

DECONSTRUCTING RACISM IN TONI MORRISON'S *THE BLUEST EYE*

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ABSTRACT

Toni Morrison's first novel The Bluest Eye came out in 1970. It depicts the relationship between western standards of female beauty and the psychological exploitation and oppression of black women. Her second novel Sula was published in December 1973. Morrison called it a novel about good and evil. The novel was nominated for a National Book Award. It brought Morrison national recognition. Morrison's later novel Song of Solomon appeared in 1977. The novel won the National Book Critics Circle Award. It was cited by the Swedish Academy in awarding Morrison the 1993 Nobel Prize in Literature. Throughout the novel the protagonist struggles with the concepts of individual identity and wrestles with the expectations of the black community. As a writer Morrison possesses a lot of magical power. Her power to inspire us is really amazing. Toni Morrison's rich family heritage was a source of inspiration to her literary and creative world. Her parents were good story tellers who emphasized the value of family, history and vitality of their people's language. All these impression built up her character, mind and flourished her talent.

Key Words: Racism, Black, Patriarchy, Exploitation and Oppression.

Toni Morrison is one of the foremost 20th century African American women novelists. Her literary canon is a testimony to the principles of dialectics: it develops, it is interconnected, it reveals contradictions; and it reflects quantity and quality. Her canon also substantiates the premise that literature is a reflection of the society in which it is produced. Toni Morrison was born as Chole Antony Wafford on February 18, 1931 in Lorain, Ohio. As her family happened to be a black family, it thought of the South not as home but as a region from which they had escaped. Her father had left Georgia because of racist atrocities which haunted him all his life. As a result, he became a racist himself and thought that his race would never improve in America. Her mother being optimistic thought that faith and individual effort could bring a better life. Her maternal grandparents believed that education based on a strong sense of values and personal worth enable us to live a better life.

Toni Morrison has written in the tradition of other black women writers such as Hurston and Paule Marshall. She wants to celebrate the strength of black women against the heavy odds of racism, sexism and classism by developing the necessary political, social and aesthetic consciousness. Morrison wants to bring out

the remaining and useful elements from the past for the survival of black life in the present as well as future. So she says: "I think long and hard about what my novels should do. They should clarify that roles that have become obscure, they ought to identify those things in the past that are not and they ought to give nourishment." (Elaine Showalter 334) Morrison says: "What we [black] have to do is to reintroduce ourselves to ourselves. We have to know that past so that we can use it for now." (*Song of Solomon* 7)

Toni Morrison believes that the African presence in American has contributed to the nation's literature and black literature must be studied to understand the nation's literature and black literature must be studied to understand the nation's literature in its totality. Toni Morrison is electric in her use of sources and influences. Her novels are reflections of her increasing awareness of the nature of the African's dilemma and her increasing commitment to help them solving it. They mainly deal with the theme of survival, the theme of self-discovery and self-definition. Not only this, her works also draws attention on African myths, Western myths, folklore, classic fairy tales, fables, nursery rhymes and popular wisdom. In many respects her novel reproduce the recognizable elements of the

traditional literature: plot, characters, themes, and symbols; eloquently appropriates the language of Standard English. Each of Morrison's novels is a progression and an increasingly bold and original revoicing of previous concerns. She characterizes the demise of the family organized according to patriarchal principles; she exposes the demoralizing and dehumanizing co-modification of romantic love and standards of beauty; she sees capitalism as a corrosive and insidious perverter of human worth; modern technology, sciences and religion become a panacea for spiritual depravity; and reality is propaganda for the bourgeoisie. Morrison says: "A dead language is no longer spoken or written, it is unyielding language content to admire its own paralysis. Like statist language, censored and censoring. Ruthless in its policing duties, it has no desire or purpose other than maintaining the free range of its own narcotic narcissism. However moribund, it is not without effect for it actively thwarts the intellect, stalls consciences, and suppresses human potential. Unreceptive to interrogation, it cannot form or tolerate new ideas, shape other thoughts, tell another story, fill baffling silences." (Quoted in Ayesha Irfan 52)

Thus one of the most critically acclaimed living writers, Morrison has been a major architect in creating a literary language for African Americans. Her use of shifting perspective, fragmentary narrative, and a narrative voice extremely close to the consciousness of her characters reveals the influence of writers like Virginia Woolf and William Faulkner. All her works show the influence of African American folklore, songs, and women's gossip. In her attempts to map these oral art forms onto literary modes of representation, Morrison has created a body of work informed by a distinctly black sensibility while drawing a reading audience from across racial boundaries.

