



RACIAL DISCRIMINATION INTONI MORRISON'S THE BLUEST EYE

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The development of the Afro-American Novel is essentially a social and human document, which deals with humanity and its social milieu. The Afro-American writers try to give their social group and community, by using innovative techniques and strategies such as irony, metaphor, language and words, with a view to communicating with the members of their group, they create an enhanced consciousness among the readers of their community.

Toni Morrison told herself that she was writing the novel, *The Bluest Eye* which was an expansion of her earlier story about a little black girl who dreamed of blue eyes, only for herself. She told herself that she did not really care if it was published or not. But when she finally finished the manuscript, she had to admit great disappointment when publisher after publisher turned it down. Finally, it was accepted by Rinehart, and Winston, who published with the title *The Bluest Eye* in 1970.

The three versions of the unique opening paragraph of *The Bluest Eye* may be said to be symbolic of the three life styles that Morrison explores in the novel either directly or by implication. The first version of the paragraph indicates an alien White world, represented by the Dick-Jane family that intrudes into the lives of the Black children. The second version represents the life style of the MacTeer family which survives the poverty and the racism that it encounters in Ohio. The third distorted run-on-version of the paragraph stands for the Breedlove family which is exploited by the ruling class. Thus, the simulated "here is the house" passage, with its variants, serves several purposes as Klotman points out: "First and foremost it serves as a synopsis of the tale that is to follow revealing the psychic confusion of the novel. It also serves as an ironic comment on a society which educated and unconsciously socializes its children like Pecola with callous regard for the cultural richness and diversity of its people" (9).

The use of names of seasons, intended to indicate the major parts of *The Bluest Eye*, aids Morrison in telling her story. By beginning the novel with autumn, she suggests to us that the world of the novel is topsy-turvy. Spring usually symbolizes the beginning of things, the time of birth and rebirth. Winter, in contrast, is the time of decay and death. And, summer, commonly associated with life in full bloom and ripeness, is a time of death, life in its final moments. These seasonal divisions help the reader in understanding the fundamental decadence of life of the Africans living in the United States. They help in telling Morrison's story of the warped psyche of an adolescent African female living in a racist society.

The Bluest Eye is the tragic tale of a young, black girl's desire for the bluest eyes, the symbol of beauty and, therefore, worthy in society. The pivotal idea in the novel is the domination of Blacks by the existing American standards of beauty—blue eyes, blond hair and white skin. It deals honestly and sensitively with the damaging influence of White standards and values on the lives of Black people. It portrays in poignant terms the tragic condition of Blacks in a racist society and examines how the ideologies, perpetuated by the institutions controlled by the dominant group, influence the making of self-image of Black women, thereby exposing the devastation caused by White cultural domination in the lives of African-Americans. In short, the novel lays bare the victimization of Black people within the context of racist social order.

The Bluest Eye, thus, makes one of the powerful attacks on the relationship between western standards of female beauty and psychological oppression of black women. The central theme of the novel is that racism devastates the self-image of the American female in general and African female girl in particular. The novel expresses the vulnerability of poor Black girls and how easily they can become the pariahs in a White society.

The novel is about the Breedlove family, consisting of Cholly (the father), Pauline (the mother), Pecola (daughter) and Sammy (the son). The narrator of the story is Claudia. Claudia and her sisters Frieda (aged nine and ten respectively at the beginning) have their own problems. Their parents are not affectionate enough. Their mother especially is very strict and uncompromising. For the slightest mistakes, they get whipped.

Pauline Breedlove had earlier been Pauline Williams. She was one of eleven children. One day, when young, a nail punctured her foot and she became a cripple. As a result, she was excluded from every activity and therefore took to tending the house. Her only recreation was arranging and rearranging things. During World War I the family discovered that Kentucky was a better place to live in, and therefore they shifted there. In Kentucky they lived in a real town, in a five-room house. Pauline left school and took care of the house. When

she was around fifteen, she met Cholly Breedlove. They fell in love and finally married and came to Lorain in Ohio where the story is set.

