

SUBVERSIVE POLITICS OF RACISM IN TONI MORRISON'S *THE BLUEST EYE*

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ABSTRACT

The narrator in *The Bluest Eye* states that "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" (162). The little black girl is Pecola Breedlove who is dissatisfied with the world around her. She is born into a society that is confused as it shuns its own cultural values and craves for self-gratification in the culture of the whites. In the novel this tendency of the society finds its symbolic and subversive expression in Pecola's quest for blue eyes which represent the western/racist ideals of beauty. The quest results in the suffering and anguish of the blacks which is presented by Toni Morrison in *The Bluest Eye*. This article proposes to analyse how the subversive politics of racism is operative in the narrative in the novel.

Keywords: Racism, Subversion, cultural values, subversive politics.

The narrator in *The Bluest Eye* states that "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" (162). This line is a pointer to the conflict, the tension and the trauma that follow an unfamiliar desire. The little black girl is Pecola Breedlove who is dissatisfied with the world around her. She is born into a society that is confused as it shuns its own cultural values and craves for self-gratification in the culture of the whites. In the novel this tendency of the society finds its symbolic and subversive expression in Pecola's quest for blue eyes which represent the western/racist ideals of beauty. The quest results in the suffering and anguish of the blacks which is presented by Toni Morrison in *The Bluest Eye*. This article proposes to analyse how the subversive politics of racism is operative in the narrative in the novel. The concept of beauty is an element of fantasy. This concept is found in fairy tales and becomes the vehicle for happiness. Pecola Breedlove, living in a real world, desires beauty as the panacea for all her troubles. Thus, reality is made unfamiliar and problematic. Pecola's fantastic desire coexists in the framework of real life. So the narration is made to follow an unconventional narrative pattern. The use of strangeness, contraries, contradictions in the narrative magnify the existential

anxiety and subjective dislocation of the characters. In *The Bluest Eye*, the narrative does not exhibit integrity, sequentiality or even finality of the plot. The integrity of the narrator is violated as Morrison decenters the text by making use of multiple narrators.

Malmgren observes that "The body of the novel is composed of two related kinds of texts, variously interspersed: four seasonal sections, narrated in the first person by Claudia MacTeer; and seven primer sections (employing various narrational situations), so named because each section is set off by an epigraph taken from the master primer" (251). Linda Dittmar also says that *The Bluest Eye* is a "brilliant orchestration of a complex multiformed narrative" (140). The pre-adolescent Claudia MacTeer and the author share the burden of narration. The story is narrated from these two points of view. They merge into one another; the one becomes the voice of the other without giving the reader a prior hint about the transition. Claudia is the narrator in the opening and the closing sections of the novel. She looks at all the incidents from her own point of view, gives the reader her own personal feeling of the story, and introduces the characters. Her style of narration changes from childish uncertainty at the beginning to dejection towards the end. "Indeed, we can say that the 'eye' in the title contains a multiple pun: it is at once the eye longed for by Pecola Breedlove, and the 'I' that author-izes the novel as a whole, the 'bluest I' that witnesses Pecola's fate, Claudia MacTeer" (Malmgren 256). At several points, the narration is taken over by the author herself as she narrates from an omniscient standpoint. She provides improvisations that corroborate the central plot. Being an omniscient narrator, she can go backward and forward in time and space. She escapes the limitations of a specific human consciousness to which Claudia MacTeer, as a narrator, is confined. The centre of the text is dislocated as a result of the intermingling of the narrative voices.

The narrative sequence is disrupted whenever Claudia passes on the narration to the author. The flow of the narrative becomes uncertain, for, the plot which is concerned with Pecola's obsession with and acquiring of the eyes is interrupted by elaborate descriptions of the lives of Cholly, Pauline, Geraldine and Soaphead Church. Dreams, that compensate for the unfulfilled wants of the characters, especially, those of Pauline, Pecola and Soaphead, break the narrative sequence and make the plot complex. Elaborate descriptions of the lives of the Negro women of the south and of the women connected with Cholly prevent the gradual unfolding of the plot and impede the progress of narration. *The Bluest Eye* is divided into four sections, namely, 'Autumn', 'Winter', 'Spring', and 'Summer'. This arrangement does not conform to the sequence of the natural cycle of seasons. Each section is named after a particular season. The titles serve as metaphors. The first section, 'Autumn', deals with the transition in Pecola's life. She matures from a girl into a woman. Gradually, the life history of Pecola is unfolded in this section. The totality of her tragedy is presented in fragments. The second chapter, 'Winter', serves as a metaphor for frigidity. Here, Morrison introduces the distasteful characters in the novels: Maureen Peal and Geraldine. Their self-hatred has a very bad impact on the impressionable Pecola. Claudia, Frieda, and other sensible people look forward to a spring, to a happier and better life. They know that spring may bend them "into a complete circle but will not break" (75) them. The section, 'Spring', contains the stories of Pauline and Cholly, of Cholly's assault of Pecola and also the story of Soaphead Church, all of which cumulatively distort the mind of Pecola. The last section, 'Summer', exposes the reality of Pecola's situation. Here one finds her in the violent summer of her life. She is totally mad, isolated from the world around her and locked in constant conversation with herself, admiring her beautiful "blue eyes".

