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Subalternity in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*

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Abstract:

The term subaltern came from the writings of Antonio Gramsci who was an Italian Marxist and referred to for the subordination in terms of class, caste, gender, race and culture. Gayathiri Chakraborty Spivak in her essay titled "Can Subaltern Speak" says that the subaltern cannot speak. She emphasizes the condition of women who are doubly oppressed \firstly by patriarchy secondly by colonialism. This paper analyses Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* especially the protagonist Pecola's desire to have a pair of blue eyes so that she might be loved by her family, community and society. She is a victim of her community's frustration, anger, ignorance and shame. She is raped by her father who in a confused state of mind, attempts to show love and impregnates her. Even in school, she faces insults. To get the immediate attention of boys, a girl says "Bobby loves Pecola Breedlove! Bobby loves Pecola Breed love!" and also black boys forgetting their blackness, dance a macabre ballet around Pecola and extemporize a verse made up of insults. "Black e mo Black e mo yo daddy sleeps nekked". When she feels desperate and tries to escape from her ugliness, "each night, without fail, she prays to the Almighty for blue eyes". Consequently, she falls into a madness that is aided by Soaphead Church and she starts thinking that she has magically been given blue eyes. This paper briefly analyses how Pecola is a permanent victim in a patriarchal society for being black and ugly, in terms of Spivak theory.

Keywords: subalternity, poverty, violence, blue eyes, prayer, deception,

In post colonial theory, the term subaltern describes the lower classes and the social groups who are at the margins of a society. A subaltern is a person rendered without agency due to his or her social status. Nonetheless the literary critic Gayatri Spivak advised against too broad application of the term in 1992. Subaltern is not just a classy word for oppressed for others, for somebody who is not getting a piece of pie.... In post colonial terms, everything that has limited or no access to the cultural imperialism is subaltern. As Spivak observes, "The object of the group's investigation, in the case not even of the people as such but of the floating buffer zone of the regional elite – subaltern, is a deviation from an ideal – the people or subaltern – which is itself defined as a difference from the elite." Guha's definition of this floating buffer zone of elite – subalternity is close to Marx's well known comments of the French peasantry in

the Eighteenth Brumaire: “At the regional and local levels (the dominant indigenous groups)... if belonging to social strata hierarchically inferior to those of the dominant all. Indian groups acted in the interests of the latter and not in conformity to interests corresponding truly to their own social being.”(Spivak 284-285)

Subalternity is a relevant subject while studying Morrison. She presents it in different forms. Her novels sometimes evoke criticism because of the gruesome acts of violence in them. Morrison’s novels aim at understanding the socio psychological aspects of these violent behavioural changes in order to reach a humanistic conclusion. It is a fact that she shows all human beings prone to use violence in order to escape frustration, disappointment and disparagement. The theme of subalternity occurs recurrently in Morrison’s writing. Pecola is one subaltern, among the many in Toni Morrison’s works and in *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison shows how a subaltern, merely on account of who he/she, is made a scapegoat by the community as a projection of the evil to realize their goodness.

As a genre, Subaltern literature came to be recognized in the middle of the 20th century. This literature can be seen in work songs, spirituals and trickster tales in the oral form. It is the projection of entrapped and enslaved blacks as well as other subalterns to preserve their humanity in dehumanizing situations. This genre of expression helps them to transcend their difficulties. Work songs strengthen them and break the monotony of the physical work. This novel depicts an oppressive situation in which the oppressed get in their own oppression by internalizing the values of the dominant culture. It is about colonization of the human mind to decolonize. This novel depicts the evil of physical exploitation and rape of black girl.

The Bluest Eye tells of a desire of black girl to have a pair of blue eyes so that she can be loved by her family, friends, community and society. It is the story of an innocent girl, Pecola Breedlove who is unloved, uncared for, by her drunkard father Cholly and mother Pauline Breedlove. Therefore, she becomes a convenient victim for her community’s frustration, anger, ignorance and shame. Entering into womanhood, she is raped by her father who is in a confused stage, attempts to show love and impregnates her. She then gives birth to a stillborn child. When she feels desperate and tries to escape from her ugliness, she confronts a malady of madness and is convinced by Soaphead Church that she has magically been given blue eyes.

