

THE OPPRESSED WORLD AND THE OPRESSOR- OPPRESSED RELATIONSHIP IN TONI MORRISON *THE BLUEST EYE*

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Abstract

This essay as an article seeks to explore the ill-effects of racism and oppression on women in Toni Morrison's novel The Bluest Eye. The oppressive world portrayed by Morrison, shows the loss of identity of the African – American's quest for establishing his/her identity. Pain, horror, violence and crime are not uncommon but rather the order of the day to day life of the oppressed African-American women and it remains more exploited and violated. The essay also highlights and reveals the deplorable and bitter fact that the African-Americans remain totally oppressed and their struggle for progress remains stunted. The aim of this paper is to bring out the pathetic and helpless condition of the oppressed African-American women and the how the aggression and violence are all part of the oppressor – oppressed relationship.

Keywords: *Oppressed World, Oppressor – Oppressed Relationship, Racism, African-American Women, Feminist Ideas, Unsettling Quality, Subordination of Woman, Oppression of Woman, Patriarchal Society, Exploited Oppressed, Self-Image, The Zero Image.*

Toni Morrison, one of the most significant African-American writers and Nobel Laureates was born on 18th February, 1931, in Lorain, Ohio. She was born almost a quarter of a century later than Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison. Her first novel, *The Bluest Eye* was published in 1970, almost thirty years after Wright's *Native Son* was published and about twenty years after Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*. It is to be realized that even a quarter of a century after Wright's and Ellison's works were published, not much has changed in the conditions of the exploited oppressed. The less spoken about the condition of women, the better. Toni Morrison enters the scene at such a stage and her family background and her living environment have molded her into one of the greatest African – American writers.

The oppressive world portrayed by Morrison, similar to the ones portrayed by Wright and Ellison, shows the loss of identity of the African – American's quest for establishing his/her identity. Pain, horror, violence and crime are not uncommon but rather the order of the day to day life of the oppressed African-American women remains more exploited, violated and oppressed. "To Survive", in such a world, Morrison's protagonists must somehow violate the rule of the oppressive system, reject the values it venerates, and recover the human potential denied to blacks, " states Terry Otten (*The Crime* 1-7).

Mentioning about aggression and violence in the lives of African-American women, Morrison states:

Aggression is not new to black women as it is to white women. Black women seem able to combine the nest and the adventure ... They are both safe and harbor and ship, they are both inn and trail. We black women, do both ... There's a special kind of domestic perception that has its own violence in the writings by black women – not bloody violence, but violence none the less (*Black Women*, 74).

Hence one can assume that aggression and violence are all part of the oppressor – oppressed relationship portrayed in the novels of Morrison.

A study of the novels of Morrison reveals not only her evolution as a writer but also her growing concern for the oppressed African-American, especially the African-American women. Mbali's statement, In each of her novels, Morrison explores some aspects of and/or solution to the oppression afflicting African people. *The Bluest Eye* examines racism, *Sula*, gender oppression, *Song of Solomon*, the necessity of knowing one's family, community and heritage; *Tar Baby*, the class contradictions that keep African people divided; and *Beloved*, the solution that will help solve the class exploitation and racial oppression of African people (*Developing Class*, 9-10).

...is in accordance with the line of argument that oppression and the resultant oppressor-oppressed relationship are some of the major concerns of Morrison's novels. This concern for the oppressed African-American is carried further in *Jazz* and *Paradise*.

Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* has its original inspiration from an earlier attempted short story by her about a little African-American girl who longed for blue eyes. This has been developed later by Morrison in her *The Bluest Eye*.

This feeling of ugliness felt by the African-American girl, caused by her skin colour is the result of many factors, such as the imposition of a 'Zero-image', the white oppressor's concept of beauty that cannot accept black as beautiful, and the identity crises. A feeling of rootlessness created by a horrible and almost nonexistent home life adds insult to injury. Unfortunately for Pecola, the young girl and a member of the Breedlove family, her home and her family do not offer any warmth or affection and of course there is no breeding of love. Her home becomes a place of violence, hatred and sadism. Otten's statement on the effects of oppression let loose on Pecola illustrates this:

Ostracized from the American dream by virtue of her blackness and from a black community too much corrupted by the values of the white cultures, she (Pecola) can only succeed in her insanity having borne the effects of a devastating fall (*The Crime*, 9).

