

The White Standard of Beauty and its Traumatic Impact: A Study of Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*

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Abstract:

*Beauty is defined by individual senses or mind. Since our minds and senses differ individually, the idea of beauty also varies accordingly. It is all about how we shape our mind and how we get ourselves influenced by the others' definition of beauty. In *The Bluest Eye*, Toni Morrison has woven story that depicts the disturbing consequences of the White standard of beauty that has rooted deep and firm in the consciousness of the Americans. Colonialism implanted in their mind a politicized and racist sense of beauty- "White is Beautiful". Since the white Americans were politically superior, their idea- fair complexion, straighter hair and blue eyes as the ideal characteristics of beauty- became dominant. This standardization of the notion of beauty triggered a race among the darker-skinned people to hunt ways and means to achieve fairer skin. However, this race has some adverse effects on- the psyche of the African-Americans. They often have to suffer from societal pressure to be beautiful and get accepted in the 'elite' category of beautiful. This societal pressure often leads to traumatic experiences. Morrison depicts the traumatic effect of this dumbest idea in the painstakingly beautiful story of Pecola and her family. The hunt for a fairer skin and the Bluest eye made Pecola psychologically unstable and unreceptive of any other notions. This article discusses the white standards of beauty and its traumatic impact on the African-American minor girl protagonist of the novel, *The Bluest Eye*.*

Keywords: *Beauty, Trauma, Black, Racism, Toni Morrison*

Introduction:

The record of valorisation of white over black goes back to the ancient times. Ancient religious beliefs like Manichaeism (founded by Mani in the 3rd century AC), is based on the conflict of God and matter or light or darkness. In this conflict, God or light always wins and dominates over the darkness. Even in Christianity light stands for spiritual illumination and truth while darkness stands for evil or ignorance. Therefore, the superiority of light over darkness, which is synonymous to white and black respectively, has been present in the human consciousness since the development of the human civilization. In America, this conception (or rather 'misconception') gained momentum when the colonisation of Africa led to slavery. The Americans saw the African slaves for the first time when in 1619 the American privateer the White Lion brought back home 20 African slaves by seizing them from a Portuguese slave ship. Therefore, the political supremacy of the whites over the blacks also gave impetus to their prior beliefs.

American sociologist Charles S. Johnson says that in the context of America the concepts of whiteness and blackness have moral connotation and it is not just a matter of pigmentation. In his work, *Growing up in the Black Belt(1941)* he argues that in the popular mind black has always been assumed as an evil or the essence and the aspect of the devil. The status of the blacks in American

society never had a religious basis, yet “the evil and ugliness of blackness have long been contrasted in popular thinking with the goodness of purity of whiteness.”(Johnson 257) Therefore, blackness is not just a skin colour, but a social construct, persistently inferiorized and contrasted with the white. Consequently, the white people began to consider their physical features as beautiful while that of the black people as ugly and deformed. Eminent Sociologist W. E. B. Du Bois in his book *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) refuted the inferiority of the black race that social Darwinism, Eugenics and Nazism established combining racial prejudices and vague scientific theory. According to him there is no scientific basis for such a belief as it is a result of social prejudice. Moreover racial differences do not mean racial inferiority.

Colonisation and slavery established the white American more politically superior than the blacks. As a result, white standard of beauty became dominant. In America black skin colour is associated with thick lips and kinky hair whereas, the white complexion goes with the straighter hair and blue eyes. Therefore, the former are the characteristics of ugliness and the latter, are of good looks. These assumptions gained more thrust by popular pop culture and other modern means of communication and got rooted deep into the psyche of all Americans, particularly, the African Americans who saw themselves through the eyes of the white. They were always aware of the dual identity – a black man and an American. While the white Americans, even though they were not the aboriginals of the continent, never considered themselves of having such dual identity. Du Bois calls this awareness by the American as ‘double- consciousness’ – “this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity”(Du Bois 615). This feelings of contempt and pity when internalized by the black often results in self- loathing, trauma, loss of identity, violence towards other blacks and even worse . Toni Morrison in her ‘The Bluest Eyes’, gives an account of a poignant story resulting out of ‘double-consciousness’. *The Bluest Eye* (1970) is the first novel of the Nobel Laureate Toni Morrison, one of the most important African-American novelists. The novel is about a doomed quest of a young poor black girl child named Pecola, for a pair of blue eyes in the twentieth century racist America. It also tells the distressing tale of various black characters, suffering because of poverty, racism and distorted assumption of beauty. This quest and conviction resulted in varying psychological conditions- from light to severe. The quest of Pecola for a *perfect* beauty in a very formidable social set-up and destruction of her life in every possible ways show the extent to which such a dangerous notion of beauty can make an individual suffer.

