



TONI MORRISON'S *THE BLUEST EYE*: A POSTMODERN RENDERING

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ABSTRACT

Toni Morrison, a prolific American writer has written on the pathetic condition of the suppressed and downtrodden with zest and zeal to highlight the western ideological apparatuses through which the African and other colonized countries are represented. *The Bluest Eye* is Morrison's first novel published in 1970. In this novel, she questions the western standard of beauty, revealed through the postmodern perspective that it's socially constructed and how this strategic subversion has created a 'myth of white is right'. Morrison wants to persuade the African-Americans from recognizing themselves through the western camera obscura. Instead, she wants to subvert that tendency and boosts them to value and celebrate the blackness. Blackness is pride not a curse, as she demonstrates how the black women characters suffer through the biased representation. Morrison manifests that the white voice is inappropriate to dictate the contours of African-American life. In this novel, the novelist not only focuses on the pride of blackness but also reveals that how the white ideology impacts the black community. This paper seeks to trace how a good piece of work in literature like Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* has dispelled the ideological fogs and how she attacks and problematizes the concept of 'beauty'. This paper will also explore the main characters' response to the western standard of beauty.

Key Words: Postmodern, Ideology, Blackness, Camera obscura, Colonized, Hegemony.

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The Bluest Eye is a novel of revelation through which Morrison wants to revivify the African-American identity and tried to dismantle the draconian parameters of western ideological apparatuses. Morrison like other black writers has portrayed a world in which the blacks have been shown as accepting and rejecting the western dominating culture. This identification and rejection has an impact on the psychology of the black Americans. She formulates her concept by revealing the inner turmoil of the black selves and distinct features of the Breedlove family which make it unfit in the white aesthetics and finally led the family to destruction. Morrison as a black writer has aptly represented the ambivalent attitude of the black American, being inculcated by rhetorical discourse of the white authorities:

Black writers have time and again dealt with the crucial question of the interaction of the black self with society. The black self, it is generally seen, suffers from conflicting pulls in its desire to conform to mainstream codes and at the same time to reject them. The black American... confront images, both positive and negative, which sift through his/her mind; some images are retained and make a lasting impression while others are discarded (Kottiswari53).

Toni Morrison in the epigraph of her novel (*Beloved*) propagates the postmodernist stance by recovering the emotional lives of those who were unrecognized. She gives importance to those who were marginalized and being unheard in the history. In her novels, the myth of morality, beauty, superiority and linearity are portrayed to dismantle those constructions which validate the presence of western ideological practices. Through the 'peripheral margins', she has deconstructed the notion of slavery, patriarchy, racism and western canon by which the right and wrong, ugly and beautiful get the license of validation. Toni Morrison has rightly emphasized the nature of mentality being infused in the minds of African-American selves.

The Postmodern writers make the reader aware about the different aspect of reality as well as the possible oppression through the ideological apparatuses. The work of art not only brings forth the depressed and subconscious arena of a particular epoch or time but also reiterates the ideological coloration of dominant and of those who get dominated. Jean Howard has rightly said:

In fact, I would argue that [...] attempting to talk about the ideological function of literature in a specific period can most usefully do so only by seeing a specific work relationally- that is, by seeing how its representations stand in regard to those of other specific works and discourses(30).

A Postmodern writer does not write about specific object through a specific stand point but through admixture of different tropes and create a trifling confusion in a text for the reader to discover different and innovative realms of reality. In Postmodern era the fictional and non-fictional texts are considered having equal importance and validity. "There are two countries" Rushdie reiterates that "real and fictional, occupying the same space, or almost the same space. My story, my fictional country exists, like myself, at a slight angle to reality" (*Shame*24).

