

## **Social Barriers Revealed Out in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye***

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Being black now is something have to choose to be, choose it, no matter what your skin colour ... something has happened. You see we are very close now to the society that is around us. I don't mean the structures that held us together are gone, but there are new things pressing in our lives. -Jones

Human community as such has its own social barriers which often curtail its growth and progress. The African Americans encounter many barriers in their place of settlement. Discrimination on the basis of gender, ethnicity, race, religion or social status are some of the social barriers. Toni Morrison in her novel *The Bluest Eye* exposes the social barriers which lead to the marginalization of the blacks in the white social order.

Morrison's novel *The Bluest Eye* is the novelist's attempt to discover the white yardsticks that measure the blacks within the oppressive structure of racism. The novel is essentially a reflection of the social barriers confronting the blacks in a mixed society of blacks and whites. The world of the whites is alive and moving while the majority of the black live in silent acceptance of their fate, concealed and paralysed. They appear to be hanging on to the very edge of life. The implication of racial differences are evident in Pecola, a young girl of twelve.

The black characters in Toni Morrison's novel *The Bluest Eye* are marginals who strive to initiate themselves into the American society dominated by the racist whites. At the sametime, these marginals try to hold on to the views of their own beauty and cultural value. The novel is an account of the victimization of the blacks in general and black women in particular in the American social order. It is the story of the damaging influence of white standards on the lives of black Americans, the marginalised lot. The source of this marginality is racism which makes the life of the black characters of the novel, vulnerable. Those people have no autonomous individual self. They are the bearers of race consciousness.

The protagonist of the novel, 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 Chwolly. Though their surname is Breedlove, ironically enough all they breed is self-hatred 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. Their ugliness is described thus:

It was as though some mysterious all knowing master had said, “You are ugly people. They had looked about themselves and saw nothing to contradict the statement; saw, infact support for it leaping at them from every billboard, every movie, every glance... And they took the ugliness in their hands, threw it as a mantle over them and went about the world with it. (28)

Pecola, the young black girl has a sense of beauty and she is obsessed with blue eyes. She is able to hide behind ugliness, but she is not able to keep away the ugliness that surrounds her in her home. Her home is filled with violence and obscenity. She wants to disappear, to leave and be free herself of the physical sickness she feels and the horrors she witnesses. So she prays to God to make her disappear. Allen comments on Pecola’s turmoil that, “there may or may not be bodily injury, but psychological trauma is coupled with physiological upheaval that plays a leading role in the long-range effects” (14).

Pecola finds that with extreme concentration, she is able to make all the parts of her body fade except her eyes. Her eyes transmit ugliness to her mind and implant it on her consciousness. Since they perceive ugliness they must in turn be ugly and if they are beautiful and blue then they would only see beauty. Further Pecola’s craziness for blue eyes leads her to devour Mary Jane Candy, which too has the portrait of Shirley Temple. The image of Shirley Temple engraved in the milk cup which Pecola drinks makes her to hanker on the model’s beauty. She consumes large quantities of milk because, the more she drinks, the more times she can gaze at Shirley Temple. To Pecola, to eat the Mary Jane Candy or to drink milk is “Somehow to eat the eyes, eat Mary Jane. Love Mary Jane. Be Mary Jane” (Blue 38). Pecola believes that blue eyes will bring her self respect, love and beauty. “Shirley Temple serves as an icon of the destructive reification of caste and whiteness” (Moses, “Blue Aesthetics”). She expects that she were beautiful like the whites.

Pecola Breedlove is ugly in the eyes of the white society. Toni Morrison tries to show that a little girl as a total and complete victim of whatever is around her. Pecola is ignored everywhere for her ugliness. People in many cases especially the whites would comment and say things without even thinking twice about their effects on a little girl. For example, Pecola has three pennies in her shoe which she has been saving to buy Mary Jane Candy. In the store, the owner, Mr. Yacobowski ridicules Pecola for her shabby appearance. When she leaves the store, “Pecola feels the inexplicable shame ebb” (Blue 37) in her. She is expunged from human society even before she has an awakened consciousness of her self. “Pecola stands for the triple indemnity of the female Black child: children. Blacks and females are devalued in American culture” (Holloway 16).

