

Self-Negation and Politics of Aesthetics in Toni Morrison's 'The Bluest Eye'

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Abstract— This research article attempts to study Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* from the perspective of Self Negation and Politics of Aesthetics in socially deprived Black Community of America. Along with looking at the denigrated social hierarchy of these Black people, the paper also endeavours to chalk out the fact that it is not that the whole of the Black community is revelling in self-loathing, there are examples from the community itself that are the paragon of self-confidence and absolutely in sync with their physical appearance. The paper goes in to substantiate the importance of family in making a child firmly rooted to the ground and keeping her in her senses. The paper concludes with the repercussion of such negligence by the family, specially the mother.

Keywords— self-negation, aesthetics, Black community, Family.

The *Bluest Eye* holds supreme importance amongst all the works of Toni Morrison, since it was the debut novel of the writer and catapulted her to fame. Written in 1970, the work became the harbinger of a new dawn in the Black writings and ended up with Pulitzer Prize and Nobel Prize for her. This novel is anything but a non sequitur. Like her other works, *The Bluest Eye* addresses the darker side of racism and brings to the fore, the loss of self-confidence that accompanies the darker shade of the skin. Morrison does this through a 15 year old girl, Pecola, who gets doomed in her over obsession with her ugliness. Along with addressing the larger social issues, the novel is piercingly about the gnostic presentation of beauty construct. Through Pecola, Morrison lets us know what it's like to be hated for things not under one's control. She calls it 'the death of self-control'. The story of Pecola is not told by herself, but by one of the two sisters, Claudia. Pecola could never have told her own story as she was too passive and weak. The details of her family can be encapsulated in very few words. She had a mother, a tipsy and weak father and a ran-away brother. The father got her pregnant in a fit of his inebriation and doomed her to suffer in self-hatred.

This novel treads on razor edge to delineate the three validated issues, racism, gender biasness and violence as an expression of frustration and vengeance. This is a mass thing. The gender discrepancy of the doubly marginalised lot is shown with the predominance of the female characters in the novel. Morrison puts Claudia and Frieda's family as a foil against the Breedlove family. On the one hand, that Frieda's parents take a strong stand against Mr Henry who attempts to touch her with mal intentions while Pecola's father himself rapes her. Her

mother also seems to be nonchalant about the whole deed. The doom of Pecola can also be traced back to the slack attitude of her mother towards her problems. But Mrs Breedlove had her own time constrains. "Holding Cholly as a model of sin and failure, she bore him like a crown of thorns, and her children like a cross." (p.98) This was how she reckoned her family. This was what the structure of the family meant to her. But inspite of Cholly absconding her behind and despising her dress shoppings, she took the charge of the sole bread winner and left Cholly far behind in the power structure. She was irritated by his cavalier attitude.

She was the main bread winner and had to comply with her working mother limitations. She had to crush her motherly concern for Pecola, rather she was blatant about her contempt for her. Instead, she caressed the White girl for whom she was working and being paid, and tried to compensate the loss of blueberry sauce with added sweetness in her voice.

Pecola is extremely conscious of her black complexion and unattractive facial contours while both the sisters are totally comfortable in their skins, though Claudia does get a temper when she looks at her comfortable, White counterparts:

"But more than that wanting to poke the arrogance out of her eyes and smash the pride of ownership that curls her chewing mouth.

.....we know she is offering us something precious and that our own pride must be asserted by refusing to accept." (p.5)

These lines are pregnant with the thought of cogent need to be superior, the urge to be at the helm of affairs, the authority to say No, to pardon, to grant mercy.

The story was written in 1970 and the “black is movement” was waged in 1960s. But no matter how the world seemed to have progressed, this so called beauty construct still persists in society. The market being dominated by skin whitening and polishing cream is ample proof of our prejudice with white or fairer skin. According to Moses, “beauty is a deeply problematic concept in Morrison’s work..., the omniscient of narrator of *The Bluest Eye* asserts that ‘physical beauty’ and ‘romantic love’ are the most destructive ideas in the history of human thought” (p.633)

Katherine Sterne quotes in her paper, ““The concept of physical beauty as a virtue,” Toni Morrison wrote in 1974, “is one of the dumbest, most pernicious and destructive ideas of the Western world, and we should have nothing to do with it” (“Behind the Making” 89). Morrison was responding to the slogan “Black is Beautiful” which she took to be “a white idea turned inside out” that still reduced the worth of a people to their bodily appearance. “Concentrating on whether we are beautiful,” she wrote, “is a way of measuring worth that is wholly trivial and wholly white and preoccupation with it is an irrevocable...””

The story is not just about the atrocities done on the very young girl Pecola but it is more about the whole milieu of Blacks, their inability or rather inefficacy of dreaming big, their easy and complacent surrender to their servile attitude, their frustration being manifested in their violent streaks. The black girls had chagrin against their white counterparts. The book is a kaleidoscopic view of wide range of emotions felt by them. In fact, we get more insight into the gloomy world of their haplessness through the narration of Claudia about how she felt when she would see the limelight being showered on a white girl, when she was young. This ‘blackness’ comes around as epidemic of which none is spared. Though it seems that the Whitcomb family is put as a foil against the Breedlove family but the bug seems the same afflicting the latter family. Mrs Whitcomb is also as frustrated as Mrs Breedlove; she keeps cribbing about the three quarts of milk drunk by Pecola.

