

Manifestation Of Gender And Racial Discrimination In Toni Morrison's Novel The Bluest Eye

Joshiha Bell J.B

Research Scholar In English

Reg.No:Mku22ffol10573

Department Of English And Comparative Literature

School Of English And Foreign Languages,

Madurai Kamaraj University

Madurai-21

Tamilnadu (Tn)

ABSTRACT

African American literature is the body of literature produced in the United States by writers of African descent. The genre traces its origins to the works of such late eighteenth century writers as Phillis Wheatley and Olaudah Equiano, reaching early high points with slave narratives and the Harlem Renaissance, and continuing today with authors such as Toni Morrison, Maya Angelou, and Walter Mosley. Among the themes and issues explored in African American literature, the role of African Americans is really commendable. African-American culture, racism, slavery, and equality are projected by these writers very poignantly in their writings. African American writing has also tried to incorporate oral forms such as spirituals, sermons, gospel music, blues, and rap.

Key Words: African American Literature, Slavery, Black Skin, Oppression, etc.

Date of Submission: 13-01-2024

Date of Acceptance: 23-01-2024

The Bluest Eye is the first novel of Nobel-Prize winning writer Toni Morrison. It was published in 1970. Set in Lorain, Ohio in 1941, the novel traces how Pecola Breedlove, the dark-skinned daughter of a poor African American family became pregnant with her father's child and lost her sanity after the baby died. Morrison prefaces the novel with a Foreword in which she explains several of her choices in writing the novel. African American literature is the body of literature produced in the United States by writers of African descent. The genre traces its origins to the works of such late eighteenth century writers as Phillis Wheatley and Olaudah Equiano, reaching early high points with slave narratives and the Harlem Renaissance, and continuing today with authors such as Toni Morrison, Maya Angelou, and Walter Mosley.

Among the themes and issues explored in African American literature, the role of African Americans is really commendable. African-American culture, racism, slavery, and equality are projected by these writers very poignantly in their writings. African American writing has also tried to incorporate oral forms such as spirituals, sermons, gospel music, blues, and rap.

As African Americans' place in American society has changed over the centuries, so, too, have the foci of African American literature. Before the American Civil War, African American literature primarily focused on the issue of slavery, as indicated by the subgenre of slave narratives. At the turn of the twentieth century, books by authors such as W.E.B. DuBois and Booker T. Washington debated whether to confront or appease racist attitudes in the United States(www.newworldencyclopedia).

The novel opens with sentences drawn from the *Dick and Jane* early reading primers. The novel then moves to first-person narration by Claudia MacTeer, who explains that she has returned to Pecola's story in an effort to understand why and how such a tragedy could have occurred. The novel tells us the shocking story of a black little girl named Pecola Breedlove, who descends into madness after being emotionally and physically abused on several occasions by the entire community around her, especially—by her family. Eleven-year old Pecola lives with her family in Lorain, Ohio. When her father, Cholly, burns down their house, she spends some days with the MacTeer family.

Claudia, the youngest MacTeer, is one of the narrators who tells us Pecola's story. In the years covered by the narrative, 1940 and 1941, the Breedlove girl is constantly bullied and mistreated by teachers, classmates, neighbours and family. Because she thinks of herself as ugly and she attributes their mistreatment of her to her physical appearance, as she believes that no one would behave badly in front of her if she were beautiful. One of

the most traumatizing events in Pecola's life is the moment when she is raped by her father, gets pregnant and loses her sanity. By telling her story, Claudia is trying to make sense of everything that happened to the youngest Breedlove and to their community.

Gender inequality means discrepancy between men and women and different access to resources in health, education, political empowerment and economic empowerment and women are considered to be the caretaker of the houses and producer of children (www.peacecorps.gov/org).

Through the stories of Pecola and the people who surround her, the novel brings to discussion matters such as gender, race and identity, and raises questions on racial self-loathing, the menace of white beauty standards, and the loss of one's self. The researcher aims to analyze how concepts of identity in relation to race and gender are manifested in the novel, how the book can be read as a claim for racial pride, and what Morrison's suggestion for a healthy, healed identity is. The first one was raised by Toni Morrison herself. In the foreword section of the book, she comments on the challenge of centering the novel's main inquiry on the vulnerable character of Pecola Breedlove—a poor, black, lonely little girl.

Morrison mentions that she desired to avoid giving the readers the comfort of simply pitying the young child instead of reflecting and questioning themselves on their participation in her smashing. After presenting her strategy for overcoming such an obstacle, Morrison confesses that the result did not satisfy her, and did not work either, for “many readers remain touched but not moved” (*The Bluest Eye* 3). In the very beginning of the novel, after revealing the shocking news about Pecola and her father, the narrator tells us that “there is really nothing more to say—except why. But since why is difficult to handle, one must take refuge in how” (*TBE* 4).

