

The Theme of Beauty Consciousness of African- American Women in *The Bluest Eye*.

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Abstract

African – American literature which marked the world literature is one of the most discussed and the most fascinated literature in the history of the world literature. Many such poets, novelists, short story writers have made American literature so rich in all aspects. In the big list of the well-known African-American writers, the name of Toni Morrison may be to the top. Toni Morrison may well be the most formally sophisticated novelist in the history of African – American Literature. The 1993 Nobel winner for literature, Toni Morrison emerged as a significant African- American writer. She has been recognized as a strident voice for the exploited black people as well as a master craftsman of the dominant artistic form. She belongs to a group of writers in America – Maya Angelou, Toni Cade Bamba, Paul Marshall, Alice walker and Ghoria Naylor. They all thought that writing is a liberating tool, a subversive strategy and artistic mode of self expression. Toni Morrison, in her ‘The Bluest Eye’ tried to explore the complexity of Black female experience in white America. She attempts to resolve the contradictions inherent in her African- American identity. She also explores the theme of beauty consciousness among the black females, in white America, that any black girl, woman tries to seek that beauty which was accepted in white America. Her novels are “Archeological explorations. Means her novels record the trip and completing of black life from painful part of slavery to the frustrating, racist present. The Bluest Eye, is the most successful attempt by Morrison to focus this humiliated and frustrated life of blacks especially back women in white America.

Key Words – Beauty consciousness, and its standards, racism, oppression, Black – white discrimination.

The present paper focuses on Toni Morrison’s attempt to explore the life of blacks, especially black women and how these black women had to suffer from the beauty standards, their beauty consciousness how remains futile. It is a truth that no black woman will have the blue eyes but again Pecola Breedlove, the central character of the novel like black girls and who are the victims of racism and sexism try to seek blue eyes and get ruined is the main focus of Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*.

Toni Morrison’s novels – from *The Bluest Eye* (1970) to *Jazz* (1992) – document the author’s awareness of, and concern for, the historical conditions of suppression of African people in America, thereby revealing her heightened consciousness of the interrelationship of race, gender and class. Although all the three elements are present in all her novels, the emphasis on them varies from novel to novel. At the beginning of her career, she thought that racism was the main source of the

oppression of blacks in white America because of her low level of gender and class consciousness. Then, becoming aware of the indispensability of American racism, she found that sexism was equally oppressive. Finally, she realized that racism and sexism were byproducts of capitalism – the economic system of slavery.

In Morrison’s first novel, the *Bluest Eye*, the emphasis is on racism, specially, she investigates the effects of beauty standards of the dominant culture on the self – image of the African female adolescent, although the novel is basically concerned with the contradictions fostered by racism. Sexism and class distinctions affecting the black girls in white America, Morrison, at this stage of her literary career, considers racism the African’s primary obstacle. *The Bluest Eye* attempts to show terrible consequences for blacks internalizing the values of a white culture that both directly and indirectly rejects them.

Eleven – year – old Pecola is a poor, ugly, black girl who longs to have blue eyes in the poignant wistful hope that this will bring her the

love she longs for and also somehow alleviate the multiple miseries of her hate-filled, quarrelsome, violent family, ironically named Breedlove. Pecola becomes the victim of one another in a chain of black people including her own mother and father who have been twisted and perverted by the false and often vicious standards of the white world. Pecola suffers not only as a black, but also as a female. If as a racial being, she is forced to relinquish her individual, cultural ways, as a Genre being she is made to subordinate her femininity and remain subsumed in the orbit of patriarchy, although her class analyses is immature in this novel, Morrison is at least conscious of a limited role that the economics play in the exploitation of African people.

The Bluest Eye is the story of three black schoolgirls growing up in 1940s Ohio, the sisters Claudia and Frieda MacTeer and their friend Pecola Breedlove. Claudia and Frieda's parents are strict, protective, and when they have time which isn't often – loving. Pecola is ignored by her mother and abused by her father. Claudia, who tells much of the story, is a strong-willed eight-year-old black girl who can't stand the sight of little blond-haired, blue-eyed dolls. When she's given one for Christmas, her reaction cuts through the pretense: "What was I supposed to do with it? Pretend I was its mother?"

