

The Commentary of Individual and Community Sufferings in Nineteenth Century American Society: Toni Morrison's Perspective

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Preliminaries

The suffering of Blacks as an individual and community is portrayed vividly and candidly in Tony Morrison's novels. She herself was a victim of such hatred and her characters go through same trauma and tragedies. Her Fictions have become a mirror to such suffering. Nobel laureate, novelist, writer, editor, essayist and lecturer Toni Morrison stormed the literary discourse with her first novel, *The Bluest Eye* (1970). She penned the traumatic experiences of a girl who symbolises the young generation of women in American society imposing the white, middleclass American standardization of beauty on the developing female identity of a young girl during the first half of 20th century. In one of her article Morrison speaks about the seed of the novel sown in her mind as she had a memory of primary school classmate who desired to have blue eyes. Morrison talks to Charles Raus about her childhood friend who wanted blue eyes. Morrison clearly questions her strange desire against her cultural background.

What I later recollected was that I looked at her and imagined her having them and thought how awful that would be if she had gotten her prayers answered. I always thought she was beautiful. I began to write about a girl who wanted blue eyes and the horror of having that wish fulfilled and also about the whole business of what in physical beauty and the pain of that yearning and wanting to be somebody else, 29 and how devastating that was and yet part of all females who were peripheral in other people's lives. (218)

The Black Pecola and her Destiny

Pecola Breedlove representing a young black girl through whom the reader travels through the novel poignantly watching the psychological devastation of a young girl. The novel unfurls the complex reality about the inner battles for emancipation by the central character of Pecola a little girl of seven. The representative of a girl belonging to a paralysed black community who have lost self-faith, self-dignity even self-identity. Little Pecola searches for love, affection and acceptance in a world that opposes her existence and devalues her living and her community. Her psyche is forged in the situation she finds herself and she is opened to the conventional American picture of feminine beauty- profoundly white skin, blond hair and blue eyes as representative of popular icons and traditions of white culture. Being opposite to the set standards she psychologically feels inferior and ugly. She becomes the victim of the white hegemony and feel depressed, ugly and discarded personality. The novel saw light in the 1960-1970s Black Arts Movement was in the air, it attracted lots of attention from literary world not to the same degree as her other novels got later on.

The novel expresses the sensitive world of Toni Morrison's community and conscious appeal about the social status of her society. Through her first endeavour she focuses on the mania of black inferiority complex with the American perception of perfect beauty based on colours. The blind perception about the physical beauty and its implication of sensuous representations in the outward expressions states the hegemony of outer form over the inner. The inferiority complex is the burden of the deep past coming out of the socio-political veins into the socio-psycho make-up of the blacks. It haunts the blacks since ages and the heavy tax it accumulates is the lost self-belief and self-dignity. The ignorant and powerless black restore to the reciprocal exploitations and torturous behaviour towards each other. The Bluest Eye is seen as literary watershed in portraying the sensitive portray of African American female identity and stern critique of internalized racism bred by American cultural definition of beauty.

The Ultimate Code of beauty: Blue Eyes

FORCED from home and all its pleasures
Africa's coast I left forlorn,
To increase a stranger's treasures
Over the raging billows borne.
Men from England brought and sold me,
Paid my price in paltry gold;
But, though slave they have enrolled me,
Minds are never to be sold.

William Copper.

The Negro's Complaint through the poem William Cowper, talks about the spirits of the Blacks during the early days of slavery. The white who oppositely colour thought that ruling black was their birth right. The poetic lines clearly show how Blacks came under the control of White people and their atrocity. Before going into detail regarding the oppression of slaves it will be meaningful to know briefly about the history of the institution of slavery and how it was legalized.

Pecola Breedlove being a victim of black representation by the white culture dominance feels herself indignant, ugly and discarded personality. The rejection from the culture and tormented with inner conflicts Pecola elucidates the desire to have blue eyes to feel equal and accepted.

It had occurred to Pecola some time ago that if her eyes, those eyes that held the pictures and knew the sights if those eyes of hers were different, that is to say, beautiful, she herself would be different. Her teeth were good, and her nose was not big and flat like some of those who were thought cute...pretty eyes, pretty eyes, pretty blue eyes, big blue pretty eyes...Each night, without fail, she prayed for blue eyes. (Morrison 4)

Pecola's craving for blue eyes shows the importance of colour and its psychological value as having a ticket of acceptance, love, beauty, friends and respectful place in society. The economic,

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political and social life around her is projected with beautiful dolls, film heroines, magazine pictures of beautiful women, the media and the movies has projected the metaphor of eyes as the success stamp.

