

RESEARCH ARTICLE



ISSN

INTERNATIONAL  
STANDARD  
SERIAL  
NUMBER  
INDIA

2395-2636 (Print); 2321-3108 (online)

PSYCHIC AND CULTURAL COLONISATION IN TONI MORRISON'S 'THE BLUEST EYE' :  
AN ETHNIC CULTURAL FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

*The Bluest Eye* is a tragic tale about a young, black girl Pecola and her desire for the bluest eyes, the symbol for her of what it means to be beautiful and therefore worthy in society. The main idea of the novel is the domination of blacks by the existing standards of beauty – blue eyes, blonde hair and white skin. It deals honestly and sensitively with the damaging influence of white standards and values on the lives of black people. It portrays in poignant terms the tragic conditions of blacks in racist America. The novel makes a scathing attack on the imposition of white/ Anglo-Saxon standards of beauty on black women and creation of cultural perversion. It presents a critique of the dominant aesthetic that is internalised by majority of black community, and attempts to deconstruct the meta-ethnicity. The feminist analysis takes into account the intra-racial contexts and locations in the discourse of Pecola, the chief black female protagonist.

Keywords: blacks, blue eyes, beauty standards, imposition, colonisation, ethnicity, gender, race.

INTRODUCTION

Toni Morrison's first novel *The Bluest Eye* (1970) makes a scathing attack on the imposition of white/Anglo-Saxon standards of beauty on black women and creation of cultural perversion. It presents a critique of the dominant aesthetic that is internalized by majority of the black community, and attempts to deconstruct the meta-ethnicity, which exercises a hegemonic control over the lives of blacks in America. The political connotations of ethnicity are derived from the desire of minority ethnic groups in a multi-ethnic society to resist oppression by the dominant culture. The celebration of a separate identity constitutes its cultural corollary. Thus *The Bluest Eye* becomes a powerful expression of Toni Morrison's ethnic cultural feminism which differs from existential, political feminism that alienates black women from their ethnic group. The feminist analysis takes into

account the intra-racial contexts and locations in the discourse of Pecola, the chief black female protagonist.

*The Bluest Eye* is a tragic tale about a young, black girl, Pecola and her desire for the bluest eyes, the symbol for her of what it means to be beautiful and therefore, worthy in society. The main idea in the novel is the domination of blacks by the existing American standards of beauty – blue eyes, blonde hair and white skin. It deals honestly and sensitively with the damaging influence of white standards and values on the lives of black people. It demonstrates how the systems of oppression are spawned and sustained by the white supremacist and exploitative culture. The analysis of the novel brings out the implications of the imposition of white dominant culture on black sensibility. It portrays in poignant terms the tragic conditions of blacks in racist America. It examines how the

ideologies, perpetuated by the institutions controlled by the dominant group, influence the making of the self-image of black woman, thereby exposing the devastation caused by white cultural domination in the lives of Africans. The text informs us that eleven-year old Pecola is pubescent, half-child and half-woman. In the defining moment of sexual and psychic awakening, she is raped and impregnated by her father. Ironically he is the only person who regards her as lovable.

The black feminist analysis of violence in domestic space does not endorse the simplistic racist/sexist contention that "black men are motivated in especially powerful ways to commit sexual violence against women" (Davis181). The feminist perspective on incestuous violence against Pecola reveals that as no other expression of male superiority is within the reach of Cholly, he resorts to subduing and possessing his own daughter. Access to her body through force is well within his reach. Viewed in this light, the incestuous assault is not an expression of black men's proclivity towards sexual violence against woman but of Cholly's essential powerlessness, emasculation of the humiliation that Cholly had suffered at the hands of the white hunters/captors during his first sexual encounter with a black girl and of his traumatized/pathological response to rejection by his father in boyhood.

