

Representation of Racism, Oppression and Marginalization of Black Women in Tony Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*

Rohini Harsh

Research Scholar,
The Department of English & MEL,
The University of Lucknow,
Lucknow, U.P., India

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“There is nothing more to say – except why. But since why is difficult to handle, one must take refuge in how.”- Claudia Mac Teer, *The Bluest Eye*

Abstract

The concept of racism is developed and constructed by our society which further creates disparities among people. This term is based on belief system and very much relevant in the modern contemporary society, therefore, internalized by great number of masses. Racism is a cooperative force of actions by large number of people that maintain and persist with each other, where some communities enjoy the benefits and other groups suffers difficulties. Thereby racism is responsible for prejudice and discrimination between people all around the world. This omnipresent and multi-faceted nature of racism is particularly poignant in Toni Morrison's novel *The Bluest Eye*. The article critically analyzes the novel, and scrutinizes how Morrison defies Western standards of beauty which further reveals that the idea of beauty is socially constructed. Morrison identifies that large section of black women is severely marginalized and oppressed by men and by western culture. In exhibiting pride in being dark, this author does not just depict optimistic pictures of blackness but also

she focus on the damage that the black women characters experiences through the development of femininity in a racialized world. This article try to investigate the issues associated with the subjugation of African American women and non American African women, the class differences, the idea of beauty and materialism linked with the growing class versatility, patriarchal society, the ill-treatment of women and the notion of beauty as a way to have a "superior life". The article shows how the prejudice that exists within the African American people can be viewed as an impact of the discrimination and bigotry that its people have been subjected by the Whites. *The Bluest Eye* is a remarkable articulation of Toni Morrison's ethnic social women's liberation, a critic of black poverty, vulnerability and loss of optimistic self-image signified by Pecola who believe that blackness has condemned her to cruelty and ignorance. The idea of race and the idiocy of fair skin are depicted through the incidents and stories told by the characters, particularly the three young women Claudia, Pecola and Frieda in the novel. Thus, Morrison proves us the damaging impact of pre-conceived notion of white beauty on individual and on society through the struggle of those people who have suffered. It also scrutinizes the marginalization and oppression of black women by not only whites but also by their native people.

Keywords- Racism, oppression, marginalization, African, beauty and whiteness, discrimination

There are certain questions whose answers are not easily accessible to us, and most probably no answer at all, racism is one such matter which is difficult to interpret. The world is still suffering from the consequences of racism as it get internalised in the societal structure and behaviour. The term 'racism' is a notion which has subsisted and fostered from the beginning

of the colonization to the establishment of globalization. The racism has not only increase discrimination on dark skinned people but also raise the issue of marginalization and oppression of black women to its apex globally. The Eurocentric social order has always conquered the mind of colonized society through its religious teachings, cultures and power, and makes them believe about their superiority against others. British colonizers have always portrayed themselves as superior as and higher than Africans because of their colour, good looks and culture. Whites are believed as godly and heavenly creature due to their light skin colour where as blacks are considered as evil, ugly and dirt due to their dark skin colour.

Women are the great sufferers of the patriarchal system and racial discrimination. In patriarchal society women considered beautiful if they have fair skin, otherwise women have to suffer prejudice because of their dark skinned colour. This preconceived notions and misapprehension of whites against blacks are emphasized and most prevalent in the novel *The Bluest Eye* written by Toni Morrison. Here, Morrison endeavours to demonstrate the reader about various catalysts which can elucidate how racism has influenced the lives of the people and, she is also trying to answer to the question “why?”, once reader comes across her novel.

