

RACE AND GENDER IN TONI MORRISON'S "THE BLUEST EYE"

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Abstract

Racism, Sexism and Classism signify the traumatic conditions under which African-Americans live in white America. These are systems of societal and psychological oppression that have adversely affected the lives of blacks in general and African-American women in particular. Black Community had to face atrocities like racism and exploitation, irrespective of sex. Black Women have been victimized not only by racist, sexist and class bias, but also by scholarly neglect. Yet, over the centuries they have tried to present their case, their quest for freedom and attempts at self-assertion through literature. Race, class and gender have figured prominently as themes in black women's writing over the years.

Toni Morrison is among the pioneer of those contemporary black writers who have redefined African-American writing in more ways than one. Black women in America being black, female and poor have been victimized by racism, sexism, and classism, not only from the white world, but also from their own men. These women have faced the problems of race, class and gender, which have pushed them towards a margin.

Key Words: Race, Class, Gender, African American Literature.

Introduction

Throughout history, the highly contested concepts of race and gender have adversely shaped the lives of million of people. In the United States it is most notably Native Africans and African Americans who have been victimized on the grounds of their skin color. Women of African descent have suffered a double jeopardy due to the intersection of race and gender. For a great many of African Americans, men and women alike, literature has become an important vehicle to represent the social context, to expose inequality, racism and social injustice.

In *The Bluest Eye* Toni Morrison explores the issue of African American female identity. The female Bildungsroman scrutinizes the problem of growing up black and female in a society which equates beauty with blue-eyed whiteness. Consumer goods, the media, adult approval and a dismissive attitude towards her mislead the protagonist Pecola Breedlove to internalize white beauty standards. With the story of Pecola, Morrison points out how the internalization leads to racial self-loathing and eventually to self-destruction. Nonetheless, the negative tone of *The Bluest Eye* is in part counteracted through Claudia MacTeer, whose narrative is juxtaposed to Pecola's anti- Bildung and thus turns the novel into a double Bildungsroman with one girl "growing up" and the other one "growing down."

This paper will focus on the issues of race and gender in *The Bluest Eye*. The topic can be considered of particular relevance as it addresses a theme which remained unexamined until the 1970s, a theme which many have not wanted to know about and which others have been in denial about. Morrison, though, faces the truth about the intersection of race and gender by exploring in her novel how racism and sexism function, as well as the devastating consequences that can occur. Her debut further underlines that the search for culprits is complicated since the perpetrators in the crimes against Pecola are often victims themselves.

As a background for discussion, the paper will first look at the concepts of race and gender in reference to African American literature and then briefly expand on Toni Morrison and her perspective on these issues. The ensuing section will sketch the socio-historical context of the novel's setting, the time of writing as well as potential influences in writing *The Bluest Eye*. Subsequently, the novel's aesthetic form will come under scrutiny. Like numerous ethnic minority women writers, Morrison seems to subvert the traditional white standards in view of structure.

The innovative nature is, for instance, mirrored in the juxtaposition of *Bildung* and anti-*Bildung*, stream-of-consciousness, multiple perspectives, and deliberate fragmentation. With this background established, the thesis will proceed to examine racism in its sheer complexity. This examination is divided into three parts. This is on anti-black racism and will briefly outline the racist actions which the dominant culture practices in *The Bluest Eye*.

This paper addresses the internalized form of racism and how this form manifests itself differently in African American men than in women. To provide an understanding for this difference some information on society's beauty standard will precede the analysis of black girlhood and womanhood. The analysis of black girlhood will delve into the fundamental differences between Claudia and Pecola, differences which decide on psychological survival or demise in their cruel host society.

The issue of black womanhood will focus on the mother-child relationship of African American women in general and of Mrs. Breedlove in particular. Black masculinity will then be examined in terms of internalized racism, with the case of Cholly Breedlove being at the center of attention. The language on racism will explore the tragic outcome of Pecola's life. Finally, a summary will be provided on the most important aspects of the thesis. The conclusion will additionally touch upon the contemporary identity formation of African Americans.

Race and Gender in the African American Literature

This part will first of all address the socially constructed concepts of race and gender in reference to African American literature, and will then proceed to Toni Morrison and her perspective on these issues.

