The Concept of Self: The Black Community in Toni Morrison’s

The Bluest Eye

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Abstract

The Bluest Eye proposes a black girlhood when it seeks identity image from white culture and from the malevolent parental mirror. In the fashion of Paule Marshal and others, Morrison shows her belief in the angst and agony of the black women and girls what their mirrors suggest them. The Bluest Eye was not an immediate literary thunderbolt but it unearths that racism is hazardous to the self-image of the African society in general and the black female in particular. The novel tells the pricking story of Pecola who comes of a poor family detached from the mainstream of life of a community. The Breedlove cultivate hatred against themselves and they believe that they have translated their unworthiness into ugliness. The entire family suffers from suffocation and ugliness. No doubt, woman as a creature is the precious creation of Almighty. It is realised that the body of woman is one of the essential elements in her situation in the world, but the body is not enough to define her as a woman.

Keywords: Black Community, Ugly, Racism, Victim, White, Nature, Eyes, Adulthood, Ritual, Myth, Symbol, Self.

Toni Morrison as a writer has made a significant contribution to America literature and the canon of writing by Black woman; her books contribute not only to the understanding of the specifics of life as a Black woman, but also the important issues of survival for the entire Black community. The Bluest Eye articulates Morrison’s concern for the Black community, which then manifests itself in a concern for world in general. The novel is about the victimization of one small Black girl named Pecola. Self-hate makes her vulnerable to abuse not only from her family but from the entire community as well. Pecola is obsessed
with the myth of physical beauty and as a result is plunged into a world of madness. Her life is devoid of love and is full of brutality and ugliness. Nature reflects the stunted growth of this child as the marigolds refuse to grow in her town. Pecola is totally defenceless as she has no sense of self, because that is something which can only be obtained if one is first nurtured and loved. Morrison contrasts Pecola’s life to the normal pain of growing up for a Black girl like Claudia, to show how unprepared Pecola will be for the realities of adulthood.

The Bluest Eye is told by a narrator who is still a child. It is the world as seen through the eyes of a Black girl named Claudia who has a constant companion and friend in her sister Frieda. Theirs is an “ideal” nuclear family and they live with their mother and father in a green house. Their house is cold and dark and is inhabited by roaches and mice. Claudia remembers the pain, anger, and humiliation that surrounded illness in this house, but with the passage of time she is able to put her experiences there into perspective. Claudia remembers the smells, touch, taste and above all the ubiquitous love of her family and her house, where adults battled to keep the children alive. Life is tied with pain from birth, and when pain is no longer felt, death is near.

In the novels of Toni Morrison, the Black people believe themselves to be ugly. In The Bluest Eye, Pecola Breedlove is told from the day she is born that she is ugly. She lives with her brother Sammy, her mother Pauline, and her father Cholly. Though their surname is Breedlove, ironically enough, all they breed is self-hate and mutual destruction. They all believe themselves to be ugly, and as a result, ugliness becomes all-pervasive in their home and in their countenances. Morrison’s tone sounds almost Biblical when she describes the decree given to Breedlove and symbolically, all Blacks—that Black will be ugly and White will be beautiful. The Breedloves are an extreme because they have not questioned whether this commandment has been given to them by God or the Devil. Pauline accepts as her standard of beauty what she has absorbed from Hollywood images. However, because she believes herself to be ugly—she is physically unable to attain these Hollywood standards—her children are taught that they are ugly too.

The concept of self of Black people revolves round an idea of “freedom” that Black men have but which Black women do not possess. Thus, Sammy can run away from the family but Pecola must stay and somehow cope with the situation. However free Black males may be, they don’t automatically have healthier psyches. Cholly had been abandoned at the age of four days and orphaned at thirteen. His life, up to the time that he meets Pauline, is a series of broken ties with people and society until he reaches the point where all his energies are directed at satisfying his own appetites and desires.

