

Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*: A Study of Black Consciousness and Wounded Psyche

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Abstract: Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* analyses the consciousness and wounded psyche of the blacks in general and black women in particular in the parenthesis of America's particular socio-political history. It presents the symbol of American standard of beauty, the bluest eye as the craze of black girls. In America, African female adolescents crave for identity, self image and beauty in their existential struggle, and in the horrors of race and class consciousness. Black female adolescent's obsession for blue eyes and ultimate sufferings for it tell the tragic tale of Pecola. Pecola's dream of having blue eyes may be an act of madness but this generates her self-hatred, alienation, exploitation in family and society; and repentance for blackness and femaleness in a kind of sexist and racist society.

Keywords: Americanising, dysfunctional, evangelical, institution-alization, retrograde, subjectivity.

Toni Morrison, the African-American woman novelist contextualizes black consciousness and the wounded psyche of the blacks in her novels of 1960s, a period characterized by almost evangelical struggle for personal and racial identity in America. Morrison chiefly draws the racial consciousness of the blacks, their disrupted emotions and living in a world where African Americans are subject to a numbers of atrocities inflicted upon them by the whites. *The Bluest Eye* (1970), Morrison's first fictional presentation, is a scathing attack on the concept of beauty standard of dominant culture on the self-image of the African female adolescent. It presents specific stories and histories of African-Americans which are quickly made invisible in commodity culture and in the obsession of blacks for American standard of beauty. The novel narrates the tragic tale about a young black girl's desire for the bluest eyes, the symbol of her desire to be. Contextualising "the concept of beauty as a virtue is of the dumbest, most permissions, and destructive ideas of the Western World" (Morrison 1974:89). Morrison visualizes black women's quest for Americanising their beauty that serve as an inescapable and destructive metaphor. The novel is a innovative project on African-Americans, their histories and bodies of black women for whom "the meaning of blackness in this country shapes profoundly, the experience of gender, just as the conditions of womanhood affect ineluctably the experience of race" (Smith 47). While the basic theme is the consciousness for American standard of beauty, the young black girls crave for blue eyes, blond hair and white skin become in America's multicultural melting pot. In the novel Morrison investigates the devastating effects of beauty standards of the dominant culture on the self-image of the African female adolescent. The thesis of the novel is based on racism that devastates the self-image of the African female in general and African-American child in particular. The role of class is

relevant as it exacerbates the self-image of the African female. It reveals Morrison's level of gender and class consciousness with the beginning of her writing career when she sought the idea of racism that was the main form of oppression of blacks in America. The color consciousness in America's socio-political dynamics not only present the complicated subjectivity of the blacks in general but also presents the distortions or denials of self in particular. Narrating the white domination and search for beauty of the blacks she examines the tragic condition of the blacks in America, their sensitiveness, and poignant tragic condition. In their 'double consciousness' and self-alienated condition they have their psychological conflict in the race, class and sex distinctions.

The Bluest Eye emphasizes on racism and psychological exploitation of black women who fail to fulfill their ambition. Morrison expresses her serious concern on racism and sexism that she draws aesthetically in the black myth decoding the societal and psychological restrictions on African-American women. In the history of America, black women are the sanctioned 'other' for their color and gender both controlled by the whites and patriarchy. Race and class are the critical sites on which multiple discourses are made. The pain of being black is the concern of the female in the novel. The pain further extends to being women, slavery, and alienation in an alien land where factors of color and consciousness dominate them and they have become the victims of institutionalized racism. Emphasizing on racism, sexism, class consciousness, Morrison makes investigation into the black women psyche, and black consciousness. It appears that gender and the class awareness of the novelist present the black memories that evoke primordial feelings, effects. The novel presents black subjectivity as a layered, shifting and complex reality. In America's prevalent insidious mass culture and its normative values black culture is sidelined and the dominant white culture annihilates the norms of black beauty. Bringing out the tragic condition of blacks particularly women in America, Morrison presents the effects of racial consciousness on human psyche where a number of atrocities are inflicted upon the black by the whites. Living in an inhospitable environment and with possessing 'disrupted emotions' the blacks prefer their "living in a world where standards and goals are presented to blacks as uniquely important and at the same time, impossible for them to achieve" (Janeway 383). The novel centers upon the blue eyes, that frames the standard norm by which the white women are judged in America. It reveals the ways of measuring beauty of American woman in general and African-American woman in particular. In America's white perspective 'blue eyes' and 'honey voices' are the primary needs to be beautiful and loved by others. Even the black women prefer to possess this to become complete persons. The blacks have a common perspective that blue eyes will make them beautiful, socialized and sexualized in America. Quest for beauty and femininity is the need of young black girls. Morrison used blue eye as a metaphor for beauty and transformation of self. The title also suggests that there can be only one bluest eye that is rooted in protagonist Pecola mutilating herself and splitting her psyche. Similarly 'Eye' constitutes the singular 'Look of the predominant oppressive visual culture for which the black Americans identify themselves as the racial 'other' Pecola's desire for the blue eyes, is not due to a loss but a possible gain at the loss of her black identity. The

