

A FEMINIST STUDY OF TONI MORRISON'S *THE BLUEST EYE*

K. Valarmathi, M.A., M.Phil., B.Ed.
Ph.D Research Scholar, Dept. of English,
Government Arts College, Coimbatore

Dr. Prof. M. Muthukumar, M.A., M.Phil., Ph.D., P.G.D.C.A.
Professor, Department of English
Government Arts College, Coimbatore

ABSTRACT

Toni Morrison a famous African American woman writer, portrays the plight of black women in her works. The status of African American women was pathetic, and also oppressed by the patriarchal society. In the contemporary world still they are not able to come up with their own identity, because of the male and whites domination. The African American woman themselves were enmeshed by desires and despairs, loves and hates, marital discord and male chauvinism. 'The Bluest Eye' deals with the issues of racism and sexism, and impact on the young black girls growing up in poor Ohio. Morrison's chief thematic concern is with woman's struggle in the African American society and also believes that it is important for the people in black culture to know their values and get identity by themselves in the society.

INTRODUCTION

Toni Morrison is the first African American novelist to win the Nobel Prize for literature in 1993 for her novel *The Bluest Eye*. She has written ten novels and the best known novels are, '*The Bluest Eye*' (1970), '*Sula*' (1974), '*Song Of Solomon*' (1977), and '*Beloved*' (1987). She received her Baptismal name 'Anthony' which later became the basis for her nick name 'Toni'. She did her post-graduation in English from Cornell University in 1955, and there she wrote a thesis on suicide from the works of William Faulkner and Virginia Woolf. She began to write her fiction as a part of an informal group, but, this leads her to have a discussion with other writers at Howard, who met her to discuss their work. She also wrote for children's literature as well. As these types of feministic writers emerge, some critics began to research those novels in terms of feminism.

Feminism is a movement and it deals with philosophies against patriarchal ideologies. This movement was initiated in 1960 by a politically committed woman. Betty Friedan, the author of *Feminist*

Mystique. It helped women to voice their grievance and fight for their rights. The early feminists were not much on literature and literary criticism but they tried to emerge themselves in the society. The thirst for women's identity is a typical motif of feminist literature; so, the feminist critics exposed their feelings against socio-political or socio-economic subjugation of women. As Linda Gordon points, "Feminism is an analysis of women's subordination for the purpose of how to change it" (qtd. Singh. Suhila 1991:8) therefore, the writers contributed their works and exposed female sufferings in their work.

Toni Morrison, in her novel *The Bluest Eye*, has presented the story of Pecola Breedlove who internalized white standard of beauty to such an extent, that she became crazy about her wish to have blue eyes. Even today, people think that white is the standard of beauty and so they long for it. The African American black people influenced by this white beauty and try to escape from the ugliness in their own society or race or colour. Morrison clearly depicts the suffering of the nineteenth century classical racism in the United States and also brings out the identity of the female character through racism and sexism. The black female identity is inseparably linked with racism, sexism, and class oppression. Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* not only reflects the issues of race, class and gender, but also presents her cultural concern in American society.

Pecola in *The Bluest Eye* had a pressure on the dominant cultural society. She had been fascinated for a pair of Blue eyes, which was the symbol of beauty and essentially different from that of the traditional black beauty. Within her community Pecola dreamt about her future, and she had a little regard for the past, and gave less importance for the present. She did not take up either the role as a mother or that of a wife, but her inner fantasy world pushed her to build a castle in the air which leads her into the self-destruction. By presenting Pecola as a pasty, Morrison directly accused the whole society, and brought out consciousness among the African American people in the U.S.A. Pecola, being powerless, was unable to accept the values exposed around her and finally descended into insanity. Even Claudia, who saw Pecola in the garbage moving unconsciously, stirred everyone, the city, the town, the whole country, and community for the condition of the Pecola. In the second chapter, Claudia narrates: "Quiet as it's kept there were no marigolds in the fall of 1941. We thought, at the time, that it was because Pecola was having her father's baby that the marigolds did not grow: nobody's did ... It never occurred to either of us that the earth itself might have been unyielding" (5-6). Through these words, we can understand that the chapter sets the stage for the story of Pecola's abjection, as well as the abjection of blackness in general.

