

**“OVIDIUS” UNIVERSITY OF CONSTANTA  
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**DOCTORAL THESIS  
SUMMARY**

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CONSTANTA, 2014

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**(RE)DEFINITIONS OF THE SELF  
IN TONI MORRISON’S FICTION**

**(RE)DEFINIRI ALE EULUI ÎN PROZA LUI TONI MORRISON**

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## **SUMMARY:**

### **(RE)DEFINITIONS OF THE SELF IN TONI MORRISON'S FICTION**

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#### **Abstract**

*This research is concerned with determining the mechanisms behind the formation, suspension, evolution and dissolution of identities in Toni Morrison's fiction. Our main assumption is that the negotiation of the self suspended between the character's own desires and the expectations of the society is a major topic in Morrison's fiction. Therefore, the objectives of our endeavor are to analyze the mechanisms underlying this negotiation, to determine the way in which the characters cope with their lack of congruence with the society and to argue that Morrison's characters follow a psychological pattern of identity formation and self-definition. This research offers a fresh perspective on Morrison's fiction, focusing on a set of coping strategies for unconfirmed identities, some of which not having been discussed in critical studies so far. The theoretical background is based both on identity theory and on social identity theory, with a strong focus on the perceptual emphasis in identity theory.*

#### **Key words**

Toni Morrison's fiction, identity, coping strategies, power relations, stigma, deviance, hybridity, the Self/Other

The present research focuses on the analysis of the way in which individuality and the self are formed in Toni Morrison's fictional works. We argue that the search for the self is one of the major themes in Morrison's fiction and that the process of identification is the main mechanism behind the architecture of the characters' relationships. The thesis has the advantage of a unified approach to the author's works of fiction. The corpus consists in Morrison's novels published so far: *The Bluest Eye* (1970), *Sula* (1974), *Song of Solomon* (1977), *Tar Baby* (1981), *Beloved* (1987), *Jazz* (1992), *Paradise* (1999), *Love* (2003), *A Mercy* (2008) and *Home* (2012) and the short story "Recitatif", published in *Confirmation, an Anthology of African American Women* (1983).

The title of the thesis, *(Re)definitions of the Self in Toni Morrison's Fiction*, reflects the dynamic of the self in terms of the creation, the modification and the elimination of identities while in interaction with other identities or stimuli. The phrase '(re)definitions of the self' reflects the characters' response to the events and attitudes they are faced with.

In accordance with the aim of this thesis, the main objectives of this research are: a) to make a comprehensive analysis of the mechanisms behind the formation, suspension and evolution of identities in Morrison's fiction; b) to identify the coping strategies of the characters when subjected to an overwhelming outside pressure and c) to argue that Morrison's fictional characters follow a psychological pattern of identity formation and self-redefinition. We have chosen to focus our analysis on the following concepts: coping strategies, power relations, the Self/Other, deviance, stigma and hybridity.

Toni Morrison's work has been the focus of critics for more than forty years, partly due to the fact that it strongly advocates equal treatment and chances for African Americans in general and for African American women in particular. Her essays and interviews are imbued with this idea of justice and equality for these minorities and not only. However, the author is mainly known for the esthetic quality of her writings, which contributed to her nomination for and granting of the Nobel Prize, in 1993 (Toni Morrison - Biographical). Toni Morrison does not acknowledge her fiction to be representative for a certain literary trend. In fact, she resists any strict categorization ("An Interview with Toni Morrison" 426), from the conviction that all things are multi-faceted and thus, they may seem different from another angle. Therefore, she has used the plurality of voices in her fiction (in *Jazz* and *Home*), she

has created an apparently omniscient narrator that eventually, and subtly, proves to be unreliable (in *Tar Baby*) and she has challenged racial prejudice by creating confusion as to which of the characters is white or black (in “Recitatif” and *Paradise*).

