

White Standards as a Conflict Against Black Women in *The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison

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Introduction :

In *American Slavery* (1993), Peter Kolchin points out that the slaves working in the fields received horrendous treatment from their masters. Animal treatment like whipping, mutilation of the body were common (Kolchin 4). Again it seems that Africans were not viewed as human beings with emotions. Slaves were held on a permanent basis and the children of the slaves would inherit their mother's or father's rank (Kolchin 12-13) a fact, that Morrison's novels deal with most explicitly.

The plight of the black community is further exemplified by social pressures which are inscribed in the character's consciousness and reflect white supremacy and the constant inequality that exists. The social pressures include racial tension and the necessity of the black community to know its place.

The Bluest Eye portrays in poignant terms the tragic condition of the blacks in racist America. It examines how the ideologies perpetuated by the dominant groups and adopted by the marginal groups influence the identity of the black women. Bombarded by image of white beauty, Morrison's characters lose themselves to self hatred and their only aim in life is to be white. They try to erase their heritage, and eventually like Pecola Breedlove, the protagonist, who yearns for blue eyes, have no recourse except madness.

Toni Morrison, the first African-American woman to win the Nobel Prize for Literature (1993), uses her novels as an expression of her concern with the inter-relatedness of race, gender and class as it is lived by individuals. Each of Morrison's works provides insights into the complexity of the black community. The general shared focus in her fictional narratives is the socio-political struggle that has historically characterized the African-American experience. All the characters in Morrison's novels exist in communities that are defined by the racial

barriers formed by the surrounding white society. These barriers are both topological and psychological which act as conflicts. The dominant white society violates, denies and sets the rules for these borders causing black communities to suffer from confusion and anxiety. On the one hand, Morrison's characters have physical and psychological qualities which enhance their chances for survival and fulfilment, thus leading to the survival of the black community. On the other, just "being black" in her novels does not promote unity within the community as there also exists discrimination and class differences within the black collective.

Methodology :

The text, *The Bluest Eye* has been taken as a primary source for the study.

Peter Kolchin's *American Slavery* (1993), A.N. Kaul's *The American Vision: Actual and Ideal Society in Nineteenth-Century Fiction* are taken under consideration as secondary sources for references to get an overall view of the American democracy with all its elements of slavery, racism and realism. Apart from the co-texts, reliable E- sources like JSTOR is used for references and further study.

Perspectives and Theoretical Approaches :

To understand the conflicts encountered by the Black women in the American society which is on both physical and mental level, the theory of psychoanalysis is used to explore the inner psyche of the marginalised black women and the way they are traumatised in a society which follows the standards of the whites.

The Bluest Eye makes one of the most powerful attacks on the relationship between white standards of female beauty and the mental, psychological oppression of black women. The all-persuasive white standard of beauty adopted by so many characters in *The Bluest Eye* leads to cruelty and destruction. Internal racism which batters the self-image of the African - American female, takes its toll on the most vulnerable victim- 'The African female child.' Morrison shows that intra-racial violence can lead to 'dehumanization of an entire race' and destroy the women and the female child completely. The community's self hatred makes them look for a social outcast, someone to look down upon, so as to enhance their constantly threatened sense of worth.

Morrison in her novel *The Bluest Eye* presents a study that revolves round the character of Pecola and her deeper inner struggle adapt to the conventional notions of a white society. Such internalization of dominant values in a child occurs psychologically through reinforcement and punishment. In this case the white cultural, economic and psychological values and standards are enforced inside the mind of the child, which act as a conflict in her normal upbringing.

Pecola Breedlove, the central figure of the novel is a pathetic creation of Toni Morrison, in the sense that she suffers consistently and disastrously from the contemporary callousness of cultural discrimination. Her parents Cholly Breedlove and Pauline Breedlove treat her as an outcast and put her outdoors where neither her mother and father ever bothered to enquire about her living conditions in the neighbouring family of Mc Teers where they had dumped her.