Each of the four sections forms a unit of the plot. But interestingly, the interrelatedness of the fragments is established by lines from the Dick and Jane Primer. Portions of the primer are used as indifferent backdrops to many sections. As one moves from one section to the other, one notices that the punctuation formalities of the lines from the primer are dispensed with. Morrison uses a run-on fragment from the primer to begin a chapter. The fragment chosen is appropriate to the subject of that particular section. These undifferentiated words are juxtaposed with Morrison's description of Pecola's house:

There is an abandoned store on the southeast corner of Broadway....
Visitors who drive to this tiny town wonder why it has not been torn down, while pedestrians, who are residents of the neighbourhood, simply look away when they pass it. (*The Bluest Eye* 24)

Pecola's house is so ugly that people wish it demolished. At the least, they try to ignore its existence. So the "green and white" house in the primer is severely contrasted with the reality of the blacks of which Pecola's house is a metaphor. The indistinguishable words are a pointer to the chaos of black establishments and underscore their ugliness that is juxtaposed with the happy family, middle American, romantic beauty myth. In this context, Khayati comments that the black person's consciousness of his/her body is "a negative activity", because it is mediated through the mechanisms of a supremacist discourse.

'In the white world the man [sic] of color encounters difficulties in the development of his 'bodily schema', because superimposed upon 'the corporeal schema' is 'a historical-racial schema' fabricated 'out of a thousand details, anecdotes, stories'.... Unconsciously the black person distrusts what is black in him/herself, and desires what belongs to the white person. *The Bluest Eye* deals with this unconscious desire, and shows how under severe white cultural imposition the black person can undergo ... 'a kind of scission, a fracture of consciousness'. (315)

The fragmented narrative of *The Bluest Eye* defies chronology, which is one of the characteristic features of the fantastic mode of narration. Chronology is defied as the past, present and future are fused into an eternal present. The stories of Cholly's childhood, of his aunt, of Pauline's childhood and even of Soaphead seem to happen at the same time as of the narration. This defiance of chronology is in consonance with the African oral tradition. Morrison continuously improvises on the central plot. Many free-floating plots and episodes prop up the central plot. The structure of *The Bluest Eye* is rhythmic and circular rather than linear. In an interview, Morrison herself says that "the movement, the rhythm [of *The Bluest Eye*] is circular, although the circles are broken. If you go back to the beginnings, you can get pushed along towards the end" (Tate 124). The narrative presents multiple plots which are not complete in themselves, but depend upon all the other plots to gain complete meaning. Each plot tempts the reader into exploring the narrative further. Indeed, the many asymmetrical plots are broken circles that help define the bigger circle, the main plot. Analysing the chapter, 'Spring', Barbara Christian writes:

The organization of this chapter is that of the sounding of motifs and the exploration of their reverberations. The chapter is a jazz composition rather than a sonata. Chords are sounded and then transformed and resounded as they are affected by other chords. Morrison's composition would lose its essence, its force, if reduced to linear structures. Cyclical

as nature, circular as spring's first twigs, this chapter defies linear analysis. (145)

The narrative in *The Bluest Eye* cannot be subjected to a linear analysis of structure. There is a harmonious progress as each 'chord' is sounded, transformed and resounded with a new force and meaning in the narrative. That is, the delving into the past and into the minds of the characters associated with Pecola ultimately make her destruction comprehensible. Like a musician, Morrison "connects Pecola Breedlove's desire for the bluest eyes to Mrs. Breedlove's restricted spirit and Cholly Breedlove's sense of unworthiness, to Geraldine's fear of funk and Soaphead Church's sterility, to Maureen's fate as an eternal dream child and Claudia's ache to be whole. By exploring the devastating effects that the Western ideas of beauty and romantic love have on a vulnerable girl, this novelist also demonstrates how these ideas can invert the natural order of an entire culture" (Christian 153). The objective, symbolically represented by the quest for blue eyes, forms the central plot of the novel.

Thus, the narrative is made unconventional and defamiliarized. Narrative qualities such as strangeness, contraries, contradictions, the existential anxiety of the characters and the subjective dislocation of the central character are the other vital aspects of the fantastic mode. Idolization of the dominant white culture makes the blacks act strangely. For example, Pauline is happy only when she goes to the movies or spends time working as a servant for the Fishers. She is a mother of two children, Sammy and Pecola. But she hates them and showers all her love and affection on the daughter of her white master. Pauline is disillusioned at the birth of Pecola. She instantly hates her infant daughter whom she describes as a "cross between a puppy and a dying man" (*The Bluest Eye* 97-98). She hates her husband, children, and above all, her own physical appearance because she feels that they prevent her from identifying herself with the white film actress, Jean Harlow.