The novel emphasizes the ideal of whiteness that is, when these girls Pecola, Claudia, and Frieda grow up with through constant allusion to William Elson and William Gray's "Dick and Janes"(19) stories,

as well as “Shirley Temple” (3), ridicule their adoration, but recognize in retrospect that “I had not yet arrived at the turning point in the developing of my psyche which would allow me to love her”(19). The above suggestion makes that the domination of the white ideal denies the possibility of finding beauty in blackness, and it can be viewed as a literary equivalent of Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks*, in which he gives a psychoanalytic account of inferior complex suffered by the colonized societies. Here Morrison and Fanon both deal with the desire to become beauty in the oppressed country. This oppressive situation has been characterized by Oliver as “colonization of psychic space” (13) through which some bodies are valued and others are devalued or abject. The devaluation or the standard of blackness, is already viewed from the black girls Shirley Temple’s fashion but the narrative technique connect to the desire for the stereotypical life style in the society.

The standard of white beauty destroyed Pauline Breedlove more than her daughter. Pauline, who liked to spend her time in the Fisher house, made herself to fascinate her and longed for such stereotype life. Pauline felt uncomfortable after her marriage because of different attitudes in fascinating the American culture; her marital life grew shaky and gloomy. For example, when she met a few black women, they “were amused by her because she did not straighten her hair, when she tried to makeup her face as they did, it came off rather badly” (116).

This type of glance and gossiping made Pauline to develop her desire for Western Culture. When she asked Cholly, he began to quarrel which led their marriage life to shred with tears and quarrels. As money was their problem Pauline decided to go to work and spend lavishly, “if one of her friends cut her short on the telephone she’d go to crying, she should of being of glad she had a telephone” (117). In this way she enjoyed and fulfilled her wishes and helped Cholly with money to drink. Morrison brings out the pressure created by the white-defined values which reflects in the African American culture. In an interview in 1978, Morrison explains that Cholly “might love [Pecola] in the worst of all positive ways because he can’t do this and he can’t do that. He can’t do it normally, healthily and so it might end up in [the rape]” (Jane Beckerman’s Interview 38).

Through the character of Pecola, Morrison warns the black female artist of the obscurity and madness that will befall her if she internalizes the racism that is infecting her surroundings, while through the character of Claudia, Morrison demonstrates the actions the black female artist must take, so she can construct an environment in which she can create. . . . Although Pecola’s rape is linked to her parents’ departure from the South, Morrison harshly indicts the larger white society and the immediate family and neighbors that have let Pecola slip self-protectively into madness, for it is in Pecola’s destruction that

historical and personal loss come together. Unlike her father, Pecola has never had any contact with an older, healing ancestor. Even though Cholly is deserted by both his mother and father, he is taken in by his Aunt Jimmy and surrounded by a nurturing community of old black women. As a child, listening to their chatter, “the lullaby of grief enveloped him, rocked him, and at last numbed him” (139); and yet while grief and its melodies soothe him at first, Cholly’s failure as a man is that grief ultimately made him devoid of feeling. . . . Morrison says that “the most masculine act of aggression becomes feminized in my language, ‘passive,’ and I think more accurately repellent when deprived of the male glamour of shame, rape is (or once was) routinely given” (Afterword 215).

Next Pecola seems to float as she cannot find a place to settle in her own community. Here she forms an unstable core, and longs to enter it, when MacTeer informed her children about Pecola’s stay with them for a few weeks, she is simply told as ‘case’ was coming, “outdoors” (17). It shows the fear of the community, which relates Pecola to outdoors and never be able to integrate within her clan. When Pauline Breedlove is so enchanted by the beauty, cleanliness, and order that followed in the Fisher home where she works, makes her to feel more comfortable than her own home that she “kept his order, this beauty for herself, a private world” (100-101). She feels that Fisher house is the secured place and she denied her own home. She does not realize that the Fisher house is a prison when Fisher themselves say of Pauline, “never let her go” (101). When Pecola goes to Fisher house to see her mother and help her, she drops blueberry on the floor, her mother curse her but on the other hand comforts Fisher’s daughter, by yelling “pickup that wash and get on out of here”(87). So, Pecola has thrown out here for the second time, not only the mother but also the community as whole.

