and *Une Valse*.

For Steven Totosy de Zepetnek (1998), comparative literature "means the knowledge of more than one national language and literature and or it means the knowledge and application of other disciplines in and for the study of literature" (13). As such, "it facilitates the cross-cultural and interdisciplinary study of literature" (Totosy de Zepetnek, 1998, p.15). The two novels under scrutiny in this article are written in different languages and therefore constitute appropriate instances of the second general principle of comparative literature according to Totosy de Zepetnek which is "the theoretical as well as methodological postulate to move and to dialogue between cultures, languages, and disciplines" (p.16). Recognized "as an *inter-disciplinary*, *cross-cultural*, and *trans-national* endeavor" (Behdad and Thomas 2011, p.1), the comparative method adopted for this study is coupled with another discipline which is psychoanalytical criticism.

Literary works lend themselves to interpretation, a pursuit that is the basis of Freudian psychoanalysis. Indeed, it was in the form of *Interpretation of Dreams* (1900) that Sigmund Freud initially propounded his newly-found components of the subconscious. In this groundbreaking work, he propounds that the subconscious manifests itself through dreams, free associations or creative work by means of symbols. His coined term of "psychoanalysis" refers to his method of treating nervous disorders. Psychoanalytical criticism as used in this study is thus the application of the theories of Freud and his followers to the reading of literature. It can

fall into three categories depending on the focus of analysis which is either on the author or on the reader or on the literary text. The first line of study which has been practised by Freud himself is a sort of psycho-biographical approach that considers literary creation as a form of neurosis and seeks to unveil the psychological conflicts of the author through his writings. The second one is a psychoanalysis of the reader as proposed by Norman Holland who suggests that readers use the text to satisfy unconscious wishes (cited by Cuddon, 1991, p.359) and thereby bring to the text their own fantasies and anxieties. The third approach which is the one employed in this article is to psychoanalyze the characters in the selected novels as if they were endowed with conscious and subconscious lives by bringing to the fore their traumas and subsequent troubles thereof.

Subalternity is another concept that is drawn upon in this analysis as introduced by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1988) in “Can the Subaltern Speak?” It is usually associated with postcolonial literary works such as Chouiten’s novel but can nevertheless be found in Morrison’s which is concerned with such ethnic and minority groups as the blacks in the United States; for subalternity may also be “conceived as a form of uneven development within the space of the nation” (Byrd and Rothberg 2011, p.5). The subaltern state of the two main female characters and their inferior position in their societies are deeply involved in the forms of trauma that they suffer from.

Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* is the story of a Black American girl who is the double victim of racism in her society and of her family’s rejection for her ugliness. Her mother prefers the white daughter of her employers and her father, himself the victim of white violence, commits rape on her twice and makes her pregnant. Pecola had always desired to have blue eyes and resemble child actress Shirley Temple to be accepted in her environment, so her reaction to her traumatic experience is the loss of her sanity as she converses with her other self about blue eyes that only she can see. On the other hand, *Une Valse* is an ultra-contemporary novel which follows the fate of Chahira, a mature seamstress who faces a frustrating patriarchal environment and a stressing mental predicament. Yet, she manages to be selected for the final round of a sewing contest to be held in Vienna where she dreams of performing the waltz of the title. Though a bright pupil at school, she is stopped from studying by her violent father who used to beat her with his belt without her mother’s intervention to help or defend her. We learn obliquely that as a child, she had been abused by their neighbour each time she went to his shop but she is unable to denounce this aggression because no one listens to her or believes her, not even her mother. As a result, she has “a problem” as it is recurrently called in the novel. She hears a multitude of voices in her head, “the others”, some of them masculine, which control her actions and intrude on her daily life. She even consults a psychiatrist once but does not return, his waiting room is crowded with patients fearing for their sanity. Though she succeeds in going to Austria, the voices spoil every achievement; she therefore decides to throw herself in the Danube River and drown. She is saved at the last moment by one of the voices and decides to carry on living with her split personality which estranges her from other people and prevents her from forming any relationship.

Trauma is an emotional response to a terrible event. The description of trauma in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual* (1987) published by the American Psychiatric Associations, (considered as the bible of psychiatric diagnosis and quoted by Laura Brown in her chapter “Not Outside the Range: One Feminist Perspective on Psychic Trauma”) is that “The person has experienced an event that is outside the range of human experience” (1995, p.100). This dimension of unhabitual and disturbing event that transgresses the very existence and violates ordinary human life is clearly found in both novels. Brown also lists the categories of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptoms which are: “reexperiencing symptoms, nightmares, and flashbacks; avoidance symptoms, the marks of psychic numbing; and the symptoms of

heightened physiological arousal: hypervigilance, disturbed sleep, and a distracted mind” (Brown 1995, p.100). All these aspects can be found to varying degrees in the two novels, with special focus on the last one (a distracted mind) as will be more fully explored.

