

From the Margins to the Mainstream: Magical Realism and the Creation of a Feminist Space in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*

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Abstract: In this paper it is my intention firstly to introduce and discuss the genre or mode called magical realism. Secondly I intend to analyse the text *The Bluest Eye* by Nobel Laureate Toni Morrison. I plan to examine how this text fits into the tradition of magical realism. The mode has been considered to be a subversive literary movement in the postcolonial regions of the world and I intend to investigate whether this nature of subversiveness has survived in the hands of this Black-American author. The novel has been very successful and i will examine whether it can be considered as containing subversive elements in it from a feminist point of view or is it merely representation of how marginal phenomena tend to move from the side lines to the centre.

Keywords: Magic Realism, Subversiveness, Feminist Space.

Magic realism is basically a postmodern mode, which has the subversive nature and therefore feminism has acquired a space by shifting margins to the centre in it. Its a genre where magic elements are a natural part in an otherwise mundane, realistic environment. On the surface the story has no clear magical attributes and everything is conveyed in a real setting. Professor Matthew Strecher defines magic realism as, "what happens when a highly detailed, realistic setting is invaded by something too strange to believe." The term "magic realism" first appeared in the context of art. The German art critic Franz Roh used it to describe the work of post-Expressionist artists in the mid 1920s (Baker). To Roh, magical realism (or *Magischer Realismus*) was a way of reacting to reality and pictorially representing the mysteries inherent in it (Chanady, 17). The term migrated across the Atlantic Ocean, and in Latin America in the nineteen-forties it became a means of expressing the authentic American mentality and developing an autonomous literature for the continent. This has been commonly referred to as the Latin American Boom of magical realism. Irene Guenther speculates that the effect of the Second World War might have been crucial for the migration of the term since many cultural luminaries travelled from Europe to South American in the wake of those events (61). After the appearance of Angel Flores' article on magical realism in 1955, the term became a concept in literary criticism and has been applied to authors who have adopted certain themes and techniques in their writing. Luis Leal also goes about explaining magical realism:

...magical realism cannot be identified either with fantastic literature or with psychological literature, or with the surrealist or hermetic literature that Ortega describes. Unlike super realism, magical realism does not use dream motifs; neither does it distort reality or create imagined worlds, as writers of fantastic literature or science fiction do; nor does it emphasize psychological analysis of characters, since it doesn't try to find reasons for their actions or their inability to express themselves (121).

One of the major works cited as the definitive novel of the mode at that time is Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967). The mode developed rapidly during the 1960s and 1970s, and according to Stephen M. Hart, the 1980s were a decade of transition for both the critical analysis and creative writing of magical realism and in the 1990s new theories of magical realism began to emerge, ones that were inspired by cultural studies and postcolonial theory. The new theories provided new readings that brought to the forefront the portrayal of cultural boundaries, the cross-mixing of cultures, race issues and the mixing of high and low cultural styles (Hart, 307). The final stages of the internationalization of the movement also occurred in the 1990s and the term no longer only referred to Latin America. Nowadays magical realism can be found in literature all around the world, for example in North America, Australia, Asia, Europe and Africa. The term 'magic' in itself refers to a notion that humans have the ability to control the natural world through supernatural, mystical or paranormal means. The belief in magic is considered to be in competition with religious and scientific belief systems. The Encyclopedia Britannica says on the topic of magic:

Magic essentially refers to a ritual performance or activity that is thought to lead to the influencing of human or natural events by an external and impersonal mystical force beyond the ordinary human sphere. (298)

Magic realism in literature exactly portrays this notion of magic and therefore the author need not be from the American South to use magical realism to grapple subjects such as race, class and gender. Although, the mode does provide unique ways of dealing with these issues. According to Taylor, magical realism not only offers a way for author outside the privileged centre to enter the so-called "main body of Western literature", but also it provides a means for authors coming from the privileged centres to dissociate themselves from their own discourse of power and speak on behalf of the ex-centric and un-privileged (450). In relation to Morrison, in my opinion she manages to address in her book how the privileged can also experience decentering, that there are differences within privileged communities as well. Apart from it in her novel *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison describes the subversiveness and decentering of black women, solely consoled by magical sense to possess the bluer eye or at times the bluest eye.