Morrison’s resistance to categorization and the complex nature of her topics and her characters have allowed for diverse critical approaches, which vary from mythical to postmodern, from historical to political, from psychological to sociological and from religious to pedagogical. The topics analyzed are equally varied: racial prejudice, gender stereotypes, the African American creativity, slavery, motherhood, deviance, religious beliefs, tradition, beauty, history, the South, trauma, the role of the community, hybridity, alienation, haunting, the absurd and war. Nevertheless, the most abundant interpretations are from the point of view of psychology, from the feminist perspective, from the postmodern perspective and from the cultural studies perspective.

It is our conviction that social psychology may provide thorough and insightful tools in determining the mechanisms behind the identity conflicts from which Morrison’s characters suffer. The thesis puts together theories centering on identity, from multiple perspectives: personal, social, cultural and even place identity. In our analysis, we have used a variety of theoretical studies, such as George Herbert Mead’s *Mind, Self and Society* (1934), Michel Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish* (1975), Laclau and Mouffe’s *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (1985), Richard Jenkins’s *Social Identity* (1996), David Osseweij’s *Identity: Between Subject and Object* (2006) and Peter Burke’s and Jan Stets’ *Identity Theory* (2009), alongside a whole range of critical articles and studies on Morrison’s fiction.

The thesis is structured in five chapters. The first chapter establishes the theoretical framework and defines the concepts used in the analysis. The subsequent chapters deal with the analysis of the characters’ constant struggle to find their true identity and the redefinition of the self they undergo in the process.

The wide array of inputs contributing to identity studies (psychology, psychoanalysis, political science, sociology and history) has led to the emergence of diverse theories and to several different approaches to the problem of the self and identity. In establishing the theoretical grid, we have selected the concepts to be used and discussed them in the context of the identity theory and the social identity theory. First, the parallel concepts in the two theories have been discussed (the bases of identity: roles vs. categories or groups; the activation of identities: self-verification vs.

depersonalization and self-efficacy vs. self-esteem; salience). Further, we have presented other relevant concepts for the analysis: the notion of multiple identities, contexts for role conflict, the importance of acknowledgement in the formation of groups and categories, the need for the external validation of an identity, the role and components of self-esteem and the concepts of meaning, identity and self, as they are used in the thesis. Identity theory is not homogenous, and thus, its versions are discussed, pinpointing that in our analysis we have applied preponderantly Peter Burke's perceptual emphasis. Subsequently, some of the key concepts of the thesis – coping strategies, stigma, deviance and hybridity –, are discussed in the context of the interaction between the individual and the society. Moreover, theories of power and control are used to explain the complexity of this interaction (Gramsci, Althusser, Foucault, Laclau and Mouffe). The analysis then switches to the mechanisms behind the formation of the self, in which concepts such as the mirror, disguise, recognition and othering are tackled.

Chapter 2, “The survival of the self: coping strategies”, analyzes three ways of preserving identity, in spite of identity non-verification: self-abandonment, suspension of identity and the preservation of identity through the support of the community. The defense mechanisms against the rejection from the society fall under two categories: a) exhibiting new behavior in order to obtain more positive feedback (the character copes behaviorally) and b) reinterpreting the feedback so that the difference from the comparator is acceptable (the character copes perceptually). Under the first category lie mechanisms of legitimization for the identity such as: withdrawal from the interaction, rationalization of behavior, depreciation or rejection of unsupportive others and displacement by directing the negative feelings at others. The second category includes selective perception, repression of negative emotions or the projection of negative feelings onto others (Burke and Stets 159).

The first subchapter, ““Giving dominion of yourself to another”: self-abandoning women”, deals with enslavement and other forms of servitude and unpaid labor found in Toni Morrison's fiction, only to identify the mechanisms which underlie servitude and how servitude becomes self-elected.

The second subchapter, “Trauma and the suspension of identity”, focuses on the suspension of the development of the identity in the novels *Beloved*, *Love* and *Home*, as a response to the denial and oppression of the black identity. In the analyzed cases, identity is preserved the way it is at a certain moment, because otherwise the

self would be destroyed due to outside pressure. This preservation of identity is undertaken both behaviorally and perceptually, in such a way that the interaction with the outside world does not engender a differentiation from the identity standard.

