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Trauma and Abnormal Psychology in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*

Abstract

Toni Morrison, the Nobel Laureate of 1993, is one of the best and sophisticated African American novelists. She has been awarded with various prizes and awards in her life for her excellent writings especially the novels. Her novels are globally read and have direct impact on the mind of the readers. It is her emphatic and compelling novels that have made her reach to the crest of popularity and made a permanent place in the hearts of her readers. Her novels have been proved to be supportive for the blacks and in fact they have changed the milieu of white America.

The main motive of this paper is to ascertain the trauma and abnormal psychology through Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theory in *The Bluest Eye*. Most of the characters in the novel are victims of poor nurturing and improper treatment of the family as well as the community. This paper focuses on the abnormal or damaged psychology of Cholly Breedlove who rapes his eleven year old daughter Pecola who goes in depression due to the effect of inferiority complex of ugliness, and being raped by her father. Due to her unconsciousness her personality becomes abnormal.

Keywords: sophisticated, abnormal, psychology, trauma, nurturing, unconsciousness.

The Bluest Eye is the novel which shows complete psychoanalytic effects on its major characters. In this novel we find most of the characters living in the fear and traumatic condition. Pecola, the protagonist, faces the worst throughout her life which starts at the age of eleven when she is raped by her own father. This situation indicates to the pre-Oedipal state that was due to the lack of raising voice or poorly nourished. Elizabeth Abel points out saying "the story that Morrison tells provides a version of psychoanalytic narrative that represents the

mother as the irreducible matrix of the child's development, the unachievable object of a desire that cannot know but must forever seek its origin"¹

The Bluest Eye is not presented chronologically but the incidents are intertwined by the voices and memories of the narrator, Claudia McTeer, a nine year old black girl of McTeer family, the neighbor of Breedlove family. The novel depicts the Breedlove family living in the outcast of the town. Every member of the family tries to seek pleasure in his/her own possible form. Pecola wishes to have blue eyes, parameter of beauty and wants to be appreciated by all. Morrison exemplifies the father, Cholly Breedlove who rapes his own daughter on a Saturday afternoon when he returns home intoxicated.

“She was washing dishes. Her small back hunched over the sink. Cholly saw her dimly and could not tell what he saw or what he felt. Then he became aware that he was uncomfortable; next he felt the discomfort dissolve into pleasure. The sequence of his emotions was revulsion, guilt, pity, then love. His revulsion was a reaction to her young, helpless, hopeless presence. Her back hunched that way; her head to one side as though crouching from a permanent and unrelieved blow. Why did she have to look so whipped? She was a child unburdened-why wasn't she happy? ²

The Breedlove family is the conventional flawed or socially impaired family which is rarely found together under the same roof. The family is basically fatherless as Cholly is always stoned by alcohol. Mrs. Breedlove, essentially a single parent, is the head of family supporting family financially but fails to supply her daughter Pecola love and attention which is indispensable for the mental and psychological development of a child. The lack of love and care in Breedlove family is the main cause of Pecola's low esteem and psychologically destroyed.

The Bluest Eye, Morrison's first novel investigates the complications of creating self-esteem or ego in the community where improper nourishment of the family and the treatment of the community is chiefly responsible for trauma and the behaviour of the people. The novel, narrated by nine year old Claudia McTeer, enumerates the lives of three young girls, their families and the way in which they struggle to satisfy their pleasure of beauty in the community that promotes Anglo Saxon standards of physical beauty and a middle class life style as the standard. The novel introduces a simple theme of beauty and the very pathetic condition of a poor family. Pecola, the protagonist, a despised figure, always prays for the blue eyes, known as the standard of beauty in the western community. John Leonard writes on the

blurb of the novel *The Bluest Eye*. The view has been taken from this criticism published in the *New York Times*.

“The *Bluest Eye* is an enquiry into the reasons why beauty gets wasted in this country. The beauty in the case is black, wasting is one by cultural engine that seems to have been designed to murder possibilities.”³

The Bluest Eye is the depiction of Pecola, a black girl who is psychologically disturbed and always desirous to have blue eyes as a symbol of beauty, decency and bliss. It is a wellknown fact that according to western culture blue eyes, blond hair and fair colour of skin are the measurement of a girl’s beauty. The same fact has been approved by the romantic novels, movies, billboards, and attitude of the people towards the beautiful and shinning things. However, we, actually, do not comprehend the gist of the myth and its valuable meaning. Pecola’s desire for blue eyes is a genuine and symbolic statement that exposes the clash and competition between two cultures. The theme of the novel is to unmask the conflict of artistic and societal values between the Anglo American and Afro-American cultures. Morrison herself states- “The concept of physical beauty as a virtue is one of the dumbest, most pernicious and destructive ideas of the western world.”⁴

