



Race, Class and Gender Bias as Reflected in Toni Morrison Novel's "The Bluest Eye"

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Race, Black, Outdoor, Body, Mammy

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ABSTRACT African American literature has engaged in a dialogue with American letters since the pre-civil war period. This dialogue has been frequently creative and more frequently contentious. It has produced a body of rich and expressive literature with insight into American society of its time. From the 1970s until now, African American writer such Toni Morrison has received acclaim for her works both abroad and at home in the United State. The present study, analyses selected works of the Toni Morrison an eminent African American author on whom very little research work seems to have been undertaken through the angle of 'Black aesthetics'. What Toni Morrison achieved in her novel of the self against the other and its effect as a social statement. The reason why I have chosen *The Bluest Eye* is because the texts of Toni Morrison's first novel, written during the era of the movement of 'Black is Beautiful', and carry the strongest to the depiction of African American women. The paper analyses about Race, class and Gender in Toni Morrison's "The Bluest Eye".

Toni Morrison is among the pioneer of those contemporary black writers who have redefined African-American writing in more ways than one. Black woman in America being black, female and poor have been victimized by racism, sexism, and classism, not only from the white world, but also from their own men. These women have been facing the problems of race, class and gender, which have pushed them towards a margin. Racism Sexism and classism signify the traumatic conditions under which African-American live in white America. These are systems of social and psychological oppression that have adversely affected the lives of blacks in general and African-American women in particular. Black community had to face atrocities like racism and exploitation, irrespective of sex. However, black women were, more oppressed physically and mentally and their cause of grievances was greater.

Pushed to the periphery on account of their gender black woman's life was full of horrors. The woman in America is expected to be beautiful in an ornamental way; she did not work for a living and was 'chaste', 'pious' and married. The black woman was an obsolete anti-thesis of this image-she was not ornamental and according to the aesthetics of the country she was not beautiful. Moreover, most of these women had to work for a living. Racism began in America when white masters brought the Africans slaves in chains and used them as laborers to work on plantation farms to fill their coffers. Very soon the black laborers ceased to exist to human begin in the white world and was reduced to 'body', a profit making 'body'. According Morrison's 'racism' as-beliefs practices and institutions, those negatively discriminate against people based on their perceived or ascribed race. Sometimes the term is used to describe the belief that race is the primary determinant to human capacities, or a more general attitude that individuals should be treated differently according to their race. The basic myth of racism is that white skin brings with it cultural superiority. The whites are perceived as more intelligent and virtuous than the blacks'. Blackness is associated with sin, dirt and cultural inferiority. Along with racism, sexism scarred the black women mentally and physically; sexism refers to the gender bias which exists against women in all patriarchal modes of thinking which subordinate women secondary roles and focus on concept of gender differences which are not natural but man made. While the white women have been victims of these prejudices, the black woman's position has been more vulnerable. These women had to suffer at the hands of both white and black men, fighting a battle for survival both inside and outside their homes. While the whites lynched and raped them, the blacks came to look upon them as immoral beings. The black men developed a kind of aversion towards the women of their community, re-

garding them as loose characters which would prefer extra marital adventures to marital permanence. The black women, therefore, had no protection from the men of their own community. Class exploitation is perhaps the greatest source of oppression of blacks in white America. The class issue is an important ant one as in is linked to capitalism, the system which divides society in to two classes: 'master' and 'slaves'

The whites have been the monopoly class under this system while the blacks have been the marginal. The black women, like the black men, were also working. The black women had to work on plantation farms as laborers and also as "mammy's" or maids in the kitchens of the white households. They were generally looked upon as menials. It is, however, important to note that race, class and gender have been interrelated in the history of black women. They, in fact, originated from the same set of circumstances and are motivated by economic, social and psychological forces. Gloria WaseGyles explains this through an imagery of circles:

"There are three major circles of reality in American society, which reflected degrees of power and powerlessness. There is a large circle in which white people, most of the men, experience Influence and power. Far sway form in there in s small circle, narrow space, in which there are the black people regardless of sex, experience, uncertainty, exploitation and powerlessness.

Hidden in this second circle is a third, a small dark enclosure in which black women experience pain, illation and vulnerability. These are the distinguishing marks of black womanhood in white America"(1983:3-4).