Many people looked down on Pecola and treated her indifferently. This leads to her isolation. The ugliness makes her ignored or despised at school, by teachers and classmates. She is the only member of her class who sits alone at a double desk. The first letter to her last name forces her to sit in the front of the room always. But her friend Marie Appolonaire is in front of her and her teachers have always treated her this way. They have tried never to glance at Pecola and called on her only when everyone is required to respond. She also knows that when one of the girls at school wants to be the particularly insulting to a boy or wants to get an immediate response from him, she could say, “Bobby loves Pecola Breedlove! Bobby loves Pecola Breedlove!” (Blue 48). In addition, after school, one day a group of boys circle around Pecola and begin making fun of her chanting “Black e mo. Black e mo. Yadaddsleepsnekked. Black e mo black e mo...” (Blue 50). She is victimised because of her dark shade of skin. With both her teachers and classmates being so cold to her, it is inevitable that Pecola would feel alone and isolated. She is often left with her thoughts which mostly consist of her desire for blue eyes. With blue eyes she would be beautiful and popular, and she expects that people would like her and treat her well.

Pecola is led to further isolation by the harsh reality that no one encourages or loves her. All the supports and encouragement that a young child needs are not there. Her family does not support her, her teachers abhor her, classmates ridicule her and people in the town ignore her. Her only real friends are the other two main characters in the novel Frieda and Claudia MacTeer. However, they are relatively powerless in helping her. All they can do is pray for her and hope that everything will turn out best for her.

All of the isolation, self-blame and negativity of Pecola's life finally escalates when she in the kitchen washing dishes and her father, who is extremely drunk becomes overwhelmed with sexual desire and rapes his young daughter. This incestual act does nothing but brings out more sympathy for the protagonist. Pecola then becomes pregnant and is asked to leave school. It is during this time that she begins to slip into her madness. She develops an imaginary friend to whom she speaks about her blue eyes. She is given a false notion of getting blue eyes by Soaphead church. The town psychic and spiritualist convinces Pecola that if she feeds an old dog some food, which actually has poison mixed in it and when it has an erratic reaction, she would be given blue eyes. She feeds the dog and after convulsing for several minutes, it dies.

Soaphead church validates Pecola's wish for blue eyes and affirms the correctness of the rejection of her race. With her new friend, Pecola talks about how blue and beautiful her imaginary eyes are and how jealous everyone is of them. Pecola as an ugly child and obtaining blue eyes is the most significant aspect of her life. When she is raped, some people even try to put the blame on her, saying that she has not fought against her father. She is isolated from the town both physically and emotionally. Mrs. Breedlove and Pecola move to the edge of the town in a little brown house. Adults look away when they see her and children who are not frightened, laugh at her outright. A young girl's life is ruined as a result of the society's yardstick of beauty. Grant comments that "Morrison had the courage to write about an aspect of the Black experience that most of us would rather forget ..." (14).

The colour distinction between the whites and the blacks in a society brings terrible conflicts. Pauline, the wife of Cholly Breedlove on the other hand is a shattered woman experiencing very little in her life. The tragedy in her life is that she is never able to mature into real adulthood. In the white social order, a woman like Pauline has no place and no voice. She is a marginalised woman. Mrs. Breedlove was born Pauline Williams, the ninth of eleven children. When she was two, a rusty nail had pierced her foot. Complete indifference to the wound left her with a crooked archless foot that flopped when she walked. Of all the children, she had no nickname, there was no jokes or anecdotes about her because people around ignored her. Nobody talked of food preferences, nobody teased her and she did not feel at home anywhere. Pauline liked to line up things in rows and when someone scattered her rows, she was never angry for it gave her a chance to rearrange them again. Whatever plurality she found she organized them into neat lines according to their size, shape or tradition of colour. In Toni Morrison's novels characters enact the historical plight of the blacks in American society. Pauline's family moved to Kentucky in search of better prospects during World War I, where there were mines and millwork. Ada and Fowler Williams found a five room frame house for their family there. Some of her brothers joined the army, one sister died and two got married. Pauline, the oldest girl, now took over the care of the house and minded the two younger children. When the war ended, Pauline was fifteen still keeping house but with less enthusiasm.

