

THE ASSIMILATION OF THE WHITE IDEAL IN TONI MORRISON'S THE BLUEST EYE

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Abstract

The white ideal misconceived as something to be attained at any cost make the central characters of the novel lose sight of reality and Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1970) begins with a very shocking and devastating revelation about a young girl's terrifying physical violation. Pecola was carrying her father's baby. Pecola's story is quite deeply complex than what would meet the external eyes. Pecola's physical terror is not much when compared with the psychic trauma experienced through her parent's indifference, inadequacies and misconceptions. The readers, after the initial shock and surprise are taken for a bumpy ride through the childhood, marriage and post marriage horrors and delusions of Pecola's parents. The traumatic backgrounds and the fallacies of her parents have converted the family into a crippling and crippled one even before the two children were born. Here, each member finds his or her own ways of searching for the so called 'ideal state of beauty and wellbeing' while converting the natural atmosphere into a meaningless and a hopeless one. The paper attempts to shed light on the misconceptions, the resultant beliefs, internalization of white ideal and their implications as faced by Pecola and her parents.

Keywords: misconceptions, aggression, white ideal, ugliness, trauma.

Introduction

"Quiet as it's kept, there were no marigolds in the fall of 1941. We thought, at the time, that it was because Pecola was having her father's baby that the marigolds did not grow" (Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* 3). Pecola and her mother, Mrs. Breedlove consider themselves ugly because of their blackness. The novelist raises the question as how being black makes one ugly. They themselves do not know the source of the ugliness. For Pecola, by having blue eyes, she could turn her ugliness into prettiness. Mrs. Breedlove takes solace from her good work at a white man's house and by taking her husband as a black sinner, her role becomes pure and thus white. In this context of misconceptions, Cholly, Pecola's father who had gone through a lot, for whom his past is his ugliness which has a bearing on his present, now seeing her helplessness and hopelessness rapes her. Soaphead Church tricks Pecola into believing that she has got her blue eyes. He believes that he has done something which will keep Pecola happy forever. Pecola thus falls into a mental state from trauma to mental disorder and delusion.

Pecola, her brother Sammy along with her parents, Mrs. Breedlove and Cholly are 'outdoors' because Cholly burned down the house which was an abandoned store area converted into a house. The tenants succumb to the idea of ugliness here within the house and make them

vulnerable creatures. Pecola's childhood lacks a place where she feels safe and loved as neither her home nor the outside world provides that for her (Firdous 434). The so-called house itself is considered as ugly in every way. Even the general passersby wouldn't want to look at it and the colourful photograph of Jesus in Junior's house seems to be considering Pecola as less important by looking down at her as she herself thinks.

Pecola's family believed in their ugliness and they were convinced by what they saw outside. The conviction they had about their poverty, blackness and the consequent ugliness was unique to themselves. Pecola imagines that by having blue eyes her missing beauty will be restored. She could be as beautiful as those blue-eyed white dolls. Pecola buys Mary Jane candies, the pretty eyes of Mary Jane on the candy wrapper would be hers by swallowing the candies, she imagines. Pecola wants her ugly body to disappear. In one of her attempts aimed at body transformation, every part of her body disappears except her eyes. Pecola has misconceptions about her ugliness and beauty in general and her desire for pretty blue eyes and the unfulfillment of it takes her further into psychological misery. Her prayers, longings and imaginations arise from the inadequacies, ugliness and unhappiness surrounding the family, especially the parents.

Pecola is taunted by black boys in school for her father's sake and a colored boy, Junior invites her home but throws a cat on her and his mother, Geraldine, a colored woman thinking herself superior to blacks because of the lighter skin colour chases her away like she would throw out a filthy street dog. Pecola's blackness is ugliness to her, her visit a contamination and her presence within her compound a pollution to her otherwise clean and pure home. Geraldine has to say this about blacks and Pecola in particular, "Like flies they hovered; like flies they settled. And this one had settled in her house" (Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* 90).

Mrs. Breedlove had fantasies about a man appearing in front of her from nowhere. As she had expected, the man came, and they got married. They loved each other. They were happy too in the beginning. They moved North, to Lorain, Ohio. Cholly found a job and she kept the house. She was looking for company but couldn't get a favourable glance from anybody both white and black. She started feeling lonely. She expected Cholly for companionship and reassurances but Cholly couldn't help her with that. After few months in order to develop friendships and good glances, she wanted money for new clothes. This created quarrels between them. She had to take up a day job for that. As months passed, they talked less and less. She ended up doing only two things, working in a house and quarrelling with Cholly.

Mrs. Breedlove is methodically moving away from reality and gets into her own imagined world of ideal state. The fall of the front tooth for Mrs. Breedlove began as a series of inadequacies which took her further and further into her methodical belief systems with regard to her husband and children. Even when she was young, she was very fond of arranging things in order. Her curious interest for order continued till the end but the focus of it changed. Mrs. Breedlove believed that it was her duty to set her husband in order. She knows that unlike her, he is beyond redemption. Her association as a servant to a white family and their appreciation of her and christening her with a nick name makes her feel purer, holier and whiter than Cholly and her children. They constantly quarrel and fight. Physical violence is very frequent. According to Mrs. Breedlove, the fight is between good and evil. Morrison describes Mrs. Breedlove as, "Mrs. Breedlove considered herself an upright and Christian woman, burdened with a no-count man, whom God wanted her to punish.

