LANGUAGE IN INDIA

Strength for Today and Bright Hope for Tomorrow

Volume 14:3 March 2014
ISSN 1930-2940

Racism, Subordination and Collective Trauma in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*

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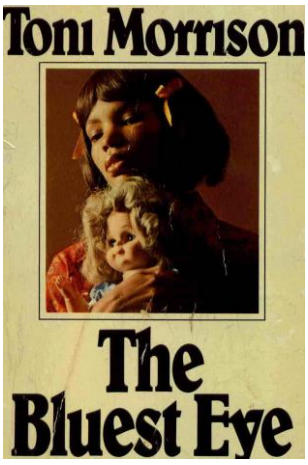

Abstract

It is incontrovertible that literary texts and life's existential realities are inter-connected. Literature is not written in a vacuum but in association to the prevalent notions. Black literature is a literature of social protest. What blacks undergo by virtue of being a black is laid bare by the black writers. Their work undoubtedly, reflects oppression and suffering on the basis of colour apartheid. They have portrayed the male protagonists, laying stress on their exclusive and complex experience in the community. Franz Fanon also mentions this state of 'nonbeing' which is 'an extraordinary and arid region, an utterly naked declivity where an upheaval can be born' (Fanon 1967:8). This is very true for the male black writers. But when the Black women wielded the pen, they not only emphasized the experience of Blacks but also drew attention to the vital female experience, important to get a complete view of the black culture and their life. These writers hold a mirror to the society, sensitizing the readers, taking up the responsibility of shaking the society out of its complacency.

Renowned Author

In the line of Black women writers Frances Ellen Watkins Harper (*Iola Le Roy*, 1892), one of the leading figures in the national struggle to free Blacks from slavery, Alice Walker, Jessie Fauset, Paule Marshall and Toni Morrison are some of the renowned names.

The present paper intends to deliberate on Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* from the angle of postcolonial thought also taking feminist thought into perspective. Rooted in history, reliving the pleasures, pains and horrors of black existence, her works are prisms of life.

The Bluest Eye

The Bluest Eye presents a story of a simple black girl, longing to have a pair of blue eyes, an adjudged symbol of 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). Claudia narrates how Pecola Breedlove is driven insane partly by her victimization and partly by her desire to have white skin, blonde hair and blue eyes. It shows her segregation with the white society. Here it would be pertinent to note what Jean Paul Sartre states in *Being and*

Nothingness. He points out how human relations depend on "the Look" and being "seen" by the others, which is very true in the case of Pecola and the many others under study in this paper (239).

Psychic Violence

The novel highlights the destructive effect of this kind of a thinking that is decidedly psychic violence. What Cynthia A. Davis states can be used here as an advantage to highlight this aspect:

> All of Morrison's characters exist in a world defined by its blackness and by the surrounding white society that both violates and denies it. The destructive effect of the white society can take the form of outright physical violence, but oppression in Morrison's world is more often psychic violence. (27)

Symbolic

The preface of the novel lends and explains the grim atmosphere pervading the novel. In engaging the lines from preface as titles of the chapter, the author astutely brings to the readers' eyes as how the blacks lack space and time in their own confined, limited world. The discerning readers do not fail to notice that it is difficult to read their life as the prose sans space, in shrunk words deliver the truth of their shrunk, timidly contoured lives, symbolically.

The Child Narrator – Condemnation of the Concept of Black Beauty

What Claudia, the child narrator says summarizing Pauline's view about "physical beauty being; probably the most-destructive idea in the history of human thought" (95) gist up what Toni Morrison intends drawing our attention to. The story is in itself a condemnation of the American concept of black beauty. It shows the negative social consequences that generates from the imposition of Euro-American concept of beauty and how the deep impact of this on the psyche of black girls hurt them and infect them with an inferiority complex. The novel is replete with such instances.

Cultural Stress on Blue-eyed Doll

During Christmas Claudia is always gifted a blue-eyed doll. The cultural stress on the kind of beauty standard is obvious from what she gathers looking around. "Adults, older girls, shops, magazines, newspapers, window signs-all the world had agreed a blue-eyed, yellow-haired, pink-skinned doll was what every girl child treasured" and "this is beautiful, and if you are on this day 'worthy' you may have it" (14), is a result of her seething hatred. She not only destroys white dolls but also draws sadistic pleasure out of teasing white girls. "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" (Moses1999: 2). Her jealousy is obvious when she transfers the same impulses to little white girls:

> To discover what eluded me: the secret of the magic they weaved on others. What made people look at them and say, "Awwwww," but not for me? The eyes slide of black women as they approached them on the street and the possessive gentleness of their touch as they handled them.
>
> If I pinch them, their eyes --- unlike the crazed glint of the baby doll's eyes --- would fold in pain, and their cry would not be the sound of an ice-box door, but a *fascinating* cry of pain. (15, emphasis mine).

