



## A HUNGER FOR LOVE AND RESPECT IN TONI MORRISON'S *THE BLUEST EYE*

KAMLESH<sup>1\*</sup> MAMAN SINGH<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Research Scholar Department of English, Singhania University Pacheri Bari,  
Jhunjhunu (Rajasthan) India

<sup>2</sup>Assistant Prof. English, Govt. College Shiwani, Haryana, India

### ABSTRACT

*The Bluest Eye* (1970), Toni Morrison's first novel, is written during her teaching at Howard University, focuses on the oppression of the Black female characters Pauline, Pecola, Claudia, and Frieda. The American concept of beauty becomes necessary for black African- American in order to mingle into the mainstream. Pecola suffers an inferiority complex since from her childhood because she is ugly and black and nobody loves her as Pecola comes from a poor family, cut off from the normal life of a community and faces final humiliation and betrayal from her own father. Cholly rapes Pecola. Pecola's move to the company of the whores shows the signals of her utter sense of loneliness. Pecola Breedlove in the novel is oppressed not only due to racism but also due to classism and sexism. Ugliness, poverty and violence are the reasons of her humiliation. Sufferings are the friend of Pecola and her hunger for love and respect leads her to the world of fantasy.

Key words: Oppression, inferiority, ugly, black, humiliation, betrayal, loneliness, racism, classism, sexism and fantasy.

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### INTRODUCTION

*The Bluest Eye* (1970), Toni Morrison's first novel and is written during her teaching at Howard University. The main character, Pecola is inspired by a real life girl whom Morrison met when she was 11 years old. She and the little girl argued whether or not there is a God. Morrison thought so but the little girl disagreed. The main conflict in this novel is about Black women that become the central object of oppression as black women characters in the novel are described as the victim of different sex or gender and also the victim of class and race that are

imposed on them. *The Bluest Eye* is linked to the Black Power movement of the 1960s, which aroused the concerns of white America. The political activists of the 1960s advocated African-American features for black dolls, declaring "Black is Beautiful." As Morrison accepts in the Afterword of the novel, "[t]he reclamation of racial beauty in the sixties stirred these thoughts, made me think about the necessity for the claim." (210) However, Morrison's anxiety is not limited to the question of racial beauty. In a 1974 *New York Times Magazine* article called "Rediscovering Black History," Morrison

asserts that the slogan "Black is Beautiful" shows a romanticized image of African beauty that focuses solely on physical appearance rather than "intelligence" and "spiritual health" (14)

The aim of this paper is to analyze Pecola's hunger for love and respect in *The Bluest Eye*. In this novel Pauline, Pecola, Claudia, and Frieda, the black female characters, face the oppression. Pecola is the only women characters that receive hard oppression than other Black female characters in the novel. Pecola's hunger for love and respect is the central object of oppression in the novel and she is described as the victim of different sex or gender and also the victim of class and race that are imposed on her. The *Bluest Eye* opens with the phrase "Quiet as it's kept, there were no marigolds in the fall of 1941." (*The Bluest Eye* 9) Trudier Harris opined in her critical study, *Fiction and Folklore: The Novels of Toni Morrison*, that Pecola Breedlove's self-destructive desire for blue eyes with "the quest for the holy grail, the quest for the silver fleece, or the pursuit of the three golden apples." (43)

*The Bluest Eye* presents a love starved girl, Pecola Breedlove, an eleven year old African-American girl who longs for blue eyes every time as a symbol of beauty because she believes that having blue eyes will make her lovable, beautiful, noticeable, and acceptable to her family and society. Pecola has strong belief that she is black and ugly because of the "vacuum edged with distaste in white eyes". (*The Bluest Eye* 42) Pecola has "internalized white supremacist values and aesthetics, a way of looking and seeing the world that negates her value." (Black Looks 3) Pauline Breedlove, Pecola, Geraldine, and Maureen Peal are characters who try to achieve an imposed ideal of femininity. They are marginalized by the "cultural icons portraying physical beauty: movies, billboards, magazines, books, newspapers, window signs, dolls, and drinking cups." (Gibson, 1989, 20)

The novel describes the story of Breedlove family. Claudia Mcteer, the younger daughter of Mcteer, narrates the tragic tale of her friend and classmate, Pecola Breedlove. Racial Prejudice with the American concept of beauty- blue eyes, blonde hair and milk white skin become the destructive force of blacks. Racism with sexism proved to be more dangerous for African- American women. "To

be black and female was to be in double jeopardy."(Frances 90)

The American concept of beauty becomes necessary for black African- American in order to mingle into the mainstream. Naturally, the whole emphasis of the novel is on racism, sexism and class distinctions. Thus the novel honestly portrays the tragic condition of blacks in a racist America. As Elizabeth Jane Way asserts, Morrison's "stunning insight reveals the disrupted emotions produced by living in a world where white standards and goal are presented to blacks as uniquely important and, at time same time, impossible for them to achieve."(Janeway 383)

Pecola suffers an inferiority complex since from her childhood because she is ugly and black and nobody loves her. She loses self-respect and thinks that if she could become pretty and beautiful then everybody can love her and give respect to her. Pecola's obsession for blue eyes makes her believe in magical tales. Pecola never considers herself beautiful and always longs to possess through some miracle. Her obsession for physical beauty leads to terrible repercussion. Morrison asserts:

"The concept of physical beauty as a virtue is one of the dumbest, most pernicious and destructive ideas of the western world, and we should have nothing to do with it." (Morrison 89)

Under the spell of white concept of beauty Pecola never realizes this.