The Bluest Eye was written when the African-Americans were still recovering from post-slavery trauma and were asserting their belongingness in the United States of America. They enforced in their movements of rights, the slogans, such as, ‘Black Power’ and ‘Black is Beautiful’. It was also a period when The Black Arts Movement was at peak. Toni Morrison shows in the novel how the popular standard of Beauty has affected the human psyche so much that a minor girl named Pecola suffered from psychological instability; although her desire was just to be beautiful, so that the people around her could love her. At eleven her own father raped her, out of pity and guilt for her ugliness. She even got pregnant with the child of her father. She suffered alone from the racist and sexual abuse that her peers and her neighbours hurled upon her. Even her own mother disliked her for her colour and ugly features. All these mental and physical abuses were inflicted upon her during the first eleven years of her life. These conditions left such a deep and traumatic impact on her mind that she became insane in the next two years of her life that Morrison writes about.

Beauty According to Pecola Breedloves:

Beauty, according to Pecola, was to have a pair of blue eyes. Her ideal kind of beauty was to have the features of the then popular White American actress, Mary Jane- beautiful white face with wavy blonde hair and a pair of the bluest eyes. Being constantly pitied and looked down for being ugly, she sought after what people recognised as beautiful. She nurtured a powerful desire for a pair of blue eyes so that she could become pretty and hence be loved and admired by all.

...each night, without fail, she prayed for blue eyes. Fervently for a year, she prayed. Although somewhat discouraged, she was not without hope... (Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* 4)

Her prayers get answered when she approaches Soaphead Church, who seemed to live a spiritual life. He understood her pain and made her believe that she has transformed into a blue-eyed girl. Now Pecola could see that she possesses a pair of blue eyes and also tries to convince others. She got completely immersed in an imaginary world where she is the prettiest with the pair of bluest eyes. For Pecola, he is the God who answered her prayers. Ironically, her imaginary eyes gave her freedom to move away from the community as she had fulfilled their notion of beauty. She moved freely with dignity and pride. But for society she became a young girl gone mad.

Beauty is therefore inherently racist and its impact very intense. Also, the features it glamorises- white skin, blond hair and blue eyes are Caucasian. The Caucasian being the colonists were politically superior than the native Africans. Therefore, their beauty standards were also accepted as superior. Gradually this idea became dangerous and lacking as it equated white skin with personal value and implies that those who do not have these standards lack beauty and therefore inferior.

Origin of Pecola's Idea of Beauty:

The sign for Pecola's tragedy began much before her understanding of beauty. It was like she inherited her obsession of blue eyes from her mother Pauline, who in her younger days were obsessed with movies and the beautiful white actresses they showcased. She was so much into those white actresses that she relentlessly tried to be like them. The movies educated her, and she understood the white standard of beauty, the fashion that was trending and a romantic love she was lacking.

...along with the idea of romantic love, she was introduced to another- physical beauty. Probably the most destructive ideas in the history of human thought. Both originated in envy, thrived in insecurity, and ended in delusion (Morrison 120).

She was so much influenced by the romanticized movies that she hoped for such standards in her drudged life with her husband, Cholly. Such desires and romantic expectations made her peaceful life complicated. She even went to the extent of trying to look like Jean Harlow from the pictures. She discarded her enthusiasm when she lost her front teeth. By then she realized no matter how much she tried she could never be as beautiful as the fair ladies- "I just didn't care no more... and settled down to just being ugly" (Morrison 121). But though she abandoned her desires and endeavours, they left a deep impression on memories. When Pecola was born, her family and neighbours recognised her as a hideous baby. When still in her womb, Pauline decided that she would "love it no matter what it looked like" (Morrison 122). But when she was born, her ugliness was beyond imagination. She was amazed by her blackness and could never accept her wholeheartedly. She says:

She looked like a black ball of hair...eyes all soft and wet. A cross between a puppy and a dying man. But I knowed she was ugly. Head full of pretty hair, but Lord she was ugly (Morrison 122-124).

