

Race and gender in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*

Shyama Bhardwaj

Research Scholar, Singhania University, Rajasthan, India

Abstract

Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* is a novel about the humiliation and oppression faced by Black women. The main story sets in the North America, Ohio in the 1941. Basically, Black women have to bear the same humiliation and oppression with White or other color women who are tortured by their gender. Meanwhile, there is a little difference between them. Here, Black women do not only face gender humiliation but also race and class oppressions. In this study, it is revealed that Black women characters, particularly Pauline, Pecola, Frieda, and Claudia, are tortured by the family and the community. They are tortured because of the different looks and colour physically and culturally or socially.

Keywords: race, gender, oppression, black, slavery

Introduction

Race and gender signify the traumatic condition under which African American lived in white America. Right from the days of slavery, the blacks, irrespective of gender had realized the cruel reality of racism. Sexism more oppressive and mentally was cause of grievance to the black women who were sexually exploited by both the black and white men. Just as black as a group were relegated to an underclass by virtue of their race, so were the black women relegated to a separate caste by virtue of their gender. Confronted on all side by race and gender discrimination, the black woman has no friends but only liabilities and responsibilities. Responsible for their own and their children's well being and future, these women had to face daily the cruelty of their relationships with white men, with white women and above all with black men. But within the separate caste, a standard of woman was designed in terms of class definitions.

Morrison's first novel *The Bluest Eye* depicts the tragic life of a young black girl, Pecola Breedlove, who wants nothing more than to have her family love her and to be liked by school friends. These rather ordinary ambitions, however, are beyond Pecola's reach. She surmises that the reason she is abused at home and ridiculed at school is her black skin, which is equated with ugliness. She imagines that everything would be all right if she has blue eyes and blond hair; in short, if she is cute like Shirley Temple. Unable to withstand the assaults on her frail self-image, Pecola goes quietly insane and withdraws into a fantasy world in which she is a beloved little girl because she has the bluest eye of all.

So far as *The Bluest Eye* is concerned, race and gender are major preoccupations which are illustrated by various incidents. The novel is about growing up black and female and poor in racist America. The story is about a year in the life of a young black girl in Lorain Ohio named Pecola. It takes place against the backdrop of America's Midwest as well as in the years following The Great Depression. The story is told from

five perspectives: Pecola's, her mother's, her father's, her friend Claudia's, and Soaphead Church's. Because of the controversial nature of the book, which deals with racism, incest, and child molestation, there have been numerous attempts to ban it from schools and libraries.

The protagonist of the novel, a poor black girl who believes she is ugly because she and her community base their ideals of beauty on "whiteness". The title *The Bluest Eye* is based on Pecola's fervent wishes for beautiful blue eyes. She is rarely developed during the story, which is purposely done to underscore the actions of the other characters. Her insanity at the end of the novel is her only way to escape the world where she cannot be beautiful and to get the blue eyes she desires from the beginning of the novel.

Rejected by his father and discarded by his mother as a four day old baby, Cholly was raised by his Great Aunt Jimmy. After she dies, Cholly runs away and pursues the life of a "free man", yet he is never able to escape his painful past, nor can he live with the mistakes of his present. When Cholly was young, two white men once caught him having sex with a girl. They forced him to continue while they watched.

"Go on, Go on and finish, And nigger, make it good" (The Bluest Eye, p.112)

This traumatic event tenders him incapable of expressing his way in a positive way. Powerless to fight the white man, he turns his hatred towards Darlene.

"Cholly, moving faster, looked at Darlene. He hated her. He almost wished he could do it - hard, long, and painfully, he hated her so much. The flashlight wormed its way into his guts and turned the sweet taste of muscadine into rotten fetid bile. He stared at Darlene's hands covering her face in the moon and lamplight. They looked like baby claws." (The Bluest Eye, p.148)

It is also the first of a

*“myriad other humiliations, defeats and emasculations”
(The Bluest Eye, p.121)*

That Cholly is to face in his life and that fills him with hatred for the whites and plunge him into depravity. Second, his horror at having impregnated Darlene and his running away to seek his father's guidance shows the rightness of his moral impulse. However, the rejection by his father leaves him morally adrift, free, and dangerously free as Morrison puts it:

“Abandoned in a junk heap by his mother, rejected for a crape game by his father, there was nothing more to lose. He was alone with his own perceptions and appetites, and they alone interested him” (The Bluest Eye, p.64)

Cholly's emotions at the time of rape of his daughter are confused. When he comes home drunk, he finds his eleven-year daughter Pecola standing hunched over the sink

“the sequence of his emotions was revulsion, guilt, pity, then love” (Mckey, p.397)

The clear statement of misery was an accusation. This is succeeded by guilt at his own helplessness to do anything for her

“What could he do for her ever? What give her? What says to her? What could a burned- out Blackman say to his hunched back of his 11 year old daughter? (The Bluest Eye, p.167)

Tragically, he rapes his daughter in a gesture of madness mingled with affection. He realizes he loves her, but the only way he can express it is to rape her. Instead of hating the white men, Cholly hated the girl. Because of this and other humiliations, Cholly is a violent and cruel man.