In order to develop the story of Pecola, Morrison begins with the story of Dick and Jane and their father and mother. Morrison co-relates this Dick and Jane story with Pecola, Sammy, Cholly and Pauline. The narrator Claudia and her sister Frieda, Pecola, Sammy and Junior are exemplified characters, that is to say that they are equally affected by the poor treatment from their parents. Among them Claudia is physically weak but mentally strong and Morrison’s most expressive character of this novel, as Jennifer Lee Jordan Heinert puts it:

All three characters pass these values on to children, and so the dysfunctional bildungsromans of one generation affect the next. These adults are parents and authority figures for impressionable children, and their stories affect these future generations. Soaphead Church preys on young girls in his neighborhood. Geraldine passes her values on to her son, Louis, Junior, who “came to agree with his mother” that “niggers” are not good enough for him to play with (87). Like Geraldine, Pauline’s internalized self-contempt prevents her from being a good mother – and she passes these “lessons” on to her children: “fear of being clumsy, fear of being like their father, fear of not being loved by God, fear of madness like Cholly’s mother’s (128). These inheritances will prove to be harmful to the children in the novel (22).

Claudia befriends the poor and ugly Pecola and understands the incidents of her adolescence in relation to her tragedy. As her search for selfhood is lost and she is led to misconceptions, Claudia narrates her childhood story to Pecola who is the protagonist. Pecola is a eleven year old black girl whose father is a drunkard and mother a domestic worker in a white person’s house. Claudia describes Pecola as a child where she is introduced as a girl who has nowhere to go because her father turns the entire family outdoors by burning the house.

“... having put his family outdoors, had catapulted himself beyond the reaches of human consideration. He had joined the animals; was, indeed, an old dog, a snake, a ratty nigger. Mrs. Breedlove was staying with the woman she worked for; the boy, Sammy, was with some other family; and Pecola was to stay with us. Cholly was in jail.” (Morrison 18)

Pecola recollects her childhood memories of her mother’s disgust and anger, her humiliation at her sickness in her old, cold and green house, her own frustration at being instructed by adults. Pecola has been put outdoors not by any of the landlords but by her own father. By doing this unimaginable act, he himself has joined the race of animals and while mother Pauline stays with her mistress, brother Sammy stays with another family. Pecola is at Claudia’s house and father Cholly Breedlove is in jail. The family is completely fragmented and lead a life of chaos. During Pecola’s stay at Claudia’s house, she realises Pecola’s hunger for the blue and white Shirley Temple Cup. Pecola is quite crazy in the way she looks at Shirley Temple attracted by its beauty.

The Breedloves don’t live in a storefront because they are poor and black, they stay there because they believe they are ugly. Their poverty is traditional and stultifying. But their ugliness is unique. Except Cholly whose ugliness is the result of despair, dissipation and violence directed towards petty things and weak people. Mrs. Breedlove, Sammy and Pecola are known for their ugliness:

“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. It was as

though some mysterious all knowing master had given each one a cloak of ugliness to wear, and they had each accepted it without question". (Morrison 39)

Poverty and violence are part of their routine life. Cholly, is habitually a drunkard and full of "orneriness". Mrs. Breedlove considers herself an upright and Christian woman with white people's values. She feels that Cholly is beyond redemption. She wants that Jesus Christ does not redeem him but instead punishes him for his bad deeds. Children react in different ways to violence. Sammy lets out his anger when he feels hopeless and runs away but Pecola wishes either to die or disappear. "... As long as she looked the way she did, as long as she was ugly, she would have to stay with these people... 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... Pecola is ignored by all at home as well as at school. Teachers never glance at her. Girls insult her when they want to insult a boy saying "Bobby loves Pecola Breedlove! Bobby loves Pecola Breedlove!" (Morrison 45) Pecola is mocked permanently. If her eyes were different as well as beautiful, she herself may be different. For that she prays,

"each night, without fail, she prayed for blue eyes. Fervently, for a year she had prayed. Although somewhat discouraged, she was not without hope. To have something as wonderful as that happen would take a long, long time".(Morrison 46)