In Toni Morrison's first novel, *The Bluest Eye* (1970), the pivotal idea is the domination of blacks by the existing American standards of beauty; blue eyes, blond hair and white skin. The novel indicates a black girl's quest to attain white standards. Morrison tells the story of a young black girl, Pecola Breedlove who wants to have blue eyes, a symbol of white beauty. Pecola believes that such eyes would make her beautiful, acceptable and admirable. However, her eyes cannot be changed into blue eyes in reality. She wants them so desperately that as a result her quest for blue eyes culminates in madness.

The Bluest Eyes is a female bildungsroman, a novel of growing up. The story depicts the two black families, the MacTeers and the Breedloves, migrants

from the south, living in Lorain, Ohio. But its emphasis is on the children, Claudia, Frieda MacTeer and Pecola Breedlove. Pecola is loved neither by her parents, nor by friends nor by school teachers, and not by any other whites in her society. She witnesses white children being loved both by white and black adults. But she found herself all alone, devoid of everyone's love. Hence she is determined to achieve beauty and acceptance by acquiring blues eyes. Morrison describes the case of her quest for blues eyes as: "Each night, without fail, she prayed for blues eyes. Fervently, for a year she had prayed. Although somewhat discouraged, she was not without hope. To have something as wonderful as that happen would take a longtime." (*The Bluest Eye* 05) Therefore Morrison draws upon the collective black consciousness, so that the text does not become a disclosure on slavery, but an intense felt experience of pain. To acknowledge the past is to remember all its ugliness, pain, grief, nastiness and meaninglessness – a reality where people do not stop playing checkers with the pieces even if the pieces happen to be your children.

Morrison does not explain, does not apologize; the focus of her writing is ruthless and unforgiving. She is the new black woman writers, confident in her blackness, and could not to be silenced no matter what she says, not afraid or ashamed to claim her ancestry or her past. The unspoken must be spoken. Going back into the past, is grounding the blacks firmly in their slave ancestry. Reclaiming the past and re-establishing connection is establishing black presence firmly in American history. For the first time a black woman seizes history and in a powerful voice provides a history for the black people. Morrison does not write to convince the whites that blacks are human. She writes to convince the blacks that they need not be ashamed of their past, it is something that they must remember and exorcize. The blacks must write their own scripts now. Slavery must be acknowledged even if white American history wishes to forget it, it must be acknowledged as a living presence in American history, and it must not be allowed to become a willed absence.

Morrison has used different techniques in each of her novels to give a realistic effect to the picture. The novel *The Bluest Eye* opens with the three versions of the "Dick and Jane" reader, so prevalent in the public schools at the time when the novel was written. Morrison uses this technique to juxtapose the fiction of the white educational process with the realities of life for many black children. The first version is printed with the structure of simple sentence in mind but later on it is repeated without punctuation, and then without spaces

between the words. According to Klotman these three versions are symbolic of the life styles Morrison explores in the novel either directly or by implication: "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 will play a good game. Play, Jane, Play (*The Bluest Eye* 10).

The first paragraph indicates an alien white world, represented by the Fisher family that intrudes in the lives of the black children: "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 will play a good game play Jane play." (*The Bluest Eye* 09) The second paragraph indicates the lifestyle of the two black MacTeer children, Claudia and Frieda, trying desperately to survive the poverty they encounter in Ohio, "Here is the house it is green and white it has a door it is very pretty here is the family mother father dick and jane live in the green-and-white house...play with jane play and play." (*The Bluest Eye* 10) And the third paragraph indicates the lives of the Breed loves and their child Pecola who lives in a deformed word which finally destroys her. Like Pecola her mother enjoys no status and self-worth. Her father, Cholly Breedlove, who was insulted and humiliated by whites; internalizes his oppression developing self-hatred for his black self and repugnance for the black woman before whom he has been emasculated. And as an outburst of his anger Cholly makes his own daughter as his victim of rape.

Claudia and Frieda face the same world that Pecola faces. However, their response is different than that of Pecola. Pecola witnesses the discrepancy between the life of a white girl with blue eyes and life as a black girl without blonde hair and blue eyes. As a result she suffers from self-hatred. Pecola's ultimate fate is to continue living on the fringes of society. Her complete dependency on others for self-identification destroys her. When society decrees her she feels unworthy of affection, encouragement and esteem, Pecola has neither the courage nor the knowledge to argue and so meekly accepts her inferior position. She comes to symbolize, as Claudia puts it, "all of our waste which we dumped on her and which she adsorbed." (*The Bluest Eye* 11) Pecola becomes an emblem of inversion, of waste, of all rubbish that no one really wants. The voice of patriarchy shatters her semi-tranquil mirror, ruins the world of her relationships, and finally produces conditions of isolation, psychic derangement and silence in Pecola's life. Unlike Pecola, Claudia never thinks that Shirley

Temple is squint-eyed, and that the dolls have moronic eyes, pancake faces and orange worms' hair. She destroys them all, their values and everything else that they represented. And in this way she protects herself from the deadly destruction which Pecola could not evade.