'Eye' establishes the look of the American's for its distinct color from the black Americans. The 'Eye' metaphorically defines their position as racial other. Pecola's, the twelve years old black girl suffers rejection for the color of her eye. Narrating the body shape, color, hair, eyes and appearance as the racial identities of the blacks in America Morrison uncovers racism on the novel that mutual exploitation and alienation. Richard Wright remarks rightly "Hated by the whites and being an organic part of the culture that hated him the black man in time grow to hated himself what others hated in his" (Bone 4).

The novel narrates the woeful tale of Pecola Breedlove the daughter of Cholly and Pauline breed loves who belong to a poor family and virtually cut off from the normal life of community. The Breedloves despise themselves for their 'look' though that carries a sense of authenticity it cannot compromise and forge with the 'self' in white culture. The consciousness of being black and realization of the futility of struggle against the oppressive system make the blacks helpless. They believe in their own unworthiness for the color of their skin and eye. Pecola's mother, Pauline works as a domestic maid in a white man's house. Pauline does not like of her being black and poor. She knows the impact of racial oppression on her. Wearing her maid's uniform she feels pride and bows low to the racist demands of the White Fisher family. In fisher' family she feels proud of the whiteness of the house and its plenty, and smiles happily playing the role of surrogate mother of Fisher's young daughter, Polly. She knows that she is irredeemably ugly but feels beautiful and important in fisher family by rendering service to the white members. Fisher's family changes her psyche where she not only feels beautiful and important but also makes aromatic pies and other dishes, and takes care of his daughter. The irony is that she has an irritating and melancholic appearance at his daughter, Pecola. She is the traditional image of black mammy, a dutiful servant to the whites. Unlike her daughter Pecola, Pauline thinks that physical beauty is a virtue, and white women take care of it. Cholly Breedlove literally an abandoned child was raised by Aunt Jimmy. His loss of mother, father, community and home extend not only a sense of great loss but also cause a sense of tragic suffering both external and internal. His tragic suffering is an outcome of his socio-economic status in the white society of America which makes him a miserable figure for his self-hatred. In a psychological prevention and revenge on his ugliness he rapes his own daughter Pecola. Cholly's action is a betrayal of parent child relationship and destruction of safety norms for a child. He is responsible for Pecola's loss of 'self' and "psychic annihilation" (Walker 295) and "Cholly's rape a profound expression of love, the rape is also an exercise of power and freedom, a protest against, an unjust culture" (Otten 21). He commits rape not being aware of the incest taboo but his attempt is to damage the familial bond. His attempt is a dangerous feat that symbolically presents his frustration is the chaotic existence of blacks. After his marriage to Pauline, their move to North for enjoying life in ease and freedom, cultural dislocation in the socio-political dynamics of North, and the appearance of their children" (126) he is compelled to take refuge in alcohol. Expressing his unwillingness to accept the monotony of sexual life and Pauline's denial of sex he commits rape not being aware of the incest taboo in an attempt to damage the parent-child relationship.

Morrison presents "rape as the 'dangerous' and 'awful' act, an outcome of racism, white humiliation and aggression that made Cholly emotionally paralyzed, dumbfounded ... and rendered him totally dysfunctional" (126). The father intrudes on and violates the child's space. Cholly's unnatural and perverse attitude is undoubtedly a pathetic attempt for the black in America. He turns to Pecola in the hope of rescuing her from the dehumanizing glare of all white people and a subsequent loveless existence. His tenderness and protectiveness undoubtedly turn into lust which he directs at Pecola. Cholly has been taught by his ordinary black experiences. The memories of his, aunt Jimmy's death, uncle Rutu's first wife, countless funerals, enviable positions and unmitigated griefs in black families shock him. The cruel and malicious attitude of the whites, their humiliation and hatred are directed towards his survival. Morrison rightly says :

When you get to the scene, where the father rapes his daughter, which is as awful, I suppose, as can be imagined, by the time you get there, it is almost irrelevant because I want you to look at him and see his love for his daughter and powerlessness to her pain. By that time his embrace, the rape, is all the gift he has left. (Tate 125)