Race, a term which originated in the 17th century, can be assigned manifold meanings, ranging, for example, from linguistic and religious to ethnic groups. Hence, it is more useful to define the aspect of race most relevant to this analysis, which understands race as a cultural designation categorizing a group based primarily upon its common visible features. In other words, this particular aspect of race has formed racial classifications based on biological differences that mask the reality of race as a social construction. The racial ideology of the United States attributed an inferior social position to African Americans and Native Americans. This myth of black inferiority, which white people cultivated and institutionalized, resulted in racial segregation, oppression and discrimination in all domains of everyday life, including literature.

Early African American writers felt that whites had misrepresented their case too often and had shown the race in too negative a light. Subsequently, African American literature began to develop into a liberating tool enabling to tackle the racialized worldview. However, the first African American texts, the so-called slave narratives (1830-1861), had to be authorized by the dominant culture, which also set the standards for their writings. Hence, these writings did not genuinely represent an authentic black voice. Various cultural and political developments, such as the Civil Rights Movement, made African American writers feel less restraint; they evolved their own standards, such as the use of black dialect, and even determined a national discourse on race. Furthermore, African American women writers became established. These women had initially been met with a double disrespect in virtue of the artificial barriers of not only their race, but also their gender.

Gender can be regarded as a socially constructed dimension of being male or female; men and women are associated with distinctively different roles, representations, values and beliefs. The Oxford Companion to African American Literature points out the magnitude of gender at this time and states that the politics of race assumed the inveterate inferiority of women in general. Hence, the black woman, burdening a double jeopardy, was placed at the very bottom of the chain of being. From the impetus to counter real, literary, but overall negative stereotypes of African American women, black feminist literature emerged. The works particularly explore the intersection of race and gender by emphasizing its detrimental impact on the black women's strenuous efforts to gain acceptance and respect in society.

Zora Neale Hurston (*Their Eyes Were Watching God*, 1937) is renowned as one of the most significant authors in African American women's literature. She has been hailed as "literary foremother" among African American women writers. Hurston was one of the innumerable black women authors whose work was continuously suppressed by the mainstream culture. Blatant racism coupled with sexism made her work become dependent on the benevolence of publishers time after time. Nevertheless, Hurston remained faithful to her black ancestry and kept celebrating African American culture in her writings. In the 1970s and 80s when African American women writers had finally freed themselves of a particular ideological and literary repression, contemporary writers such as Toni Morrison fostered a renaissance of the African American literary landscape.

Toni Morrison, award-winning Nobel laureate and the author of *The Bluest Eye*, has established herself in the literary canon through her multi-faceted work as a lecturer, editor, novelist, and essayist. However, feeling initially constrained to enter a racist and male dominated literary world, Morrison kept rewriting her first novel over and over again. For the final publication of *The Bluest Eye* in 1970, Morrison changed her original name, Chloe Anthony Morrison, to Toni Morrison in order to keep from her employer that she was publishing with another press.

Her literary debut scrutinizes the issue of African American female identity, a theme that was heretofore unexamined. Generally speaking, Morrison uses her art to call attention to the historical and continuing plight of African Americans, and examines concepts such as community, individuality, and moral responsibility. Interestingly, Morrison's parents and their attitude towards the racialized world are said to have been of crucial importance for their daughter's writings. In looking at her family background, her father's hostility towards white people coupled with her mother's sanguine attitude, Mobley notes that it is no surprise that her novels reflect both the pessimism that racism produces and the optimism that has empowered African American people to survive and thrive in spite of racism.

In light of the loss of some black traditions such as storytelling, black fiction increased in importance for Morrison. She is not only a writer, but also an editor with heart and soul. In the latter role Morrison has paved the way for a good many other African American and feminist writers by promoting them. However, Morrison has not always been heaped with praise only. Based on misinterpretations of her novels, critics accused her of confirming, rather than challenging, stereotypes about African American people.

Besides nine novels, of these *Beloved* (1987) is often considered to be her masterpiece, Morrison has published various other forms of literary work, among them literary criticism. Works such as *Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature*, a lecture delivered at the University of Michigan in 1988, and *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (1992), Morrison's first book of literary criticism, are of considerable relevance since they reveal Morrison's perspective on race.

