

Body, Violence, and Trauma in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*: A Feminist Appraisal

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Abstract

The present paper deals with the amalgamation of physical affliction with the psychological aberration of women. In asserting the major issues of violence and brutality on the psyche, it reflects the loss of human attributes and condemns misogyny at its best. Toni Morrison with her realistic depiction of womanhood under dual subjugation of patriarchy and racism, advocates for equal treatment towards mankind whether men or women. The story of agony and suffering has been nurtured in such a way that it gives a natural touch not only to characters but especially to women all over the world, who suffer from mental illness resulting from torture given to their benign selves and torment given to their bodies that shakes their identity completely.

Keywords: Psychological aberration, Violence, Womanhood, Subjugation, Patriarchy, Racism

Being the first African American to win the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1993, Toni Morrison has gained name and fame with her outstanding array of literary works that made her a household name throughout the nation. She has been an unexceptional curator of novels, children's books, essays, and whatnot. *The Bluest Eye* (1970), *Sula* (1973), *Song of Solomon* (1977), and *Beloved* (1987) are the finest among the lot. Toni Morrison received her baptismal name 'Anthony', which later became the basis for her nickname 'Toni'. She did her post-graduation in English from Cornell University in 1955, and there she wrote a thesis on the works of William Faulkner and Virginia Woolf. She began to write her fiction as a part of an informal group, but this led her to discuss with other writers at Howard's, who met her to discuss their work. The power of Faulkner's imagination and the prowess of Virginia Woolf's words were enough to provide Morrison with the acumen to be a writer of her kind.

As an author of outstanding qualities to depict the cultural, social, and political scenario and a girl tackling the subjection of Whites and Men together in an unknown place or the place to which she does not belong or will not belong at all just because the acceptance seems unacceptable and expectable in the regime of Whites, Morrison grounds her narratives in a way

that she becomes reflective, full of energy and genuineness while talking about her people, and their plights in taking a breath beneath the hostile sky. Jesmyn Ward opines, “*Her every word a caress, her sentence an embrace, her sentence an embrace, her every paragraph a cupping of her hands around our faces that said ‘I know you, I see you, We are together’*” (Christensen).

The novel taken into consideration is the author’s debut one named, *The Bluest Eye* and it has been immensely praised for its ‘*profound and unrelenting vision*’. *The Bluest Eye* is acclaimed as “*a fiction so charged with pain and wonder that the novel becomes poetry*” (Leonard). Thus, it flows and flows with an essence to touch every heart and soul. Even the title of the novel ‘The Bluest Eye’ gives a sense of being the best or having the superlatives in terms of eyes as the notion of beauty standard depends on having the best physical attributes and the apt example of that is the protagonist of the novel.

Thus, to talk of the protagonist of the novel is to talk of every woman, especially Black women living in the adverse American society with their plights and deadening circumstances where they have no say of theirs. With the suppressed voice and crushed identity, Black women or African Americans as depicted by Morrison through Breedloves, especially Pecola and her friends Macteer sisters deeply resonate with the lethal atrocities faced by African Americans. While sketching Pecola to generalize Black women, Morrison’s writing has the power to deal with the past as well as the present in order not to rewrite it but to rectify it. In that case, she condemns being compartmentalized. She rejects the label of “feminist”, and expresses her sense of the problematic nature of white feminist views in which they ignore and even exploit the specific needs of black women, and has observed that “*the enemy is not men. The enemy is the concept of patriarchy.*” She “*would never write any ... ‘ist’ novels,*” she says, because she “*can’t take positions that are close*” (qtd. in Roynon 13).

She advocates the rights of women but does not identify her works as feminist. Despite focusing frequently on female characters, Pecola, Claudia, Frieda, Sethe, and Sula, she wants her works to be identified as pieces of equity. In an interview with Zia Jaffrey, Morrison explains her decision to omit the feminist moniker:

“*To be as free as I possibly can...everything I’ve done, in the writing world, has been to expand articulation, rather than to close it, to open doors...I think it’s a question of equitable access, and opening doors to all sorts of things*”. Morrison keenly knew the world, the surroundings, the atmosphere, she even knew the differences between being a white feminist and a black advocator of rights.

From the very outset, Pecola Breedlove, the protagonist who was also the victim of this dismal world of disillusionment went through many trials and tribulations throughout her life. Pecola's body becomes the vehicle on which her destiny and her society are surrounded by whites and her community strikes so hard that she becomes voiceless. The double subjugation of such a tiny being just because she has been considered 'second sex', (a derogatory term) demands the existing self of a woman and shows the dominating existence of males in the society we have been living in for so long. Pecola, an eleven-year-old girl, was abused and scorned by everyone in the story. She was the victim, always the object of other's wrath. Pecola was raped by her

drunken father and self-deceived into believing that God had miraculously given her the blue eyes that she prayed for. She lost her body, and shortly she lost her sanity.

