

Pushed to the Peripheries: Locating Self Through Racial Matrix in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*

Gargy Ganguly

Research Scholar

Department of English Studies

Central University of Jharkhand

Ranchi.

Abstract:

The present paper attempts to analyse the psychological damage caused to an individual trapped in the vicious circle of self denial, reinforced by racist ideologies. The chosen text is, *The Bluest Eye* by Afro-American writer Toni Morrison, wherein, the protagonist is an eleven year old black girl from Ohio of 1970's named Pecola whose self gets utterly fragmented owing to the internalization of constant attacks from society reinforcing white Christian ideology of superiority. Pecola Breedlove is an eleven years old black girl, facing systematic rejection by parents, neighbours, and by her immediate circle of friends and society at large for being "ugly and black" which pushes the peripheries of her sanity. The utter fragmentation of self of a child acts as an indictment of a decadent society crushing under racist ideology. The paper also attempts to delineate further on the psychological repercussion of the legacy of slavery which still rings true from the vestiges of Afro-American history. The manifestation of the extreme psychological distortion which a black individual faces under the crushing regime of colour segregation becomes the focal point of research. The paper also aims to explore the larger ramifications of dehumanisation of an entire section of society on the collective black psyche. The paper will be using Lacanian deconstruction of self along with feminist scholarship on the theories of race and gender in delineating the psychological ramifications of racial subjugation through a vulnerable site of a black girl child.

Keywords: black psyche, insanity, internalisation, race.

America's chequered history of slavery, although seemingly distant has thriving currency in recent times. The often likely to be forgotten history of transatlantic slavery withheld not just one but multi continents of Europe, Africa, America under its devouring clutches. Race consciousness is something which acted as a foil as well as a legacy of slavery. The concept of racial 'othering' as opposed to white self of the English master has its genesis in the history of transatlantic slavery. The negative ascriptions imposed on the racially 'othered' slave acts as a trope for sanctioning sense of difference. The white European master faces "an incomprehensible and multifaceted alterity" as, and translates it into "in terms of identity and difference (Janmohamed 32)." Instead of seeing the native as a bridge toward syncretic possibility, it uses him as a mirror that reflects the colonialist's self image (19)." These negative ascriptions expedite the imperialist agenda to establish the native/slave as irrevocably savage so that in lieu of moral superiority, the white master can continue to civilize the native slave. In the western grand narratives of history, the black subject has always been ascribed with negative binaries such a savage/inferior/ignorant as opposed to the enlightened white man. Contemporary times have not been infrequent with racial attacks whether verbal or physical or psychological upon the binary opposite of immaculate white

English Man. The colonial obsession of white standard of beauty still continues as a hangover in twenty first century as well. The fixation upon white as a standard of beauty can be exemplified in plethora of cultural manifestations such a virtual media, magazines, billboards etc. The lion's share of these media expressions are tainted with selective preference for white standard of beauty, wherein colour segregation plays a pivotal role. Images of body ideals which reiterate white beauty standards of thin body, white skin, blonde hair, blue eyes are found in abundance in magazines, commercials, movies, and advertisements. These images play a pivotal role in formation of identity and self esteem. An unattainable ideal has been constructed by society and by the media and women and girls are expected to conform to it. The insidious trope of these selective preference even percolates to seemingly innocuous nursery tales and rhymes catered to young minds wherein the ideas of white beauty and white English ways of living gets reiterated. The dangers of this white-non white binary becomes thwarting when one succumbs to it irrevocably rather than moving past the predominant and pervasive societal matrix of colour ideology.

Toni Morrison's novel *The Bluest Eye* (1970) lends itself extremely well in portrayal of the catastrophic consequences of the internalisation of the racial regime and colour ideology. The novel takes into account the story of an eleven year Afro-American girl named Pecola Breedlove who fails to resist the pervasive racist ideology prevalent in the society during the 1940's and succumbs to utter fragmentation of self. Morrison brings out the psychological damage done to Pecola who was doomed to unquestioningly accept idealized white definition of beauty. The novel focuses on Pecola's futile longing for blue eyes and the inherent psychological plight she meets. Morrison's work also critically engage in exploring the role of "Ideological State Apparatuses" (Althusser) like School, Family, Church etc. in formation of identity of fragile minds in society. This paper takes recourse to textual analysis of the text in exploring the junctures leading to the protagonist's self devastation.

