

**Woman As A Victim of Racial Hatred: A Study of
Toni Morrison's Novel *The Bluest Eye***

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Abstract

The woman represents the symbol of nature. She contributes to make progress in the family, society as well as country through her active participation same as the male counterpart. But woman is suppressed into lower status compared to the male power and position in the society intentionally, even after her great contribution in reality. The evidence can be found in the portrayal of woman in the literatures from the different cultures.

African-American literature has played a significant role in American literary history since the eighteenth century. Black writing owes its very nature to the oppressive conditions under which the Blacks have been subjected to in America. What motivates the Blacks to write is the condition of oppression, and what they desire of their writing is to ameliorate their condition. Racism and sexism have made heavy inroads into the lives of African-Americans. Black woman is a victim of multiple oppression and double marginalization of race and gender. Keen attempts have been made, particularly in the last two decades, by Black women writers to withstand and rectify the evils of racism and sexism. A plethora of critical and fictional works, by writers like Barbara Smith, Gloria T. Hull, Ann Shockley, Alice Walker, Maya Angelou and Toni Morrison are gaining attention and general leadership.

Toni Morrison deserves to be called as one of the most prolific Black Women writers. She has always been concerned about the unique positions of black women in American life and literature. Morrison deals with varied themes and this paper deals with one particular theme: racial hatred. Because of this the heroines are usually alienated from

their family, friends, and society and even from their own self. This alienation turns the heroines either to madness or death. Morrison clearly depicts this in all of her novels. This particular paper deals with the one memorable heroine of Morrison: Pecola Breedlove of Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*. This also elucidates how the heroine travels her journey of life and meets her tragic end after a strong and long struggle from people. Alienation confirms devastating for Black women in white America. Migrated from their motherland, caught in the iron chains of slavery, black women were reduced to the roles of breeder, maid and domestic and other such menial roles. Thus, they have suffered the most brutal form of racism and sexism which results in their distinctive excruciating alienation. The black women writers struggled to overcome from the shackles of the white society. In the body of black American fiction written by women, crucial issues like female alienation and oppression are mirrored and artistically dealt with.

Introduction

African-American literature has focused on a number of recurring historical and sociological themes, all of which reflect the politics of Black experiences. The political content of African-American literature includes correcting stereotypes of African-American culture, experiences and achievements, and exploring racial issues, including, institutionalized racism, internalized racism, intra-racial racism and the combined oppressions of racism, classism and sexism. These themes constitute surviving life's negative experiences and questions, and rectifying them the positive.

BEING A BLACK WOMAN: EFFECTS OF RACISM

Racism is the theory or idea that there is a link between inherited physical traits of personality and culture. The politics of racism has assumed greater significance in the context of the considerable numerical strength of the Black community in America. In this regard, Calvin.C. Hernton remarks:

Racism is a man-made, man enforced phenomenon...may be defined as all of the learned behaviour and learned emotions on the part of a group of people towards another group; whose physical characteristics are dissimilar to the former group; behaviour and emotions that compel one group to conceive of and to treat the other on the basis of its physical characteristics alone, as if it did not belong to the human race (175).

Racism is a politics based on the notion that some races are inherently superior to others.

There are many writers who have adopted the racist point of view. A writer's attitude to racism is part of his ideology or politics and is reflected in his writings. Race is a group or category of persons connected by common origin. The word entered the English language at the beginning of the sixteenth century. Since the beginning of the nineteenth century the word has been used in several other distinct senses.

Joel Kovel, in his critically penetrating analysis of racism, explains the theory whereby the Whites quantifies the Blacks into a wholly new equation wherein they exist not as people, but as things. He says that the White slave-owner

... first reduced the human self of his black slave to a body and then reduces the body to a thing: he dehumanized his slave, made him quantifiable, and thereby absorbed him into a rising world market of productive exchange... Thus, in the new culture of the west, the black human was reduced to a black thing, virtually the same in certain key respects as the rest of non-human nature-all of which could become property (18).

