

Feminist Consciousness in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*

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“I’m writing for black people. I don’t have to apologize”¹

—Toni Morrison

ABSTRACT

Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* explores the internalisation of white hegemony by the black community and its implications, especially for the black women. The parameters of beauty created by the whites produce a sense of inadequacy and inferiority among the black women as happens in the case of Pecola. Her desire to possess a pair of blue eyes almost becomes an obsession and has serious and dangerous repercussions. There are moments of resistance as well when the concept of beauty and virtue are challenged by some of the women in the novel. This paper attempts to study the women characters in Morrison's novel and map their engagement with the male members of the black community as well as their negotiation with racism. The paper shall explore the intersections of gender and race to foreground the double victimisation of the black women and Morrison's indictment of the same.

*T*he world admires Morrison—the American novelist, editor, essayist and teacher for her works that bring to light the agony and pain of the African-American people, the endless sufferings and miseries of their lives. She also presents a trenchant critique of the discrimination and societal pressure that girls of the black

community inevitably experience. When Morrison received the Nobel Prize for *Beloved*, she was quoted as saying, “I’m just a girl from Lorain.”² Morrison seems to be deliberately invoking the image of an ordinary black girl whose voice needs to be heard. This sharp awareness of her identity as a black girl is the genesis of her feminist consciousness—something that heavily informs her day to day activities as well as her writings.

Toni Morrison often weaves in the details of her personal life or life as she understands and observes into her art. One can see this as emerging from her conviction that an individual’s experiences and the nation’s history or the personal and the political are inextricably bound. This assumption urges us to look deeply into her life and place a few of her personal experiences against sections in her writings which have strong feminist overtone. She spoke admiringly of her mother who was a member of the local African Methodist Episcopal church. “She sang, my mother, the way other people muse.”³ Morrison was the only African American student in her first grade class along with being the first girl in her entire family to have attended college. Having married Harold Morrison, a Jamaican architect she also underwent a divorce. Morrison and her husband didn’t get along on the ground of her not being subservient enough. These stray, seemingly unrelated details from her life assist us in understanding Morrison and her unconventional views—it is only natural that the writings of such a woman would have strong feminist inclinations.

The Bluest Eye is one of Morrison’s most poignant works that revolves around a young black girl, Pecola Breedlove who craves for blue eyes—it is her unquestioning internalisation of the dominant, white discourse of ‘beauty’ that makes her think that a girl cannot be beautiful unless she has blue eyes. Her strong desire for blue-eyes and the utter impossibility to attain the same rips her apart. Through Pecola and the other female characters

and their tormented, disturbed lives in this novel, Morrison engages in the extremely nebulous issues pertaining to the lives of black women in the United States of America. Morrison wrote in a 2007 foreword to the novel that she wanted to focus on “how something as grotesque as the demonization of an entire race could take root inside the most delicate member of the society: a child; the most vulnerable member: a female.”

Pecola is saddled with the realisation that she is ugly—a belief she was literally born with because her mother, Pauline Breedlove, too saw her child as ugly. When Pecola's friends, Claudia and Frieda very naively think of Pecola's unborn child, they too envision a white complexioned child with blue eyes and red lips because that is the only version of beauty available to them—“the world has agreed that a blue-eyed, yellow haired, pink skinned doll was what every girl child treasured.”⁴ Pecola's obsession with this false notion of beauty goes to such an extreme that she prays to God to “make me [her] disappear”. A superior white male at the store denies looking at her because she belongs to an inferior race and sex. She feels a “total absence of human recognition—the glazed separateness.” She devours sweets with packaging that has pictures of the stereotypical beautiful woman to feed her desire of beauty—“To Pecola they are simply pretty. She eats the candy and it's sweetness is good. To eat the candy is somehow to eat the eyes, eat Mary Jane. Love Mary Jane. Be Mary Jane.”⁵ The blonde, white doll with blue eyes becomes the epitome of beauty and helps reinforce certain standards of beauty.⁶ As black girls, Pecola and even Claudia and Frieda fall short of this standard and begin to see themselves as ugly.

Though Claudia, at least once, does challenge and reject this image of the ‘beautiful girl’ perpetuated by the whites when she tears apart the Mary Jane doll that she has received as a gift from her parents, she too largely subscribes to the white notion of beauty. Both Frieda and Claudia feel insecure and inferior in

the presence of Maureen Peal, a mulatto. The latter too considers herself superior to Pecola, Claudia and Frieda because of her lighter skin complexion. Morrison, thus, ascertains how the black community has been divided internally by a hierarchy premised on skin colour. This division is the offshoot of a certain submission to ideas and assumptions which themselves are products of white hegemony. The insecurity that Claudia and Frieda feel in the presence of Maureen is because they think of her as someone superior—"We were lesser. Nicer, brighter but still lesser. Maureen Peal was not the Enemy and not worthy of such intense hatred. The Thing to fear was the Thing that made her beautiful, and not us."⁷

