

LANGUAGE IN INDIA

Strength for Today and Bright Hope for Tomorrow

Volume 10 : 1 January 2010

ISSN 1930-2940

Managing Editor: M. S. Thirumalai, Ph.D.

Editors: B. Mallikarjun, Ph.D.

Sam Mohanlal, Ph.D.

B. A. Sharada, Ph.D.

A. R. Fatihi, Ph.D.

Lakhan Gusain, Ph.D.

K. Karunakaran, Ph.D.

Jennifer Marie Bayer, Ph.D.

Language and Literature: An Exposition -
Papers Presented in Karunya University International Seminar

Editor:

J. Sundarsingh, Ph.D.

***Language in India* www.languageinindia.com**

10 : 1 January 2010

P.V. Annie Gladys and Edwingsingh Jeyachandra

The Danger Lurking Within: The African American Woman in Tony Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*

206

The Danger Lurking Within: The African American Woman in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*

**P.V. Annie Gladys
Edwingsingh Jeyachandra**

The Goals of This Paper

In this study we examine how the society, the family and one's own psyche are antithetical to the Afro-American woman in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*.

Societal, familial and psychic factors are the triple forces that put the blacks of America in jeopardy.

The article traces out the obstruction constructed against the blacks by the white community. Blacks are dehumanized and minimized from subject-hood to object-hood.

The paper also discovers how an unhealthy family life alienates one from the other resulting in little sense of belonging. Family, which ought to nourish and develop the individual, degrades into a destructive factor.

The study examines the psychological trauma and the danger lurking within the African-American woman. Unable to meet the needs of one's environment the individual is on the quest to quench the expectation of others. In the process the individual becomes a prey to depression and frustration which ultimately leads to self-mutilation.

In order to have a true sense of an illness one must have the experience of the same. So also to know the ins and outs of an African woman in America, the writer has to be an African-American and a woman. Since they are of the same kind they could only understand the untold feelings. The whole black American community is put to limitless suffering where the woman's condition is pathetic.

Tony Morrison, the Author

Toni Morrison is the first African-American writer to win the most coveted Nobel Prize for Literature. She may well be acclaimed as one of the most sophisticated and prolific writers in the annals of African American literature.

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

10 : 1 January 2010

P.V. Annie Gladys and Edwingsingh Jeyachandra

The Danger Lurking Within: The African American Woman in Tony Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*

207

The fiction of Morrison demonstrates her rare virtue of presenting truth as raw truth. Morrison made her debut in literature through the fiction *The Bluest Eye*. The novel is about the yearning of a young black girl for blue eyes which is celebrated as the order of beauty by the whites.

Accepted Standards of Beauty and Consequent Trauma

As the accepted standard of beauty, both by the society and the family, is the pink-skin, the African American woman suffers psychological trauma and remains constantly in a state of jeopardy. Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* reveals the ill effects of the factors within the individual as a consequence of complete rejection of identity by societal and familial forces.

Danger from Within

Morrison shows us how danger sprouts form within as a result of total negation from without. Pecola Breedlove, the protagonist leads a wretched life. She is ignored by the society, neglected by the family and despised by teachers and classmates.

Pecola sits long hours looking in the mirror, "[...] trying to discover the secret of the ugliness, the ugliness that made her ignored or despised at school, by teachers and classmates alike" (34). Pecola's discovery of ugliness stands in contrast to Claudia's dismemberment of pink-skinned dolls to discover its beauty. Unlike Pecola, Claudia tries "to discover the dearness, to find the beauty, the desirability" (14). It is clear that the quest that stems from both of them is the sure result of the danger lurking within.

Rejection from Society and Family

The African American woman find themselves doomed under rejections both from society and from family. As a result of this they feel alienated and frustrated. Pecola, finds herself unable to withstand all these rejections finally decides to take shelter under the blue eyes. She discovers the resting place of her ugliness to be in her eyes. Pecola innocently considers: "If she looked different, beautiful, may be Cholly would be different and Mrs. Breedlove too" (34).

