

Black empowerment and Afro-American values in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*

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Abstract

The Bluest Eye of Toni Morrison is extraordinarily significant, as it addresses the different sides of American literature, and the lives of the Afro-American people. Although the conventional theological aspects of white culture can negatively influence other characters of Morrison, it is Pecola whose life appears to be increasingly defenseless against the impulses of the individuals who have accepted the Western custom. In a democratic country, people generally have the same value, but there are still prejudices in the concepts of beauty and worthiness. The search for freedom, black identity, the nature of evil and the robust voices of African-Americans have become themes for African-American literature. Folklore covers the history of black and white interaction in the United States and also summarizes the feelings expressed in protest literature¹. Morrison argues that the survival of the dark ladies in a white dominated society depends on loving their own way of life and dark race and rejecting the models of white culture or white excellence. This article attempts to examine *The Bluest Eye* from the perspective of empowerment of blacks and African American and their value system.

Keywords Afro-American values, Black Empowerment, African culture, Toni Morrison

Paper type Research paper

Toni Morrison carried acknowledgment to the Afro-American literary genre by winning many distinctions, such as Pulitzer Prize, National Book Award and the Nobel Prize. *The Bluest Eye* is Toni Morrison's first novel which was written in 1970. She has essentially made vital contributions to American literature. This novel not only just dissects the ruinous psychological impacts of racism on the youngsters and grown-ups but also investigates totally and reasonably their infringement, which impacts identity formation. The novel deals with a girl's reliance on the world for confidence, self-definition and confidence, the world which finds similarity between darkness and ugliness.



Pecola Breedlove is an eleven years old girl who accepts that not having the blue colour eyes has become the key to her ugliness. Pecola fell prey to the supreme “absence” and “silence” as she was raped by her own father. Pecola acknowledges her lower status since society treats her severely and thinks unsuitable for love, fearlessness, honour and consolation. The tale of Pecola demonstrates her total exploitation by American culture.

Critics of *The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison, so far, deal with the ideas of racism, internalized racism, class exploitation, gender bias, history, genealogy of rejection, Afro-American folklore, black identity, abject selfhood, blues aesthetic, image of god, marginal existence, concept of beauty, child oppression, trauma, black feminism and sexism. It is noteworthy that race, gender and class have been inter-related in the history of black women. They are truly derived from the same source of circumstances and are motivated by social, financial and psychological forces. The main source of oppression of black people in America is, perhaps, class exploitation. The class issue is very important because it is associated with Capitalism system and this system divides a society into two classes - master and slave. But, black empowerment and Afro-American values can also be vital issues in this novel and I have worked on these issues.

Morrison starts *The Bluest Eye* with reference to the “Dick and Jane” reading primer. As the story advances, Morrison used again the section of the primer, first without punctuation and then with no space between words. What it shows is that, while the words continue as before in the section, there are no components that make up for a sort of brokenness. This model is moved to the main content. The father is a boozier and the mother loathes herself, they can’t be good parents and unworthy to nurture their daughter or express their love. The main path for Pecola to escape from a rude world without love is to go insane, hence creating an elective world for herself and hindering the offensiveness of this present reality. The primer used to “juxtapose the fiction of the white educational process with the realities of life for many black children”. (Klotman, 1979: 123)

One of the regrettable scenes in the novel is where Pauline strikes Pecola for accidentally spilling the blueberry cobbler and Pauline pushes Pecola to get her out of the house and delicately hugs a little white girl called Fisher, who calls her by name (84 - 85). Obviously, Pauline has accepted the idea that dark isn’t pretty and worthy to be loved. That dark berries in the foaming cobbler and Pecola are simply objects must be cleared, as Pauline races to embrace the rich white young lady who inspires love. To Pauline her daughter and black girls are almost non-existent as she replies –

“Who were they, Polly?”
“Don’t worry none, baby.” (85)

Dismissing Maureen Peel and “calling her out of her name”, Claudia rejects the illogical privilege of Maureen Peel’s “high yellow dream” and her “two lynch ropes” of lengthy dark hair (47). Pecola needs what Claudia refuses: blue eyes, golden hair, pink colour skin, and the societal position the white people enjoy. The challenge of Claudia is a shrewd and healthy challenge, supported by a hard and yet adoring mother who sings on Saturday. Claudia reveals that she can grasp this aesthetic temporarily, with hesitance and caution. Softing (1995) says that “Claudia is the only character in this novel who consciously makes an attempt at deconstructing the ideology of the dominant society. This is seen in her dismembering of the dolls” (90). Claudia says, “I did not know why I destroyed those dolls. But I did know that nobody ever asked me what I wanted for Christmas” (14).