Further, Pecola comes from a poor family, cut off from the normal life of a community. Her parents, Cholly and Pauline detest themselves because of inferiority complex. They do not appreciate the love and do not convey their children a sense of positive self-love and self-respect. They too have grown up unloved and uncared for. Moreover, Pecola's mother who is a domestic servant in a beautiful house, dislike the ugliness of her house, daughter, family, and herself. Pauline hates her daughter. Pauline too is never loved or cared by anyone in her childhood. Cholly too has a miserable childhood. While growing up Cholly has to suffer very unfortunate experiences and these experiences have a dangerous effect on her personality. He was looked after by an old aunt jimmy. As Gurleen Grewal states, merely revising perceived 'ugliness' to beautiful blackness "is not

enough, for such counter- rhetoric does not touch the heart of the matter: the race-based class structure upheld by dominant norms and stereotypes." (Grewal, 1998, 21)

Moreover, as a teenager, Cholly suffers humiliation at the hands of the White men. Cholly is interrupted and sneered by pair of voyeuristic white men who humiliatingly forced Cholly to continue having sex with a girl named Darlene in their presence at the day of Aunt Jimmy's funeral. By the time Cholly has lost the tender and affectionate passion and enthusiasm of love. Pauline and Cholly's marriage proves disastrous because both of them are not suited to each other and incapable of giving love to one another.

Pecola is never allowed to know her prospective self. Both within and outside the family, Pecola is forced to accept the "other". The novel describes many deciding events in which Pecola is seen defeated before herself. Every episode forces Pecola to shrink from her own self, not from the world. Pecola's prospective self is destroyed to an extent that she herself is no more interested to reconstruct it. She is so much rejected that she is ready to accept even the hatred. When she becomes unable to find place even in people's hatred, Pecola moves towards a world where she is completely absorbed in the "other". "Pecola stood a little apart from us, her eyes hinged in the direction in which Maureen had fled. She seemed to fold into herself, like a pleated wing." (*The Bluest Eye* 57)

Furthermore Maureen Peal, green eyes girl, receives favourable treatment and admiration from the teachers and friends. She loses no opportunity to make fun of Pecola: "I am cute! And you ugly! African - American and ugly black emos. I am cute." (*The Bluest Eye* 56) The students of her class not only hurt pecola but also force her to feel isolation and pain. They make a group and jeer at her by singing chorus,

"Black emo. Black emo Yadaddsleep-snekked. Black emo black emo ya dadd sleeps nekked. Black emo..." (*The Bluest Eye* 50)

Pecola starts believing that she is ugly and people ignore her because of her dark colour. The reason is that white concept of beauty has spoiled the minds of African – American people and therefore they have developed self – hatred. For Pecola, blue eyes

symbolize beauty and happiness; she believes that having blue eyes would mean that she would no longer have to look at "bad things" (*The Bluest Eye* 40), because "bad things" do not happen in front of blue eyes, nor to people with blue eyes. As Trudier Harris notes, images of blond hair and blue eyes are constant reminders that "blackness is of lesser value" and that whiteness makes happiness and beauty (43).

Another experience of Pecola's humiliation is that when she goes to buy candy from a store, she feels that the store master avoids looking at her. It is as if she does not really exist: He does not see her, because for him there is nothing to see.... She does not know what keeps his glance suspended. (*The Bluest Eye* 36)

These experiences are very painful and frightening for Pecola. The most terrible, Pecola has to face when a young boy named Louis Junior makes a play. Louis invites her to show her kittens at his house. He throws the cat at her. Pecola's face is scratched and bruised by the frightened. The boy not only makes Pecola's injured but also throws the cat into the radiator and blames pecola for killing it. Geraldine, Louis Junior's mother, scolds Pecola in words that cut deeper than cat's claws: "Get out. You nasty little black bitch. Get out of my house." (*The Bluest Eye* 72)

Pecola faces final humiliation and betrayal from her own father. Cholly rapes Pecola. He rapes her second time soon afterward and Pecola becomes pregnant with her father's child. The rape is thus, the end of Cholly's love for Pecola. Pecola's stillborn child is not only a symbol of his personal violation but of her shackled life.