The connotation of looking different is completely associated with her family pride and development. Because, if Pecola looks different and beautiful, her father Cholly and Mrs. Breedlove would be different too. If Pecola is blessed with blue eyes, the entire family will be graced with societal up gradation. For that reason, she prays for blue eyes. Isolated Pecola longs for love and beauty. It is her hunger that makes Pecola crazy for Mary Jane candies. Feeling love and hunger for Mary Janes, she goes to Mr. Yacobowski's store to buy it. He is a man with a grey head, blue eyes and an unfeeling heart for the blacks. She looks up at him and sees the curiosity of his sight. She does not know what keeps his glance suspended. She has seen this lurking in the eyes of all white people. The distaste must be for her and her blackness. "It is the blackness that accounts for, that creates the vacuum edged with distaste in white eyes".(Morrison 49) This situation is about the black girl's attempt to communicate with a white adult. She holds the money towards him but he hesitates to touch her hand. Finally, somehow he takes the pennies from her hand. Once again, Pecola feels the inexplicable shame.

The only persons in the neighborhood, who love Pecola are three prostitutes named China, Poland and Miss Marie and a rich girl named Maureen Paul who enchants the entire school. When teachers call on her all the students smile encouragingly. Frida and Claudia are bemused, irritated and fascinated by her. When they come from school with Maureen, a group of boys are seen circling and holding the victim, Pecola Breedlove. She is surrounded and harassed by the boys. They themselves are blacks. "Racism involves understanding the definition of racism. Racism does not concern prejudices alone; it is a system of oppression, one

that creates two sets of people; the powerful and the powerless". (Radhika) It is their contempt for their own blackness which gives the first insults. They cultivate ignorance and learn self hatred. They dance a macabre ballet around Pecola and extemporize a verse made up of two insults. "Black e mo Black e mo Ya daddy sleeps nekked, Stch ta ta stch ta ta Stach ta ta ta ta ta" (Morrison 65)

Pecola is edged around the circle crying, then she drops her note books and covers her eyes with her hands because of shame. Suddenly, Maureen appears and the boys seem reluctant to continue. She is being nice to Pecola because of the boys. On one idle day, Junior tempts Pecola to his house to show her some kittens. Feeling overjoyed at the beauty of kittens, Pecola goes to his house. However, he throws the black cat right in her face hurting her. She is startled and frightened and starts crying. Her attempt to run away is blocked by Junior. She is imprisoned in the room and attracted to the blue eyes of that cat. Junior feels jealous at Pecola's attraction towards the cat and snatches it by its hind legs and swings it. Pecola tries to prevent him but both of them fall down and the cat is dashed against the window. Then, Junior's mother Geraldine beholds Pecola with contempt and calls her 'nasty black bitch'. She is accused of killing the cat.

Geraldine points out the ruling class aspirations of the black, their adoption and approximation of their behavioural patterns, looks, living style and speech pattern of the ruling class and their disassociation from the black community. She emphasizes how urban surroundings strip them off their natural feelings. Geraldine and Junior's attitude to Pecola intensifies her humiliation and separation. While the blue eyes in the black face of the cat further intensifies Pecola's desire for blue eyes.

Pecola's mother Pauline is the ninth of eleven children. A wound left her with a crooked foot that flops when she walks. Her general feeling of separateness and unworthiness is such that she blames her foot. She cultivates private pleasures. Marrying Cholly who finds a job in the steel mills, Pauline stays at home. In her loneliness, she turns to her husband for things to fill the vacant places. She feels uncomfortable with the few black women she has met. They are amused by her because she does not straighten her hair. When Cholly begins to quarrel for money that he wants, Pauline decides to go to work. She takes up a job as a day worker that helps with the clothes and even few things in the apartment but this does not help her relationship with Cholly. Their marriage is shredded with quarrels.

Money becomes the focus of all their discussions because she wants money for clothes and he wants money for drink. As Wendy Harding & Jacky Martin are of the view: so in *The Bluest Eye*, the "waste and beauty" (159) mourned by Claudia characterizes not just Pecola's life but those of her whole family, although the young girl is most obviously a victim of blighting

influences. The Breedloves follow two of the more destructive courses available – while Pauline attempts to imitate dominant gender models, Cholly tries to escape from them in flight.

The sad thing is that Pauline does not care for clothes and make up. But she merely wants for other women to cast favourable glances in her way. One winter Pauline discovers that she is pregnant. When she goes to hospital for confinement, She is treated in an inhumanized way that the old doctor says to young ones “Now these here women you don’t have any trouble with. They deliver right away and with no pain. Just like horses. The young ones smiled a little.” (Morrison 125) Doctors say they don’t have pain because they don’t cry. Their life is completely connected with troubles and pains. Therefore, they are capable to endure pains.

