



Problematic of Racism and Sexism: a dialogic in Toni Morrison's "The Bluest Eye".

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Abstract:

"Black Americans must speak for themselves; no outside tongue however gifted with eloquence, can tell their story (1968: 1)."- Thomas Hamilton;

"Black people have a story, and that story has to be heard."-Toni Morrison to Nellie McKay (1983).

Physically bruised and psychically maimed, Black Americans had long writhed in silence, earnestly waiting for the arrival of a messiah, a deliverer who would take up their baton and speak with and for them, championing their crestfallen condition. However, worser was the scenario for women who were dubbed as the coloured 'other'. Although exalted as sexually desirable by the White male gaze, such a desirability seamlessly gives way to brutal forms of racist and sexist oppression, both by white and black males. Ceaselessly thwarted and inexorably scarred by racism, they remained "subversive and spurious" in their "silence". Having been battered by the double-edged sword of racism and sexism, for long Black women had felt the need to break this 'silence' by revealing a black woman's anxiety about sexuality and "the need for control over one's female body." The two pertinent issues that haunt the Black feminists are: the introduction of race into feminist theory and the subject of gender as a social construct which is further problematized by the issue of race. Black women are thus flung into the deepest abyss of emotional and spiritual atrophy by the dual evils of marginalization and disinheritance from mainstream politics, culture, religion, even literature for being the coloured 'other' or the subaltern (a decidedly racist and sexist construct). In this light, "The Bluest Eye", an

award-winning text of the Black Afro-American Nobel laureate, Toni Morrison, might be analysed as essentially a feminist narrative that follows the heart-wrenching one-year in the life of Pecola Breedlove as she slowly passes into psychic dementia and the readers can't but help being filled with pathos at the loveless life of Pecola Breedlove.

Keywords-

Bruised; maimed; crestfallen; abyss; feminism; racism; sexism

Morrison has ascribed an indeed interesting title to her first novel. About its title, Arup Kumar Ghosh writes, "The term 'Blues' indicated a musical genre that got associated with sadness, a sadness linked to slavery, and the Jim Crow era. Blue-songs celebrated happiness also. The Blues stood for consolidation of power that tended to cut that power down. They symbolized alienation and the spirituals signified commonplace Black American culture." The title is amply self-revelatory; it adumbrates Morrison's womanistic stance that sexist oppression of women (and men) was deeply rooted and firmly entrenched in racist polarizations. . Ralph McGill opines that "the human condition always has had three yearnings...to be treated as a human being, to have an equal, fair chance to win respect and advancement and freely to seek spiritual and cultural happiness(1963:230)". Denied these three basic human yearnings, the Blacks had almost forgotten to live with dignity and self-respect. Such a social anathema left indelible scars on Black psyche that simply refused to heal; the bitter music of the 'Blues' ruptured their personal



lives and relations, and worst sufferers were perhaps women for being the colored other of subalterns. Morrison's novel under concern traces the relentlessly tragic yet futile quest for a pair of blue eyes, of eleven-year old Pecola Breedlove as she slowly passes into madness.

Morrison interestingly titles the opening chapter "Autumn" as it presupposes a pestilence-stricken condition of Blacks, both socially and personally. Two black kids – Frieda and Claudia are denied entry in an eatery by its White female owner and the small kids seethe with chagrin and contemplate revenge but stops short from its extreme form as they feel that by showing mercy to their white offender, their hurt pride would be reinstated. Skin colour has robbed two innocent children of their basic right to move about freely or satiate their hunger. Evidently, "most White Americans had come to believe that the Black Americans were 'inferior' and so an orthodox color-line was drawn between the Blacks and the Whites." From the very beginning, they are dehumanized and their humane emotions are ripped apart. Such racial discrimination adumbrates a similar situation in Ellison's "Invisible Man" where a White shop-owner received maltreatment in the hands of some violent black Americans "threatening to attack the man until a policeman appeared and dispersed them(384)". For the little kids, nature metamorphoses into polarizations of colour and the otherness, i.e. Blackness. Besides being marginalized and tormented for being the coloured other, the adults, having reached the crux of spiritual atrophy, "do not talk to us-they give us directions." Here Morrison has problematized the Mother figure, as Sylvia Plath has done in her poem, "Daddy", by referring to her hands as "large and rough" making her little daughter go "rigid with pain". However, being battered emotionally and physically, little Claudia's mother despises her weakness "for letting the sickness take hold". Evidently from their childhood itself, their natural human instincts are smothered to camouflage their weaknesses and the readers know, even before they are

