

Race as A Personality Construct: Toni Morrison's the Bluest Eye

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Abstract

Toni Morrison centers *The Bluest Eye* around the life of a young African American girl. Her dark skin makes her "ugly". As a result she develops inferiority complex. This stimulates in her a desire for blue eyes which she equates with beauty- an achievement necessary for being loved and accepted both at home and the world around her. The novel draws every character as suffering from the fangs of racism leading to tumultuous life, lost self and ultimately meeting disastrous consequences. Morrison tries to analyse the "imprinting" factors that shape the identity of the self during the process of maturing of young black girls in racist America.

KEYWORDS : Psychological disorders, loss of consciousness, paralyzed self-esteem, vulnerability, alienation.

"The attempt to become 'white' intensifies rather than mitigates the Negro woman's frustration in white world. No amount of pain, powder and hair straightner can erase all the things in the black women's background that make her femininity and aesthetic appreciation of herself as a beauty capable of attracting men. The Negro woman becomes ashamed of what she is....."

William Grier and Price Cobbs, *Black Rage*

Her blackness is the antithesis of a creamy white skin, her lips are thick, her hair is kinky, and short she is, in fact the antithesis of American beauty.....in this country she is ugly....when to her physical unattractiveness added a discouraging, deprecating mother-family environment into which she is born, there can be no doubt that she will develop a damaged self concept and an impairment of her feminine narcissism.

Calvin Hernton, *Sex and Racism in America*

It is a peculiar sensation, this double -consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in an amused, contempt and pity.

W.E.B. DuBios, *The Souls of Black Folk*

When the strength of a race depends on its beauty, when the focus is turned to how one looks as opposed to what one is, we are in trouble.....The concept of physical beauty as a virtue is one of the dumbest, most pernicious and destructive ideas of the western world, and we should have 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.

Toni Morrison, *Behind the Making of The Black Book*

“to be black was to be a victim ; therefore not to be victim was not to be black.”

Steel Shelby , Black Consciousness in Perspective, The American Review, 33, 1(1989), 58.

The oppressive slavery system in America not only dehumanized the blacks but also made every attempt to wipe out their traditions and consciousness. It then imposed the dominant groups ‘special’ thoughts. Being black and slaves, therefore, considered as subhumans, the Africans often crave for Caucasian standards of superiority so that they are accepted. The Africans, in particular, the black women are more vulnerable to this as they often become victim of psychological bondage. They measure themselves in relation to the white American women and end up feeling enormously wanting.

This observation illuminates the socio-political implications behind black women’s writing . The pivotal idea of these novelists is the domination of blacks by the existing American standards of beauty- blue eyes, blonde hair and white skin. These writers deal honestly and sensitively with the damaging influence of white standards and values on the lives of black people. They portray the tragic condition of blacks in a racist America and simultaneously examines how the ideologies perpetuated by the institutions controlled by the dominant group, influence the making of self image of black woman, thereby exposing the devastation caused by white cultural domination in the lives of African- Americans.

The novels of African America women writers expose the victimization of black people within the context of racist social order. In his definition of double- consciousness, W.E.B. DuBois in his book, *The Souls of Black Folk*, talks about the deleterious impact of racism on cultural self consciousness and identity. The term ‘double-consciousness’, refers to two distinct realities- a psychological conflict between opposing cultural world views and debilitating resolution in which externally derived and distorted perceptions of the self constitute a single, but alienated self consciousness.

The idea of racism degrades the colour of the living body into non-colours of extreme value black and white, within the institution of racism. Black represents the shades of evil, night, separation, loneliness, sin, dirt, excrement, the inside of the body. White represents the mark of good, the token of innocence, purity, cleanliness, spirituality, virtue and hope. The obsession with physical beauty of the whites leads to disastrous consequences.

Toni Morrison in *The Bluest Eye* explores the fact that racism devastates the self image of the African female in general and African female child in particular. The belief that black was not beautiful or invaluable lays the foundation of the tragedy of Pecola Breedlove who is the protagonist. Racism pushes Pecola towards the fringes of existence. The novel brings forth inter- racial as well as intra- racial problems. The black community wants to conform to the white standards of beauty, they desperately want to be accepted by the whites, and this internalized ideology is the root cause of the central conflict of the novel. The novel explores in depth the psychological oppression of black female because of their belief in their own unworthiness by virtue of the colour of their skin. This all-persuasive white standard of beauty adopted by so many characters in *The*

Bluest Eye leads to cruelty and destruction. It batters the self-image of African- American female, particularly African- American child as can be seen in the case of Pecola Breedlove.