The novel tells the story of Pecola Breedlove who lives in Lorain, Ohio during the 1940's. She is the daughter of Cholly Breedlove and Pauline Breedlove, two completely distant and different individuals unwillingly trapped in the institution of family. They also have a son named Sammy. The relentless fights of their parents force the children to adapt and devise their own mechanisms to cope up with the emotional turmoil they go are coerced to go through. Sammy succumbed to running away from home to avoid witnessing the fights: "by the time, he was fourteen, he was known to have run away from home no less than twenty seven times (Morrison 43)." Pecola, on the other hand, being a girl and younger than Sammy, unable to run away was coerced to look for other methods to deal with the turmoil. Pecola, thus as way to escape, wished death either for herself or one of her parents. "She struggled between an overwhelming desire that one would kill the other, and a profound wish that she herself could die (Morrison 43)." Pecola as a child always encountered corrosive racial hatred for her black skin colour and ugly appearance. On her birth, her mother exclaimed "But I know she was ugly. Head full of pretty hair, but lord she was ugly (Morrison 125)." Pecola was relentlessly harassed by her school mates for being an ugly black girl. She lacked companionship. She was a stark juxtaposition to white skinned, green eyed, yellow haired Maureen Peal. Having faced existential denial at every juncture of interaction with society; from her own parents, her school, other members of her immediate society since tender age, Pecola internalizes that "the distaste must be for her, her blackness (Morrison 49)." This

internalization becomes one of the leading causes for the disintegration of her self-identity later in the text.

The narration of the novel is done by Claudia McTeer, another fellow girl from Pecola's community and also her school friend. Claudia narrates the saga of Pecola's life from the perspective as a child as well as an adult. Her retrospective narration as an adult offers deeper insights into the cultural understanding of racialized Afro-American society. Claudia and her sister Frieda also face racial comments and isolation from society at large owing to their skin color and class, but unlike Pecola Breedlove, this McTeer girls do not succumb to self hatred as much as Pecola do. The difference in psychological construction of selves in McTeer girls, in limited but profound ways, depended on the way their parents treated them. Although from the perspective of the children, adults and parents always appeared distant and dismissive. Claudia in her narration, poignantly points out, "We didn't initiate talk with grown ups, we answered their questions (Morrison 23)." But compared to Pecola's relation with her parents, Claudia and Frieda's relation with their parents was more inclusive and comforting. In an instance from the novel, when Freida was wrongly touched by their tenant, Freida's father had beaten the person black and blue and threw him out of the house. This act of standing up for their girls shaped the girls in different ways than Pecola. Pecola, as Claudia narrates, referred to her own mother as "Mrs. Breedlove" rather than calling her Mamma or mother. This referential distance in the mother-daughter relationship reveals the gap in the full blossoming of familial ties in the Breedlove family. This is complicated further when Pauline Breedlove begins working for a white family as a servant and caretaker of their child. The master's child refers to Pauline as "Polly" in stark contrast to what her own daughter is allowed to call her. These existential denial loops Pecola faced everyday strengthened her unworthiness in her mind. The Foucauldian concept of discourse becomes relevant here. Michel Foucault's idea of discourse "refer to all utterances and statements which have been made which have meaning and which have some effect (Mills 53)." Discourse includes statements, ideas, opinions that circulate themselves. These descriptions, opinions also regulate what is being described. The discourse of denial in Pecola's life also regulated her concept of self. All the negative ascriptions owing to racialized structure of society gets ingrained in her fragile mind and gets internalized and regulated within her. The self loathing gets heightened within her as there is acute dearth of any single comforting and positive discourse from institution of family, school etcetera.

The relation between Pauline and Cholly Breedlove merits attention. Claudia, as she talks about Pecola's parents, notes that "although their poverty was traditional and stultifying, it was not unique. But their ugliness was unique. (Morrison 35)." The ugliness which Claudia is refereeing here is not the physical ugliness she is talking about. This ugliness is the ugliness of internalized self loathing, exhibiting itself as an external ugliness. The narrator further remarks, "It was as though some mysterious all knowing master had given each one a cloak of ugliness to wear and they had to accept it without question (Morrison 38)." Pauline being a lonely child in her childhood has grown up facing body shaming and racial segregation herself. She had her front tooth missing and she had a limp walking style due to problematic foot. This already instilled a conscious shame in her throughout her adolescent life. After her marriage with Cholly, when they moved to Ohio during the late 1930's, she experienced a psychological upheaval there as she faced racial separation more blatantly there. Pauline recalls in the novel, "Northern coloured folk was different too... No better than whites for meanness. They could make you feel just as no count, except I didn't expect it from them

(Morrison 117).” She felt more lonely there and her only recourse was turning towards her husband Cholly for company and emotional nurture. But her husband Cholly was unable to totally respond to her dependence on him. He himself was a victim of abuse in his fragile formative years. Having never received parental affection being an abandoned child, he grew up in his initial years with a very old grand aunt whom Cholly viewed just as old skin. Cholly’s psycho-sexual development was affected by total absence of maternal nurture. He also experienced abusive encounter in his adolescent years in the hands of two whitemen while having physical encounter with a girl. This violent intrusion in his life affected in different way. Instead of directing his anger towards the white men, he directed all his anger and feelings of worthlessness towards the girl at hand : “Sullen, irritable, he cultivated his hatred of Darlene. Never did he once consider directing his hatred towards the hunters. They were big, armed, white men. He was small, black, helpless (Morrison 151).” This thwarted his normal growth as an adult with a balanced mind. After few years, the marriage between Pauline and Cholly began to crumble, both living a thwarted and alienated existence in a society that did nothing to soothe them in any way. Pauline devoted her all to her workplace because that was the only place that offered her some self worth and catered to her obsession of cleanliness. It was Pauline’s “neatness, the charm, the joy he awakened in her made him want to nest with her (Morrison 160).” Pauline’s own home and children became secondary to her, which did not provide any emotional nourishment to her. Cholly also “having no idea how to raise children, and having never watched any parent raise himself, he could not even comprehend what such a relationship should be. He reacted to them, and his emotions were based on what he felt at that moment (Morrison 161).”