through with the novel, that another Mother is in the making. Little Claudia feels-

"So when i think of autumn, i think of somebody with hands who does not want me to die." The little kids are left to battle dual scourges of marginalization and gender discrimination that further complicates Black history. Strangely though, in the pestilence-laden world of blacks, two young girls, Claudia and Frieda want Pecola's child to survive – "just to counteract the universal love of white baby dolls, Shirley Temples and Maureen Peals". An eminent voice of Harlem Renaissance, Langston Hughes' lines are ripe with pathos:

"We run
He run
We cannot these shadows
Give us the sun
We are not made
for shade
for heavy shade
And narrow space of sterling air
That these White things have
made(1970: 258)"

And they decided to create a miracle to save her child. However, just like the blacks do not stand a chance against whites, the earnest wish of these little girls was thrown asunder.

Interestingly Pecola came to Claudia's household accompanied by a white woman. This sufficiently shows her dependence on whites for fulfilling her bare minimum need. Pecola even looked immaculately at the supposed beauty of the ever-elusive white skin by studying closely the silhouette of Shirley Temple's dimpled face. Even Claudia's inbuilt unsullied hatred against whites dates back to the days of Christmas when they received big blue-eyed Baby Doll as a special loving gift. Such a gift triggered sadistic thoughts of vengeance as she confessed "I destroyed white baby dolls." As if dismembering of dolls was not enough, her urge for vengeance was transferred to little white girls who evoked



possessive gentleness of touch among Black women. From their childhood itself, these Black girls were doubly marginalized- by Black society and also by their elders. Lives for them had become an emotional wasteland with no fondness, affection or love so much so that Cholly Breedlove, on being released from the jail, didn't care to enquire or meet his own daughter. These little kids only wanted to feel alive rather than being almost forced to share their bed with a cold Blue-eyed doll having "round moronic eyes, the pancake face, and orangeworms hair." Morrison sets the series of tragedies to befall Pecola, in motion by referring to beginning of her menstrual periods, or as Frieda clarifies to her, her fitness to bear a baby! The beginning of her fertility in Autumn is pregnant with immense significances as it forebodes doom for her.

The Breedloves believed they were doubly marginalized- they were "poor and black". Even their storefront where they stayed was lovelessly done with fair amount of disinterest. They believed they were ugly and their rooms were merely an externalization of their pent up sense of oppression and polarization for being the subaltern other. Their mantle of ugliness was put on aggressively and diligently as if dictated by a master. However, the oppression that they faced was linearly and hegemonically transferred on to weaker people and petty things. Whereas the men remained as inflictors of hurt and pain, women remained passive and Pecola withdrew behind her mask which seems to be a social construct, blackness as a metaphor of difference rather than merely colour of skin. When Cholly, in his greener days, was engaged in extricating sexual favours from a girl and two white men surprised him by shining a flashlight at his back, his hatred fell on the girl rather than on those two white men as she was the weaker subaltern other. When her parents fought, Pecola "restricted by youth and sex, experimented with methods of endurance. Though the methods varied, the pain was as consistent as it was deep." Evidently reaction to a troubled situation has been sufficiently feminized in Pecola's perseverance and

