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EXPLORING THE BLACK FEMALE PSYCHE IN TONI MORRISON'S
THE BLUEST EYE

SATENDER KUMAR

Research Scholar, Jai Narain Vyas University, Jodhpur, Rajasthan

Email: satya197902@yahoo.com



ABSTRACT

Black women suffered from multiple oppressions by being Black and woman at the same time. As a result of this marginalization, the theory of Black feminism was emerged. The concept of Black feminism was oppositional to both patriarchy as well as white feminism. Black feminism delineates the multiple oppressions experienced by black women, and reflects their everyday experiences. This paper is concerned with the exploration of black women's marginalization and oppression in *The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison. It examines role of their cultural heritage in black women's suffering through racism, and sexism in the American society. *The Bluest Eye* is studied as the basis for this analysis, because it depicts the oppression towards the black people in different forms, especially on women's marginalized life.

Key words: Oppression; Racism; Culture; Marginalization

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Toni Morrison is not only a leading African American woman novelist, but also one of the most significant and relevant writers on the literary scene today. Her genius was evident from publication of her very first novel, *The Bluest Eye* (1970). She has been recognized for her great as a voice of black people and as a great master craft person of dominant literature. For her, writing is a liberating tool, a revolutionary strategy and an artistic mode for self-expression. Morrison seeks to produce literature especially of black and explores the distortion of reality by dominant group for their vested interests. Exploring the complexity of black female experiences in black and white society, she is concerned with the idea of 'a black community' – how it was, how it has changed and how it should be maintained.

Toni Morrison can easily be read as a black feminist author. She was influenced by the ideologies of women's liberation movements. When the problems of black women were not addressed by the white feminists as well as by Black arts movement and the civil rights movements, Black feminism emerged which emphasizes the need to include the racial and cultural differences within feminist arguments. The black feminism had questioned the patriarchal ideologies of black movement and the racism in the feminist movement. So, the core of study is the question 'How alienation from own culture and assessment of self from 'the Look' imposed by white society effects the self image of the black community, women and a black child in particular.

Pecola Breedlove, main victim of *The Bluest Eye* (1970) describes the story of a young black girl who wants to be accepted by black and white society. Pecola's yearning for the blue eyes is an external manifestation of the eternal need to be loved and accepted by the society. But she is not aware that she is not built in that way, as Raymond Headin opines that "Pecola Breedlove is a young black girl driven literally... by the pressure toward absolute physical beauty in a culture whose white standards of beauty...are impossible for her to meet, though no less alluring and demanding. Surrounded by cultural messages that she is ugly by definition, she can achieve peace only by retreating into schizophrenia" (49).

Pecola Breedlove's negative conception of self as ugly derives her to the peripheral existence in the society in which she survives, 'Being a minority in both caste and class, we [Breedlove family] moved away about any way on the hem of life, struggling to consolidate our weakness and hand on, or creep singly up into the major fold of the garment' (Morrison, 11). This negative conception about herself is rooted in her emotional, verbal and physical humiliation by her family and the society. Pecola seeks her identity with a pair of blue eyes. The myth of physical beauty leads her to hate herself and exposes her to the abuse not only from the family but also from the black community.

She is harassed by her schoolmate for being black and ugly. "She [Pecola] also knew that when one of the girls at school wanted to be particularly insulting to a boy, or wanted to get immediate response from a boy, she could say 'Bobby loves Pecola Breedlove'" (Morrison, 162). She was not harassed by white kids only but by their own race also. They pass verbal assault by calling her 'black e mo' (Morrison, 120). This self critical attitude of the black towards the black is not developed all of sudden. It is gradually cultivated over years. The reason for this tendency of black people to harass black people is, perhaps, self hatred induced by white hegemony. White standard has corrupted the mind of the black people in such a way that black people have developed self hatred. Thus the hatred of the black boys for the black girls is the self hatred induced by the racism. The strong belief that blacks are not valuable or important or beautiful having is a deeply felt conviction in the mind of black people in such a way that black people have developed self hatred:

"It was as though some mysterious all-knowing master has given each one a cloak of ugliness to wear, and they had each accepted it 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 move, every glance" (Morrison, 28).

