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QUEST FOR IDENTITY IN TONI MORRISON'S *THE BLUEST EYE*

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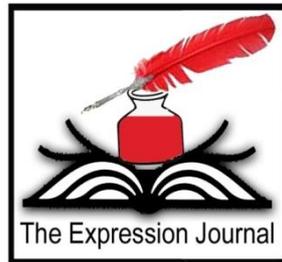
Abstract

The Bluest Eye is the first published novel of Nobel laureate Toni Morrison. Although the novel was not an instant favourite, it gradually came to be recognized as a masterpiece and is today regarded as an indispensable art of Afro-American literary canon. *The Bluest Eye* makes one of the most powerful attacks yet on the relationship between western standard of female beauty and the psychological oppression of black women. But Pecola Breedlove's predicament, as the young black girl who feels that blackness condemns her to ugliness and lovelessness, is not only a problem for black girls and women. Morrison makes this clear in an expose of the ugliness of black poverty; powerlessness, and loss of positive self concept in this poignant, haunting poetic narrative. *The Bluest Eye* was not an instant literary success, and it was out of print by 1974. In this wake her name appeared frequently in magazine articles in which she commented on black life and women's issues set in a small mid western town in Lorain, Ohio, during the depression. In this research work, my intention is to analyze how concepts of identity in relation to race and gender are manifested in the novel.

Keywords

Toni Morrison, Oppression, Powerlessness, Depression, Culture,
Identity, Fraudulent Love.

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The Bluest Eye narrates the story of Pecola Breedlove, who hating her black self, yearns of blue eyes, she believes will make her white, extinguish her position as pariah, and give her the love and security that are desperately missing from her life. Blue eyes, she believes, are a panacea a self hate makes her vulnerable to abuse not only from her family but from the entire community as well as Pecola is obsessed with the myth of physical beauty and as a result is plunged into a world of madness. For her the bluest eye is symbolic of her dream for racial superiority. They symbolize beauty, respect and equality. According to Barbara Christian, "Pecola's desire for blue eyes, the white model of beauty, encompasses three hundred years of unsuccessful interface between black and white cultures" (Christian 138). Her feelings around her incessant urge for the bluest eyes. "It has occurred to Pecola some time ago that if her eyes, those eyes than held the picture, and knew the sights-if those eyes of her were different" (Davis 335). We find up on close analysis that Pecola, a young girl in quest of womanhood suffers an identity crisis when she falls victim to the standard set by American society that ascribes what is beautiful to ascertain images of white women. This standard has no place for Pecola's brown skin and eyes for unlike Maureen Peal her high yellow dream child classmate, Pecola does not fit the mould. Whereas Maureen's complexion and sole green eyes make her influential, winning her preferential treatment from and the admiration of teachers and peers and allowing her to wallow in comfort and care. Dark skinned Pecola is considerate black, irrelevant, and uninfluential. She is ugly. Unlike Pecola, Maureen has influence as she involuntarily enchant the entire school:

Black boys didn't trip her in the hall; white boys didn't stone her,
white girls didn't stuck-their teeth when she was assigned to their

work partners: black girls stepped aside when she wanted to use the sink in the girl's toilet. (*The Bluest Eyes* 43)

The poignancy of Pecola's victimization arises not only from the realism and resulting interracial conflicts Pecola must encounter on the way to self-hood but also from the interracial conflicts related to colour, firmly rooted in white racists myth, subscribed to by black culture in the Novels of Toni Morrison. The Black people believe themselves to be ugly. In *The Bluest Eye* Pecola Breedlove is told from the day she is born that she is ugly. She lives with her brother Sammy her mother Pauline and her father Holly. Though their surname is Breedlove, ironically enough, all they breed is self-hate and mutual destruction. They all believe themselves to be ugly and as a result ugliness becomes all-pervasive in their home and in their countenances.