According to Judith Herman in her book *Trauma and Recovery*, “When the victim is already devalued (a woman, a child) ... Her experience becomes unspeakable” (1992, p.5). The subaltern situation of trauma victims and their denigration by other members of their family and/or society exposes them to even more threatening forms of psychological damage. This kind of “fragmentation, whereby trauma tears apart a complex system of self-protection that normally functions in an integrated fashion” (Herman 1992, p.25) is central to the predicaments of Pecola and Chahira. Herman also mentions “the ‘dissolving’ effects of intense emotion, which incapacitate[s] the ‘synthesizing’ function of the mind” (p.25). This, according to Herman, is a defence mechanism adopted by the victims who find refuge in another world of their own creation, which is aptly rendered in the novels under study.

When a person is completely powerless, and any form of resistance is futile, she may go into a state of surrender. The system of self-defense shuts down entirely. The helpless person escapes from her own situation not by action in the real world but rather by altering her state of consciousness (Herman 1992, p.31).

Though fictional characters, both Pecola and Chahira are showed to present the same psychological troubles which transform their psyches as those diagnosed by psychoanalysts in clinical observations of victims of traumas that cannot be voiced. For girls and women in particular, “most traumas do occur in secret” (Brown 1995, p.101). Moreover, Diana Russell (1986) calls incest the “secret trauma”. She also documents the buried consequences of sexual assaults upon the lives of girls and women which are found to be similarly mirrored by devastating effects on Morrison’s and Chouiten’s traumatised female characters.

The fragmented narratives and non-linear plot lines of both novels reflect the broken personalities of the main characters torn asunder by their traumatic experiences. *The Bluest Eye* opens with three versions of a schoolbook story about the perfect family where the last version which is written without punctuation or spaces, running wildly and incomprehensibly, is representative of the Breedlove family which is torn apart, and of Pecola’s mental state which is dissolved and chaotic. Concurrently, *Une Valse* begins with a poem as an epigram that was composed by Chouiten herself in 2018 under the title “*Au bord de ma folie*” (on the edge of my madness). It describes a fairy that has grown out of the speaker’s madness and constituted another self which ends up shattering her reason and tolling the knell of her destroyed sanity – “*sonnent le glas d’une raison qui s’achève*” (Chouiten 2019, pp.9-10). Prior to reading the stories themselves, the reader is intimated subtly that what is to follow is no conventional narrative and that something awful has occurred.

The two novelists adopt carefully-chosen narrative strategies to present the reader with the traumatic experience that Pecola and Chahira have undergone right at the outstart of their works. Morrison does so in a sort of preamble where the narrator casually mentions that “Pecola was having her father’s baby” (Morrison 1970, p.5), implying rather than stating an incestuous relation that impregnated her even before she appears in the novel. As for Chahira, the opening lines show her singing and happily trying a “sublime” dress but soon shirking away at the recollection of the disturbing mixture of odours of fish and sweat which had caused her to hurry away from the mercery shop, even though she had taken a shower in the morning (p.14).

The common patterns adopted by the two female novelists start with the choice of the titles. The bluest eye and the waltz are exactly what the two traumatized female characters desire most as a healing token to restore their shattered selves. However, though they are granted their desire, they are both estranged from their environment and continue to suffer from

dislocated identity and live with visual, auditory and even, in the case of Chahira, with olfactory hallucinations. Pecola has prayed endlessly for blue eyes throughout her dire existence, eating candy Mary Janes to symbolically become white and blue-eyed like them. But when she can finally see her eyes in the mirror and admire their utter blueness, she has already lost her sanity and talks to her imaginary self in a surreal dialogue which recapitulates her new life as totally cut off from reality. Chahira has similarly yearned for travelling to Austria for months and finally managed to overcome the obstacles of her conservative family to realize her dream. Yet, just as she is miraculously granted the waltz of her obsessed mind, she is engulfed into the whirlpool of the “others” whose voices she alone can hear. She fears the touches of their “fingers” over her body that she could distinctly feel, in addition to the pestilent smells that suffocate her and that she is persuaded that her dancing companions are smelling too (pp.209-11). Having fulfilled more than she had bargained for by waltzing with two men, “a brown and a blond” (p.210), an Algerian and a German, she sees all her achievements irredeemably spoilt by her sensory hallucinations and decides to put an end to her life and torments.