The Bluest Eye is a masterpiece in its portrayal of the black girl striving to achieve the unachievable standard of beauty and trying to be with the mainstream culture in which she gets isolated and discriminated. Morrison has vividly justified the white ideological oppression and how Pecola internalizes and manipulates it. The novel has the vigor of relating the incidents precisely to draw analogy between the ambivalent aspects of black temperament. Pecola gets ignored by the white folk which is quite fathomable, but the anger and dislike shown to her by her mother (and a sweet attitude towards the white child) is puzzling and problematic. Morrison through a post-modernistic stance problematizes the concept of black identity through the ambivalent attitude of Breedlove family. Mrs. Breedlove finds a reflection of her own in Pecola which is "ugly" not only for others but for her also. She dislikes the ugliness and in turn herself becomes the victim of it by putting the standard of "white is right".

The Postmodern capitalist tactics have been the moving force for the promoter and propagator of western ideology for their hegemonic desires. Claudia unlike Pecola hates the white doll which makes her indifferent towards the social norms of beauty. "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. ...this is beautiful, and if you are on this day 'worthy' you may have it" (*Bluest Eye*20). Claudia's recalcitrance towards the social trademark of beauty like advertisements, kids gadgets, toys, beauty products etc. instigate a desire in her to know the 'thing' putted in the doll that makes it beautiful. She examined it by tearing it apart "to see what it was that all the world said was lovable" (21). She asks a very apt and clear question by asserting that the real need and quest of a black child is not a white doll and "didn't want to possess anything". The black child also beseeches for love and care that a white child wants on her special day. Claudia's attitude reflects the agony and apathy of black child whom everyone wants to behave and act on the dictated terms. That's why Claudia "destroys the white baby dolls" (22). She tries to investigate the cause and effect relation of the socially constructed idealization of beauty, which is quite difficult for her to decipher: "I

had only one desire: to dismember it. To see of what it was made, to discover the dearness, to find the beauty, the desirability that had escaped only me" (*Bluest Eye* 20).

In contrast to MacTeer's family, Breedloves are indifferent and rude towards the children. Mrs. Macteer behaves friendly with her children and makes them feel at ease to gratify their enquiries and providing them the knowledge of the outside world. Claudia and Frieda are sometimes accused by others but the motherly treatment at home soothes the ill treatment meted out outside the home. Pecola becomes the target not only in school or outside home but also maltreated at home as well. Furthermore, Claudia possess the sense of belonging to a black family and resists the pressure of the outside dominant culture imbibed by other characters in the novel. When Pecola is laughed at and mocked by Maureen, Claudia and Frieda took on the charge and stood with her to show the strength of inculcated belief in their own beliefs and culture. This incident for instance clearly reflects the need of a kind of family set up where the black pride should get the priority and being used as a strong weapon to counter the racial abuses. Pecola is unaware and ignorant to her own beliefs and culture as well as to the entrusted beliefs of the society. The other self of her own mother, Pecola finds no support anywhere, unlike Frieda and Claudia who believe and practice their own value standards and fight against the absurd distinction on the basis of color. The isolation and disintegration in Pecola is caused due to these restraints and finally led her to yearn for the 'blue eyes'. She finds no support by her family to counter the racial and nasty abuses unlike Macteer family. She feels humiliated and prays to God "Please make me disappear" (*Bluest Eye* p45). Her desire to possess blue eyes makes her feel very soothing if she had blue eyes; 'looked different' 'beautiful' Cholly and Mrs Breedlove would have been different. "While quarrelling they might have said, Why, look at pretty-eyed Pecola. We mustn't do bad things in front of those pretty eyes" (46).

Pecola's toxic environment engraved her internal emotional trauma and makes her believe in her own ugliness; caused by the family and believers of white superior race. This harmful effect created by the internalized shame inflicted at her by different persons on different points of time forces her to accept and believe in her ugliness. For instance when Mr. Yacobowski refuses to see and touch her:

At some fixed point in time and space he senses that he need not waste the effort of a glance. He does not see her, because for him there is nothing to see.... She doesn't know what keeps his glance suspended.... But she has seen interest, disgust, even anger in grown male eyes. Yet this vacuum is not new to her. It has an edge; somewhere in the bottom lid is the distaste. She has seen it lurking in the eyes of all white people. So. The distaste must be for her, her blackness (*Bluest Eye* 48-49).