Cholly himself had a very different childhood. When he was four days old, his mother discarded him in a junk heap. He was rescued by his great aunt Jimmy who herself raised him. He did not know who his father was until he was old enough to ask Jimmy. She told him that it was Sammuel Fuller, who ran off to Macon after making his mother pregnant. Two years later, Cholly quit his school and took a job. He had a friend here named Blue Jack who entertained him with stories. Aunt Jimmy became very old and died one morning. All the relatives came for the funeral. During the funeral dinner, Cholly has his first sexual experience. He along with Darlene gets into the bushes and when they are performing the act, two White men shine their torches on them and watch gleefully. This incident makes Cholly surprisingly hate Darlene instead of the White men. After some days, Cholly runs off to Macon to find his father. The meeting is not very satisfactory because his father refuses to recognize him. After this meeting with his father he meets Pauline.

Soon after marriage, the love dissipates. Pauline feels uncomfortable meeting other women, whereas, Cholly is always among his friends. Slowly the quarrels started. When she becomes pregnant, they are happy for some days, but later again the problems started. Soon Pecola and Sammy are born and Pauline has to go back to work in order to support her family; she now starts mixing with people and even takes to religion. She bears Cholly's sins, "like a crown of thorns, and her children like a cross". She is, in a sense, a martyr. At this time she finds a permanent job in the fisher family and she takes care of their need very well.

One day, during a hated quarrel, Cholly tries to set the house on fire. For this he is arrested and the family becomes scattered. Pecola is, temporarily taken in by the narrator's family. There, Claudia, Frieda and Pecola form a friendship. One day, Pecola drinks three quarts of milk and for this, gets a verbal lashing, indirectly from Claudia's mother.

Pecola has only one desire in life and that is to become blue-eyed. She herself is very ugly; so ugly, that no one sit next to her in class and her class-mates make fun of her. She believes that she would become beautiful if she gets blue eyes.

Pecola Breedlove believes that it is blue eyes alone which will help her in restoring her all respect. As she has not got blue eyes, she suffers from self-scorn that creates a kind of scar on her heart.

When she comes of age, Pecola attends the local school along with the girls. During the winter, the school in which the girls studied has a girl named Maureen Peal. She is different from other Negro girls. She is rich, dresses fashionably and is very beautiful. As a result, Frieda and Claudia are jealous on her. She is everything they are not- teachers love her, boys do not play practical jokes on her and she is popular. They try to find out the ways to tease and insult her. She has a dog tooth and has been born with an extra finger on each hand. Therefore they call her "six-finger-dog-tooth-pie". One day Maureen herself comes and talks to Claudia. Since they went the same way to home, Maureen accompanies them. On the way, they see Pecola being teased by some black boys. The crux of their teasing is that Pecola's father slept naked. "Black e mo. Black e mo. Yadaddsleepsnekked", Frieda unhesitatingly runs towards them and hits one of the boys on his head with her book. She also threatens to tell out one of his secrets (that he wet his bed). Later when Maureen also comes over, the boys disperse. Maureen puts her hands across Pecola's shoulder and start; talking to her. She even offers to buy her an ice-cream. They talk about things such as Betty Grable, and menstruation. Then Maureen asks Pecola whether she had seen a naked man. Pecola's answer betrays the fact that she had seen her father naked. Now Maureen turns on her, affirming the taunt and going still further: "I am cute and you ugly; Black and ugly e mo" (50). Her attack, directed at all three girls, hits home. Thus this attempt at friendship ends at total failure as Maureen insults the three and runs away.

By now, Pecola has become very intense in her desire for blue eyes. She approaches a person called Soaphead Church for this. Soaphead Church is famous as a person who grants people their wishes. He helps people achieve their simplest aims-love, health and money. He is rather queer in his sexual performance; he likes to have sexual contact with small girls. To such a person comes Pecola. Soaphead tells her that he can do nothing for her. But if God wills, He can do it. Pecola is now convinced that she will get blue eyes. Pecola by now firmly believes that she has blue eyes. Towards the end of the story, she begins to talk about her blue eyes. She thinks that her eyes are bluer than Joanna's and Michelen's. Years pass by, Sammy leaves town and Cholly dies in the workhouse. Pecola now lives with her mother. She soon became mad.

The story deals with at least two levels if we take up the theme of suffering. On one level it is the suffering of women in general and on the other, and on a more specific level, it is about the sufferings of Blacks, especially the Black women. Thus suffering is based on both gender-races -with the Black women getting worst of everything.

