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The Double Burden: Intersection of Racism and Sexism in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*

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Abstract:

Racism inherently embodies a belief in the dominance of one race over others, resulting in discrimination and bias directed at individuals due to their racial or ethnic origins. The presence of African-American people has been significantly shaped by the omnipresent reality of racism. The alleged frameworks of social and cognitive limitations result in individuals of colour grappling with sentiments of inferiority. Toni Morrison has garnered global recognition with the publication of her debut novel, *The Bluest Eye*, created during the era of the 'Black is Beautiful' activity and struggle, and it powerfully articulates the experiences of African American women. This novel elucidates the profound consequences endured by Black individuals who adopt the principles of a white culture that consistently repudiates them, both overtly and insidiously. Notwithstanding the formal eradication of slavery, accomplished through the tireless efforts of eminent figures, African Americans persist in being perceived as inferior to their white counterparts. Morrison intricately develops remarkable female characters of African descent in the novel. The characters endeavour to construct their own identities amidst the intricate and interconnected dynamics of sexism and racism. Consequently, these women adeptly maintained their identities throughout the narratives.

The examination delves into the novel, shedding light on the nuanced intricacies that black womanhood reveals within the dominant cultural framework. This analysis explores how each character either assimilates or challenges the complexities of race, gender, and sexuality, ultimately providing readers with novel insights into Morrison's oeuvre. Toni Morrison urges African-Americans to take pride in their Black identity and highlights the importance of Black cultural history throughout the book. The lived experiences of African-American women who face widespread discrimination in their families and in a primarily multicultural, post-colonial white America are profoundly examined in this study.

Keywords: Discrimination, Racism, Slavery, Womanhood, Multicultural.

In post-colonial writing, the investigation of racial and gender inequality has arisen as a key issue for a several of writers. Those of African origin who have written have not only represented their own personal experiences, but they have also expressed the larger narratives of their racial and cultural history. Through the tremendous creative contributions they have made, they make an effort to explain their Afro-American identity. Novelist Toni Morrison, who is of African-American descent, tackles this problem in her writings on behalf of those who have been subjected to racial injustices. There is no denying the fact that racism is a reality in the United States. Postmodernity is a paradigm that gives the discourse around resistance to racial discrimination a more incredible amount of attention and relevance than it would otherwise have. Toni Morrison has been a prominent voice for people of colour that has risen in recently. Her essays investigate the historical accounts of marginalised populations that have been subjected to oppression within the context of a patriarchal and predominantly white framework. Beginning at an early age in her life, Toni Morrison became aware of the fact that racism emerged as the most

significant foe of people of colour. In the works that she has produced, she makes an effort to convey that the only method for combating racial injustice is to recover the black identity. Morrison is aware of a specific problem that affects populations who are exposed to racism, which is that Afro-Americans begin to internalise notions about themselves, they see Euro-Americans as being ideal when it comes to beauty, morality, and intellect. Toni Morrison is celebrated for her Afro-American belonging, which she utilised to investigate the complex lives of black slaves and other individuals who endured highly marginalized and mistreated situations throughout the United States. They are not only treated in a way that is profoundly dehumanising, but they are also exposed to hostility from the white population of the United States of America. She places a significant emphasis on the development and prosperity of the black community as her primary concern. During the course of the conversation with Salman Rushdie, she articulated profound insights at one point, stating:

“I am not sure what the word “Negro” means, which is why I write books. What is black child/woman/friend/ mother? What is a black person? It seems to me that there are so many that inform blackness. One of the modern qualities of being an Afro-American is the flux, is the fluidity, the contradictions.”

Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* not only poses unsettling questions regarding the racist ideology that marginalised the black community in America, depriving them of a respectable social existence through the insidiously constructed illusion of their inherent inferiority and deficiency but also explores the specific oppressions faced by black women as a result of their gender. The theme elements of racial and gender inequality are intricately woven into the fabric of her story. Morrison's critical perspective examines both the falsehoods manufactured by a dominating faction of American society to maintain ideological oppression and the detrimental complexities

of the oppressed individuals. *The Bluest Eye* is not merely one of the many subversive texts that aim to foster cultural resistance against the imposition of hegemonic discourse on the subaltern community; it also serves as a distinctive cultural artefact that compels Black individuals to engage in introspection and examine the origins of their sociocultural subordination within their own self-loathing, which is indicative of their emotional servitude and the result of an insidious infiltration of the dominant white discourse into Black consciousness.

