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OBSESSION OF BLACKS WITH AN AMERICAN MEASUREMENT OF BEAUTY IN TONI MORRISON'S *THE BLUEST EYE*

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Abstract

In the historical paradigm of African American narrative art, Toni Morrison commands a distinguished position. The creative perspective of Toni Morrison emanates several mind-blowing questions related to race, gender and class. The narratology of the author palpably examines the colour, culture and context against which the different characters stand and struggle. She offered a clear and close understanding of black life, society and culture. *The Bluest Eye* was published in 1970 and the centrality of this novel is designed around the obsession of blacks with an American measurement of beauty. The novel is a traumatic tale of a black girl's search to obtain white parameters. *The Bluest Eye* traces the painful condition of blacks especially women in America where even now racial consideration commands everything, though the American society boasts of the development of individuality irrespective of race and gender. Morrison's debut novel *The Bluest Eye* has been analysed as a saga of black community and at the same time woman's subjectivity has been kept in focus. It has been realized that the novel is about the contradictions fostered by racism. Toni Morrison is extremely sensitive towards the contemporary situation and surroundings amid which she was living and struggling. As a woman writer, Toni Morrison focussed on the theme of African-American women novelist's role. She offered a clear and close understanding of black life, society and culture. She strongly believes that history and tradition are the storehouse of human wisdom, enlightenment and progression.

Keywords: beauty, colour, discrimination, gender, love, race

Introduction

The overriding theme of Morrison's fiction is the search for identity of a black person making an effort to reconstitute and recover his history and culture which has been pushed into the state of oblivion and narcissism. *The Bluest Eye* was not an immediate literary thunderbolt but it unearths that racism is hazardous to the self-image of the African

society in general and the black female in particular. The novel tells the picking story of Pecola who comes of a poor family detached from the mainstream of life of a community. The Breedloves cultivate hatred against themselves and they believe that they have translated their unworthiness to ugliness. The entire family suffers from suffocation and ugliness. No doubt, woman as a creature is the precious creation

of Almighty. It is realised that the body of woman is one of the essential elements in her situation in the world, but the body is not enough to define her as a woman.” (Benhabib 134) In American context, the concept of blackness has been held as an unfavourable connotation in the popular mind. There are numerous phrases and proverbs designed by the people with nefarious intention like ‘black is evil,’ ‘black as sin,’ ‘black as the devil,’ which reflect the emotional and aesthetic implications. The evil and ugliness of blackness have been presented and denoted like antithesis of the goodness and sanity of whiteness.

The narrative pattern of *The Bluest Eye* is classified into four sections and each section is named after a season, which begins with Autumn and closes with Summer. The story starts with a reference from Dick and Jane Primer taught to American children and printed in three ways. It is first printed in a common way, afterwards without capitalisation and punctuation and at last without capitalization and punctuation and also without spaces given between words. There is a description of a happy white American family which is meant to provide an ironic epigraph to the whole narrative design. Hence, there is an introductory message put forward by Claudia Macteer, a girl child who grows to adulthood and narrates the fictive set-up. The narrator makes us alarmingly aware of how Pecola got herself pregnant by her own father. Cholly Breedlove and lost her child in miscarriage. Meanwhile, Claudia and her sister played an important role for the safe birth of the child but in vain. Each section of the novel begins with Claudia speaking in her own voice and giving us some of Pecola’s life or story what she was come across. At times, we notice that there are other voices as well. Pecola hails from an underdog and privileged family that is actually dissociated from the usual current of life of a community. The Breedloves develop disdain against themselves as they become the victim of their own inability. Pecola’s mother Pauline who works in the capacity of maid-servant in a beautiful house does not like and approve the abject condition and ugliness of her house, her daughter, her family and herself. Genuinely, she hates poverty and blackness.