The self esteem of Pecola is shattered when her existence is denied at Mr. Yacobowski's shop as "She looks up at him and sees the vacuum where curiosity ought to lodge. And something more. The total absence of human recognition, the glazed separateness" (Morrison, 36). Pecola's non reorganization as a human being at Mr. Yacobowski's shop reinforces her own negative self perception. For her these encounters grow very painful and frightening. The most horrible rejection occurs when a young boy named Loius Junior plays a cruel hoax on her. Louis invites her to his mother's house to show her some kittens. Instead of showing her, he throws his mother's cat at her. The frightened cat scratches and bruises her face. After that he throws the cat flying into the radiator and blames Pecola for killing it. Geraldine, Louis's mother infuriated not as much as by the death of the cat, as by the presence of the black girl in her home, lashes out at Pecola in words that cut deeper than the cat's claws, "Get out you nasty little black bitch Get out of my house" (Morrison, 72). What is here is the mimicking of white values and attitude by the black woman itself.

In the process of imitating the ways of the white women, Pauline, Pecola's mother, becomes a victim of white hegemony and neglects Pecola. She at the birth of Pecola, declares that she is an ugly child. Pauline showers her love and affection on her white employer's child whereas she scolds and "with the back of her hand knocked her to the floor. Pecola slid in the pie juice, one leg folding under her. Mrs. Breedlove yanked her up by arm, slapped her again, and in a voice thin with anger, abused Pecola directly and Frieda and [Claudia] by implication" (Morrison, 109). J. Brooks Bouson explains, "While Pauline dotes on the little white Fisher girl, she neglects and physically abuses Pecola, transferring to her daughter her deep-rooted contempt for her own blackness" (34). This behavior of Pecola's mother becomes an act of resistance to the oppressive society thereby redirecting her powerlessness to redefine herself as dominant woman. Pauline hates the

ugliness of her house, her daughter and herself. She becomes an ideal servant because that role fulfills all her requirements. She loves her employer's house, Fisher, with her own, and neglects her house, her children, and her man. For her, life at Fishers is light, delicate, and lovely. She has found beauty, order, cleanliness and praise at Fisher's residence. Power, praise and luxury are hers in this house. Pauline keeps in order for herself, and does not impose it on her children. In this case one can see that Pauline attempts to alienate herself her own community. She is a black woman who is struggling against social and economic hostilities stacked against her. But in spite of the limitations set by her family, society and race, she endeavors to live by the female American standards. Pauline learns not only what physical beauty is but also the significance of that beauty.

Pecola's development is effected by her parent's relationship and she becomes "a total and complete victim [...] not only of racial shaming but also of her crippled and crippling family" (Bouson, 25). She yearns for love from her parents. But her parents are unable to provide the same as they themselves are spiritually depraved because of the social order of which they are a part. Thus, Pecola and her parents' spiritual deprivation and search for identity are the search of a race under subjugation due to many years of misery and neglect and lack of means to come up. They resign themselves to their fate. She experiences the suffering at the hand of these negligent parents. They fail to provide identity and security which has been denied to them too in American social conditions. The emptiness of their life and its negativity destroy their self image and creates self hatred. Thus the hatred of the Breedlove family members for one another is the result of internalization of racist hatred. The ultimate act of brutalization and betrayal of Pecola comes when her own father, Cholly seduces her and makes her pregnant.

The love of one's black image is one of the essential ways to preserve black women's identities. It is dangerous to encourage racial solidarity by denying one's individuality. Morrison points out in one of her articles "Behind the Making of The Black Book" as "when the strength of a race depends on its beauty, when the focus is turned to how one looks as opposed to what one is, we are in trouble" (Morrison, 89). For Morrison, to consider "[the] concept of physical beauty as a virtue is one of the dumbest, most pernicious and destructive ideas of the western world and we should have nothing to do with it" (Morrison, 89). Like Pecola, Claudia also suffers from the oppressions of racism, sexism and classism, typically the white beauty standards and material insecurity, but she loves her black image and her own culture, which makes all the difference for her. She feels comfortable in her skin, enjoys the news that the senses released to her, admires her dirt, and cultivates her scars. She puts high premium on blackness. In her eyes, to black is to be beautiful. That's why she strongly believes that Pecola's black baby must be beautiful. As bell hook claimed that "As subjects, people have the right to define their own reality, establish their own identities, name their history" (bell, 42). Claudia is one of such subjects whom Morrison makes efforts to celebrate. She refuses to be controlled by the dominant culture and relentlessly rejects a white baby doll, although "adults, older girls, shops, magazines, newspapers, window signs--- all the world had agreed that a blue-eyed, yellow-haired, pink skinned doll was what every girl child treasured" (Morrison, 20). She questions the basis for white cultural domination and its manipulating power over black. In order to investigate what makes the doll "lovable" and black girls such as Pecola and herself unlovable, to "see of what it was made, to discover the dearness, to find the beauty" (Morrison, 20), Claudia dismembers a white baby doll given by her parents as a Christmas present. She just wants to "examine it to see what it was that the entire world said was lovable" (Morrison, 21).

