

## **THE PSYCHOLOGICAL MECHANISM OF INTERNALIZED RACISM IN TONI MORRISON'S *THE BLUEST EYE***

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### **Abstract**

*The Bluest Eye by Toni Morrison is a brilliant and exemplary novel based on racial discrimination, sexism and class distinctions. Morrison at the primary stage of her literary career considers racism as the African's primary obstacle. Pecola, the protagonist of the novel comes from a poor family and becomes the victim of several people. To gain beauty, affection, care and self-respect she needs only a pair of the bluest eyes. Pecola desires the bluest eyes because it is a symbol of white beauty. She longs for tender affection but she doesn't receive it till the end. Due to that Pecola creates an imaginary character within herself and talks with it and at last the poor girl's hopeless need for affection results in her madness. 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.*

*At the end of the novel, Morrison does not suggest that the victim is to blame for all that happens, in every instance. She is, however, exploring a larger question of 'being' through the characters of this novel. In spite of the existence of the "other", what is important is each individual's willingness to take responsibility for his or her own life. Morrison does not suggest that external forces, such as racism and sexism, are unimportant. Neither the indictment of white society for its oppression of blacks nor the indictment of blacks for their treatment of women is her sole interest or focus.*

### **THE PSYCHOLOGICAL MECHANISM OF INTERNALIZED RACISM IN TONI MORRISON'S *THE BLUEST EYE***

Toni Morrison's recent naming as winner of the 1993 Nobel Prize for Literature compels us to recognize her not only as a writer of international stature, and of "universal" significance, but also as an African-American woman writer, writing out of racial, gendered, class and national specificity. To understand the remarkable achievement of Toni Morrison as a novelist, one must go back, and appreciate the black women's literary tradition to which she belongs and the conflict of images with which her foremother have had to contend.

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 is 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*.

*The Bluest Eye*, at the core, is about the contradictions fostered by racism, sexism and class distinctions affecting the black girls in white America. Morrison, at the primary stage of her literary

career considers racism the African's primary obstacle. The novel is a tragic tale about a young black girl, Pecola, who desire's the bluest eyes, the symbol for her of what it means to be beautiful. When the novel opens she is at the age of eleven and she is not happy with herself and longs for blue eyes as they are symbolic of American white beauty. The thought becomes like "the first twigs are thin, green and supple, they bend into a complete circle but will not break" *The Bluest Eye* (75). She longs for the bluest eyes as she got the knowledge of reasoning and wont change that at any cost. She firmly believes those eyes will give all things she desire in her life.

Pecola comes from a poor family that is virtually cut off from the normal life of a community. The Breedloves despise themselves because they believe in their own unworthiness which is translated into ugliness for the women of that family. Pecola's mother, Pauline who works as a domestic servant in a beautiful house hates the ugliness of her house, her daughter, her family and her self. She does not like her being black and poor and thinks herself as unworthy for the society.

Morrison shows what can happen to a person who is alienated from positive black traditions. Pecola desires blue eyes, the symbol of white beauty; she feels that such eyes could make her beautiful and admirable and she could restore her self-respect. In Mrs. Breedloves workplace Pecola inadvertently drops her mothers berry cobbler and Mrs. Breedlove beats her severely and spits out words like rotten pieces of apples. These words symbolize the blacks as a rotten part in the white society.

There are many incidents in the novel which hurt Pecola into a feeling of isolation and pain because of her race. To mention but a few, her encounter with the fifty-two-year old white storekeeper makes her aware that for many people, she does not really exist as,

He hesitates, not wanting to touch her hand, she does not know how to move the finger of her right hand from the display counter or how to get the coins out of her left hand. Finally he reaches over and takes the pennies out her hand. His nails graze her damp palm.

Pecola feels the inexplicable shame obb (**TBE** 37).

She becomes the victim of her school boys. They call out. "Black e mo, Black e mo Yadaddy sleep nekked". Pecola is helpless to stop the boys and, worse she believes them. It carries a great deal of weight and remembers witnessing of participating in the cruelty of children who learn to hate from adults and act it out on each other. Junior, a black boy, makes her the scapegoat for his own pain.

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 a way that the black people had developed self hatred:

It was as though some mysterious all-knowing master has given each cloak of ugliness to wear, and they had each accepted in without question. The master had 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 more, every glance. "Yes", they have said. "You are right." And they took the ugliness in their hands, threw it as a mantle over them, and went about the world with it (**TBE** 28).

The ultimate act of brutalization and betrayal for Pecola comes when Cholly her own father rapes her. Cholly turns to Pecola in the hope of rescuing her from the dehumanizing glance of white people and a subsequent 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 the flashlight." (**TBE** 119) Cholly's rape of Pecola is, thus, the distortion of his love for Pecola. Pecola's

stillborn child is not only a symbol of his personal violation but of the fettered life she has been made to live.

Pecola prays for the bluest eyes day and night for years as “a little black girl yearns for the blue eyes of the little white girl and the horror at the heart of her yearning is exceeded only by the evil fulfillment (TBE 162). She visits Soaphead Church asking to give her the bluest eyes. His main function in the novel is to give Pecola the final push toward insanity. The depiction of Soaphead Church in bizarre and unfortunate Morrison places in him all the degradation caused by internationalized racism, in which lighter skin is regarded as superior and caring sophistication in morals and manners.