The novel becomes a saga or a mythical document that denotes human potency and explains the viable greatness of the people who are suppressed by the idea that they are outsiders. The novel makes it a point of discourse how Pecola is compelled to aspire for blue eyes like those of white children. She has immense urge to be loved and identified by both whites and blacks. The white standard of beauty becomes a key-point in the mind of Pecola’s dream and desire. The racist idea of physical beauty in the novel controls and captures the narrativity and leads straight to Pecola’s painful suffering. The novelist goes to the extent of saying that equating of physical beauty with virtue is the pernicious and destructive idea of the western world. The physical glamour has nothing to do with our past, present and time to come. To her, it also damages one’s self-image and further destroys happiness and regulates creativity.

Of course, Pecola does not identify it as she is mesmerised by white cultural notion. She faces very brutal form of negligence and rejection. Her parents never experienced the fruit of love, so they were unable to provide the worth of love. All the things crystallize owing to racial impiety. In the early section of the novel, the racial predicament comes to fore. The simple chapterization of the novel like Autumn manifests us that the fictive universe is badly disturbed. Spring normally stands for the beginning of things, the time of birth and rebirth. Almost in contrast winter is the embodiment of decay and death. Moreover, Summer suggests life in charm and maturity which also leads towards death. Critically speaking, the classification according to seasons underlines the understanding and the natural dislocation of life of the Africans residing in the United States. Toni Morrison has provided the three sets of language signifying three life-styles. The first form of narration suggests an alienated white world represented by the Dick-Jane family that comes to the lives of the black children. Morrison shows the simplicity in the first set of her expression. “Here is the house. It is green and white. It has a red door. It is very pretty. Here is the family. Mother, Father, Dick and Jane live in the green-and-white house. They are very happy. See Jane. She had a red dress. She wants to play. Who will play with

Jane? [...] Look, look. Here comes a friend. The friend will play with Jane. They will play a good game. Play, Jane, play." (1)

here is the house it is green and white it has a red door it is very pretty here is the family mother father dick and jane live in the green-and-white house they are very happy see jane she has a red dress she wants to play who will play with jane [...] look here comes a friend the friend will play with jane they will play a good game play jane play. (1)

The third section offers distorted running version of the paragraph symbolising the Breedlove family which resides in a deformed universe being explained by the ruling class.

Here is the house. It is green and white. It has a red door. It is very pretty. Here is the family. Mother, father, Dick and Jane live in the green and white house. They are very happy. See Jane. She has a red dress. She wants to play. Who will play with Jane? See the cat. It goes meow-meow. Come and play. Come play with Jane. The kitten will not play. See Mother. Mother is very nice. Mother will you play with Jane? Mother laughs. Laugh, mother laugh. See Father. He is big and strong. Father will you play with Jane? Father is smiling. Smile, Father, smile. See the dog run. Run, dog, run. Look, look. Here comes a friend. The friend will play with Jane. They will play a good game. Play, Jane, play. (Morrison, 2007:3).

It is true that the destructive myth of white beauty is astonishingly suggestive to women. Claudia does not have the same fate as we find in the case of Pecola. She is a bit younger than Pecola and both of them got their education in the same school. For a few days, Pecola enjoys the company of MacTeers. Actually, Claudia is not the singular voice of the novel. Morrison adopts a strategy in which there is a third person narrator who fulfils the vacuum created by Claudia. The third person omniscient narrator gives the information about the Breedloves, Geraldine and her family.

Another striking feature of Morrison's narrativity suggest, although *The Bluest Eye* is a search novel, the novelist does not show the intensity of mission and motive. Claudia's narrative technique starts at the end by synthesizing the traumatic conclusion of Pecola's life. In a suggestive note, it is Claudia who matures into an adult: she speaks about the failure of her and her sister's endeavour to make Pecola's baby live through the use of the magical incantation and the disintegration of the Breedlove family. She also argues the motive of the narrative: "There is really nothing more to say-except why. But since why is always difficult to handle, one must take refuge in how."

The cyclic characteristic of Claudia's narrative approach is also approved by the different seasons. The narrative cycling starts with the Autumn and finishes with Summer. The ironic situation is that Pecola's story is not the normal discourse of birth, death and rebirth from planting to harvest to planting, rather it is a story that moves from pathos to tragedy and finally to madness. Claudia's mode of narration confirms ripeness that is making an effort to recall or recapture her past experience.