Her notion of beauty standard is what every black woman thinks of. But there prevails a notion of innocence mingled with immaturity on the one hand and a deep desire to get a pair of blue eyes so that she can transform herself into the best life possible on this planet. Having blue eyes means meeting the white standard of beauty, and living a high standard of life which is suited only for light-skinned people with blue eyes. Even “*God was a nice old white man, with long white hair, flowing white beard, and little blue eyes that looked sad when people died and mean when they were bad*”(Morrison, 132).

White supremacy is much endowed in them as they believe that “*all civilizations derive from the white race, that none can exist without its help, and that a society is great and brilliant only so far as it preserves the blood of the noble group that created it*” (166). Pecola “*an ugly little girl asking for beauty*” (172) rises from her atrocities and sees the world with blue eyes. She doesn’t want to be a part of that pit of blackness which made her deprive of every opportunity to rise and locate herself among the supreme order of people. If Pecola had blue eyes, it would be possible for her to live a sane life. Had she been one of the whites, the circumstances would have been different. These all reflect the dominance of white beauty standards which resulted in the endless reproduction of images of feminine beauty in everyday objects and consumer goods: white baby dolls with their inhumanly hard bodies and uncanny blue eyes, Shirley Temple cups, Mary Jane Candies, and even the clothes of “dream child” Maureen Peal which are stylish precisely because they suggest Shirley Temple cuteness and because Claudia and Frieda recognize them as such. But Claudia and her sister can recognize “the things that made Maureen beautiful and not them” only in terms of its effects on other people. Despite knowing that they are “richer, brighter” they cannot ignore “how the honey voices of parents and aunts, the obedience in the eyes of peers, the slippery light in the eyes of teachers” all pour out to the Maureen Peals of the world and not to them. From the responses of other people to girls like Maureen and others for whom Shirley Temple is the model the sisters learn the fact of their lack, variously identified as ugliness or unworthiness, if not the essence of it.

Pecola has always been the subject of mockery and a thing to despise. She felt ashamed of her identity, her color, her presence, and her existence. The teacher of her school didn’t care a bit for her in the least. In addition, one can see through the novel as the story advances how the children mocked Pecola. She 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 never fail to get peals of laughter from those in earshot, and mock anger from the accused. Maureen Peal also referred to not only Pecola but Claudia and Frieda in derogation while screaming at them,

“I am cute! And you ugly! Black and ugly black e mos. I am cute!” (71).

This scenario is more evident in the words of Claudia, “*We were sinking under the wisdom, accuracy, and relevance of Maureen's last words. If she was cute – and if anything could be*

believed, she was – then we were not. And what did that mean? We were lesser. Nicer, brighter, but still lesser” (72).

With an oppressed body and psyche, Pecola's mother, Pauline Breedlove was convinced of her no-choice world and started finding recluses in white households. The deadening black is so nurtured in the surroundings that it gives vent to establish oneself as one of them by being their maid. So does Pauline. She was unaware of herself and her identity, even unaware of her children. And most importantly, she was even unknown of the fact that Pecola was raped by her father. She took on the full responsibility and recognition of breadwinner for the family by working for the Fishers, who considered her “the ideal servant”. She kept their house pick and span and arranged things in such a manner as to make them say that they would never let her go. She enjoyed her job and kept her white employers happy. What made her unhappy was the clumsiness of her own house and its tenants.

All said and done, Pecola, Pauline, and Cholly are the victims of traumatic events that happened to them in their lives. The outcomes of which are so devastating and terrible. Claudia and Frieda are no less survivors of subjection. They are the true spectators of the drama in Pecola's brutal life. Whatever the brutality faced by the characters especially women, is felt and even seen upon their harassed bodies, deeply shaken by torture and savagery. The pain and agony inflicted upon their bodies is not anyway less the aberration seen on their mind and psyche. All this savagery towards women is in a way to dominate them physically and mentally. The story of domination has been in the soil for so long and embedded like men from the very beginning. Men's domination is very strong in society and women are always dominated by men considering them as weak. In a patriarchal society, men feel superior to women and violence is more likely to happen. Thus, the body becomes the tool for violence of every kind. And that violence results in the traumatic condition of an individual or a whole lot.

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