From a feminist perspective, *The Bluest Eye* is a study of the various degrees of fulfillment women experience as women. Pauline is at one hand of the spectrum. Other women characters are less obviously deprived, at least economically. Some are "comfortable" completely immersed in the motherhood and find peace in resignation to the limitations of their lives. Mrs. Mac Teer, whose daughters befriend Pecola, is mice" and open around windows and doors to the cold wind. She makes ends meet by taking in boarders and by

“watching every possibility of excess.” Like other women in the community, she dreads the “real terror of life,” being put “outdoors,” and “having no place to go,” Claudia MacTeer explains the reality of her mother and other women in the community: “Being a minority in both caste and class we moved about...on the hem of life, struggling to consolidate our weakness and hang on, or to creep singly up into the major folds of the garment” (18).

The second group of women, whom Morrison calls the “sugar brown mobile girls,” lives in better neighbourhoods where everyone is employed and where there are fine houses with porch swings and sun flowers and pots of bleeding hearts. These women are poor imitations of what they believe Whiteness to be. They have smooth hands and slim ankles. They wash with “orange-colored lifebuoy soap, dust themselves with Cashmere Bouquet and soften their skin with Jergen’s Lotion.” (64)

The third category of women Morrison depicts in the novel have no desire for prosperity or rootedness of any kind. These women are prostitutes, embittered and frigid in love-making because they choose to be. And they choose to be prostitutes because they hated men, all men, without shame, apology, or discrimination.” They abused their visitors with a scorn grown mechanical from use. Black men, White men, Puerto Racians, Mexicans, Jews, Poles, whatever-all were inadequate and weak; all came under their jaundiced eyes and were the recipients of their disinterested wrath” (43). Regardless of the category in which her women characters exist, they are removed from the possibility of self-knowledge, self-expression, and freedom.

The central character, Pecola, is subjected to suffering by all the above mentioned. The rest of the Black women in the novel undergo one form of suffering or the other, or all. It should be mentioned that even Black men are subjected to subordination. Cholly gets transformed because his embarrassment of getting caught in the act by two White men while having sex for the first time. He is never able to get over this. He is so much changed by this that, later, he even murders some White men. But more importantly, in the novel, the focus is on the sufferings of Black women.

The most profound irony of this situation is that many false fairy godfathers known by such titles as Daddy, Father, and Prophet, and Soaphead Church, exploited the disenchantment of their race and deluded them into believing that they offered the panacea for their hopelessness and despair. Thousands flocked to their “heavens” and believed that they were saviours. So it is natural that Pecola Breedlove, a little twelve-year old black girl, was also vulnerable and was deluded enough to believe what she felt so strongly had come to pass— Soaphead Church actually “gave” her blue eyes. The irony of the transformation lies in the comment: “A little black girl yearns for the blue eyes of a little white girl, and the horror at the heart of her yearning is exceeded only by the evil of fulfillment” (162).

White beauty, white living, white freedom—these are what the characters in *The Bluest Eye* long for, strive for, and yet can never realize. “For the first time (Soaphead) honestly wished he could work miracles” (138), so much so that he vows to “annihilate” the evil by, like Cholly, assuming his own god-like stance. To prove to Pecola that she can indeed have blue eyes, Soaphead used a dying, old dog as a catalyst for her conversation. Like Junior’s helpless cat, Pecola is once again made analogous with the defenseless animal as scapegoat. Soaphead tells Pecola to feed the dog his food (mixed with poison) and tells her that if “...nothing happens, you know that God had refused you. If the animal behaves strangely, your wish will be granted on the day following this one”, (138).

Of course, the dog convulses and dies, and Pecola is left with her illusion of blue eyes. Soaphead, like all the principal male characters, has again selfishly denied presence to Pecola, but his own act of appropriation has gone one step further; he composes a letter to God, and in it he arrogantly assumes the role of God because He “...forgot how and when to be God”. Because God denied Pecola her blue eyes, Soaphead vows to give them to her “No one else will see her blue eyes. But she will” (144). He boasts in his letter: I did what you did not, could not, would not do; I looked at that ugly little black girl, and I loved her. I played you. And it was a very good show: (144). Soaphead uses Pecola to give some definitive meaning to his own life and to substantiate his own identity, and like Cholly, he further sees her face permanently separating her from any meaningful potentialities within community.