It is clearly seen in this explanation that one of the methods employed in the creation of a new social system in which the Whites are masters and owners, and the Blacks are a subnormal group of property which can be sold, bartered or used as a convenient form of currency. By the mid-seventies, African-American women fiction writers like Paule Marshall, Toni Morrison, Alice Walker and Gayle Jones had not only defined their cultural context as a distinctly African-American one, but they had also probed many facets of the interrelationship of sexism and racism in their society.

This reduction of humans to chattels or non-humans is the first definite step towards the establishment of racism as an innate archetype of the White American civilization. In short, black symbolizes everything negative and sordid in life, culture and religion. To be worthy of love one has to be beautiful; to be beautiful one has to be white in colour. The poor Negro has no place in this scheme. That which is unattainable becomes the most agonizingly desirable thing for all humanity. So the Black man's soul-wrenching desire for whiteness is an indirect desire for love, respectability, honour and acceptance. It is an agonizing human experience.

Being White in colour implies a series of connotations: of being attractive, both physically and culturally, desirable, intelligent, reasonable and above all worthy of love.

Blackness is seen as a negative sign, a symbol of ugliness, uncontrolled, irrational behaviour, violent sexuality and so on. In short, black symbolizes everything negative and sordid in life, culture and religion.

Having allotted a burden of evil, fear and diabolism to black colour, western philosophy, society and culture finally find the perfect personification of this misalliance in the Black man. The devil is an abstract entity in western thought until western man encountered the Black man from Africa. The triangle drawn with devil, black colour and the Black man is firmly entrenched in the psyche of White America. Within this atmosphere of anger, hatred and fear, with its background of blackness, began the extraordinary performance of a tragedy wherein the Black man is the principal villain. As against the more overt forms of racism, the method of racial indoctrination is much more covert.

The western perspective of beauty becomes the Black man's burden from the beginning of his racial history in America; he has to carry the burden on his tortured back. From the times of slavery to the modern period the Blacks have to endure a whole extent of emotions like anger, envy and frustration. They appreciate the White American economy, society, culture and colour. The outcome of this destructive attempt is a decline of values like self-respect, self-love, dignity and pride in one's own race. This extremely subtle, but very corrosive facet of racism has its birth in American history and its maturity in modern American thought. This covert form of racism, which is subtle but slow and fatal in its methodical progress, is doubly injurious to the Black race. Its invisibly corrosive nature is hardly explicit. It is this type of subtle, but deeply damaging variant of racism that forms the background to African-American women's fiction. Cruelty, torture, lynching, rape and bestiality, the marks of traditional racism, which form an important ingredient in the writings of Black male writers like Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison, do not find any place in Black women's fiction. Racism plays an insidious role in their writings. But the effect of this type of racism is much more devastating in its consequences.

The predicament of "internalized racism" results from the psychological conditioning by which a racist society indoctrinates people of colour to believe in the White superiority. Victims of internalized racism generally feel inferior to the Whites: they are less attractive, less worthwhile, less capable, and often they wish if they were

White or looked more White. Toni Morrison provides us with one of the most chilling portraits of internalized racism in *The Bluest Eye* in which Pecola Breedlove, a young Black girl who can't see her own beauty, believes she would be pretty, happy and loved only if she had blue eyes. In this novel, Morrison weaves stories of violation and hardship to examine the ugliness that racism produces.

“Internalized racism” often results in intra-racial racism, which refers to discrimination within the Black community, against those with darker skin and more African features. Filmmaker Spike Lee also portrays intra-racial racism in *School Daze* in which students at a historically Black college form two rival groups based on the relative “whiteness” or “blackness” of their physical appearance.