The third subchapter, “Identity and community support”, focuses on the importance of the community for the development of identity in the novels *Beloved*, *Home* and *A Mercy*. We propose that communal actions are behavioral coping strategies, not of the individual but of the community. A community cannot be considered as such if it lacks interconnection and mutual help. Therefore, rescuing someone who is part of the community, even if that someone is an outcast, legitimizes the community and gives it substance. In the three novels we decided to investigate, the community is the last resort for the salvation of the characters that were either outcasts or self-exiled. By returning to the community for help, they allow the community to make amends for their rejection (*Beloved*), they rely on the community to legitimize their existence and integration (*A Mercy*) or they return to their forsaken roots in order to heal their wounds (*Home*).

Chapter 3, “Defining identities: resetting the mechanism of identification”, focuses on three aspects that lead to the modification and evolution of identities and of the self in Morrison’s novels: the importance of love, hunger and death as basic drives in identity construction, introspection through the haunt of the Other and women’s role in the formation of male identities. We have used W.E.B. Du Bois’s theory of the double consciousness to account for the characters’ conflicting behavior and changes in identity. Furthermore, the changes which the characters undergo are analyzed from the point of view of Arnold Van Gennep’s rites of passage.

We consider both the actions undertaken based on the psychological drives and the haunts as coping strategies of the psyche against the extreme behavior of the character, which is inconsistent with the identity standard. The first subchapter, “Love, hunger and death in identity construction”, focuses on the novels *Beloved*, *Love* and *Jazz*. As regards love, we have dwelled on two cases: a) mistaking passion and possession for love and b) extreme actions taken in the name of love. Hunger has been analyzed in relation to the others, as absence of satiety in what concerns the others’ participation in a character’s life and development. The death principle is seen as the last stance in which the characters may resolve their past and haunting issues.

We have reached the conclusion that the actions following these drives and the drives themselves are, in the cases we have analyzed, the result of role conflict. In

*Beloved*, Sethe acts upon her love drive and kills her daughter, as a result of the conflict between the meanings of the role of slave and the meanings of the role of mother. Her consciousness is split in two and her alter ego, Sethe-the-object, perpetrates the killing. In *Love*, Christine and Heed legitimize hateful actions when they are refused love by the hierarchical system they are part of and engage in violent acts as a result of their prior narcissistic identification. Hate is, therefore, the guise of narcissistic suicidal aggression. Like in *Beloved*, Christine and Heed are touched by role conflict: they are former best friends, thrown into fierce competition for Bill Cosey's affection when Heed is made Christine's step-grandmother. In *Jazz*, Violet mistakes and combines the meanings of wife, lover and object of adoration, mother and daughter, which brings her to face an identity crisis and the doubling of her consciousness. Joe's consciousness is also doubled, fluctuating between him being the object of choice or the subject doing the choosing. He also experiences role conflict, combining the meanings of the roles of husband, lover, son and adoring subject.

Ironically, the death principle is in most cases redeeming, cancelling the negative effects of love. In Sethe's case, the self must first be destroyed in order to regenerate. In Heed's and Christine's case, one of the women must first die, so that the other may incorporate her. Similarly, in Violet's case, one of the two parts of the self must be murdered in order to be incorporated. The hunger principle is also enmeshed within role conflict, hunger being the unconscious need for recognition and acceptance by the other.

As regards the doubling of the self, we argue it contributes to the exacerbation of the three drives. Beloved is Sethe's and Denver's double, building a self based on their wounds and taking their experiences in. Christine and Heed are each other's double, through their narcissistic identification. Violet has Violent as a double and Joe has a double gaze. We presume that, in the case of these six characters, the double consciousness plays a decisive role in the translation of the drives into extreme actions.

In the second subchapter, “Alternative presences: haunted by the Other”, we have analyzed the way in which haunting images or presences of the past may lead to the resolution of an identity crisis, residing in the lack of confirmation of the identity standard. We have dwelled on two situations: a) the elimination of the disturbance and the confirmation of the identity standard (*Jazz*) and b) the change of the identity standard by turning to past values (*Home*) or to future values (*Tar Baby*).