In this outdoor and rejected state, Pecola likes to have pair of blue eyes which, she feels, will give her guarantee and comfort, instead, she undergoes her own father’s delirium, induced rape. She has a harrowing experience that is “a wild and forbidden thing” (128). The male violent aspect is isolated here. The character Geraldine is more affectionate towards her cat than for her son, and the three prostitutes use sex to profit and humiliate men, but no one loves Pecola and her black baby. Hence, the male dominated social system is exposed through this violent, to which Pecola is victimized, separated or colonized by her own community. It is similar to Chinua Achebe’s “Things Fall Apart” where Okonko was not supported by his own community.

Though the novel has been divided into seasons, it suggests maturation, which clearly shows the growth and changes of the feminine qualities. Claudia’s maturation stage has been contrasted with Pecola’s. Claudia provides her with knowledge of the larger world which includes pain, rejection, and guilt. Claudia’s

childlike voice is interspersed with the knowing adult voice who can look back on the events of her life and begin to interpret them. As she hears her mother sing of those bad times she's endured, Claudia realizes that "misery colored by the greens and blues in my mother's voice took all of the grief out of the words and left me with a conviction that pain was not only endurable, it was sweet" (26). The ability of her mother to sing of pain, to tell her stories through song, makes Claudia long for hard times without "a thin di-i-ime to my name" (25), as she looks forward "to the delicious time when 'my man' (79) would leave me, when I would 'hate to see that evening sun go down . . . 'cause then I would know 'my man has left this town'" (26).

Through her song, Claudia's mother communicates to her daughter the beauty of the African American folk tradition of storytelling. By listening and then speaking, Claudia becomes a modern-day griot who affirms, as she participates in storytelling, the culture that the white society would like to destroy. Her positive self-identity is nurtured by her continuing relation to a maternal oral tradition. In addition, by telling her story in language that sings of an eerie beauty in the midst of pain, Claudia confirms that loss has its own melodic, harmonic rhythms that can only be unearthed through the speaker's desire to link her experience with words. Claudia not only rejects white female beauty, but she declares that she will create a life that is different from what the women in the song experience. Through her experience, she has learnt to accept responsibilities; but in the case of Pecola's life, each stage pushes her to the margin of the society.

Morrison reconstructs the black images through her writing and illustrates the richness of black culture. As Barbara Smith says that Morrison includes, "the traditional Black female activities of root working, herbal medicine, conjure, and midwifery into the fabric of (her) stories" (174). Her writing states how black people are denied from the equality and treated as animals in their own society. She feels that the black had received only a little in the literary field and finds a vacuum in American literary discourse. As McKay says, "Black have a story, and that story has to be heard" (152). Therefore, Morrison places the narrative techniques of stories which are abundant in information about black culture, and tries to fill the gap that has developed between those who have profited educationally and economically through her feministic writings. The voice of the oppressed black females in the African American society is silenced; therefore *The Bluest Eye* articulates the victim's voices.

CONCLUSION

The feminist analysis of *The Bluest Eye* attempts a reading that views the texts as an ethnic, cultural and political response to the racist, sexist patriarchal and capitalist oppression and domination of the blacks.

Her responsibility as a black artist is to cultivate black cultural consciousness, to enlighten and strengthen the values of black cultural heritage. *The Bluest Eye* makes a scathing attack on the imposition of white standards of beauty on black women and presents a critic of dominant aesthetic that is internalized by majority of black community which exercises a hegemonic control over the lives of black Americans.

Toni Morrison represents Pecola, who feels that blackness has condemned her to ugliness and neglected the Western standards of beauty under racial pressure of the dominant culture. The feminist perspective on incestuous violence against Pecola, reveals that as no other expression of male superiority is within the reach of Cholly and possessing his own daughter which makes her life to become a wasteland. Pauline's rejection of Pecola becomes the cause of her, self-deception and doom. Pauline embraces the trapping of African American Christianity, she clings to Western notion, which glorifies the future and undervalues the past and belittles the present. The social forces which ruined Pecola are still rampant in the country. African American has no resources with which to fight the standards presented to them by white culture that scorn them. Even though *The Bluest Eye* set in 1940s, Morrison integrates thesis pressure that blacks feel to love up to the white society's standards of beauty with racism. She barrows down her audience to women and say that there were no books on her and did not exist in all literature, but she writes to fill in the gap. So the novel not only protests against colonization and racial discrimination but also reveals women's struggle to strive and thrive.

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