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Knowing the Self through the Other: Dysmorphophobia as a Product of Epistemic Violence in *The Bluest Eye*

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Abstract:
Dysmorphophobia, clinically known as body dysmorphic disorder (BDD), is a mental disorder in which affected people excessively brood over some perceived flaws in their physical appearance. They continuously think that their body is defective or unattractive in terms of its shape, size, skin colour, complexion despite no clear evidence of it. Epistemic violence refers to the harm exerted upon the individuals or communities through systems of knowledge that distort, erase, silence, or devalue their identities, experiences and ways of knowing. It does not operate through direct physical force; instead, it works through language, education, religion, culture, law, media representation, and other socio-cultural institutions that legitimize certain forms of knowledge while marginalizing others. The concept of epistemological violence is most closely associated with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, who, in her popular essay, *Can the Subaltern Speak?*, argues that colonial discourses silence marginalized identities by speaking for them and denying them the authority and space to speak for themselves. Toni Morrison is one of the most celebrated contemporary African-American authors whose works foreground the issue of race and expose its dehumanizing, demoralizing, and devastating impact on Black individuals. Her debut novel, *The Bluest Eye*, is populated by individuals who suffer from imagined bodily imperfections. Characters such as Pecola Breedlove, Pauline Breedlove, Geraldine, Maureen Peal, Frieda, and Claudia experience dysmorphic tendencies to varying degrees, though the nature and intensity of their experiences differ significantly. Drawing on the theoretical insights of Frantz Fanon, W. E. B. Du Bois, Michel Foucault, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, and other relevant thinkers, this research paper explores the functioning of epistemic violence in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*. It also analyses how dominant epistemic structures are transmitted through family, education,

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religion, media, and everyday social interactions and subsequently internalized by Black individuals.

Keywords: Dysmorphophobia, discourse, epistemic violence, marginalised identities, internalized racism.

Dysmorphia is a condition in which individuals falsely believe that there is something wrong with the size, shape or complexion of their body and constantly brood over it and the fear that crops up with the over-rumination of this belief is called dysmorphophobia. The idea of body dysmorphic disorder (BDD) can be traced back to 1891, when an Italian psychiatrist, Enrico Morselli, coined the term 'dysmorphophobia' to refer to an excessive fear of possessing a bodily deformity or physical defect. This imaginary condition which underscores self-perceived imperfection in one's physical appearance arises when one is heavily engrossed in thinking and comparing one's body on the scales of different parameters of existing beauty ideals and it becomes disproportionately scathing when such clearly visible bodily differences are located. The effects of these physical differences are so pervasive and intrusive that they shake the whole psychology of an individual. They do not only cause severe emotional anguish but also drastically disturb the routine activities of the sufferer. Dysmorphophobia does not take shape in isolation. It is deeply embedded in various prevailing socio-cultural norms and practices that are nurtured and reinforced over a long period of time, eventually reaching a point at which racial oppression becomes normalized and is perceived as a natural part of social life.

The Greek term, *episteme*, means knowledge or understanding. Initially, it was used in contrast with another Greek term, *doxa*, which stands for such common belief or opinion that can not be methodically validated. A comparison of these two contrasting terms reveals that episteme refers to the knowledge that is objective, rational, intellectually proven and well accepted by majority of people as truth in any specific era. In Plato's philosophy, episteme refers to the ability to know the things as they truly are. It is also differentiated from another contemporary

popular term, *technē*, which means art, craft, skill or practical knowledge. Thus, episteme signifies knowledge grounded in theory and understanding, whereas *technē* refers to the skilful application of such knowledge in practice. There emerged, almost at the same time, an additional but closely associated area of inquiry called epistemology, which is the combined form of two different Greek terms – *episteme* and *logos* – meaning the critical study of knowledge.

Epistemology, thus, investigates how knowledge originates, evolves, and operates within different contexts. It is based on the fact that no knowledge is absolute; hence, it is always open to critical examination. It seeks to understand how knowledge is generated, developed, transmitted, and authenticated. The concept of epistemic violence is fundamentally grounded in epistemological thought. Michel Foucault, a 20th century historiographer, argues that no knowledge is entirely objective; instead, it is unconscious conditions of knowledge in any particular era that help to create, shape and authenticate any knowledge. He calls our attention to the fact that an episteme is the hidden historical structure that makes certain forms of knowledge possible, while excluding others.

