



THE INDIAN REVIEW OF WORLD LITERATURE IN ENGLISH

A PEER REVIEWED AND INDEXED BI-ANNUAL ONLINE LITERARY JOURNAL

<http://www.worldlitonline.net>

ISSN: 0974 - 097X VOL. 13 NO. II July - December, 2017



Longing for Blue Eyes: Search for a Way to Escape from the Wild Nature of Family Setting in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* - A Study

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The Bluest Eye is Toni Morrison's debut novel, though she has already foot printed as a writer in the field of essay and journalism, writing a novel was an adventurous effort as a female and as an African American woman since it was the period which concentrated more on thrillers, adventures, expeditions, explorations and other science fictions. In spite of all, she ventured her talent as a novelist through *The Bluest Eye*. It has not made any maiden record such as the best sold or master piece or the author's favourite work, but it gave her recognition as a novelist, which moulded her confidence to continue her career in the field of novel. Morrison uses different tools to present her novel in an attractive manner. In this effort, she begins *The Bluest Eye* with a prelude in which she foretells the story in nutshell so as to give her readers a quicker view of the novel. Apart from this, the prelude is written repeatedly thrice to signify the state of mind and tormented life of the protagonist, Pecola Breedlove. First, it is with proper punctuation marks, it symbolizes she is born good to lead a blissful life. Secondly, the prelude is without punctuation marks, it symbolizes her confused state of mind because of the recklessness and regular fights of her parents. Thirdly, without any space between the words, it symbolizes her life is totally collapsed by the society so that it has become meaningless. With regard to the above stated point, Michele Wallace says,

Morrison announces that the meaninglessness of this official text (and perhaps all unitary models) will be a primary focus in *The Bluest eye* by repeating it a second time without punctuation—the law of the Father, or dominant discourse—and a third time without space between the words, undercutting the very basis of the alphabet's power to signify. In the process, Morrison suggests that Pecola's madness originates less in her individual psyche or the psyche of anyone else in the ghetto; rather, it is socially and linguistically constructed by the dominant discourse (64).

Morrison chooses very sensitive, sometimes very dirty subjects as the theme of her novels. She, besides giving importance for familial, social, parental and friendly relationship, also gives equal importance for sexual relationship. The aim of the author to be more descriptive while portraying the sexual relationship is not to give a glamorous effect, like the commercial movie makers deliberately do, so that they can attract audience, but it is with a purpose to expose the black human follies that affect their future generation. They happen to commit mistakes, not with an eye to survive by the miseries of others, but they just want to release their stagnant feelings which is made discomfit by the society. While their freedom is restricted, knowledge is limited, physique is wounded, mind is addicted, colour is mocked and personality is insulted, they become incapable to think rationally, impotent to act valiantly and irresponsible to shoulder commitments. The anger induced by the powerful people namely the white people, the emotional urge or sexual urge which is inflamed by surrounding nature searches for a non-reactive and easy-to-handle medium to dilute their engraved feelings, as a result, the black women and small children become the victims. In this context, Jennifer Lee Jordan Heinert expresses her view, "His

response, violence directed at Darlene, is echoed later in his treatment of both his wife and daughter. It is significant that the white dominant culture interrupts his first sexual experience, which is supposed to be a key turning point in his development. It's not his education, his actions, or his failure that causes this change in Cholly," (18).

The story evolves around the central character Pecola Breedlove, a 12 year old girl, who is portrayed as an ugly looking black girl who prays for Blue Eyes, so that she will look beautiful and she will be paid attention and everybody will look up to her including her parents. The story very well says about how recklessness of parents affects their children. The narrator Claudia and her sister Frieda, Pecola, Sammy and Junior are exemplified characters to say that they are affected by the poor treatment of their parents. Among them Claudia is physically weak but mentally strong and Morrison's expressive character of this novel, as Jennifer Lee Jordan Heinert puts it in her words,

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).

This novel does not hold any of Morrison's mighty mothers such as Sethe in *Beloved*, Pilate in *Song of Solomon* and Eva Peace in *Sula*, instead it holds different types of mothers who limit their responsibilities to nurture their children. In the very beginning of the novel, Claudia gives a brief description about her house and how they are treated by their elders. The children in the house are ordered to do any work but they are not informed why they have to do a particular work. This foretells the poor relationship maintained in their family that keeps the young ones at stake, especially the young girls. They are threatened not to get affected by any disease, if so happens, they warn them by saying that there is no one to look after them. This kind of treatment for small children commonly prevails in most of the black families. Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* attempts to create awareness in her people how they should not treat their children.