It was as though some mysterious all-knowing master had said you are ugly people. They had looked about themselves and saw nothing to contradict the statement; saw, in fact, support for it leaping at them from every billboard, every movie, every glance... and they took the ugliness in their hands, threw it as a mantle over them and went about the world with it. (*The Bluest Eye* 102)

One of the best things we notice about Pecola Breedlove in *The Bluest Eye* is her silence. For an adolescent Pecola is unnaturally quiet. There are only one or two instances in the novel where she has some dialogue. Even when she speaks she does so with a great deal of trepidation. Only in the episode where she visits the neighbourhood prostitutes does she come close to 'being herself. For most of the novel it is either Claudia who is trying to interpret her action or the omniscient narrator who constructs Pecola's inner-most thoughts and doubts. In the first section of the novel Pecola comes to stay with the MacTeers and from this point in their lives- Frieda MacTeer and Claudia MacTeer take an almost parental interest in her. They try to protect her from Mrs. MacTeer's anger and they want her to feel secure in spite of the fact that they know it is her father's act of arson which has landed the family outdoors.

Pecola desires to possess beauty is first hinted through her infatuation with the Shirley Temple mug at Claudia's house. She drinks a lot of milk just to have an opportunity to hold and cradle the mug in her hand. She repeats this process with utmost reverence. Frieda, the elder MacTeer girl loved Shirley Temple as much as Pecola and therefore sympathized with her. But Claudia, as she confesses it, found Shirley Temple an object of hatred. This hatred was evident in her violent disgust towards the Shirley Temple dolls. These dolls are given the look of Shirley Temple with blonde hair and blue eyes. Claudia, however is mature enough to understand that her violent, almost visceral reaction due to the fact that black women responded to these dolls and handled them with possessive gentleness, all the while remaining aloof to the needs of their own daughters who also craved the same possessive gentleness of their touch.

Thus Pecola's idolizing Shirley Temple contains the seeds of her gradual loss of self-esteem and her final descent into madness. Her mother's indifference to her and her own knowledge that she was unloved make her a victim of the

community's apathy. She internalizes the community's standards of beauty that were borrowed from the mainstream culture and finds herself to be all the more ugly and undesirable. Claudia and Frieda especially the former know that their strict parents in spite of their stoic manner were caring and loving towards them. Thus the MacTeer girls have a healthy sense of self-esteem and self-love. Claudia, whose narration reconstructs Pecola's story, is also mature and intelligent enough to know that the love that black people express towards the Shirley Temple dolls was actually a 'fraudulent love'.

Morrison thus juxtaposes Picola Breedlove and Claudia and Frieda MacTeer to establish the contrast in their upbringings which in turn affect their sense of self after this initial introduction Picola and the MacTeer girls come together in the Maureen Peal episode and later in the episode where they find Picola being chastised by Mrs. Breedlove in the kitchen of her white employer. With every episode it is clear that Pecola retreats into her shell of loneliness and her self-confidence is dented and she realizes with an absolute certainty that she is unloved because of her ugliness. Claudia and Frieda are angry on her behalf but they cannot do enough to change the situation. In the Maureen Peal episode, after Maureen leaves Pecola in tears calling her ugly, Claudia describes Pecola's reaction in the following manner:

Her pain antagonized me. I wanted to open her up, crisp her edges, ram a sticks down her hunched and curving spine, force her to stand erect and spit misery out on the streets. But she held it in where it could lap up into her eyes. (*The Bluest Eye* 57)

Claudia feels that Pecola's posture of abject submission made it difficult for her to show any kind of retaliatory anger. Instead in her posture was inherent the willingness to internalize misery. Claudia's anger at Maureen Peal was an anger which was directed at her elders and teachers-persons who can easily exempt the Maureen Peal of the world from any kind of punishment just because they had lighter skin was an epitome of the black kid who was not poor or ugly enough to be black. Claudia's outrage is very significant as she learns to identify the flaws of her community members who elevate the Maureen Peals of the world ignoring their streak of meanness and their sense of superiority.

