

# Examining the Gender Discrimination in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*

J. Jeba Salvasani,

Research Scholar, ADM College for Women (Auto), Nagapattinam

jebasalvasini142@gmail.com

**Abstract**— The novels of Toni Morrison depict her tirade against the forces of white hegemony; she has raised a cry of Black women in America. *The Bluest Eye* use the tools of subversion, perversion to depict the traumatic experiences of the Black women protagonists. Toni Morrison's main concern is to tell the world how the Blacks are dehumanized. Her novels depict the cancerous virus of hatred and racial antagonism and gender discrimination. She uses grotesque, magic, the gruesome and elements of folk tale to depict the psychological depression and mental disorder of her women protagonists. Here, Black women do not only face gender humiliation but also race and class oppressions. In this study, it is revealed that Black women characters, particularly Pauline, Pecola, Frieda, and Claudia, are tortured by the family and the community. They are tortured because of the different looks and colour physically and culturally or socially.

**Keywords**— Race, Gender, Oppression, Black, Slavery, Discrimination, Struggle.

## Introduction

Race and gender signify the traumatic condition under which African American lived in white America. Right from the days of slavery, the blacks, irrespective of gender had realized the cruel reality of racism. Sexism more oppressive and mentally was cause of grievance to the black women who were sexually exploited by both the black and white men. Just as black as a group were relegated to an underclass by virtue of their race, so were the black women relegated to a separate caste by virtue of their gender. Confronted on all side by race and gender discrimination, the black woman has no friends but only liabilities and responsibilities. Responsible for their own and their children's wellbeing and future, these women had to face daily the cruelty of their relationships with white men, with white women and above all with black men. But within the separate caste, a standard of woman was designed in terms of class definitions.

Toni Morrison is a great twentieth-century writer to whose writings we can apply matters of race, gender, sexuality, social class and rape. As a celebrated American writer, she is greatly concerned with the life and problems of African Americans. She won the Pulitzer Prize in 1988 for *Beloved* and the Nobel Prize in 1993. Morrison gave inspiration to black women writers and generated a new kind of readership that was more alert about issues of race and gender and also more eager to achieve a fuller understanding of these matters. The central motif of most of Morrison's works is the role that race plays in American life. Among the issues she addresses are the victimization of blacks, racial discrimination, motherhood, and the emotional and psychological problems posed to African Americans in a dominantly white society.

## *The Bluest Eye* and the gender issues

Toni Morrison is among the pioneer of the contemporary black writers who have redefined African-American writing in many ways. Black women in America being black, female and poor have been victimized by racism, sexism, and classism, not only from the white world, but also from their own men. These women have faced the problems of race, class and gender, which have pushed them towards a margin. They are separated from the society. They have to endure all the violence and racist behaviors of both white men and women. In addition to these, a colored women not only struggle against racist society, but also she has to suffer at the hands of black men. Being aware of these facts,

Toni Morrison aim to portray the experiences of black women in her novels. Morrison expresses her knowledge about black life creating fictional characters. "Morrison's strengthening of definitions and focusing of perception is reflected in the novels' narrative structures" (Birch, 151).

The black woman is the main concern when Morrison plans her characters. She tries her best to depict different women experience in her novels and each female character has some specific features which are interesting to discuss. Adolescent girls often appear as characters in Morrison's stories. Unlike common young people, those girls have no choice but to accept some trauma instead of possessing the happiness of their youth. The author wants to make some issues clear by making her characters special in some way. One of the features of Morrison's adolescent girls is that they get hurt and enter the adult world early. Her first novel *The Bluest Eye* examines the consequences of black womanhood in an oppressive white world. The reader witnesses the psychological disintegration of Pecola Breedlove, an adolescent girl whose blackness is shame to a society in which blue eyes are valued above all others.

*The Bluest Eye* is the story of Pecola Breedlove, a young black girl in Ohio. It deals with the great range of black feminine voice into the artificial mould of stereotype. It allows us to get a deep look into the black woman's dilemma, oppressions and trials symbolized by the tragic life of Pecola, who is driven insane by the pressure of having absolute physical beauty, the beauty of a white woman, by having fair skin, blond hair and blue eyes. This was the definition of beauty in the society, which was impossible for Pecola to meet them. The sense of "unsettling emptiness" and the "enemy within" drive Pecola to the need of a man who could make her happy. The emotionally deprived life of Pecola's parents forces her to a state of schizophrenia. Her mother Pauline is troubled by the feeling of motherhood in her life. The daily need of her children seem to her troublesome, as she is totally disappointed in her personal life.