Victim of the Concept of Ugliness

Another victim of racial superiority is Pecola. She thinks herself 'ugly'. Long hours she sat 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. Partial behavior of her teachers is obvious when in school she is made to sit alone at a double desk.

> Her teachers had always treated this way. They tried never to glance at her, and called on her only when everyone was required to respond. She also knew that when one of the girls at school wanted to be particularly to be insulting to a boy, or wanted to get an immediate response from him,

> she could say, "Bobby loves Pecola Breedlove! … and never fail to get peals of laughter from those in earshot, and mock anger from the accused. (34)

Yearning to Become Beautiful

Yearning to acquire beautiful blue eyes and wishing to be beautiful, Pecola unconsciously adopts the white beauty standards that are valued. Each night she prays for nice blue eyes. She even observes a fifty two year old white shopkeeper who did not notice her, "a total absence of human recognition" (36). She can sense the "distaste" "for her, her blackness" "lurking in the eyes of all white people" (36-37). She holds her blackness a curse that accounts for and creates "vacuum edged with distaste in white eyes" (37). She knows that to be white is to be respectable and loved. Even a candy-wrapper carries the picture of a smiling white face. She draws a parallel between herself and the dandelions that are considered a weed. In search of recognition, respect and self worth, she transforms into "a little black girl who wanted to rise up out of the pit of her blackness and see the world with blue eyes" (138). Nobody played with her probably "because she was ugly" (69).

"At every turn Pecola is confronted with attitudes and images based on the myth of white superiority that reinforces her tendency towards self hatred" (Alexander 1998:2).

Colour Consciousness All Over

Louis Junior's mother, Geraldine too calls her a nasty little black bitch. Geraldine, a half-black, is proud owner of milk brown skin. She forbids her son from playing with black children and explained to him the difference between colored people and niggers:

> Colored people were neat and quiet; niggers were dirty and loud. He belonged to the former group: he wore white shirts and blue trousers: his hair was cut as close to his scalp as possible to avoid any suggestion of wool … in winter his mother put Jergen's lotion on his face to keep the skin from becoming ashen. Even though he was light-skinned, it was

> possible to ash. The line between colored and nigger was not always clear; subtle and tell tale signs threaten to erode it, and the watch had to be constant. (67-68)

A Dream Child with Brown Hair

Frieda and Claudia are jealous of Maureen Paul. Maureen is a "dream child" with brown hair, green eyes and fair complexion, which enchanted the entire school. They are jealous of her and the special treatment she gets by virtue of being a white: When teachers called on her, they smiled encouragingly. Black boys didn't trip her in the halls; white boys didn't stone her, white girls didn't suck their teeth when she was assigned to be their work partner; black girls stepped aside when she wanted to use the sink in the girls toilet, and their eyes genuflected under sliding lids. She had to never search for anybody to eat with in the cafeteria. To let out the hidden hatred born out of injustice make them look hard for flaws in Maureen to restore equilibrium but had to be contented by making ugly and distorting her name to Meringue Pie. Discovering that she had a dogtooth and was born with six fingers on each hand, though the extra one had been removed surgically, they felt triumphant. The covert hostility gained overt in expression in teasing her and calling six-finger-dogtooth-meringue-pie. Though they were secretly prepared to be her friend Claudia considered it 'a dangerous friendship.' The 'unearned haughtiness' in Maureen's eyes made Claudia plot accidental slamming of locker doors on her and want to kick her.

Wronged for No Fault of Her

Pecola is the prime example of the one wronged for no fault of hers. Girls like Claudia who too feel inferior due to their blackness felt beautiful, standing astride her ugliness and "honed our egos on her, padded our characters with our frailty, and yawned in the fantasy of our strength" (163). Boys, for being a black, teased Pecola. Though the boys themselves were black, it seemed it was their contempt for their blackness that gave the first insult its teeth. Their self-hatred burst as an outrage on their lips and they extemporize a worse insulting and harassing Pecola: "black e mo…" (50). Maureen too

calls Pecola's father "old black daddy." (56). Claudia too feels miserable for being considered secondary and un-important as compared to Maureen, just because she belongs to the world of whites.

> If she was cute—and if anything could be believed, she *was*—that we were not. And what did that mean? We were lesser. Nicer, brighter, but still lesser. Dolls we could destroy, but we could not destroy the honey voices of parents and aunts, the obedience in the eyes of our peers, the slippery light in the eyes of our teachers when they encountered the Maureen Peals of the world. (57-58)

What Do I Lack?

She often thinks, "What did we lack? Why was it important?" It was a time when she was "in love" with herself and "felt comfortable in our skins, enjoyed the news that our senses released to us, admired our dirt, cultivated our scars, and could not comprehend this unworthiness". (57-58) It was a stage when jealousy was considered a part of natural instinct, "but envy was a strange, new feeling" and "that Maureen Paul was not the Enemy and not worthy of such intense hatred" and they could understand that "The *Thing* to fear was the *Thing* that made *her* beautiful, and not us". (57-58).