The novel doesn’t attempt to salvage a solution to Pecola’s situation, nor does it develop any surprise element in the denouement or the climax, as at the very outset, Pecola’s getting pregnant with her father is mentioned. What the whole narrative does is, it makes us, the readers, point a questioning finger at us, it makes us interrogate ourselves. It stares straight in our face to take the social responsibility of upholding/helping to uphold the self-dignity of each and every individual on this earth. Pecola’s culmination into insanity is a metaphor of the nadir to which the global

sanity is going. Critic Barbara Christian (1980) notes, “In *The Bluest Eye*, the central theme is the effect of the standardized western ideas of physical beauty and romantic love not only on the black women in Lorain, Ohio, but also on the black community’s perception of its worth. All of the adults in the book, in varying degrees, are effected by their acceptance of the society’s inversion of the natural order. For, in internalizing the West’s standards of beauty, the black community automatically disqualifies itself as the possessor of its own cultural standards” (p.52) Pecola is introduced in page no 11. So, it is not just her story but it is the metanarrative articulating the Black sensibility. Each one has a different story to tell but their basic predicament remains the same: their unacceptability by the White people and as a repercussion their fatal acceptance of self-loath. Even the delineation of Pecola’s rape by her father is written in such a compassionate language that Morrison’s stand seems dubious. The whole concept of Family goes in for a toss when you feel culturally deprived in the social milieu of the things. Mrs Breedlove’s background is given substantial pages by the narrator, that too in very poetic and assertive prose. Then, Mrs Breedlove’s story is handled in a very delicate and vulnerable fashion. Claudia keeps telling about her inner world in clear cut terms, unabashedly. The three prostitutes are given ample space with their idiosyncrasies, peculiarities, and weaknesses with brutal honesty. Pecola was fascinated by them and it is also hinted tongue in cheek that she had lesbian tendencies or may be the writer wants to emphasise the point that she was dying for love and was ready to get the love from just anybody, irrespective of the gender. She is also mentioned as getting orgasm looking at Mary Jane wrappers. May be the writer wants to connote the extent of her happiness with such sexual innuendo. As Bousan puts forward:

“The ‘Thing’ Claudia learns to fear is the white standard of beauty that members of the African American community have internalised, a standard that favours the ‘high-yellow’ Maureen Peal and denigrates the ‘black and ugly’ Pecola Breedlove.” (p.31)

While Morrison tells of the Breedlove household, her narrative smacks of completely indescribable grief and utter frustration. It declares the denial of the world to Black people. Look at the moribund life in these words: “No young girl had scared at the tiny Christmas tree and remembered when she had decorated it, or wondered if that blue ball was going to hold, or if HE would ever come back to see it.” (p26) And this negation is so paramount that the narrator prefers anger over it. “Anger is better. There is a sense of being in anger. A reality and presence. An awareness of worth. It is a lovely surging.”(p.37) and

such negation finds absolute voice in Pecola's urge to disappear. Though she goes totally freaky about her looks in the end, but her mental aberration can well be gauged through her magical want of disappearing in the beginning: "Please, God," she whispered into the palm of her hand. "Please make me disappear." (P.33) She wants to disappear. She doesn't want to acknowledge her own existence because what she has experienced is only rejection, rejection and rejection.

Sami Ludwig in "Toni Morrison's social criticism" emphasizes Morrison's concern for pointing out black women's representation:

"At the core of Morrison's concern in her social criticism are logical snares of representation. They have to be pointed out because they dominate the media, the political debates and agendas, and they are abused for reasons of power, racism, and, sometimes, sheer ignorance. Moreover, many of these images also determine our internalized discourse, our thinking, writing, and reading. It is at this cognitive core of mental human agency where Morrison is most political, when she unpacks the modalities, incompatibilities, the contradictions, and the injustices, and effectively demonstrates how exactly they measure our lives." (p.136)

Through Pecola's life, Morrison attempts to give an insight into the derogatory behaviour of the boys. "That they themselves were black, or..." (p.50) throws light on their mindset. The cultivated frustration would find ways in harassing the vulnerable Black targets that would give them an acknowledgement of their superior self, being boys. All these apprehensions culminated in breaking down Pecola. She wanted to see the acknowledgement of her existence in people's eyes. She knew that her ugly looks and giving birth to a baby had spread a wrong name for her. She connected her being bereft of love to her not conforming to the set standards of beauty. As a result, she desperately wanted to have blue eyes that could give extra edge to her stature.

The obsession with the bluest eyes leads her to the utmost insanity. She goes completely berserk. Like a frantic dervish, she can't think about anything but verifying whether she is endowed with the bluest eye in the whole wide world! Her tragedy is not her obsession with the bluest eye or craving to be very beautiful but rather getting born in a disoriented and self-abnegating family. Had Pecola been born in a family where parents acknowledged their roles and internalised the burden of responsibility towards their children, it's very likely that Pecola could hold a decent life instead of falling down the precipice.

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