One more episode in this novel expresses the distaste of Whites for Blacks. Cholly is insulted by White hunters when he is with Black woman undergoing his first sexual rites of passage. He is discovered by two White hunters who insist that he complete the act with them as an audience. He is told: “get on wid it, nigger... I said, get on wid it. An’ make it good nigger, make it good”. There is no place for Cholly’s eyes to go. They slide about furtive searching for shelter, while his body remains paralyzed. The flash light man lifts his gun down from his shoulder, and Cholly hears the clop of metal... with a violence born of total helplessness, he pulls her up, lowers his trousers and under wears...” (TBE, 116). Thus the Whites treat Blacks only as animals. Like the ancient Romans who such sports among animals, the Whites here experience joy in seeing the Black mate. Of course, their main intention is just to embarrass the Blacks. They exhibit a voyeuristic tendency to find out whenever the Blacks are as good at sex as they are reputed to be (According to stereotype, the Blacks have enormous sexual prowess). Here it is Darlene who is the worst sufferer. She is treated like an animal by the Whites and Cholly starts hating her after this incident.

Subordination and violence against Black women by Black men forms the second most significant base for the novel; the first being the apathy among Black women themselves. Throughout the novel, we do not find one single Black man treat s women properly. All the male characters, Cholly, Mr. Mac Teer, Louis Junior etc. Seem to have only one motive in the novel, and that is to find out various techniques to torture Black women.

Cholly is the main anti-protagonist of the novel. At least three Black women suffer under him—Darlene, Pauline and Pecola. His treatment of Darlene is appalling. When the whites embarrass him, he lays the blame on her. He conveniently forgets the facts that it takes two to have sex. Somehow seems to forget her in his shame. This reveals his escapist nature. Morrison seems to point out that man always considers himself infallible; he projects the woman as the cause of his worries. Cholly, unable to protect either himself or Darlene, and unable to fight against the white hunters, directs his hatred toward the one who “had created the situation the one who bore witness to his failure, his impotence. The one whom he had not been able to protect, to spare, to cover from the round moon glow of the flash light” (118). After this incident, he avoids Darlene like a plague. There is another reason for his evasion—he does not want to take up responsibility if she becomes pregnant. This attitude of his-to-escape responsibility is presented throughout the novel.

Cholly marries Pauline when he falls in love with her. At first their life is happy. But later on, it sours. He starts drinking and battering Pauline. He shirks responsibility. Even though he enjoys having sex with her, he fears her pregnancy and children. For him, children are an entrapment. When Pauline starts earning their livelihood, he resents her independence. He goes to the extent of burning their house, simply because it is Pauline who pays for the house. Thus he ensures that Pauline never feels secure. For the Blacks, owning a house is the ultimate symbol of security and independence. By burning the house, Cholly destroys both. This is why he is considered as an “animal” by the other Blacks.

Cholly’s treatment of Pecola is the most significant aspect of the novel. He commits the bestial act of raping his own daughter. The scene in which he rapes her is very surrealistic. He rapes her without knowing what he is doing. He rapes her “tenderly”. But after satisfaction, his tenderness is gone, “Removing himself from her was so painful to him, he cut it short and snatched it out of the dry harbor of her vagina”. He felt a “hatred mixed with tenderness”. It is this ambiguity which marks his character. He is a postmodernist man who encompasses both the opposite of love and hatred feelings of him.

The root cause of Cholly’s behavior lies in his childhood. He is treated badly by at least three men. First his father, who deserts his mother after getting her pregnant. When Cholly goes to meet him after his aunt’s death, his father is more absorbed in gambling than in talking to him. Then the two white men who catch him are having sex with Darlene. It is these men who define his later life. Cholly grows up as a man who shirks responsibility. For him, women are only objects to vent his feelings of frustration and sex. He vents his frustration on Pauline and Darlene. And he enjoys the body of all the three women—Pecola, Pauline and Darlene.

One minor character of the novel is Louis Junior exhibits his sadistic streak on Pecola. He is the son of Louis and Geraldine. The nigger boys do not play with him. He enjoys bullying girls. And when he sees Pecola, he dreams it an opportunity to bully her. He calls her home to see his kittens. When she comes inside, he throws the cat on her which scratches her face. When she tries to go away, he locks her inside the room. The cat comes near and she comforts the animal. When Junior Louis sees this, he gets very angry and he holds the cat by one of its hind legs twirls it around his head and throws it full force against the window. The cat falls hard on the radiator behind the sofa and is still. At this moment, Geraldine comes in and asks what is happening. Junior lays the blame on Pecola and Geraldine believes her son. She fails to see a child; she sees a type, a class representative for whom she has only disgust. His mother prefers the cat over him and therefore he seems to vent his personal frustration on Pecola and the cat.