Pecola Breedlove, the protagonist of the narrative, harbours an intense desire for blue eyes and has been subjected to the harsh realities of interracial discrimination and societal prejudices. The mythological dimension that Morrison examines in this novel focuses on the prevailing criteria of physical beauty through which white women are evaluated in America. They are instructed that their fair hair, azure eyes, and pale complexion are not merely attractive but are the outward expressions of the highest virtues that divinity and nature have ever crafted. Oral traditions, challenged by literature and various media, have reinforced the process of pedestrianisation, internalising the prevailing narrative of beauty. Pecola aspires to attain, through some extraordinary intervention, blue eyes that would grant her the acceptance and affection of a harsh and indifferent world. A society that bestows its admiration and affection upon those deemed beautiful while directing its unreserved disdain towards their so-called less attractive counterparts. Pecola's fixation on an unattainable standard of physical beauty inevitably results in catastrophic outcomes. Morrison articulates in "*Behind the Making of the Black Book*".

"When the strength of a race depends on its beauty, when the focus is turned to have one look as opposed to what one is, we are in trouble." (89)

However, unfortunate Pecola remains oblivious to this, perpetually ensnared by the alluring influence of White cultural hegemony. Her journey has been marked by a series of rejections and instances of harsh treatment. Pecola's profound yearning for blue eyes can thus be seen as an outward expression of a more profound, underlying desire for acknowledgement, influence, and validation that embodies the aspirations of any marginalised community. The Shirley Temple and Mary Jane candy enable Pecola to embody the image, merging her essence with it. Though only for brief intervals. Nevertheless, she holds the conviction that the pursuing of the bluest eyes and the most impeccable features in existence will facilitate a lasting connection with those ephemeral attributes. Harboured disdain for her identity, she longs for blue eyes, convinced that their acquisition will alleviate her suffering and provide the sense of security that eludes her existence. Barbara Christian "*The Highs and the Lows of Black Feminist Criticism*," published in *The Black Scholar* suggests that Pecola's desire for blue eyes, the white model of beauty "*encompasses three hundred years of unsuccessful interface between black and white culture.*" (Christian47). The culture engages in self-sabotage by bestowing both praise and condemnation upon misguided notions: mothers present their children with Shirley Temple dolls while simultaneously attributing the shortcomings of the adult world to them. The racist ideology is indeed accountable for the marginalisation and subsequent suffering of black girls such as Pecola. Furthermore, the survival of the black community is intertwined with a complex web of mythologies, revealing a troubling complicity in embracing the identities imposed upon them by the dominant narrative. This situation underscores a critical failure to assume the essential responsibility of forging an alternative identity, one that dismantles the myriad negative stereotypes perpetuated by white society. Moreover, they significantly exacerbated their condition through the cultivation of profound self-loathing. The Breedloves harbour a profound disdain for themselves, rooted in a

conviction of their unworthiness, which manifests as a perception of ugliness among the women of that family. Before her marriage, Pecola's mother, Pauline, sought solace from her feelings of inadequacy in the realm of cinema, where she deciphered a framework of understanding that rendered both herself and her family inconsequential. This particular manifestation of cultural literacy constrained her awareness "*in equating physical beauty with virtue, she stripped her mind, bounded and collected self-contempt by the heap*" (Morrison122). Entering service in a white family, "*she becomes what is known as an ideal servant*" and she lavishes all her love and affection on her employers' children, reserving her disgust for her hapless daughter. Upon Pecola's birth, Pauline asserts she "*knew she was ugly*" (Morrison126). During the visit of the MacTeer sisters to the Fischer residence to have a conversation with Pecola, Claudia felt offended by the young white Fischer girl's use of the name "*Polly*" for Pauline. On the other hand, Pecola was allowed to address her mother as "*Mrs. Breedlove*" (Morrison128–130). The lady did not feel much pride for her daughter. As a result of an accident, Pecola spills a pan of deep-dish berry cobbler, which causes Pauline to get quite upset. She is unconcerned with the burns that her daughter has sustained; she hits the child and calls her names. After Pecola is raped by her father and ends up becoming pregnant, a woman comments that "*they say the way her mama beat her she is fortunate to be alive*" (Morrison187). This is a harsh statement that is similar to the one that was made before. It is possible that Pauline's first impression of Pecola's looks, which was that she was ugly, also had a role in her lack of care for her daughter. Rather than that, she decides to give in to the demands of the small white Fischer girl, who is a perfect example of the beauty standards prevalent in society. In addition, Pauline physically hits Pecola after Cholly has raped her. This demonstrates that the woman holds the girl responsible for the occurrence, which is representative of the prevalent inclination to hold sufferers of sexual abuse accountable for their actions. It is once again