The Breedloves pursue a curved way that moves far away from the black people’s values and also from the poor people and the country of the South, and pursue the values that were followed by the white privileged middle class and the follower of capitalism. The curved way leads to create a feeling of uselessness and absence of value in the Breedlove family. Claudia comprehends that the Soaphead Church may dwell inside the community, yet does not have a place within the community. It appears to be intuitive to comprehend that the Soaphead detests blackness and the lives attached to a system of values that rejects it. Since Claudia is a part of the community, she knows about the oral information scattered about the Soaphead’s “nasty” habit of sexually manhandling young ladies. However, Pecola, since she is treated as marginalized, doesn’t know about this information. She sees in Soaphead an outcast like herself, who lives outside the community, and on her first visit to him she is made to comprehend that he scorns darkness similarly as she detests her very own darkness.

To the narrative style of Claudia oral tradition of testifying is central. Smitherman points out that this ‘oral tradition’ appeared from the conventional church of the black people as “a ritualized form of black communication in which the speaker gives verbal witness to the efficacy, truth and power of some experience in which all blacks have shared” (58). Smitherman (1986) also says, “to testify is to tell the truth through story” (150). Testifying is not “plain and simple commentary but a dramatic narration and a communal reenactment of one’s feelings and experiences” (Smitherman, 1986:150). From the Afro-American religious practice ‘Testifying’, as a custom, is derived and it is like ‘call and response’. In spite of Claudia’s narration, we additionally find Pauline as an omniscient

storyteller, and also different fragments of languages express almost every side of the black community: from the three prostitutes to Geraldine and her son to the Soaphead church and the strange tattles.

Deeper within the community, Pecola, at first, makes herself alienated and then again marginalised by other characters, whereas the Breedloves themselves are socially exiled. “[Junior’s] mother did not like him to play with niggers. She had explained the difference to him between colored people and niggers” (89). Both the mother and son, Geraldine and Junior, are black, nevertheless she gives a clear explanation of the differences between “colored people” and “niggers”. In spite of the fact that society considers all belong to the same black community, specially, Pecola and Breedloves are marginalized by Geraldine. “[Niggers] were easily identifiable. Colored people were neat and quiet; niggers were dirty and loud” (67). Creation of segregation, among the social groups, for example, Geraldine and her son Junior are middle class ‘colored people’ and Pecola and Breedloves are lower class, keeps the Breedloves aside who become exiled in the society. This is very interesting that during the African-American civil rights movement (1954-1968) people were segregated on the basis of color in American culture. In this novel the black people who are isolated are again isolated and separated by social class into “colored people” and “niggers”. It is a social exile and it has deep impact. Since the extensive inconvenience Pecola’s family members experience, they are considered at the bottom of the social ladder. In spite of the fact that they are not actually exiled in the true sense of being ousted, they are compelled to live in indistinguishable networks away from others, and they have a lower financial status and are dismissed by other blacks and are socially exiled. Geraldine’s family relinquished their race because of the maltreatment and disgrace forced upon them by whites, and that is the reason they came to accept that whites were predominant for their color, and the blacks felt disgrace and abhorrence for themselves. This hatred is exhibited in their imitation of ideal life style of the white people.