As Morrison shows us, the women of the black community remained victims of double oppression long after slavery had been abolished. If the skin colour becomes a major issue in the rhetoric of white oppression, gender too is a reason why black women encounter oppression and abuse in different forms. The guilt and shame that haunts Cholly Breedlove, Pecola's father, clearly shows us how—Cholly was once caught in the act of having sex with a black girl by two white men. The men forced him to continue while they watched. At that instant, Cholly hated the girl more than the white men. Scarred beyond repair by this incident, Cholly becomes a volatile person who later rapes his own daughter, Pecola. Women thus become victims of the rage and frustration of the male members of the community who, unable to retaliate against the whites, salvage their male egos by asserting power over the women in their lives. When Pecola's premature baby dies and Claudia and Frieda's marigolds do not bloom, Claudia laments, "Our seeds were not the only ones that did not sprout; nobody's did."⁸ The statement uncannily refers to the status of women in this society where they are cursed with metaphorically, if not physically, barren lives without any hope of achieving a fruition of their powers and abilities. Their limited,

restricted lives are an indication of their lack of autonomy—"Outdoors, we knew, was the real terror of life."⁹ As Claudia reminds us, "being a minority in both caste and class, we moved about away on the hem of life, struggling to consolidate our weakness and hang on, or to creep singly up into major folds of the garment."¹⁰ The life of a woman, thus, is a sustained effort to somehow move on and survive as is exemplified by Pauline, Pecola's mother who tries to raise her two children despite the disruptions caused by her drunkard husband, Cholly.

The way in which Mary Jane dolls projected a certain image of feminine beauty has already been discussed. These dolls also reinstated a certain notion of femininity—"It was very good of Mary's mother to buy her a doll, not that she would have done so had not Mary behaved very well and minded what her parents said to her, for bad children must not expect dolls or pretty toys. Dolls are nice things for little girls." Thus, these dolls become embodiments of demure, submissive, nice girls and subtly convey the message that this is how girls should be. Pecola, on the contrary, is a girl who deviates from these norms in her desire to find out what love is. She is reminded of her incompetency and social handicap throughout—"Pecola on the other hand, restricted by youth and sex, experimented with methods of endurance."¹¹ Unlike her brother, Sammy, who runs away to escape the murk and disturbance of his family, Pecola does not have the complete liberty to call the shots in her life. She can question a few norms and conventions but is unable to break free of them. Thus, gender and race are coupled in the novel and Morrison seems to be suggesting that poverty is a direct consequence of the social and cultural limitations the blacks have to face. Thus the oppression that we see in the novel is three tiered.

The notion of female victimisation reaches its apotheosis when Pecola is raped by her father. It is interesting to note that incest,

as part of the white discourse, has often been associated with the African-American community. Elizabeth Wilson observes that the “official domestic ideology of the white middle class” is that “incest does not take place in the white middle-class family; it is a vice of class and racial others who lack the rationality necessary to control their impulses. Suspicions that others engage in incestuous practices have long been part of the arsenal of moral prejudice that has been used to justify the social and political hegemony of the white middle class”. Rather than dismissing this assumption outright, Morrison delves into the psychology of both the tormentor and the victim to reveal how the white hegemony works in an invisible manner to ruin the lives of the black people. The readers cannot be too harsh in judging Cholly because he too is a victim of circumstances. Soaphead is accused of paedophilia but he too is a hapless victim of white domination—“Here was an ugly little girl asking for beauty. A surge of love and understanding swept through him, but was quickly replaced by anger. Anger that he was powerless to help her.”¹² Pecola’s mother too is instrumental in her oppression because she refuses to believe that her daughter has been molested by her husband—her inability to see things for what they are indicates a general social blindness where people fail to recognise the insidious ways in which oppression and injustice operate. The extreme trauma that Pecola undergoes results in her loss of sanity and she, like many other black girls, simply becomes a scapegoat for the male members of the community.

Morrison uses this novel to engage in a direct indictment of the racial discourse perpetuated by the whites that has caused a permanent damage in the conception of ‘self’ of the black community. The feminist consciousness she imbues the novel with does not emerge from a direct challenge to the patriarchal structures but from the subtle questioning of the same.

Morrison's feminism much like Alice Walker's or Gwendolyn Brooks's is part of her political consciousness—in intertwining race and gender, she establishes the inability of white feminism to address the issues specific and unique to the women of the black community. The image of Pecola talking to her alternate self, the self that has beautiful blue eyes, keeps haunting the readers as the projection of the ruptured psyche of the black community—a community which is torn between self-love and self-loathing.

NOTES

- 1 <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/apr/25/toni-morrison-books-interview-god-help-the-child> Date: 26/02/2018
- 2 Roynon, *The Cambridge Introduction to Toni Morrison*, Cambridge University Press, November 26, 2012, 1.
- 3 Roynon, *The Cambridge Introduction to Toni Morrison*, Cambridge University Press, November 26, 2012, 3.
- 4 Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*, (Vintage Random House: Vintage 1999, 1970), 18
- 5 “The history of little Mary & her doll Jane: a new pleasing & complete nursery alphabet, or learners A.B.C (London: J. Bailey, 1822), 3.
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*, (Vintage Random House: Vintage 1999, 1970), 72
- 8 Ibid, 3
- 9 Ibid, 15
- 10 Ibid, 15
- 11 Ibid, 41
- 12 Ibid, 172