Toni Morrison was born Chloe Anthony Wofford in 1931 in Lorain, Ohio. Her mother's family had come to Ohio from Alabama via Kentucky, and her father had migrated from Georgia. Morrison grew up with a love of literature and received her undergraduate degree from Howard University. She received a master's degree from Cornell University, completing a thesis on William Faulkner and Virginia Woolf. She then moved to New York and became an editor at Random House, specializing in black fiction. During this difficult and somewhat lonely time, she began working on her first novel, *The Bluest Eye*, which was published in 1970. Morrison's first novel was not an immediate success, but she continued to write. *Sula*, which appeared in 1973, was more successful, earning a nomination for the National Book Award. In 1977, *Song of Solomon* launched Morrison's national reputation, winning her the National Book Critics' Circle Award. Her most well-known work, *Beloved*, appeared in 1987 and won the Pulitzer Prize. Her other novels include *Tar Baby* (1981), *Jazz* (1992), and *Paradise* (1998).

The Bluest Eye contains a number of autobiographical elements. It is set in the town where Morrison grew up, and it is told from the point of view of a nine-year-old, the age Morrison would have been the year the novel takes place (1941). Like the MacTeer family, Morrison's family struggled to make ends meet during the Great Depression. Morrison grew up listening to her mother singing and her grandfather playing the violin, just as Claudia does. In the novel's afterword, Morrison explains that the story developed out of a conversation she had had in elementary school with a little girl, who longed for blue eyes. She was still thinking about this conversation in the 1960s, when the Black is Beautiful movement was working to reclaim African-American beauty, and she began her first novel. While its historical context is clear, the literary context of *The Bluest Eye* is more complex. Faulkner and Woolf, whose work Morrison knew well, influenced her style. She uses the modernist techniques of stream-of-consciousness, multiple perspectives, and deliberate fragmentation. But Morrison understands her work more fundamentally as part of a black cultural tradition and strives to create a distinctively black literature. Her prose is infused with black musical traditions such as the spirituals, gospel, jazz and the blues. She writes in a black vernacular, full of turns of phrase and figures of speech unique to the community in which she grew up, with the hope that if she is true to her own particular experience, it will be universally meaningful. In this way, she attempts to create what she calls a "race-specific yet race-free prose."

In the afterword to *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison explains her goal in writing the novel. She wants to make a statement about the damage that internalized racism can do to the most vulnerable member of a community—a young girl. At the same time, she does not want to dehumanize the people who wound this girl, because that would simply

repeat their mistake. Also, she wants to protect this girl from “the weight of the novel's inquiry,” and thus decides to tell the story from multiple perspectives. In this way, as she puts it, she “shape[s] a silence while breaking it,” keeping the girl's dignity intact.

Nine-year-old Claudia and ten-year-old Frieda MacTeer live in Lorain, Ohio, with their parents. It is the end of the Great Depression, and the girls' parents are more concerned with making ends meet than with lavishing attention upon their daughters, but there is an undercurrent of love and stability in their home. The MacTeers take in a boarder, Henry Washington, and also a young girl named Pecola. Pecola's father has tried to burn down his family's house, and Claudia and Frieda feel sorry for her. Pecola loves Shirley Temple, believing that whiteness is beautiful and that she is ugly. Pecola moves back in with her family, and her life is difficult. Her father drinks, her mother is distant, and the two of them often beat one another. Her brother, Sammy, frequently runs away. Pecola believes that if she had blue eyes, she would be loved and her life would be transformed. Meanwhile, she continually receives confirmation of her own sense of ugliness—the grocer looks right through her when she buys candy, boys make fun of her, and a light-skinned girl, Maureen, who temporarily befriends her makes fun of her too. She is wrongly blamed for killing a boy's cat and is called a “nasty little black bitch” by his mother.