In this manner, the beauty standards turn into a hateful and racist trap where black people in America are conceived and they can never rescue themselves from this trap. James Joyce, in the novel *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, gives the same kind of depiction of the society trapped by its counterproductive traditions. Joyce made comparison between the mythical character Daedalus and his protagonist Stephen. Like Pecola, Stephen internalized the labyrinth of his society’s dangerous social norms. The conceivable transcendence of Stephen out of this labyrinth is parallel to the trip of Daedalus from the Labyrinth. Although Irish culture remains detained in the labyrinth, Joyce’s novel closes with a hopeful note that

independent and illuminated Stephen means to restart his life. Pathetically, neither the Afro-American culture nor Pecola can transcend the labyrinth of internalized white beauty. Moreover, each book recounts the narrative of the protagonist's life; Pecola speaks about the Afro-American culture, while Stephen's encounters summarize the state of his native land, Ireland. At the end of these books, the two characters go into unequivocal clash with the prohibitive labyrinths of their social orders. Whereas Stephen becomes successful as an independent individual, the clash of Pecola closes with her madness. When the omniscient narrator says, "We tried to see her without looking at her, and never, never went near. Not because she was abused, or repulsive, or because we were frightened, but because we had failed her" (162).

The dark young boys who teased her were unable to perceive a kindred individual from their own culture and community. Awkward (1993) says that their abuse ironically projects "their ability to disregard their similarity to their victim; the verse they compose to belittle her ('Black e mo...Yadaddsleepsnekked') reflects their own skin color and, quite possibly, familial situations" (191). The mindset of the white people toward dark people is reflected in Pecola's contact with a shopkeeper called Mr. Yacobowski: "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" (36). Afterward, Pecola turns out to be particularly defenseless against the unexpected, rough injuries because she was beaten and dismissed by her mom Pauline, and awfully damaged because she was sexually assaulted by Cholly, her dad, and after that she lost her infant.

Pecola as well as Pauline, similar to the other members of the dark race, have adopted the general example of whiteness in the white dolls that the youngsters purchase; what they see in the movies imitate, and taking the advantage of the dark child with light skin, Maureen Peel feels superior to the darkest kids. Gibson (1989) explains that Morrison highlighted the life style of the black people by using the school primer as a narrative technique, and black people's lives are "contained within the framework of the values of the dominant culture and subjected to those values" (21). Many critics of Morrison's work, particularly, Davis (1982) has analysed how oppression, though not directly indicating trauma, is showed in the shape of "psychic violence", that is, the disastrous white racist culture is not only physically cruel but also damages the black people through "the systematic denial of the reality of black lives" (323). Morrison's work, Rubenstein (1987) says, is explaining that the "constriction of the growth of the self is implicitly linked

to restrictive or oppressive cultural circumstances” (126). Most importantly, Morrison utilises the portrayal of Maureen to present the submerged history of lynching in America. Through the depiction of Maureen Peel, having green eyes, as “a high-yellow dream child with long brown hair braided into two lynch ropes that hung down her back” (47), readers are urged to observe cautiously the intertwined history of racial and sexual treachery encoded in the braided hair.

Morrison depicts that the Afro-American community is trapped by its adaptation of a “blue-eyed, yellow-haired, pink-skinned” (14) beauty standard. Black women are evaluated in terms of white beauty ideals, and for that reason dark women are always judged ugly. As a result, black people start to detest their own community. Hence, Pecola started to pray to God for blue eyes every night. The omniscient narrator says, “Each night, without fail, she prayed for blue eyes. Ferently, for a year she had prayed. Although somewhat discouraged, she was not without hope.” (35). *The Bluest Eye* shows how ideologies propagated by predominant groups and embraced by minority groups impact the personality of dark women. Destroyed by the picture of white magnificence, Morrison’s characters are lost in self-loathing, and their solitary objective in life is to be white. They attempt to eradicate their inheritance, and at last, like Pecola Breedlove, the protagonist, who needs blue eyes, they have no option but madness to accept.

In simpler terms, darkness is identified with ugliness and, accordingly, with inferiority, but beauty is viewed as a feature distinctly found in white people. Additionally, white is beautiful and symbolises goodness and pureness, and Cholly, Pecola’s dad, accepts God as “a nice old white man, with long white hair, flowing white beard, and little blue eyes” (105). Working in a white family, Pauline got all that she needed and required. In this manner, she totally dismissed her family’s needs, not by any means her little girl Pecola’s right to call her “mother”; yet she was compelled to call her “Mrs. Breedlove”, an image of abnormal relationship with mother. Normally relationship with mother ought to be loaded up with adoration, instead their relationship was just full of scorn and dismissal, which increased in intensity when Pecola was sexually assaulted by her dad, and trailed by her mom to beat her until the child’s death. This last blow, the ultimate frustration of rejection brought about by outer and internal racism, drove Pecola insane.

