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## Dynamics of Motherhood: A Study of Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*

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Afro-American women writers present how racism permeates the innermost recesses of the mind and heart of the blacks and affects even the most intimate human relationships. While depicting the corrosive impact of racism from social as well as psychological perspectives, they highlight the human cost black people have to pay in terms of their personal relationships, particularly the one between mother and daughter. Women novelists' treatment of motherhood brings out black mothers' pressures and challenges for survival and also reveals their different strategies and mechanisms to deal with these challenges. Along with this, the challenges black mothers have to face in dealing with their adolescent daughters, who suffer due to racism and are heavily influenced by the dominant value system, are also underlined by these writers. They portray how a black mother teaches her daughter to negotiate the hostile, wider world, and prepares her to face the problems and challenges boldly and confidently.

Toni Morrison in *The Bluest Eye* depicts how motherhood is influenced by various factors present in socio-cultural environment. Racial and gender discrimination and economic exploitation profoundly shape the mothering context. The influence of these factors on mothering is undeniable but a mother's vulnerability to these factors has a negative impact on her relationship with her children. On the other hand, a mother's resistance to these factors proves to be a positive example for her children and it provides them with a strategy and confidence to handle these factors on their own.

A notable paradigm of black motherhood is physical survival versus emotional nurturing of children. Most of the black mothers have to take jobs in order to support their families. This creates physical as well as emotional distance between a mother and her children. Emotional distance involves a mother's inability to express affection toward her children. Both kinds of distance are detrimental to the mother-child relationship. Black daughters often complain of lack of affection from their mothers. In such cases they fail to understand their mothers' predicament and perspective. However, for Black mothers, work outside the home is an expression of love for their families, particularly for their children.

The relationship between husband and wife also has a bearing on the nature of black motherhood. Frustrated by racism, a black man often finds it difficult to fulfill his role as the provider and protector of the family. His frustration results in drinking, domestic quarrel, wife-beating and staying away from home for long durations. All this adds to the emotional and practical problems of a black mother, and thus negatively influences her relation with her children.

In *The Bluest Eye*, the prominent factor that determines the nature of motherhood is interracial as well as intra-racial discrimination. It is the mother's vulnerability to the racial standards of beauty that is transmitted to the daughter and ultimately leads to her victimization. In fact, the reason of Pauline's vulnerability to the racially prejudiced notions of beauty lies in her relationship with her own mother. The relationship between Pecola Breedlove, the protagonist, and her mother, Pauline Breedlove, is ironically characterized by lack of love, and emotional attachment, indifference, frustration and cruelty. Set in a small town in Ohio, during the Depression, *The Bluest Eye* is the story of eleven year old Pecola Breedlove, who, victimized by the racist society, yearns for blue eyes, which, she believes, will make her worthy of love, happiness and acceptance in the society.

Racism is the dominating factor in determining the nature of Pauline's relationship with her daughter. It is therefore important to understand its influence on Pauline's psyche and the process which ultimately leads to her own vulnerability to and consequently her own daughter's victimization by the racial stereotypes of beauty. Though Pauline has been aware of the menace of racism since her childhood, her sense of inferiority is heightened by her exposure to racial stereotypes of beauty, particularly in the movies. Watching the movies and admiring the heroines, Pauline learns that black women are the antithesis of American beauty. This realization came along with a compulsive habit of judging everyone on the scale of absolute beauty which she learnt from movies. As the narrator describes, "She was never able, after her education in the movies, to look at a face and not assign it some category in the scale of absolute beauty, and the scale was one she absorbed in full from the silver screen" (95). And the impact of this learning was that it made her personal life miserable. She felt unworthy and inadequate on account of her colour.

Conditioned by the prevalent notions of beauty, Pauline is not able to shower motherly love on her newborn daughter. Prior to her birth, she had decided that she would "love it no matter what it looked like" (96). But when she had her daughter in her lap she could not love it because of her habit of measuring everyone on the scale of absolute beauty. On that scale her daughter, Pecola, was assigned the bottom category. For Pauline, her daughter was black and hence ugly and unworthy of love and happiness.