While love, hunger and death push the characters to act towards solving their incongruence, personal ghosts and disconfirming female characters are a means of probing the characters' subjectivities in order to reach a state of balance. There is, therefore, no question of imposition from without since personal ghosts are the result of the characters' own subjectivities and female characters are considered inferior to the male characters under scrutiny. We have concluded that the 'ghosts' in *Tar Baby*, *Jazz* and *Home* are symptoms of the characters' double consciousness. How can Violet be the woman she has to be if her mother is not there to recognize her worth? The same goes for Joe. Furthermore, how can Violet emulate being white when she is, in fact, black? Frank Money's double consciousness is self-imposed. By assigning his reprobable acts to someone else, he can criticize the acts but not himself. His double consciousness is a strategy of denial in an attempt not to admit the highly negative facets of his identity. Jadine has a double consciousness too. She knows she wants to be a modern woman, but she is made to question her decision when left in awe by a woman she considered to represent the authentic black female subjectivity. Therefore, Jadine is split between who she wants to be and who she is expected to be and experiments with the latter.

In the third subchapter, "Women and the setting up of male identity", we have analyzed the effect of an empowered female subjectivity on male subjectivity in the context of the patriarchal societies in *Song of Solomon*, *Tar Baby* and *Paradise*. Male identities are particularly interesting, since their position of authority is enforced by society. Therefore, the men's commitment to their identity is enhanced, as is distress in case of identity non-verification. Furthermore, non-verification comes from an 'inferior' being (a woman) and sometimes engenders the modification of the identity standard into renouncing the claim of superiority. In *Song of Solomon*, Pilate Dead leads Milkman on a journey of embracing his family's past in order for him to become a free-thinking, empathic man and to be integrated in his family. In *Tar Baby* there is a war of the will between Son and Jadine regarding the position of the woman towards the man. Jadine eventually flees and Son is left with negotiating his commitment to his values. If in *Tar Baby* Jadine flees to her safe heaven, the white society of Paris, another female safe heaven is destroyed in *Paradise* by men, only to let 'loose' the women to 'infect' them and the society with their progressive ideas.

The conclusion of the third subchapter is that the female contribution to male identity engages the male characters' commitment to their own identity. The society

in which Milkman, Son and Deacon Morgan function is patriarchal, therefore, when a woman contributes to the development of their identities, the first reaction upon its acknowledgement is refusal and the commitment to the former version of the identity. The three characters undergo rites of passage in their transformation, but the result is different. While Pilate's and Consolata's deaths are strong enough to break the men's resistance to their contribution, Son still oscillates in his pursuit of Jadine. He avails himself ready to adopt her values and lifestyle but, at the same time, he still has a strong urge to control her. Therefore, Milkman and Deacon manage to achieve the incorporation of the female principles, while Son fails to achieve the third rite of passage. In his case, the will to power and the commitment to his definition of male identity are too strong.

In Chapter 4, "Extreme actions and reactions: creating deviance", we have used Erving Goffman's theory of deviance and stigma to analyze behavioral and tribal stigma in Morrison's fiction. Furthermore, Edwin McCarthy Lemert's distinction between primary and secondary deviance has been applied, in order to stress the internalization factor in secondary deviance and to prove that, in Morrison's case, deviance is mainly secondary. We have also applied Klaus Eder's theory of narratives in the analysis of the mechanisms of control. Motifs such as abandonment, sexual deviance, prejudice and stigma are analyzed in this chapter.

