

The Emergence of Blues Aesthetic in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*

Dr Arvind Kumar Sharma

Assistant Professor of English, Al Jouf University, Sakaka (KSA)

Email- arvind.8872@gmail.com

Abstract

Toni Morrison, the Nobel laureate in 1993 for literature, the most sophisticated novelist in the history of African American literature, has been recognized as a strident voice for the exploited black people as well as a master craftsman of the dominant artistic form. Adorned with several awards, she has confirmed her permanent place in the heart of her readers. Blues is the name that was given to musical form and musical genre. It was originated by African American musicians. Generally these blues were written or sung at the time of any death or sad situation. That's why they denote a very slow and sad music with a strong rhythm. Toni Morrison's first novel 'The Bluest Eye' often excites and overwhelms much to its readers by the narrative's emotional content- nine

year old Pecola's incestuous rape, ensuring pregnancy and subsequent abandonment by her community and descent into madness- that we can't forget the music in this lyrically narrative. The catharsis and the transmission of cultural knowledge and values that have always been central to the blues, form the thematic and rhetorical underpinnings of 'The Bluest Eye'. Blues Aesthetic plays a dignified part in western literature as emotions and cultural values are counted the major levels of aesthetic cognition and the blues express the emotions and cultural values very effectively. In nutshell we can conclude that in 'The Bluest Eye' Claudia is the voice for the community's blues and Pecola is the site of the inscription of the community's blues.

Keywords: Blues, musical, genre, rhythm, catharsis, aesthetic, cognition, musicians, slow, sad, emotional.

Toni Morrison, the Nobel laureate in 1993 for literature, the most sophisticated novelist in the history of African American literature, has been recognized as a strident voice for the exploited black people as well as a master craftsman of the dominant artistic form. Adorned with National Book Award for *Sula*, (1974) National Book Critics Circle Award for *Song of Solomon* (1977), and the Pulitzer Prize, she has confirmed her permanent place in the heart of her readers. It is her passion for writing for the upliftment of society that has made her reach at the crest of popularity. The magic effects of her writings can easily be observed in America as before 1950 the Negroes (African American or black people) had no right to write or fight for their right but today Mr. Barack Obama, the negro, is the first person of USA. It is the best example of indiscrimination (due to the

sorcerous or genius effect of literature) that he was elected twice in the same and highest rank in continuation.

Blues is the name that was given to musical form and musical genre. It was originated by African American musicians. Generally these blues were written or sung at the time of any death or sad situation. That's why they denote a very slow and sad music with a strong rhythm. Obviously the music or the sound in the blues is stronger and more effective than the words. Blues Aesthetic plays a dignified part in western literature as emotions and cultural values are counted the major levels of aesthetic cognition and the blues express the emotions and cultural values very effectively. In the traditional blues song the narrator or singer is the subject in the form of first person and this subject in the form of 'I' tells his or her own story. It starts with an emphasis on loss and a concluding suggestion of resolution of grief through motion. The blues lyrics that punctuate the narrative at critical points suggest a system of folk knowledge as well as cultural values of a society or culture.

Although the blues typically feature a first person singular subject and exhibit a concern with the problems and/or experiences of the individual, Davis observes in women's blues a "public communication of private troubles" that "allows for the development of a collective social consciousness within the black population".¹ Houston A Baker Jr. describes the blues as "an anonymous (nameless) voice issuing from the black (w)hole."² In *The Bluest Eye* however Claudia tells Pecola's story. Undoubtedly *The Bluest Eye* is the tragic story of Pecola but except few dialogues, Pecola remains mute within Claudia's narrative. Claudia's voice elucidates not only Pecola's abjections but also touches and reveals African American cultural values, standards, and mentality of the people residing there.

