

The Confusion of Growth

—A Cultural Interpretation of Pecola’s Love for the Bluest Eye

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ABSTRACT

The confusion of growth of black women is vividly depicted in Toni Morrison’s leading novel *The Bluest Eye*, in which the confusion and desire for recognition is deeply analysed under the racial and gender discrimination in American society. Focusing on exploring the influence of the dominant culture and racism together with the rejection from the African American themselves, the paper describes Pecola’s characters and life experiences, and probes into hardships when black women are making every effort to pursue their self-identity and recognition, and intensifies Morrison’s enduring concern and artistic creation.

Keywords: *confusion of growth, gender discrimination, recognition, self-identity*

1. INTRODUCTION

Considered one of the pioneers in contemporary American novels, Morrison has obtained an international fame for works in which she probes the role of race in American society. Using unconventional well-formed narrative structures, with the poetic language tuning in, and myth and folklore threading through, Morrison examines issues as black victimization, the racial and sexual oppression causing key mental and social impact, and the every effort African Americans are making to obtain a sense of identity in a society dominated by white cultural values. Morrison’s Nobel Prize for Literature can provide a glimpse of her great contribution for giving “life to an essential aspect of American reality in novels “characterized by visionary force and poetic import.” [1]

2. THE INFLUENCE OF THE DOMINANT CULTURE AND RACISM

Every reader of *The Bluest Eye* would show great sympathy to the protagonist after finishing reading it. Every Afro-American character in the novel is forced to struggle against a standard of beauty that is almost exactly opposite of what they are. And the consequences can be deadly. The African-American people in the African American community have no choice but to accept this kind of reality of being exploited, both physically and mentally. Baldwin explains it as, “The Negro is compelled to accept the fact that this dark dangerous and unloved stranger is part of himself forever

[2] The African American people, often judged by white American society as inferior, have endured the stigma of being different ever since their history on this continent began. “And this cultural domination is a situation on which members of a subordinated class” [3] to an significant extent have accepted this ideology of the ruling class.

The “Dick and Jane” reader was very prevalent in public schools at the time of 1940s of the novel, and Morrison opens her novel with three different versions of that indicates to compare the fictions of the white educational procedure with the real life of many black children. Through carefully-designed structure, the sarcastic duality of school and home experience is vividly depicted and acquired by readers. Meanwhile, she instils characters at the tip of her pen with sophisticated social environment which we are all acquainted with...like those secure, suburban and white middle-class families, non- working mother playing with dogs or cats and idle father...This first version of the simulated-reader quotation is obvious, clear, rendered in “Standard English” filled with correctness and whiteness. The second, while it repeats the message exactly, assumes another visual appearance on the page which is not clear with inaccurate capitals and punctuations, yet still can be understandable. The third, despite no alteration is made, the wording of a long collection of consonants and vowels seems to notify nothing but absurd.

These three versions are symbolic lifestyles that the Toni Morrison explores in her novel either directly or by

implication. Clearly, the Fisher family is the best representative of the first version—an alien white world which much easily affects the lives of black children and their families while at the same time pushing them out. The second version is injected on Claudia and Frieda, stuck by the poor life but loving parents trying desperately to survive the poverty, the Northern coldness and Northern style of racism. However, the Breedlove's lives are more like the third, a distorted run-on version of "Dick and Jane", and their daughter Pecola really lives in a misshaped world destroying her at last. The simulated "here is the house" quotation indicates a lot: to be a general outline of the tale which happens next and a subtly sarcastic injection on a society that teaches while socialize its teenagers unconscionably with indifferent ignorance for the cultural richness and diversity among these people.

The media which produces pictures of white girls dominates Pecola as well making her obsessed with blue eyes, especially when white girls Shirley Temple and Mary Jane are considered as perfect beauty by society. Her inability to be admitted and measured by white standards of beauty jeopardizes her self-esteem, and she enforces herself to shoulder the load of her family problems, or rather to say its poor conditions and disappointed love "If she looked different, beautiful, maybe Cholly would be different, and Mrs. Breedlove too." [4]

Pecola desires for favourable recognition from her parents and society as well. She once has three quarters of milk a day to hold the Shirley Temple cup exhibits her inner desires. Pecola stares at Shirley Temple's blue eyes, hoping to take them over on her face. On the contrary, however, those blue eyes to some extent driving her into insanity incorporate Pecola. She isn't able to possess them successfully as she prays; they come to possess her instead, damaging her mind and ideology.