The social predicament in which Pecola and her parents are placed forms the main plot of the novel. They are a poor family that is virtually cut off from the normal life of the community. The Breedloves despise themselves because they believe in their own unworthiness which is translated into ugliness for the woman of that family. Their ugliness came from their own conviction that they were ugly. Pecola's mother, Pauline works as a domestic servant in a beautiful house owned by a wealthy white American family. She does her best to keep the house beautiful and even takes pride in her job which also gives her happiness and loved taking care of the little Fisher girl, bathing her and drying her in fluffy towels. She stopped taking care of her own house, her children and her husband. She, in fact hates the ugliness of her house and her family. She never introduces the order and beauty of her work to her own household. Mrs Breedlove used her ugliness in her role as a martyr. Sammy, her son used his to hurt other people. Pecola hid behind her ugliness as if it were a mask. Though their surname is Breedlove, ironically enough, all they breed is self hate and mutual destruction. Having inherited the myth of unworthiness the Breedloves can only live the outlined saga to its expected conclusion. The novel, therefore, becomes a myth that defines human worth and explores the potential greatness of the people who are waylaid by the beliefs they have adapted from outsiders.

Morrison has founded her novel on the mythology of the standard of beauty by which white woman are judged in America. Blonde hair, blue eyes and creamy skins are the parameters to measure the beauty of American women. This is conceived as not only wonderful but the surface manifestations of the very best character God and nature ever moulded. This concept of beauty is the very basic myth of racism. This myth is further strengthened through oral traditions, literature and other media. In the novel almost every female character seems to have internalized this mythical standard of beauty. One such example is Mrs Breedlove. Before her exposure to movies, Pauline did not think she was ugly. After she thinks she is ugly, she gives up on self-respect and love of all sorts. The women in Pauline's northern black community looked down upon her. She was still wearing her hair natural, not having the message yet that natural meant ugly. She was still speaking with her home dialect, not having acquired the sense that the dialect spoken in the movies were was the dialect of sense and sophistication and all other dialects equaled ignorance and backwardness. In short, Pauline was rejected because she had not internalized all the messages that she was not good enough as she was and that she needed to do something to herself to look more like European Americans.

Another example of such a victim of mythical standard of beauty is Pecola Breedlove, the protagonist of the novel. The novel portrays in a poignant manner how Pecola is forced to long for blue eyes like those of white children. She thinks if she had blue eyes, her looks would magically right itself. Pecola feels that she is somehow to be blamed for the brutality around her. Her eyes transmit ugliness to her mind and implant it on her consciousness. Since they perceive ugliness they must in turn be ugly and if they were beautiful, blue then they would only see beauty. It would also hold true that if she were beautiful, people would treat her in a beautiful manner. Her desire for blue eyes is a

symbolic reflection of her earnest wish to be accepted and loved by both white and black :

Pecola Breedlove is a young black girl driven literally insane by the pressure toward absolute physical beauty in a culture whose white standards of beauty.....are impossible for her to meet, though no less alluring and demanding. Surrounded by cultural messages that she is ugly by definition, she can achieve peace only by retreating into Schizophrenia.

Being under the spell of white cultural domination all that Pecola has experienced is repeated rejection and brutalization. Even worst, her parents, who have never experienced nurturing love, do not know how to love, and so they cannot give their children a sense of worth. This predicament of her parents is also the outcome of racial injustice.

The novel offers plenty of incidents which push Pecola into an isolated and painful domain by virtue of her race. To mention but a few, her encounter with a fifty-two-year-old white storekeeper makes her aware that for many people, she does not really exist. He cannot see her, a black little girl. She looks up at him and sees “the total absence of human recognition- the glazed separateness.” She has seen this look in the eyes of all white people.

