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Apartheid and Scarred Consciousness in Toni Morrison's 'The Bluest Eye'

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Abstract

Toni Morrison's The Bluest Eye is one of the greatest novellas ever written, highlighting the neglect faced by an eleven year old black girl impacting her identity in such a way that she internalizes the projected standard of beauty, forgetting hers. Desire of being loved, acting as the motivating force behind Pecola's life—gives her a scarred consciousness of a distorted vision of the society, where people were unreal even with themselves. They pretended to be someone they were not, and abandoned their family to belong to the minority white family. Their ideals became theirs and this was their inheritance of being able to serve those who took away their name and identity forever. The paper discusses the extent to which consciousness be scarred for life, under an epidemic problem of apartheid.

Keywords: Aparthied, The Bluest Eye, Scarred consciousness, victimization, racism.

It Comes Unadorned

It comes

Unadorned

Like a phrase

Strong enough to cast a spell;

It comes

Unbidden,

Like the turn of sun through hills

Or stars in wheels of song.

The jeweled feet of women dance the earth.

Arousing it to spring.

Shoulders broad as a road bend to share the weight of years.

Profiles breach the distance and lean

Toward an ordinary kiss.

Bliss.

It comes naked into the world like a charm.

~Toni Morrison

In the wake of Post WWI many opportunities were given to the growing and expanding group of African-Americans living in the North US. More than 15 lakh African-Americans moved to Northern US in the 1930s and around

25 lakh in the 1940s. Life in the North was extremely difficult and dismal for the African-Americans. Race riots, limited housing resulting in slum dwelling, restricted job opportunities, increasing animosity and alienation from one another were only a few of the many hurdles faced by the US Africans.

Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* beautifully presents this schism or duality that afflicted the characters and distorted their sense of self- worth and identity. The popular iconographic representations in US perpetrated hatred, denial and feeling of being cast away by another race of people. George Meredith apt words sums up the strange situation:

> *"In tragic life, Got wot,*
>
> *No villain need be! Passions spin the plot:*
>
> *We are betrayed by what is false within." (www.poetrynook.com)*

The Bluest Eye is the novel that launched Toni Morrison into the spotlight as a talented African-American writer and a poignant social critic. Morrison literalizes black female bodies as sites of fascist invasions that is indicated and subtly delineated through the magnificent characters named Poland, China and Maginot Line. Morrison's endeavour at the same time is to re-write the histories of the black Americans whose positive images and stories have been eradicated by a commodity culture. Morrison achieves this by her narrative style, representing black

female subjectivity as a layered, shifting and complex reality. She states in a film interview:

> *"The Bluest Eye" is about one's dependency on the world for identification, self-value and feelings of worth." (Tatum 7)*

The author's argument is woven around how influential society's ideas and views can be on an individual that its negative effect can transform life forever. Holloway considers that "Morrison has written of desolation and decay because this is where, as victims of our environments, we are left." (Morrison 3) Morrison shows how the dominant culture seeks to impose its moral and aesthetic values on the ineffectual and in capacitated ethos of the enslaved people. *The Bluest Eye* is a portrayal of a life of negation motivated by deprivation and degradation that brings down the culture of humanity. The novel is indeed reminiscent of Harriet Beecher Stowe's epoch-making novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) which laid bare the travails of the Blacks in America; and Canadian playwright Sharon Pollock's powerful dramatic work *The Death of Bessie Smith.* Bessie being "coloured" could not get timely treatment after her road accident in the hospital run by Whites. The works of contemporary South African writers Henry Lopez, the novelist and Denvis Brutus, the poet are replete with the accounts of ill treatment a Black undergoes in the White Western world. Another poet Pitika N Tuli tellingly pens her experience:

> *"In my country they jail you*
>
> *For what they think you think…*

They'll implant a microchip in our minds

To flash our thoughts and dreams

On to a screen at John Vorster Square

I was scared:

By day I guard my tongue

By night my dreams" (Shapiro 45)

Living in a grimy storefront, taunted and alienated by the classmates, beaten and ignored by her parents, Pecola, the protagonist of *The Bluest Eye* emerges as a 'victim-figure' who begins life at the very bottom. Pecola is doomed the moment her mother decides her daughter is irretrievably ugly: "Head full of pretty hair, but Lord she was ugly." (Morrison 126) Pecola is led to further isolation by the harsh reality that no one encourages or loves her. She has no support from her family and abhorred by her teachers. The classmates enjoy ridiculing her and people around choose to ignore her. The only offhand acceptance Pecola receives is from the three prostitutes, who themselves are social outcasts. Michele Wallace believes that their kindness fail to understand victimization or the fact that she is in danger. Pecola's only real friends are the other two main characters in the story, Frieda and Claudia Mac teer who are relatively powerless in improving her situation.