We learn that Pecola's parents have both had difficult lives. Pauline, her mother, has a lame foot and has always felt isolated. She loses herself in movies, which reaffirm her belief that she is ugly and that romantic love is reserved for the beautiful. She encourages her husband's violent behavior in order to reinforce her own role as a martyr. She feels most alive when she is at work, cleaning a white woman's home. She loves this home and despises her own. Cholly, Pecola's father, was abandoned by his parents and raised by his great aunt, who died when he was a young teenager. He was humiliated by two white men who found him having sex for the first time and made him continue while they watched. He ran away to find his father but was rebuffed by him. By the time he met Pauline, he was a wild and rootless man. He feels trapped in his marriage and has lost interest in life. Cholly returns home one day and finds Pecola washing dishes. With mixed motives of tenderness and hatred that are fueled by guilt, he rapes her. When Pecola's mother finds her unconscious on the floor, she disbelieves Pecola's story and beats her:

It never occurred to either of us that the earth itself might have been unyielding. We had dropped our seeds in our own little plot of black dirt just as Pecola's father had dropped his seeds in his own plot of black dirt. Our innocence and faith were no more productive than his lust or despair. (03)

After this mishapening Pecola goes to Soaphead Church, a sham mystic, and asks him for blue eyes. The very pathetic real situation is

intolerable to her and therefore she peeps into a magical realm, which is the sole purpose of magic realism:

It had occurred to Pecola some time ago that if her eyes, those eyes that held the pictures, and knew the sights—if those eyes of hers were different, that is to say, beautiful, she herself would be different. (44)

Claudia and Frieda find out that Pecola has been impregnated by her father, and unlike the rest of the neighborhood, they want the baby to live. They sacrifice the money they have been saving for a bicycle and plant marigold seeds. They believe that if the flowers live, so will Pecola's baby. The flowers refuse to bloom, and Pecola's baby dies when it is born prematurely. Cholly, who rapes Pecola a second time and then runs away, dies in a workhouse; Pecola goes mad, believing that her cherished wish has been fulfilled and that she has the bluest eyes. *The Bluest Eye* provides an extended depiction of the ways in which internalized white beauty standards deform the lives of black girls and women. Implicit messages that whiteness is superior are everywhere, including the white baby doll given to Claudia, the idealization of Shirley Temple, the consensus that light-skinned Maureen is cuter than the other black girls, the idealization of white beauty in the movies, and Pauline Breedlove's preference for the little white girl she works for over her daughter. Adult women, having learned to hate the blackness of their own bodies, take this hatred out on their children—Mrs. Breedlove shares the conviction that Pecola is ugly, and lighter-skinned Geraldine curses Pecola's blackness. Claudia remains free from this worship of whiteness, imagining Pecola's unborn baby as beautiful in its blackness. But it is hinted that once Claudia reaches adolescence, she too will learn to hate herself, as if racial self-loathing were a necessary part of maturation. The person who suffers most from white beauty standards is, of course, Pecola. She connects beauty with being loved and believes that if she possesses blue eyes, the cruelty in her life will be replaced by affection and respect. This hopeless desire leads ultimately to madness, suggesting that the fulfillment of the wish for white beauty may be even more tragic than the wish impulse itself.

Pecola's desire for blue eyes, while highly unrealistic, is based on one correct insight into her world: she believes that the cruelty she witnesses and experiences is connected to how she is seen. If she had beautiful blue eyes, Pecola imagines, people would not want to do ugly things in front of her or to her. The accuracy of this insight is affirmed by her experience of being teased by the boys—when Maureen comes to her rescue, it seems that they no longer want to behave badly under Maureen's attractive gaze. In a more basic sense, Pecola and her family are mistreated in part because they happen to have black skin. By wishing for blue eyes rather than lighter skin, Pecola indicates that she wishes to see things differently as much as she wishes to be seen differently. She can only receive this wish, in effect, by blinding herself. Pecola is then able to see herself as beautiful, but only at the cost of her ability to see accurately both herself

and the world around her. The connection between how one is seen and what one sees has a uniquely tragic outcome for her.