The lower he sank, the wilder and more irresponsible he became, the more splendid she and her task became. In the name of Jesus" (*The Bluest Eye* 40). Mrs. Breedlove took on the

responsibility of caring for the family as the bread winner. At the house where she worked, she was an ideal servant, a perfect woman to them but she stopped keeping her own house. For her Cholly was a thorn and her children cross. She hated the home for its 'ugliness' but she found beauty, purity and cleanliness at the Fishers. She liked the order at the Fishers but the disorder in her own home was not cared for. Because she believes order and beauty could never be found at her home. To quarrel with Cholly was an everyday routine and an unmissable brutal formalism.

Cholly was thrown at the waste dump when he was four days old. He was saved by his great aunt, Jimmy. His mother ran away few days after that and his father had already gone away when his mom was pregnant with him. His aunt old Jimmy brought him up but Cholly has always hated it, but he had no other choice. Even, Cholly got his name from his aunt rather than from his parents. His name wouldn't be recognizable to his parents even if he would meet his parents. The main dejection for Cholly was when he and his girlfriend, Darlene were together in the bushes, two white men raced the flashlight at his back and forced them to restart and continue at gun point what they were doing. Cholly obeyed them because he was "rendered voiceless, a cipher, a perfect victim" (Morrison, *Black Matters* 24). Cholly, instead of pitying the girl, hated her, and hated her more than those white men.

"Never did he once consider directing his hatred toward the hunters. Such an emotion would have destroyed him. They were big, white, armed men. He was small, black, helpless. His subconscious knew what his conscious mind did not guess – that hating them would have consumed him, ... for now, he hated the one who had created the situation, the one who bore witness to his failure, his impotence" (Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* 148, 149).

Cholly's inability, his helplessness and his impotence against the mighty has shattered him into pieces. To mend his broken pieces, he goes in search of his father for reassurance and for putting the pieces together. He meets the man, but Cholly couldn't recall his mother's name when asked. He stumbles and his father calls him a prostitute's son. His father's rejection of him further destroys his physical and psychic wellbeing. He is traumatized. He is lonely and unwanted. As he wanders, crying, unable to control the tears, his bowels open up, liquid stools were running down his legs (Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* 155). The meeting between Cholly and Mrs. Breedlove takes place as he wanders after these traumatizing and demonizing events.

"The constantness, varietylessness, the sheer weight of sameness drove him to despair and froze his imagination. ... Nothing interested him now. Not himself, not other people. Only in drink was there some break, ... Having no idea of how to raise children, and having never watched any parent raise himself, he could not even comprehend what such a relationship should be" (Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* 159).

Cholly loved his wife but the wound, the memory and the trauma had an inevitable impact on his subconscious. The rape of his own daughter was not a physical abuse to him, and it was not violence to him in his drunken state. Instead, he called it care, tenderness and protectiveness. In his confused state of mind with the memories of the first meeting of his wife, the desire overtook him. "In a drunken, savagely misguided attempt to show Pecola she is desirable, her father rapes her, leaving her pregnant. Now an outcast both in the community and within her own fractured family, Pecola descends into madness, believing herself possessed of blue eyes at last" (Fox). Cholly, who lost his humanity long ago behaves as an "enraged father who projects his own shame onto his daughter" (Bouson).

After the birth and quick death of the baby, after Sammy left the town and after Cholly died in the workhouse, with help from Soaphead Church, Pecola got her blue eyes or she

believed she got a pair of bluest eyes. Pecola “simply substitutes her inchoate reality with a better one: she has blue eyes which everyone admires and envies” (Furman 19). She was happy and grateful that her prayers were granted in the form of the two pretty blue eyes.

Conclusion

Internalizing and assimilating such white superiority over one’s natural beauty makes the characters victims as they move away from the reality. It is the white society that instilled the poison in the collective consciousness of the blacks that white is the ideal state of beauty. Even the lighter skinned ‘colouredblacks’ such as Geraldine consider darker ones inferior. As Morrison observes, “Freedom can be relished more deeply in a cheek-by-jowl existence with the bound and unfree, the economically oppressed, the marginalized, the silenced”(Disturbing 64). In this way, whoever came near Pecola felt more beautiful and wholesome. Pecola is a representative person of all the oppressed and the voiceless. Through her, Morrison makes us question our own belief systems and our idea of beauty. Whatever Pecola suffers and what she turns out to be at the end is our own making. Pecola is mentally traumatized and physically abused for something which is neither the natural nor the right ideal. “All of us – all who knew her – felt so wholesome after we cleaned ourselves on her. We were so beautiful when we stood astride her ugliness”(Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* 203).

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