The first subchapter, "Motherhood, motherlessness and abandonment", analyzes deviance in the most intimate of relationships, that between a mother and her offspring. We have analyzed the reasons behind a mother's abandonment, even infanticide, and the consequences of these acts on surviving children and on society at large in the short story "Recitatif" and the novels *A Mercy*, *Tar Baby* and *Beloved*. Our interpretation of is that the author is trying to counteract the oppressions, outlawing them and demonstrating that it is oppression that created negative stereotypes and not the opposite. By having her characters perform unimaginable acts of violence against their children and then humanizing the inhumane act, by legitimizing it, she creates different typologies outside the socially constructed controlling images. From the point of view of identity theory, we consider that to the role of black mother different meanings have been attached, meanings that come into conflict with those attached to the simultaneously activated roles of slave, servant and wife. When in crisis, one role has to prevail, de-classing the others. In our view, the role of mother prevails in Morrison's fiction, as well as the meaning of 'protector of her own offspring'.

In the second subchapter, “Stigma, caste and intraracial prejudice and collective hysteria”, we have focused on two types of stigma: the one regarding behavioral deviations and tribal stigma, and their effect on the characters in the novels *Home*, *Sula* and *Paradise*. We have also tried to determine how the cultural and institutional castigation of stigmatized traits creates inferiority complexes and the internalization of negative meanings. Another point in our analysis is caste and intraracial prejudice and collective hysteria, which, we propose, are the result of internalized meanings of long practiced stigma.

One of the conclusions of our analysis is that in *Home*, *Sula* and *Paradise* a very thin line may be drawn between difference and deviance and the characters touched by tribal stigma are more likely to be labeled as deviant for any behavioral differences they might exhibit. Thus, being a black man, Frank is more predisposed to being labeled as deviant and being a war veteran qualifies him as dangerous. Therefore, it is easy for him to play the tormented and maddened ex-soldier. In *Sula*, the long-practiced stigma against the black community finishes with collective hysteria on National Suicide Day, in an outburst for collective catharsis. In *Paradise*, the fight for power within the black community ends up with the murder of the women who embodied the black community’s stigmatized features (impure bloodlines and lack of attachment to controlling men).

The third subchapter, “Sexual deviance, denatured family relations and incest”, tackles frotteurism, exhibitionism, sexual fetishism, sexual sadomasochism, pedophilia, incest and rape in the novels *Song of Solomon*, *The Bluest Eye* and *Love*. We have concluded that there is a strong connection between internalized tribal stigma and sexual deviance, which, in this case, becomes secondary deviance. Cholly internalizes the stigma of his skin color and eventually commits incest and rape. Similarly, Ruth internalizes the inappropriateness of her relationship to her father and derives sexual pleasure from nursing her son. Although in Bill Cosey’s case stigma is not very obvious, we presume that his strife to secure his social position as a successful black man, the fact that he may be an informer to the police heads, like his father, and the boat trips organized for his business partners, all contribute to his tacit image as a deviant, which he in turn internalized, and pushed him to his taking of a child bride.

Chapter 5, “The hybrid: between me and not-me”, analyzes cultural and racial hybridity in five of Toni Morrison’s novels and the way in which simultaneous

difference and sameness may lead to misrecognition identity wise, which in turn may lead to displacement, internalized stigma or behavioral deviations.

The first subchapter, “Miscegenation, purity of race, inbreeding and ‘passing’ as white”, stresses racial hybridity, discussing three different trends in the novels *The Bluest Eye*, *Song of Solomon* and *Paradise*: accepting or rejecting racial hybridity in others, accepting or rejecting one’s own racial hybridity and (dis)simulating racial specificity. Morrison’s novels are populated by communities of African Americans who, due to their racial stigma, are in between accepting or rejecting their racial descent. For instance, in *The Bluest Eye*, the light shade of the skin is considered a sign of social status, while in *Paradise*, it accounts for racial tempering. This idea, pushed to the extreme, even leads to inbreeding. In *Song of Solomon*, racial hybrids ‘pass’ as whites and they use this to gain advantages and cheat on the very race that instituted the hierarchy of skin color.