These images of beauty and lust creates a feeling of dejection, self-hatred and social rejection. Claudia MacTeer, the principal narrator recalls from late 1941 as a young girl of nine years living in Lorain, Ohio with her family of poor but loving parents and ten years sister, Frieda. Pecola Breedlove an African American girl who comes to stay with them from a broken family and home. The novel is divided into four separate parts each named with season.

The Form and the Four Seasons

The autumn begins with Pecola comes to stay with MacTeer family after Cholly burns down their family house. The horrified fights between the mother and father of Breedlove's family noting how the parents are unable to hide the violence of their relationship in the presence of small children. Here the small girl feels that blue eyes will solve all her life problems. Winter, Claudia recalls the coming of Maureen Peale, a new wealthy and confident black girl with green eyes who became a centre of attraction for both her admirers and haters. She had good and fighting times with Pecola but finally turns on her calling as dark skinned and ugly. Geraldine another socially middleclass Afro American woman comes into the story who used to love her blue-eyed cat more than her own son. But the cat meets its death and the blame is restored with Pecola whom Geraldine calls as "nasty little black bitch". The spring sequence follows with the description of Pauline and Cholly's family history. The events from Pauline's early life, her teenage, marriage and her becoming a maid in an affluent white family. Cholly's traumatic childhood and his exploitations at various stages of his life that shapes his devastated personality. Born as orphan and abandoned, he is rescued by his Aunt Jimmy who leaves him alone and dies when he was just sixteen. His humiliation by two white hunters during his first sexual experience tormented his nature. He flees to Georgia to find his father but meets an indifferent man who is miserable and hopeless. Eventually he meets Pauline and marries her and have children. In the state of drunkenness, he brutally rapes his own daughter and impregnates her. It concludes a story about Soaphead church a self-proclaimed psychic and mysterious counsels an unattractive black girl who wishes she had blue eyes. Summer is the last season and narrative section in the novel, the gossip spreads regarding Pecola's pregnancy. At the end of the novel, Pecola finally narrates a story about her conversation with an imaginary companion concerning her new blue eyes and whether they are "the bluest eyes" in the world. In the last section of *The Bluest Eye* Claudia remembers meeting Pecola after Cholly's baby is delivered stillborn and accounts for the whereabouts of Sammy, Cholly, and Pauline.

The Standardization of the Abstract Beauty

Though beauty is considered as abstract and so cannot be concretised in by any standard, the novelist counts it through the eyes of the black girl. For her the abstract beauty can be only standardised by blue eyes. The experiences of African American characters set the tone for Morrison's examination of a young black girl's growing self-hatred. Morrison portrays this oppression through an incident in which Claudia tears her dolls and reflects her anger towards the existing social conditions for her race. She violets the cultural code and violently tries to destroy the racism through her acts. She wishes to destroy the symbol of American beauty and metaphor for black inferiority. It was an act of subverting

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the white domination as beauty seems to be the white's virtue. She dismantles the parts of the doll to make the pieces of the orthodoxy. The white American culture illusions Pecola happy, white, middle-class families are better than hopeless, black, working-class families. Being victims in different degrees by media, movies, books, news magazines, advertising and merchandise, the black community was made to believe that they are the ugliest and stain on the beauty. They are made hollow by the shallow misconception of white beauty standards. Girls in particular are more victimized like Pecola who feels that only blue eyes will make her beautiful and accepted by the society. Her innocent heart expects that the blue eyes will change her life and it will an entry into new birth where there will be no problem of any sort. Her colour creates a sense of damage in her senses. "The desire for blue eyes is part of the inverting quality of her world, in wanting blue eyes Pecola wants in fact to be white." (De Weever, 406)

At the cost of inferiority complex every African American character in the novel hates to be black in various degrees and feels ashamed of any associated with their own community, race, manners, culture and blindly accepting the generations old burden of being black. Their self-belief became their firm reality that they are ugly, stereotype cultureless and unlovable. In school too, she experiences indifferent attitudes of her teachers and classmates:

Long hours she sat looking in the mirror, trying to discover the secret of the ugliness, the ugliness that made her ignored and despised at school, by teachers and classmates alike. She was the only member of her class who sat alone at a double desk. (45)

The complete outward form of beauty is dominated over the inward sense of beauty. The absence of black cultural standards is their lost identity. Pecola symbolises the scapegoat for its own fears and feelings of unworthiness and hopelessness. "Pecola is the epitome of the victim in the world that reduces person to objects and then make them feel inferior as objects." (Davis 330) Claudia possess the love of her family and Pecola learns from her that the appearance conscious parents to devalue herself. Her insanity is the reflection of her rejection from those who valued appearance and, she shares the symptoms of the same. Self-hatred for not having the white cultural life haunts the minds of blacks. This sorrowful atmosphere in and around the family forge the negative identity of the protagonist. Pauline, Pecola's mother who works in white family as a servant becomes more negative and critical about their own ugly house. As a mother:

"Into her son she beat a loud desire to run away, and into her daughter she beat a fear of growing up, fear of other people, fear of life." (128)

The clean, neatly arranged, dirt less home is only white home while ill organized, dirty and gloomy homes are black homes. The sense of ugliness grown in the psyche from forefathers is passed on in the children and the negative feelings is carried like a burden on the minds.

...a dutiful black female servant, who attempts to keep white families from cutting their souls on the shattered pieces of their morally bankrupt lives while able to place only a thin and soiled bandage on the open wounds of her own black family. (Heinze 72)

In addition to the exposure of inherent racism against the American beauty standards, the novel throws light on the child abuse issues. Like Charles Dickens the novelist portrays the victimization of children due to racism. Some Afro American parents subconsciously inflict the violence on their children by forcing them to weigh their self-worth against white cultural standards. Cholly's rape of his daughter is an outrage of his towards the white system which has been abusing him throughout his life. Sexual supremacy is white culture which he operates to get rid of his own frustrations. He became the stereotype of lusty, ignorant and ill cultured father whose lust knows no relationship barriers. He becomes father of his own grandson through his daughter. The ugliest relationship is exposed by Morrison which becomes the destiny of black community in America. The incident damages the imaginative and romantic world of Pecola. Initially Cholly wants to protect his daughter from the dehumanizing glare of white people and their lusty attempts but he turns towards her with the same intent. The drunkard father makes her an object of lust and it reflects on the fact that women are nothing more than an object. The rape of Cholly is "pathetic attempt to return to the heady days of first love when his very presence essentially created another human being." (Janeway 383)

Blue is the symbol of deep ocean and black or brown stands for soil or land. Pecola wants to go away from her roots and ill fate into a dream land where there will be no colour bias and hatred. She wanted the blue 'sight' where she can see all as equal and with respect.

At the end Pecola's dream of having blue eyes speaks of her connection between how one is seen and how one sees. Her self-belief that had she been blue eyed the society would have not dared to torment her mind and body. She has lost her sight to see beautiful things around her rather she sees what she carries in her mind – the dark, ugly and gloomy.

Conclusion

The Bluest Eye is the first female bildungsroman i.e. the literary form that depicts the coming to an age of its times in the form of novel. The novel has been considered as a landmark in the personal and literary journey of Toni Morrison and African American novel. The undesirable is followed by Pecola and her family throughout the novel and hence meets the inevitable tragedies. Her story contrasts with the story of Claudia MacTeer whose coming of age is challenging but not alienating. She progressed towards maturity and happiness along with her family. The novel is a commentary on social issues that drive understanding and definition of cultural contrasts such as self-esteem, love, acceptance and sexuality. These are focused issues of Afro American community for the exclusion and exploitation in America. Novel depicts the challenges of growing and surviving in white community culture for blacks. Morrison's writing mainly at the initial stage is seen reflecting the hollowness of black existence and the psychological wound from they have been passing from generations. The glory of their historical past, their folklores and their traditions have been subverted by the white culture and its dominance. "to be black was to be a victim and therefore not to be a victim was not to be a black." (Steel 58) Thus the research paper shows how Toni Morrison depicts the suffering of individual in the form of the protagonist Pecola and the suffering of entire black community in American white dominated society.

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