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Forms of Violence in *The Bluest Eye*

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Toni Morrison is a Noble Prize and Pulitzer Prize—winning writer, who has emerged as one of the major contemporary Afro-American women novelists on the literary scene of American literature. The burden of history, the devastating effects of race, gender or class on an individual and especially on a woman in American white, male-dominated society constitute her thematic concerns. *The Bluest Eye* (1970) represents how black women suffer from an institutionalized dehumanization in the context of race, gender and class in American society.

This paper is an attempt to explain that violence is expressed by different forms throughout the novel. There are many forms of violence, but most prominent and widely accepted are: physical, sexual, verbal and psychological. It is very difficult to draw lines between these forms. All of them tend to overlap and intersect each other. For example, physical violence can be considered as a substitute for sexual violence. Similarly, sexual violence cannot take place without hurting the physical self. Then physical, sexual and verbal violence always affect the psyche in one way or the other.

The Bluest Eye is about the life of a black low class family, who resides in America in the late 1930s. Everyday they are confronted to the problem of violence. And we would see that this violence is present inside their own family as well as in the community around them. This abuse comes for the most part from racism and the idealized concept of white beauty. Gloria Steinem in her introduction to *Outrageous Acts and Everyday Rebellions* explains this connection, as she says, "Just as male was universal but female was limited, white was universal but black was limited." Gloria Wade-Gayles depicts this phenomenon through the imagery of circles:

> There are three major circles of reality in American society, which reflect degree of power and powerlessness. There is a large circle in which white people, most of them men, experience influence and power. Far away from it there is a smaller circle, a narrow space, in which black people, regardless of sex, experience uncertainty, exploitation, and powerlessness. Hidden in this second circle is a third, a small dark enclosure in which black women experience pain, isolation, and vulnerability. These are the distinguishing marks of black womanhood in white America. (qtd. in Badode 85)

The black woman faced the reality of double discrimination, of both race and sex. In *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison has described the world wide gender disparity by her characters like Pecola, Frieda, Pauline and the narrator Claudia, who once mentions in the novel that three things have greatly affected her life: being a child, being Black and being a girl. All the women characters are abused by both white women and men, as well as by black men.

This novel probes deeper into the black woman's psychic dilemmas, oppressions and tribulations symbolized by the tragic life of pecola literally affected by the dominant culture's beauty standards (Swain and Das 89). It speaks about "a little black girl who wanted to rise up out of the pit of her blackness and see the world with blue eyes" (Morrison 174). The Anglo-Saxon concept of beauty was forcefully thrust upon the black race as a necessary requirement for

survival in America. White colour had to be, and should be, the only criterion for survival, success and happy co-existence in America. Badode asserts that being white in colour implied a whole series of connotations: of being attractive—both physically and culturally, desirable, intelligent and reasonable, and above all, worthy of love. Blackness was seen as a negative sign, a symbol of ugliness, uncontrolled, irrational behaviour, violent sexuality and so on. Thus, to quote Bell Hooks, "Black woman had to accept 'racial polarity in the form of male dominance'" (qtd. in Badode 87).

Living in an ugly and cruel world where her parents fight brutally and where school is the playground for vicious taunts and threats, Pecola yearns to be loved. "Long hours she sat looking in the mirror, trying to discover the secret of the ugliness, the ugliness that made her ignored or despised at school, by teachers and classmates alike" (Morrison 45). Pecola realizes at an early age that beauty is necessary for being loved. Equating love with beauty as two necessary accompaniments that would reduce the cacophony in her life, Pecola succumbs to the Western concept of beauty. Markedly Anglo-Saxon in its dimensions, white American prescriptions for beauty include blonde hair, white skin, and above all blue eyes. But such things are impossible for one to meet. So Pecola is disgruntled about her beauty. Disgust drags her to the corridors of madness.

Pecola's direct prayer for blue eyes is synchronized with Pauline's (her mother) need for order and Cholly's (her father) need for economic strength. All three of them are victims of a vicious dream of an ideal way of life which exists in a perfect form in the outside world, the world of the Anglo-Saxon American. Pauline, Cholly's wife, experiences the racial violence while working for a white mistress as a maid.