Then she rips it to pieces, trying to discover what there was about that hard little pink thing that everyone seemed to find so lovable. The strong-minded Claudia can't stand the sight of the child movie star Shirley Temple, with her golden curls and baby-blue eyes. (If you haven't read the novel, I won't deprive you of the pleasure of discovering for yourself why Claudia hates Shirley Temple.) Eleven-year-old Pecola idolizes Shirley Temple, loves drinking milk out of Claudia's Shirley Temple cup, and loves eating Mary Janes, the epoxy-like penny candies with the Shirley Temple clone on the wrapper, Pecola is lonely and sad. Her classmates tease her constantly, telling her she is ugly, or sings at her that her father's a drunk who sleeps naked. Pecola, utterly clueless about the war raging inside her, thinks that her life would be perfect if only she could have blue eyes. In one especially poignant

scene, Pecola had begun to menstruate earlier in the day. Neither she couple years older than Claudia. That night in bed, the three of us lay still. We were full of awe

And respect for Pecola. Lying next to a real person who was

Ministration was somehow sacred. She was different from us now-grown up like. She, herself, felt the distance but refused to lord it over us.

After a long while she spoke softly. "Is it true that I can have

A baby now?"

"Sure," said Frieda drowsily. "Sure you can.."

"But... how?" Her voice was hollow with wonder.

"Oh," said Frieda, "Someone has to love you."

"Oh,"

There was a long pause in which Pecola and I thought this over,

It would involve, I suppose, "My man," who, before leaving me,

Would love me. But there weren't any babies in the songs my

Mother sang. Maybe that's why the women were sad: the men left

Before they could make a baby.

Then Pecola asked a question that had never entered my mind.

"How do you do that? I mean, how do you get someone to love you?" but Frieda was asleep. And didn't know.

Pecola is raped by her drunken father and becomes pregnant with his child. As her pregnancy begins to show, instead of being sympathetic, Pecola's mother beats her and forbids her to go school. When the baby is born prematurely and dies, Pecola loses what little grip on reality she had and begins to go mad. Desperate and confused, she visits a West Indian preacher called Soaphead Church to see if he can give her the blue eyes she's always wanted. Soaphead, an unscrupulous creep who's almost crazy enough to believe in his own miracle, "tells Pecola that god will give her blue eyes, but that she'll be the only one who can see them. By the end of the book, Pecola is talking to an imaginary friend, asking over and over if her eyes are the bluest of all.

Toni Morrison's first novel, *The Bluest Eye*, published in 1970, focuses intently on the colonizing

effects of white female beauty on black girls and her community. In her 1993 Afterword to the novel, Morrison explicitly ties the issue of beauty in *The Bluest Eye* to the politics of racial beauty and identity in the 1960s. She writes: “The reclamation of racial beauty in the sixties stirred these thoughts about beauty, made me think about the necessity for the claim. Why, although reviled by others, could this beauty not be taken for granted within the community? ... The assertion of racial beauty in the novel was ... against the damaging internalization of immutable inferiority originating in an outside gaze.” Rejecting that internalization of the white outside gaze was part of the project of the Black Arts Movement. Essays such as Ronkarenga’s *Black Cultural Nationalism*,” Larry Neal’s “The Black Arts Movement,” and Morrison’s own “What the Black Woman Thinks About Women’s Lib” – all written during this period – each discuss the black struggle to be free of white ideas, aesthetic or otherwise. A representative poem of the period. Don L. Lee’s “The Primitive,” illustrates the dominant Black Arts theme of rejecting colonization in the lines, [whites] Christianized us. Raped our minds with: “T.V. & straight hair Reader’s Digest & bleaching creams, Tarzan & jungle jim ... European history & promises. Those alien concepts of whiteness.” During the Black Arts Movement writers delineated the impact of the cultural colonization of the black community by Euro – American culture and values and actively pursued a black aesthetic. Using a decolonization framework for periodizing Morrison’s work thus embraces both her recurring concerns as well as her literary origins during the Black Arts period. Morrison’s first four books *The Bluest Eye*, *Sula*, *Song of Solomon* and *Tar Baby*, constitute Morrison’s struggle with colonization, both for her characters and their communities, as well as in her own writing. We can see this pattern in the dialogical way in which Morrison frames her early novels: *The Bluest Eye* is framed with a deconstructive dialogue with the Dick and Jane children’s books; *Sula*, with the Bible; *Song of Solomon*, with the American capitalist success myth, with *Tar Baby*’s explicit identification of colonization as a central issue, Morrison finally breaks free from the need to focus primarily on white ideas, aesthetic or otherwise; following Tar