Like Morrison's other novels, *The Bluest Eye* also helps its readers to trace out many themes such as, identity crises, race, gender discrimination, ethnicity, sexual abuse and many others, of which, the portrayal of family setting is yet another significant theme. This essay, does not advocate how a good relationship should be maintained, rather it says why there is no good relationship among the family members in the light of family setting. In this regard, at first Pecola's familial relationship is taken for discussion. Pecola's family consists of four members, her father Cholly, mother Pauline and her brother Sammy. Sammy is Morrison's first inept boy introduced through *The Bluest Eye*. The description of Pecola's house says that there is no emotional attachment with the house.

The background information of Pecola's parents answers the question why they are not responsible to take care of their children. First Pauline's family background is taken, she is the ninth of eleven children and portrayed as a good dreamer. She got deformity in one of her legs by a deep punching of a rusty nail on her foot, it creates a flap sound while walking and also gives her the feeling of being unworthy to her family, in this context, it is important to point out the semblance of Pecola's feeling for her ugly looking and her mother's feeling for her leg's deformity. She feels isolated and does not feel at home anywhere. To overcome her feeling, she cultivates her private pleasures, she does not want to mingle with her family, and there is no close affinity with anyone of her family members. She is not interested in talking and playing with her brothers and sisters, rather she is interested in arranging the things in order and also in housekeeping. She finds happiness in arranging the jars on the shelves and cleaning the floors. Close to World War I, her family was shifted to Kentucky, her mother got a job at a White Minister's house, and she felt comfortable with the new place, surroundings, the processions, music and songs. At the age of fifteen there is a transformation in her dream, she dreams of an unknown

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adult at whose presence, she feels elated in her dream. As her dream comes true, in her buoyant mood, she finds that dream boy is present before her; it is none other than Cholly Breedlove. Her age and mood gives a positive sign for Cholly's wooing, soon after they got married, shifted to a new place with a promise that Cholly could find a job in steel industries and with that income he would take care of her.

They stayed in a small house which has only two rooms. Cholly was in the beginning very kind to her, he said that he liked her deformity, Pauline feels so happy to hear for the first time someone say that her defect is liked. As time goes on, Cholly doesn't like her being solely dependent on his income. Pauline starts giving importance for women's talk about her dresses and make-up. She considers their comments very seriously about her odd way of dressing and grooming sense so that she decides to buy new clothing and other cosmetic items; this is where Morrison says Pauline commits her first mistake,

Probably the most destructive ideas in the history of human thought. Both originated in envy, thrived in insecurity, and ended in disillusion. In equating physical beauty with virtue, she stripped her mind, bound it, and collected self-contempt by the heap. She forgot lust and simple caring for. She regarded love as possessive mating, and romance as the goal of the spirit. It would be for her a well-spring from which she would draw the most destructive emotions, deceiving the lover and seeking to imprison the beloved, curtailing freedom in every way (TBE 122).

Of course it is a destructive idea that gives room for fights between Cholly and Pauline. As a result, she decides to go for job so that she can bear her own expenses. She spends more money for dresses and make up sets. Cholly doesn't like her attitude, to show his counterpart to Pauline, he starts drinking. At one stage, her earnings are spent for clothing and Cholly's for drinking; in this combat the children are least bothered. Because of their individual desires, they find pleasure in justifying themselves and accusing each other. 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 the women attempt to imitate dominant gender models, the men try to escape from them in flight. (TBE 64)

When they come back from work, there is a fearful expectation whether there will be any reason for fighting, at the same time, the children had the feeling whether they would be the reason for their fighting. The children find loneliness in day time, because of their parents' absence at home, in the evening, they feel threatened by their fights, during the night once again the loneliness, but this time they feel 'calm after storm', in which they make decision after hours of pondering over their parents' fights. At this juncture what Rosalie Murphy Baum says as the reaction of children befits the context,

The children's reactions to the fighting vary. Sammy's aggressive reaction is like that of Jimmie in *Maggie*. Sammy sometimes curses, sometimes leaves the house (he runs away at least twenty-seven times by the time he is fourteen).... Eventually he simply leaves town. Pecola, like Maggie, takes a passive role. She shrinks from the scene, sometimes covering herself with her quilt, wishing that one of her parents would kill the other or wishing that she herself would die.... It is during these periods of trying physically to shrink herself out of the horrors of her life that she develops the habit of praying God to help disappear (15).

Sammy decides to escape from the house to avoid seeing such nasty fights of his parents, but the girl children cannot take the decision of going away from the house, because there is no outside world open for them to get relieved of their pains, rather, it is more scary and critical than the house, so that they have to find pleasure in having some strange ideas; Pecola's idea of longing for Blue Eyes is born out of such state of mind.