Morrison argues that "race" which she herself often puts in quotation marks has always been an integral part of American culture and literature, or as she phrases it, For both black and white American writers, in a wholly racialized society, there is no escape from racially inflected language. She vehemently disagrees with the consensus among literary scholars who claim that "race" was not meaningful to the construction of American identity. Instead, Morrison calls the Africanist presence/absence the ghost in the machine. What made America distinctively American was the real or invented Africanism, which functioned as the vehicle by which the American self knows itself as not enslaved, but free; not repulsive, but desirable; not helpless, but licensed and powerful; not history-less but historical; not damned, but innocent; not blind accident of evolution, but a progressive fulfillment of destiny.

Morrison makes clear that the concept of the blacks' inferiority not only adversely affected black people, but also reciprocally affected white people and the way they imagined their roles in society. Furthermore, Morrison implicates American literature in disregarding and misinterpreting African American female characters. In this context, she quotes the following scene from Hemmingway's *To Have and Have No*, Marie: "Listen, did you ever do it with a nigger wench?" Harry: "Sure." Marie: "What's it like?" Harry: "Like nurse shark."

Here, she proves that the black woman stood even further outside the margin of the marginal groups and is presented as "the furthest thing from human, so far away as to be not even mammal but fish." To Morrison, the plight of non-white Americans continues; she labels "declarations that racism is irrelevant, over or confined to the past" as "premature fantasies." While "race" generally remains "a virtually unspeakable thing," Morrison ventures into speaking the unspeakable in *The Bluest Eye*.

Historical Context of The Bluest Eye

To establish a basis for discussion, this section will sketch the cultural and historical background, and examine to what extent this background is integrated in *The Bluest Eye*. The novel is set in Lorain, Ohio, in 1940/41. However, the preceding decades and their significance for African Americans have to be taken in account as well. Furthermore, one has to keep in mind that *The Bluest Eye* was published no earlier than 1970. This circumstance necessitates looking beyond 1941 and considering potential events which could have influenced Morrison in writing.

At an international level, the most drastic 20th century incidents are arguably the two World Wars. *The Bluest Eye* is set midway through the Second World War, more precisely in the year the United States entered the war. Still, Morrison clearly subordinates international matters to local ones and only makes a subtle reference in the form of three prostitutes. At first, these

women are introduced as China, Poland and Miss Marie, names which the reader does not necessarily associate with the war-time setting since the prostitutes China and Poland were seemingly named after their countries of origin. Notwithstanding, the reference to World War II becomes finally overt when Claudia brings up the Maginot Line, the name Miss Marie is given from the townspeople.

Jennifer Gillan maintains that “While the names China and Poland signify on the European and Asian fronts of World War II, Maginot Line refers literally to the failed French border fortifications and metaphorically to focus on the wrong front.” Feeling impotent against the continuing exclusion from society, black townswomen unreasonably focus their anger and discontent on others, such as the Maginot Line.

Morrison’s implicit criticism of focusing attention on the wrong front can be transferred to international affairs. With its 1941 intervention in a war against racialized nationalism in Europe, the United States called Germany to account for its ethnic and racial conflicts and absurdly acted abroad like the moral crusader, though the United States was, in actual fact, negligent of its own racial crimes. In bestowing such a significant name as Maginot Line on a character, Morrison might have intended to show that both the black womanhood in the novel as well as the United States overlooked the real problem and concentrated attention on the wrong front.

While the Second World War recedes into the background, the black community comes to the fore in *The Bluest Eye*. Though African Americans in the United States endured endless and untold suffering, most of them fervently hoped that race relations would improve over time. Fortunately, they proved right. The end of the American Civil War in 1865 heralded the abolition of slavery. Within the next five years, African Americans were granted full and equal citizenship and black males were given the right to vote. Yet, discrimination on the grounds of race did not come to an end. Under the “separate but equal” doctrine, the 1896 *Plessy v. Ferguson* case advocates the constitutionality of racial segregation laws, which covered many public facilities, such as restaurants, restrooms and public schools.