This was the price innocence had to pay due to the presence of oppressive standards which were considered normative even by the mother who herself had to suffer from a sense of inadequacy and worthlessness due to these very standards. In this context, D.W. Winnicott observes that "the core of what eventually forms as the individual's self-concept begins with the mirroring that occurs between mother and baby. Typically, what the baby sees when it looks into the mother's face is himself or herself. In other words, the mother is looking at the baby and what she looks like is related to what she sees there"(Gates Jr., and K.A.Appiah 129-130). The baby's self-esteem is in trouble if the baby sees only a troubled, uncongenial visage looking back at her. Pecola's first perception is her mother's reflection of her ugliness. From this seed of initial negation grows her sense of inadequacy, unworthiness and a negative concept of herself. So, more than the outer society, Pecola's own mother is responsible for creating a sense of inferiority in her. As she is heavily influenced by the prevalent beauty standards, naturally her daughter will follow her. Combined with racial discrimination are many other factors which are responsible for Pauline's harsh attitude towards her daughter.

The first and foremost is her frustration with her drunken husband, Cholly Breedlove. He provides no financial help to run the family and creates nuisance. Pauline has to work as a maid in order to shoulder the responsibilities of household. The traditional Kawaiida philosophy of black people clearly puts down the norms of behaviour in a racist society. But as Cholly and Pauline have been deprived of good family life in childhood, they are not even aware of these norms. Hence, their behaviour and consequent distortion of their family life. Racial discrimination, disharmony in family and burden of running the household – all these factors contributed to Pauline's frustration and its expression in the form of harshness and indifference towards her daughter.

Pauline's indifference, lack of warmth and harsh attitude towards her daughter make it impossible for Pecola to establish a good communication with her mother. There is no sharing or expression of tender feelings between mother and daughter. A child needs initiation for the expression of her feelings. But Pauline, disturbed by her circumstances, never pays any attention to this need of her daughter. As a result, it becomes a habit with Pecola not to share her feelings, tensions and anxieties with her mother. Though they live under the same roof, they are miles apart mentally as well as emotionally. Pecola, like any

other child, yearns for the expression of love, and sweet words from her mother. But her mother, troubled by her own frustrations, has no time and attitude for expression of love. It is this harsh and indifferent attitude of her mother that makes Pecola a reserved and introvert girl.

Pauline's vulnerability to racist beauty standards plays a major role in shaping her daughter's attitude towards it. Being a daughter, she identifies with her mother and silently imbibes her notion of beauty. She unquestioningly accepts the notion of beauty that renders her ugly and incapable forever to rise up to that standard. It is this acceptance of her ugliness that makes her appear uglier than she actually is. And this acceptance stifles her self-confidence and self esteem. It crushes whatever little sense of self-worth she possesses. It is because of such faulty upbringing that Pecola is not able to muster enough courage and mental strength to counter the harsh reality of racial discrimination. She is not able to develop a positive concept of self which is necessary in order to defend herself in face of racial onslaughts.

Influenced by her mother's attitude and behaviour, Pecola too is infatuated by beauty standards. She too desires for white skin, blond hair and blue eyes. The infatuation initiated by her mother's attitude is hammered in her psyche by media and silver screen. The parameters of beauty are propagated through advertisements and by media icons. Pecola is surrounded by such an environment where everything and everyone proclaims the superiority of whiteness. The notion radiated by her mother is again confirmed by the wider society and Pecola finally accepts and internalizes the belief that being white and everything associated with whiteness is beautiful.