Cholly's destructive abuse of his daughter is because of his misery and suffering psychologically. For Cholly, Pecola is an unproblematic sexual object. Rape is 'dangerous' and 'awful' for Pecola as its repercussion is her psychic death, which ultimately causes her a greater degree of rejection than in her normal situation. Raping his daughter also appears to be an act of insanity as Pecola's craze for blue eyes is an insanity that causes her psychic death. Cholly's misdirection is paralleled in his wife's misdirected anger at her daughter another friends as both fail to protect, shelter, and care for those who, by right of lineage and culture are closest to them. The perception of beauty among the whites corrupt the mind of the black people in America. This not only develops self hatred among the blacks but also induces the perception of beauty in an adverse way causing self-hatred, racial prejudice, and the worst when the black people start to harass other black people. Pecola is the victim of her race and gender identity. She suffers both as a black and a female. She is the victim of worst racial discrimination. Her physical and psychological predicament is narrated first as black and second as a woman. The rape of Pecola and her ill fated pregnancy occupy the centre of the plot. Morrison focuses the psyche of an adolescent African American female and her life in a racist society. Pecola's yearning for the blue eyes, the symbol of standard beauty of white Americans. She is not aware of her natural limitation but takes more care of her skin and eye color. In her school she is taught about the importance of being white as white woman's blond hair, blue eyes and creamy skin makes her beautiful. Pecola thinks of possessing an acceptable, admirable beautiful blue eye. It appears:

Pecola Breedlove is a young black girl driven literally ... by the pressure toward absolute physical beauty is a cultural whose white standards of beauty... are impossible for her to meet though not less alluring and demanding. Surrounded by cultural messages that she is ugly by definition, she can achieve peace only by retreating into schizophrenia (Hedin 49-50).

Pecola has all admiration for the eyes of the whites which she longs for. She knows that she cannot achieve this for her rooted racial identity but she longs for them in the hope of a miracle. Her earring for blue eyes, the white American standard of beauty, and external manifestation of the body identity invite disastrous consequences for her. Ironically, the pursuit and acquisition of the blue eyes in the fantasy world of Pecola only promotes the loss of the self. Pecola makes vain attempt to establish identity by asserting her beauty. She believes that her blackness creates a vacuum in her and she “sees the vacuum... the total absence of human recognition the glazed separateness” (36). This puts her sense of self in danger. For “long hours she sat looking at the mirror trying to discover the secret of her 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 double desk” (34). The thought of her black skin retrogrades her life. She lacks a voice of protest to affirm her presence when the shopkeeper recoils “not wanting to touch her hand” (31). This makes to think her position vulnerable and she draws inward in shame as she is not emboldened by her inner psychological strength to defend her 'look'. The white cultural set up and black racial prejudices create a sense of negation in her. In American puritan ethic “Pecola's ugliness defined visually by white standards, forces her into a position of invisibility and absence, which in turn becomes her only mode of presence. She hides behind the ugliness, the mainstream culture won't look at” (36). The shopkeeper, the white and black boys at school her mother, her mother's employer's children express their jibes at her. The white perception of beauty corrupts the mind of black people that develops self hatred. Morrison describes the black aspiration for physical beauty that damages the components of sexist and racist oppression of black women. Pecola's rape by her father distorts his love by personal violation of natural love and relationship. Pecola's life from the axis of race to that of gender in a society in the sectional status of 'other', Pecola believes:

When the strength of a race depends on its beauty, when the focus is poured to how one looks one of the dumbest, most precious and destructive ideas of the western world, and we should have nothing to do with it. Physical beauty has nothing to do with our past, present or future. Its absence or presence was only important to “them”, the white people who used it for anything they wanted. (Morrison 1974:89)

Pecola undergoes a traumatic experience when her father rapes her and she gives birth a still born child. Her fantasy to have blue eyes, memories of the violation of herself, incidents of racial discrimination wound her psyche. In the vicious circle of family and society she realizes “to be black was to be a victim; therefore not to be a victim was not to be a black” (Shelby 58). Pecola's seeking for blue eyes is symbolic of her need to “get somebody to love” (23) and her search for “pretty eyes, pretty blue eyes” (34) is fostered in a white culture, which imposes its own definition of beauty and love. In Pecola's perception on the white standard of female beauty she not only underscores their psychological oppression but also debunks at the white values. Pecola is denied of love in her own home and in her own environment. She is not allowed to flower and complete her childhood. Her childhood is foreclosed and she is forced into premature adulthood. Her racial identity imbibes the white identity of beauty