Strong Pulls of White Beauty and Social Life Standards

All these characters feel the strong pulls of white beauty and social life standards. In their desire to adopt the values of the dominant culture they face incompatibility, tension and conflict both overt and covert. In the very psyche of the young black girls is embedded that whatever belongs to the whites is perfect, thus igniting a sense of inferiority in them – that seethes and hurts within, giving them a feeling of rejection in the racist world. The inevitability of the predicament of these characters is rooted in the color of their skin and their being born black, "the alignment of a personal disability with an external substance" (Rosenbtalt 1973: 10).

Colour Apartheid

The scars of colour apartheid are clearly drawn in the life of elders as well, particularly the black men. Oppressed by the dominance, they let out a chain reaction by maltreating their women. These women become doubly oppressed as their men direct their repressed hostility against the whites, towards their women. For example, Cholly Breedlove who suffers the sexual humiliation at the hands of the white policemen shifts his hatred for them towards his partner. It is a kind of a displaced fury that often, black women undergo.

In their early, married life Pauline and Cholly loved each other, keeping each other happy with small gestures of care. He was "kind and lively" and Pauline felt "secure and grateful" (90). But as he joined work in the city Pauline resented her loneliness:

> Housework was not enough; there were only two rooms, and no yard to keep or move about in. The women in the town wore high-heeled shoes, and when Pauline tried to wear them, they aggravated her shuffle into a pronounced limp. Cholly was kindness still, but began to resist her total dependence on him. They were beginning to have less and less to say to each other. He had no problem finding other people and other things to occupy him—men were always climbing the stairs asking for him, and he was happy to accompany them, leaving her alone. (91-92)

Pauline's Suffering

Pauline lacks the female company that would bring respite in her otherwise inert life. She feels uncomfortable with the few black women she met. She amuses them because she did not straighten her hair like them, emulating the white females. Pauline's effort to match them by trying to make up her face as they did, ignites further resentment, for it came off rather badly. "Their goading glances and private snickers at her way of talking (saying "chil'ren") and dressing developed in her a desire for new clothes" (92). When Cholly was unable to provide for her clothes and make-up accessories, they began to quarrel. She decided to go to work. This did not solve the problem but made the matter

worse. Taking jobs as a day worker helped with the clothes, and even a few things for the apartment, but it did not help with Cholly, for he was not pleased with her purchases and often complained about it. Their marriage was shredded with bickering:

> She was still no more than a girl, and still waiting for that plateau of happiness, that hand of a precious Lord who, when her way grew dreary would always linger near. Only now she had a clearer idea of what dreary meant. Money became the focus of all their discussions, hers for clothes, his for drink. The sad thing was that Pauline did not really care for clothes and makeup. She merely wanted other women to cast favorable glances her way. (92)

A discerning reader can easily append that Pauline's desire to work in spite of her handicap to meet her requirements, bolsters Cholly's ego. It is only when Mrs Pauline Breedlove discloses to her husband that she was carrying, he suddenly transforms into a once-again- loving and caring husband. This transformation delights Pauline.

White versus Black

The black and white discrimination is conspicuous in the way Pauline is treated at the hospital. The biasness of the doctor, examining her while explaining to a student doctor is openly conspicuous:

> A little old doctor come to examine me…One old one and some young ones. The old one was learning the young ones about babies. Showing them how to do. When he got to me he said now these here women you don't have any trouble with. They deliver right away and with no pain. Just like horses… I seed them talking to them white women: 'How you feel? Gonna have twins?" … I had to let them people know having a baby was more than a bowel movement. I hurt just like them white women. (97)

The attitude of the doctor that alienates his sympathy with the black women in labour whereas aligns it with the white women, results from his subjection to the white system of dominance that infuses a kind of irrational superiority complex which dehumanizes the black. Fanon writes in *The Wretched of the Earth* that colonial

Manichaeism finds its "logical conclusion" when it "dehumanizes the native, or to speak plainly it turns him into an animal" and often mentions the native in "zoological terms" (Fanon 1963:32-33). To their biased and blinkered selves the blacks are the caregivers and the whites tender, sophisticated, the ones cared for.

Short-Lived Transformation of Cholly and Mrs. Breedlove

Cholly's transformation is not permanent but short-lived. He again reverts to the old way of life, given to excessive drinking, turning a nelson's eye to the house hold responsibility. To run the house and combat this tough situation Mrs Breedlove — "holding Cholly as a model of sin and failure, she bore him like a crown of thorns, and her children like a cross"--- took on the full responsibility and recognition of bread winner and turned to church for moral support and courage. For her all the meaningfulness of her life was in her work. It is a kind of escape from her otherwise dull life. She literally rises above Cholly in every way, and felt she was fulfilling a mother's role carefully. She worked twelve to sixteen hours a day to support them. It appears as if she has a deep-seated hatred towards Cholly, generated by his indifference. She turns a strict mother and pointed out to her children their father's faults to keep them from having them, punished them when they showed any slovenliness, no matter how slight.