Racism is a central subject of the novel, so the theme of black identity is illustrated very vividly by the author. As the author points out in the afterword of the novel, the political climate of the United States was one of agitation, turmoil and great upheaval in the lives of African Americans when she wrote *The Bluest Eye*. Since she deals with concepts of identity and pride that were prominent in the American scene in the 1960s, both in the political and the artistic fields, events and concepts like the Civil Rights Movement, Black Power, Black Nationalism and The Black Arts Movement are the key themes of the paper. These topics are frequently explored in Toni Morrison's fiction.

In a number of interviews, the author has affirmed that she always makes sure to identify herself as a black woman novelist, who writes primarily for a black audience and is concerned about speaking of African American people and culture in an African American language.

In an interview to *The Paris Review*, Morrison has declared that it is very important to her that her work is African American, and that she finds it more relevant that her production fits into the black culture tradition than in the literary canon tradition (Morrison “Art”. Web). Being no exception to Morrison's fictional tendency, *The Bluest Eye* has it as absolutely relevant information that Pecola is black. However, as the writer highlights in the foreword section of the book, it is also extremely important to the narrative that she is a young child: “I focused, therefore, on how something as grotesque as the demonization of an entire race could take root inside the most delicate member of society: a child; the most vulnerable member: a female” (*TBE* IX–X).

Hence, as they are essential to the construction of Pecola's character and the novel as a whole, identity, race and gender are all examined in this paper. The discussion of black identity is analyzed in the contexts of the New Negro Movement, the Black Arts Movement and black feminism. What those artistic and political movements were saying at the time is examined, since Morrison establishes dialogues with ideas which emerged in these contexts. The author says in the novel,

Love is never any better than the lover. Wicked people love wickedly, violent people love violently, weak people love weakly, stupid people love stupidly, but the love of a free man is never safe. There is no gift for the beloved. The lover alone possesses his gift of love. The loved one is shorn, neutralized, frozen in the glare of the lover's inward eye (*TBE* 22).

When Pecola was born, Pauline declares that she “knewed she was ugly” (*TBE* 124). The woman was not proud of her daughter, and when the MacTeer sisters visited the Fischer's house to talk to Pecola, Claudia was angered by the fact that the little white Fischer girl called Pauline “Polly”, when Pecola was only allowed to call her mother “Mrs. Breedlove” (*TBE* 104–106). When an accident takes place and Pecola knocks over a pan full of deep-dish berry cobbler, Pauline gets extremely furious. She does not care that her daughter has burned herself; she launches and slaps the girl, yelling at her (*TBE* 106–107).

In a similarly aggressive manner, when Pecola is raped by her father and gets pregnant, a woman comments that “they say the way her mama beat her she lucky to be alive herself” (*TBE* 187). Since one of the first thoughts Pauline had when Pecola was born was that the girl was ugly, it seems that that might be one of the reasons for her not displaying or even feeling affection towards her daughter. Instead, she prefers to dote on the little white Fischer girl, who matches the dominant society's ideal of beauty.

Pauline also beats Pecola when she is raped by Cholly, so one understands that the woman blames the girl for what happened—as women are quiet frequently blamed when they become victims of sexual aggression. One more time, Pecola is abused because she is black, “ugly” and female. At the end of the novel,

when Pecola goes to beg Soaphead Church to give her blue eyes, the man's thoughts are that "here was an ugly little girl asking for beauty" (*TBE* 172). He laments the fact that he could never help her, which shows how he does not believe blackness could ever be beautiful.

Despite his apparent desire to aid her, the old man only uses Pecola to kill a dog that was bothering him. Innocently, the girl feeds the dog the poison Soaphead Church had given her, and believes its convulsion is a sign that the magic has taken place and that she now possesses her so desired blue eyes. Soaphead Church is the fourth person to think or call Pecola ugly using that exact word. Although Yacobowski and Geraldine do not use the word themselves, it is clear that they also find the girl undesirable based solely on her appearance.

However, there is at least one more person who believes Pecola is ugly—the girl herself. When upset by Cholly and Pauline's turbulent fights, Pecola thinks that she cannot escape her misery because "as long as she looked the way she did, as long as she was ugly, she would have to stay with these people" (*TBE* 43). Constantly exposed to the worship of white idols and icons such as Shirley Temple and Mary Jane, and seeing how everyone seems to adore them, Pecola prays for blue eyes in order to be more like Temple, Jane or the Fischer girl. In that way, maybe, the girl hopes she may come to be loved. After visiting Soaphead Church, Pecola believes she has acquired blue eyes.