SELF- HATRED AS AN EFFECT OF RACIAL-HATRED IN *THE BLUEST EYE*

Morrison considers racism as the African-American's primary obstacle. Racism pushes the central character in *The Bluest Eye* towards the fringes of existence. The novel focuses on intra-racial as well as inter-racial problems. The black community wants to conform to white standards of beauty, they desperately want to be accepted by the whites and this internalized racism is the root cause of the central conflict in the novel. According to K. Sumana, Morrison believes that “the concept of physical beauty as a virtue is one of the most pernicious and destructive” (7). *The Bluest Eye* makes one of the most powerful attacks on the relationship between white standards of female beauty and the mental, psychological oppression of Black women. The all-persuasive white standard of beauty adopted by so many characters in *The Bluest Eye* leads to cruelty and destruction. Internal racism which batters the self-image of the African –American female, takes its toll on the most vulnerable victim- ‘The African female child.’ Morrison shows that intra-racial violence can lead to ‘dehumanization of an entire race’ and destroy the female child completely. The community's self- hatred makes them look for a social outcast, someone to look down upon, so as to enhance their constantly threatened sense of worth. The novel shows how Pecola perishes in a community that is plagued by self hatred. The social predicament in which Pecola and her parents are placed is expressed in the main body of the novel which is divided into seasonal sections. By beginning the novel with autumn, Morrison suggests that the world of the black community in Lorain is topsy turvy. These seasonal divisions help in telling Morrison's story of the wrapped psyche of an adolescent female living in a racist society.

There are many incidents in the novel which constantly push Pecola towards a marginal existence because of internal racism. Her encounter with a fifty-two-year old storekeeper makes her aware that for many people she does not really exist. Black boys humiliate her at school, she becomes a scapegoat for their own humiliation and pain. Her encounter with Maureen Peal, the young mulatto girl who is her school mate is extremely devastating. Maureen's relative affluence and popularity are advantages of being nearly white. She humiliates and attacks Pecola, Frieda and Claudia—"I am cute and you are ugly Black and Ugly." (31). While Claudia is enraged at this insult; 'what did that mean, we were lesser'? (Ibidem), Pecola stunned by the pain of Maureen's humiliation "seemed to fold into herself, like a pleated wing." (Ibidem) After Maureen's cruel rejection is the episode with Geraldine, the middle class woman who wants to erase her blackness, her very identity. In poor, unkempt Pecola, she sees a type, a class for whom she has only disgust. For Geraldine, Pecola is a 'dirty, loud, nigger' (Ibidem). Geraldine is devoid of any emotion and to quote Karren Carmean, in getting rid of the "funkiness of passion she becomes emotionally hollow and insensitive, unable to feel affection for any living thing, except, perhaps act" (24). Her cruel rejection of Pecola once again devastates the young girl. Pecola's last encounter is with Soaphead Church, the West Indian of mixed parentage. Although Pecola's request for blue eyes moves him tremendously, he too victimizes her by making her innocently poison a dog he detests. Rejection by the more affluent segments of society is bad enough, but Pecola is cast out by her own family. Pecola's mother Pauline is also a victim of internalized racism. She fantasizes about movie stars and works as a housekeeper (mammy) in the white household of the Fishers, lavishing all her love and affection on her employer's daughter. When Pecola comes along with Claudia and Frieda to the kitchen of the Fishers, and accidentally Pecola drops a pan of blue berry pie on the floor, instead of comforting her daughter who has been burnt, Pauline soothes the tears of "the little pink and yellow girl" (22) who is upset by the accident, while Pecola calls her mother Mrs. Breedlove, the white girl calls her by an affectionate nickname, "Polly." Pauline is plagued by overwhelming self-hatred. K. Sumana believes that although she is aware of the turning wheels of racial oppression in her life, she makes no effort to stop the turning. She kowtows before the demands of the Fisher family. She cooks for them, bakes pies and keeps the house in good order while her own storefront home and its inmates 'fester' due to neglect. In her own house, Pauline is ugly, but in the Fisher home, 'Polly' is important and indispensable, made so by