Pecola, carried away by the pretty blue eyes of Alice-and Jerry story book is on the quest for blue eyes. Each night she used to pray fervently for blue eyes.

Pointed Oppression from Within

According to Gibson, "we are oppressed by the values of the ruling class. We participate in our own oppression usually to the extent of being literally the very hand or arm of that oppression" (162).

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

10 : 1 January 2010

P.V. Annie Gladys and Edwingsingh Jeyachandra

The Danger Lurking Within: The African American Woman in Tony Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*

208

The African American woman is often perceived not as an individual but as belonging to herd or group. For instance, Geraldine sees in Pecola a type of repulsive black: “this little girl all of her life. Hanging out of windows over saloons in Mobile” (71). Geraldine fails to see Pecola as an individual.

‘This little girl’ refers to a type of poor black. She contemptuously remarks: “Grass wouldn’t grow where they lived. Flowers died, shades fell down. Tin cans and tires blossomed where they lived [...]. (72)

Pecola is truly, “the epitome of the victim in a world that reduces persons to objects and then makes them feel inferior as objects” (Davis 33). Little did the Americans realize that their beauty is but grass born to wither away and join the ground even though they were Snowwhite.

Through the character of Soaphead Church, Morrison completes the destruction of Pecola. There in the Church is a man of mixed-race, Soaphead, who poses as Reader, Advisor and Interpreter of Dreams. When Pecola comes to him with her fantastic and logical request for blue eyes, he immediately understands her need: “Here was an ugly little girl asking for beauty [...]. A little black girl who wanted to rise up out of the pit of her blackness and see the world with blue eyes” (138). Soaphead’s racial disgust prevents him from offering any sound counsel to her.

Shame and Guilt within Black Mind in White America

In white-dominated America, African Americans feel guilt and shame about their own race. One of the poignant scene in Morrison’s novel is the one in which a group of boys who encircle Pecola and shout at her, “Black e mo. Black e mo” (50). The worst insult the black boys can think of is to call Pecola black. With no sense of self-respect or pride in one’s own race the blacks sacrifice people belonging to their own race. The verse black males compose to belittle Pecola reflects their own warped mental state, a creation of societal and familial influences.

Self-generated Humiliation and Despair

To some extent such a condition of the African-American women is their own making. Want of parental love and concern evokes feelings of dejection and despair.

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

10 : 1 January 2010

P.V. Annie Gladys and Edwingsingh Jeyachandra

The Danger Lurking Within: The African American Woman in Tony Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*

209

Pecola's tragedy begins with her mother's rejection of her at birth because of her colour. Mrs. Breedlove says offensively "I knowed she was ugly. Head full of pretty hair, but Lord she was ugly" (98). Pauline attracted by the beauty, order, cleanliness of the luxurious house where she works, she deserts "her house, her children, her man" (99). By such discriminatory attitude, Pauline allows herself to be a slave and wounds Pecola's psyche.

Regarding this Sengupta states:

Most upsetting for Pecola psychologically has been her rejection at the hands of her own mother in the kitchen of the Fisher [...]. The woman has no sympathy for her own child, but she is a caring "mammy" to the wealthy blonde girl doll. (95).

A Stranger to Her Own Mother

Psychologically affected Pecola appears to be a stranger to her own mother, addressing her as 'Mrs. Breedlove'. Actually mother is the one who is near and dear to our heart. In contrast, Pecola is psychically far and remote from her mother. On the other, the white child of the Fisher family is privileged to call Mrs. Breedlove by the nickname 'polly'. It reduces her dignity and identifies her as the true servant and an 'untrue mother'.

Pecola, in her quest for identity and recognition ends up in insanity. Pecola has gone unnoticed by the eyes of others and so has been unable to recognize herself and realize her own worth. In her madness she manufactures a 'friend'. Her imaginary friend the companion she has never had. Moreover, he is an ardent admirer of her newly acquired blue eyes and becomes her only conversation partner.