The girl is broken, and that is shown by the way she now has two selves: one she perceives as her true self—with blue eyes—, and one who is her imaginary friend. Even though she does believe to possess blue eyes now, that still does not seem to be enough:

Please. If there is somebody with bluer eyes than mine, then maybe there is somebody with the bluest eyes. The bluest eyes in the whole world. That's just too bad, isn't it? Please help me look. 43 No. But suppose my eyes aren't blue enough? Blue enough for what? Blue enough for...I don't know. Blue enough for something. Blue enough...for you! I'm not going to play with you anymore. Oh. Don't leave me. Yes. I am. Why? Are you mad at me? Yes. Because my eyes aren't blue enough? Because I don't have the bluest eyes? No. Because you're acting silly. Don't go. Don't leave me. Will you come back if I get them? Get what? The bluest eyes. Will you come back then? Of course I will. I'm just going away for a little while. You promise? Sure. I'll be back. Right before your very eyes (*TBE* 201–202).

It is apparent that Pecola is truly looking for affection and someone who will stay with her. The girl fears that she will be left alone again if she does not have the bluest eyes. This passage shows how she is trying to achieve white beauty standards will never truly work for Pecola: she will be forever chasing them. If blue eyes—that is, the white concept of beauty,—cannot work for her and make her loved, it seems not to be the correct answer for the healing of an African American identity.

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 (*The Bluest Eye* 45).

In "Wounded Beauty: An Exploratory Essay on Race, Feminism, and the Aesthetic Question", Cheng seems to have an inquiry similar to that of Morrison's in *The Bluest Eye*. Both writers seem bothered not only about those excluded by the white concept of beauty, but about the concept itself.

As Cheng says, the insurgence of strategies to combat the history of aesthetic denigration through revaluing notions of difference or alternative beauty offers only short term cures since the fundamental logic of aesthetic and moral judgment remains intact. A reevaluation of "bad looks" as something positive inadvertently reconfirms the existence of "good looks." Similarly, efforts at racial reclamation through slogans such as "Black Is Beautiful" seem to announce injury more than remedy. Both strategies replace the object of aesthetic value without questioning the primacy of that value. We continually run into a double bind wherein liberal discourse wants to rehabilitate beauty without having to assent to its seductions. (Cheng 193).

Toni Morrison created a slogan "Black is Beautiful"; therefore, the novelist does not seem to feel that associating blackness to beauty is the best way to value African American traditions. To her, valuing beauty is actually another way of assimilating white values as the most important. As an alternative, Morrison proposes that racial pride and connection to African American roots can be more successfully achieved through traditions that come from the community, such as music (blues and jazz, for instance) and storytelling (seen in oral traditions such as call-and-response and in acts as signifying and testifying). However, Pecola, who is only exposed to aspirations of white values and does not learn to connect to African American traditions, cannot find peace or love. Thus Toni Morrison exposes the racial and gender issues encountered by black women in a white—dominating society. In her view, accepting one's own self is the first step to give a blow to all Whites who ill-treated them because of their complexion and their race.

WORKS CITED

- [1]. Bailey, D'Army. "James Meredith Shot During The March Against Fear". Youtube. Youtube,2015. Available At <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Mss04qbbme> Accessed On May 26th , 2016.
- [2]. Baraka, Amiri. "Amiri Baraka Reads Black Art". Youtube. Youtube, 2009. Available At https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dh2P-Tleh_W Accessed On May 28th, 2016.
- [3]. Bernard, Emily. "The New Negro Movement And The Politics Of Art". In *The Cambridge History Of African American Literature*, P. 268–287. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2011.
- [4]. Buck, Christopher George. "New Negro Movement". In *Encyclopedia Of African American History*, P. 662–664. Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2010.
- [5]. Cheng, Anne Anlin. "Wounded Beauty: An Exploratory Essay On Race, Feminism, And The Aesthetic Question". In *Tulsa Studies In Women's Literature*, Vol. 19, No. 2, P. 191–271.
- [6]. Tulsa, OK: University Of Tulsa, 2000. Dittmar, Linda. "'Will The Circle Be Unbroken?' The Politics Of Form In *The Bluest Eye*". In *Bloom's Modern Critical Interpretations – Toni Morrison's The Bluest Eye – Updated Edition*, P. 67–86. New York, NY: Infobase Publishing, 2007.
- [7]. Douglas, Cristopher. "What *The Bluest Eye* Knows About Them: Culture, Race, Identity". In *Bloom's Modern Critical Interpretations – Toni Morrison's The Bluest Eye – Updated Edition*, P. 209–232. New York, NY: Infobase Publishing, 2007.
- [8]. Gillespie, Carmem. *Critical Companion To Toni Morrison – A Literary Reference To Her Life And Work*. New York, NY: Facts On File, Inc., 2008.
- [9]. Gravett, Sharon L. "Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*: An Inverted Walden?" In *Bloom's Modern Critical Interpretations – Toni Morrison's The Bluest Eye – Updated Edition*, P. 87–96. New York, NY: Infobase Publishing, 2007.