In the second subchapter, “Birthmarks, physical deformity and disability”, we have analyzed the role of birthmarks, physical deformity and disability for the evolution of the characters’ identities in the novels *The Bluest Eye*, *Sula* and *Song of Solomon*. We have shown how a broken tooth may bring about an identity change, how a birthmark is indicative of the character’s development, how an amputated leg can mark a presence and be a sign of authority, how a shorter leg is a sign of character’s lack of fulfillment and how an absent navel represents the connection to another world. Furthermore, the consciousness of these abnormalities, we believe, brings about identity change. By including the meaning of these traits in their identity or by internalizing the judgment of the society, we argue that the characters analyzed become hybridized.

The third subchapter, “The institutionalization of beauty as a means of control”, dwells on the ideals of beauty and their effect on the characters of *The Bluest Eye*, *Song of Solomon* and *Tar Baby*. We argue that the ideals of black beauty depicted in these novels are the result of the internalization of beauty as promoted by the ruling ethnicity and, therefore, they are hybrid and lead to misrecognition or false interpretation from the part of the analyzed characters. We presume that this process of internalization leads to cultural hybrids, often incapable to deal with the different sets of meanings in the two standards: the white standard the African American standard.

Our analysis of hybridity in Morrison's novels has focused on two opposing trends: accepting and resisting the genetic and cultural heritage of the white society. Even if they are opposing, both may lead to extremes and to deviance. For instance, the black characters of *Paradise* and *Sula* go to extreme lengths to keep their racial purity, taking pride in being different from their oppressors. But this fidelity to genetic purity eventually leads to inbreeding and to genetic 'glitches', such as Sweetie's children. The opposing trend, promoting the whitening of the race, also leads to inbreeding, as in Soaphead Church's case. In our demonstration, we have shown that these deviations are the result of the power hierarchy in society and that they are born out of the characters' strife to secure a better social position for themselves and for their offspring. The characters either try to use the system in their favor, by passing as white or by differentiating from the darker blacks, or they assign negative meanings to the whites so that they are able to take pride in their genetic heritage.

It is our claim that all of the characters are culturally hybrid, in the sense that they are the result of the acknowledgement of their unprivileged position in the white patriarchal society. The same mechanism of internalization is paralleled in the case of birthmarks, physical deformity and disability. These features are differences from the norm and, like skin color, represent grounds for discrediting the characters, in the economy of power. Thus, like the black community of Ruby, Milkman tries to turn his discreditable feature in an advantage. Similarly, Sula's birthmark is reflective of her capacity to do evil deeds, the way skin color is representative of deviant behavior, in the same novel.

The thesis is organized around the idea of identity change. In that respect, an assumption has been that the disconfirming situations present in Morrison's fiction are strong enough to produce not only the change of an identity standard, but also of identity itself. Nevertheless, this assumption was initially challenged by the identification of several instances in which the characters are not constantly redefining themselves, on the contrary, they are blocked from developing their identity. But the fact that the characters either manage to change or their subjectivities are destroyed in the process, has led us to believe that their suspension is only a stage in their development in which, unable to find a confirming situation, they settle for a less disconfirming one, through a series of coping strategies designed to deflect negative emotions. Thus, although prolonged, the characters' resistance to change is

only a stage in their development, which ultimately confirms our assumption regarding the fact that they are driven by the process of the redefinition of the self. Surely, it is not clear whether Sethe will ever recover or whether Son finally pursues Jadine or the blind horsemen, but it is certain that, like the other characters undergoing the process of redefinition, they have gained the awareness of themselves that is indispensable to their evolution. Pecola's awareness is not enhanced. On the contrary, it is stifled, which denies her the possibility of evolving.

To sum up, the analysis of Toni Morrison's characters has revealed their complexity and unveiled unexpected questions of identification and redefinition of the self. By contextualizing Toni Morrison's fiction and by investigating it from the view point of identity theories, new facets of identity have emerged, as well as the redefinition of African American identity against the background of multiculturality and cultural hybridity. The capacity of the model to incorporate both perception and behavior opens it up to versatile components and to the possibility of transgressing diachrony. Therefore, the identity theory model we have attempted to create is, we argue, applicable to other fictional texts in general and to intercultural and inter-/intra-racial texts in particular.

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