Pecola focuses on physical beauty and she has become the victim of inferiority complex. She thinks that her teeth are good her nose is not as big and flat as of her neighbours. If her eyes were different, Cholly and Mrs Breedlove would be different. And in such different situation may be they will say, “Why look as pretty eyed Pecola. We must not do bad things in front of those pretty eyes.”⁵ Pecola is too much humiliated in the society only due to her ugliness and being black girl. This is the reason Pecola always yearns for the blue eyes so that she may not be ignored in the family or the community.

“Each night, without fail, she prayed for blue eyes. Fervently for a year she had prayed. Although somewhat discouraged, she was not without hope. To have something as wonderful as that happen would take a long-long time.”⁶

Pecola can be seen traumatized due to rejection and dehumanization of the family as well as society. She, being ignored by mother, teacher and friends, raped by father, and not appreciated by anyone, is always with the thought of humiliation consciously and unconsciously. Her parents who have not experienced love and appreciation in nurturing, do not know how to love and acknowledge their children for their worth. Thus in this world black represents the shadows of evil, the devil’s aspects, night, separation, loneliness, sin, dirt, excrement, the inside of the body and white depicts the mark of good, the token of innocence,

purity, cleanliness, spirituality, virtue and hope. Morrison says, “When the strength of a race depends on its beauty, when the focus is turned to how one looks as opposed to what one is, we are in trouble...”⁷

Morrison speculates all the psychoanalytic circumstances which are responsible for such scornful misdeeds. First of we should focus on the prior upbringing of Cholly Breedlove to know how he attained such mentality as per Freud’s theory. Cholly was found wrapped in a blanket and leaves on a railway track when he was only an infant. Therefore he could not overcome his bowels due to the lack of proper nurturing by his aunt. That’s why he felt free to get pleasure with those who were the closest to him. He could not show his frustration on the white people who always checked him from any advancement and humiliated him. He never realized any responsibility and under the effect of *id* and *ego* he wanted to satisfy his lust without any remorse. Cholly never experienced the bond of healthy love that a child gets from his parents. This is the reason why Cholly never knew how to love his family. He was not aware with a positive parental role or how to care the family members in their needs. By applying the psychoanalytically informed case studies of Sigmund Freud, Willner proposes that the trauma and psychic disruption reach at the extreme when sexual activity inflicts on children imposed by a more adult transgressor. She also proposes that “fathers dominate their daughters by virtue of male dominance over females and by virtue of household authority”⁸

The novel cites a depressing account of Pecola’s rape by his drunken father, who reaches home and finds her to be sad. Cholly shows sympathy to her. Such fathers do not think themselves as abusers but they consider as if they are devoting to their daughters’ education when Cholly thinks,

“Why did she have to look so whipped? She was a child -unburdened-why wasn’t she happy? The clear statement of her misery was an accusation. He wanted to break her neck-but tenderly. Guilt and impotence rose in a bilious duet. What could he do for her - ever? What give her? What say to her? What could a burned-out black man say to the hunched back of his eleven-yearold daughter?...How dare she love him? Hadn’t she any sense at all.”⁹

Shelly Wong asserts that society’s disapproval of Cholly and his past experiences are to blame for the rape of Pecola. Her article “Transgression as Poesis in The Bluest Eye,” written in 1990, defends Cholly’s inability to ground himself in new perspective results in despair.

Moreover, Wong suggests that the rape of Pecola is an arrested history from Cholly's abandonment by his parents, the community and the interference of White men during his first sexual encounter. Wong declares that:

“Pecola's shocked body excites him, perhaps because it recalls for him a time before the freezing of his bodily imagination. Thus while trying to break out of the stultifying confines of his quotidian existence by doing a wild and forbidden thing. Cholly succeeds in copying the two earlier moments. In turning back the process through raping his own daughter, Cholly breaks with and thwarts genealogical time.”¹⁰

Cholly Breedlove was not only rejected by his parents but the society had also not accepted him. Malnourishment and racism are the main reasons why Cholly could not get mastery over his genital state. There were only two women in his life- his wife and daughter. Being black and poor he could not interact with white people and the other black ones. This is one of the major psychoanalytical facts why he raped his own daughter in the kitchen as he never experienced such things.