When Samy and Pecola are still young, Pauline takes over the full responsibility and gains recognition as bread winner of the family. Holding Cholly as a model of sin and failure, she bears him like a crown of thorns and her children like a cross. It is her good fortune to find a permanent job in the home of a wealthy white family. She looks at their house, smells their linen, touches their silk draperies and loves all of it. However, “more and more she neglected her house, her children, her man- They were like after thoughts one has just before sleep”. (Morrison 127) She finds beauty, order, cleanliness and praise in her work place. In the white person’s house, they humiliate her when she goes to them but she never bothers about their criticism. Power, praise and luxury are hers in this house hold. They give her a nick name ‘Polly’ that she never had had in her life and she feels inexplicable happiness. She will not leave the kitchen until everything in order. She is an ideal servant there. “Pauline kept this order, this beauty, for herself, a private world, and never introduced it into her storefront or to her children”. (Morrison 128) She continues to work twelve to sixteen hours a day.

When Cholly is four days old, his mother wraps him in two blankets and a newspaper and places him on a junk heap by the rail road. His great aunt Jimmy, who sees her niece carrying a bundle out of the back door, rushes forward and rescues him. Since then, she raises Cholly herself. Having four years of school, Cholly quits and joins a job at Tyson’s Feed and Grain stores. Longing for his father’s affection, Cholly loves a man named Blue Jack who tells timely stories and “ when the Emancipation proclamation came, how black people hollered, cried, and sang”. (Morrison 133) When his aunt Jimmy died, Cholly is again abandoned. On the day of Jimmy’s funeral, he goes with Darlene for physical intimacy. Though humiliated, scared and rejected in a raciest society, he takes refuge in alcohol to sooth his rage and frustration. It is one such moment of intoxication and confusion, he commits an inhuman act. Feeling disturbed, he sees Pecola and rapes her with a sense of pleasure, guilt, impotence and a desire to give happiness to her. It is all happened because he lives in a state of bewildered and besotted despair. Toni Morrison presents the reason for Pecola’s suffering as Pauline and Cholly. His love is corrupt and tainted but Pauline is unloving . Though she does not physically rape her, Pauline ravages Pecola’s dignity and leaves her unprotected and vulnerable to public forces.

Longing to have a pair of blue eyes, Pecola comes to meet Soaphead Church who is a man of supernatural rather than unnatural. He is a misanthrope and fraud who has the ability to win the trust of others. Finally, the unattractive Pecola approaches him in frustration. Immediately, he asks her what she wants. She is reluctant to answer. However, he says, "I am a true spiritualist and Psychic Reader, born with power, and I will help you." (Morrison 173) Pecola says "I can't go to school no more. And I thought maybe you could help me." "Help you how? Tell me. Don't be frightened." "My eyes." "What about your eyes?" "I want them blue." (Morrison 174)

Here is an ugly little girl asking for beauty. A little black girl, who wants to rise up out of the pit of her blackness and sees the world with blue eyes. Soaphead says "I can do nothing for you, my child. I am not a magician. I work only through the lord. He sometimes uses me to help people. All I can do is offer myself to Him as the instrument through which he works. If He wants your wish granted, He will do it." (Morrison 174) When Soaphead speaks to Pecola and walks here and there, his eyes fall on the old Bob which is the Land Lady's dog sleeping on the porch. Then he kneels down at the window and places the substance of poison in a half opened packet. But Pecola doesn't know what is kept in packet and assumes that it is food. Soaphead Church instructs Pecola "Take this food and give it to the creature sleeping on the porch. Make sure he eats it. And mark well how he behaves. If nothing happens, you will know that God has refused you. If the animal behaves strangely, your wish will be granted on the day following this one." (Morrison 175) When Pecola goes to dog to feed the food, "Good-bye, God bless," he said and quickly shut the door." (Morrison 175) She places the food near its nose and the dog eats it in three or four gulps. Suddenly, the dog behaves strangely and Pecola starts jumping with happiness thinking that she gets the blue eyes. Thus, Pecola is used a scapegoat and completely deceived in her entire life.

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