Instinctively Claudia understands that there is an enormous invisible white cultural force that diminishes black presence and insists that "Maureen Peal was not the Enemy and not worthy of such intense hatred. The Thing to fear was the Thing that made her beautiful" (Morrison, 74). She alone realizes that the events which occurred in her community are part of a larger social structure of violence. While not negating her own personal responsibility, Claudia blames "the earth, the land...the entire country" (Morrison, 160). When she learns that Pecola is pregnant, she challenges this invisible power, wishing well for Pecola and her unborn baby as "More strongly than my fondness for Pecola, I felt a need for someone to want the black baby to live just to counteract the universal love of white baby doll, Shirley Temples, and Maureen Peals"(Morrison,149).

She also plants marigold seeds, praying that the health of seeds will assure the health of the baby, which for her represents the collective survival of her race. Yet the seeds die, and so does Pecola's baby. Claudia feels responsible for the death and regrets not having planted the seeds deeply enough in the earth, but later she realizes that "the earth itself might have been unyielding" (Morrison, 7) and "the land of the entire country was hostile to marigold that year. This soil is bad for certain kinds of flowers. Certain seeds it will not nurture certain fruit it will not bear" (Morrison, 206). She is able to articulate the cause which leads inevitably to Pecola's madness society's destructive victimization of a defenseless little girl. Although it is too late for Pecola, who never planted anything in the unyielding earth, it is not too late for Claudia, who continues to grow through her assessments, questions, actions and choices.

As an important unit of the society, family provides safety and peace for people particularly for the children. It is MacTeers family whose love protects their daughters Claudia and Frieda from going insane. They represent the mainstream black family in Lorain, Ohio. The mother stays at home and takes care of the children; the father is breadwinner and protector. Even while the parents seem to be quite troubled by poverty, they retain their duty to their home. Unlike Pecola who has a quarrelsome and violent family, Claudia has a loving and stable family, which safeguards her moral growth. Contrasted with Pecola's distant and indifferent mother Pauline, Mrs. MacTeer is the one who exhibits the traditional values of black woman. She takes care of her families, loves her husband, children and the family, and is not preoccupied with physical standards of beauty as a measurement of self worth. Mrs. MacTeer is subjected to the same victimization as Pauline Breedlove and Geraldine because she is black. Her life could be viewed as dull and uneventful, but she never takes refuge in the cinema like Pauline. Resisting the temptation to retreat into the movie theaters, she survives with a sense of self and culture that stands in striking oppositions to the black community. Unlike Pauline and Geraldine, Mrs. MacTeer rises above the conditions of herself in order to fulfill her duty as a loving mother. Her songs and soliloquies equip her daughter with self esteem and pride in their black identity and culture. Jill Matus states, "Claudia's mother may be tough and often angry, but she nevertheless communicate a fierce and protective love" (38). Bouson asserts, "Although Claudia is subjected to maternal shaming [...] she still feels in a deep-rooted way that she loved and secure" (33). Claudia once recalls her mother's care and love during her illness as,

"Love, thick and dark Alaga syrup, eased up into that cracked window. I could smell t-taste it-sweet, musty, with an edge of wintergreen in its base-everywhere in that house. It stuck, along with my tongue, to the frosted windowpanes. It coated my chest, along with the salve, and when the flannel cane undone in my sleep, the clear, sharp curves of air outlined its presence on my throat. And in the night, when my coughing was dry and tough, feet padded into the room, hands repined the flannel, readjusted the quilt, and rested a moment on my forehead. So when I think of autumn, I think of somebody with hands who does not want me to die" (Morrison, 12).

