



THE BLACK IS BEAUTIFUL: A COMPARATIVE STUDY IN SELECTED NOVELS OF RICHARD WRIGHT AND TONI MORRISON

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ABSTRACT

The present study attempts to analyse selected works of the two eminent American authors on whom very little research work seems to have been undertaken through the angle of Black aesthetics. Richard Wright and Toni Morrison novelists are an effort to bring out the central theme of the Black American experience in an unjust society like America. Compare and contrast the ways that these two American writers have conceived the relationship between racial oppression (black) and the institution of the family (society) in their respective works of Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), *Bluest eye* (1970), and Richard Wright's *Native Son* (1940), *Black boy* (1945). The novel, *The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison has tried to redefine beauty and the identity crisis of the black women out of the specular American Psychological system into a racial authenticity. The author brings out the psychological damage done to a black girl (protagonist of the novel) who self destructively accepts white culture's definition of beauty. The novel focuses on Pocola's futile longing for blue eyes. The paper presents the problems of freedom and equality which are denied to black people in the United States with particular reference to her novel *Beloved*. In *Native Son* Richard Wright showed Americans how a Black youth rages against White oppression. With some slight and perchance negligible change in laws and attitudes in the United States, the Black writers and their protagonists changed somewhat too. *Black Boy* is a biography, and it is the story of the author's life told from his point of view. *Black Boy* celebrates Wright's talent for narrative in its description of the brutal South from the black perspective between 1900 and 1945.

Key Words: Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, *Bluest eye*; Richard Wright's *Native Son*, *Black boy*; Black American experience, A Comparative Study.

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INTRODUCTION

Over the past century, southern black literature has evolved from a relatively sparse body of writings, mainly imitative of Afro-American

literary forms and thematically focused on the plight of blacks, to a sophisticated literary canon whose forms and meanings combine to give it a distinct identity (Wilson 1989).

Black writers in the United States needed to answer the subject of whether their work was tasteful or political. One could read a political proclamation into any work by Richard Wright — for instance — or style into Toni Morrison's books .

But the writer establishes his / her identity in each of his/her work. Cecil Brown states:

A black writer can write about anything . . . Literally, and what he has to say will still be said by a black man (James A. Emanuel).

African American literature can be divided into around six ages as follows:

1. Age of Apprenticeship (from the beginnings until 1830)
2. Age of Abolitionists (from 1830 until 1895)
3. Age of Negro Nadir (from 1896 until 1920)
4. Age of the Harlem Renaissance (from 1920 until 1930)
5. Age of Richard Wright (from 1930 until 1960)
6. Age of the Black Militant (from 1960 onwards)

Black literature in America created in an indistinguishable path from White writing. That is, it started with instructive verse and pedantic composition, for example, slave stories, journals and sermons and was later on took after by verse and fiction and it likewise extended to show. Other than this, Black writing managed the social, artistic, recorded, political and financial states of the Black individuals.

Most of the literature by African American writers describes past slavery and their culture, with regard to whose they were and what the White people did to them. African American literature initially focused on the issue of slavery as presented in one of its popular subgenres called slave narratives. The history of African American people was the story of their forced journey from one continent to the other; a story of their oppression, slavery and liberation. In most of the works of African American writers, we have a depiction of African cultures and the slave trade due to which many of the Africans lost their freedom. It is also the story of their survival, of how they suffered misery and trouble during this period and of how they escaped from slavery. Also, identity is in large part relational, that is, it is conceived in terms of

comparison with others. The blacks never got the opportunity for repudiation or identification in their attempt for developing a coherent identity. They, in fact, were 'nameless' and 'faceless' which was their heritage.

After 1970, African American literature was dominated by the masculinise of Richard Wright's novels. The re-emergence of Zora Neale Hurston and the pastoral in Black literature produced an explosion of Black women writers including Toni Morrison. Here, the main focus was urban sensibility. Though his novels may have been read less often, as has been suggested,

Morrison was, of course, familiar with the mantra "Black is Beautiful" and the resistance to established standards of beauty it expressed, but she had no illusions about how deeply in the black psyche the opposite message had been embedded and how much effort and understanding would be required to bring about an enduring reversal in attitude. Richard Wright is doubtlessly best known for his novel *Native Son*. He was a great Black American novelist, autobiographer, short story writer and playwright. Also he was one of the most important writers of his generation who, very effectively, acquainted the readers with dehumanizing effects of racism; and his works and political views were deeply influenced by the experience of the Great Depression and an extraordinary working-class conflict of that era. In addition, he was the first African-American writer to achieve literary fame and fortune for his writings and not for the color of his skin. He was one of the pioneers of Black protest writings. Wright's personality shaped and reflected his works throughout his literary career. His language is more powerful, authoritative and influential and he used words as weapons in his novels and essays on American society which, Wright thinks, is racist. As has been explained in Chapter One, as a result of Wright's influence over Black writings and activism, the thirty years (i.e. 1930-1960) that followed the Harlem Renaissance, are called as the Richard Wright Age.