Morrison attempts "to show a little girl of eleven as a total and complete victim of whatever was around her." Pecola knew how children mocked at her. When one of the girls at school wanted to be particularly insulting to a boy, or

wanted to get an immediate reaction from him, she would only say, "Bobby loves Pecola Breedlove!"(Morrison 46) With both her teachers and classmates being cold to Pecola, it was inevitable for her to feel formidably alone and isolated. She was often left alone with her thoughts which mostly consisted of her loving desire and yearning for blue eyes, with which she would be considered beautiful and popular. Each night before she went to sleep she would fervently pray for blue eyes:

> *"If she looked different, beautiful, maybe Cholly would be different, and Mrs. Breedlove too. Maybe they'd say, 'Why, look at pretty-eyed Pecola. We mustn't do bad things in front of those pretty eyes." (Morrison 46)*

So deep-rooted is society's expectations that Pecola internalized the standard requirements of being considered beautiful with being loved. The assurance of the society was important for restating her identity that made her possessed with the idea of blue eyes. In essence beauty equaled happiness—where a black child like Pecola must see herself in the body of a white girl. In other words, she must not see herself at all. She prays to God: "make me disappear" (Morrison 45) thus making a life of her own erasure and annihilation.

In Toni Morrison's other novel *Tar Baby*, Jadine is shown to be consumed with "white societal values and ideas of success, emphasizing the need for self-discovery, introspection and self-identity leading to self-actualization." (Otten 87) In *Sula* too, along with the

protagonist, all the other characters suffer from a sense of isolation. Morrison's fictional characters are seen engaged in a perpetual struggle to establish their identity and emotional sensitivity in an impersonal, indifferent and menacing world. The development of an integrated self is possible only by imbibing or rejecting the social dictates. It is this sense of painful process of self recognition that the novelist seeks to highlight in *The Bluest Eye.* The predicament of Pecola over her racial and sexual experiences invites participatory reading that Toni Morrison seeks to bring out:

> *"My writing expects participatory reading, and that is what I think literature is supposed to do." (Ogunyemi 71)*

At the time when *The Bluest Eye* was written, society's standard of beauty was white skin, blond hair and blue eyes. The Shirley Temples of the world were adored and cherished, many sought after their beauty, making it the current rage. For Pecola accepting her reality would have meant accepting her 'unworthinesss' so she starts fantasizing. She finds substance in the candy with the picture of Mary Jane on its wrapper. By losing herself in the candy's sweetness the girl thinks she can dissolve her own being and tragically lets herself be subsumed by a blond girl. Thus, "to eat the candy is somehow to eat the eyes, eat Mary Jane. Love Mary Jane. Be Mary Jane." (Morrison 50) However, even having this candy from the white immigrant's shop is a challenge that fills Pecola with abject shame. The absence of conscious human contact is

a step further in dehumanizing of the little girl. The storekeeper, Mr. Yacobowski's total disregard and unregistering manner does immense harm to Pecola's self-esteem. "Somewhere between retina and object, between vision and view, his eyes drew back, hesitate, and hover…. He does not see her, because for him there is nothing to see." (Morrison 48) This encounter of unalterable fact of her reality, strikes Pecola dumb:

> *"She looks up at him and sees the vacuum where curiosity ought to lodge. And something more. The total absence of human recognition the glazed separateness…. And it is blackness of her body that accounts for, that creates the vacuum edged with distaste in white eyes."(Morrison 48-49)*

This reminds us of Addison Gayle's observation:

> *"A Negro community daily confronted by the horrors of the urban ghetto represents a reality too much under stress to be liberated by any exploration of such questions as "Who am I? What is my identity? What is my relationship to the universe, to God, to the existential other?" (Morrison 10)*

Pecola's parents sponged off all their deprivations and disappointments on to Pecola in order to attain "a quest for their individual identity." Pecola becomes a painful reminder of Pauline's own ugliness and deprivation, and therefore she turns away from her family to devote herself to the White Fisher family. Relegating her home to an 'after thought', Pauline immerses herself in her job, for, "here she found beauty, order, cleanliness and praise…. They even gave her what she had never had—a

nickname—Polly." (Morrison 127-128) Selfishly hoarding this brighter side of her life, Pauline refused to allow her children to bask in its warmth. Spending herself at the Fishers, Pauline had nothing to offer her offsprings. In Eric Fromm's terminology, "Pauline gives milk to a hungering Pecola but is unable to give her honey." (Kristin 34)

The non-availability of 'honey' and a 'mother figure', made Pecola's psyche quite fragile, poised for collapse. Thus, within the home, too, Pecola is victimized by the metaphoric absence of her mother.