"The zero image" is a term used by Carolyn F Gerald. It is a term of "negative definition of self commonly associated with oppressed peoples and familiar to black children of Morrison's Depression generation" (*The Black Writer*, 3), according to Samuels and Clenora. The imposition of the zero image on African-American children and their negative definition of self become obvious even at the outset:

We had dropped our seeds in our own little plot of black dirt just as Pecola's father had dropped his seeds in his own plot of black dirt. Our innocence and faith were no ore productive than his lust or despair (*The Black Writer*, 9).

This is further amplified by the treatment meted out to them at their home. The children, especially the girl children are expected to behave themselves by remaining silent spectators: "Frieda and I are washing Mason jars. We do not hear their words, but with grown – ups we listen to and watch out for their voices" (18). The place of female children in an African-American household is insignificant, as revealed in the description of 'pointing out' the girls, to Mr. Henry, a new boarder at their house: "Frieda and I were not introduced to him – merely pointed out. Like, here is the bathroom; the clothes closet is here; and these are my kids, Frieda and Claudia".

While discussing the ill-effects of racism and oppression on women, Mbalia goes to the extent of asserting that "The thesis of the novel (*The Bluest Eye*) is that racism devastates the self-image of the American female in general and the African female child in particular" (*Developing Class*, 28).

Pecola Breed love, is placed by the country into their house. Pecola is a "case", a girl who had no place to go, and "outdoors". 'Outdoors', they know is the real terror of life. There is a difference between being put out and being put outdoors. If you are put out, you go somewhere else; if you are outdoors, there is no place to go. The distinction was subtle but final. Outdoors was the end of something, an irrevocable, physical fact, defining and complementing our metaphysical condition (*The Bluest Eye*, 59).

The callous attitude of the parents, especially toward the female children has a telling effect on Claudia: I did know that nobody ever asked me what I wanted for Christmas. Had any adult with the power to fulfill my desires taken me seriously and asked me what I wanted, they would have known that I did not want to have anything to own, or to possess any object. I wanted rather to feel something on Christmas day (*The Bluest Eye*, 25)

Claudia is not interested in 'having', but interested 'to feel', and her parents do not even care to ask their child what she wants. These things, though normal and quite insignificant in the viewpoint of the parents, help only in creating a negative zero-image in the child's mind.

When Toni Morrison was asked why she wrote *The Bluest Eye*, she has said, "I was interested in reading a kind of book that I had never read before. I didn't know if such a book existed, but I had just never read it in 1964 when I started reading writing *The Bluest Eye* (*Black Women*, 19). This response of Morrison's may perhaps be the answer to the yearnings of Claudia and Pecola's horrors of life.

Pecola like most of the other children remains innocent even after she has reached puberty. Her hesitant, soft way of seeking certain clarifications express the ominous fact that Pecola is no exception to the zero image. Pecola is told that somebody has to love her, for her to have a baby. Then Pecola asks a question, "How do you do that? I mean, how do you get somebody to love you?". This becomes very pertinent and the answer to her questions unfortunately lies in the tragedy of the being raped by her own father. The zero image is forced on Pecola, since she is one of the Breedloves whose "ugliness was unique".

You looked at them and wondered why they were so ugly, you looked closely and could not find the source. Then you realized that it came from conviction, their conviction. It was as though some mysterious all knowing master had given each one a clock of ugliness to wear, and they had each accepted it without question. The master had said, "you are ugly people" ... "Yes", they had said, "You are right". And they took the ugliness in their hands, threw it as a mantle over them, and went about the world with it (*The Bluest Eye*, 52).

Cholly, Pecola's father, a burnt-out alcoholic, has "the meanest eyes in town". Mrs. Breedlove is an ever complaining woman, using her anger against her husband as a safety valve, to relieve her boredom. If Cholly has stopped drinking, she (Mrs. Breedlove) would never have forgiven Jesus. She needed Cholly's sins desperately. The lower he sank, the wilder and more irresponsible he became, the more splendid she and her task became. In the name of Jesus (*The Bluest Eye*, 81).

