

Cultural Marginality and its Psycho-Social Impact on Children in Toni Morrison's Fiction

- Abhilasha

Abstract: There is a close relationship between society and literature and sometimes either theories influence literary work or in turn get influenced by them. For example, sociological theory of marginalization, (whether societal, cultural or structural) has been influenced by the African-American literature and vice-versa. This paper is an attempt to establish this relationship in concrete form with the help of literary works by African-American author Toni Morrison, the first black woman to receive Nobel Prize for literature in 1973.

Keywords: Culture, marginalization, African-American fiction.

Introduction: The concept of marginality is closely linked to identity, for the simple reason that we tend to live our lives in and through “identity shelves”: males-females, dominant-nondominant etc. Either directly or indirectly when we discuss marginality we are probing the degree to which power is held and/or exercised by one individual, group or nation to the detriment of other individuals, groups or nations. The consequences of this power-powerlessness or dominance-nondominance dialectic are situational and contextual. But we can note, using history as a guide, that the marginalization of one group is often not accidental but results from a carefully crafted desire to exploit, use or abuse power and dominance to secure or maintain an historical position, or to marginalize another in order to acquire such a position or place.

In his book, *The Neighbor: The Natural History of Human Contrasts*, N.S.Shaler (1904) examined the problems of the African as the African was affected by the counter stresses of his own native culture and that of the European colonizer's. In the meantime, the problem of status dilemma incident to colonization, slavery, migration of freed slave, etc. had long been recognized and addressed in American literature, and relevant views were expressed in literary terms, often by writers who personally were involved and/or directly concerned. The best example of this is contained in two writings of W.E.B. DuBois. In *Religion in the South* (1928) he discussed the freed man as the confused person who was torn between glowing promises and the realities of actual treatment. Earlier in his book, *The Souls of Black Folk*, DuBois in 1903 commented on the subjective aspects of this status confusion: “It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others”. He also referred to it as a “two-ness” feeling, like “an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two... strivings, two warring ideals in one dark body” (Stonequist 145). Park's concept of the “marginal man” officially appeared in 1928 in his article: “Human Migration and the Marginal Man”. Park defined the marginal

man as a person between cultures; e.g., a migrant, immigrant, or wanderer. This person is characteristically spiritually unstable, intensely self-conscious, restless and suffers from malaise (1928, p.893), with a temporal dimension between the old and the new self. One possible outcome of the struggle between this divided self is disillusionment, but another possible outcome is greater breadth in thought and action. Park notes that 'the stranger' (Simmel) or the "marginal man" is less prejudiced, more objective and more comprehensive in judgment than the person isolated in one community. Jadine in *Tar Baby* is one of its best examples. In 1937 Stonequist published a book titled *The Marginal Man* that carried an introduction by Park. Stonequist's interest was colonialism and the adjustment native people made to European domination. Following a suggestion in Park's original essay, Stonequist turned his attention to the mental state of native populations. He concluded that two factors were crucial: first, the extent to which the native sought to assimilate into European culture; and second, the extent to which the native's efforts to achieve assimilation were rebuffed. Stonequist concluded that if the desire for assimilation was great and the rejection fairly complete, the native was likely to experience bitterness and confusion that could result in forms of mental illness, criminal actions, or other expressions of personal dysfunction. Pecola Breedlove and her entire family especially her mother are the best examples of this maladjustment. (*The Bluest Eye*)

Expansion: From this brief perusal of the earlier literature on marginality, we can see that the concept refers to a social phenomenon characterized by unsatisfactory, conflicting, inadequate, or unstable definitions of a person's self and/or his or her role relationships with others. Cultural marginality refers to the dilemmas of cross-cultural contact and assimilation. Race, ethnicity, religion and other cultural differences are the defining variables in this type of marginality. A clash of cultures produces a measurable psycho-social impact on the individual's personality, as well as ambiguities of status and role. Such impacts include anxiety, depression, identity confusion, anger and even suicide. I propose to look out for (a) the individuals who have been affected by this adverse social scenario, (b) to measure the extent and limit to which a human being can get exposed to the clash between cultures and also (c) the positive outcome of this clash. The issues of cultural conflict and the outcome of cultural domination are commonly dismissed with comments such as, 'it is over, it's done; let's put it all behind us'. However Toni Morrison, the first black woman to win the Nobel Prize for literature, delineates in her creative works that history is not over and done with. She paints a horrible picture of cultural conflict and the outcome of cultural domination through characters like Pecola Breedlove and her mother Pauline (*The Bluest Eye*). But at the same time she also voices unbiased opinion of its positive aspect as well with the help of character such as Jadine (*Tar Baby*). Toni Morrison's first novel, *The Bluest Eye* (1970) states that "A little black girl yearns for the blue eyes of a little white girl, and the horror at the heart of her yearning is exceeded only by the evil of fulfillment" (*The Bluest Eye* 162). The little black girl is Pecola Breedlove who is dissatisfied with the world around