Any episteme or knowledge is not originated and sustained in isolation. It requires continuous support, authorization, and legitimization through sustained discursive practices within a society. This task is completed by a nexus of several social, cultural, educational, religious and political power structures/institutions which present it as natural, universal and unquestionable. Michel Foucault observes that each society has its general politics of truth which suggests that what is counted as truth in any society is determined not only by evidence/facts/theories but also by those institutional practices which approve certain forms of knowledge as valid while excluding others. Owing to constant support, it becomes powerful by

acquiring the appearance of inevitability and legitimacy, often concealing the historical and ideological processes through which it has been created over a period of time.

Once when it is naturalized, it leaves individuals with three broad possibilities; unconscious acceptance, conscious acceptance, or conscious resistance. In first two forms of acceptance, they are left with either advantageous or disadvantageous positions within the system, whereas those who consciously challenge or resist it often find themselves subjected to penalization, exclusion and marginalization. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak calls it epistemic violence. The idea of epistemic violence is based on the systemic exclusion of those who either reject such power-driven epistemological constructions and challenge their authenticity or accept it willingly and be the victims of their own self inflicted psycho-physical pain. She highlights the fact that dominant discourses suppress alternative voices and forms of knowledge. In her opinion, knowledge of any era is not merely a matter of truth but also of power as societies constantly regulate, legitimize and defend particular ways of knowing while excluding other similar claims.

Toni Morrison is one of the most influential African American authors of the twentieth and twenty first centuries. As a novelist, essayist and professor, she has tried to explore the experiences of African Americans, particularly women, within the framework of racism, identity, memory, history and socio-cultural oppression. She has dedicated her life highlighting several obscure essential issues of American realities through her writings. She received the Pulitzer Prize for her novel, *Beloved*, in 1987 and the most coveted Nobel Prize in 1993 for her literary oeuvre. Her literary and non-literary works both focus on how people are systemically marginalized in a country which is known for flaunting its democratic values across the globe.

She has given powerful vent to her experiences and feelings in her works; *The Bluest Eye*, *Sula*, Song *of Solomon*, *Beloved*, *Jazz* etc.

Her debut novel, *The Bluest Eye*, portrays the life of a young Black American girl, Pecola Breedlove, who suffers from self-denigration and rejection by those who live around her. Pecola's father is a drunkard, and her mother fails to provide her sufficient care. Her brother also sides with their mother in conflicts with their father. At school, she is taunted and bullied, while in her neighborhood, she faces discrimination from both white and coloured people. At such a tender age, she has to live the life of an outcast. She feels that the hardships and sufferings of her life are caused by her ugliness and she associates this to her black skin and dark eyes. Consequently, she obsessively longs for owning blue eyes believing that they would resolve all her problems and transform her life. Blue eyes, for her, symbolize happiness, prosperity, beauty and social acceptance which she thinks she does not have because of her racial identity.

It is important to note how dominant belief system deeply influences the psyche of individuals like Pecola, driving them to extreme behavior to conform to establish societal standards. Frantz Fanon argues in his seminal work, *Black Skin White Mask,* that colonial and racial hierarchies do not remain external social structures but penetrate the consciousness of the oppressed. Consequently, the Black subject comes to understand the self through the White Other. He states:

> Below the corporeal schema I had sketched a historico-racial schema. The elements that I used had been provided for me not by "residual sensations and perceptions primarily of a tactile, vestibular, kinesthetic, and visual character," but by the other, the white man, who had woven me out of a thousand details, anecdotes, stories". (111)

Pecola's self-image, in Fanon's terms, constitutes a "white man's artefact," produced by dominant standards of beauty that devalue her blackness and compel her to perceive herself through the lens of whiteness (*Black Skin White Mask* 16). She is so obsessed with the white ideals of beauty that she repeatedly drinks milk in a cup named after a white actress Shirley Temple to escape social rejection and attain beauty, love, and recognition. In the novel, Claudia observes that Pecola "took every opportunity to drink milk out of it just to handle and see sweet Shirley's face" (Morrison 21). She is fascinated with Mary Jane candies not merely because of their taste but because of the cute white smiling girl's image printed on their wrapper. This image becomes an object of identification for Pecola because she imagines that consuming these candies will bring her closer to beauty, purity, and acceptance that whiteness signifies. In the words of Claudia:

> Each pale yellow wrapper has a picture on it. A picture of little Mary Jane, for whom the candy is named. Smiling white face. Blond hair in gentle disarray, blue eyes looking at her out of the world of clean comfort. The eyes are petulant, mischievous. To Pecola they are simply pretty. She eats the candy, and its sweetness is good. To eat the candies is somehow to eat the eyes, eat Mary Jane. Love Mary Jane. Be Mary Jane. (Morrison 48)

Driven by utter frustration and a deep sense of insecurity, she visits Soaphead Church, a self-proclaimed "Reader, Advisor, and Interpreter of Dreams" (Morrison 163), hoping that he can fulfill her wish for blue eyes. Instead of helping her, he exploits her innocence and psychological vulnerability by manipulating her into poisoning his landlady's dog under the pretext of granting her desperate wish for blue eyes. He is one of Morrison's most despicable characters, exploiting the emotional fragility of marginalized individuals like Pecola for his own purposes. When she visits him, he recognizes her deep psychological turmoil. Instead of warning

her against the falsity of the racist beauty ideals that have generated self-loathing in her mind, he convinces her to grant her wish. Allen Alexander states that he "assaults her psyche, taking from her any knowledge of her true identity" (120). In doing so, he acts as an agent of the epistemic violence consistently proliferating white supremacist ideologies and denigrating black identities. In his letter to God, he attempts to rationalize his action in the following words:

> You have to understand that, Lord. You said, "Suffer little children to come unto me, and harm them not." Did you forget? Did you forget about the children? Yes. You forget. You let them go wanting, sit on road shoulders, crying next to their dead mothers. I've seen them charred, lame, halt. You forgot, Lord. You forgot how and when to be God. That's why I changed the little black girl's eyes for her…I gave her those blue eyes she wanted. Not for pleasure, and not for money. I did what you did not, could not, would not do. (Morrison 179-80)

She prays to God every night "for a year" (Morrison 46) in order to become beautiful which, for her, is equal to owing a white body, blues eyes and blond hair. Eventually, when she is raped by her father and begets a baby, she faces severe social rejection and isolation. Unable to bear the trauma and humiliation, she descends into madness and starts thinking that she has finally achieved blue eyes which she always longed for. The root of Pecola's extreme psycho-physical torture lies in her blind acceptance of an imposed system of knowledge that equates blackness with ugliness and whiteness with beauty.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak argues that epistemic violence silences the subaltern voices through hegemonic structures of knowledge. In this novel, Morrison highlights how whiteness is made a standard of beauty through dominant discursive practices and how it shapes the characters' perceptions of/about themselves and others. This epistemological category functions

by equating whiteness with beauty, value, virtue and social worth and blackness with ugliness, barbarity and valuelessness at the same time. This is how it legitimizes the epistemic violence by creating the binary of white vs. black and causes the epistemic marginalization of Black people. It results in the form of psychological colonization which forces black characters in the novel to view themselves through the eyes of white people and their standards. Pecola's strong desire to own blue eyes reflects the internalization of these imbalanced narratives. Her self-loathing stems not from any inadequacy within her character but from her sustained exposure to the dominant socio-cultural ideology which equates beauty and desirability with whiteness.

Not only the daughter but also the mother, Mrs. Breedlove, is depicted inflicting psychological and emotional sufferings upon herself in the novel in her attempts to match up to the white standards of beauty and respectability imposed upon her since childhood. She has developed an inferiority complex through her constant exposure to Hollywood films, popular culture and racialized standards of attractiveness. Her black body, physical disability, poverty and other socio-cultural factors have left a profound imprint on her psyche. She appears to perceive herself "through the eyes of others" (Du Bois 8), internalizing the dominant white standards of beauty that shape her understanding of her own identity and physical appearance. When she herself fails to attain the dominant ideals of beauty, she starts hoping the same from her children. The first born was a baby boy and the second child was Pecola. The birth of Pecola caused heavy frustration for her as she failed to conform to the established white standards of attractiveness. Unable to recognize the fact that beauty is a cultural construct, she views the beauty of her own daughter through the same ideological lens that has damaged her own self-image. She accepts the white ideals as natural and universal. Thus Pauline has become not only a victim of epistemic violence but also the carrier of it. Pecola's belief that black bodies are

incompatible with beauty spoils her own life. Morrison observes, "In equating physical beauty with virtue, she stripped her mind, bound it, and collected self-contempt by the heap" (120).