"In Morrison's novel the ideology of domination is visible in every face of her characters' carefully individuated lives." [5] informing not only the public confrontations but also her characters' private decisions, such as social customs, domestic arrangements. Blackness is a socially constructed category and a social fact in the racialized and race-conscious society like America. *The Bluest Eye*, concentrating on the self-hatred of the Breedloves, points to the damaging effects of internalized racism and accepts as part of their blackness. The Breedloves keep undermining their own races as ugly but think the people of other races as pretty. Just as the narrator in this novel says: "you looked at them and wondered why they were so ugly; you looked closely and could not find the source. Then you realized that it came from conviction, their conviction...and they had each accepted it without question." [4]

In *The Bluest Eye*, a polar-extreme form of the shame-vulnerability and shame-anxiety suffered by those Africans in white America is successful dramatized. Morrison also depicts further the ways in which internalized white to be her own happiness. Pauline as one of main characters in the novel exactly knew what she could have to sacrifice so that she might be satisfied internally and incorporated the difference between herself and the rest of society. The movie theatre promoted her to realize the stark difference between her and other women around. In order to constantly pursue the romantic love, when another physical beauty appearing, she grasps it immediately and never wants to give up. "She was never able, after her education in the movies, to look at a face and not assign it some category in the scale of absolute beauty..." [4]. At that time, Shirley Temple beauty best signified physical beauty—the equation of blonde hair and blue eyes which stood for equality, happiness, worthiness and overall comfort. It was so simple to conclude that if you belong to one of those white women with such innate qualities living in northern America, you were no doubt to be content. As Pauline learned these guidelines, after she gave birth to Pecola and she got a job as a black "mammy" to a white family. A fact quickly stroked her that the more time she spent with the white family who were equal, happy, and worthy in the eyes of society, the more she felt as if she was part of all these positive virtues. In contrast, every time she went back to her own black family, a sense of ugliness, poverty hanging over.

Pauline is tragically stuck with her biological family, therefore, running far away from her own black family and pouring all her time, energy even love to the white family seems to offer a best answer to do so. She decides to mentally desert her family for her "Perfect Life" without a second thought yet the final failure is doomed at the very first beginning—a black servant in a white world.

3. THE REJECTION FROM THE AFRICAN AMERICAN THEMSELVES

Here I also want to point out Morrison's view on the responsibilities of the other black people in the community for the tragedy of Pecola. Pecola, who absorbs the waste others dump on her, ultimately becomes the community scapegoat as members of the African American community project onto her their own self-loathing and self-contempt—their own stain of blackness:

"All of us—all who know her—felt so wholesome after we cleaned ourselves on her. We were so beautiful when we stood astride her ugliness...and she let us and thereby deserved our contempt." [4]

A group of black boys are circling Pecola, holding her at bay. "Thrilled by the easy power of a majority," the boys "gaily" harass Pecola with an insulting verse,

“Black e mo. Black e mo. Yadaddsleepsnekked.” [4] Repeating what has been done to them and attempting to rid themselves of their own deeply rooted sense of racial shame and self-loathing, they humiliate Pecola. Their “exquisitely learned self-hatred” and “elaborately designed hopelessness” become obvious when they said with insulting speech, and showed teasing movements “macabre ballet” around Pecola, “whom for their own sake, they were prepared to sacrifice to the flaming pit” of their scorn” [4]. It is clear enough to show that in treating Pecola as the stigmatized racial other, at the same time those boys express contempt for their own black identity as well.

In the novel, Morrison intends to bring the “ugly” black Pecola and the “high-yellow” Maureen Peal together to highlight the role of a stigmatized racism and interracial shaming in the construction of a stigmatized racial identity, for Maureen Peal is wealthy and light-skinned, she separates herself from others intentionally and makes herself special among them. Everybody except Frieda and Claudia shows a different attitude toward her because she is rich and light-skinned. So, Maureen looks down upon other boys and girls of her race. Being superior she thinks she should be, while others are inferior. Maureen claims her predominance by taunting: “m cute! And you ugly! Black and ugly black e mos. I am the cute” [4].

“To be poor is hard, but to be a poor race is the very bottom of hardships.” [6] Shapiro also interprets, “wealth is seized by the strong, honor by the well-born, office by the well- educated. Perhaps the ideology that justifies the seizure is widely believed to be true. But resentment and resistance are (almost) as pervasive as belief.” [7]

From Maureen’s case, we can easily conclude that she is responsible for the role in which Pecola is driven mad. But she is after all an exception in the African community, she is not that much frightful. What frightens, as Claudia tells us, is “the thing that made her beautiful...” [4]

The most annoying interracial facing related to colour, however, traps Pecola and an adult, Geraldine. She is identified by the narrator as one of the “thin brown girls”, women who have internalized white, middle-class standards of beauty and behaviour, and who, in developing “high morals” and “good manners”, have lost their “funkiness, that is, they go to land-grant college, normal schools and learn how to do the white man’s work with refinement [4]. Geraldine controls her son’s behaviours as well as his appearance, advising him to play with only “nice” children. She gives him a prejudice against a portion of her own race, “colored people were neat and quiet; niggers were dirty and loud” [4]. She overlooks the fact that the discrimination directed to “niggers” also applies to herself, which indicates how vain and destructive it is to act in accordance with white standards.

Pecola who lives in a storefront apartment that lacks decoration is deeply attracted by the little lace doilies and potted plants Geraldine decorates her house with. However, the house lacks welcoming warmth. When Pecola is kicked out of the house and to be exposed to the cold March wind, she unconsciously mixes this coldness with that of Geraldine’s house. Then the result is obvious: even though Geraldine reproduces the domestic lifestyle superficially, she still looks down upon her own race in it, contributing to reminding herself of a racialized hierarchy, which implicitly suggests a displaced isolation from her origins and her community.