her. She is born into a society that is confused as it shuns its own cultural values and craves for self-gratification in the culture of the whites. In the novel this tendency of the society finds its symbolic expression in Pecola's quest for blue eyes which represent the western ideals of beauty. The quest results in the suffering and anguish of the blacks.

The preadolescent Claudia McTeer and the author share the burden of narration. The story is narrated from these two points of view. They merge into one another; the one becomes the voice of the other without giving the reader a prior hint about the transition. Claudia is the narrator in the opening and the closing sections of the novel. She looks at all the incidents from her own point of view, gives the reader her own personal feeling of the story and introduces the characters. Her style of narration changes from childish uncertainty at the beginning to dejection towards the end. At several points the narration is taken over by the author herself as she narrates from an omniscient stand point. She provides improvisations that corroborate the central plot. Being an omniscient narrator, she can go backward and forward in time and space. She escapes the limitations of a specific human consciousness to which Claudia McTeer as a narrator is confined. *The Bluest Eye* is divided into four sections, namely, 'Autumn', 'Winter', 'Spring' and 'Summer'. This arrangement does not conform to the natural cycle of seasons. The ironic suggestion is that "Pecola's story is not the usual story of birth, death and rebirth, from planting to harvest to planting, rather it is the story that moves from pathos to tragedy and finally to madness" (Christian, Barbara. "A Promise Song" Black women Novelist). Pecola's house is so ugly that people wish it demolished. At the least, they try to ignore its existence. So the "green and white" house in the primer is severely contrasted with the reality of the blacks of which Pecola's house is a metaphor. The indistinguishable words are a pointer to the chaos of black establishments and underscore their ugliness that is juxtaposed with the happy middle class family, and American beauty myth. By exploring the devastating effects that the western ideas of beauty and romantic love have on a vulnerable girl, Morrison also demonstrates how these ideas can invert the natural order of an entire culture" (Christian 153). The objective symbolically represented by the quest for blue eyes, forms the central plot of the novel.

The novel opens with Claudia's rumination. She peeps into the past and ruminates over it in the present. The childlike innocence of the past is now being examined through the grown up experience and this is how we came to know about the shocking fact that Pecola is having her father's baby. This highest order of incest becomes disgusting not only to the neighbors but to the surrounding nature as well hence it becomes unyielding, shocked into barrenness. There is no coming of flowers like marigold no sprouting of any seeds. "Quiet as it is kept, there was no marigolds in the fall of 1941... no green was going to spring from our seeds...the earth itself might have been unyielding" (BE 3). The 'Autumn' section also gives a simple account of the hurt pride of two little black girls Frieda and Claudia and the arrogance of their 'white skinned' friend Rosemary Villanucci. The narration shuttles between past and present and that which was so painful and puzzling has become tangible

to the mature mind of Claudia, “but was it really like that? As painful as I remember? Only mildly” (7). Now comes Pecola. She is to stay with Frieda and Claudia because her father Cholly Breedlove has burned up his house in drunken state and was in jail. Mrs. Breedlove was staying with the woman she worked for and Sammy was with some other family. Pecola gets very warm welcome from the two girls of her own age. Frieda gives her “some milk in a blue—and--white Shirley Temple cup” which Pecola loves so much and looks fondly at the picture of Shirley Temple's dimpled face who is the role model of American standard of beauty and acceptability. One can see the devastating effects of social prescription and how it is damaging the psyche of young girl like Pecola whose aspirations for the standard, ‘that bluest eye’ shatters her own perception of the self. It is not that only society rejects her for being black and poor. She rejects herself too, desiring to be someone else. The white standard of beauty strangles the very imagination of tender children, “...all the world had agreed that a blue-eyed, yellow-haired, pink-skinned doll was what every girl child treasured...” (14). Pecola and Frieda are not exceptions in loving white dolls and Shirley Temple but Claudia certainly is. When she gets a white doll as Christmas present she destroys the doll. She wants to discover what it is that makes white baby dolls or for that matter little white girls so desirous to others, “the secret of the magic they weaved on others. What made people look at them and say, ‘Awwwww’ but not for me?” (14). This shows that though Claudia and Frieda, the McTeer girls are also troubled by questions of beauty the family support gives them strength to survive against all odds. But, Pecola, like her mother believes in the white standards of beauty and craves for blue eyes. The family of Pecola, her father Cholly Breedlove, mother Pauline Breedlove and brother Sammy lives in extreme poverty with just the bare needs of survival. The omniscient narrator says at one place that, “Being a minority in both caste and class, we moved about anyway on the hem of life, struggling to consolidate our weakness and hang on ...our peripheral existence, however, was something we had learned to deal with” (28).