She found in her master's family what she lacked at home --- affection, appreciation and generosity, "power, praise, and luxury were hers in this household" (99). It won't be a hazard to state that she neglected her house directing all her attentions to her master's. Her children feel the partial response of their mother towards them and the children of the whites. Her children resent the "honey in her words" for the white child of her master while she is stern with them. (85). For Mrs Breedlove, being lost in housework is a liberating experience from the suffocation she feels in her own home:

> Soon she stopped trying to keep her own house… More and more she neglected her house, her children, her man—they were like the afterthoughts one has just before sleep… Here she could arrange things, clean things, line things up in neat rows. Here her foot flopped around on deep pile carpets, and there was no uneven sound. Here she found beauty, order, cleanliness, and

> praise…They even gave her what she had never had—a nickname—Polly. It was her pleasure to stand in her kitchen at the end of a day and survey her handiwork… (99).

Pauline as a Breadwinner of Her Family

Pauline rises as a breadwinner of her family, working twelve to sixteen hours to support them but she fails to maintain the aura of motherhood unable to tend her children emotionally. She provides the basic needs but holds back the caring touch. The place of her work and her home are two separate worlds for her, out of which she prefers the former. She keeps her children beyond the reach of this world and induces in them a feeling that it was unattainable:

> Pauline kept this order, this beauty, for herself, a private world, and never introduced it into her storefront, or to her children never introduced it into her storefront, or to her children. Them she bent toward respectability, and in so doing taught them fear: fear of being clumsy, fear of being like their father, fear of not being loved by God, fear of madness like Cholly's mother's. 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 (100).

This is a reason enough for her daughter Pecola to have blue eyes like the whites, who belong to this other world – alluring, respectable and valuable.

Existential Deviation

Why does the drunkard Cholly set his house on fire, bringing his family on road when the desire to own was super most in him? It may be attributed to his anger towards the white which induces "existential deviation" (Fanon 1967:14). As Fanon points out in *The Wretched of the Earth* that "the colonial context is characterized by the dichotomy which it imposes upon the whole people"(35). The resulting seething anger then gets imposed on his own people in the form of violence. Though Cholly's act disintegrates the whole family, even then his wife does not leave him, "I started to leave him once, but something came up. Once, after he tried to set the house on fire, I was all set in my mind to

go. I can't even 'member now what held me" (100). She seems to accept him with all his faults. Unable to take it any longer and with the need to give an outlet to the anger lying within his heart, he rises to the height of bestiality by raping his daughter. Pecola's rape by her own father lays bare the ugliness of child abuse and dehumanization. On the part of Cholly the burning of the house and raping his own daughter are more an act of dominance. But it is after her rape that she becomes mentally deranged and starts hallucinating blue eyes in her otherwise black face. The dual dilemmas of being a black and of rape by her own father pusher her all the more into inner recesses of her hurt psyche.

A Discourse on the Plight of the Blacks

On the whole the novel produces a discourse on the plight of the blacks. Toni Morrison herself acknowledges that her works reflect the Black life and their experiences in general. In her interview with Nellie Mckay, she says, "… I am trying to recreate something out of an old art form in my books ---the something that defines what makes a book 'Black'" (Morrison 1983:423). Claudia's narration of her life preempts the exploration of the lives of the other blacks. The emphasis is on the race, class and gender oppression.

Morrison highlights the economic exploitation of the blacks—an oppressed group in a system that lets one group to enjoy privileges and live on the sweat of the former – through the exploitation of Pauline by her white mistress who refuses her, her wage when she decides to leave the job. She draws our attention to the ugliness of child abuse in Pecola's rape by her own father. Cholly's metaphorical rape and humiliation at the hands of the white policemen when they force him to reenact lovemaking with Darlene, drawing nasty pleasure, make him feel sub-human. A dexterous artist that she is, Morrison shows clearly that the assertiveness of Claudia and her sister cannot conceal their sense of insecurity. She goes to show that the social order produces conditions that destroy and distort individual beings that are a part of an oppressed group.

In delineating the characters like Pauline she brings out the double oppression – patriarchal as well as that of the white masters. Talking about her fictional characters,

Morrison says, “I try to borrow as deeply as I can into characters. I don’t come up with all good or all bad” (McKay 1983:420). What she captures in her story is not only the typical experience of the blacks as blacks but also the need of essential humanity, a societal set-up that promises meaningful life, listens to the blacks and accepts them not on the white terms but as they are.

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