White society associates whiteness with beauty, value and social worth whereas black individuals unconsciously internalize and reproduce them, thereby participating in the reproduction of their own oppression. Once this dominant idea is internalized, oppressed groups start honing themselves according to the values of the oppressor. Several other characters such as Geraldine, Maureen Peal, Cholly, Claudia and Freda are also affected more or less by dysmorphophobia. They all try their best to be as fair as possible. Geraldine is a light-skinned, middle class Black woman who comes from the Southern part of U.S.A. She strives to emulate all forms of white beauty ideals through all possible means and ways with a view to achieve respectability in society. Describing women of Geraldine's sort, Morrison writes:

> They come from mobile. Aiken. From Newport News. From Marietta. From Meridian…They wash themselves with orange-colourd Lifebuoy soap, dust themselves with Cashmere Bouquet talc, clean their teeth with salt on a piece of rag, soften their skin with Jergens lotion…straighten their hair with Dixie Peach, and part it on the side…They do not drink, smoke, or swear, and they still call sex "nookey"…They go to land- grant colleges, normal schools, and learn how to do the white man's work with refinement…here they learn…how to get rid of the funkiness. The dreadful funkiness of passion, the funkiness of nature, the funkiness of the wide range of emotions…They never seem to have boyfriends, but they always marry. (79-81)

These women rarely initiate intimacy with their husbands; they are more concerned with the curlers in their hair and physical reactions rather than their own personal pleasure. They condition themselves to approximate whiteness as closely as possible while distancing

themselves from Blackness, thinking that conformity to the prevalent white ideals would earn them social respectability and wider acceptance. Frantz Fanon examines how colonial ideologies of whiteness shape the consciousness of women of color through his discussion of Mayotte Capécia in the second chapter, “The Woman of Color and the White Man,” of his work, *Black Ski, White Masks*. He states:

> We are thus put notice that what Mayotte wants is a kind of lactification. For, in a word, the race must be whitened: every woman in Martinique knows this, says it, repeats it. Whiten the race, save the race, but not in the sense that one might think: not “preserve the uniqueness of that part of the world in which they grew up,” but make sure that it will be white. (47)

These internalized ideological misconceptions foster Geraldine’s contempt for other Black individuals like Pecola. When Geraldine's son, Junior, deceitfully lures Pecola into his house with the promise of showing her his cat and kittens, traps her in a room, and kills the cat by hurling it against a window. Geraldine readily accepts Junior’s false accusation that Pecola is responsible for the cat's death despite any evidence. She shows no sympathy for the distressed Pecola. Her deep-rooted prejudice against the Black people leads her to assume that Pecola would definitely have killed the cat. This internalized racism is fully expressed when she orders Pecola saying, “"Get out... you nasty little black bitch... Get out of my house" (Morrison 90).

Maureen Peal, a coloured classmate of Pecola, Claudia and Frieda, gets more admiration from her friends and teachers for her lighter skin than her other friends. It leaves a scathing effect on the darker skinned girls as they receive less attention in the class from both, the teachers and the students. Respect and admiration often appear to be proportional to skin color; the darker an individual's skin, the less respect and social recognition they tend to receive. Pecola becomes an

easy target within this color hierarchy as she occupies the lowest position. As a result, she faces derision, discrimination, and social exclusion. Epistemic violence reaches its zenith when oppressed communities begin to act in accordance with the oppressive standards. In this socio-cultural set-up, every dark-skinned individual suffers more or less from dysmorphophobia because these judgments stem not only from white society but also from the members of the black communities. During the quarrel between Frieda, Claudia and Maureen Peal, Maureen's recurring use of the term 'black and ugly' (Morrison 71) for Pecola and her father reflects her deep-seated prejudice against darker-skinned Black people.