Fantasies about men and love were drawing her mind and handed her away from her work. Changes in weather began to affect her. In the church choir, a woman Ivy's voice articulated Pauline and Cholly loved each other. They decided to marry and moved over to Lorain, Ohio.

Soon after their marriage, Pauline realised the value of money. Cholly started working in the steel mills and Pauline started missing her people. In her loneliness, Pauline turned to Cholly for reassurance, entertainment for things to fill the vacant places. Pauline wanted to dress up like the other black women but Cholly did not have enough money to give her. She decided to go out to work. Their marriage was shredded with quarrels. Money became the focus of all their discussions. Rich people were treated better than the poor blacks. Pauline realised the damaging influence of white standards and values on the lives of the blacks. Morrison's stunning insight reveals the disrupted emotions produced by living in a world where white standards and goals are presented to the blacks as uniquely important and at the sametime, impossible for them to achieve.

Pauline is a victim at home also. Her husband Cholly became meaner and meaner and he wanted to fight with Pauline all the time. Pauline did not pay her salary to Cholly. He was pleased when Pauline became pregnant. He began to drink less and came home more often. Soon after her first child Sammy, Pauline was pregnant again with Pecola. Pecola was easier to bring up than Sammy. When the children were young, Pauline had to get back to work.

She took on the full responsibility and recognition of breadwinner for the family by working for the Fishers, who considered her as an ideal servant. She kept their house pick and span and arranged things in such a manner as to make them say that they would never let her go. She enjoyed her job and kept her white employers happy. She taught her children fear, "Fear of being glumsy, fear of being like their father, fear of growing up, fear of other people, and fear of life" (Blue 126).

Pauline finds the white family to be sloppy and dirty and everytime she is at the point where she could begin to like her employer, the white woman interferes with Pauline's work as if she knows more about cleanliness. Pauline's situation is difficult from a typical black women's side of house maids. She is able to do her job and handle the situation until the white woman asks her to make a choice between her and Cholly. In fact, it is an insult to Pauline. She rejects the impracticality and undesirability of whites norms. Pauline has responsibilities as wife, mother and provider. The demands of her life force her to put dreams aside. Pauline is a responsible woman though she is not the backbone of her family. She uses violence to shape and control her children.

As the society is highly colour conscious, Pauline abandons her children especially Pecola whom she despises for her ugliness. The incident in the Fishers' kitchen is a proof to show the extent to which Pauline, the mother has degraded because of the social barriers. When Pecola accidentally spills the black berry pie that Pauline has made for the employer's child, instead of soothing the burns of her daughter, she attends to the need of the white child. She is anguished by the careless action of her daughter. She "rejects her own daughter because she has erased from her psyche the line separating reality from illusion, mammyhood from motherhood" (Hariprasanna 121). She hates her children because they represent poverty and ugliness, the dual vices in the social order to which she belongs.

Pauline wants to identify herself with the white women by imitating their ways. She is a black woman who longs for beauty, romantic love, recognition and desire to live an ideal feminine life. Deprived of the same, she develops self-hatred. She tries to explore herself as central rather than marginal.

In Pauline, one sees an attempt of a black woman to alienate herself from her own community. She is a black woman struggling against social and economic hostilities stacked against her. In spite of the limitations set by her family, society and race she endeavours to live by female American standards.

Though the novel is a study in race, gender and class, the main focus is on social barriers and its effects on the lives of the African Americans. Pecola suffers and is doomed because she belongs to a black community, a marginalized group. The novel exposes the devastating effect of racism on

the self image and psyche of the African Americans. It is a study of a people relegated to a class of marginals by virtue of their race. Racism serves as the source of this marginality. Whiteness is equated with beauty and culture and blackness with ugliness.

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