Pauline's blaming Pecola for the incestuous rape makes Pecola realize that her mother is conditioned to act as the great arm of parental conjugal phallocentrism. Evidently, the gulf between mother and daughter has been created by patriarchal/racial constructions of female subjectivity. Mainstream culture's norms of beauty and identification of beauty with virtue have been inculcated into Pecola by her mother, herself a victim who leads a life of drudgery as a domestic servant in a white, affluent household. Pauline's abdication of maternal duty makes Pecola seek her redemption through blue eyes. The desire for blue eyes springs from the impingement of the Anglo-Saxon model of beauty on her sensibility. Claudia and Frieda are of the same age as Pecola but they perceive blackness in a positive manner. Though a minority in both class and caste, they are unfazed by

the meanness of their lives and the hegemony of the whites. Pecola's destruction is caused by her alienation from the folk knowledge and values that have not been transmitted to her by her mother. The cultural wisdom, enshrined in the blues lyrics, punctuating the narrative at critical points and crucial to the survival of a vulnerable young black woman, has not been handed over to Pecola by the mother. On the other hand, Claudia's and Frieda's caring through stern mother has systematically initiated them into folk wisdom and values which have helped them in developing self-esteem. Claudia's sense of self-worth is further heightened by her father who protects her from the amorous advances of Henry, the potential rapist, while Pecola's father rapes his daughter.

The St. Louis Blues transmit cultural values, crucial to Claudia's and Pecola's survival. The verses address caste prejudice or intra-racism based upon skin tone. The caste hierarchy has percolated from the dominant white culture into Lorain's black community. It privileges light skin, Anglo-Saxon features and blue eyes. In the novel, it is represented by Maureen Peal; light skinned black girl whose whiteness enslaves most of her black schoolmates. By worshipping blindly that which is white they are putting their head in a noose, symbolized by Maureen's two lynch ropes of hair. It is suggestive of the noose that strangulates Pecola.

The St. Louis Blues present an anti-thesis of the aesthetic code of the dominant class. The aphorism: "Blacker di berry sweeter is de juice", constituting an integral part of the collective unconscious of African-Americans, attaches the highest aesthetic value to dark skin. While Claudia is exposed to the lyrical deconstruction of the Shirley Temple aesthetic by her mother, Pecola is rejected by Pauline who invests her fond affections in the corn yellow haired child of her white employers who claim her attention and loyalty more than any one in her family had done because "they gave her what she never had"(10). She keeps drawing sustenance from her relationship with Fishers but miserably fails to find in her daughter a similar craving for being claimed. It is evident from her slapping Pecola when she accidentally drops a pan, containing blue-berry cobbler, burning her legs. Pauline unleashes a life-

long fury of hatred on her daughter and hugs the white Fisher child who, assuming racial superiority, calls her "Polly" while Pecola is instructed to call her mother "Mrs. Breedlove". As a result of this mistreatment, Pecola comes to believe that she is just an object like the dark berries which she represents.

In rejecting Maureen Peal, whom Pecola befriends, Claudia denounces the Shirley Temple aesthetic and the gospel of intra-racism. Pecola craves for what Claudia scoffs at i.e light skin, blonde hair, blue eyes and the social status. Claudia's defiance is an acquired/cultural defiance, nurtured and promoted by a fond mother. Pecola internalizes the Anglo-Saxon aesthetic that the St. Louis Blues mediate against because her mother has not exposed her to black heritage and culture. Thus Pauline's rejection of Pecola becomes the cause of her deception and doom. Though similarly situated, Claudia's response to the dominant culture is opposed to that of Pecola. She comes to embrace the caste aesthetic tentatively, reluctantly and consciously. Claudia is the only character in the novel that consciously makes an attempt at deconstructing the ideology of the dominant society. This is seen in her dismembering of the dolls. Claudia is the only character who presents a critique of a reigning aesthetic that is internalized by Soaphead Church, Geraldine, Louis Junior, the bully boys, Pecola and Pauline. While Cholly rapes Pecola's body, Pauline rapes her mind because she does not expose her to the black aesthetic. From the feminist viewpoint, both are to be looked upon as transgressors. Thus Pecola's alienation from her racial heritage makes her vulnerable to the pernicious effects of internalized colonialism.