the case that Pecola is the target of insults because of her ethnicity, the perception that she is ugly, and her gender.

Apart from her mother, most of the tormentors of Piccola happen to be black. Her black schoolmates taunt her. Junior, a black boy makes her the scapegoat of her pain. Geraldine, a coloured woman who refused to tolerate “nigger” said Piccola “*Nasty little black bitch.*” (Morrison92). The assertion made by an adult, labelling her as a ‘nasty’ little girl, reinforces for Picola the validity of that characterisation. These instances reinforce Morrison's argument that the prejudices and self-loathing within black communities significantly contribute to their struggle to achieve a genuine sense of self, thereby contesting the detrimental identity that has been imposed upon them by white Americans. Pecola's sense of alienation and unworthiness arose not only from the definitions imposed by others but also from her failure to rise above the consequences.

Suppose Breedloves signifies the black community's acquiescence to the prevailing discursive constructs, cultural narratives, and stereotypes inherent in the overarching discourse of racism. The Macteer family exemplifies the resilience of the black community against the oppressive frameworks of racism. The dominant culture has undoubtedly constrained their familial structures, yet it has facilitated a transcendence that allows for the realisation of individual potential, the construction of an alternative self-identity, the discovery of beauty in Blackness, and the embrace of pride in being Black. This rebellious and unconventional drive compels Claudia to reject all that is linked to white ideals of beauty, culminating in her violent destruction of their blue-eyed dolls. Through her interactions with Claudia, the presence of the White influence prompts a profound journey of introspection, ultimately guiding her towards self-discovery. It forces her to discover “*the secret of the magic they (whites) weaned on others. What made people look at them and say, ‘Awww, but not for me?’*” (Morrison 22). Claudia is undoubtedly cognisant of the pervasive white

influence; however, her profound familial connections empower her to transcend it and embrace her identity with unwavering self-love, irrespective of external perceptions. However, this reaction to the overarching issue of race ultimately reveals itself as a form of inverted racism or anti-racist racism, which implicitly acknowledges the binary oppositions established by the prevailing discourse.

On another level, it is important to notice that in *The Bluest Eye*, the black women are shown to suffer from the jeopardy also of gender. As a gender being, she is socialized to subordinate her femininity and remain subsumed in the orbit of patriarchy, as Simone de Beauvoir points out:

"one is not born, but rather becomes woman... it is civilization as a whole that produces this creatures intermediate between male and eunuch, which is described as feminine." (Beauvoir 283)

It is the Patriarchal culture that describes or defines the woman as the marginalised creature. She is the second sex; a woman is never considered an autonomous self but just incidental, the essential, and an appendage to man.

In *The Bluest Eye*, a black girl embodies tragic dimensions as she adopts identity frameworks dictated by the imperatives of white culture and the harmful reflections of her parents. Morrison illustrates how black girls raised in a predominantly white society grapple with the affliction of internalising the notion that an aesthetically pleasing image defines their worth. This conviction is an essential prerequisite for attaining affection and a sense of safety. It is evident that sexism and racism function as frameworks of societal and psychological limitations that have profoundly influenced the experiences of African American women.