Even the life of Pecola's father Cholly is an instance of negligence, frustration and quest for identity. Without parental affection and care, he feels himself alienated from his family. Pecola thus becomes the victim of her parent's bitter dissatisfaction with life; dissatisfaction is greatly connected to the various forms of discrimination with which blacks have to live within white American society. She is trapped in a world of taunts, threats but yearns for love and protection. But neither Pauline nor Cholly can provide her with any emotional or moral support since they themselves are without roots and are emotionally and spiritually deprived. Pecola desires to have blue eyes, she wants in fact to be white, and like her mother Pauline she wants to identify herself with the white women.

Pecola and her family members all accept the expression of the people around them. "The community senses the Breedloves self-hatred and encourages it by agreeing that the Breedloves are ugly" (Kubitschek, 34). Thus, Pecola herself knows the truth that she is a colored person and ugly. As a member of black race "Pecola, suffering from a sense of self-loathing and false identity..." (Peach, 27) wants God to give her bluest eyes that are seen the mark of beauty in the community.

In *The Bluest Eye*, the superiority of white people is displayed by standards of beauty. Therefore, Pecola cannot live the happiness of being different and treated in a different way in white society. As the narrator of the novel, states the problem is not Pecola's and her family's "...ugliness, but their "conviction" of their ugliness that makes the difference" (Bloom, 13). Not only Pecola, but also the members of her family accept the state of ugliness and this acceptance causes them to experience nearly all evil racial and interracial acts of people.

The novel *The Bluest Eye*, begins with Morrison's comments "...on the movement's assertions of racial beauty" (*The Bluest Eye*, 2). The political movements assertions of 1960s and 1970s, demonstrate that in fact the colored ones are beautiful. Likewise, Morrison aims to imply this thought by the help of her story. In the novel, "The self-hatred is often focused on the body as the most obvious indicator of race; hair and color, for example, are recurrent concerns" (Peach, 28).

Morrison states that the black females are only seen as housemaid or slaves at the hands of white race. Even, the white little children order something and they act as if they have no wish. The white people "...use to despise African Americans" (Kubitschek, 34). The colored women are always viewed as a person who should endure violence and hardness even they are at home. The black women should "...combat the waywardness of their husbands and children and the racism of whites" (McKay, 70).

One should not, however, fail to note that Pecola suffers not only because of her race but also because of her gender. In other words, she suffers both as a black and a female. Just as blacks as a group are relegated to an underclass in America by virtue of their race, so are women relegated to a separate caste by virtue of their sex. "Just as white people have created and maintained a racist culture, so have men created and maintained a sexist culture." (Hernton, 10). The women find themselves in a double jeopardy of race and gender. As a racial being she is asked to relinquish her individual and cultural ways and follow white dictates and as a gender being she is socialized to subordinate her femininity and remain subsumed in the orbit of patriarchy. Morrison seems to move her examination of Pecola's life back and forth from the axis of race to that of gender.

Since black women find themselves in a double jeopardy of race and gender, any study on them must be related not only to their racial or colonial experience, but also to the experience arising out of their femininity. Having got to share oppression equally with both the groups, blacks and women, the black woman remains a victim of both racism and sexism. That is why, Pecola in the novel experiences dependency, repression, internalization, alienation and all such neuroses not only as a racial being but as a woman as well. As a woman, she shares almost the same experiences and undergoes the same subjugation and marginalization which any other woman would experience under patriarchal imperialism.

Woman in a patriarchal society is the socially sanctioned 'other' and her psyche is the product of social constructs. As Simon-de-Beauvoir points out;

"One is not born, but rather becomes woman.... It is civilization as a whole that produces this creature, intermediate between male and eunuch, which is described as feminine" (Simon-de-Beauvoir, 16).

From the moment of birth, when the conventional first question is asked regarding the gender of the child, a female is constantly bombarded with social images, rewards, and punishments that are designed to ensure that she does not develop any quality associated with the other half of humanity. She must be "feminine" and restrict herself to a 'woman's place'. It is the patriarchal civilization that defines woman as a marginalized creature. Her definition and differentiation is always made in deference to man. A woman is never considered an autonomous self, but as just incidental, the inessential and an appendage to

man. In *The Bluest Eye*, black girlhood assumes tragic propensities when it borrows identity models from the mandates of white culture and from the malevolent parental mirrors as well. Like many other contemporary black women writers such as Maya Angelou; Gwendolyn Brooks and Paule Marshall, Morrison believes in the anxiety black girls and women feel about and what their mirrors tell them. For instance, Maud Martha, in Brooks' *Maud Martha*, is a woman who is aware of her own reality, and this is evident from what she understands of her husband's mind:

“... It's my color that makes him mad. I try to shut my eyes to that, but it's no good. What I am inside, what is really me, he likes okay. But he keeps looking at my color - which is like a wall. He has to jump over it in order to meet and touch what I've got for him. He has to jump away up high in order to see it. He gets awful tired of that jumping” (Gwendolyn, 87-88).