Besides her parents, other black characters like Geraldine, Louis Junior, Maureen Peal and a group of black schoolboys represent the intra-racial forces that rob Pecola of her personhood, push her into the abyss of a fatal fantasy and lead her to self-destruction. Geraldine, a black woman, has separated herself from African/black heritage and suppressed her racial identity by getting rid of "the dreadful funkiness of passion, the funkiness of nature, and the funkiness of the wide range of human emotions" with a view to appeasing the

white man's "blunted soul." She leads her son, Louis Junior, to disown his real self. Her investing affections in a cat create cruel sibling rivalry in the mind of Junior. He sadistically lures Pecola into his house, pretending to show her kittens. Once she is inside, Junior makes her a scapegoat of his neglect by his mother and the cat a victim of cruel sibling rivalry:

Junior said, 'Here! Pecola turned. Here is your kitten!' He Screeched. And he threw a big black cat right in her face. She sucked in her breath in fear and surprise and felt fur in her mouth. The cat clawed her face and chest in an effort to right itself, then leaped nimbly to the floor (66-70.)

All of a sudden, Geraldine appears on the scene and immediately Junior blames Pecola for killing the cat. Geraldine regards Pecola not only as a nuisance and blight but a threat to the anti black environment that she has constructed around her son. As Pecola is thrown out of Geraldine's house, she sees a portrait of an anglicized Jesus "looking down at her with sad and unsurprised eyes"(76) representing an image of God who seems either incapable of helping her or is an accomplice in her suffering. With the portrait of Jesus, Morrison introduces us to one of shortcomings of the western model of God, namely the problem of how a supposedly omnipotent God and loving God can allow the existence of evil and suffering. Geraldine's aping the white and imbibing negative perceptions of blackness and Pecola's fascination for the blue eyes of the black cat contextualize the motifs of race, power and cruelty of white/western definition of beauty and cultural mutilation of the blacks in America.

At one point of time in school, Pecola begins to feel worthy when she is seemingly befriended by Maureen who is both hated and admired for her beautiful clothes, light skin, long hair and green eyes. Unlike Pecola, Claudia and Frieda want to counteract the universal love for the black community's flawed beauty Maureen Peel and subvert her Mulatto aesthetics, which uphold that the blacks, closely resembling the whites, are considered the most beautiful. According to Holloway, Mulatto aesthetics is a residue of the "the enslavement and colonization of black people in the

United States..." (38). However, Pecola soon realizes that she is being tricked into revealing "humiliating" facts about her family in exchange for Maureen's specious information about sex:

'Did you ever see a naked man? Pecola blinked and then looked away. 'No, where would I see a naked man? I don't know. I just asked, 'I would not even look at him, even if I did see him. That's dirty. Who wants to see a naked man? Pecola was agitated. 'Nobody's father would be naked in front of his own daughter. Not unless he was dirty too...' How come you said 'father'? Maureen wanted to know (55).

The self-pity that Pecola feels is further heightened by the taunts of the black schoolboys who, like Louis Junior, make her a scapegoat of their own humiliation and pain: "Black e mo. Black e mo. Yadadd sleeps nekked. Black e mo black e mo ya dadd sleeps nekked. Black e mo..." (50). The boys' contempt for their own blackness emanates from their internalized notions of white superiority, which have also been imbibed by Geraldine, Pauline, Pecola and Soaphead. The humiliation that they heap on Pecola is suggestive of the ignorance, self-hatred and hopelessness that they have acquired as a result of their cultural uprootedness and alienation from black heritage.

Pecola's intra-racial encounter with the black boys is followed by her falling a prey to the inter-racial superiority of Yacobowski, the white storekeeper. She likes to eat the Mary Jane candy because of her fascination for blonde blue-eyed Mary Jane on the wrapper. An intra-textual parallelism, provided by Pecola's drinking gallon after gallon of milk during her stay with Mactees simply because she loves to gaze at the golden-haired, blue-eyed, dimple-faced Shirley Temple on the special drinking cup, reinforces Pecola's fatal fascination for the white dominant culture's much advertised images of beauty. When she goes to buy the candy, she is made aware that she does not exist for the white storekeeper:

He does not see her because for him there is nothing to see. How can a fifty-two-year-old white immigrant shopkeeper with a taste of potatoes and beer in his mouth,

his mind honed by the doe-eyed virgin Mary, his sensibilities blunted by a permanent awareness of loss, see a little black girl?... She looks at him and sees the vacuum where curiosity ought to lodge. And something more. The total absence of human recognition—the glazed separateness. She does not know what keeps his glance suspended. Perhaps because she is grown... and she is a girl. But she has seen interest, disgust, even anger in grown male eyes.... It is blackness that accounts for, that creates, the vacuum edged with distaste... (36-37).