Wright made a formal definition of Black literature in his essay, "Blueprint for Negro Writing". Wright attended to the writer's duty to community

as seen in his novel *Native Son* and later. Toni Morrison and some other novelists, paid attention to aesthetic search.

Critics like Elliott hold that Richard Wright and the Black protest novel raged against the injustice of the antebellum American South. Toni Morrison agreed in on the point that art should be political and more than other writers of the movement she went so far as to demonstrate this issue. Toni Morrison has characterized the experience of White racism as trauma and psychosis — the latter term referring actually to an unsolved conflict. This conflict is at two levels: one being between self and the other who is an oppressive character and the other being a conflict of external interactive force and internal psychological force. Toni Morrison's novels have described the conflict or trauma of the African Americans as "fragmentation" — which, as has been mentioned before, manifests in her narrations. The present study is as in-depth a study as possible of social analysis of the condition of the Blacks in America and their direct confrontation with prejudices, stereotypes, and racial mythologies that allowed the Whites to ignore worse social conditions created by them for the Blacks till the last decades of the 19th century. Altogether the African American literature has evolved from the slave narratives of its early time to include the modern novel. In this research work, the growth and development of the Black aesthetic from the work of Toni Morrison novels *Beloved*, *Bluest* and Richard Wright's *Native Son*, *Black boy* has been studied. Although Richard Wright, whose protagonists reflect the outrage against White racism in post-Civil War United States has influenced both Morrison, each of them has grown up in and reflected a separate period of Black history. Racism certainly exists — although in a slightly diluted from the present times also.

The advantages of studying

The advantages of studying and practicing Comparative Literature are many . . . In studying and practicing Comparative Literature, the comparatists gain a better understanding of the phenomenon called Literature. We are able to appreciate the unity and universality of mankind through Literature. Any national literature therefore

becomes a part of a larger whole. The scholar of comparative literature . . . gains a more balanced view, a truer perspective than is possible from the isolated analysis of a single national literature, however rich in itself (Aduke Adebayo 2010).

Morrison's *Beloved* and Richard Wright's *Native Son*

Both Morrison's *Beloved* and Richard Wright's *Native Son* depict and analyze the brutalities, violence and dehumanizing effects of racism in American society, but they presentation of the relationship between racism and the institution of the family differs and has a different emphasis in each novel. These differences can be linked to the vastly different contexts of production of each author and, as a consequence, their own very different ideological view of the solution to the dysfunctionality of the institution of the black family and black life in general. However, both Wright and Morrison would surely agree that the dysfunctionality of black families is the result of the history and facts of slavery in the USA and the continued racist attitudes of that country. There are also differences because of the gender of the chief protagonist: Morrison's Sethe is a mother and Morrison explores the dynamics of being a mother under the system of slavery, while Wright explores a type of black masculinity during a decade of economic recession. In *Native Son* Richard Wright seems to be stating that racist America created Bigger and if America changed its racist position, then there would no more be Biggers. Bigger Thomas is the killer of two women: Mary Dalton, his employer's daughter, and Bessie Mears, his Black girlfriend. Wright seems to project that Bigger's violence is one of the effects of slavery, repression and oppression to which the Blacks were subjected in American life, society and history right from the beginning of the system of slavery. Through this novel, Richard Wright wants to show unjust White American society and Negro's attitude towards this society and vice versa. Furthermore, Wright seems to project that although Bigger is a Black man, he is a native son of the United States. Wright added one more angle to Bigger's violent acts by opining that Bigger would not have become a murderer if the

White community had recognized his humanity. In this respect, James Baldwin says:

. . . He is the monster created by the American republic, the present awful sum of generations of oppression; but to say that he is a monster is to fall into the trap of making him subhuman and he must, therefore, be made representative of a way of life which is real and human in precise ratio to the degree to which it seems to us monstrous and strange (Baldwin, James, 1984)

Aesthetic discourse in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*

In *The Bluest Eye* (1970), Toni Morrison addresses a timeless problem of white racial dominance in the United States and points to the impact it has on the life of black females growing up in the 1930's. Morrison started writing the novel in the mid of 1960s, but the idea was lodged twenty years earlier when one of her classmates revealed a sorrowful secret that she had been praying to God for two years to give her blue eyes but receiving no answer. Morrison wrote this novel when the "Black is beautiful" slogan of movement was at the peak. She started to think why such movement was needed, "why although reviled by others, could this beauty not be taken for granted within the community? Why did it need wide public articulation?" (Anderson Claud, 1977).

Morrison uses the element of aesthetics in her novels. Her novels focus on political, cultural, and racial elements. She attempts to use aesthetic element in her writing to show Black misery and desolation.