In *The Bluest Eye* Morrison briefly brings up the matter of racial segregation, for instance, in hinting at Lake Shore Park, the city park black people are not allowed to enter. Still, African Americans were generally better off living in the North than in the South, where the Black Codes restricted African Americans’ rights and opportunities. Consequently, hundreds of thousands of southern black people moved during the Great Migration (1910s to 1940s) to the North. With the Breedlove parents, Morrison, however, demonstrates that some African Americans who moved north in search for better living conditions still had to face a sad fate.

The Great Depression then put all Americans to a test. However, racial minorities such as African Americans were hit hardest. Unemployment among African American males averaged 66 percent for most of the depression. Black men additionally had a hard time finding work since white immigrants flooded the low-level jobs. In contrast, black women were given the chance of working as nannies, caretakers and cooks; consequently, the males had to make way for their women to become the primary breadwinners. This role reversal is strongly prevalent in the Breedlove household with Mrs. Breedlove working as a servant for the Fisher family and Mr. Breedlove being unemployed. However, the Breedloves are not the only ones facing the long-term consequences of the Great Depression.

The MacTeers, for example, are reliant on taking in roomers. Moreover, public discontent with the economic reality made Hollywood rise as the “fabricator of dreams,” dreams that were

supposed to bring hope and optimism.⁴⁵ The pivotal role of movies in general and Shirley Temple in particular in *The Bluest Eye* will be elaborated in the section on black femininity.

The African Americans' journey to true equity and respect dragged on for several decades. In 1954 racial segregation in public schools was finally overturned in the case of *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*, which declared separate educational facilities to be inherently unequal. Playing a part in contributing to the decision to make racial segregation in schools unconstitutional were the study results of Kenneth B. Clark. He and his wife conducted a series of psychological experiments into the impact of racial segregation on black schoolchildren. The "doll test" is the most remembered today: children were presented with a black and a white doll and were asked to choose a favorite one. It showed that ten of the sixteen children said they preferred the white doll. Eleven of the children referred to the black doll as 'bad', while nine said the white doll was 'nice.' Seven of the children pointed to the white doll when they were asked to choose the doll that was most like themselves.

The results proved school segregation to be psychologically detrimental, found to evoke feelings of legitimate social inferiority and to cause a distorted self-image which promoted internalized racism.

White dolls and doll-like icons like Shirley Temple are a recurring motif in *The Bluest Eye*, in which quite similar to the Clark studies, all the world had agreed that a blue-eyed, yellow-haired, pink-skinned doll was what every girl treasured. Claudia MacTeer, though, represents an exception with white dolls unmistakably stirring up feelings of hatred in her.

Despite the fact that at the time *The Bluest Eye* is set desegregated schools were nowhere near common practice in Ohio, Morrison still sends her protagonist Pecola to an integrated school. It seems then like a critical commentary on the Clark studies that Pecola, although partially integrated, evolves into a psychological wreck. Morrison might have wanted to call attention to the more complex concept of identity formation of African American children.

Desegregating schools does not automatically keep black children from developing feelings of social inferiority and inadequacy. In fact, segregation in other areas of public life and factors such as the stability and quality of family relations and personal characteristics are of paramount importance for identity formation as well. In Pecola's case, one could even assume that attendance at a desegregated school has an adverse effect on her development as Pecola comes to realize that teachers and students treat her and other black children differently than the white and light-skinned class mates. Without any family support, Pecola does not manage to overcome feelings of unjustified inferiority and succumbs to the concept of white beauty.

The concept of beauty in American society was somewhat revolutionized in the 1960s. "Black is Beautiful" became one of the slogans for the Black Power movement, which was propagated during this time. In contrast to many other African Americans, Morrison could not share the enthusiasm for "the reclamation of racial beauty" but rather wondered, "Why could this beauty not be taken for granted within the community? Why did it need wide public articulation to exist?". Bringing issues such as internalized racism into public focus, the Black Power movement certainly impacted on Morrison's first novel.

In an attempt to battle her loneliness in the evenings when her children were in bed, Morrison started writing *The Bluest Eye*. Hence, it is unsurprising that Morrison's own sense of motherhood has had an influence in her writing. According to Peach, the black child had hitherto been, if at all, "peripheral" and "doubly marginalized" in literature. *The Bluest Eye*, however, centers on young African American Pecola, and Morrison sets out to explore "how something as grotesque as the demonization of an entire race could take root inside the most delicate member

of society: a child; the most vulnerable member: a female”. Morrison’s impetus for writing her first novel, as Justine Baillie notes, was to hinder that a tragic story like that of Pecola was being forgotten in the articulation of the new-found political consciousness of that decade.