The Bluest Eye moves around the tragic life of Pecola and her parents' failure to give her warmth and stability. Her family members live a life of misery and frustration convinced as they are of their ugliness and worthlessness. “No one could have convinced them that they were not relentlessly and aggressively ugly...you looked at them and wondered why they were so ugly; you looked closely and could not find the source. Then you realized that it come from conviction, their conviction (28). On account of her lack of self-esteem Pauline Breedlove is unable to nurture feelings of self-worth in her daughter. Dissatisfied with the role of motherhood, Pauline carries it with resignation as a heavy cross and her “crown of thorns” is her drunken husband Cholly. Cholly Breedlove, himself a man without center is unable to inspire any feeling of self-respect in Pecola. Her parents do not know how to love and they cannot give their children a sense of self, for they have none of their own. The home which should have been an anchor to Pecola (like McTeers home) fails to give her any moorings. Perhaps the seeds of her parent's discontent lie in their own childhood experience. Being the ninth of

eleven children in her family, Pauline was totally ignored by her parents and she blames their parental neglect on her limp foot. In the absence of her mother who goes to work outside the house, Pauline is forced to baby-sit and run the house. Early in life she is introduced to do the duties of a woman which she performs with efficiency.

“Pauline remembers her first meeting with Cholly as the day of her salvation” and the initial days of their marriage are happy. But soon dissatisfaction sets in. Since Cholly himself is not whole he cannot make her feel whole and as partners in life they are unable to give each other emotional support. *Both of them are victims of a culture that make them feel inferior, unworthy, incomplete. And they give to each other what they receive.* (Italics mine). Pauline is not eager for the role of motherhood because she has seen how in her mother's life it has brought only more work and no gratification. Yet Cholly's tenderness towards her during her pregnancy fills her with expectations of bliss but she realizes that it brings only loneliness. She therefore escapes into the world of fantasy and experiences vicarious pleasure in identification with white women in the movies. “There I was, five month pregnant, trying to look like Jean Harlow, and a front tooth gone” (96). *This is another example of cultural assault that compels an individual to look like someone else rejecting her own self* (Italics mine). In spite of her bitter dissatisfaction with motherhood in the case of the first child, Pauline once again becomes pregnant. But her experience at the labour ward in the charity hospital is bitter. She who imagines herself in the role of a creator feels debased when the white doctor attending on her comments. “They deliver right away with no pain. Just like horses” (B E 97). *This way one cultural personae is trying to debase other cultural personae on to a sub-human level* (Italics mine). Thus feelings of inadequacy and disappointments in life lead Pauline to vent her anger on her children. Pecola becomes the tragic victim of her parent's disillusionment with life. She searches pathetically for self-esteem but without the nourishing support of her parents she cannot succeed. She also inherits her mother's total acceptance of white standard of beauty and craves for not only the blue but the bluest of eyes. Pecola's encounter with Maureen Peal and the lighter skinned middle class boy deepen her sense of worthlessness. When Maureen Peals taunts at Pecola and McTeer girls by screaming at them “I am cute! And you ugly! Black and ugly black emos. I am cute” it leaves Pecola dumb with pain and misery. Claudia says to herself that “Dolls we could destroy, but we could not destroy the honey voices of parents and aunts, the obedience in the eyes of our peers, the slippery light in the eyes of our teachers when we encountered the Maureen Peals of the world. What was the secret? What did we lack?” (57). But Pecola “sat looking in the mirror, trying to discover the secret of the ugliness, the ugliness that made her ignored or despised at school, by teachers and classmates alike. She was the only member of her class who sat alone at a table desk” (34).