Pecola lives in an abandoned store with angry parents who fight and curse each other every day. Pecola does not have white skin with blue eyes and also not have anyone to love or be loved by. She lacks a friend, a dog, or a cat to play with. Pecola and her family are held in "disdain" by the black community; her father was "the old Dog Breedlove [who] had burned up his house" (*The Bluest Eye* 11). Pecola makes efforts towards a desire to "disappear" from human sight. Pecola's continuous struggle for self-respect and to create an identity, constant rejection makes Pecola disturbed. Her last desire is to "disappear" "Please, God", she

whispered into the palm of her hand. "Please make me disappear." Thus Pecola's desire to disappear is a serious act of self – rejection.

Further Pecola's parents are in themselves confused about their identity and done violence to their children. From the moment Pecola is born, Pecola is defined by the 'Look' of her mother that 'she is ugly' (*The Bluest Eye* 45) Pauline in her disillusionment fails to find beauty in her daughter. As a result she stimulates a similar refutation of 'self' in her daughter. Pecola received the ultimate refutation by her mother when she lashes and shrieks her in anger. "Crazy fool....my floor, mess....look what you....work....get on out...my floor....my floor." (*The Bluest Eye* 84-85) When in her nervousness and awkwardness Pecola unexpectedly drops the blackberry pie at the Fisher home. Pecola suffers irreversible psychological damage when her mother dumps her for the Fisher girl saying, "Hush. Don't worry none" (*The Bluest Eye* 85) Thus self-mutilation makes Pecola strong for her persistent wish for blue eyes.

Pecola's parents never put any effort to make a positive relationship with her. Throughout the novel Pecola is refused to love not only by her parents but also by the society. Pecola's denigration of her 'self' is escalated by her mother's negation. Her father, Cholly, fails to encourage her daughter to grow and develop a positive 'self'. He rather annihilates her love by exploiting her body and stimulates self-hatred in her. Pecola believes that is the blue eye that will make her life different.

"If she looked different, beautiful, maybe Cholly would be different, and Mrs. Breedlove too. Maybe they'd, "Why, look at pretty – eyed Pecola. We mustn't do bad things in front of those pretty eyes." (*The Bluest Eye* 34)

Pecola makes hard efforts to develop a positive relationship with her family. Pecola's hunger for white beauty is connected with the devouring act. She drinks three cups of white milk at once when she stays with Claudia in order to become white. Milk and candy, Pecola eats and drinks are the signified symbols of whiteness, beauty, love, and acceptance. She eats candy because she wants the whiteness that the little girl image on the candy cover represents, and she becomes a Mary Jane. As Minrose C. Gwin depicts her, Pecola is framed in the

"claustrophobic spaces" where her blackness cannot be tolerated, and squeezed tighter and tighter until she shrinks into nothing (322). Pecola needs her parents's attention and love because of her helpless position in the society. The ultimate irony of Pecola's desire is exposed when each and every moment she wants to disappear. Pecola prays to God for blue eyes, "Each night, without fail, she prayed for blue eyes. Fervently, for a year she had prayed." (*The Bluest Eye* 35) She is very hopeful of getting them someday despite drastic odds.

Pecola's move to the company of the whores shows the signals of her utter sense of loneliness. Her search for company discloses the other facts of the story also. Pecola realize that the whore girls has created a world of their own and cut off from the world in which Pecola lives. Their hatred for human beings and the total mechanical relationship with their customers show their complete alienation from the normal world. This place welcomes Pecola and her frequent visits to the whores suggests the little girl's growing sense of alienation from the world in which she supposed to live. Pecola shares her internal silence with the company of the whores. The reason is that the girls listen to her, answer her questions and satisfy her repressed urge for human communication. But all this give temporary comfort and not sufficient for her to heal her wound. Unfortunately getting no support in her family and in the outer world Pecola gradually moves towards a world of fantasy. Pecola's conversation with an imaginary friend suggests the greatest need for a friend to save herself from total dislocation.

The novel also presents that Pecola is not only the victim of race and gender but of class also. Pecola is insolvent but it is Macteer family that takes her in. The difference between the Macteer house and the White house where pecola's mother works is not the evaluation between African-American and White only but between destitution and affluence also. "Our house is old, cold, and green. At night a kerosene lamp lights one large room." (*The Bluest Eye* 5)

#### CONCLUSION

Thus Pecola being a black undergoes all the humiliation and insult. Cholly's rapes to his own daughter push her to an endless silence. But it is the

reaction of Poulina to the rape that finally thrusts Pecola to the world of fantasy and later madness. Racial discrimination and inequality eliminate Pecola from reality. Pecola has lost her balance of mind and goes mad. In her madness Pecola has obtained a "self" (blue eyes) and so fitted her for the world. As Cynthia Davies states, "Pecola is the epitome of the victim in a world that reduces persons to objects and then makes them feel inferior as objects."(Davis; 330)

Pecola Breedlove in the novel is oppressed not only due to racism but also due to classism and sexism. Ugliness, poverty and violence are the reasons of her humiliation. Sufferings are the friend of Pecola. Pecola's hunger for love and respect leads her to the world of fantasy.

To conclude, Toni Morrison emphasis is on racism and it is the chief obstacle of the Africans in America. Though classism and sexism are also treated in the novel and they are equally responsible for Pecola's sufferings.

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