Cholly Breedlove gets caught in the trap of epistemic violence because his identity, self-perception and relationships are all shaped by the repressive systems that deny him self-respect and meaning in the society. He grew up as an orphan, deprived of any parental care and emotional security in a racialized society. His knowledge of the self and the world is shaped/shattered by racial domination. Since childhood, Cholly has internalized the belief that Black individuals are powerless and inferior, while whites possess unquestionable authority. Consequently, his inability to confront the dominant racial order leads him to redirect his accumulated anger and frustration towards members of his own community. Fanon observes that "The colonized subject will first train this aggressiveness sedimented in his muscles against his own people" (*The Wretched of the Earth* 16). A defining moment to feel this powerlessness occurs in his life when he is caught having intercourse with Darlane by two white policemen who mock him and force him not to stop the activity. This is more than a physical insult. It leaves a lasting effect on his mind because the white men reduce him to an object of entertainment. This incident profoundly impacts him and he starts believing that Blacks are fundamentally flawed. His internalized sense of worthlessness prevents him from fulfilling his

family obligations. His shattered sense of self, shaped by racial oppression and insult, finally manifests in alcoholism, neglect and violence towards his family. The rape of Pecola by her father, Cholly, is the culmination of his profound sense of personal worthlessness, a condition that has been nurtured by the sustained racial humiliation and social exclusion that he has been suffering since his childhood days.

Morrison demonstrates the resistance to the epistemic violence through the characters of Claudia and Frieda who do not surrender before the white supremacist norms like other black and coloured characters in the novel. They are not obsessed with the white ideals of their society. Claudia's dismantling of a white baby doll to find out the source of its supposed beauty, her rejection of the Shirley Temple cup, her repudiation of the white actresses as beauty queens, her desire to scratch Rosemary Villanucci, her confrontation with Maureen Peal and her deep compassion for Pecola, collectively reveal that she is not ready to swallow all that come in her way without critical examination. Her actions underscore an emerging critical consciousness that enables her to question the ideological framework through which a white-dominated society constructs and legitimizes its models of beauty.

Frieda is a little less vocal than her sister, Claudia, in questioning the governing ideals of beauty; however, she is not the passive recipient of these notions. Her feelings for Pecola, her sincere efforts to save her unborn child, her refusal to participate in the community's rejection and ostracization of Pecola show that she is not always eager to internalize the dominant socio-cultural norms without critical reflection; instead, she demonstrates an ethical consciousness that resists epistemic violence entrenched in racist and patriarchal discourses exposing the ideological foundations that govern the community's perception of Black womanhood, beauty and identity.

Thus Toni Morrison's novel, *The Bluest Eye*, is one of the most significant explorations of race, beauty and psycho-physical oppression. Through her characters, she displays how dominant discourses in her society shape the consciousness of the individuals and produce a profound sense of self-alienation. These discourses, according to her, have the power to determine who is beautiful, valuable, worthy of recognition as a full human being and who is not. Pecola's inability to understand these ideological underpinnings makes her susceptible to violence. Her total surrender to the idea that Black is not beautiful (hence not desirable), brings all the miseries in her life. She perceives herself as dysmorphic because she fails to think beyond the already drawn boundaries of beauty. She desperately wishes for a pair of blue eyes. This happens, not because she is intrinsically ugly or weak, but because she has been trained to internalize the authoritative beauty ideals from her early childhood. Her clear dissatisfaction with her black body is the result of her constant exposure to racist cultural representations. Family relationships, educational and religious institutions, media representations, political discourses and socio-cultural interactions, all play a vital role in creating and popularizing the dominant systems of knowledge in any society. Morrison's novel, *The Bluest Eye*, successfully depicts how epistemic violence is implanted in everyday social practices and cultural representations that have hazardously damaging effects on those who consume them indiscriminately. At the same time, the close reading of the novel compels the readers to question the oppressive structures that sustain epistemic violence and to envision alternative ways of seeing, valuing, and affirming human identity beyond the established hegemonic discourses of race, beauty and power.

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