Pauline is also a betrayer of her own tender hearted daughter. While she has been pregnant, she had talked to the baby into her belly as if it were a friend. She has felt good about this baby. She has planned to love it no matter how it is but she saw only a “black ball of hair”. She likes to watch her and hear her baby sounds, but she knew right away that Pecola is ugly. If Pauline has showed the same friendliness towards Pecola her life may have been different. In the novel Pecola doesn't have a person to share all her feelings till the end. Due to that Pecola creates an imaginary character within herself and talks with it and at last the poor girl's hopeless need for affection results in her madness. The damage caused to Pecola fail in total. She spent her tender sap green days just walking up and down and head jerking to the beat of a distant drummer to distant only she could hear. Her appearance becomes as if, “Elbows bent, hands on shoulders, she flailed her arms like a bird in an eternal, grotesquely futile effort to fly. Beating the air, a winged but grounded bird, intent on the blue void it could not reach- could not even see- but which filled the valleys of the mind (TBE 162).

Pauline too is hurt in two primary ways. First, she was hurt by institutional racism; particularly the racism of the media which depicts European features as beautiful and consigns all other kinds of features as ugly and less estimable. Before her exposure to movies, Pauline did not think she is ugly. After she thinks she is ugly, she gives up on self-respect and love of all sorts. Secondly Pauline was hurt by internalized racism. This happens when people in the group targeted by racism begin to believe the lies about their inferiority, ugliness, lack of morality, and general lack of sophistication and in turn oppress their peers.

The women in Pauline's northern black community looked down on her. She was still wearing her hair natural, not having gotten the message get that ‘natural’ meant ugly. She was still speaking in her dialect, not having acquired the 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 said she was not good enough as she was, and that she needed to do something to herself to look more like European Americans.

Morrison's portrait of Pauline in the chapter is very poignant. It gives the reader insight into a very complex process whereby a person is stripped of a sense of self-worth. This is the process of which Pecola is undergoing and it is the primary subject of the novel.

In sum, Pecola is the central scapegoat of the novel, *The Bluest Eye*. For, 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 caring friend shuns Pecola in the end. At the end of her assessment, Claudia recognizes Pecola's role as a scapegoat.

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 decorated us; her guilt sanctified us, her pain made us glow with health, and her awkwardness made us think we had sense of humour. Her inarticulateness made us generous... We honed our egos on her, padded our characters with her frailty, and yawned in the fantasy of our strength (TBE 163).

According to Cynthia Davies, Pecola is the person in this novel who makes us feel that they are inferior as objects. She undergoes all the dramatic experiences of life dreaming that she would see the world with blue eyes and come out of blackness. But no one takes pity on her. She suffers the reality of racial discrimination and inequality and goes mad.

Thus, Pecola Breedlove in the novel is oppressed not only racially but also sexually and on the basis of class distinction. Associated with her condition is funk, violence, ugliness and poverty, symbolized by her storefront house. The mother's own internalization of the desirable woman as beautiful, well-taken-care-of and cuddled, results in Pauline's rejection of her own daughter, Pecola, who cannot possibly obtain such a standard not only because of her blackness but also because of her poverty become failure in her lie. Nevertheless, Morrison's focus is on racism in as much as she considers, at the initial stage of her career, racism the primary obstacle of the Africans in America.

Morrison's condemnation of racism in *The Bluest Eye* is, thus, tempered by the recognition of the unnatural position of blacks in a racist society. At the end of the novel, Morrison does not suggest that the victim is to blame for all that happens, in every instance. She is, however, exploring a larger question of 'being' through the characters of this novel. In spite of the existence of the "other", what is important is each individual's willingness to take responsibility for his or her own life. Morrison does not suggest that external forces, such as racism and sexism, are unimportant. Neither the indictment of white society for its oppression of blacks nor the indictment of blacks for their treatment of women is her sole interest or focus.

Woman in patriarchal society is the socially sanctioned 'other' and her psyche is the product of social constructs. As Simon de Beauvoir points out: "One is not born, but rather becomes woman...It is civilization as a whole that produces this creature, intermediate between male and eunuch, which is described as feminine." From the moment of birth, when the conventional first question is asked regarding the gender of the child, a female is constantly bombarded with social images, rewards, and punishment that are designed to ensure that she does not develop any quality associated with the other half of humanity.

Though Morrison has rightly understood the concept of beauty from an intellectual point of view, she could not understand that even this concept would change depending on the racial make up of the dominant class. Her misconception of class consciousness at this point in her writing career might be due to her lack of understanding of three important factors. First, the ruling class, whether of European, African or Asian descent, possesses the major instrument of economic production and distribution as well as the means of establishing its socio-cultural dominance. Second, possessing such means, the ruling class uses and promotes its own image as a measurement of beauty for the entire society. Third, the success of this promotion ensures the continual dominance of the ruling class. This is amply endorsed when Nkrumah says: "Race is inextricably linked with class exploitation; in a racist-capitalist power structure, capitalist exploitation and race oppression are complementary, the removal of one ensures and the removal of the other.

To conclude, a close study of *The Bluest Eye* from the viewpoint of the interaction of race, gender and class reveals Morrison's low level of gender and class consciousness 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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