There are other instances of ill-treatment by Black men also. The Black boys who surround Pecola and tease her about seeing her father naked is one example. Claudia and Frieda also have their own Black tortures. Mr. Henry tries to sexually abuse Frieda. Their father Mr. MacTeer does never very love towards them. Thus Black women are always treated badly by their male counterparts in the novel.

The White women seem to be an extension of their men. At very place, they subordinate Black women; Pecola, Frieda and Claudia are ill-treated by their teachers. They are seated apart, questions are never put to them and it is almost as if they are dead objects. Pauline enjoys no status and self worth. When she delivers her baby, Pecola, she is equated with a horse by the doctors. She resists being considered an animal, and the notion that birth and pain are somehow different for White and Black women. She insists that they recognize or at least hear her pain, her humanity, and her womanhood which make her aware not only of racism but sexism as well. Pauline does not get her salary at one place she works. The woman says that she will only give her salary if she comes away from her husband. So for Pauline, it is either her husband or her salary. Pauline chooses the former and forfeits her salary. Later when Pauline comes to work at another place, they like her so much that they decide to keep her. But significantly, they rename her as “Polly”. Renaming a person is the ultimate symbol of dominance. The little girl of the house is frightened when she sees Pecola, Frieda and Claudia in the kitchen.

This seems to suggest that Black women have no place in White society, unless they subject themselves to subjugation, like Pauline.

It is very surprising that Black women, who face the bulk of their problems from three sections-Black men, White men and women-do not form a cohesive group. Instead they go about abusing each other. The reason for the tendency of Black people to harass other Black people is, perhaps, self-hatred induced by White hegemony. White standards corrupted the minds of Black people in such way that Black people have developed self-hatred. 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 had said, "You are ugly people". They had 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. (28) Pecola finds solace in the company of only Frieda and Claudia and the three prostitutes. Everywhere else, her contact with Black women causes her distress. Maureen, the new Black girl in their school, walks along with them, buys ice-cream for Pecola and then insults all the three and runs away. Geraldine is a woman who does not enjoy sex nor does she love her family, though she keeps them contented. By confirming her beliefs and behavior to a narrow standard instead of developing her own, Geraldine remains emotionally hollow, unable to feel affection and love for any living thing, except, her cat. She hates "niggers" and tells her son to avoid them. Her distinction between colored people and niggers is that "colored people were neat and quite; niggers were dirty and loud". Geraldine considers Pecola as a peril to her a "nasty little black bitch" (72). Even her own mother, Pauline does not treat her well. For her, her two children are like a cross which she carries. She prefers her White mistress's daughter to her own. For instance, when Pecola comes along with other Black girls to the kitchen of the White home where Pauline works to pick up wash, she drops a hot pan of blueberry pie and dirties the floor, instead of comforting her daughter, who has been scolded by the falling pie, Pauline spits out words like "rotten pieces of apple" at the Black girls and turns to hushing and soothing the tears of the little pink-and-yellow girl who is upset by the accident. Pecola is made to feel ugly and stupid beside the little White girl, who represents everything that is "right". Similarly Mrs. MacTeer, the mother of Frieda and Claudia also ill-treats her children. There is an absence of love in their household also. When Pecola drinks two quarts of milk in Mrs. MacTeer's house, she is criticized and ticked off by her.

But this is not to say that she lacks companions. One companion is Mrs. MacTeer though her sympathy is suppressed because of her own (Mrs. MacTeer's) suffering and anxiety. After Pecola's pregnancy, none of the Black women, save Frieda and Claudia sympathize with her. Thus, as a Black girl, Pecola undergoes all the traumatic experiences. She wants to rise up out of the pit of her blackness and see the world with blue eyes, but the pity is that she is not allowed to. Excluded from reality by racial discrimination and inequality, Pecola goes mad, fantasizing that her eyes have turned blue and so fitted her for the world. She has lost her balance of mind.

To conclude, a close study of *The Bluest Eye* from the viewpoint of the interaction of race, gender and class consciousness reveals Morrison's low level of gender consciousness and at the beginning of her literary career. Initially she thinks that racism is the only form of oppression of Africans in the White-dominated society. Though classism and sexism, the other primary causes of oppression, are also treated in the novel, they are overshadowed by Morrison's emphasis on racism.

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