Brooks has shown us a courageous, simple black woman who is able to make the best of her life, despite her race and sex. Morrison too holds that girls growing up black and female in a white society often experience the malady of internalizing the belief that an aesthetically pleasing image is what constitutes the necessary precondition for receiving love and security. Clearly, sexism and racism are systems of societal and psychological restrictions that have critically affected the lives of African-American women. Since sex and race have been so interrelated in the history of America, it is not surprising that when black women published novels, they necessarily reflected that relationship.

From a feminist perspective, *The Bluest Eye* is a study of the various degrees of fulfilment women experience as women. Pauline is at one end of the spectrum. Other women characters are less obviously deprived, at least economically. Some are “comfortable” completely immersed in the motherhood and find peace in resignation to the limitations of their lives. Mrs. MacTeer, whose daughters befriend Pecola, is such a woman. She rears her family in rooms “peopled by roaches and mice” and open around windows and doors to the cold wind. She makes ends meet by taking in boarders and by “watching every possibility of excess.” Like other women in the community, she dreads the “real terror of life,” being put “outdoors,” and “having no please to go.” Claudia MacTeer explains the reality of her mother and other women in the community

Although Morrison's class analysis is immature at this point. She is at least conscious of a limited role that economics plays in the exploitation of African people. It is Morrison's growing awareness of the inherent characteristics of capitalism that help her understand that racism is an integral part of the capitalist mode of production. There is ample evidence to prove that racism is a by-product of capitalism. However, to state that racism is the consequence of the European's quest for greater profits, is not to imply that racism has not ultimately become a concomitant reason for oppressing African people. In the words of Rodney, “oppression of African people on purely racial grounds accompanied, strengthened and became indistinguishable from oppression for economic reasons.” (Rodney, 100).

Though Morrison has rightly understood the concept of beauty from an intellectual point of view, she could not understand that even this concept would change depending on the racial makeup of the dominant class. Her misconception of class consciousness at this point in her writing career might be due to her lack of understanding of three important factors. First, the ruling class, whether of European, African or Asian descent, possesses the major instruments of economic production and distribution as well as the means of establishing its socio-cultural dominance. Second, possessing such means, the ruling class uses and promotes its own image as a measurement of beauty for the entire society. Third, the success of this promotion ensures the continual dominance of the ruling class.

To conclude, a close study of *The Bluest Eye* from the viewpoint of the interaction of race, gender, and class reveals Morrison's low level of gender and class consciousness at the beginning of her literary career. Initially she thinks that racism is the only form of African's oppression in the white-dominated society. Though racism and sexism, the primary causes of African's oppression, are treated in the novel, they are overshadowed by Morrison's emphasis on gender issues

## Conclusion

Written with the impacts of experience of slave life, the social movements emerged in the United States during 1950s and 1960s and the violent racial forces, the novels of Toni Morrison *The Bluest Eye* succeed in displaying the sufferings of women. The black characters in the novels try to endure gender discrimination, violence, racial attitudes and sexual abuse. Toni Morrison focuses on the sufferings of black females in a white society in *The Bluest Eye*. This novel “...shows racism's damaging effects on the black community at large and on black families” (Kubitschek, 27). In *The Bluest Eye*, a black girl Pecola Breedlove realizes the supremacy of white society and longs to have the features of white females. She starts his desires by praying to have the bluest eye in the world. The superlative form of this word is used to demonstrate the willingness to have even more superior features than white race.

It is obvious that the novels of Toni Morrison portray the sufferings of black women like violence, rape, motherhood and the most important reason that causes this is racism that is their color. They are discriminated by the white society because of their God-given colors. They are seen as the objects that do not have any feelings. In novels of Morrison, some black female have the opportunity to find their identity and survive in the hard atmosphere of racial society. Her novels are meant to celebrate a sense of black womanhood and to create awareness for the honor and dignity of Black women in the society.

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