Toni Morrison's first novel *The Bluest Eye* often excites and overwhelms much to its readers by the narrative's emotional content- nine year old Pecola's incestuous rape, ensuring pregnancy and subsequent abandonment by her community and descent into

madness- that we can't forget the music in this lyrically narrative. The catharsis and the transmission of cultural knowledge and values that have always been central to the blues, form the thematic and rhetorical underpinnings of *The Bluest Eye*. The blues lyrics that punctuate the narrative at critical points suggest a system of folk knowledge and values that is crucial to a young black woman's survival in the 1930s and 1940s and which supports Claudia's cathartic role as a storyteller.

But is not this story primarily Pecola's? Why is Claudia needed at all? The use of Claudia as a child narrator of Pecola's descent into madness seems to be one of Morrison's most brilliant strokes. Obviously she has not have the necessary distance, space or time to know what is happening to her. She cannot look her own story in the hind sight, for she goes mad. Claudia is telling Pecola's story after it has happened and after she has made some sense of it, a particular characteristic of her throughout the book. But even more dramatically "this story is also Claudia's story. She does not experience the

gravest effects of the myth of the beauty as Pecola does. She is seen as the ugliest of the ugly, but she does not know that blue eyes and blond hair are admired by all and she does not possess them.”³ The dolls she receives at Christmas, Shirley Temple mug and so on are the measures of her own lack of desirability. Pecola and Freda had long conversation about how cute Shirley Temple is. Claudia cannot join them in their adoration because she hates Shirley.

The *Bluest Eye*'s silenced protagonist and its traditionally African American equation of voice with empowerment by situating Claudia's narrative voice within African American oral traditions and a blues aesthetic. Claudia sings the community's blues rather than singing Pecola's blues. Claudia bears witness through the oral tradition of testifying to the community's lack of self love and its transference of this lack into the abject body of Pecola. There is an attempt to discern female blues subjectivity in *The Bluest Eye*, a subjectivity constructed through African American oral tradition.

Every chapter begins with an episode usually involving Pecola told from the point of view of Claudia, the child but shaped by her adult reflection and rhetoric. Claudia's stories then yield to one or two stories told by an apparently objective omniscient narrator. This narrator usually recalls information to which Claudia does not have had access. She tells stories from Pecola's life that involves other characters and weaves flashbacks from there other into Pecola's story. In addition, in each chapter several garbled lines from the primer separate Claudia's voice from that of the omniscient narrator and foreshadows the tension contained within the story that follows.

“Morrison reveals...the myriad ways in which human beings are implicated in each other circumstances. The form implies that the meaning of Pecola's story may be understood only in relation to broad social practices and beliefs.”⁴

Pecola's story is undoubtedly and essentially her quest to find beauty. She

believes that all hate her because her eyes are not blue. She has this idea simply because she learns from the society that blue eyes, blond hair and fair skin is the standard of a beautiful girl. Finally in the end of the novel she believes that her wish has been fulfilled as she talks with herself that she has the bluest eyes. However, Claudia clarifies “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 fulfillment.”⁵ Though she believes that she has the blue eyes, it is clear to all except Pecola that it is an unattainable goal. Morrison points out that we cannot achieve beauty unless we achieve our own idea of beauty. Morrison introduces some other different characters in the novel as Maureen and Geraldine who believe in their class and attractiveness even though they are African American. It is because they judge by their own principles of beauty and not that of society. Pecola is unable to do that which is why her attempt of beauty is ultimately a collapse. Pecola fails to realize that beauty is not based on the colour of skin.

Claudia describes her mother’s singing in lyrical language which is suggestive of the sweet and cathartic tone of traditional blues. She leaves no stone unturned to express the tone and emotions of her mother that is more affecting than the pain signified by the words. Morrison apprises that music was one of ‘the most prominent elements’ in her own early life. Her mother was a singer and the milieu of her family was full of seductive blues yearning that Claudia describes a yearning at the emotional centre of the ‘St Louis Blues’ and *The Bluest Eye*. Claudia is regularly serenaded on Saturdays, when her mother was in singing mood- with this concise, confident and lyrical deconstruction of the Shirley Temple aesthetic. Pecola is rejected by Pauline who embraces the blond haired child of her white employees. Pecola internalizes the notion that the black is not beautiful. Pauline, though she is also black, wishes to sweep out all the things which are not beautiful as she rushes to embrace the rich white child.