The issue of sexual harassment looms both the MacTeer and the Breedlove family. When the MacTeers came to know about the rumor of sexual harassment of Frieda by Mr. Henry, they violently attacked Mr. Henry. Her sister narrates the reaction of her parent to the incident, "When daddy saw him come up on the porch, he threw our old tricycle at his head and knocked him off of the porch. [...] Daddy shot at him and Mr. Henry jumped out of his shoes [...] momma hit him with the broom told him to keep the Lords name out of his mouth" (Morrison, 100). Contrary to Claudia's responsible and caring mother, Mrs. Breedlove is "neglected her house, her children, her man – they were like afterthoughts one has just before sleep, the early morning and the late evening edge of her day" (Morrison, 127). After raped by her father, Pecola approached her mother to complain about her father's molestation, "[s]he [Pauline] didn't even believe me when I told her" (Morrison, 200). Whereas Mrs. MacTeer prepares her children about their femininity, enriches them with their innate positive black heritage, which gradually inculcates self-esteem and self reverence in the MacTeer children.

Culture performed a pivotal role in the survival of black women in racist and sexist society. Morrison proclaims that the purpose of writing *The Bluest Eye* is to show "how to survive whole in a world where we are all of us, in some measure, victims of something" (Jane Bakerman, 60). Besides three whores and the

MacTeers, black women of Aunt Jimmy's community are those people who do not follow the standard of white aesthetics and retain their identities by transmitting the traditional values of black culture, consciously or unconsciously. The first black cultural tradition those black women transmit is the community commitment. Because of their cultural heritage black women endured the multiple oppression during slavery and afterward. MacTeer family is not obsessed with the need to be beautiful, wealthy, or white; they concentrate their efforts on family community. Besides bearing multiple oppressions, they care if someone is "put out" or "put outdoors", for "there is difference between being put out and being put outdoors. If you are put out, you go somewhere else; if you are outdoors, there is no place to go. The distinction was subtle but final. Outdoors was the end of something, an irrevocable, physical fact, defining and complementing our metaphysical condition" (Morrison, 17).

When Pecola's father burns down the house, putting the family "outdoors", Mrs. MacTeer takes the homeless Pecola. Her teachings about sexuality are clear in her response to the assumption that the girls have been playing nasty. She tenderly guides Pecola into the bathroom for care at the onset of her menstrual cycle. Obviously the MacTeers do not have the time, energy and money to adopt all the Pecolas in the world. But even when the poverty has deprived them of much happiness, it is really a miracle that they still share the responsibilities of their community.

The most significant cluster of women who sincerely transmit the black cultural values, are those who come together at the time of Aunt Jimmy's death. Being keepers of tradition, they survive the multiple oppressions. Upon hearing about Aunt Jimmy's illness, they come to see her. "Some made camomile tea; others rubbed her with liniment" (Morrison, 136). When they hear the remedy is to "drink pot liquor and nothing else" (Morrison, 137), the women "brought bowls of pot liquor from black eyed peas, from mustards, from cabbage, from kale, from collards, from turnips, from beets, from green beans. When Aunt Jimmy dies, they unite to oversee and conduct the appropriate ritual of departure for one of their members. They "cleaned the house, aired everything out, notified everybody, and stitched together what looked like a white wedding dress for Aunt Jinuny, a maiden lady, to wear when she met Jesus"(Morrison, 140). Those women represent the ideal neighbourhood. They come at the moment when they should arrive.

The second black cultural tradition is their black music, which helps black women to face multiple adversities. The black music has healing qualities as Mahalia Jackson opines that "There's something about music that is so penetrating that your soul gets the message. No matter what trouble comes to a person, music can help him face it" (Mahalia, 454). Music has occupied a special place in black women's expression of their self-definitions. Through the music, Morrison lets the marginalized group utter their voices. When the poverty and oppression silence many people, MacTeer still remembers the healing and restorative black songs. Claudia recalls when her mother "sings about hard times, bad times" (Morrison, 25). Her mother's music is so sweet that Claudia finds herself with a conviction that "pain was not only endurable, it was sweet" (Morrison, 26). Even the prostitute Poland in her sweet strawberry voice expresses her desire to be recognized.

Thus, in her first novel, Morrison explores the consequences of isolation from her own culture and judge herself from the standards of beauty set by a dominating culture. Pecola and Pauline are the victims of both the sexist and racist oppression of an American standard of female beauty. The agent of their oppression is not just men either black or white but the entire culture which perpetuate the standard in every channel available to them. Then the solution Morrison suggests is not political feminism that alienates black women from black men but a more self-conscious appreciation of their own culture and to love their black heritage by everyone in the society.

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