Pecola sees "the total absence of human recognition – the glazed separateness" in the shopkeeper's eyes. Identifying Yacobowski's petrifying look as the one that she sees "in the eyes of all white people" Pecola concludes, "the distaste must be for her, her blackness" as "her blackness is static and dread" and creates "distaste in white eyes" (37).

Engulfed by shame, Pecola buys the candy and leaves. She identifies herself with the dandelion weeds she passes by. An overpowering sense of shame does not allow anger to surface. While eating the candy, she internalizes the smiling picture of the blue-eyed, blonde-haired little girl that adorns its wrapper. She eats the candy, and its sweetness is good. "To eat the candy is somehow to eat the eyes, eat Mary Jane. Love Mary Jane. Be Mary Jane" (38). Humiliated and hurt, Pecola tries to cover up her unearned shame with "nine lovely orgasms with Mary Jane. Lovely Mary Jane, for whom a candy is named" (38). The harrowing experience of not being seen by the white shopkeeper makes Pecola aware of herself as seen by 'the other' to whom she is just an object. By not recognizing her, the white shopkeeper judges, categorizes and castigates her. Not looking at her is a way of making her hate herself. It is an attempt on the part of the white shopkeeper to rob Pecola of her subjectivity and make her wear the mantle of invisibility and non-existence. Pecola's foreshadowing encounter with the white shopkeeper, upon careful examination, testifies to her reification. It is to be noted that Pecola while savouring the sweetness of candy is in a state of pure consciousness. She is conscious only

of herself and concerned only with the candy and its wrapper. Her encountering Yacobowski's blue eye brings about a qualitative change in the scene. As she steps out of the recesses of her thoughts, she, at once steps into the hostile world of the white dominant culture. The shopkeeper feels "he does not need to waste the effort of a glance" (37). The perceived "object" is identified and negated.

The black feminist analysis of Pecola's self-hatred reveals the self-destructive obsession of the black girl with the dominant culture's standards of beauty i.e. blue eyes, blonde hair and fair skin. It is the standard that defines the core of western/white culture's aesthetic code that regards blue eyes as the symbol of beauty. Pecola's ardent desire for the blue eyes represents the collective desire of the black folks to be white. It highlights black obsession with whiteness and how the blacks conceptualize and fantasize whiteness and perceive their own blackness. It is a symptom of the pervasive and penetrating psychic and cultural impact of internalized colonialism and the racist/sexist ideology.

Pecola thinks that whiteness represents beauty, love, purity, and goodness while blackness represents ugliness, hatred, impurity and evil. Her longing for the blue eyes is symptomatic of her passionate desire for being liked, accepted and recognized as a person by her privileged blonde, white schoolmates who treat Pecola as a non-person, simply because of her blackness. Consequently, Pecola comes to believe that blackness has condemned her to a state of wretchedness and alienation. This forms the propelling impulse behind her quest for blue eyes.

Pecola's response to her blackness offers a telling illustration of the psychic impingement of white/racist/supremacist aesthetic values on her sensibility and of the colonization of her mind and imagination. To corroborate the point, it is pertinent to quote Bell Hooks: "Systems of domination, imperialism, colonialism and racism actively coerce black folks to internalize negative perceptions of blackness, to be self-hating. Many of us succumb to this" (32). Pecola comes to regard blackness and ugliness as synonymous. She painfully realizes that the white as well as the black

adults love white children. Starved of love and attention, she pines to achieve beauty and recognition by acquiring a pair of beautiful, blue eyes. Her desperate longing finds a poignant expression in praying patiently for blue eyes.

The ethnic/cultural/feminist analysis of Pecola's discourse of madness denounces the internalization of the Western standards of female beauty by the blacks like Pauline and Pecola and validates the traditional beauty and strengths of black women like Mrs. Macteer, the mother of the narrator. Barbara Christian thus, defines the traditional black beauty:

I come out of a tradition where those things are valued where you talk about a woman with big hips and black skin. I come out of a black community where it was all right to have hips and to be heavy. You did not feel that people did not like you. The values that you must be skinny come from another culture. Those are not the values that I was given by the women who served as my models. I refuse to be judged by the values of another culture. I am a black woman and I will stand as best as I can in that imagery (1).