The cultural values and folk knowledge embodied in the blues

enables Claudia to develop the sense of black aesthetic. She not only hears the blues but she actively listens to and more importantly ‘sings’ the blues. Indeed these blues define her storytelling voice and style. As a singing subject Claudia has some talented and versatile models in *The Bluest Eye*. Mrs McTeer and Poland serenade only a few lines but these few lines constitute a rich variety of blues expression that reflects the range of techniques, Claudia employs as a blues narrator. Poland transforms lack into poetry. On an October morning Pecola hears Poland singing in sweet and hard voice like new strawberries.

“I got blues in my
meal barrel,

Blues up on the
self

I got blues in my
meal barrel

Blues up on the
self

Blues in my
bedroom

’cause I ’m
sleepin’ by myself.”⁶

The transformation of lack, loss and grief into poetic catharsis is the constitutive task of the blues singer and it is the hard labour that Claudia accomplishes in narrating *The Bluest Eye*. Transmogrification (change) of lack into poetry in Poland’s ‘meal barrel blues’ is an assertion of subjectivity.

Testifying is a tradition which, like call-and-response, is rooted in African American religion practice and can be traced to West African songs and speeches. Geneva Smitherman defines this oral tradition that came out of the traditional black church as "a ritualized form of black communication in which the speaker gives verbal witness to the efficacy, truth and power of some experience in which all blacks have shared."⁷ The accomplished blues singer blend these two forms- call-and-response and testifying. Claudia also follows this pattern in *The Bluest Eye*. When she offers Pecola’s story, she testifies to the community’s failings and unspoken desires which Pecola vocalizes. Claudia’s position in *The Bluest Eye*

may be compared to Pilate who also focuses all the standards of the contemporary society in *The Song of Solomon*. In the same way Claudia, in *The Bluest Eye*, is the character who questions the community's tastes and judgments and often suspects but she is neither out of the community nor opposes the community. She criticizes the community from within. Morrison places her in call-and-response dialectic with a community chorus. The traditional blues singer did not speak for the community but she did speak from the community.

The cultural values and knowledge embodied in the blues and transmitted orally to Claudia makes her realize the value of black aesthetic. Claudia does not, however, passively absorb this body of cultural knowledge and draw strength from it. She not only hears the blues, but she listens to and, more importantly, sings the blues. Of course the blues defines and explains her storytelling voice and style. Beauty is a deeply problematic concept in Morrison's works. In fact the omniscient narrator of *The Bluest Eye* succumbs that

'physical beauty' and 'romantic love' is probably the most destructive ideas in the human thought. Morrison's blues aesthetic lends structure, style and form to interrogation. The emphasis in Claudia's blues narrative is leniency and the leniency she develops in her blues subjects, allows her to appreciate the beauty and nobility even in a community that fails its destitute resident.

Morrison forms Claudia as a blues subject: sensuous, brutally, honest, poetic, ironically, humorous, innocence and adept in call-and-response, signifying and testifying. Though Claudia learns to sing the blues from her mother and *The Bluest Eye* is the perfect blues of Claudia. Her storytelling mode is a blues mode in its sensuality, sensuousness, honesty, innocence, lyricism, sarcastic distance, humour, dialectic with the community and open ended ness.

Thus the blues aesthetic is the perfect medium to elucidate every aspect of a culture most effectively and secretly. *The Bluest Eye* closes with a sense that Claudia moves on while Pecola remains motionless or frozen in

time-a child, trapped in the tragic first verse of her own blues with her imagined blue eyes. In nutshell we can conclude that Claudia is the voice for the community's blues and Pecola is the site of the inscription of the community's blues.

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