The episode in which four black boys hurl insults at Pecola for her black skin and for the relaxed sleeping habits of elders is also very revealing

“Black e mo, Black e mo, yadadsleepsnekked, Black e m black e mo ya dadd sleeps nekked, Black e mo....” (The Bluest Eye, p.14)

The insults help us to get an idea of the self-hatred of these black children and help to prepare us for Pecola's helpless encounter with her father later on. The tragic irony is that the fatal love of her father is all the love that Pecola will ever experience. The adult Claudia's comments on the episode also anticipate Pecola's status as scapegoat:

“They danced a macabre ballet around the victim, whom for their own sake, they were prepared to sacrifice to the flaming pit” (The Bluest Eye, p.17)

Pecola's mother, Mrs. Breedlove is married to Cholly and lives the self-righteous life of a martyr, enduring her drunken husband and raising her two awkward children as best she can. The entry of Cholly in Pauline's life is like the expected coming of the stranger:

“He came big, he came strong, he came with yellow eyes, flaring nostrils, and he came with his own music” (The Bluest Eye, p.18)

Breedlove is a bit of an outcast herself with her shriveled foot and Southern background. Mrs. Breedlove lives the life of a lonely and isolated character who escapes into a world of dreams, hopes and fantasy that turns into the motion pictures she enjoys viewing.

Pecola's older brother Sammy is Cholly and Mrs. Breedlove's one son. Sam's part in this novel is relatively low key. Like his sister Pecola, he is affected by the disharmony in their home and deals with his anger by running away from home.

Much of the novel is told from the perspective of Claudia. She is the primary narrator in the book. Claudia is Pecola's friend and the younger sister of Frieda MacTeer. The MacTeer family serves as a foil for the Breedloves, and although both families are poor, Mr. and Mrs. MacTeer are strict but loving parents towards their children - a sharp contrast to the dysfunctional home of the Breedloves.

Frieda is Claudia's older sister and close companion. The two MacTeer girls are often seen together and while most of the story is told through Claudia's eyes, her sister Frieda plays a large role in the novel.

The Bluest Eye is about a black girl's desire for the bluest eyes, the symbol for her of what it means to be beautiful and therefore worthy in our society. At the centre of the novel is Pecola Breedlove, who comes from a family that is poor and virtually cut off from the normal life of a community. The Breedloves despise themselves because they believe in their own unworthiness, which is translated into ugliness for the women of that family. Associated with their condition is funk, violence, ugliness and poverty, symbolized by their storefront house.

In contrast, Pecola's mother Pauline works as a domestic in a beautiful house that is a reflection of the ideal women. She is, in effect, a black mammy to the wealthy blonde girl - doll who lives in the beautiful house. In a pivotal section of the novel, Pauline expels her ugly, 'poor' daughter Pecola from this house because she drops a hot pan of blueberry pie and dirties the floor. Instead of comforting her daughter, who has been burnt, Pauline rushes to console the girl - doll who is upset by the accident. The scene is beautifully constructed to contrast the extremes of class position in terms of what is desirable.

For Pauline hates the ugliness of her house, her daughter, her family, herself and blames her sense of unworthiness, on being black and poor. Instead, she aspires to the polished copper and sheen kitchen; she works in where everyone is clean, well-behaved and pretty. For her, any violation of that paradise by anyone, even her daughter, is paramount to a crime. The mother's own internalization of the desirable women as beautiful well-taken-care of cuddled, results in her rejection of her own daughter, who by virtue of her blackness and her poverty cannot possibly obtain such a standard.

“There I was, five months pregnant, trying to look like Jean Harlow, and a front tooth gone, everything went then.... I let my hair go back, plaited it up and settled down to just being ugly” (The Bluest Eye, p.87)

When her world lies in a shambles around her, Pauline goes back to church, neglects her home, fights with her husband furiously and seeks satisfaction in being martyr who has to bear the cross of her husband and children.

“Holding Cholly as a model of sin and failure, she bore him a crown of thorns, and her children like a cross” (Mosby, p.32)

It is at the movies that Pauline learns to equate physical beauty and virtue, here she watches

“White men taking such a good care of their women, and they all dressed up in big clean houses” (The Bluest Eye, p.102)

Pauline finds it increasingly difficult to return to her own life and, as a result,

“more and more.... Neglected her house, her children, her man” (The Bluest Eye, p.97)

Between the bottom, Pecola and her storefront house, and the top, the little girl doll in her perfect home Morrison presents us women situated on different points along the scale. Their positions are generally symbolized by the order of their homes and their shade of skin color.