Black Women have been victimized not only by racist, sexist and class bias, but also by scholarly neglected, yet, over the centuries they have tried to present their case, their quest for freedom and attempts at self-assertion through literature. Race, class and gender have figured prominently as theme in black women's writing over the years. There are some important writers like Rancid Harper, who wrote in their nineteenth century, including Zora Neale Hurston, and Alice Walker. Morrison also belongs to this group of writers who have tried to trace the development of black women's image from its infantile stage of invisibility to its present of self-definition and assertion. Morrison is an expert lecturer, educator, editor, essay writer, literary critic and short story writer, but it is her work as a novelist that makes her such a significant member of the Black American canon. The aesthetic beauty of her writing, coupled with its political power, has guaranteed Toni Morrison win the 1993 Nobel Prize for literature. She was the

eighth woman and first Black Women to do so. In her Nobel-Prize lecture, she said, "Tell us what it is to be a woman so that we may know what it is to be a man. What moves at the margin? What it is to have no home in this place? To be set adrift from the one you knew. What it is to live at the edge of towns that cannot bear your company?" (Karen 1993)

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. The *Bluest Eye* is told from the perspective on nine-year old Claudia Macteer, a young black girl in Lorain, Ohio in the 1940s. The Macteers take in another young girl Pecola whose father Cholly has burned down their home, leaving the family "outdoors" (an important term in the novel) (1970:5, 9). A violent and abusive husband and father Cholly rapes Pecola soon after she returns home. Pecola visits a Holy Man, Soap-head Church and wishes for the "the bluest Eyes". These, she believes will grant her the redemption of white beauty. In Pecola's eventual mental breakdown and the death of her body, Claudia sees a condemnation of the society in which she lives. The novel traces the environment that produces this crisis. Morrison's examination of lives of different characters which form this black community presents the black experience in a Midwest town-microcosm for the experience of blacks in America.

The book is divided into four sections-autumn, winter, spring and summer. Morrison's narratives weave its way through the four sections, and through flashbacks and time shifts. Morrison provides the reader with the context and history behind the breed love family's misery and Pecola's obsessive desire to have the Bluest eyes and her eventual descent into madness. Morrison uses multiple perspectives of the nine-year old and the adult narrator, Claudia, as well as the other characters, to examine the themes of race, class and gender in *The Bluest Eye*. Morrison considered racism as the African-American's primary obstacle. Racism pushes the central character in the *Bluest Eye* towards the fringes of existence. The novel focuses on intra-racial as well as inter-racial problems. The black community wants to conform to white standards of beauty, they desperately want to be accepted by the whites and this internalized racism is the root cause of the central conflict in the novel. According to K.Sumana, Morrison believes that "the concept of physical beauty as a virtue is one of the most pernicious and destructive"(1998:7). The *Bluest Eye* makes one of the most powerful attacks on the relationship between white standards of female beauty and the mental and psychological oppression of black women. 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 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. The novel shows how Pecola perishes in a community that is plagued by self-hatred. The social predicament in which Pecola and her parents are placed is expressed in the main body of the novel which is divided in seasonal sections. By beginning the novel with autumn, Morrison suggests that the world of the black community in Lorain is tippy turvy. These seasonal divisions help in telling Morrison's story of the wrapped psyche of an adolescent female living in a racist society.

There are many incidents in the novel which constantly push Pecola towards a marginal existence because of internal racial. Her encounter with fifty-two year old storekeeper makes her aware that for many people she does not really exist. Black boys humiliate her at school; she becomes a scape-

goat for their own humiliation and pain. Her encounter with Maureen Peal, the young mulatto girl who is her school mate is extremely devastating. Maureen's relative affluence and popularity are advantages of being nearly white. She humiliates and attacks Pecola, Frieda and Claudia-"I am cute and you are ugly and Black Ugly". (Morrison 1970:31). Claudia is enraged at this insult:"what did you mean, we were lesser'? Pecola stunned by the pain of Maureen's humiliation.