The house provides shelter and security to its inhabitants though the Breedlove family could attain neither of these. As a result when Cholly saw Pecola standing by the sink cleaning the plates, he related this scene to the first encounter with Pauline standing by the fence. In Cholly we find no parental skills that would enable him to match with any of the sentiments that Pecola was experiencing.

Thus Cholly had no religion, no friend and getting no place in the society. Due to having no experience of social or communal norms he was completely unable to understand that such a sexual act with his daughter cannot be accepted by the community as it is a taboo. Neither he got love in the family nor did he truly feel love for others. Due to his psychic mentality he realized that he was showing love, sensitivity, sympathy and kindness to his daughter. That is why he wanted to “fuck her tenderly but the tenderness would not hold.”¹¹ This is why all coarse traumas exposed upon him. He was discarded, humiliated, emasculated, un-nurtured and hated in the whole life. In the absence of proper upbringing or any type of therapy he got a negative form of freedom which is best explained by Toni

Morrison in *The Bluest Eye* when she writes,

“The pieces of Cholly's life could only become coherent in the head of a musician.... Only a musician would sense, know, without even knowing what he knew, that Cholly was free. Dangerously free. Free to feel whatever he felt-fear,

guilt shame, love grief, pity. Free to be tender or violent, to whistle or weep. Free to sleep in a doorway or between the white sheets of a singing woman. Free to take a job, free to leave it...Cholly was truly free. Abandoned in junk heap by his mother, rejected for a crap game by his father, there was nothing more to lose. He was alone with his own perceptions and appetites, and they alone interested him.”¹²

Madelon Sprengnether suggests that because of Cholly’s prior life experiences the rape was not primarily sexual, but something deeper. Pecola reminds him perhaps of a lost buried self. To support this argument she applies Morrison’s words:

“The tenderness welled up within him, and he sank to his knees, his eyes on the foot of his daughter. Crawling on all fours toward her, he raised his hand and caught the foot in an upward stroke. Pecola lost her balance and was about to careen to the floor. Cholly raised his other hand to her hips to save her from falling. He put his head down and nibbled at the back of her leg. His mouth trembled at the firm sweetness of her flesh. He closed his eyes, letting his fingers dig into her waist.”¹³

Every chapter begins with an episode usually involving Pecola, told from the point of view of Claudia, the child but shaped by her adult reflections and rhetoric. Claudia’s stories then yield of one or two stories told by an apparently objective omniscient narrator. The narrator usually recalls information to which Claudia would not have had access. She tells stories from Pecola’s life that involves other characters and weaves flashback from there other into Pecola’s story. In addition, in each chapter several garbled line from the primer separates Claudia’s voice from that of omniscient narrator and fore shadows the tension contained within the story that follows.

“Morrison reveals ... the myriads ways in which human beings are implemented in each other circumstances. The form implies that the meaning of Pecola’s story may be understood only in the relation to broad social practices and beliefs.”¹⁴

In spite of all trials Pecola cannot ignore her eyes i.e. physical ugliness. She cannot forget the humiliation by the teachers and the classmates. She is only the girl in the school who sits at the double desk. She is always ignored by the teacher.

“She also knew that when one of the girls at school wanted to be particularly insulting to a boy, or wanted to get an immediate response from him,

she could say, ‘Bobby loves Pecola Breedlove! Bobby loves Pecola Breedlove’ and would never fail to get peals of laughter from those in earshot and mock anger from the accused.”¹⁵

There are many events in the novel which hurt Pecola into a feeling of isolation and pain because of her ugliness and race as well. To mention but a few, her encounter with a fifty two years old store keeper makes her aware that for many people, she doesn’t really exist-when she asks for Mary Jane Candies, he looks towards her and he senses that he need not waste the effort of a glance. He does not see her because of him, there is nothing to see. She looks up at him and observes the vacuum where curiosity should lodge. This vacuum is not new for her-

“It (vacuum) has an edge, somewhere in the bottom lid is the distaste. She has seen it lurking in the eyes of all white people. So the distaste should be for her blackness. All the things in her are flux and anticipation. But his blackness is static and dread. And it is the blackness that accounts for that creates the vacuum edged with distaste in the white eyes.”¹⁶

When Pecola is a new born baby, Pauline’s comment is “Eyes all soft and wet. Across between a puppy and a dying man. But I knowed she was ugly. Head full of pretty hair, but lord she was ugly.”¹⁷ In the categorization Pecola is put in ugly category she too will learn to be separated and unworthy.