Cholly, divorced of reason and the dicta of society is all instinct. His first attempt at sex was scorned, mocked and watched by two white police officers. His embarrassment had deepened into humiliation when the stalkers forced him to continue in the glare of their flashlight: "Go on…Go on and finish. And, nigger, make it good. The flashlight did not move." (Morrison 42) Cholly is branded for life: ashamed of his victimization he transposes his hatred on Darlene, whom he had covertly admired for long. Robbed of his manhood, unable to shield himself or the girl from the wanton cruelty of the men, Cholly was on his way to becoming a dangerous bully:

> *"Never did he once consider directing his hatred toward the hunters, such an emotion would have destroyed him. They were big, white, armed men. He was small, black, helpless…" (Morrison 150)*

Later unable to reveal his identity to his own father whom he found "gesturing in a quarrelsome, agitated manner

with another man", Cholly flew to escape the ridicule of people and sought refuge in primeval nature, where he lay by the river Ocmulgee in a fetal position.

Morrison characterizes Cholly's disinterestedness as the condition of being "dangerously free. Free to feel whatever he felt—fear, guilt, shame, love, grief, pity. Free to be tender or violent." (Morrison 159) Her depiction of him traces the source of this freedom to his loss of mother, father, community and home and to the feeling that the history of people and events extends as far as his interest in them: "...Cholly was truly free. Abandoned in a junk heap by his mother, rejected for a crap game by his father, there was nothing more to lose." (Morrison 160) Cholly's freedom extends to his heart which throbs with passions uncontrolled by the mind. His drunkenness, rootlessness and anarhy, then set the stage for Pecola's rape.

Pecola's isolation, self-blame and negativity of life finally escalated when she was in the kitchen washing dishes while her father, who had been extremely drunk, became over-stirred with sexual urge. Her unhappiness and beaten frame aggravated his impotence as reminders of his helplessness and failure. Cholly responded animalistically to that pinpointed gesture with a concomitant feeling. All Cholly's deprivations and frustrations resulted in the rape answer his question, "What could he do for her.... What can he give her? What could a burned-out black man say to the hunched back of

his eleven-year-old daughter?" (Morrison 160) Apparantly nothing, save a legacy of scarred feeling sand actions. Cholly's mangled self-esteem is better satisfied by the total subjugation of Pecola. Her silence heightens his power of the moment. Thus, a directionless tender, desperation to escape ennui and to gain potency in Cholly results in his raping Pecola and the only sound Pecola made "was a hollow suck of air in the back of her throat. Like the rapid loss of air from a circus balloon." (Morrison 163) Wilfred D. Samuels and Clenora Hudson aptly comments:

> *"When Cholly rapes his daughter, it is a physical manifestation of the social, psychological and personal violence that together with his wife, he has put upon Pecola." (Tate 26)*

Pecola's psyche, her feelings and then her body got maimed and mutilated and there was no cubby hole to which she could escape now, save that of illusion. It is during this time that she began to slip into madness. She developed an imaginary friend with whom she spoke about her "new blue eyes" She was given these blue eyes by Soaphead Church, the town Psychic and Spiritualist, who mastered "the fine art of self-deception." His assurance to Pecola arises out of his vanity, the wish to kill the dog and his long history of abuse and rejection.