Pecola is despised not only by the whites but also by the blacks. The black boys in her school taunt her. She would sit for hours looking at her reflection in the mirror wondering what made her so ugly , an ugliness that made teachers and classmates at school ignore or despise her. She alone in her school sat alone at a double desk. Her teachers always avoided looking at her. Black boys often made fun of her. However most certainly they were acting so out of their contempt for their own blackness , their self hatred. Even the light-skinned black girl Maureen brings up the same taunts the boys hurled at Pecola . Junior, a black boy, makes her scapegoat for his own pain. Pecola’s mother reserves her jibes and slaps for her own helpless daughter. The reason for the tendency of black people to harass other black people is perhaps, self-hatred induced by white hegemony. White standards so corrupted the psyche of black people that they developed self - hatred. Speaking on this internalized racism Morrison opines:

“It was as though some mysterious all knowing master has given each one a cloak of ugliness to wear, and they had each accepted it without question. The master has said, “you are ugly people.” They looked about themselves and saw nothing to contradict the statement, saw, in fact support for it leaning at them from every billboard, every move , every glance.” 2

The ultimate act of brutalization and betrayal for Pecola comes when Cholly , her own father, rapes her. This rape is a physical manifestation of the social , physical and personal violence that has raped Cholly for years. His name is “ Breedlove” , but he is incapable of loving. Because he has been so depreciated by white society , he is reduced to breeding with his own daughter , a union so debased that it produces a stillborn child , one who cannot survive for even an hour in this world where self-hatred breeds still more self-hatred. Cholly’s unnatural rape of Pecola could be interpreted “as a pathetic attempt to return to the heady days of first love when this very presence essentially created

another human being.” 3. Cholly turns to Pecola in hopes of rescuing her from the dehumanizing glare of all white people and a subsequently loveless existence . His tenderness and protectiveness however , unfortunately slip into lust and rage which he directs at Pecola and all those like her “who bore witness to his failure , his importance. The one whom he had not been able to protect to spare to cover from the round moon glow of flashlight.” 4.The implication here is to the incident where Cholly was “ raped” by white men when he was he was a teenager .Cholly’s rape of Pecola is , thus, the distortion of his love for Pecola. Ultimately Pecola is made a scapegoat for the entire community. She is not only made a scapegoat by her parents but also by the mulattos in the novel, and even by the narrator, Claudia a once a caring friend who shuns Pecola in the end. Identifying Pecola’s role as a scapegoat Claudia says :

“All Of us – all who knew her-felt so wholesome after we cleaned ourselves on her. We were so beautiful when we stood astride her ugliness. Her simplicity decorates us , her guilt sanctified us , her pain made us glow with health , her awkwardness made us think we had a sense of humour . Her inarticulateness made us generous . Even her waking dreams we used – to silence our own nightmares . And she let us , and thereby deserve our contempt . we honed our egos on her , padded our characters with her frailty , and yawned in the fantasy of our strength.” 5

Racial discrimination blinds Pecola so much so that she attributes all her sufferings to her ugliness. She , therefore , craves for the blue eyes a symbol of beauty and acceptance and love to rise up out of her blackness. She , finally goes mad , fantasizing that her eyes have turned blue and so fitted her for the world. She has lost her balance of mind. As Cynthia Davis points out :

“ Pecola is the epitome of the victim in a world that reduces persons to objects and then makes them feel inferior as objects.” 6

The disintegrated psyche state of Pecola in a white world unravels the purpose of the novel , that is, to explore the vicious genocidal effects of racism on black girls, thereby raising the question of what it means to be black in a racist society.

Morrison has conveyed the experiences of black children growing up amid the standards of the larger, white society through series of images which are both grotesque and ordinary . The Bluest Eye is a harsh warning against the old consciousness of the black folks attempts to emulate the slave master. Pecola’s quest is not for money or a better house or even more sensible parents. But she craves solely for blue eyes – something that is a symbol of beauty for the dominant class. The people who influence Pecola as she grows up are clearly the source of this harmful idea. Pecola’s tragedy is thus indicative of the centuries of cultural mutilation of black people in America. The three hundred year old history of black people brought to the United States during the period of slavery has explored the psychological oppression that fosters a love for everything connected with the slave master (whites) while promoting a revulsion towards everything connected with themselves.

From the day she is born Pecola learns from her mother that she is ugly and she thereby learns to hate herself. Hating her black self, she yearns for blue eyes because she

believes that it will extinguish her position as pariah and give her love and security that are desperately missing from her life.

“ It had occurred to Pecola some time ago that if her eyes...were different ... she herself would be different If she looked different , beautiful , maybe (her father) would be different , and (her mother) too. Maybe they'd say , why look at pretty-eyed Pecola . we must not do bad things in front of those pretty eyes.” 7

The Bluest Eyes, here becomes the carrier of the myth of the white standards of beauty. Having blue eyes means everything – love, acceptance, friends, family – in short a truly enviable place in the society.

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