The attitude of this eleven years old girl is understandable in the context of her situation vis-à-vis her immediate environment. The impression she gets from her environment is that blue eyes and fair skin are beautiful and therefore, desirable. But as she is just eleven years old her intellectual faculty is not so developed that she can clearly distinguish between myth and reality. She is unable to understand the motivation behind creation of such discriminatory standards of beauty. Her mental horizon is not so broaden as to understand the subtle implications and bearings of such standards on the development of her personality. In this context, John. J. Mitchell observes, "Early adolescent is the least introspective of the adolescent stages for two decisive reasons. First, the mental skills, required for introspection are not refined.... Second, the practical demands of day-to-day living monopolize the intellect and leave little energy for reflective contemplation"(30). That is why, Pecola is so much influenced by these standards and makes no attempt to shield herself from such self-depreciating standards.

And in such a situation the role of mother is very significant in the life of a daughter because she can help her in understanding the scenario from a mature and practical perspective. An adolescent daughter can make use of her mother's mature judgement in coming out of confusing and conflicting situations. But Pecola's mother fails to perform the role of a guide and counsellor to her daughter. She never thinks about the psychological condition and emotional needs of her adolescent daughter. She never thinks about the challenges that her young daughter faces everyday in the wider racist society. She is not concerned about the impact of such confrontation on her adolescent daughter. It is she who crushes her daughter's infantile sense of self esteem and confidence by creating a sense of worthlessness in her. An adolescent Pecola does not understand the mechanism and motives behind the propagation of racist standards of beauty. But her mother, living in such a society as a victim, must analyse the mechanism and motive behind such standards. She also must inform or warn her daughter about the propaganda and its fatal consequences. But instead of doing so, Pauline, herself being a victim of racism, becomes a perpetrator of racial discrimination against her own daughter.

A noticeable fact is that Pecola's attitude is in sharp contrast with that of her friends Claudia and Frieda, who too are Black and live in the same society. But their attitude and response to racism is markedly different from that of Pecola. And herein comes the role of family as a cohesive unit and role of mother in particular. Claudia and Frieda's mother is markedly different from Pecola's mother in her attitude towards racism. She seems to have come to terms with the reality that according to beauty standards prevalent in the wider society, she, her kids and people of her community can never be called beautiful. This is a 'given' fact of life and she accepts it gracefully. She does not define herself by a lack of whiteness. She is not vulnerable to the prevalent beauty standards and does not try to emulate them. She is at peace with the reality and there is no restlessness in her mind on account of colour. She is what she is and has no qualms or regrets about it. And the same attitude Mrs. MacTeer passes on to her daughters. Though she is not shown teaching it consciously to her daughters, they learn it in a natural process of imitating the actions, gestures and attitude of their mother.

The impact of self-worth and self-esteem which is passed on to them by their mother is that they do not get bogged down by racism. MacTeer girls are aware of the reverence paid to Maureen Peal, a rich white girl, by her classmates. But they are not in awe of her. Rather, they "looked hard for flaws to restore" their "equilibrium" (48). They display dialectical synthesis. As Claudia says, "Guideless and without vanity, we were still in love with ourselves then. We felt comfortable in our skins..." (57). And they are also aware that it is not white colour but the ideology behind its glorification that is the real enemy. And once they know the enemy, they won't let it take over themselves. The capability of understanding the surrounding environment, and the quality of their response prove that MacTeer sisters are smart, intelligent and tough as compared to Pecola. And the credit again goes to their family and mother in particular. The confidence instilled by mother in childhood, her assurance of being around when needed, her faith in the child's abilities – all these factors combine in bestowing mental toughness and self-confidence to her daughters.

Pecola is not as fortunate as MacTeer sisters are. Her mother is not as bold and wise as Mrs. MacTeer. Being herself a victim of racism and self-loathing, Pauline shows no sympathy with or interest in her daughter. She never asks or encourages Pecola to share her daily experiences with her. Also she never shares her own experiences with her daughter. Being a mother, she owes a responsibility of preparing her daughter to deal with racially hostile world. But as she herself does not possess mental toughness to resist racial oppression, she is unable to teach her daughter how to deal with different kinds of people and situations. Her indifference discourages Pecola from sharing her problems. As a result, there develops a communication gap between Pecola and her mother and its negative impact is evident in Pecola's personality. She becomes timid, submissive and introvert. Also, she becomes a passive recipient of all insults as she does not have courage to fight back to the perpetrators of such psychic violence, nor is she able to open up her bleeding heart to her mother or for that matter to anyone else and all her problems, tensions and anxieties remain unexpressed.