Pecola is the tragic character in the novel. She is victimized by both parents because they are made incapable of nurturing her by the limiting phenomena of race, sex, and class. Out of a deep well of self-hatred and psychic pain they give Pecola the fullest measure of their misery. Pauline loves Pecola, but she beats her; Cholly loves Pecola, but he rapes her. On account of a lack of self-esteem Pauline Breedlove is unable to nurture feelings of self-worth in her daughter. Being the ninth of eleven children in her family, Pauline was totally ignored by her parents and she blames her parental neglect for her limp too. On the other hand, Cholly, an-alcoholic man, was also rejected by her parents, in his childhood. And more destructive is Cholly's castration at the hands of white men who surprise him in the act of his first sexual encounter (with Darlene) and ask him to proceed in their full view. Pecola becomes the tragic victim of her parents' disillusionment with life.

Claudia and Frieda, members of McTeer family, are also troubled by questions of beauty; but family support gives them strength to survive against all odds. Pecola's encounter with Maureen Peal and the lighter-skinned middle-class boy deepen her sense of worthlessness, as when Maureen Peal, a white girl, says, "I am cute! And you ugly! Black and ugly black e mos. I am cute!" (Morrison 73).

The novel is rich in the examples of physical violence within the black community. For instance, Cholly Breedlove and Pauline Breedlove are shown as quarrelling in a horrible way. Cholly came home too drunk to fight. So, the battle was postponed for the next morning. Mrs. Breedlove, in the morning, demanded from Cholly to fetch her some coal. Cholly was not interested in helping his wife. As a result, Mrs. Breedlove emptied a pot of cold water on her husband. Cholly stood at once and was on his wife in no time. Both of them fell on the ground. Cholly put his leg on her breast. He also slapped her many a time on her face. She also, on her part, reciprocated in the best possible way. Very soon, she found an opportunity to slip away and

gather a stove lid top which she hurled at Cholly in such a way that it almost knocked him down, but not before Cholly had received blows from his son, Sammy, as well.

Yet another instance of physical violence is seen when Pecola receives beating from her mother in the Fisher's kitchen, where Pauline was a servant. When Pecola drops the hot berry cobbler on seeing the Fisher's white daughter, Pauline swoops on Pecola with a vengeance while cooing to the Fisher's child. Pauline has no sympathy for her own daughter who is burnt but is all tenderness for the Fisher's daughter. By this action, Pauline further conforms Pecola's sense of ugliness and dejection. There is a distortion in the natural self of Pauline because she exchanges her role of an ideal mother with that of an ideal servant. Wade-Gayles says that, "Pauline rejects her own daughter because she has erased from her psyche the line separating reality from illusion, mammyhood from motherhood" (qtd. in Badode 90). Into her son, Sammy, Pauline beat a loud desire to run away, and into her daughter she beat a fear of growing up, fear of other people, fear of life.

No one loves Pecola except her father who expresses his tenderness for her in a distorted manner by raping her, i.e. an instance of sexual violence. When the drunken Cholly sees his daughter bent over the sink washing dishes, a mixture of emotions surges through him: "revulsion, guilt, pity and then love. . . . What could he do for her—ever? What give her? . . . What could a burnt-out black man say to the hunched back of his eleven-year-old daughter?" (Morrison 161). Morrison sees love as a dynamic force, which can be extremely damaging depending on who is doing the loving. As Claudia points out in the end of this novel, "Love is never any better than the lover. Wicked people love wickedly, violent people love violently, weak people love weakly, stupid people love stupidly" (Morrison 206). Cholly violates her body as the others have violated her spirit, and pushes her into final withdrawal as she gets pregnant.

Pecola's desire for blue eyes intensifies and a neighbourhood seer helps in bringing about this miracle. But the result is ironic because it is only by descent into madness can she be convinced that her eyes are the bluest of all. Pecola does achieve what she had set out to, but at the expense of her sanity. She is a winner who is also a looser. Claudia says that she saw Pecola after the baby was born and then died. Pecola walks up and down the street flapping her arms, as if she was a bird that could not fly. Pauline still works for white folks, Sammy ran away, and Cholly died in a workhouse.

Apart from physical, sexual, verbal violence, Morrison also depicts psychological violence in her narrative world. As we see Pecola is injured psychologically by almost everyone she comes across. Her mother does not trust her, her father rapes her, her brother does not take her with him, her classmates make fun of her, a shopkeeper does not notice her, her best friends, Claudia and Frieda, also start avoiding her. One can easily imagine the plight of this poor girl who has no one in this entire world to play with except an imaginary friend.

Thus it is evident from the above discussion that Morrison has dealt dexterously with the theme of violence. Here, one meets the white characters inflicting torture and pain on the black. Not only this, the Afro-Americans are equally responsible for the misfortunes of the members of their own race. The way the writer has dealt with the theme of violence also has its own moral and aesthetic impact. It arouses feelings, such as: pity, sympathy, appreciation and disgust in the hearts of the reader.

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