American author and the Noble Prize Toni Morrison wrote her first novel *The Bluest eye* in 1970. The story reveals the disaster of beauty and the traumatic effect of racism in the social and individual life. This novel analyse the tragic and catastrophic effects of white American principles of beauty on the emerging black female personality- a young African American teenager, named Pecola, residing in Lorain, Ohio in 1939. It portray the extreme psychosomatic desolation of an 11year old black girl, Pecola Breedlove, who seeks for affection and acceptance in the community

that rebuffs and underestimate people of her own race. “The Breedloves lived there because they were poor and black, and they stayed because they believed they were ugly” (Morrison 38). She is subjugated, exploited and suffered racial discrimination by whites and within her own family. She develops an inferiority complex because of domination and oppression, and as her psychological condition is deteriorated, she desperately yearns to have the traditional American ideals of feminine beauty especially blue eyes which she found the cure of her ugliness and her frantic conditions. She desired to become white with blue eyes because she wanted to be treated lovingly by her parents and other people around her. Since childhood she was molested, abused, neglected and raped by her father and never attains the true love and affection from her family. Pecola’s family were separated, when her father Cholly Breedlove is in prison for a certain crime. She then shifted to Macteers’ family which proves to be more stable home than her own and there she also met Macteers’ girl, Claudia and Frieda, with whom she developed sisterly affection. But because of the racist society and the cruelty of her own parents, she becomes completely mad at the end, thinking she’s been given “blue eyes”.

Many female black African writers has penned down their experience of exploitation and subjugation of women like Toni Morrison, Sefi Atta, Flora Nwapa, Teju Cole and others. Toni Morrison urges: I write for black women. We are not inscribing the men, as some white female writers do. We are not attacking each other, as both black and white men do. Black women writers look at things in an unforgiving, loving way. They are writing to responses, rename, re-own (Nellie 64). Morrison examined the idea of blackness and beauty that shaped our culture and society. She challenged the Western standards of beauty through her novel and reveals that the

idea of beauty is socially constructed. She was concerned about many cultural and modern issues like exile, trans-Atlantic slave trade, history of racism, black immigration, poverty, discrimination and violence. She constantly put emphases on the damage experienced by the Africans through colonization such as degrading native language, exploitation of natural resources, demeaning indigenous culture and suppression of local people by decolonizing their mind. The idea of beauty and materialism are linked with the growing class versatility, patriarchal society, the ill-treatment of women and this notion of beauty becomes way to have a better lifestyle. Morrison argue that racism can only be comprehend through the understanding of racialized structure where the submissive racial personalities are arranged and establish in a particular form that generate differences by making binaries, policies, secret codes and manipulating people by creating illusions. According to Morrison race is not only a mode of generating economic-social relations or just a skin tone colour of a person but it becomes a method for the European countries to oppress and marginalized people of the third world countries. Morrison identifies that large section of black women is severely marginalized and oppressed by men and by western culture.

The novel *The Bluest Eye* reflects the glimpse of why racism arises and how it continues. The foremost evidence is Pecola's community and surroundings where intra-racism is usual and somewhere is responsible for mental imbalance and insanity of Pecola. Franz Fanon had rightly said in his work *Black Skin, White Masks*: "The Negro's behaviour makes him akin to an obsessive neurotic type, or, if one prefers, he puts himself into a complete situational neurosis. In the man of colour there is a continuous endeavour to run away from his own personality, to annihilate his own presence" (Fanon 43). Fanon

emphasises the condition of blacks who lives in a racist society and their psychological state that longing for whiteness because it stand for power and supremacy in the social order. The Africans have ignored the fact of blackness and become obsessive for whiteness which results in loosing oneself. Instead of waning racism people of black community are more inclined towards colour and start comparing each other with the hierarchy of favouritism of white against black, of male blacks against female blacks and of fairer blacks against darker blacks, and forget that the sense of superiority and self-worth comes not from external beauty but from understanding the meaning of internal beauty. The most relevant example is when Pecola's mother Pauline does not want to recognize her daughter instead she turns to soothe 'a little girl in pink' rather than her own flesh-and-blood: "Pick up that wash and get out of here, so I can get this mess cleaned up."... As Pecola put the laundry bag in the wagon, we could hear Mrs. Breedlove hushing and soothing the tears of the little pink-and- yellow girl [...] complemented the sundown spilling on the lake (Morrison 109). Being a black African poor girl, Pecola is lonely and shunned. She always desired for love and acceptance from people around her, but neither her parents nor her social community accept her. Black people were imitating the culture of whites and become incompetent to give affection and love to Pecola as they have been insolvent and disillusioned in their own selves. The whites have decolonized the mind of blacks which impacted greatly to African American women as well as non American African women and created the class and caste differences. These notions are quite evident with the protagonist Pecola who believed that she is herself responsible for her turbulent condition and ugliness but through the different voice of narration and outlook in the novel it indicates that the self-abhorrence was not occur due to