Just below the girl-doll is Maureen Peal, the light skinned dream girl with green eyes who lives in a fine house, wears immaculate clothes, and is seen by everyone around her as a princess. Geraldine is slightly darker than Maureen. Because she is precariously on the edge of bright skin, she hates any element of funk, which associates with blackness; she rigidly maintains her prissy home.

She expels Pecola from her house, for this black girl with her happy hair represents to Geraldine both racial and class deterioration. In the novel, Maureen and Geraldine are also associated with fear of sex. Maureen is clearly interested in learning about ‘it’. But since that would violate the status of her position, she tries to learn about ‘it’ from Pecola, who, because, she is black, must know about such nastiness.

Geraldine is so afraid of funk creeping into her pseudo-white middle class life that she is frigid much the same way southern ladies were supposed to be. Freida and Claudia Mc Teer’s mother is just one level above the Breed loves, at least economically. Somehow, she has managed to hold onto her self-respect, despite her love of Shirley Temple-dolls, ‘good hair’ and bright skin. Her home is not storefront, though stuffed newspapers in the cracks are necessary to keep out the cold.

Instead, there is a hard, firm love that permeates her home. She and her women friends from their own community as they waver precariously on the edge, between Mrs. Breedloves total alienation from any community and their desire not to work and to own a neat home like Geraldine.

The idea of the ‘inherent,’ superiority of the white and other lighter complexions over black complexion persists to this day not only in the USA but elsewhere too including in India. In America black skin colour is associated with thick lips and kinky hair and ugliness whereas the white complexion goes

with straighter hair and blue eyes and good looks, This conventional white notion of beauty is reaffirmed by Knight Dunlap a professor at the prestigious John Hopkins University at Baltimore:

The type which is highest in value tends to approximate the European type, wherever the European type becomes known. All dark races prefer white skin... The broad fat nose and the thick wide lips are often repulsive because they suggest the African, if for no other reason. But I suspect that the thick lips are also a defect because they are in *themselves a hindrance to efficient speech.* (The Bluest Eye, p.101)

The Bluest Eye is about the contradictions fostered by racism, sexism and class distinctions that assail the black. The contradictions are too intense for Pecola to sustain her sense of worth. As a result, she descends into madness. The other girls, Claudia and Frieda, barely manage to survive. Claudia, the narrator of this story summarizes Pecola’s tragedy in this way:

“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 we know her—felt so wholesome after we cleaned ourselves on her. We were so beautiful when we stood, astride her ugliness. Her simplicity decorated us, her guilt sanctified us, her pain made us glow with health, her awkwardness made us think we and a sense of humor. Her inarticulateness made us believe we were eloquent. Her poetry kept us generous.. (The Bluest Eye, p.163)

Pecola is raped by her father and the girl’s need to be loved taken the doomed form of a yearning for blue eyes. Morrison sums up this personal fate and the novel’s power full theme.

“The damage done was total. She spent her days..... Walking 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 on the mind.” (The Bluest Eye, p.176)

Pregnant by her father, she goes to soap-head church a man who believes himself possessed of holy powers, what she wants are blue eyes. In this scene, in which a young black on the verge of madness seeks beauty and happiness in a wish for a girl’s eyes, the author makes her most telling statement on the tragic effect of race prejudice on children.

Thus the novel shows us the psychic state and the resultant behavior of Pecola under the pressure of white domination. Morrison’s interest is in exposing the vicious genocidal effects of racism on the black girl, Pecola, Cholly, Pauline, and some other characters can also be examined in the light of the questions of what it means to be black in a racist society. As Shelby Steels says “to be black was to be a victim, therefore, not to be a victim was not to be black.”

References

1. Toni Morrison. *The Bluest Eye* London: Picador, 1970.

2. John Stuart Mill. *The Subjection of Women*, in *On Liberty and The Subjection of Women* Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Classics, 1996.
3. Donald Gibson B. *Text and Countertext in the Bluest Eye in Toni Morrison: Critical Perspectives Past and Present*, eds. Henry Louis Gates Jr. et al., (New York: Amistad). 1993.
4. The Seams Can't Show, 60, quoted in Terry Otten, Horrific Love in Toni Morrison's Fiction, *Modern Fiction Studies* Fall/ Winter. 1993, 39(3&4).
5. Nellie McKay. An Interview with Toni Morrison, in *Toni Morrison: Critical Perspectives Past and Present*, eds. Henry Louis Gates Jr. and K.A. Appiah (New York: Amistad). 1993.
6. *Personal Beauty and Racial Betterment* (St. Louis: CV Mosby, 1920), 32, quoted in 'The Bluest Eye by Toni Morrison,' *Literature and Its Times*, Joyce Moss and George Wilson (Detroit: Gale). 1997, 4.