Morrison utilizes mainstream white stars of 1940’s to demonstrate the acknowledgment of Afro-American people’s attitude towards “white beauty”. It is found while Mr. Henry reaches Mr. McTeer’s home, welcoming Claudia and her sister Frieda with: “Hello there. You must be Greta Garbo, and you must be Ginger Rogers.” [10] Garbo was a motion picture star, and

Rogers was a dancer, and both were white, and the behavior of Mr. Henry guided the readers to expect that white women were presented to depict lovely beautiful young women in all races. One day Pecola Breedlove, who lives in MacTeer's home, fixes her eyes on the picture of Shirley Temple, a white young female artist, engraved on the glass while she is drinking milk, and imagines that she becomes fair like Shirley Temple. " 'Three quarts of milk. That's what was in that icebox yesterday. ... Now they're ain't none.' ...We knew she was fond of the Shirley Temple cup and took every opportunity to drink milk out of it just to handle and see sweet Shirley's face." [16]. When Pecola purchases three Mary Jane Candies from the shopkeeper Mr. Yacobowski, Pecola stares at the wrapping paper having the image of the grinning white young girl with golden hair and blue eyes: "To eat the candy is to somehow eat the eyes, eat Mary Jane. Love Mary Jane. Be Mary Jane." (38)

If these social beliefs which act as apparatuses of racial abuse, were not imposed upon the Afro-Americans, Pecola could never go to be a tragic character. It is not like this that outside powers, for example, sexism and racism, are irrelevant, but "the ontological structures and mythological thought systems that blacks develop to define and reinforce their definitions of self and existence" (Samuels and Clenora, 1999: 78) have huge damaging impact upon black people. Pecola's loneliness is progressively intense, hardened by dark complicity, seen in Pecola's mom's replacement of self-scorn by pouring it upon Pecola. Ellison (1986) explains the complicity in different places she encounters, "Much of the damage sustained by Negroes begins in the Negroes family and much occurs in the Negro nursery school, the kindergarten and the first few grades" (17). Ellison further says that from self-dislike spreads their rudeness.

This 'self-dislike' is established in the "deficit" viewpoint on Afro-American society. According to this viewpoint black people are "somehow deficient with respect to intelligence, perceptual skills, cognitive styles, family structure, and other factors" (White and Parham, 1990: 8). From this point of view, ecological variables decide the supposed inadequacies in Afro-American People. When Pecola's dad, Cholly Breedlove, was caught as a youngster in a field with Darlene by two white men, he never coordinated his disdain towards those white men, yet rather transferred his scorn towards the young lady since his contempt for white men, he thought, would burn him. He was frail against white men and couldn't shield Darlene from them. This caused him hatred for her to be in such a circumstance with her, and to acknowledge how vulnerable he truly was. The omniscient narrator says, "He hated her. He almost wished he could

do it – hard, long, and painfully, he hated her so much” (116).

“Through the name Pecola, Pauline learns to devalue herself through fantasies and teaches her daughter a similar sense of unworthiness” (Rosenberg, 1987:440). Again, Walker (1983) explains it as “psychic annihilation.” She also says, “... certainly every Afro-American is descended from a black woman. What then can be the destiny of a person that pampers and cherishes the blood of the White slaveholders who maimed and degraded their female ancestor? What can be the future of a class of descendants of slaves that implicitly gives slaveholders greater honor than the American women they enslaved?” (295)

Morrison challenges, in *The Bluest Eye*, Western criteria of beauty and exhibits that the idea of excellence is developed culturally. Similarly, Morrison perceives that if whiteness is treated as a symbol of excellence or anything like that, the evaluation of darkness vanishes and the novel attempts to discourage that propensity to evaluate beauty by white standards. “In demonstrating pride in being black, this writer does not simply portray positive images of blackness. Instead, she focuses on the damage that the black women characters suffer through the construction of femininity in a racialised society” (Matus, 1998:37). Grewal (1998) explains it by reversing the concept of “ugliness” to “beautiful blackness” and beautiful blackness “is not enough, for such counter-rhetoric does not touch the heart of the matter: the race-based class structure upheld by dominant norms and stereotypes” (21). Hence, in attempting to acquire beauty, Taylor (1999) further explains, “the experience of a black woman ...differs from the experiences of ... Jewish and Irish women” (20). It can obviously be found in the manners of dark lady characters of Morrison’s novels who suffer in their attempt to fit in with Western principles of beauty.