The evidence of aesthetic discourse in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* from both the visual and literary perspective. On the one hand, it has been pointed out that Pecola's obsession with White beauty is Morrison's criticism of the concept, while, on the other hand, the description of beauty treatment in the novel achieves the aesthetics of both visual art and poetry combined. For example, in *The Bluest Eye*, Pecola Breedlove's identity is challenged by shocking social circumstances such as the one that has been elucidated. Morrison's *Beloved* partakes of the recuperation and re-writing of the history of African American struggle. It offers

an ingenious re-writing and encoding of the history of American slavery and the oppositional agency of African American slave women. Indeed, Toni Morrison, like many other African American writers, writes in the realist tradition in a distinctive poetic and deeply evocative prose style.

The Bluest Eye is not flawless. Miss Morrison's touching and disturbing picture of the doomed youth of her race is marred by an occasional error of fact or judgment. She places the story in a frame of the bland white words of a conventional school 'reader'—surely an unnecessary and unsubtle irony. She writes an occasional false or bombastic line", 'they were through with lust and lactation, beyond tears and terror.' She permits herself some inconsistencies: the real name of Soaphead Church is given as both Elihue Micah Whitcomb and Micah Elihue Whitcomb. None of this matters, though, besides her real and greatly promising achievement: to write truly (and sometimes very beautifully) of every generation of blacks—the young, their parents, their rural grandparents—in this country thirty years ago, and, I'm afraid, today."

Pecola Breedlove, in her first year of womanhood, is black, ugly and poor, living in a storefront, sharing a bedroom with her brother, her crippled mother and her drunken father. Pregnant by her father, she goes to Soaphead Church, a man who believes himself possessed of holy powers. What she wants are blue eyes. In this scene, in which a young black on the verge of madness seeks beauty and happiness in a wish for a white girl's eyes, the author makes her most telling statement on the tragic effect of race prejudice on children. But the scene occurs late in the novel—far too late to achieve the impact it might have had in a different construction. For most of the way, Pecola yields centre stage to Frieda and Claudia—who, aside from knowing her, and perhaps offering contrast, by themselves being black and poor (though from a happier home), serve little purpose beyond distraction (Haskel Frankel, 1970).

She gives us a fresh, close look at the lives of terror and decorum of those Negroes who want to get on in a white man's world—Negroes who would now be scorned as Uncle Toms; she puts her

compassionate finger on the role of crude fantasy in sustaining hope, as in the experiences of Pecola's mother. . . . Here again see, as the overriding motif of this book, the desirability of whiteness, or, as the next-best thing, the imitation of whiteness; as a corollary, blackness is perceived as ugliness, a perception that must surely have given rise in later years to the over-compensatory counter-statement 'Black is beautiful' (L.E. Sissman, 1971).

"*The Bluest Eye* makes one of the most powerful attacks yet on the relationship between Western standards of female beauty and the psychological oppression of black women. But Pecola Breedlove's predicament, as the young black girl who feels that blackness condemns her to ugliness and lovelessness, is not only a problem for black girls and women. Morrison makes this clear in an expose of the 'ugliness' of black poverty, powerlessness, and loss of positive self-concept in this poignant, haunting, poetic narrative. *The Bluest Eye* was not an instant literary success, and it was out of print by 1974.

Ruby Dee says about Toni Morrison's book, *The Bluest Eye*,

It's all I can do not to lie down and cry myself into some kind of relief from the life-pain of Pecola, the central character. She is a girl born black, poor and, by majority standard, ugly. It is also an account of the people that surround her, especially Pauline, her mother and Cholly, her father. They are the kind of people that all black people know of—or are—to varying degrees. The author digs up for viewing deep secret thoughts, terrible yearnings and little-understood frustrations common to many of us. She says these are the gnawing we keep pushed back into the subconscious, unadmitted; but they must be worked on, ferreted up and out so we can breathe deeply, say loud and truly believe 'Black is beautiful' (Ruby Dee, 1971).

***Black Boy* (1945)**

Black Boy is a memoir of Richard Wright's childhood and young adulthood. It is split into two sections, "Southern Night" (concerning his childhood

in the south) and "The Horror and the Glory" (concerning his early adult years in Chicago). The book begins with a mischievous, four-year-old Wright setting fire to his house, and continues in that vein. Wright is a curious child living in a household of strict, religious women and violent, irresponsible men.

The society becomes a love/hate object for the characters, like Richard in Wright's *Black Boy* (1945) justifying the preoccupation of African American writers with the theme of protest, Richard Wright opines:

If the expression of the African American Negro should take a sharp turn, then you will know by that token that we are suffering our old and ancient agonies at the hands of our white American neighbors. If, however, our expression broadens, assumes the common themes and burdens of literary expressions which are the heritage of all men, then by that token you will know that a humane attitude prevails in America towards us (Kehinde, Ayo, 105).

