

Internalized Racism and Self Hatred: A Study of Toni Morrison's Novel *The Bluest Eye* in the Light of Edward Said's Theory of Orientalism

Anaha Paul
MA English Studies
Central University of Tamil Nadu
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Abstract

This paper is an attempt to delineate the orientalist attitudes and to show how the internalized racism leads to self-hatred. Orientalism refers to the binaries of East and West. It indicates the domination of one culture over the other. The unity or harmony between the nations is broken here. This paper examines the various incidents from the novel *The Bluest Eye* in the light of Edward Said's theory of orientalism. It also takes a look into the circumstances in which the characters are oppressed. The study on the orientalism and internalized racism throws light in to the realities of the life of the marginalized sections in the society. It is closely related to how the stereotypes are internalized by the dominating and the suppressed group. This contributes to develop self-hatred. The oppressed groups are always doubly victimized. They suffer discrimination within their community and outside their community. The colonizers have conquered not only the lands but also the minds of the natives. The study focuses on how the internalized racism of Pecola and other characters in the novel made her an orient. It also takes in to account the series of oppressions through which the oppressors of Pecola had undergone.

Keywords: Orientalism, internalized racism, nation, self-hatred, stereotypes, discrimination

Toni Morrison, the well-known Afro-American writer unravels the tragic plight of blacks under the white supremacy through her works. It reflects the ugliness, frustration and pessimism abundant in the multicultural American world. Also the beauty and hope is portrayed beneath the surface of ugliness of cultural conflicts. Her stories revolve around the social, cultural and racial concerns of her own people. Her first novel *The Bluest Eye* delineates the story of a black girl named Pecola who longed for the blue eyes. The title itself refers to the urge for possessing the white standards of beauty like blue eyes, blond hair, white skin etc. Pecola has a great fascination towards the colonizer's culture. She thinks that the blue eyes would be enough to fit her into the white culture. She wants to get absorbed into the white culture. The stereotypes in the society prevent her entry into the dominant culture and remind her black identity. Pecola wished to escape from her black identity at any cost. She internalizes the notion of beauty of the whites

and gradually a kind of self-hatred develops in her. Her desire for the blue eyes stems from the discrimination she faces for being black. She believes that the blue eyes would be a solution to her problems but it turns out to be the sole reason for her sufferings.

Orientalism refers to the binaries of East and West. It indicates the views held by the West about the East. The East was considered as the “other” category by the West. Said traces this tendency from the classical period to the works of renaissance and after. It shows that Orientalism is not so much a product of circumstances specific to a historical context, but something embedded deeply in western culture itself. To make it clear, Said brings out the distinction between latent and manifest Orientalism. Latent Orientalism is an unconscious positivity and manifest Orientalism consists of the stated views about Oriental phenomena. Such a distinction enables Said to emphasize that modern Orientalism, being manifests in the supremacy of American imperialism is rooted in latent Orientalism. The hostility produced by latent Orientalism is passed from one generation to another as a pillar of western culture, always viewing the East as inferior. It becomes internalized and fixed as a cultural orientation to improve the life of natives and make them civilized in the case of West. This study is intended to show how internalized racism makes the character Pecola in the novel *The Bluest Eye* an Orient.

In post-colonial studies internalization refers to the incorporation of values of dominant culture. The internalization in *The Bluest Eye* relies extensively on traditional myths related to blackness. Beauty, order, cleanliness are often associated with whites whereas blacks are seen as unattractive, unclean, unintelligent etc. These views which the characters uphold are based on stereotypes. As Said says, West regards Orient as “irrational, depraved, child-like, different” (40). Said uses Foucault’s theory of discourse in his theory of Orientalism. For Said, the colonized is a discourse. His main concern is to reveal the relationship between knowledge and power. Foucault theorized the way power is internalized by those it disempowers through ideology or language. Said appropriates Foucault’s idea of discourse and power.