Major black characters in *The Bluest Eye* are delineated as different and altogether these various characters stayed in the three hierarchical families: “first Geraldine’s (a counterfeit of the idealised white family), ... [then] the MacTeers and at the bottom [of the social order], the Breedloves” (Ogunyemi, 1977:113). This story indicates how the dark characters react to this prevailing culture diversely and overthrows by argument the simple binary social differentiation. Thus, Claudia perceives that if dark people pursue the white ideology of beauty they may achieve magnificence, however, just at the expense of black culture. Claudia charges the dark people who accepts “a white standard of beauty ... that makes Pecola its scapegoat” (Furman, 1996:21). Claudia also says, “Frieda and she [Pecola] had a loving

conversation about how cu-ute Shirly Temple was. I couldn't join them in their adoration because I hated Shirly" (13). By being, ugly, pregnant, insane and subject to hideous nightmares Pecola has finally become 'dumped'. Hooks (1992) says that "As long as black folks are taught that the only way we can gain any degree of economic self-sufficiency or be materially privileged is by first rejecting blackness, our history and culture, then there will always be a crisis in black identity" (18). hooks and Morrison both are having the same type of political attitudes. They discover connection between consumerism and degeneration, and how these two assist the correction of the identity of dark characters and culture and finally black community.

One of the most widely praised black novelists, Morrison was an extraordinary planner in the creation of a scholarly language for African-Americans. Her utilization of an evolving point of view, a fragmentary story and a narrative voice were very close to the features of the characters that uncover the impact of the scholars like Virginia Woolf and William Faulkner, the two authors that Morrison studied extensively as a student of the college. Her works additionally demonstrate the impact of Afro-American old stories, melodies and ladies' tattle. In her endeavors to apply these types of oral art to literary methods of portrayal, Morrison made a lot of works influenced by an unmistakably dark reasonableness while attracting various types of readers, beyond the black community. Characters in *The Bluest Eye* and the time frame mark a period in American history that assumed a significant role in the thoughts of freedom and equity. Each of the components on which America was established has been mutilated and never again applied to blacks and different minorities in this nation. Life led by Pecola and others like her, positive or negative, is a piece of the story that numerous Americans lived across the country. Though numerous policies have been changed to improve the situation of freedom and equality, it is still a matter of question whether equality is prevailing in American society.

Morrison composed this story on a general level. An individual from any culture can peruse this and get a link with the pulse of the story, and simultaneously appreciate the masterly strokes with which the novel was composed. It is not difficult to accept this story and create an enthusiastic bond with it. What Morrison proposed to state in the novel is available for explanation to any individual who understands it, regardless of whether it is an assault on the white culture, which made the story conceivable, or dark culture's lack of interest which is similarly liable for the suffering and distress of the Afro-Americans. Morrison addresses the majority, both white and dark, indicating how a racial social framework wears out the brains and spirits

of individuals, how predominant pictures of white actors and actresses with blue eyes and their celebrated life style show youthful dark kids that to be white means to be successful and cheerful, and after that they glance around at their own existences of destitution and abuse, and figure out how to despise their dark legacy. These social goals are as alive today as they were in the 1940's. In this way, the African-Americans are particularly powerless against the messages passed on to them by mainstream culture that white beauty will definitely rule individuals' life.

All the textual quotations are taken from *The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison published by Vintage, UK, 1999.

Notes

[1-1]. One of the most significant devices accessible to protest gatherings was literature. Probably the most renowned protest publications on the planet have their underlying foundations in the history of the United States. For instance, a portion of the incomparable American scholars of protest literature incorporate Thomas Paine, Thomas Nast, John C. Calhoun, and Martin Luther King. These writers have become the spokesmen for their particular protest movement through eloquence and sometimes in a cunning way.

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