Black Boy is deeply indebted to the blues. Indeed, Ellison views *Black Boy*, as he would later consider *Invisible Man*, as a fruitful combination of "high" art and "low" art, canonical literature and African-American oral folk expression. Accordingly, Ellison differs from the other reviewers that, as bleak as Wright's vision of black life in the south may be, it is not without beauty, hope or humor. Ellison argues that Wright, like the blues balladeers who helped it inspire him, recounts a tale of suffering and woe not merely to elicit pity from his readers but so part of their common quest to achieve a more democratic society. Jan Mohamed concludes his essay with the idea that (Jan Mohamed, 2009):

. . . *Black Boy* is remarkable not so much for its rebellion as for the control that Wright had to exercise and the internal struggle that he had to wage against being engulfed by the racist sovereignty.

The problems of black Americans began to be treated poignantly by the black writers. Richard Wright in an essay entitled "Blueprint for Negro Writing" published in 'New Challenge' urged the Negro writers to abandon the posture of humility,

and to develop a collective voice of social consciousness, both nationalist and Marxist. In other words Negro writing could fulfill itself only by becoming at once 'black' and 'red' (Marxism). Through his novel *Native Son* he tried to transform the avuncular diminutions of previous Negro writing, including his own, into a larger and bolder form of assertion. Yet the merger between the red and the black is as problematic in the novel as it came to be for Wright in life. In *Black Boy* he movingly documented the destitution and emotional insecurity to which he was heir from his childhood while his mother's unending illness filled him with an abiding sense of existential anguish. Richard Wright perceived his own trouble as representative of the black's and saw himself as an outsider between two cultures.

In "White Man, Listen" he claimed that he was "a rootless man but neither psychologically distraught nor in any way particularly perturbed because of it" (Fabre, Michel, 8).

This control is actually incomplete and a repressive discipline achieved at the expense of the feminine. This "control" for which Richard Wright is praised is the same discipline Jay-Z raps about in "99 Problems." That is, in my opinion, the deadly beauty of oppression – that even when admiring his liberated reflection the resister's still trapped in oppression's house.

Native Son (1940)

Wright's *Native Son* (1940) stirred up real controversy by shocking the sensibilities of both black and white America. He makes his readers feel the reality of race relations. The protagonist of the novel, Bigger Thomas, hails from the lowest class of society. Bigger is what one might expect him to be—sullen, frightened, violent, hateful and resentful.

In an essay entitled, "How Bigger Was Born" Wright describes the creation of the character Bigger and refers to real-life "Bigger" that he encountered to explain how each of them helped to create Bigger Thomas in the novel. He says, "The birth of Bigger Thomas goes back to my childhood, and there was not just one Bigger, but many of them, more than I could count and more than you suspect" (How Bigger, 434).

The publication of Richard Wright's *Native Son* had a profound impact on the understanding of race relations in the United States. Blacks witnessed the limit situation of anger and fear play out in Wright's protagonist, Bigger Thomas' murder of a white woman named Mary. Whites recoiled before the violent effects of anti-black racism and the desperation of black existence. And women of all races were left pondering the link between racism and aggression against women. His counter-stereotyping of whites is his defines of white power in image –formation. He has turned the image of Mary into the image of a victim who has lost control of the situation and therefore he "felt that he had his destiny in his grasp" (Demitürk, Lale, 141). He has also killed the referential meanings of Mary, Jan, Mr. & Mrs. Dalton that create shame, fear and hate in him. His sense of powerlessness in the face of the taboos. He has been deprived of a being any symbol of beauty, because his skin colour has been the symbol of absence in the white society. He has used his chance to kill the symbol that the white oppressor created in Mary: "Bigger Thomas," Houston A. Baker, Jr., points out, "struck America's most sensitive nerve; he attacked the white female, its 'symbol of beauty'". The white oppressor's image of beauty presents the very image of oppression for him. The whites' admiration for their object and beauty has meant the rigid control of the black image and sexuality.

Critics find strands of other influential themes and stylistic mannerisms in *Beloved*, notably the dark reflection on hardscrabble community life, which generates uncharitable rivalry between haves and have-nots, as delineated in Richard Wright's *Black Boy* and *Native Son*. Obviously, Toni Morrison and Richard Wright are well schooled in literature, yet the urgency and pathos of her characters and situations are uniquely her own. After Richard Wright, Negroes both as people and as writers have developed. In American and African writings, there is an amalgam of existential and essential issues. One comes across the existential themes of death, dread and bad faith, the 'death' of God, the non-existence of an 'other' world, the fact of human responsibility for all value systems, and the like. Hence, in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* the

issues of slavery and freedom are imaginatively depicted.

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