Confidently considering herself as racially superior to lower-class African Americans, Geraldine underrates Pecola, seeing her dark skin as a sign of her shameful racial identity. Geraldine’s revulsion toward poor people of her race whom she sees as the dirty and subhuman “other” reveal her internalization of the essentialist racist construction of black degeneracy. To Geraldine, children like Pecola, were everywhere.

“If the ultimate enemy that shames and traumatizes African Americans is the racist white society, there are also more immediate and intimate enemies within the African-American community and family” [3].

It’s safe to say that the responsibility of Pecola’s negativity rests primarily with her family’s failure to offer the identity, love, and security that are absolutely significant to her healthy growth and further development. From reading the book, we can get the conclusion that Pecola suffers a lot from the interracial prejudice, however, due to her abusive and irresponsible parents. The shallowness of her parents’ lives and their own negative self-images do real harm to her undoubtedly. Not only does their socioeconomic status as poor African Americans puts them on the edge of society, but also their recognition of themselves as ugly isolates them further away. This self-hatred is the most damaging element in their lives. Pauline Breedlove’s personal story is demonstrated in extreme measures in the life of her daughter. From her early childhood up to the time the readers’ meet with Pauline, she has worn a shroud of shame. The novel tells that it is primarily because of her injured foot which she felt a sense of separateness and unworthiness and also why she “never felt at home anywhere, or that she belonged anyplace” [4]. After moving up to the north. the feeling of being separated and worthless was reinforced by her experiences of exclusion and loneliness when she was confronted by prejudice on a daily basis, both classism and racism, and for the first time, the white standard of beauty. These experiences worked to transform Pauline into a product of hatred and ignorance, leading her to hold herself up to standards that she didn’t fully understand nor could realistically attain. These standards and feelings of refection are the qualities that Pecola inherits from Pauline. Her mother, from her

birth, placed upon her the same shroud of shame, loneliness, and inadequacy.

Pauline's sense of defectiveness ultimately transfers to her daughter her own feeling of separateness and unworthiness and also her borrowed ideas about beauty, which lead inevitably to self-contempt. Pauline's lack of love and her restricted material circumstances distort her impulse to work. When Pauline describes her new-born baby as ugly "Head full of pretty hair, but lord she was ugly" [4]—illuminates that from the early start Pauline imposes her own belief of undermining as ugliness on her daughter.

In the novel—*The Bluest Eye*, the narrator, Claudia makes us aware of another individual who is as responsible as the Breedloves, Maureen, and so on. This is Pecola herself. She is taught that she is neither "free" to create herself nor responsible for choosing and defining a positive course of life.

Morrison notifies that a major answer to Pecola's tragedy is that she refuses to define a life for herself actively. As a child, she has started her menstrual cycle, which makes her a "little-girl-gone-to-woman" [4]. She is a "woman-child" with freedoms and responsibilities. Pecola's failure to define and recognize her perceptions doesn't allow her inherent freedom and responsibility. She is unfaithful to herself as she lives a life falsely. Morrison repeatedly puts emphasis on describing her unfaith to herself to disclose about Pecola who is responsible wholly for what happens to her. Pecola is shrouded with shame and "seemed to fold into herself, like a pleated wing" [4].

The most heart-breaking illustration of Pecola's failure to perform occurs in a central scene of the novel, as Pecola comes into Mr. Yacobowski's store, the young child looks up she finds only "the total absence of human recognition—the glazed separateness" in the shop owner's eyes. Identifying Yacobowski's look with one which she sees "in the eyes of all white people," Pecola makes up her mind that the distaste must be for her blackness. Yet she can easily choose anger, for "anger stirs and wakes in her" (4) but rather than choosing this creative act, Pecola accepts it quietly and thus is consumed by shame.

In *The Bluest Eye*, Toni Morrison shows that anger is healthy and it is not something to be feared; those who are not able to get angry are the ones who suffer the most. She criticizes Polly, Claudia, Soaphead Church, the Mobile Girls and Pecola because these blacks in her story wrongly place their anger on themselves, their own race,

their family, or even God, instead of being angry at those they should have been angry at: whites.

Pecola Breedlove suffered the most because she was the result of having others' anger dumped on her, and she herself was unable to get angry. When Geraldine yells at her to get out of her house, Pecola's eyes were fixed on the "pretty lady and her "pretty" house. Pecola does not stand up to Maureen Peal when she made fun of her for seeing her dad naked but instead lets Frieda and Claudia fight for her. Instead of getting mad at Mr. Yacobowski for looking down on her, she directed her anger toward the dandelions she once thought were beautiful. However, the anger will not solve the problem that she faces.

4. CONCLUSION

Toni Morrison in *The Bluest Eye* presents to us a full picture of black woman's struggle in the cultural conflict, against which black women fight for their own identity in order to survive. If the black women want to maintain their own cultural value, they have to inherit their own ethical tradition, while conversely, if they spurn their own cultural value, they are doomed with self-destruction.

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