Baby, Morrison begins publishing a trilogy, of which we now have seen *Beloved* and *Jazz* published, a trilogy focused on black history and written primarily within an African American cultural perspective. In contrast to the concern with white frames in the early novels, both *Beloved* and *Jazz* take as their frames historically documented events in black lives; *Beloved*, on the case of Margaret Garner; *Jazz* on a photo taken by James Van Der Zee that appears in the *Harlem Book of the Dead*. One of the many thematic concerns that can be clarified by a periodization of Morrison’s work based on her struggle with colonization is her treatment of beauty throughout her work.

We can say of the *Bluest Eye* that signs of white beauty throughout the culture were internalized by the black community. We can say that, accordingly to that discourse of signs, Pecola was rendered invisible. We can even say that the sign system of beauty (along with the rape by her father) drove her mad. We cannot make such statements about beauty in *Jazz*. In *Jazz*, Morrison signifies on the signs from *The Bluest Eye*, but her characters and the novel escape being determined by them. They remain at play, never resting with a final signified. And that breaks their power. The first sign in *Jazz* that Morrison is signifying on *The Bluest Eye* from a decolonized position comes in Morrison’s repetition and revised use of the narrator Claudia’s opening comment, “Quiet as it’s kept, there were no marigolds in the fall of 1941”. In *Jazz*, this phrase reappears in the first section in the narrator’s disclosure about violet: “But quiet as it’s kept, she did try to steal that baby although there is no way to prove it”. Such repetition of a phrase might seem coincidental, were it not for Morrison’s newly published Afterword to the 1993 edition of *The Bluest Eye*, as representative of her writing at that time. As the Afterword makes clear, Morrison is looking back with a critical eye at her early work, noting its limitations, and in *Jazz*, playing with its possibilities. Morrison also signifies in *Jazz* on the color and musical motifs of *The Bluest Eye*. The blue eyes Pecola longs for are not only blue because they represent a white, Aryan ideal, but because her desire for them and the madness that brings is a

theme suitable for a blues song. As Ralph Ellison defines it the blues is an impulse to keep the painful details and episodes of a brutal experience alive in one's aching consciousness, to finger its jagged grain and to transcend it, not by the consolation of philosophy but by squeezing from it a near – tragic, near-comic lyricism. As a form, the blues is an autobiographical chronicle of personal catastrophe expressed lyrically. Pecola has the blues and cannot sing them away. She is “the bluest I.” In Jazz, however, the blues is transposed into jazz, which, while grounded in the “blues impulse” that acknowledges the painful realities of a complex experience, transforms blues materials into something different.

Conclusion:-

The Bluest Eye is thus a beautiful novel in where Toni Morrison tries to explore the complexity of black female experience in white America. Morrison attempts to resolve the contradictions inherent in her African- American identity. She was aware of her marginalization within the context of the mainstream. This all, she has presented in her novel *The Bluest Eye*. How the black girls in white America suffered from their color and the color of eyes that is blue eyes and get mad and ruined is presented in *The Bluest Eye*. Pecola's search for identity was defined by her everlasting desire to be loved and she thought that she could be loved only when she would have the blue eyes. According to her having the blue eyes means beautiful that is her concept of beauty and the standards of beauty.

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