profound desire for self-annihilation. Even Mrs. Breedlove is stuck in a loveless marriage in which only animosity and mutual hatred keep the relationship alive and throbbing. Often Pecola would look into the mirror for hours on end, trying to figure out the source of her ugliness that made her despised at all places. When she imagined fading into oblivion, she could imaginarily dismember all her body parts excepting her eyes. For her, her eyes became the Holy Grail of prettiness and happiness. Such intense was her desire for blue eyes that she fervently prayed for the same every night. She was always hopeful. She becomes victim of apartheid at the Yacobowski's Fresh Veg. Meat and Sundries Store. "The distaste must be for her, her blackness." Soon anger substitutes shame within her. For her, eating Mary Jane candies becomes an orgiastic experience and beauty of blue-eyed Mary Jane almost seeps into her. Quite strangely though, Pecola was not despised by three whores who live in the apartment above the Breedloves'. The socially marginalized welcome her with warmth hitherto unknown to her in her family. From what Pecola could decipher from Mr. And Mrs. Breedlove's lovemaking, "Maybe that was love, Choking sounds and silence."

Morrison initiates Pecola into fertility through the beginning of her menstrual cycles during Autumn. The adolescent girls do come to know that now they can give birth to babies which is the result of Love from a man. This again triggers frantic quest for the man of love in her life for Pecola who has seen her Parents yoked together in a loveless marriage which is sustained by violence and equally violent lovemaking. Problems of racism have also problematized man-woman relationships creating incorrigible fissures in human relations, almost forcing females to take recourse to animal cuddling or other men. This further problematizes mother-child relations that travesties itself into brutal manifestations by torture of the weak and submissive, as happened in case of Junior's psychical torture of Pecola and his final killing of the cat against which he bore malicious chagrin for its



purportedly covert sexual relationship with his mother. Metaphorically the killing of the cat with blue eyes, has macabre implications for Pecola as it foreshadows her impending doom in the form of rape by her sire, her father. Apartheid has so deeply and inhumanly wrested all traces of humane feelings from their hearts that Pauline was busy cuddling the pink-dressed white girl rather than her own child who had been burnt, “Over her shoulder she spit out words to us like rotten pieces of apple.”

Pauline, Pecola’s mother, was destined to be isolated and unworthy from the time she had a deformed, crooked, archless foot. However, in her isolated fantasies, she was secretly pining for love of men and their touch. Under such circumstances, she met her future husband, Cholly Breedlove, a man with “yellow eyes, flaring nostrils, and he came with his own music.” However her first meeting and grotesque interaction with Cholly can be said to be having macabre implications as later on, Cholly would rape his own daughter by tasting the sweet flesh of his daughter’s leg after having bitten it. The way Morrison narrates in great detail gradual decay and final falling free of Pauline’s diseased tooth, is reminiscent of the pestilence-stricken condition of Blacks- “But even before the little brown speck, there must have been the conditions, the setting that would allow it to exist in the first place.” Interracial hatred too ran rampant, as Pauline broods- “Northern colored folk was different too. Dicty-like. No better than whites for meanness.” Interestingly, Pauline thinks, “I didn’t even have a cat to talk to.” However to make ends meet, she took up a maid’s job at one of the White households where her bitter realization is “Nasty white folks is about the nastiest things they is.” Although she wanted to, she had a strong inclination to, yet she decided better than leaving her job- “But later on it didn’t seem none too bright for a black woman to leave a black man for a white woman. Interestingly white mistress of the household tries to inculcate a sense of respect in Pauline and advises her, “I shouldn’t let a man take advantage over me.””