Pauline's total submission to the aura of whiteness and her consequent lack of sensitivity, warmth, affection and emotional attachment to her daughter is evident in her treatment of Pecola when she accidentally spills hot blackberry pie on the Fisher's clean, white kitchen floor. Instead of attending to burn injuries of her daughter, Pauline turns to white owner's daughter and lavishes upon her the love which Pecola deserves and desires for. This kind of discrimination by her own mother and her refusal to show any parental or even human concern towards her cuts to the core of Pecola's heart. Pauline's preference for the white girl makes Pecola realise her own position as ugly, an outsider and unwanted and this realization dilutes whatever little sense of worthiness she may possess.



Her mother's behaviour in the presence of white girl not only shatters Pecola emotionally but also reinforces the idea that she can be lovable if she fits into the standard definition of beauty, i.e. blue eyes, blond hair and fair skin. As blond hair and fair skin are unachievable, she comes to believe that blue eyes will serve as panacea and her situation will improve.

And then comes the ultimate act of brutalization and betrayal for Pecola. Cholly, her own father, rapes her. She tells her mother but the latter does not believe her. The reason of disbelief is that what Pecola says is a vindication of the stereotype image of black man propagated by the whites. According to this image, a black man indulges in incest and hence is a sinner. Irony of the situation is that while Pecola tells the truth, her mother finds her standing with the white people in castigating her father. In this manner, the issue between child and parent assumes racial dimensions and they find themselves standing in two different and mutually hostile camps. Thus racial consciousness prevents Pauline from believing her own daughter. In her inability to detach herself from the influence of racism, she commits injustice to her daughter by not viewing the issue impartially. In the first place, in her inability to protect her daughter from her drunken husband, Mrs. Breedlove fails in her maternal duty. Then, she commits injustice to her daughter by viewing the issue from racial perspective. And the brunt of her prejudice is borne by Pecola.

Having suffered at the hands of people around her and her mother alike, Pecola takes refuge in her private world of illusion. After her mother's betrayal at a point of time when she needs her the most, she loses her balance of mind. She goes crazy fantasizing that her eyes have turned blue. But the question arises as to why only Pecola needs blue eyes and not her friends, Claudia and Frieda. Why does Pecola succumb to the pressure of discriminatory standards of beauty and goes mad whereas the MacTeer girls, living in the same locality, manage to live with dignity and self-confidence. The answer lies in the role played by family and parents and especially the mother. Here, it is the mother and her attitude towards her daughter that makes all the difference.

Thus Morrison effectively depicts the pressures, tensions and frustrations of black mothers and how these affect their relationship with their children. The inability of Pecola's mother in handling the racial pressure coupled with financial crisis is instrumental in Pecola's debilitation. Pauline fails to inculcate in Pecola those life-nourishing values which form the basis of a healthy and balanced personality. Her biased vision, along with other factors, hinders the creation of loving and nurturing atmosphere at home, which is the basic requirement for healthy relationships among family members. Because of her faulty upbringing, her daughter is not able to muster enough courage and mental strength to counter the harsh reality of racial discrimination. She is not able to develop in her daughter a positive concept of herself and a sense of being worthy which is necessary in order to defend herself in the face of racial onslaught. Morrison, like a truly skilled artist has presented the situation in such a manner so as to bring out the conflicting facets of the same situation. As opposite to Pauline, Morrison presents Mrs. MacTeer and through her tells how to handle the racial pressure on one hand and the responsibilities of motherhood on the other.

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