Further Claudia speaks in the second-to-last chapter of the novel in such a manner that It can be read as a concise description of Claudia and Frieda's ethos as a whole. The MacTeer girls take an active stance against whatever they perceive threatens them, whether it is a white doll, boys making fun of Pecola, Henry's molestation of Frieda, or the community's rejection of Pecola. Their active and energetic responses contrast sharply with Pecola's passive suffering. Though Claudia and Frieda's actions are childish and often doomed to failure, they are still examples of vigorous responses to oppression. Claudia hints here, however, that this willingness to take action no matter who defies them disappears with adulthood. Frieda and Claudia are able to be active in part because they are protected by their parents, and in part because they do not confront the life-or-death problems that Pecola does. As adults, they will learn to respond to antagonism in more indirect and perhaps more self-destructive ways:

We had defended ourselves since memory against everything and everybody considered all speech a code to be broken by us, and all gestures subject to careful analysis; we had become headstrong, devious, and arrogant. Nobody paid us any attention, so we paid very good attention to ourselves. Our limitations were not known to us—not then. (189)

In the last chapter Claudia transforms Pecola into a symbol of the beauty and suffering that marks all human life and into a more specific symbol of the hopes and fears of her community. The community has dumped all of its “waste” on Pecola because she is a convenient scapegoat. The blackness and ugliness that the other members of the community fear reside in themselves can instead be attributed to her. But Claudia also describes Pecola as the paragon of beauty, a startling claim after all the emphasis on Pecola's ugliness. Pecola is beautiful because she is human, but this beauty is invisible to the members of the community who have identified beauty with whiteness. She gives others beauty because their assumptions about her ugliness make them feel beautiful in comparison. In this sense, Pecola's gift of beauty is ironic—she gives people beauty because they think she is ugly, not because they perceive her true beauty as a human being:

ouThe birdlike gestures are worn away to a mere picking and plucking her way between the tire rims and the sunflowers, between Coke bottles and milkweed, among all the waste and beauty of the world—which is what she herself was. All of our waste which we dumped on her and which she absorbed. And all of our beauty, which was hers first and which she gave to us. (203)

As a whole Claudia attempts to describe love as a potentially damaging force, following the suggestion that Cholly was the only person who loved Pecola “enough to touch her.” If love and rape cannot be

distinguished, then we have entered a world in which love itself is ambiguous. Against the usual idea that love is inherently healing and redemptive, Claudia suggests that love is only as good as the lover. This is why the broken, warped human beings in this novel fail to love one another well. In fact, Claudia suggests, love may even be damaging, because it locks the loved one in a potentially destructive gaze. Romantic love creates a damaging demand for beauty—the kind of beauty that black girls, by definition, may never be able to possess because of the racist standards of their society. But the pessimism of this passage is offset by the inherent hopefulness of the idea of love. If we can understand Cholly's behavior as driven by love as well as anger (and his rape of Pecola is in fact described in these terms), then there is still some good in him, however deformed. We are left to hope for a kind of love that is a genuine gift for the beloved. She concludes:

Love is never any better than the lover. Wicked people love wickedly, violent people love violently, weak people love weakly, stupid people love stupidly, but the love of a free man is never safe. There is no gift for the beloved. The lover alone possesses his gift of love. The loved one is shorn, neutralized, frozen in the glare of the lover's inward eye. (204)

Eventually what I have attempted to bring in this study is first the motion of magic realism; second the manner, how feminism has created a space through magic realism in the realm of *The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison. Pecola is the central character advances her life from the margins the centre, through at the cost of sanity. She becomes insane and realizes that she now possesses 'the bluest eye' and has become beautiful, beloved and respectful girl. It means she conceives now that she has created a space in the patriarchal racial and class oriented society. All this happen due to magic realism, which removes the certain of class, race and sex not permanently but momentarily.

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