Existing within the confines and constraints established by a patriarchal and racially biased society, the sense of fulfilment that black women achieve in their lives is regrettably minimal. The Bluest

Eye examines the diverse levels of fulfilment encountered by black women in their identities as women. Piccola's mother, Pauline, clearly occupies a position at one extreme of the spectrum. Other female characters exhibit a less overt sense of deprivation; economically, some are “*comfortable*,” fully engaged in motherhood, and discover tranquility in their acceptance of life's constraints. Mrs. Macteer, a woman of notable character, is the mother of the daughter who forms a friendship with Piccola.

The second cohort of women, referred to by Morrison as the sugar brown mobile girls, reside in more affluent neighbourhoods, characterised by universal employment and elegant homes adorned with porch swings, sunflowers, and pots of bleeding hearts. These women represent inadequate reflections of their perceptions of whiteness. They present a facade of artificiality and emotional detachment, rejecting their identity and sensuality while attempting to distance themselves from their inherent vibrancy. The third category of women that Morrison portrays in the novel exhibits an absence of aspiration for wealth or any form of stability. These women embody the role of prostitutes, harbouring bitterness and emotional detachment in their intimate encounters as a result of their own choices. They harbour an unreserved disdain for all men devoid of remorse or distinction.

In his article titled “*Wounded Beauty: An Exploratory Essay on Race, Feminism, and the Aesthetic Question*,” Cheng seems to have conducted an examination akin to the one that Morrison conducted in *The Bluest Eye*. It would seem that these writers are not only worried about the individuals who are excluded by the white conception of beauty, but they also appear to be concerned about the concept of beauty itself. Cheng is of the opinion that the resurrection of efforts to transcend the long tradition of aesthetic denigration by reassessing ideals of variety or

alternative aesthetics only provides short-term cures. The reason for this is that the fundamental logic of aesthetic and moral assessment has not been altered in any way despite the passage of time. Unintentionally reclaiming one's racial identity via expressions such as "*Black Is Beautiful*" is more likely to announce damage than to give a cure. This is because the term reevaluates "*bad looks*" as something positive. The object of aesthetic value is substituted by both of these strategies, however the fact that the primary significance of that value is not questioned confirms the existence of "*good looks*." (Cheng193). In a similar vein, it appears that efforts to reclaim racial identity through phrases such as "*Black Is Beautiful*" are more likely to proclaim harm than to offer a solution. The object of aesthetic value is replaced by both of these tactics, but the prime importance of that value is not called into doubt. When we try to rehabilitate beauty, we find ourselves in a precarious position. This is since liberal discourse strives to do this without requiring individuals to give in to the allure that beauty has to offer. "*Black is Beautiful*" is a slogan created by Toni Morrison; hence, the author does not seem to feel that establishing a connection between blackness and beauty is the most efficient way to celebrate African American heritage. When she gives it some thought, she realizes that emphasizing beauty is ultimately simply another way of accepting white ideals as the most important. An option that Morrison proposes is that racial pride and a connection to African American heritage may be more effectively fostered via the practice of customs that emerge from the community. For instance, blues and jazz music and storytelling (which may be observed in oral traditions such as call-and-response and actions such as transmitting information and testifying) are two examples of traditions that fall under this category. Pecola, conversely, is incapable of discovering either love or tranquility due to her exposure solely to the ideals of white values and her failure to educate herself on how to engage with African American cultures. As a result, she is unable to discover either. Consequently, Toni Morrison puts

emphasis on the racial and gender disparities that black women experience in a society that is dominated by white people. She highlights these challenges via her writing. According to her, the first step is to accept oneself, which is the first step towards striking a blow to all of the white people who have abused them because of their ethnicity and their complexion. She believes that this is the most significant action one can take.

In *The Bluest Eye*, the complexities of race and gender are intricately connected. Sociocultural marginalization and economic deprivation confine the males of the black community to a state of self-loathing and disillusionment, from which they seem reluctant to escape. Consequently, with their wounded self-esteem and troubled minds, the black men express their anger and discontent towards their female counterparts. The women within the black community experience a dual-layered oppression necessitating a journey of self-exploration and the construction of an independent identity. This identity not only challenges the limitations imposed by a racist, patriarchal society but also seeks to overcome internalized feelings of inferiority and diminished self-worth. Because of this, self-reflection is more important than just fighting against outside oppression, because the Black community needs to get rid of the memories of slavery from their collective minds.

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