The two female protagonists are given names that ironically suggest the opposite of their personalities. Pecola which means a “brazen” and bold woman (“Pecola” 2022) is the name of an ugly, insignificant and shameful black girl who grows up in a family devoid of love ironically named Breedlove. Chahira which means famous in Arabic, is paradoxically an obscure seamstress from a small seaside town who seeks to become well-known by participating in an international fashion contest in Vienna. Her surname Lahab (meaning fire in Arabic), which is mentioned but once in the novel, reflects nothing flamboyant about her. However, after being granted their long sought-for desires, the two heroines begin to think highly of themselves, even though pathologically. Pecola reflects aloud that her eye are “*Much prettier than the sky*” and “*Much prettier than Alice-and-Jerry Storybook eyes*” (p.201) and Chahira recognizes that “Sissi” looked exactly like her when admiring the portrait of impress Elizabeth of Bavaria in an Austrian gallery (p.175).

Morrison’s novel is divided into four parts named after the four seasons that reflect the natural cycle of development, beginning with that of planting time, Autumn, but which in the case of Pecola follow her gradual sinking into madness as witnessed by her friends Claudia and Frieda who narrate part of the novel. An analogous rationale is followed in Chouiten’s novel which is divided into three parts named after the three towns where the actions are set, beginning in El Moudja, and moving to Tizi N’Tlelli, then to Vienna. The three settings may be a reflection of the very characteristics of a waltz which is defined as “a dance in which a couple moves in a regular series of three steps” (Britannica 2022). The first two settings are fictional places in Algeria meaning the wave and col of freedom, whose names are symbolically evocative of Chahira’s gradual breaking free from social constraints until Vienna in Europe; yet, her wish to escape her traumatizing reality only results in being trapped in the imaginary world of her altered consciousness.

The two novelists adopt the same strategies for exposing the devastating consequences of female trauma. Both Pecola and Chahira are doubly victims to their violent societies and to specific assaults at a young age which have similarly resulted in the form of split personalities and hallucinations. Both are afflicted with violent fathers who replicate the violence they themselves suffered from on their helpless daughters but which in the case of Pecola go as far as incest. Their two mothers are not on their side but rather repeatedly put the blame on their daughters for what happened. When Pecola is raped by her father, all the efforts she made to explain to her mother are useless as is disclosed towards the end of the novel when she talks with her “other self”:

*You don't understand anything, do you?*  
She didn't even believe me when I told her.  
*So that's why you didn't tell her about the second time?*  
She wouldn't have believed me then either.  
*You're right. No use telling her when she wouldn't believe you.* (Morrison 1970, p.200).

However, there are slight differences between the two novelists' dealing with sexual assaults. The two rape scenes of *The Bluest Eye* are explicitly described which had caused the novel to be banned for many years and while Chahira's beating is rendered with all the bloody details, the sexual abuse that occurred in her childhood is only hinted at.

Morrison openly indicts white racism and how it contributes to the double trauma of Pecola who is symbolically "dumped" by both society and her family. At teenage, her life is already finished as she is mad and living in the garbage. The novel ends with the glaring consequences of her traumatic experience; "The damage done was total. She spent her days, her tendrils, sap-green days walking up and down, up and down, her head jerking to the beat of a drummer so distant only she could hear" (Morrison 1970, p.204). Incest is too powerful a trauma to recover from, especially when it is added to the subaltern and oppressed situation of a black ugly girl in the United States where it is still needed to assert that "black lives matter".

Chahira is much older and has carried on her schizophrenic life for decades, often not able to make the difference between reality and her internal state, complaining that "there is a riot in her head in all languages" (Chouiten 2019, p.166). Chouiten subtly introduces the background of violence caused by a whole decade of war waged within Algeria by "bigots with mad eyes and hirsute hair" slaughtering even babies to quench the inextinguishable thirst of "a barbarous and sadistic divinity invented by pious demons" (p.26, translation mine). She shows how Chahira tries to find a cure to her "problem" by going to a psychiatrist and finds a lot of people waiting "fearing for their head full of chaos like the whole country" (p.60, translation mine). Chouiten links Chahira's predicament to all her society and implicitly denounces the pervading violence that claims more and more victims, both physically and psychologically.

To conclude, though belonging to different backgrounds and separate continents, Toni Morrison and Lynda Chouiten do not differ much when representing the issue of female trauma through their novels *The Bluest Eye* and *Une Valse*. Their respective protagonists Pecola and Chahira are similarly victims of the general violence of their societies which is the cause of the private aggressions that have caused their insanity. The two women writers dealing with traumatic experiences of female characters albeit in diverging situations are found to converge in their treatment of this painful issue whatever their origin or language or society, for the universal agony that girls are subjected to in brutal and oppressive situations can be expressed in analogous ways.

Their novels reveal and denounce the same female suffering resulting from various forms of violence and oppression that are not that different, whether having their roots in slavery or colonialism, racism or terrorism. *The Bluest Eye* and *Une Valse*, written in various registers of English and French respectively, rely both on complex narrative strategies and thus seem to be at the intersection between cultures, languages and identities. They convey in concurrent manners the harrowing issue of female trauma in fictional form and adopt a similar focus on the psychological pathologies and subconscious manifestations of their protagonists.

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