Pecola’s parents were thus themselves two bruised , incomplete , wandering souls having no strength to nurture the young, fragile minds of their children. Pecola being caught in the double bind of gender and sex and also class in a racialized society, was on threshold of victimhood until she gets brutally raped by her father. Cholly, in a fit of delusion, viewed Pecola as an abject, ugly black body. He, in his drunken state also felt immense pity for her ugliness, having no one to love her. These unresolved, conflicted emotions pushed his boundaries of morality and he succumbed to an instinctive overwhelm, having raped his little eleven year old girl. This violent encounter coupled with Pauline’s further torture and beating upon Pecola breaks the thin line between sanity and insanity. Pecola prior to her violation, held fiercely only prayer to have beautiful eyes. The genesis of this idea of “grotesque beauty” as Toni Morrison calls it, that is , asking for having blue eyes in an irrevocably black body , lies in the “crippled and crippling family (Morrison 3).” Pecola succumbed to it, as she did not have any single straw to lean into for support. Post her violation, she gives in to insanity and believes that her eyes have transformed into azure blue eyes. Now that she has the most beautiful eyes, she believes she is loved by all. This pathetic crumbling of the most vulnerable member of society mocks the progressive advancement of civilized society.

Not all members succumb to the violent crushing regime of racial self loathing in the novel. The novel’s narrator, Claudia McTeer, becomes a subversive presence in the otherwise docile, accepting females in the racial social matrix. Claudia , since childhood questions the very idea of gifting white , pretty dolls to girls for playing. She questioned the naturalization of white standard beauty ideals as the only medium of surviving in a corrosive racial society. She violently questions when she was gifted the white doll as a Christmas gift: “What was I supposed to do with it? Pretend that I was its mother. I had no interest in babies or concept of motherhood. I was interested in humans of my own age and size (Morrison 20).” Claudia’s

retrospective look critiques the performativity of gender roles, as espoused by Judith Butler in her seminal book *The Gender Trouble*. The indoctrination process involved in the little acts like giving white dolls to little girls to play with, delineate the performativity of specific gender role assigned to girls. “Gender is an act or a sequence of acts that is always and inevitably occurring, since it is impossible to exist as a social agent outside the terms of gender (Salih 47) Claudia also does not give in to self loathing. She, on the other hand, questions the monopoly of white ideal of beauty: “The other dolls, which were supposed to bring me great pleasure, succeeded in doing quite the opposite. I had only one desire, to dismember it. To see what it was made, to find the beauty, the desirability that had escaped me, but apparently only me (Morrison 20).” Claudias resisted the coercive and pervasive ideology of race and hierarchy as espoused by her immediate society at large.

The narrative structure of the novel also wonderfully explicate the central argument of self fragmentation. There are two prologues at the beginning. The first prologue is a dominant ‘Dick and Jane’ primer that foregrounds the internalization of white ideal of beauty and also the supremacy of white grand narratives that were targeted to upheld the canonicity of European narratives. In the Dick and Jane Primer, a supposedly perfect family of four: mother, father, brother and sister, along with a dog is shown which stands in stark juxtaposition to Pecola’s dysfunctional family. The second paragraph, the same primer gets repeated without the punctuation marks. It gets once more repeated, but this time without any space and punctuation marks. The deletion of space and all punctuations in a way refer to Pecola’s fragmented self wherein all words and phrases are meaningless, because the thin spaces between them has been burst by societal thrust. The second prologue is given from Claudia’s perspective. She and Frieda envisions Pecola’s unborn baby as marigold seeds. The growth of marigold plants from them will safeguard Pecola’s baby was their firm faith. But unfortunately they did not survive. The earth became unyielding. This prologue foregrounds the inefficiency of a society to protect its most vulnerable member from crushing.

The Bluest Eye, thus vehemently critiques the reigning cultural standards of beauty and pervasively damaging it can be exemplifies through its protagonist Pecola Breedlove. The longing for a pair of blue eyes mocks the unattainable idealized beauty yardsticks. The novel also critiques the social institution of family which if not thoroughly resilient itself, cannot protect its most fragile members. The very idea that “beauty is something not to behold, but to do (Morrison 1)” explicates the problematic matrix in which little girls gets coercively trapped. Pecola’s devastation as a little girl opens up new paradigms of questioning the established notions of social hierarchy and set patterns of beauty.

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