Toni Morrison describes *The Bluest Eye* as a novel "about one's dependency on the world for identification, self-value, and feeling of worth."²⁶ The novel is mainly concerned with survival. The MacTeers girls survive and Pecola does not. Claudia is able to survive because the MacTeers have the inner strength to withstand the poverty and discrimination of racist society and to provide an environment in which their children can grow. Pecola's family, on the other hand, is without those resources. Pecola's original desires were not insane until the insanity of society pushed her to self-destruction and naturally in the end she goes mad. Thus by providing two similar black female characters Morrison reveals how white Eurocentric standards play havoc with the life of these girls. In addition to this, she also informs how a critical and conscious black woman can evade the extreme effects of racism and sexism if they trust themselves.

The tension in the novel *The Bluest Eye* double focuses on racial and sexual victimization (i.e. sexual oppression in the black community) leads to an interpretive impasses characteristic of the grotesque mode, especially in the explanation of the novel's central incident, Cholly's rape of his daughter. This scene of rape is significant of physical violence done to the black child by parents who are themselves confused about their identity. Another most discomfoting factor in *The Bluest Eye* is produced by the narrator's comment that Cholly was the only one "who loved Pecola enough to touch her." (*The Bluest Eye* 86) The word touch serves as a curious euphemism for rape.

Cholly's role as a rapist yields primacy to his helplessness as a black man unable to assume a masculine, paternal identity: "Guilt and impotence rose in a bilious duet....What a burned out Black man could say to the hunched black of his eleven year old daughter." (*The Bluest Eye* 87) However, Pecola's paralysis and silence during the rape powerfully convey her absolute helplessness as a victim of sexual abuse. This impossible entanglement of racial and sexual victimization holds us in suspension, prevents us from resolving the ambivalent narrative presentation of the rape scene.

In *The Bluest Eye* each expression of black feminine desire, whether Pecola's longing for blue eyes,

Frieda's love of Shirley Temple, Claudia's hatred of white dolls, Maureen's adoration of Betty Grable, or Pauline's of Jean Harlow, takes the white woman as its object. Even the title of the novel establishes the white woman rather than the black man as the other against which the black woman is judged to be grotesquely lacking. This emphasis, clarifies the complex and simultaneous interaction of racial and gender dynamics in the formation of black feminine subjectivity.

Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* presents neither the relationship between black men and women as "complementary"; nor affirms to the black family and community. It rather conforms to the stereotypes of earlier black fiction. The black community depicted in the novel is totally out of keeping with Black Aesthetic requirements. Entirely estranged from its own cultural heritage, the novel's black community is committed to white middle – class values, and is divided by color – bias and sexism. The novel's presentation of rape, incest, and madness flagrantly flouts the Black Nationalist injunction that black art "must divorce itself from the sociological attempt to explain the black community in terms of pathology." (Michael Awkward 57-58)

According to Dellita Martin, *The Bluest Eye* helped to "propel African American literature towards total liberation from the constraints of the Western aesthetic" (*The Voices of Toni Morrison*, 76) by exposing its damaging psychological and social effects. In her often cited work, *Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation*, Morrison endorses the Black Aesthetic fusion of aesthetics and ethics: "The novel should be beautiful and powerful, but it should also work. It should have something in it that enlightens; something in it that opens the door and points the way." (88) Morrison's conception of her work also confirms the Black Aesthetic belief that art should be political and should address the black community. The most appropriate mode for exploring the contradictory conditions of black feminine subjectivity is the grotesque mode. Grotesque characters, as they are marked by bodily lack or deformation, offer a perfect means of figuring the qualities historically attached to black femininity. Black women characters in *The Bluest Eye* are constructed around bodily lack or deformity, as with Pecola's lack of blue eyes, or Pauline's missing teeth and deformed foot. This representation of black femininity as lack, clarifies the novel's divergence from Black Aesthetic conception of the black subject as a self-present plenitude.