After Maureen's cruel rejection is the episode with Geralldine, the middle class woman who wants to erase her blackness, her very identity. In poor, unkempt Pecola, she sees her as a type of class for whom she has only disgust. For Gerakine is devoid of any emotion and to quote Karen Carmean, in getting rid of the "funkiness of passion she become emotionally hollow and insensitive, unable to feel affection for any living thing, except, perhaps act"(1993:24). Her cruel rejection of Pecola once again devastates the young girl. Pecola's last encounter is with Soap head Church, the West Indian of mixed parentage. Although Pecola's request for blue eyes moves him tremendously, he too victimizes her by making her innocently poison a sod he detests. Rejection by the more affluent segments of society is bad enough, but Pecola is cast out by her own family.

Pecola's mother Pauline is also a victim of internalized racism. She fantasizes about movie stars and workers as a housekeeper (mammy) in the white household of the Fishers, lavishing all her love and affection on her employer's daughter. When Pecola comes along with Claudia and Frieda to the kitchen of the Fishers, and accidentally Pecola drops a pan of blue berry pie on the floor, instead of comforting her daughter who has been burnt, Pauline soothes the tears of "the pink and yellow girl" (Morrison 1970:22) who is upset by the accident, while Pecola calls her mother Mrs. Breedlove, the white girl calls her by an affectionate nickname, "Polly". Pauline is plagued by overwhelming self-hatred. K.Sumana believes that although she is aware of the turning wheels of racial oppression in her life, she makes no effort to stop the turning .she kowtows before the demands of the fisher family. She cooks for them, bakes pies and keeps the house in good order while her own storefront home and its inmates 'fester' due to neglect. In her own house, Pauline is ugly, but in the Fisher home, "polly" is important and indispensable, made so by the magic of service to the white people. The ultimate act of brutalization and betrayal for Pecola comes when her own father rapes her. His tenderness and protectiveness as a father however turns into lust and rage. Cholly rapes her twice, turning her 'outdoors', pushing her towards the depths of despair and the fringes of insanity. 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 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 tangible Shirley Temple mug has blue eyes, so do the little Fisher girl. The Shirley Temple mug and the Mary Lane Candies allow Pecola to carry the image through her very being. The dolls presented to black girls like Claudia are to the parents, their own unfulfilled longings of childhood and Mrs. Macteer cannot understand Claudia's destroying them. Claudia tears them apart in the attempt to find a source of their loveliness and what makes the world treasure them. Ultimately, Pauline and her marginalized community succumb to the look of the other. 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 breed loves are even poorer. Patric Bryce asserts that "the Double Jeopardy of being both 'poor' and 'ugly' excludes Pecola from sharing in whatever social and economic tidbits that may be offered. Pecola and

her parents cannot fully comprehend the depth of ostracism and are powerless to change the situation."(1992:39) The novel begins with a passage from an elementary children's school book in the simplest language- the language of a prep school reader. The primer describes the red and green house or white children-Dick and Jane. It talks about their father, mother dog and cat and a friend who comes to play with them. It depicts the life of an 'idle' bourgeoisie white family. The primer white the white children was the way life was presented to black people. The second version of the primer repeats the same passage exactly but without any punctuation. In the third version of their primer, the wording remains unaltered but the passage is run together in frenzy, like one long collection of vowels and consonants, seeming to signify nothing.

All black women in *The Bluest Eye* experience dependency, repression, internal racism and alienation. All these women try to find meaning and fulfillment in different ways. All these women on account of their race and gender are marginal groups "moving at the helm of life". Claudia explains the real-

ity of her mother and other women in the community. "Being a minority in both caste and class we moved about on the helm of life."(1970:11). she dreads being put "outdoors", the way Cholly has put the women in his life outdoors. While other women in the novel find fulfillment Mrs.Macteer is looking after her family and trying to make ends meet, Geraldine and Maureen Peal in trying to make ends meet, Geraldine and Maureen Peal in trying to assume fake identities, Pauline in trying to fulfill the role of the ideal mammy-Pecola does not find fulfillment anywhere. In fact she does not get any maternal apace from any of these women except the three prostitutes, China, Poland and Maginot Line who are marginal groups as well. Pecola only escapes in descent into madness.

The theme 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 edge of the town towards marginality, both literally and figuratively. Madness is Pecola's fate there is no savoir for her. Claudia observes towards the end of the novel." it's much, much, much too late."(1970:164).

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