It seems that she transmitted all her self-contempt and obsession with physical beauty to her daughter. She realized her appearance would not bring her any respect; therefore, she tried to compensate and

gain respectability in other ways, by being an ideal servant in a rich household. She also could never love her daughter because of her ugliness. She loved the people of the white household more than her ugly daughter. Thus, Pecola was a girl, neglected by her mother, raped and impregnated by her father and downtrodden by the society. The harassment she received started at home, which intensified her desire to be beautiful even more.

Isolation and Victimization: Contributors to Trauma

Toni Morrison in her narrative shows various instances of how Pecola, because of her complexion and ugliness had to feel isolated and victimized not only from the racist society but also her parents. Even her own age group did not leave her in peace. In an episode, a group of black boys was circling and holding Pecola. They were gaily harassing her with racial and sexist insults:

Black e mo Black e mo Yadaddd-sleepsnekked. Black e mo Black e mo ya dadd sleeps nekked. Black e mo... (63)

This scene of black insulting blacks is very disheartening. It reveals their colonised and wrongly educated minds. It seemed that they thrust all their self- contempt into much weaker Pecola, who swallowed their tortures without a word. Maureen Peal, the high yellow dream child consoles Pecola when the group of black boys teased her. She tolerates and pities Pecola's blackness. She even buys her ice-cream. But once she figured out that it threatened her superiority, she proved to be hostile and insulting to Pecola just like the black boys who were tormenting her.

More painful to this incident was in an instance where she faced rejection from her own mother. This incident occurred when Pauline was working in the white household of the Fisher family. One day Pecola accidentally spills peach cobbler, her legs get burnt by the hot liquid but Pauline is unmindful of it and making the situation more humiliating for Pecola adds insults to the injury by beating her and turning her out of the kitchen. The situation gets more intensified for Pecola as it happens in the presence of the Fisher doll child who possessed the ideal characteristics of beauty and represented what Pecola has dreamed of becoming.

Pecola, hated by almost every person around her, including her parents, grew this dire need for the miraculous gift of blue eyes which according to her only Soaphead Church can deliver. Her need grows so much that it consumes her intellect and she hallucinates having a pair of blue eyes and acknowledges herself as becoming the most beautiful girl of her place. Hence, her traumatic experiences deeply distresses and disturbs her life, making her go insane. Healing was out of question due to the then social and economic conditions.

Conclusion:

The mistreatment and subjugation of the black people by the whites has been continuing since the beginning of the colonisation. They had to fight many fights for their rights, such as- the Civil Rights movement, the Black Power movement, the 1980s Black feminist movement, pan-Africanism and the Anti-Apartheid Movement. Recently the movement of Black Lives Matter is gaining momentum among the victimized African-American community. The movement campaigns against cruelty, violence and systemic racism towards black people.

The Black is Beautiful as a cultural movement started in the United States in the 1960s by the African-Americans. This movement aimed to dispel the racist notion that black people's natural physical features such as colour, hair, facial features are inherently ugly. Influenced by the movement and her personal experiences, Toni Morrison started to write *The Bluest Eye* in 1962. She delineates the purpose of choosing the issue in her forward to the novel. She says, "...the assertion of racial beauty was not a reaction to the self-mocking, humorous critique of cultural or racial foibles common

in all groups, but against the damaging internalization of assumptions of immutable inferiority originating in an outside gaze” (Morrison IX). Therefore, as a protagonist she chose a character most delicate- a black child who is a female. Her sufferings and psychological conditions mirror that of a section of people she represents. She is an example of what society can create and also denigrate from a perfectly normal being. She was born perfectly fine. It was the social set up that defined her as ugly and lacking. Therefore, her ugliness does not belong to her. It is just a social construct. Her desire for a pair of blue eyes is symbolic of her ardent desire for freedom- freedom from oppression, from being defined, from being mocked and pitied; and freedom of love. However, Morrison reveals that the extremities of Pecola’s case were possible only because she belonged to a ‘crippled and crippling family’ (Morrison X). The story of Pecola therefore served her purpose of illuminating the unacknowledged version of trauma that many people face because of the misleading idea of beauty.

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