But more damaging than these is Pecola's rejection at the hands of her own mother in the kitchen of the Fishers. When Pecola drops the hot berry cobbler, on seeing the Fisher's daughter, Pauline swoops on Pecola with a vengeance while cooing to the Fisher's child. Pauline has no sympathy for her own daughter who is burnt but is all tenderness for the

fisher's daughter. By this action, Pauline further confirms Pecola's sense of ugliness and dejection. Pecola's sense of isolation and alienation is almost complete for, "all she has learned about herself from school from her peers, from her family and the world around her is that she is black, poor and ugly, the antithesis of that the society values" (Klotman, Phyllis).

No one loves Pecola except her father who expresses his tenderness for her in a distorted manner by raping her. When the drunken Cholly sees his daughter bent over the sink washing dishes, a mixture of emotions surge through him. "...revulsion, guilt, pity and then love...what he could do for her...what could a burnt out black man say to the haunched back of his eleven-year-old daughter..." (127). Cholly violates her body as the others have violated her spirit. Pecola's desire for blue eyes intensifies and a neighborhood sheer Soaphead Church helps in bringing about that 'miracle'. But the result is ironic because it is only by descent into madness can she be convinced that her eyes are the bluest of all. Pecola does achieve what she has set out to, but at the expense of her sanity. Pecola craves for love and happiness and holds her brown eyes responsible for her misery. She strongly believes that if her eyes "were different, that is to say beautiful, may be Cholly would be different, and Mrs. Breedlove too. May be they'd say, 'why, look at pretty eyed Pecola. We mustn't do bad things in front of those pretty eyes'" (34). Pecola's desire for blue eyes disturbs her ability to perceive and comprehend reality. It becomes an obsession with her and results in hallucination. She dislocates herself from reality and believes that her desire for the ideal of the white romantic myth of blue eyes has become palpable, that she has really acquired the bluest eyes, which is impossibility. The dividing line between the self and the other dissolves for Pecola and she steps "over into madness". *The Bluest Eye* represents an indictment against the whole of a value system that has afflicted not only Pecola and her family, but an entire community. They are victims of the force of alien culture and its manufactured image; it is an image that connotes myriad contrived values including how a girl and /or a woman should look, act and even feel.

The Breedloves are the victims of a racist, class conscious society that has forced them to live unnatural lives. But while their lives have been battered by racism's more tangible effects of extreme poverty and deprivation, the most insidious effects of racism as well as sexism are represented by the maliciousness of stereotypes. It is not only that the tragedy of Pecola and her family results in their loss of self-worth, but it more significantly becomes the catalyst for the abuse and violence that the family inflicts upon each other and that is further inflicted upon them by a community who themselves are caught up in the same futile cycle of desire and denigration. They abuse each other in an attempt to displace their pent-up, inarticulated fury toward a hostile world; and thus they become mutual scapegoats who assuage their inadequacies by assuming positions of tenuous dominance. But Morrison is not intent upon merely affirming the existence of the fear, frustration and fury inherent in black life. She wishes to expose the psychic causes for the social distortions within a black community. To do so Morrison has chosen Pecola as her

thematic representative. But in other seemingly unrelated episodes and scenes about various members of the community, she reminds the reader that the individual, the personal story, reveals but one product of a larger, more complex, more diffused social and historical schema. To fully understand why the Breedloves are powerless to change and why the community has so little regard for them requires that the narrative shift abruptly in order to bridge the gap between individual experience and social history. From 'Autumn' the novel shifts to 'Winter' detailing therein the cold, sterile undercurrents within the community. It is a relatively new Northern black neighborhood which, in its physical and psychic disengagement from the South, is attempting to reestablish some reified social order. But their basis for continuity patterns is a white, bourgeois social model that, for Morrison, denies all "passions" and "human emotions" in black life. The narrator recalls the urban black woman's adaptive development with scathing description: "They go to land-grant colleges, normal schools, and learn how to do white man's work with refinement: home economics to prepare his food; teacher education to instruct black children in obedience, music to soothe the weary master and entertain his blunted soul. Here they learn the rest of the lesson begun in those soft houses with porch swings and pots of bleeding heart: how to behave... Whenever it erupts, this Funk, they wipe it away, where it crusts they dissolve it, whenever it drips, flowers or clings they find it and fight it until it dies. They fight this battle all the way to the grave... and they worry, worry, worry about the edges of their hair" (BE 68). In this passage Morrison laments the lack of sensuality and spontaneity in the lives of these dispossessed, Northern black women. It accentuates the emotional void which has been precipitated by the tremendous influence of the white social model. Thus we come across the truth that how cultural marginalization or alienation can bring destruction and devastation for both an individual and an entire race.

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