The image of the traditional black beauty is an antithesis of the mainstream culture's physical standard of female beauty as a measure of self worth. According to Bell Hooks "To be born light meant that one was born with an advantage, recognized by everyone. To be born black has to start life handicapped, with a serious disadvantage" (29). As the Anglo-Saxon physical traits like blue eyes and blond hair are glamorized, the women not having these physical traits are not regarded as beautiful and virtuous. Historically, the acceptance by blacks of the Anglo-Saxon physical standard of female beauty for their own women has made the black women victims of racist and sexist oppression. In this connection, Toni Morrison offers a critique of the white/dominant culture's notion of beauty:

When the strength of a race depends on its beauty, when the focus is turned to how one looks as opposed to what one is, we are in trouble.... The concept of physical beauty as a virtue is one of the dumbest,

most pernicious ideas of the Western world, and should have nothing to do with our past, present or future. Its absence or presence was only important to them, the white people who used it for anything they wanted (29).

Toni Morrison's criticism of the belief in the synonymy of physical beauty and virtue offers an explanation of why black women simply do not qualify as beautiful and how the beauty of black women is destroyed by the cultural engine of racial prejudice. This is at the heart of the tragic story of the dehumanized and colonized little black girl, Pecola who prays every night for a pair of blue eyes. Her praying for a pair of blue eyes means attempting to live up to a paradigm that differs starkly from the essential nature of black beauty. It inevitably involves alienation from ethnic and cultural roots that leads to self-hatred and self-destruction.

Pecola lives in a world of her own fantasies, believing that she has miraculously acquired blue eyes and become beautiful. Her schizophrenia has created an imaginary friend for her who will listen while she talks about her new blue eyes. She has come to believe that people avoid her because they are dazzled by her blindingly blue eyes. Wrapped in madness, Pecola lives in a make-believe world. Her mind has been destroyed by the dominant white culture that completely negates her dreams and aspirations.

Pecola is also to be held responsible for her destruction because she never fights back her oppressors. If she had been initiated into black aesthetic like Claudia and Frieda and experienced black rage, she would have been able to frustrate the racial and interracial attempt at humiliating and dehumanizing her. She might have snubbed Junior who tricks her into his house to torment her and challenged Geraldine who calls her black to insult her; she might have thrown money at Mr. Yacobowski when he does not take notice of her; she might have fought back Maureen when she questions her about her father's nakedness. She remains passive because she does not realize the positive power of rage and cannot wield it as a weapon against racism and sexism. As a result, she fails in her quest for authentic existence. For Pecola

in Morrison's words, "It is much, much, much, too late" (164).

The black feminist study of *The Bluest Eye* explores the psychic compulsions, travail and plight of a poor black girl, trapped in the web of gender, class and race. Black female identity and subjectivity are analyzed in an African-American perspective, existing on the boundaries between the black and white cultures. The study moves towards an ethnic cultural sphere of perceiving and understanding the black female reality. The ethnic cultural feminist position advocates allegiance to positive black traditions and rejects the embracing of blonde, blue-eyed, Anglo-Saxon myth by the blacks. Ideologically this position is opposed to existential, political feminism that promotes the alienation of black women from their ethnic group and regards it as a remedy of their oppression.

The main thrust of the present analysis of *The Bluest Eye* lies in validating the viewpoint that the oppression, devaluation and destruction of black women has its roots in internalization by the blacks of western/white standards and stereotypes of beauty. By juxtaposing Pecola's and Claudia's contrapuntal responses to white dominant culture, the feminist analysis of the narrative reveals how, on the one hand, the alienation of black women from black cultural aesthetic values promotes the assimilation of the majority's standard of beauty, and on the other hand, the absorption of black aesthetic values empowers them to counteract cultural perversion. The analysis of Claudia's assertiveness highlights the positive role of black aesthetic values and rage in resisting the imposition of white dominant culture while that of Pecola's cultural up-rootedness and absence of rage underscores her meek submission to white aesthetic values.

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