The novelist is vigilant of the role of class considerations particularly in the minor families. She frequently talks about the inter-racial preoccupations based on the colour of the skin rather than the class-oriented form. The principal focus in *The Bluest Eye* is on colour-discrimination faced by the African people. The numerous incidents take place in the heart of the novel which pushed Pecola into oblivion. She has acquired awesome realization when she encounters an old white storekeeper. Not only is she teased by the whites but also by black boys at school. She finds herself a scapegoat because of humiliation and suffering. She finds herself a scapegoat because of humiliation and suffering.

The heart-rending scene of cruelty and crime for Pecola comes to light when we visualize the scene of rape by her own father, Cholly. This was really inhuman and unnatural act of physical assault. Here Cholly comes to Pecola with the intention of releasing her from the bond of loveless situation. But suddenly he comes into the grip of lust and fails to

seize his temptation. It is a distortion and dehumanization of fatherly love. Afterwards, Pecola conceives and her still born child symbolizes the slavery and suffocation of her life. Pecola is surrounded by problems and puzzlements where she is not only a scapegoat for her parents rather also for the mulattos. Claudia, the narrator of the novel also presents her as a scapegoat.

The narrator of the novel is of the opinion that Pecola herself is responsible for her destiny and character. In the novel, sex and love are principal preoccupations. Since Claudia is recalling her childhood days with Pecola, we have eye-witness details of their curiosity and their fears about menstruation, pregnancy and also what love is. The awakening of children to their sexuality and later to love is a natural part of the process of maturity and the achievement of selfhood. What complicates the process is the fact that the three children with whom the novel is centrally concerned are surrounded by the powerful parameters of white behaviour. The novelist reasonably goes into the heart and psyche of the blacks residing in the white society. In fact, the black woman makes her best effort to channelize her romantic passion, what she was acquired from white movies.

Moreover, the notable fact is that little daughter of the employer of Pecola's mother has blue eyes. She however believes that getting the bluest eyes will provide some significant dimension to her personality. In that case, she may command love and security which she is missing at present. She dreams to get blue eyes which may prove to be a bliss and panacea for all the ailments: "it had occurred to Pecola sometime ago if her eyes [...] were different [...] she herself would be different [...] if she looked different, beautiful, may be (her father) would be different and (her mother) too. May be they'd say, why look at pretty-eyed Pecola. We must not do bad things in front of those pretty eyes." (97)

The black mother is very significant almost in all the white American fictions. This is simply because the black women are much punctual, duty-bound and loyal to their work and responsibility. Jacques Lacan propounds a theory of Mirror Stage to argue the origin and development of the concerned

persons. The idea of image is noticeable in the process of recognizing one's self at the same time; it enables to realize the identification of another as a significant fact. Lacan is of the view that identification is a matter of searching and locating the concept of beauty on both the levels of formative. No doubt, the correlation of beauty to sexual and social fulfilment suggests a priority of thought for Morrison. Like a psychoanalyst, Toni Morrison advocates the anxiety of black women, what they feel after observing mirrors as they live in the white dominated society. The mirror reflects the cultural or patriarchal image of the black women in their introspection not merely that it is also gives a painful idea that they are not properly women in the conventional sense. That's why Pecola used to pass "long hours [...] looking in the mirror, time to discover the secret of the ugliness, that made her ignored or despised." (39)

The bitterness if Pecola's suffering comes out not only from the racism and gives inter-racial conflicts in relation to colour deeply rooted in white racist myths. Pecola promotes a positive sense of being when she watches the values of light-skinned Maureen Peal whose sense of greatness is attached to her colour. Morrison is very much incisive in her argument when she says how the Breedloves' appearance emerges to be problem-ridden. It is not their ugliness, but their conviction of their ugliness that points out the real difference. Pecola notes down the irreparable damage received from inter-racial preoccupation. It is a matter of examination on the part of the child when Pauline at the time of Pecola's birth says that she is an ugly child. The child, however, loses its sense of worth if it finds the mother mirror controlled only by moods or worse still, the rigidity of her defences. From the very inception of the novel, Pauline Breedlove works as a mirror and reflects to her daughter her own sense of inferiority which enters Pecola and she radiates back to her. The critic says, "This mother-daughter mirror reflects images of sometimes-self and sometime-other in their struggle to know who each is, an effort which runs generationally.