encouraging the mandates of the dominant culture in a self-motivated definition. Pecola's search for an aesthetically defined beauty (blue eyes) subsumes her mother Pauline's adaptation of the same into her life. Pecola fails to achieve coherent 'self' because of the blue eyes, the central metaphor. Many incidents in the novel certainly develop a feeling of isolation and pain for Pecola because of her race. Her encounter with a fifty two years old white storekeeper makes her aware that for many people, she does not exist. For her color and ugliness black and white boys taunt her at school. Pecola's dropping of blackberry pie at the Fishers' home where her mother works as a house keeper, and her mother's screams at her daughter, "crazy fool ... my floor ... mess ... my floor, my floor" (84-85) affect her psyche. The traumatic screams of her mother causes irreversible damage when Pauline abandons her for the Fisher girl, Polly. Pecola is denied of love in her own home and in her environment where she is deprived of an awareness of black cultural values. Her physical unattractiveness and her attempt to become 'white' intensify rather than mitigate the Negro woman's frustration in white world. No amount of pain, power, and hair straightener can erase all the things in the black woman's background that make her femininity and aesthetic appreciation of herself as a beauty capable of affecting men. Pecola is oppressed racially and exploited sexually. This compels her to live in funkiness. Secondly ugliness and poverty internalize her fear for which she nurtures a feeling that she will be an undesirable woman for lack of her beauty. While narrating Pecola's psyche

Throughout the novel, Morrison reiterates that Pecola has to be loved. Her mother Pauline not only refuses her love but also negates her own daughter reinforcing Pecola's denigration of her 'self'. And her father Cholly above all, fails to provide the necessary nurturance of her body and like Pauline inspires self-hatred in his daughter. Through Cholly and Pauline, Morrison uncovers facets racism its impact detrimental to the lives of black during World War II. (Rani 50-51)

Both the flawed parent figures Pauline and Cholly have caused failure in Pecola to develop self worth. Like many black people she develops the idea; "Black women are unable to transcend the conflicting emotions of self-hate for being black. This hatred is transferred to the Black male" (Staples 178) also. Morrison's principal narrator Claudia articulates Pecola's tragic end while attempting herself to unravel the complexity of dominant culture. At a tender age when love, care and support are prerequisites to generate a self, she is denied of love from her own mother and a mutilation of morality by her own father. To her great misery her unflowered childhood is shrunk and madness is imposed. Pecola's madness for 'magical blue eyes' is a kind of self-perpetuated attraction for white racist hegemony. Pecola's existential situation, ugliness, dead baby, and yearning for blue eyes create a catharsis for her. At the end of the novel, Morrison comments rightly, "the sorrow in her voice seemed to call for sympathy and I faked it for her, but astonished by the desecration she proposed, "I got made' at her instead" (167). Mrs. Breedlove also loses her voice and has no dialogue or song to give her the seeds of reflective thought.

In the novel Morrison narrates the black girl's quest for blue eyes and damaging result of her beauty perception. She presents a story of life of black women punctuating with the possible negations, oppressions, and

resentment of the African American women. The black women's perception is that blackness is ugliness and ugliness unworthiness. Pecola believes that black eyes would make her beautiful, acceptable and admirable. She believes that only blue eyes would help in restoring her self-respect. Since the racial color of her eyes is beyond change, her quest for blue eyes culminates into madness. Pecola's friends Claudia and Frieda know this physical trait as the cause of their subordination, 'female sexualization' and institutionalization of racism. Narrating the three versions of black women's life styles Morrison explores the novel first in an alien white world where Dick-Jane family intrude into the lives of the black children. Secondly, she presents the Macteer family with poverty and racism that they encounter in Ohio. Thirdly, the novel gives the picture of a deformed world where Breedlove family is exploited by the ruling class whites. Pecola experiences the greatest damage from intra-racial prejudice. The inter-racial prejudice an outcome of intra-racial possibility although sustains the white cause of domination it strangely suspends the possibilities for the blacks. The feeling of emptiness the Breedlove parents enjoy in their poverty not only isolates them from the mainstream of African American life but also generates self-hatred. This kind of feeling promotes Pecola's alienation, sense of unworthiness and self-hatred. Her hope for blue eyes and possible transformation for this suits her logic but not cure her insanity. Similarly Claudia and Frieda learn about their blackness and femaleness from their mother Mrs. Macteer how to cope with their destinies. In the narration of beauty and virtue, racism and female sexuality Morrison presents the prerequisites of female beauty and virtue in a kind of sexist and racist psychological parenthesis.

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