I have found it useful here to employ Michel Foucault’s notion of a discourse...Orientalism as a discourse one cannot possibly understand the enormously systematic discipline by which European culture was able to manage...and even produce the Orient politically, sociologically, militarily, ideologically, scientifically, and imaginatively during the post-Enlightenment period...it also tries to show that European culture gained in strength and identity by setting itself off against the Orient as a sort of surrogate and even underground self(3)

Breedloves are othered at various levels: ontologically, socially and politically. The colonization of their minds provides an important evidence for the bad effects of Orientalism. They are forced to accept the white culture in the discourse of Orientalism and it resulted in their down fall. Pecola, along with other characters has internalized the “racialised, absolutized, and ontologically generalized aesthetic dualism” (Valkeakari 79) of the white beauty against her blackness. She prays for blue eyes every night. She has also internalized other people’s views of her as “black, poor, and ugly, the antithesis of all that the society values” (Klotman 124). Pecola

idealized Shirely Temple as the paragon of beauty. She was under the false conviction that her eyes would become blue if she ate the candy with the picture of Mary Jane on the wrapper. Many of her internalized values are influenced by her mother Pauline, who has a blind belief towards the white culture. Pauline feels that “northern coloured folk was different too. Dicty –like. No better than Whites for meanness” (Morrison 117). She is facing a kind of internal racism or the racism within the black community. Her failure to be a “proper black woman” makes her crave to be like the whites, though she hates them. From movies she internalizes the myths of stable white families, of white respectability, beauty of whites etc. She also internalizes the dualism of Christianity and it makes her see her husband Cholly as the antithesis of her own righteousness. . She is not showing motherly feelings when Pecola is raped by Cholly. She shows such feelings towards the daughter in the White’s family. Pauline takes the role of ideal servant there and she soothes the little girl when she is frightened by Pecola and MacTeer girls. Pecola was born against her fantasy. She even beats Pecola for making the child cry. This is how the Orientalist binaries work on the mind of the suppressed. Her own family and culture becomes the other for her when she falls into the stereotype of the “ideal servant”. The internalization is evident when the narrator says,

You looked at them and wondered why they are so ugly; you looked closely and could not find the source. Then you realized that it came from conviction, their conviction. It was as though some mysteries all-knowing master had given each one a cloak of ugliness to wear, and they had each accepted it without question. The master had said, “you are ugly people”. They had looked about themselves and saw nothing to contradict the statement; saw, in fact, support for it leaning at them from every billboard, every movie, every glance. “Yes”, they had said. “You are right”. And they took the ugliness in their hands, threw it as a mantle over them, and went about the world with it (39)

These lines reveal the Orientalist attitudes and hegemonic furtherance of racial stereotypes to degrade and suppress the natives. The white superiority and black inferiority occurs at the cost of conscious negation and observation of the spiritual, ontological and epistemological realities of the blacks. This underlines Saidian position about how Orientalism imbues certain negative characteristics in the minds of the colonized people. The novel presents Pauline Breedlove as the scapegoat of movies and both Cholly and Pecola are the victims of oriental gaze. Pecola is looked at and judged from a racist or orientalist perspective both by whites and blacks. Jean Paul Sartre in his book *Being and Nothingness* delineates how the formulations of self and other happen through the look or gaze. He says,

One way that I acknowledge the existence of the “other” is the le-regard or the “look” of the other defines me, puts me in the context of his vision, and grants me an identity, the “look” makes me aware of “my self” as perceived by the “other”. I become aware of the fact that to the other i am an “object”, i am an “object”, i am a thing. It serves as a vehicle through which i am judged and labeled. The look threatens by ignoring my free subjectivity... (266)