The reverence for whiteness, which is Pecola's most valued possession, is passed on to Pauline through the intergenerational mirror by her

mother. Pauline seeks her own missing mother as she looks at Pecola." (Kulkarni 2) Pauline once tells Pecola, "So when I see it [the baby] it was like looking at a picture of your mama when she was a girl. You know who she is, but she does not look the same." (99) It should be remembered that Pauline's mother works as maid to white family. The intergenerational mirror has already punctured Pauline's mental condition and she is beyond redemption. She does not accept any concept of internal wholeness based on cultural liberty by thinking that freedom will come from outside. Pauline comes to the dream world of the whites under the impression that she has got sophistication but the harsh reality is that she is suffering from psychological ailment.

The in-depth socio-psychological observation reveals the fact that Pecola's suffering is based on the failure of her family which does not offer proper kind of socialization, education, love and sense of security which are requisite for the healthier growth of the child. Parents cannot be changed and for Pecola it is bad luck because she did not get good parentage. In addition to it she suffers from the feeling of self-hatred because of her colour-complex. Toni Morrison remarkably argues that Pecola's sense of alienation and unworthiness come to the front and focus not because of the 'others' approach, rather these things culminate owing to her own failure and in-competency to cope with the situation.

Morrison genuinely makes a vigorous attack against racism. *The Bluest Eye* identifies the unnatural position of blacks in a society which is ruled by colour and sex determination. She all the time poses a greater question of 'being' through the characters of the novel. The most important thing is that every individual is eager and inclined to accept the responsibility for his/her own life. It should ever be in mind that Pecola's suffering is acute and it became possible on account of her gender. The black women, moreover, find themselves in a double crunch of race and gender. There is a kind of pressure on the individual to leave her individuality and cultural entity and to follow the very white dictates. The novelist seemingly makes an inquiry into Pecola's life on the axis of race and gender. Morrison is of the opinion: "the assertion of racial

beauty was not a reaction to the self-mocking, humorous critique of cultural racial foibles common in all groups, but against the damaging internalization of assumptions of immutable inferiority originating in an outside gaze. The novel tried to hit the raw nerve of racial self-contempt, expose it, and then soothe it not with narcotics but with language that replicated the agency I discovered in my first experience of beauty."

In the second category of women, Morrison talks about the sugar-brown mobile girl living in better neighbourhood where there are privilege and facilities. "These women have smooth hands and slim ankles. No doubt, they marry and beget children but to them, sex is repulsive. In schools and colleges, they have been taught how to do the white men's work with refinement [. . .] how to instruct black children in obedience and how to develop thrift, patience, high morals and good manners."

The third type of women that Morrison discusses in the novel bear no desire for prosperity of rootedness. Here, Morrison differs from Simon de Beauvoir because the French philosopher does not believe in the categorization of women as Karl Marx has done. To Morrison, there are prostitutes and embittered women who have developed hatred for all the men without any discretion and rationality. To such women, everything is a subject of denunciation and depravity. This is all because of patriarchal frame of mind.

Conclusion

Morrison makes a significant assessment by exploring, exposing and redefining the position of women in the socio-historical, political and economic context, highlighting her latent power and talent. She strongly shows her disrespect to patriarchal society which nourishes preoccupied notion of women being synonymous with womb, bust and hips. These things do happen in mechanistic society but the voice of women could not be silenced and stopped. *The Bluest Eye*, above all, becomes a dynamo of womanist's point of view where there is a claim for just, justice and natural treatment perpetrated by the society. Morrison's mode of treatment becomes different from others also because she is truthfully committed to the black

women's experiences by residing in the white dominated American society.

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