To console herself and to come out of the 'inexplicable shame', she directs her hate to dandelions and think, "They are ugly. They are weeds" (50). Pecola's shame pops up and being quenched by Mary Jane who is the epitome of beauty for her. The eyes of her are 'quite pretty' for Pecola. "To eat the candy is somehow to eat the eyes, eat Mary Jane. Love Mary Jane. Be Mary Jane" (50). Her transformation and realization of disgust instead of love and care is because of her psychological and literal transformation being inculcated in her by different means. Not only Pecola but Claudia who possess the strength to resist the hegemonic power of the deprived society succumbs to pressure and relevance. She affirms "it was a small step to Shirley Temple. I learned much later to worship her, just as I learned to delight in cleanliness, knowing, even as I learned, that the change was adjustment without improvement"(23). The adjustment by black people remains illusion. At the end of the novel, Claudia realizes:

And fantasy it was, for we were not strong, only aggressive; we were not free, merely licensed; we were not compassionate, we were polite; not good, but well behaved. We courted death in order to call ourselves brave, and hid like thieves from life. We substituted good grammar for intellect; we switched habits to simulate maturity; we rearranged lies and called it truth, seeing in the new pattern of an old idea the Revelation and the Word (205-206).

Through the character portrayal in the novel Morrison has revealed the different reflections and attitudes of black self which resists and submits to the canon consciously or unconsciously. And it makes clear that the norms and parameter of society are learned not natural.

According to Roman Jakobson "The dominant may be defined as the focusing component of a work of art: it rules, determines, and transforms the remaining components" (Postmodernist Fiction 6). Pecola "a little black girl who wanted to rise up out of the pit of her blackness and see the world with blue eyes" (174). Blue eyes for her are the important tool through which Pecola wants to come out of the discriminated social set up. She strives for them to elevate herself to be recognized, and felt as a human being worthy of love and affection. Toni Morrison tries to portray the fundamental framework of the internalized racism in the African-American community. In this racial discourse, one must consistently demonstrate and testify his whiteness out of the fear of not feeling perfectly white (Hasan 27). The *Bluest Eye* grapples with the important question regarding the apparent manifestation of race, class and desire to hide one's identity by changing one's appearance. The novel persistently portrays the anxiety of those whose appearances clash with their set ideal norms of beauty. Pecola similarly follows the dictates of the dominant ideological apparatuses to counter the abuse not through the self-retaliation but through the desire and longing for the blue eyes. At the end the fantasy of getting blue eyes gets shattered and led to her insanity.

Morrison in an interview with Charles Ruas describes that she: "[...] write about a girl who wanted blue eyes and the horror of having that wish fulfilled; and also about the whole business of what physical beauty and the pain of that yearning and wanting to be somebody else [...]" (qtd in *Blooms Guide*17).

Finally at the end, when the Breedlove family gets ill-treatment by the white hegemonic forces, they live their life in alienation, deprivations, shamefulness, self-hatred, which led the detrimental forces to destruct the hope of black folk to be recognized and treated as the important and relevant members of society. Cholly's attempt of rape is the internalized hatred for one's own race which has a substantial residue at conscious and unconscious level. Thus, Pecola, Cholly and Pauline succumb to the myth of 'white is right', 'capitalist tactics' and to their own shortcomings through which they analyze their life which lead them to the failure and being out casted and trampled on by others to validate the rule of the dominant capitalists. Who propagate and sell a different version of reality which is countered by Morrison in this novel aptly.

Conclusion

Toni Morrison through *The Bluest Eye* has reiterated that how social identities are created and replicated by different means. Morrison displays the difficulty of recognizing the self in the different groups as an individual and the member of a group without any hesitation. Also, she renders how the visibility poses a challenge to the society to counter and formulate a balance for an equal opportunity and peace. The hatred for one's own race and particularly for one's own family has been described to reveal not only the inner turmoil of African-Americans but the outlet of those emotions; which cause a traumatic impact on the psyche-positive as well as negative.

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