the magic of service to the white people. The ultimate act of brutalization and betrayal for Pecola comes when her own father rapes her. Cholly's unnatural rape of Pecola is an attempt to rescue her from the dehumanizing gaze of the white people. His tenderness and protectiveness as a father however turns into lust and rage. The 'dangerously free' Cholly rapes her twice, turning her 'outdoors,' pushing her towards the depths of despair and the fringes of insanity. Ultimately Pecola is made the scapegoat for the entire community. Her ugliness has made them feel beautiful, her suffering has made them comfortable and her silence has given them the opportunity to speak. But because she continues to live after she has lost her mind, Pecola's aimless wandering at the edge of the town haunts the community reminding them of the ugliness and hatred that they have tried to repress. She becomes a reminder of human cruelty and an emblem of human suffering. The experiences of black children growing up amid the standards of white beauty are conveyed through a number of images. The tangible Shirley Temple mug has blue eyes, so does the little Fisher girl. The Shirley Temple mug and the Mary Lane Candies allow Pecola to carry the image through her very being. The dolls presented to black girls like Claudia are to the parents, their own unfulfilled longings of childhood and Mrs. Macteer cannot understand Claudia's destroying them. Claudia tears them apart in an attempt to find a source of their loveliness and what makes the world treasure them. Ultimately, Pauline and her marginalized community succumb to the look of the other. The class conflict is also an important issue which pushes Pecola towards marginality. The blacks as a class were poor and were marginal groups in America. The Macteer's are poor, but the Breedloves are even poorer and hence ostracized. Patric Bryce asserts that "the Double Jeopardy of being both 'poor' and 'ugly' excludes Pecola from sharing in whatever social and economic tidbits that may be offered. Pecola and her parents cannot fully comprehend the depth of ostracism and are powerless to change the situation" (39). Morrison uses a primer story to depict this class conflict in the novel. The novel begins with a passage from an elementary children's school book in the simplest language, the language of a prep school reader. The primer describes the red and green house of two white children-Dick and Jane. It talks about their father, mother, dog and cat and a friend who come to play with them. It depicts the life of an 'ideal' bourgeoisie white family. The primer with the white children was the way life was presented to black people. The second version of the primer repeats the same passage exactly but without any punctuations. In the third version of the primer, the wording remains unaltered but the passage is run

together in a frenzy, like one long collection of vowels and consonants, seeming to signify nothing. The three version of primer are symbolic of three lifestyles-the first version is the description of the alien white world that the poor blacks cannot hope to attain, the second version represents the lifestyle of the Macteer family which tries to survive the poverty and racism in Ohio and the third distorted version represents the Breedloves family which is being exploited by the capitalist ruling class. The Breedloves live a futile, makeshift existence, their storefront house and even their furniture reflects their decadent condition. The primer with its picture of a happy family is the frame acknowledging what Morrison calls the 'Outer Civilization.' In *The Bluest Eye* there are three minor African Families who try to imitate the whites for their social, economic and political advancement. These people also exploit members of their own community in order to get close to the monopoly ruling class; are pampered by teachers at school. One such 'most white' family is that of the Peals who are mulattos. Although the reader is only introduced to one member of this family, Maureen, her appearance, her behavioural pattern and remarks offer sufficient glimpses into the social consciousness of the Peals. Maureen terrifies the girls and has fully internalized white associations of darkness with ugliness. For people like Maureen, black seems to be the color of the devil himself. Geraldine Louis' family is another such family. The middle class Geraldine wants to be a part of the ruling class. They consider themselves to be colored and despise the poor blacks, any personality trait which might seem too black "The sway too free, the too full lips"(33). They try to erase. The Geraldine's of the world hate their 'blackness' and Geraldine's rejection of Pecola is a symbol of this self-hatred. Morrison says that the Geraldine's of this world are too 'clean and high maintenance.' (Ibidem) For Geraldine, Pecola is not a human being, but a 'class', a 'type' that she hates; "they were everywhere.....Like flies they hovered, like flies they settled" (72). The third family represented by Elihue Whitcomb Soaphead Church is so obsessed with the physical appearance of Europeans that they endanger their mental stability by inter-marrying to maintain some semblance of whiteness. Pecola thus becomes a victim of this intra-community class conflict which further leads to her destruction. Pecola suffers not only because she is black and poor, but also because she is a female. The gender issue therefore becomes an important one in the novel. Pecola's destruction is almost like genocide which viciously claims her sanity. Pecola experiences and undergoes the same subjection and marginalization which any other woman would experience under patriarchal imperialism. All