Claudia Mcteer underlines the most cruel careless attitude of Pecola's parents towards their daughter :

Folks just dump they children off on you go and go on 'bout they business, Ain't nobody even peeped in here to see whether that child has a loaf of bread. Look like they would just peep into see whether I had a loaf of bread. But now. That thought don't cross they mind. That old trifling Cholly been out of jail two whole days and ain't been here yet to see if his own child was 'live or dead. She could be dead for all he know. And that mama neither (34)

Pecola's parents are selfish, neglectful and brutally indifferent, devoid of all moral, social and parental obligations, even the natural bond of child-love is desperately wanting. Such an unnatural behaviour pattern on the part of the parents may not be attributed to the curse of poverty only. There are however, some other latent reasons that are responsible for shaping their sensibilities, perhaps their uncongenial conjugal relationship and the hard facts of their seminal cultural background where such sentiments as love and concern have not been experienced by them. Nevertheless the mother-daughter relationship is something natural but Pauline's discriminatory behaviour towards her own child Pecola in comparison to the white little girl in the white family where she works as a domestic, is quite unnatural and amazing. It is not an attitude of racial discrimination but an attitude within the black family itself. The black mother humiliates her own black daughter in an ugly situation which could easily be averted in a more mild and tender fashion but her malicious behaviour exhibits the underlying complex of total surrender to white superiority. Pauline regards the white girl superior to her own daughter and condemns her with contempt and beats her brutally. It all happened when Pecola visited her mother at her working place with her friends, where she in all her childish innocence, tried to touch the silvery pan near the stove to see if it was hot. It may have been nervous, awkwardness, but the pan tilted under Pecola's fingers and fell to the floor, splattering blackish blueberries everywhere. Most of the juice splashed on Pecola's legs and burnt must have been painful, for she cried out and began hopping about just as Mrs. Breedlove entered. In one gallop she was on Pecola, and with the back of her hand knocked her to the floor. Pecola slid into pie juice, one leg folding under her. Mrs, Breedlove yanked her up by the arm, slapped her again, and in a voice thin with anger, abused Pecola.

"Crazy fool . . . my floor, mess . . . look what you . . . work . . . get on out . . . now that . . . crazy . . . my floor, my floor . . . my floor."(87)

The life of abundance might have developed a complex of inferior superiority in the mind of black woman out of sheer vanity of self importance which might have emanated from the false sense of belonging to the rich white family making her quite forgetful of her real station. Her attitude of discrimination in discarding her own daughter in the face of the white girl may have another angle that could have been perceived not out of the curse of poverty but

as a natural reaction of a desperate, disgusted and dissatisfied mother- woman who has been consistently denounced, beaten and tortured by her husband. Her family life has been a trauma of wishful thinking. The peace, comfort and a sense of self importance that Pauline receives in this white family, is something of so great importance to her that she does not allow her daughter to be a cause of their annoyance. The conflict drawn by class and inferiority within herself acts as a hindrance in childrearing and their proper upbringing as she has consciously or unconsciously internalised the standards of the whites in her psyche as the absolute standard of human life.

Cholly Breedlove can be seen as a violent figure more to his family rather than a father figure. Cholly at the early stage of his puberty indulges in sexual activity with a black girl Darlene, at an open place where he is caught in action by two white men. He suffers great humiliation and curses his sex partner for his insult.

When he was still very young, Cholly had been surprised by two white men while he was newly but earnestly engaged in eliciting sexual pleasure from a little country girl. The men had shown a flash light right on his behind . He had stopped , terrified . They chuckled. The beam of flashlight did not move. "Go on," they said. "Go on and finish. And, nigger make it good." The flash light did not move . For some reason Cholly had not hated the white men; he hated , despised the girl.

If Cholly's anger is not directed at the white males, it must be directed towards the action that takes place or at anyone else who is not white. Cholly was actually lured by the girl herself to do the game, and thus a notion got stuck in his mind that a woman hunts a man for sexual pleasure which consequently brought shame , defeat and humiliation for Cholly. That flash light did not move from his behind for the rest of his life. He never knew any other use of woman. And for that reason the music of marriage turned out into jarring notes of broken symphony and abuses his family as an adult.

Pauline, his wife, remembers Cholly during her pregnancy: "We started fighting again. I tried to kill him. He didn't hit me too hard, 'cause I were pregnant I guess" (123). Not only does he abuse his wife but he also expresses sexism toward his child. As he looks at his daughter, he is overwhelmed with a "confused mixture of his memories" of Pauline, which leads him toward his desire to "fuck" Pecola (163). Pecola never found a father in Cholly. But on the contrary he turned out to be a cruel rapist of his own daughter.