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scarcity or adversity of the people but because of a traditional social inclination towards white culture to uphold its supremacy. Pauline, like Pecola, is a victim of the beliefs of white supremacy. She is a mother of Pecola and wife of Cholly, who has a disabled foot and she firmly believed that she is ugly. She had a bad childhood experience and she held responsible to her foot for her ugliness. Pauline self-perception of being ugly deepened when she lost her front tooth and later consider herself sacrificial victim when she stays with her husband Cholly who usually beat her and verbally abuse her. In this novel Morrison used various means of sources to represents black women's ache, suffering and thwarted needs. Pauline is one such woman who is a victim of patriarchal system which makes her 'double-disabled' and 'extreme vulnerable' to take any optimistic actions. Due to her failure in her own youth that had gone away; she starts loathing for everything even her own family. She suffered the identity crises since her childhood as she was ignored by her parents and later experienced racism which worsen her condition. She rejects her identity of being black though admiring white culture and starts ignoring her own blood. She considers her daughter Pecola too ugly and mercilessly beat her when she find out that she got raped by Cholly. From the day Pecola is born Pauline is more concerned with the beauty of her new born baby rather than her health, therefore Pecola learns from her mother that she is hideous. Thus women are marginalized and oppressed by not only whites but also by their native people and other women.

The idea of race and the idiocy for fair skin are depicted through the incidents and stories told by the characters. Pecola believe that her blackness has destined her to cruelty and ignorance. She always wishes to have blue eyes which she thinks will make her beautiful and resolve her pathetic condition. "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" (Morrison 46). Though Pecola's wish ultimately fulfilled for blue eyes, but she acquires it in wickedly sarcastic form by becoming mentally unstable. These imaginary blue eyes make her more invisible to others and create a type of sightlessness that disconnects her from outer world. Thus Morrison has presented testimony to their reader that this narrative is not about act of racism but the force on African Americans to adjust in disparaging cultural belief and principle. Racism is not only applicable for Non-Americans but African American too suffered the similar hardships of racism. A nine year old Claudia MacTeer is one such character who faces the universal hopelessness of being black and poor. She is the narrator of parts of the novels who did not suffer the explicit racism and marginalization by whites but she revolt against the devotion towards whiteness. Claudia did not experience that adversity which Pecola has gone through because she always has a support and love of her family. She had not yet learned self-hatred from her community but she faces the burdens of being a black girl turning into a woman which is more delicate than the pressure of racism. The patriarchal society makes life difficult for women to live on their own way; they were exploited, abused, beaten and oppressed by men and their fates are under control by them. This is one such reason for Pecola's wretched condition as her father has beaten his wife, burned their home and raped her own daughter. Thus for Claudia, affairs of scarcity, racial discrimination, and standards of beauty are personally associated to her unavoidable entrance into womanhood.

Class distinction, poor life-style, poverty and recklessness of men make African as well as African American women feel outcast and marginalized group. There are

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several instances in the novel which portray the issue of colour and class inequalities and people from same community maintain distance to preserve their superior position in western society. Foremost example is Geraldine who herself is a black African woman; she is a light skinned black women who think herself and her family higher than other black family. She teaches her son to stay away from the niggers: "his mother did not like him to play with niggers. She had explained to him the difference between coloured people and niggers... Colored people were neat and quiet; niggers were dirty and loud" (Morrison 87). She is fanatical for physical appearance of her family and spotlessly keeps her home clean and beautiful. She preserves her high social status by not interacting with black people. She only feels true affection for her cat rather than her native people. Morrison surpasses everything in describing racism and reveals that racism is not the chief mechanism for the adversity of black people but it is the entrenched customs and mindset of society which plays major role in the destruction or upliftment of individual and society. Thus it can harm person's identity, self-assurance and can bring self-destruction to people but on the other side it can sustain an optimistic outlook by adhering equality and freedom.