Pecola is abused not only by her family, but also by the oppressive society making its contribution to hurt and damage Pecola. Pecola is a never-sought-after companion at her school. Pecola is ill-treated at Geraldine's home, after being made the brunt of a cruel hoax. Geraldine's son Louis Junior, invites Pecola in, throws a frightened cat at her, and later he sends that cat flying into the radiator, pointing an accusing finger at Pecola. Geraldine is more disgruntled by the presence of a little African-American girl in her house than by the injured done to her cat. Samuels and Clenora state, "Geraldine expels the innocent girl with words that cut deeper than the cat's claws "Get out ... you nasty little black bitch. Get out of my house" (13) revealing the insults and injustice heaped on Pecola, for no faults of hers. This ill-treatment she receives from the society and the total absence of love and warmth of her family hasten the process of her self-hatred and her zero image: "Please God", she (Pecola) whispered into palm of her hand. "Please make me disappear". All these contribute to Pecola's suffering an identity crisis making Samuels and Clenora state " Pecola, a young girl in quest of womanhood,

suffers an identity crisis when she falls victim to the standard set by an American society that ascribes what is beautiful to a certain image of white women" (*Toni Morrison*, 11).

It is not that Pecola never feels angry against oppression and rootlessness, but her anger is short lived and ineffective:

It is against this history of depravity and perversion that Pecola's violation occurs. It gives a witness to a world already fallen... the rape is also an exercise of power and freedom, a protest against an unjust and repressive culture (20-21).

Pecola's tragedy is treated variously in the view point of critics. Samuels and Clenora have said, 'She (Morrison) indicates that a major part of Pecola'sd tragedy is her failure to recognize that she is responsible for defining a life for herself" (14-15) and "By acting in 'Bad Faith', Pecola remains responsible in the final analysis, for what happens to her" (15). On the other hand Mbalia feels that the devastated "self-image of the African-American female in general. And the African female child in particular" (28) ... the gender oppression suffered by the African-American female to be precise has caused the tragedy of Pecola. Otten feels, "Morrison depicts Pecola more a victim than a genuinely tragic figure. Unable to commit a saving sin or protect herself against the prolonged self-hate of Cholly or Pauline or Geraldine, she (Pecola) falls prey to an evil beyond herself" (*The Crime*, 23). Butler-Evans feels that the tragedy of the Breedloves and their oppression have been caused by their acceptance of ugliness(65). Trudier Harris is of the opinion that "a self-hatred that manifests itself in Pecola Breedlove's desire for the bluest eye of all" (*The Crime*, 29) causes her tragedy. Thus one can surmise that various factors, such as the intense self-hatred, the feeling of ugliness, gender oppression and the feeling of rootlessness and ill-treatment felt especially by African-American female children – all these work against Pecola resulting in her tragedy of violation and her madness.

Tony Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, becomes exclusive in the sense that it is one of the earliest novels to address the problems of child abuse and the emotional violence heaped upon children by parents. Morrison herself has identified "the emotional violence heaped upon children as a special concern" of her *The Bluest Eye* Samuels and Clenora state:

Although now a highly publicized topic, child abuse, including incest and rape, was once a socially unmentionable subject that remained unaddressed though secretly known. It is readily exposed by Morrison, however, in her pioneering novel (*Toni Morrison*, 14). On the significance of physical and psychological violence done to the female Children by their parents they have stated:

Equally significant is the physical violence done to the black child by parents who are themselves confused about their identity, as is the case with Breedloves ... when Cholly rapes his daughter, it is a physical manifestation of the social psychological, and personal violence that, together with his wife, he has put upon Pecola (*Toni Morrison*, 14).

Thus the novel *The Bluest Eye*, reveals the deplorable and bitter fact that the African-Americans remain totally oppressed and their struggle for progress remains stunted. The train conductor shows “a nigger is a nigger” (*Developing Class*, 46) as stated by Mbalia: “The struggle has enabled a few Africans to progress, that is, to be as much like their oppressors as they can, while the masses of the African people continue to struggle for survival (*Developing Class*, 46). Mbalia's statement also hints at the pathetic and painful fact of the oppressed African-American surrogating hid oppressor.

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