The grotesque mode helps to manage the novel's ideologically risky disclosure of sexual oppression in the black community. By portraying the

"grotesque violence", Morrison explained that she was attempting to show the nature and relationship between parental love and violence. This focus on the compounded effects of racial and gender oppression on the black woman is achieved by means of an over determined narrative structure. Each short narrative foray leads to a single point, suffering of Pecola. Each detail in the novel contributes its own resonance to Pecola's tragedy, at the novel of plot or symbolism. The stories of Cholly's, Pauline's, Geraldine's and Soaphead Church's culminate in their disastrous encounters with Pecola.

Morrison's representation of black feminine identity, in accordance with Black Aesthetic theories of the subject, discloses the destructive power of the white cultural construction of blackness as absence. The novel *The Bluest Eye* clarifies how black femininity is produced and read as a sign of invisibility in the white American symbolic system. It insistently reminds us that the black body is not intrinsically ugly and grotesque. The ugliness of the Breedloves, is bestowed on them by white culture: "It was as though some mysterious, all-knowing master had given each one a cloak of ugliness to wear, and they had accepted it without question." (*The Bluest Eye* 88) The clothing imagery used in this line emphasizes that lack and ugliness are culturally imposed rather than naturally gives attributes of the black body.

This evocation of black femininity is supported by the novel's use of the seasonal cycle as an organizing device. The novel is divided into four sections corresponding to the four seasons. By beginning the novel with late autumn, when Pecola literally falls from society; Morrison informs us that the world of the novel is topsy turvey. In the spring, she is impregnated which symbolizes the beginning, the time of birth and rebirth. During the winter, the time of death and decay, Pecola experiences her darkest season of torture by her schoolmates and abuse by adults. And in the late summer, when life is in full bloom, life in its final moments and marigolds usually flourish, she prematurely gives birth to a dead child. These seasonal divisions aid the reader in understanding the fundamental decadence of life for the African living in the United States. They help Morrison to tell the story of the warped psyche of an adolescent African female living in a racial society. The seasonal frame enacts an opposition between nature and culture. This jarring juxtaposition of nature and human perversion illustrates the novel's presentation of culture as a grotesque distortion of the natural order.

Susan Gubar argues that the novel's selective variation on the Persephone myth discourages a mythical celebration of feminine fertility, "Persephone is reunited with her mother and allowed to return to each other where she renews life. But Pecola is rejected by her mother and remains a victim as well as a symbol of the dying land." (Susan Gubar, 29-30) A mythical conception of fertility is further unsettled by the novel's opening and closing images of natural and feminine sterility: "The seeds shriveled and died; her baby too." (*The Bluest Eye* 109) Thus the novel seems to affirm a mythical vision of nature in its use of a seasonal frame and a cyclic structure. But the inverted echoes of the Persephone myth render ironic mythical conception of femininity as a source of fertility and natural renewal. The novel's inconsistent treatment of nature signals its difficulty in articulating black femininity within or outside of the ideological vision of nature not only because such a vision equates the feminine with procreation, but also because it tends to dehistoricize political oppression. For example Claudia, attempts to direct the course of natural and human events together. She plants marigold seeds, hoping that if they sprout, Pecola's baby will live. The failure of her attempt convinces her that: "The earth itself might have been unyielding. We had dropped our seeds in our own little plot of black dirt just as Pecola's father had dropped his seeds in his plot of black dirt. Our innocence and faith were no more productive than his list or despair." (*The Bluest Eye* 120)

The disturbing comparison of a child planting seeds to a father raping his daughter gives rise to the despairing sense that no human agency has value, that all human acts are equally powerless against the unyielding course of nature. In the last paragraph of the novel, the adult Claudia's pessimist voice, enlarged from "I" to "we," speaks for her entire community: "This soil is bad for certain kinds of flowers, certain fruit it will not bear, and when the land kills of its own volition, we acquiesces and say the victim had no right to live. We were wrong, of course, but it doesn't matter. It's too late." (*The Bluest Eye* 125) In this passage, the black community's mythical perception of nature leads to a dangerous fatalism. In viewing Pecola's victimization as an irreversible fact of nature, the black community is able to find an excuse for inaction, and to absolve itself of all responsibility for Pecola's tragedy.

Despite Toni Morrison's avowed rejection of black feminism, *The Bluest Eye* evokes the black feminist vision of community that was developed in the 1970's, a community galvanized by differences and contradictions. Morrison thinks that the Africans must be united for their survival. She wants to convey the truth that the Africans all over the world are the same, so they should look at themselves as one people who cannot be divided by their class status. Solidarity is her theme of the novel. Toni Morrison thus emphasizes that only the collective struggle can stop oppression. Therefore the community should support the individual in a society where survival of women is so hard.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

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