In *The Bluest Eye* "whiteness" is connected with beauty and purity. It is a way to lead a 'superior life-style'. There is much obsession for whiteness and spotlessness in the African community that increases women's physical and psychological seek for beauty which results in the feeling of disgust with their own selves as they are aware about fact of being black. The idea of beauty and racism are reflected in the title of the novel itself. It narrates the theme of longing for blue eyes which Pecola desires: "Each night without fail she prayed for blue eyes" (Morrison 46). Metaphorically, 'The Bluest Eye' is a symbol

of ideal concepts of beauty and better life which highlighted throughout the novel. For instance Pecola believes that her family's mishaps are an outcome of their ugliness, thus bodily features of the characters are symbols for the placement in the socio-economic ladder. In the hope of attaining these 'blue eyes' Pecola has been totally ruined by sadism, she got tragically raped (twice) by her father in the kitchen with kaput saucers which symbolizes her "ruined" status of being. Hysterically she thinks that her wish has been granted of having blue eye, and continues to live in her fancy dream world therefore, become insane. Pecola's innocence has turned into sanity, tormented by the hands of whites as well as by her own community. She becomes the souvenir of colonial brutality and symbol of mankind suffering. Claudia believes that the whole city has dumped its waste on Pecola and robbed her innocence of purity in different ways. Further, to the response with physical and sexual loss of innocence, black people face this failure because of their self perception and communal disunity. Morrison's main objective in writing this novel is to make people aware about the harm which internalized racism can do to susceptible community members especially 'adolescents', thus black society has accepted the white standard of beauty and culture.

This novel re-approves the domination of white social structure and demonstrates how the nuisance of these values averts the progress of a black identity. The white society hampers the black people's consciousness and tries to threaten their identity by repressing their self conscience. Morrison elucidate that the western society have always demean blacks as inferior people and blacks impulsively believed in this imposed feeling of low self-worth without inquiring its foundation. This text is a hard-hitting notification about the old perception of black community that endeavours to follow the slave

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master. Pecola's wishes are not for good house, or wise parents, or for more riches; instead she prays for blue eyes something that even if she had gain would never reduce the severity of her dejected reality. Every culture teaches their own notion and standards of beauty through many different ways but in this novel the white standard of beauty is more invasive as there is no black standard of beauty, hence prove the psychologically oppressed people of African American society. The issue of child abuse is also prevalent in this novel *The Bluest Eye* which remained unaddressed and publicly unstated. Cholly Breedlove's rape of Pecola and Mr. Henry touching of Frieda's breast are fine example of the oppression of adolescent. Morrison thus connects a striking assessment of internalized racial discrimination with a critique of adultism. To conclude, Toni Morrison's 'The Bluest Eye' describes the experience of African American people in the U.S. and their racial issues which are still neglected. The African American society is divided into the hierarchy of everything whether it's a class, caste, race or beauty. The black people were harassed in every extent especially under-class black women who were treated as mere an object by men of every stratum. Certainly, one thing that flummoxes me about African American society is mania for lighter skin. Western notion of beauty becomes the only mean for blacks to lead a first-class life and this fixation is still prevalent in present modern society. One of the most callous realities of present world is the stigma attached with dark-skinned and its traumatic impact in the psyche of people. In fact, the fourth pillar of the society, media, has played a significant role in influencing people's mind and developing craze for whiteness. It affects people through its advertisements, its myths, movies, songs and other mode of communication. Through this novel *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison has raised a question- why this

racism gets under our skin! Why people behave in abnormal way forgetting humanity being human. Of course, not every black or brown colour remark as ugly or nasty; dark brown chocolate always tempts others and black shiny hair is always connected with youth and beauty hence considered as beautiful then why black skin colour considered as ugly? We 'people' have to change our attitude regarding skin colour which only hampers us in becoming one. We need to broaden our understanding of what make a person good – is it just the skin colour or is it a humble nature, striking personality and overall behaviour. People need to battle with their inherent biased self and should realize that what matter most is person's diligence, capability and compassion; the skin colour is just the outer covering of our body to protect our internal organs and it has nothing to do with our worthiness. I would say, Morrison's novel takes me into a completely different outlook of the human race that modestly enlightened me and unveils racially predisposed world.

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