"Driven by sexual passion, blinded by the madness of lust , he swoops down like a hawk and pounces upon the little sparrow, his immature daughter and cuts through her with his gigantic prick." The rape scene makes us aware of Cholly's damaged self and how the girl child suffers as an unfortunate daughter of a traumatic father. The traumatised Cholly devoured Pecola and this destruction can be linked with the incident of Cholly's teenage sex scandal and

whose sole cause was the white men who made his experience bitter. The frustrated father could not help himself from bursting out his rage and remorse on his poor girl.

and a bolt of desire ran down his genitals, giving it length and softening the lips of his anus. Surrounding all this lust was a border of politeness. He wanted to fuck her tenderly. But the tenderness would not hold. The tightness of her vagina was more than he could bear. His soul seemed to slip down to his guts and fly out into her, and the gigantic thrust he made into her then provoked the only sound she made a hollow suck of air in the back of her throat. Like the rapid loss of air from a circus balloon. Following the disintegration - the falling away of sexual desire, he was conscious of her wet, soapy hand on his wrists, the finger clenching, but whether her grip was from hopeless but stubborn struggle to be free, or from other emotion, he could not tell. Removing himself from her was so painful to him he cut it short and snatched his genitals out of the dry harbour of her vagina. She appeared to have fainted.(94)

Critics have noted, a central theme running through Morrison's novel is "speaking the unspeakable" and giving a voice to those whom Morrison calls "discredited people" (Toni Morrison, "Unspeakable Things Unspoken" 58) whose narratives have been silenced by both the weight of their unbearable traumatic experiences of loss and the systematic denial of those experiences by a white hegemonic society.

Most of the Morrison's novels highlight and study the trauma survivors and restore humanity to them by showing that their behaviours are normal reactions to abnormally cruel or devastating life experiences. Thus Pecola's incestuous rape by her father Cholly Breedlove could be an outcome of the trauma which both of them have to face in a racist society. The intergenerationally transmitted traumas of rejection and racial self-loathing, the omnipresent white gaze and the ever present class conflict internalized by many members of the black community, and the community's final scapegoating of its most innocent and weakest member testify to the psychic erosion permeating the world depicted as the barren or "unyielding" soil.

The themes of race, class and gender are inter-related in *The Bluest Eye*. Spurned and rejected by a community plagued by the virus of self hatred, Pecola is pushed to the fringes of the town and towards marginality, both literally and figuratively and Pauline as an unfortunate mother suffers under the dominance of her maniac husband and her internalisation of white standards leads to a conflicting relationship with her own girl child.

Conclusion :

Madness is Pecola's fate and there is no saviour for her. Claudia observes towards the end of the novel "It's much, much, much too late." Morrison shows that intra-racial violence can lead to 'dehumanization of an entire race' and destroy the female child completely. The

community's self hatred makes them look for a social outcast, someone to look down upon, so as to enhance their constantly threatened sense of worth. Ultimately Pecola is made the scapegoat for the entire community. Her ugliness has made them feel beautiful, her suffering has made them comfortable and her silence has given them the opportunity to speak. But because she continues to live after she has lost her mind, Pecola's aimless wandering at the edge of the town haunts the community reminding them of the ugliness and hatred that they have tried to repress. She becomes a reminder of human cruelty and an emblem of human suffering. The experiences of black children growing up amid the standards of white beauty are conveyed through a number of images.

The class conflict is also an important issue which pushes Pecola towards marginality. The blacks as a class were poor and were marginal groups in America. The Macteer's are poor, but the Breedloves are even poorer and hence ostracized. Patric Bryce asserts that "she longed for blue eyes: "I looked around to picture her with them, was violently repelled by what I imagined she would look like if she had her wish".

Black women under any condition, could not lead a life of liberty or could not ask for basic human emotional fulfilment in such a society of white socio-cultural and socio-political imperialism. In the study we have found ample evidences of the psychological as well as social conflicts by analysing the characters of Pecola Breedlove and her mother Pauline Breedlove. In every step, they had to weigh themselves and their virtue and crawl under the shades of white dominance to survive and let their generation persevere.

Works Cited

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