She is given the doll as a gift on Christmas. What is she supposed to do with it? Pretend she is its mother. She has no interest in babies or in the concepts of motherhood. She learns quickly that she is expected to rock it, fabricate stories situations around it, sleeps with it. The dolls which are supposed to bring her great pleasure succeed in doing the quite opposite. When she takes the dolls to bed, it is the most uncomfortable companion. To hold it is no more rewarding. She has only one desire, to dismember it, to see what is made, to discover the dearness and to find the beauty. Adults, older girls, shops, magazines, newspapers windows signs- all the world has agreed that a blue eyed, yellow haired and pink skinned doll is what every girl child treasure.

“‘Here’, they said, ‘this is beautiful and if you are on this day ‘worthy’ you may have it.’ I fingered the face, wondered at the single stroked eyebrows, picked at the pearly teeth stuck like two piano keys between red bowline lips. Traced the turned up nose, poked the glassy blue eyeballs, twisted the yellow hair. I could not love it.”¹⁸

In spite of having lost all hopes for beauty, Pecola does not lose heart. She, now, tries to find her way to Soaphead Church that she goes for reconciliation, for salvation, for rebirth. Elihue Micah Whitcomb, Soaphead, comes from a mulatto West Indian family dedicated to preserve its British blood, not only in terms of color and shade but in the culture it represents. His family is industrious, orderly and energetic to prove that all civilization derives from the white race and none can exist without its help. His father develops his own legacy of Anglophile into the unworthiness of man, concealing his own distaste for himself and his son. Elihue, inherits this view of man, for as he grows up he sees the sterile ugliness of the need to be British, this need to erase color, all vitality, all funk out of life, Velma, a lonely, laughing big legged girl, marries him. She learns two months into marriage, how important his melancholy was to him. He resists her with such skill that she is finally driven out to escape the inevitable boredom produced by such a daily life. Velma leaves him the way people leave a hotel room. Leaving the Iceland he tries the usual professions open to one of his class and finally seeks into a rapidly fraying gentility in Ohio. The women and people find his English awe inspiring, his lack of funkiness amazing and declare him supernatural, a reader advisor and interpreter of dreams. One late hot afternoon he hears a tap at his door, observes a little black girl about twelve. Soaphead Church asks her-

“What can I do for you my child?”

... ‘May be, May be, you can do it for me.’

‘Do what for you?’

... ‘My eyes.’

‘What about your eyes?’

‘I want them blue.’¹⁹

Soaphead purses his lips .He thinks it is at ones the most fantastic and most logical petition he ever received.

“Here is an ugly girl asking for beauty. A surge for love and understanding swept through him, but was quickly replaced by anger. Anger that he was powerless to help her. Of all the wishes people had brought him-money, love, revenge, this seemed to him the most poignant and the one most deserving of fulfillment. A little black girl, who wanted to rise up out of the pit of blackness and see the world with blue eyes,”²⁰

His outrage grows and feels like power. For the first time he honestly wishes, he could do miracles. Never before he had really wanted the true and holy power, he is chilled. In a god like manner he gives blue eyes to the girl. One can understand the grimness of his settlement that he writes in a letter to god and sleeps into an ivory sleep forever. "I, I have caused a miracle. I gave her blue eyes. ... No one else will see her blue eyes. But she will. And she will live happily ever after."²¹

Pecola is shocked and under trauma and loses all hopes from the family and community. She starts to live in her own imaginary world where she can explore happiness.

"The damage done was total. She spent her days, her tendril, her sap-green days, walking up and down, up and down, her head jerking to the beat of a drummer so distant only she could hear. Elbows bent, hands on shoulders, she flailed her arms like a bird in an eternal, grotesquely futile effort to fly. Beating the air, a winged but grounded bird, intent on the blue void it could not reach – could not even see – but which filled the valleys of the mind."²²

By exploring the devastating effects that the western ideas of beauty and romantic love have on a vulnerable black girl, the novelist also demonstrates how these ideas can invert the natural order of an entire culture. The vertex at which two conflicting orders meet, Pecola becomes the scapegoat for that part in all of us that needs to see our own fears of unworthiness embodied in the same form. As black and female, the Pecolas of America are in accessible dumping ground. In the words of Dorothy H. Lee –

"*The Bluest Eye*, Morrison's first novel presents a fail quest culminating in madness. The young Pecola Breedlove searches painfully for self-esteem as a means of imposing order on the chaos of her world. Because a sense of self-worth and the correlative order that would accompany it are unavailable to her, in the familiar or wider environment, she retreats to the subjective world of fantasy"²³

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