The internalized racism also leads to self-hatred. Cholly's rape of his daughter Pecola is a manifestation of his inner struggle and hatred. The rape exposes Cholly's painful memories of his humiliating sexual experience with Darlene and the passion he felt for Pauline years ago. In his drunken stupor he confuses his previous passion for Pauline with Pecola who was standing on one foot and was scratching her toe. It resembled the act of Pauline when he first met her. Cholly's hatred for women is because of the painful memories of his past. His hatred for women is then extended to Pauline and Pecola. His self-hatred is also seen when he tries to hide himself from his father. Pecola's self-hatred is the consequence of the people's rejection. It is also the result of the awareness of her invisibility in the community. When she goes to the candy store of Mr. Yakobowski, a white immigrant, he denies her-self. "He does not see her, because for him there is nothing to see" (48). For Geraldine shame and internalized racial self-hatred are motivating factors. She is a middle class black woman obsessed with distinguishing her family from lower blacks. It is her self-hatred which makes her avoid all reminders of her African heritage. She is afraid and repulsive when she sees Pecola in her house. For her, Pecola represents everything she despises. This incident strengthens Pecola's belief that she is ugly and she would be accepted by everybody if she possesses blue eyes. She seeks the help of the local mystic Soaphead Church and he tricks her into killing a dog which he hates. He poisons the meat and makes her believe that she will get blue eyes if the dog reacts strangely. He is of mixed origin and he internalized the white's purity and cleanliness. He associates the dog's uncleanliness with his own blackness and that makes him to kill the dog. Soaphead Church, like his ancestors uses the power gained through his white heritage to exploit Pecola for his own ends.

The psychological mechanism of internalized racism is based on the cycle of oppressions. Their mind set is colonized because of the internalized racism. The cycle of oppression affects people whether they assumed the role of oppressor or oppressed. The child who grows in the oppressive system would attain the role of oppressed in the beginning and later the role of oppressor in his adult stage. In the novel, the oppressors of Pecola have themselves undergone racist ideology or series of oppressions. People are not born with the tendency to hurt others. They are taught to do so when they themselves are hurt. Pauline is the best example for this. Pauline adopts the role of oppressor in the discourse of physical beauty. Pecola is thus born with this ideology of racialized beauty. The colonizers impose power on the colonized not only physically but also mentally. At the physical level Pecola is suppressed by her own parents. Mentally she is suppressed by the white culture. The colonizers oppressed her not only on the basis of color of the skin but also mentally. Thus the internalized racism of Pecola and other characters in the novel strengthens their inferiority. Not only the colonizers, but also the colonized consider themselves as inferior. This gradually leads to the Orientalist attitudes of the Whites. All the characters in the novel are silenced. The colonizers do not pay any attention to what the colonized want to say. This resembles Spivak's idea that the subaltern cannot speak. They have the ability to speak but others do not have the patience to listen to them. Both Pauline and the whites do not want to listen to Pecola about her rape. She is a doubly oppressed woman. Her parents and whites treat her with Orientalist attitude.

Conclusion

In the novel *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison delineates the Afro-American's worship of white culture along with their hopelessness. Pecola's ugliness is a state of being that is both forced upon and chosen by them. Pecola is not alone in the internalization of white standards of beauty. The blacks internalize the white culture and view the world through the eyes of whites. Due to this they gradually develop self-hatred. It leads to their destruction. In the case of Pecola the stereotype torments her mentally and leads to the point of insanity. She is accustomed to the racism which she faces every day and internalizes it. Her desire for blue eyes stems from the fact that it belongs only to the whites. She tries to escape from reality by acquiring blue eyes, but she never escapes. Her acquiring of blue eyes is only an illusion. Even if she acquires blue eyes in the reality, the whites are not ready to adopt her to their community since the other standards of white beauty does not fit to her. She is mad in the Orientalist's eyes. This emphasizes Said's idea that the Orientals are irrational, savage, different, child-like etc. for the Orientalists. The blue eyes indicate only the European culture. For the Orientalists, Orientals are always inferior and are unable to enter into the white culture. No change happens in her status as Orient because of the blue eyes. Thus the desire for blue eyes reinforces her position as an Orient.

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