black women in *The Bluest Eye* experience dependency, repression, internal racism and alienation. All these women try to find meaning and fulfillment in different ways. All these women on account of their race and gender are marginal groups “moving at the helm of life”. Claudia explains the reality of her mother and other women in the community. “Being a minority in both caste and class we moved about on the helm of life” (11). She dreads being put “outdoors”, the way Cholly has put the women in his life outdoors. While other women in the novel find fulfilment. Mrs. Macteer in looking after her family and trying to make ends meet, Geraldine and Maureen Peal in trying to assume fake identities, Pauline in trying to fulfill the role of the ideal mammy-Pecola does not find fulfillment anywhere. In fact she does not get any maternal space from any of these women except the three prostitutes, China, Poland and Maginot Line who are marginal groups as well. Pecola’s only escape is descent into madness. White Beauty, White Living, White freedom—these are what the characters in *The Bluest Eye* long for, strive for and yet can never realize. Morrison explains that the story was developed out of a conversation she had with a little girl in elementary school who longed for blue eyes: “I looked around to picture her with them, was violently repelled by what I imagined she would look like if she had her wish”. Morrison goes on to wonder, “Implicit in her desire was racial self-loathing. And 20 years later, I was still wondering about how one learns that. Who told her? Who had looked at her and found her so wanting so small a weight on the beauty scale?” (167). It is for this reason Morrison says that she focused on the most delicate member of society: ‘a child’, the most vulnerable member, ‘a female.’ Valerie Smith in her book on Toni Morrison points out, “The meaning of blackness in this country shapes profoundly the experience of gender, just as the conditions of womanhood affect inculcated of race” (47). Pecola, the ugly black girl who does not meet society’s standards is expunged from human society even before she has awakened to a consciousness of self. Pecola stands for the triple indemnity in the female black child: children, blacks, females, and the poor are devalued and pushed to the margins of the already marginalized community. The themes of race, class and gender are inter-related in *The Bluest Eye*. Spurned and rejected by a community plagued by the virus of self-hatred, Pecola is pushed to the fringes of the town and towards marginality, both literally and figuratively. Madness is Pecola’s fate and there is no saviour for her. Claudia observes towards the end of the novel “It’s much, much, much too late” (164).

CONCLUSION

Women had to suffer and probably have been suffering due to men's oppression, abuse or patriarchal mentality in people's minds. In time women activists struggled and surely in many parts of the world they are still struggling to get their natural rights from politics to law, from equal education rights to show off their creative skills in art, literature or in any science. The literature of Black women is an adventure into the unexplored regions of the Black experiences. Black women's novels analyses how a Black woman's life is affected by the interconnection of sexism and racism. The Black women writers attempt to have a self-realization of themselves in the totality of their self as Blacks and as women. Black women write about the dehumanization they have been experiencing at the hands of Black men as well as White men and women. They seek to illuminate the condition of Black community in general and Black women in particular.

Sexism and racism are systems of societal and psychological restrictions that have critically affected the lives of African-American women. Through her novel, Toni Morrison makes it amply clear that the African-American reality is contaminated by the pestilential vapours of racism and sexism. She delineates the Black woman's struggle for spiritual wholeness and political autonomy. This will continue till Black men and women recognize their true enemies and fight together. A definitely positive step in this direction has been taken by the African-American women writers of the seventies and eighties.

Ultimately, the one common theme these Black women demonstrate is that despite all the obstacles placed in their way, African American women as a group are resilient, spiritual and forgiving women, and the reality is that this world is not perfect, and no one, regardless of color or sex, has experienced a fair and perfect life. One can only make the best of what one is given, and Black women do this very well. The answer to that most important question, the lesson we can learn from these women, is that African American women writers overcame great obstacles and hardships because they share some common traits, which we can all celebrate and can all emulate: they are smart, strong, and resilient, and above all, soulful. Through her erudition and literary techniques the African-American woman writer finds her right space in modern literary America.

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