Claudia, who is also the omniscient narrator, narrating Picola's gradual descent into madness also gives other examples of the community's accountability in damaging Pecola's already fragile self-esteem. The candy store owner looks at Pecola with indifference. It is almost as if he cannot see Pecola. The narrator ask the pertinent question: "How can a twenty two year old white immigrant store keeper with the taste of potatoes and beer in his mouth...see a little black girl?"(36). Pecola's reaction to the store keeper's gaze is even more significant. It further consolidates her believe in her own ugliness. 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...this vacuum is not new to her. It has an edge; somewhere in the bottom lid is the distaste. She has seen it lurking in the eyes of all white people show. The distaste must be

for her, her blackness...But her blackness static and dread. And it is the blackness that accounts for that creates, the vacuum edged with distaste in white eyes. (36-37)

Barbara Christian has made a pertinent point about the role of Claudia has the narrator in *The Bluest Eye*. In her essay Contemporary fables, She asserts:

Claudia is telling Pecola's story after it has happened and after she has made some sense of it a particular characteristics of hers through out the book. But even more dramatically, this story is also Claudia's story. she does not experience the gravest effects of the myth of the beauty as Pecola does. She is not seen as the ugliest of the ugly, but she does know that blue eyes and blonde hair are admired by all and that she does not possess them. She becomes the girl-women in the book with whom we can identify, for most of us are not the extreme, as Pecola is, and do not overtly go mad. Claudia, then, becomes a way of giving voice to the graveness of Pecola's situation even as she herself is confronted with the same problems, although less intensely. (Christian 62)

Claudia as the retrospective narrative gives a double perspective to the narration and tries to explore Pecola's plight as a witness who was also a little girl at the same time that the events of the noble happened in 1940-1941. As a narrator Claudia performs the function of 'bearing witness' to a period in their lives when the lives of a little black girl disintegrated because her entire existence was jeopardized by community that found her by turns-ugly too black and an invisible presence. But reading Claudia's narration as the account of a survivor is to limit her function. Claudia in her avatar as the adult narrator has the same boldness and courage that she had as a little girl. She is bold enough to admit that Pecola's marginalization was a collective failure of the community that included herself as well as her sister. She admits that they were accomplices in Pecola's destruction. She says:

All of our waste which we dumped on her and which she absorbed and all of our beauty, which was hers first and which she gave to us. All of us-all who knew her-felt so wholesome after we cleaned ourselves on her. We were so beautiful when we stood strides her ugliness. Her simplicity decorated us, her guilt sanctified us, her pain made us glow with help, Her awkwardness made us think we had a sense of humor. Her inarticulateness made us believe we were eloquent. Her poverty kept us generous even her waking dreams we used-to silence our own nightmare. And she let us, and thereby deserved our contempt we honed our egos on her. Padded our characters with her frailty, and yawned in the fantasy of our strength. (*The Bluest Eye* 162-63)

Morrison deliberately gives Claudia's concluding narration as a sense of responsibility to impress upon the reader that the community was the culprit in the Pecola's story. Claudia also looks at Pecola's pathetic figure scouring the garbage pile and conjectures with self loathing that perhaps she was looking for the

thing that 'we', that is the community 'assassinated'. In her final indictment Claudia comments that the Marigolds did not bloom because the soil of Lorrain was inimical to certain type of flower. By soil, she obviously alludes to the People of Lorrain whose hearts were not generous enough to accept Pecola for what she was. In the wistful last lines, she admits that recrimination were 'too late' as it won't matter to Pecola.

Claudia is thus made to be the articulate kinswoman and in her narration she performs the same function that Morrison once said was her purpose in writing a fiction for the tribe in her interview to Thomas LeClair. She had said "My work bears witness and suggest who the outlaws were, who survived under what circumstances and why, what was legal in the community as opposed to what was legal outside it". (qtd in Taylor-Guthrie 371) Claudia does all this and with complete honesty so much so that she also concedes her own responsibility in Pecola's tragic fate. Toni Morrison has called her fiction, 'fiction for the tribe'. Such fiction, according to her, is dedicated to the people who need to re-learn their racial legacy that might have been obscured in the quest for progress or migration to a different kind of culture existence. In her first novel *The Bluest Eye*, she was able to perform the function of apprising her community to their older 'tribal' values that had been displaced by the newer 'urban' values.

The Bluest Eye with its unflinching portrayal of the Black community's responsibility in a little girl's destruction does bear witness and indicts the community unequivocally for having forsaken its legacy of sustaining the individuals within it- even those the people dismissed as eccentrics. Thus, in *The Bluest Eye* Morrison reveals how white Eurocentric standards of beauty and self play havoc with the lives of Black girls.

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