The myth of racism is that white skin and blue eyes carries with it intelligence and virtue more than the black by the mere fact of being white. On the psychological level, thus, "Whiteness is equated with beauty and culture and blackness with ugliness and savagery" (Sengupta 89-90).

Pecola's tragic plight stems mainly from her inability to resist the white standards. On the other, she is influenced and seized by a white perception of beauty. Pecola is represented as a bird in its "[...] grotesquely futile effort to fly. Beating the air, a winged but grounded bird, intent on the blue void it could not reach [...] but which filled the valleys of the mind" (162). The craze for blue eyes within Pecola makes her to force her friend to acknowledge her eyes to be "Much prettier than sky [...]. Much prettier than Alice and Jerry storybook eyes" (159). Her victimization is the result of her own illogical desires.

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

10 : 1 January 2010

P.V. Annie Gladys and Edwingsingh Jeyachandra

The Danger Lurking Within: The African American Woman in Tony Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*

Power of Vision to See Beyond

Morrison's narrator Claudia has the power of vision to perceive beyond. Unlike the Breedloves and the light-skinned Geraldine and Maureen, the MacTeers do not compare their worthiness with that of the dominant white culture. Although the Shirley Temple cup belongs to the MacTeers, no one in the family yearns for whiteness.

Claudia points out the moral of Pecola's story:

All of us—all who knew her—felt so wholesome after we cleaned ourselves on her. We were so beautiful when we stood astride her ugliness [...] her guilt sanctified us, her pain made us glow with health. Her inarticulateness made us believe we are eloquent. Her poverty kept us generous. (163)

Being alienated from the society and the family psychically, Pecola tries to possess the unattainable blue eyes which are not really essential for her. Indeed the society and the family have to change their typical way of gazing at the African-American woman. Further, the colour of the eyes is of no importance to see into the life of things. In the words of Emerson 'imitation is suicide' and one should be a non-conformist.

Conclusion

Jeopardy arises when the African American woman adapts to the American standard of beauty instead of maintaining their distinctness from the accepted White norms. Imitation can never bring recognition or identity. African Americans must develop the attributes of resolution and determination portrayed in Frances E. W. Harper's 1892 novel *Iola Leroy*. Though made black by nature they must nourish the indomitable will not to yield to the American myth of beauty. Morrison exhorts the black woman to develop the stamina to assert their worthiness and uniqueness and resent the dominance of whiteness and never meekly remain an acquiescence and conformist.

There is a lot more for us in India to learn from this heartrending story. Our cultures and families are heavily color-conscious. It affects everyone, more so the women. Often spousal selection and marriage hinge upon how fair a girl is, in addition to what property and how much dowry she can bring with her! It is not hard at all to find Pecola's mother among us. It is not hard at all to find the same social attitudes that prevail/prevailed among the Blacks in the United States. It is not hard to find scores of Soapheads among us.

References

- Davis, Cynthia A. "Self, Society and Myth in Toni Morrison's Fiction". *Toni Morrison: Contemporary Critical Essays*. Ed. Linden Peach. New York: Martin's Press, 1998. 27-39.
- Gibson, Donald, B. "Text and Counter text in *The Bluest Eye*." *Toni Morrison: Perspectives Past and Present*. Gates, Henry Louis, Jr. and K.A. Appiah, eds. New York: Amistad Press, 1993. 159-172.
- Morrison, Toni. *The Bluest Eye*. London: Macmillan Publisher Ltd, 1990
- Sengupta, Ashis. "Afro-American Womens Fiction: Perspectives on Race and Gender" *New Quest* 110 (1995): 89-97.

P.V. Annie Gladys
Department of English
Nesamony Memorial Christian College
Marthandam 629165
Tamilnadu, India
gladyskirubas@gmail.com

Edwingsingh Jeyachandra
Department of Post-Graduate Studies and Research Centre in English
Scott Christian College (Autonomous)
Nagercoil 629 003
Tamilnadu, India

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

10 : 1 January 2010

P.V. Annie Gladys and Edwingsingh Jeyachandra

The Danger Lurking Within: The African American Woman in Tony Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*

212