The quarrels between Cholly and Pauline have become routine in their life. She hates coming back to her house from job. She feels that the quarrelling time is reduced as long as she is at her work place; she considers Cholly as 'a crown of thorns' and her children as crosses. Though Pauline is hard worker in housekeeping, she fails to keep her own family in order, she instead of educating them how to

keep themselves and the house quiet and clean, she threatens them not to be noisy and dirty. Morrison says,

Pauline kept this order, this beauty, for herself, a private world, and never introduced it into her storefront, or to her children. Then she bent toward respectability, and in so doing taught them fear: 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. Into her son she 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. (TBE128).

Like Geraldine ignores her son, Junior, and always dotes on her cat, Pauline is also ignorant of her role to play as a good mother to her children due to her concentration on Cholly's misbehaviour. She least bothers about her children's emotions. In this regard, both Pauline and Geraldine think that if their children are given food and clothes, then their job is done, they don't realize that they need moral support more than food and clothes. These two mothers themselves were once craving for an unconditional moral support from their family members. They don't realise that the food will give them only physical nutrition whereas the love and care will give them mental nutrition. In this context, it is necessary to cite what Morrison insists about the importance of conversation among the people, how it paves way for building up a good relationship and also how it enhances moral support to one another; when Hannah questions her mother Eva in *Sula* whether she had talked to her, laughed and played with her like other parents do with their children, because of the absence of these emotional sharing, Hannah concludes that Eva doesn't love her children. Another example situation about the importance of conversation is the conversation between Sula and Ajax. He listened more than talked to her that is what makes Sula feel good and happy about his presence, similarly in *Song of Solomon*, there is a mention about the same point; the prevailing of good conversation in Pilate's house which attracts Milkman to pay frequent visit as it is missing in Macon Dead's house, they don't talk to each other, they speak only when there is a fight or if there is anything to order, on that way, in this novel also, it is obvious that there is a strong mentioning about the importance of conversation. If there is proper communication, there will be a chance to know other's feelings, while it is missing; the elders of the family go on with their own way leaving the young ones astray. Claudia, Frieda, Pecola and Junior are the victims of communication failure of their parents. They have a kind of one way communication; it means their parents raise voice to the children when something goes wrong. For instance, Claudia's parents shout at Frieda and fight with Mr. Henry only when they found him fondling Frieda's breasts. Geraldine, Junior's mother, shouts at him when he throws the cat which she dotes on more than anybody in her family. And Pauline shouts at Pecola when she poured down some juice on the floor by mistake. In these occasions, their parents fail to understand the disturbed state of mind of those tender hearts. Through their anger, they break those tiny feelings. They are ready to wound but not to heal. When Pecola stumbles down with the juice prepared on a pan, she is severely beaten and pushed down to fall again on the messed up juice,

"In one gallop she was on Pecola, and with the back of her hand knocked her to the floor. Pecola slid in the pie juice, one leg folding under her. Mrs. Breedlove yanked her up by the arm, slapped her again, and in a voice thin with anger, abused Pecola directly and Frieda and me by implication..." "Crazy fool.... My floor, mess ... look what you... work... get on out... now that... crazy... my floor, my floor... my floor." Her words were hotter and darker than the smoking berries, and we backed away in dread (TBE 109).

Pauline very much bothers about the dirtied floor and calculates the burden of job fell on her shoulder to clean the floor and prepare the juice once again. Not even a tinge of consideration that her own daughter fallen on the floor might be hurt by the thudding or scorched by the spilling of hot juice all over her body. Pauline, instead of consoling her panicked daughter, gives her a bag full of washed clothes to dry them on terrace. But she talks to her owner's child very soothingly, promises to wash her dirtied dress and assures she will prepare another juice quickly. In this connection, Wendy Harding & Jacky Martin point out, "Pauline Breedlove bakes for the Fisher family represents the part of herself that she dedicates to her employers, but when the scalding purple juice splashes on Pecola's legs and stains the gleaming floor, it becomes a projection of the blackness that she has passed on to her daughter and for which she has only disgust." (26). On hearing this, the inferiority complex imbibed from Pauline drives

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into Pecola's mind and provokes her idea to have blue eyes so that, like the boss's child, she will be treated well.

Pecola's character reflects many black female children's tormented life. Pecola's search for blue eyes does not mean that she gives much importance for beauty consciousness, but it is a search for a true and meaningful relationship. She has been pushed into poor state of mind to think that if she looks beautiful, she will be paid attention, given importance, loved by her parents and liked by the society. There are people who pity at her poor condition, misuse her innocence and looked at her madness but no one comes dear to her to recognize her feelings which are hidden inside the chambers of heart. Though she has been a harmless person all through her life, she has been given the life of misery by her parents and society. This essay concludes by saying that Pecola always has a search for true and meaningful relationship which houses her emotions.

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