In The Bluest Eye, this role of woman is given to Pauline who feels that she has responsibilities as wife, mother, and provider. The demands of her life force her to put dreams aside. She instinctively reorders her world in terms that make sense to her. Pauline becomes an adult in her responsibilities but she does have an adult’s ability to sort out and assimilate complex information, to put things into a proper perspective. The more simply things can be explained and justified, despite their complexity, the better she likes it. Ironically, Pauline begins to fit better into the community. Because she works and goes to church, she suddenly has access to the fellowship of other women.

The characters thus far discussed are part of a Black community which Morrison paints as the background in this novel. This community has its own standards of right and
wrong, beauty and ugliness, and its own methods of healing wounds. Claudia and Frieda’s family life reflects many of the norms of the larger community, while the Breedloves reflect all that can go wrong. When Cholly burns his family out of their apartment through his meanness and carelessness, they are left outdoors because they have no friends, family, or support network to rely on; they may turn instead to the social welfare system to provide them with shelter.

Morrison’s goal pursued via fiction laden with ritual and myth is to restore a sense of wholeness to her people. The various characters in the *The Bluest Eye* participate in many rituals, each of which serves as a special function. One example of a naming ritual is the way Cholly’s family waited, not naming him until the ninth day of his life, as a sign that he would be staying in this realm for a while. Another important ritual that can be found in any Black community is a funeral; and in *The Bluest Eye*, it is the funeral of Aunt Jimmy. The funeral is divided into different parts, each one representing a facet of community’s world view, and showing how readily people adapt to the roles that life and death impose upon their lives.

Throughout the novel, Pecola is used as a dumping ground by most of the other characters. She is not considered a witch; rather, she is the scapegoat, the sacrificial victim. Cholly Soap head and the boys in the schoolyard, for instance, with their battered egos and tortured psyches, can safely vent their rage and frustration on her because she has no defence system, and thus cannot fight back. She is a rarity of Nature—a completely defenceless creature—and when she can no longer stand the ugliness and pain which her eyes reveal to her, there is no recourse for her but to withdraw into her sanctuary of blue eyes and madness, where she can no longer be hurt. She flutters around aimlessly, looking like a bird that is trying to fly away into the endless blue of the sky, trying in vain to be free of this earth, but cannot because it is crippled. But, of course, Pecola cannot fly away to the heavens.

In *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison gathers together an assortment of elements—ritual, myth and complexities—of human relationships and weaves them into the framework of Nature to create a novel rich in natural imagery. The events of the story follow the cycle of the seasons: in winter, the childhood and innocence reign supreme; in spring, there is flowering and maturation; in summer, adulthood, work and love abound; and in autumn, there is old age, death and freedom. This is a sensual world where men—like dogs—want to smell the “funk” of life, and where women work and suffer like mute horses. It is a world where children use their senses to decipher the mysteries of Nature. It is by having their senses stimulated that children are able to learn and grow, with self-knowledge being the ultimate goal. But the final, most important lesson in growing up is the refinement of one’s sense of perception, for without this skill, mere awareness can only provide an overabundance of useless sensual information, and without lucid conception to give meaning and order to the information provided by one’s senses, further growth is impossible. There must be no more Pecola’s thrown into unyielding and infertile soil to die before they have a chance to live.

The novel ends on a note of tragedy. Pecola is deceived into believing that she has acquired blue eyes and, in this way, loses her sanity mind. She is treated as a pariah living on the periphery of the village in the company of her mother. However, the novel does not end without hope. Claudia and Frieda do not surrender to the myth of white beauty. Community or the neighbourhood is a very strong factor in the novels of Toni Morrison. In *The Bluest Eye* the community gives life and sustenance to the people. Pecola is victim of illusory ideals
but these two sisters are very much realistic in their outlook. The novel is not merely the story of Pecola but it deals with the entire Black Community. It is not depressive because the fighting instincts of other characters like Claudia are there. However, a single character like Pecola is isolated and segregated from society and is made the scapegoat.

**Works Cited**