Abandoned at infancy and disdained by his father (although he had no knowledge about Cholly’s parentage) and having spent his life without even knowing the name of his mother as he had never felt the need or love or affection towards her to be inclined to know her name, Cholly can’t be expected to be a caring and affectionate husband and responsible father and he religiously sticks to his ill-repute as a man who had absolutely no interest in either his wife or his children, although he had felt trickles of pleasure light up his soul on coming to know that his wife was pregnant. That anti-Black sentiments ran strong among the whites and the emotional and psychical scar ran deeper and destroyed their family lives, is evident even on the operation table at the time of delivery of her second child- “now these here women you don’t have any trouble with. They deliver right away and with no pain. Just like horses.” Poignant is Pauline’s thought- “I moaned something awful. The pains wasn’t as bad as I let on, but I had to let them people know having a baby was more than a bowel movement. I hurt just like them white women. Just ‘ cause I wasn’t hooping and hollering before didn’t mean I wasn’t feeling pain. What ‘d they think?” According to O. B. Emerson, “...the blacks were discriminated against. They struggled hard, remained speechless. The bifurcation of the American society on the basis of racism pointed out the sheer abuse of power and White supremacy was openly critiqued.” However, Morrison reaches zenith of pathos as Pauline realizes about her newborn “A cross between a puppy and a dying man. But I know she was ugly. Head full of pretty hair, but Lord she was ugly.”

Cholly, on the other hand, denied family bondings and love, had travestied sexual hankerings from his childhood. Insults heaped on him by two White men at the time of his first sexual encounter, channelized his anger towards Darlene who was weak, timid and submissive. In both cases though, “superiority justifies domination.”, although Darlene was doubly marginalized. “Get on wid it, nigger,” and again, “I said, get on wid it. An’ make it

good, nigger, make it good.” Infact the attitude of Whites towards black males was condescending enough; as Arup Kumar Ghosh writes, “Black American males were in general considered to be sexually impotent; from the political point of view they nurtured deep-rooted rage and unlimited agony. The black slaves were doomed to an ill-fated life of enslavement.” Darlene being a witness to his moment of utter helplessness, his failure and impotence, and as the one who was responsible for creating this situation, he cultivated his hatred of her, rather than against the whites as they were “big, white armed men” and he was “small, black, helpless”. Insults, for being black, were “part of the nuisances of life, like lice.” When he went to the colored side of the counter to get his tickets and wanted to save whatever little funds he had, he was meted with “I reckon I knows a lying nigger when I sees one, but jest in case you aint, jest in case one of them mammies is really dyin’ and wants to see her little old smoke before she meets her maker, I gone do it.” Confused and disdained at every walk of life for being a black and having no idea whatsoever about how to raise children nor having watched himself any parent raising theirs’, Cholly committed rape on his eleven year old daughter in a fit of drunkenness and also impregnated her although the child she gave birth to, died.

Her pregnancy and eventual restriction to move out of her home, intensified her desire to get a pair of blue eyes from certain Soaphead Church who felt pity and tenderness for “an ugly little girl asking for beauty.” and, understanding the poignancy of her appeal, gave her a pair of metaphorical blue eyes which only she could see and no one else. Even before birth, Pecola’s baby was cursed as people felt “She be lucky if it don’t live. Bound to be the ugliest thing walking.” “A little black girl yearns for the blue eyes of a little white girl, and the horror at the heart of her yearning is exceeded only by the evil of fulfilment.” And Pecola soon passed into madness by paying for the sin of all who washed theirs’ on her. Infact, the “vicious

genocidal effects of racism dictates the tragedy. It seemed to produce the axiom that to be black was to be a victim, and, therefore, the only way of not being a victim was not being black. ” Morrison’s statement about the psychic dementia of Pecola couldn’t but be laden with more pathos- “The damage done was total.” Her narrative is indeed a disturbing exemplar of the harsh and ruthless legacy of slavery on Blacks, particularly on Black women and their eventual internalization of this sense of hatred and despair, wreathed in silence, existing merely as “shadow personalities or persons with no autonomous role...they are incomplete without males. Men are the center and women the periphery (1999: 108).” And Morrison takes up the uphill task of bringing this ‘periphery’ to the crux of the entire creatrix.

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