Soaphead used Pecola to poison the dog, thus making her a scapegoat with the lie that if the dog behaved strangely, her wish would be fulfilled. She fed the dog. After convulsing for several minutes, the dog died. The agony of

the dying dog transposed Pecola's yearning with her achievement of getting blue eyes. Thus, "Soaphead Church validates Pecola's wish for blue eyes affirming the correctness of her rejection of her race." And yet the gift is flawed. As Cholly's tenderness was destructive, Soaphead's pity is debilitating. Pecola wrapped in her own fantasy crosses the boundary of sanity, her quest still not over. She had blue eyes, bluer than most, however, her wish to possess the bluest eyes remained unfulfilled. This inadequacy and apprehension of not having the bluest eyes threatens the extreme alienation of Pecola from her own self. The true extent of her deprivation is reflected when she asks her own alter ego, "Will you come back if I get them [the bluest eyes]?" The victimization of Pecola is thus complete:

> *"The damage done was total….Elbows bent, hands on shoulders, she flailed her arms like a bird in an eternal, grotesquely futile effort to fly. Beating the air, a winged but grounded bird." (Morrison 204)*

Pecola's victimization has been used to relieve the community's inadequacy and oppression. Claudia, reflects as an adult that people need someone like Pecola in their lives to feel superior and at par: "All of us—all who knew her—felt so wholesome after we cleaned ourselves on her….We honed our egos on her, padded our characters with her frailty, and yawned in the fantasy of our strength." (Morrison 205)

The society's inability or refusal to make sense of her actions, to put them in context foreshadows their eventual

scapegoating of Pecola. Trudier Harris tellingly comments that the scapegoating of Pecola instead of purging the community of its reliance on alien standards of beauty, merely "solidifies those images." (Jane 421)

At the end of the book she is isolated from the town both physically and emotionally. Mrs. Breedlove and Pecola moved to the edge of town in a little brown house. They were removed from society not only because they were poor and black but also, because they were made to believe they are ugly: "You looked at them and wondered why they were so ugly you looked closely and could not find the source. Then you realized that it came from conviction, their conviction." (Morrison 39)

A young girl's life is ruined as a result of society's placing beauty on such a high standard. Pecola's life is plagued event after event which kept impressing her ugliness on her and scarred her consciousness—her identity. She becomes an easy target of hatred of all the members of her town.

Claudia says at the beginning of the book "there were no marigolds in the fall of 1941." She and her sister Frieda plant marigold seeds with the belief that if the marigolds would grow and survive, so would Pecola's baby. Morrison, through Claudia, finally explains the metaphor of marigolds and broadens its scope to all African-Americans on the last page when Claudia is grown-up: "I even think now that the land of the entire country was hostile to marigolds that year. Certain seeds it will not not

nurture, certain fruits it will not bear…." (Morrison 206) The implication is that Pecola, like so many other African-Americans, never had a chance to grow and succeed because she lived in a society ("soil") that was inherently racist, and would not nurture her.

The Bluest Eye is broken up into seasons—Fall, Winter, Spring and Summer. This type of narrative structure suggests that the events described in the novel have occurred before and will occur again. Linda Dittmar, in her article examining form in *The Bluest Eye,* says: "Inherent is the notion of the seasons is the fact that they are an annually recurring condition from which there is no escape." (Holloway 18) Further dividing the book are small exerpts from the "Dick and Jane" primer, which is the epitome of the white upper-middle class lifestyle. Each excerpt has, in some way, to do with the section that follows. The logical fallacy known as red herring, which is when the audience's attention is shifted from a crucial issue to an irrelevant one, appears at the beginning of each chapter in the form of this primer. Recognizing the complexity of Pecola's initiation into reality, Morrison shun the trap of simplistic reductions by restricting her narrative to an evocative description, "since why is difficult to handle, one must take refuge in how." The first aspect of 'how' is given in the passage from the "Dick and Jane" primer depicting the idea of an ideal family from a white perspective. Its self enclosed neatness and simplicity, however, soon collapses into syntactical anarchy. The paradigmatic text gives way to an absence of punctuation,

which in turn surrenders to a jumbled mass of words, marking the transition from the white prototype, through coloured progression, to black existence.

Toni Morrison stated in an Interview:

> *"Black community is a pariah community. Black people are pariahs…. In fact the concept of black in this country is almost always one of the pariah." (Janeway 32)*

The pariah status may be elevated only if they are recognized as separate but equal individual and without a condescending attitude. We can sum up with the following self-composed poem:

We belong to one creation
Made of the same atom
But alas! We seek imitation
In every chartered field and direction

Poor Morrison's Pecola
Carried the burden of society's plight
Picking every misery in her stride
Relieving society of perfect guile

It's a long journey
Of fall and rise, suffering and pain
When from the rocky hill of apartheid
Will peep the dawn of love and pride

Yes! The day is still to come.

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