In her foreword Morrison explains that the story of her first novel arose from a conversation she had in elementary school: back then a childhood friend expressed her wish for blue eyes. This information suggests examining *The Bluest Eye* for further autobiographical elements. Indeed, one is to find a host of significant parallels between Morrison and Claudia. Both of them grew up in Lorain, Ohio, and in 1940/41, the year the novel is set, Morrison would have been the same age as Claudia. Moreover, Morrison, like Claudia, belonged to a loving family, who appreciated and kept alive black traditions. Like the MacTeers, Morrison’s family was financially troubled during the Great Depression.

Lastly, Morrison was angry with her childhood friend for longing for blue eyes similar to Claudia, who cannot comprehend her sister’s and Pecola’s fondness for white dolls. All of these autobiographical parallels support the conclusion that Claudia embodies Morrison’s fictional “second self.” It seems as if Morrison partially recalls her own girlhood through Claudia as narrator. With a variety of historical and cultural events integrated, *The Bluest Eye* turns out to be a complex and multi-faceted novel. This nature is also mirrored in the novel’s aesthetic form.

Conclusion

All black women in *The Bluest Eye* experience dependency, repression, internal racism and alienation. All these women try to find meaning and fulfillment in different ways. All these women on account of their race and gender are marginal groups “moving at the helm of life”. Claudia explains the reality of her mother and other women in the community. “Being a minority in both caste and class we moved about on the helm of life.” She dreads being put “outdoors”, the way Cholly has put the women in his life outdoors. While other women in the novel find fulfillment. Mrs. Macteer in looking after her family and trying to make ends meet, Geraldine and Maureen Peal in trying to assume fake identities, Pauline in trying to fulfill the role of the ideal mammy-Pecola does not find fulfillment anywhere.

In fact she does not get any maternal apace from any of these women except the three prostitutes, China, Poland and Maginot Line who are marginal groups as well. Pecola’s only escape is descent into madness. White Beauty, White Living, White freedom—these are what the characters in *The Bluest Eye* long for, strive for and yet can never realize. This story was developed out of a conversation she had with a little girl in elementary school who longed for blue eyes: “I looked around to picture her with them, was violently repelled by what I imagined she would look like if she had her wish”. Morrison goes on to wonder, “Implicit in her desire was racial self-loathing. And 20 years later, I was still wondering about how one learns that. Who told her? Who had looked at her and found her so wanting so small a weight or the beauty scale?.” It is for this reason Morrison says that she focused on the most delicate member of society: ‘a child’, the most vulnerable member, ‘a female.’

Also the meaning of blackness in this country shapes profoundly the experience of gender, just as the conditions of womanhood affect inculcatable of race. Pecola, the ugly black girl who does not meet society’s standards is expunged from human society even before she has awakened to a consciousness of self. Pecola stands for the triple indemnity in the female black child: children, blacks, females, and the poor are devalued and pushed to the margins of the already marginalized community. The themes of race, class and gender are inter-related in *The Bluest Eye*. Spurned and rejected by a community plagued by the virus of self hatred, Pecola is

pushed to the fringes of the town and towards marginality, both literally and figuratively. Madness is Pecola's fate and there is no saviour for her. Claudia observes towards the end of the novel "It's much, much, much too late."

Preference

Linden Peach, *Toni Morrison* (London: Macmillan, 1995), 2.

Cf. Pin-chia Feng, *The Female Bildungsroman by Toni Morrison and Maxine Hong Kingston A Postmodern Reading* (New York: Lang, 1998), 40, 51.

Cf. Dana A. Williams, "Contemporary African American women writers." *The Cambridge Companion to African American Women's Literature*. Eds. Angelyn Mitchell and Danille K. Taylor. (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2009), 72.

William J. Harris, "Black Aesthetic." *The Oxford Companion to African American Literature*(Oxford: Oxford UP, 1997), 67.

Cf. Patrick Bryce Bjork, *The Novels of Toni Morrison: The Search for Self and Place Within the Community* (New York: Lang, 1994), 1.