Similarly, Geraldine suppresses the natural instincts of motherhood and love. She meets all the physical needs of her only son, Junior, but does not indulge any of his emotional desires. She reserves her 'funkiness' for her cat alone, thus teaching her son hatred instead of love. Maureen Peal is "a high yellow dream child" (47) who "enchanted the entire school" (48) with her "silo green eyes" and an air of prosperity about her. She is not black. She is an affluent coloured girl who becomes the ideal and envy of all. Unfortunately, the reality of her situation shows through the crack in her demeanour. Unlike normal children, she indulges in obscene talk about men and boys. Imitation has made her vain and destroyed her childlike innocence. Natural phenomena, too, seem strange and new. Children wait "for spring, when there could be gardens" (47), but spring refuses to sprout seeds. Moreover, spring "holds no cheer" for little black children. For them, spring brings more pain than winter. Instead of cheerfulness, spring offers "a nervous meanness" (75).

The black children are whipped and beaten by their parents. But the white children are loved and cherished by their parents. Morrison begins the novel with a section of the Dick and Jane Primer:

Here is the family. Mother, Father, Dick and Jane live in the green-and-white house. They are happy. See Jane ... She wants to play ... See Mother. Mother is very nice ... Mother laughs ... See Father. Father is big and strong ... Father is smiling ... Play, Jane, Play. (1)

The Dick and Jane Primer provides the picture of the ideal white family, in which father, mother and children live in perfect harmony. A perfectly ordered world is portrayed here. But in the

novel, the reader is exposed to the reality of two black families. Her parents being what they are, Pecola is deprived of a proper childhood. The reader is told that "Pecola's father had dropped his seeds in his own plot of black dirt ... What is clear now is that of all of that hope, fear, lust, love and grief, nothing remains but Pecola and the unyielding earth" (3). Unlike the girl in the primer, Pecola does not have a chance to play. Her mother, far from being nice to her, neglects and abuses her. This is quite unnatural.

The story of Geraldine, too, contradicts the myth of the ideal family. Geraldine despises her own culture and tries to imbibe the values of the dominant culture which she takes to be all "order, precision, and constancy ... clean and quiet ..." (66). She lives in a beautifully maintained house with her husband, son, and a cat like the one in the primer. But unlike the parents of the primer, she does not allow emotion to disturb the precision and order of her family. She is trained to despise her own cultural values. As Morrison observes:

[Geraldine is one of those who] go to land-grant colleges, normal schools, and learn to do the white man's work with refinement: home economics to prepare his food; teacher education to instruct black children with obedience; music to soothe the weary master The careful development of thrift, patience, high morals, and good manners. In short, how to get rid of the funkiness. The dreadful funkiness of passion, the funkiness of nature, the funkiness of the wide range of human emotions.

Wherever it erupts, this Funk, they wipe it away; where it crusts, they dissolve it; wherever it drips, flowers or clings, they find it and fight it till it dies. They fight this battle all the way to the grave. (64)

Geraldine eradicates all signs of her native culture in herself and her family. Whatever she learns is for the benefit of the whites. She is constantly watchful and wary lest the black reality should show through her carefully groomed artificiality. Like Pauline, she imagines herself to be better than the rest of her society. But her imagination is limited and a pointer to the reality of her situation.

As a result of their anglophilia, Geraldine and Pauline divest themselves of their natural maternal feelings. Pecola's father, Cholly Breedlove, contradicts the very concept of fatherhood. Cholly's feelings for his daughter are all negative: "The sequence of his emotions was revulsion, guilt, pity, then love" (127). Love is the last emotion he feels for his offspring. Yet he has a strange feeling when he looks into Pecola's eyes: "... he would see those haunted loving eyes. The hauntedness would irritate him—the love would move him to fury ..." (127). Irritation and fury give way to a "tenderness" that wells up in him as a consequence of which he rapes her. His feeling and "tenderness" for his daughter can only be manifested in sexual assault. Cholly's love for Pecola subverts the normal father-daughter relationship. It is not even a relationship suffering from the electal complex. It is a relationship incited by both tenderness and helplessness to provide for his daughter. The narrative coaxes one into compromising with his unfamiliar expression of filial love: "Cholly loved her ... He at any rate, was the one who loved her enough to touch her, envelop her, give something of himself to her" (163). Thus, love is debased into sex. Cholly loved his daughter, but his touch was fatal because "love is never any better than the lover," and "the love of a free man is never safe" (206). The father's gift to his daughter fills "the matrix of her agony with death" (163). The pain and disillusion of this experience, along with her fervent desire for blue eyes, drives Pecola mad. The reader is made to

believe that madness is a blessing for her. It confines her to her own realm of fantasy and thereby gives her the security she yearns for; "She ... stepped over into madness, a madness which protects her..." (163).

Pecola's madness really protects her from the people who call her ugly and treat her with contempt. It protects her from the jeers of the black boys, from the Maureen Peals and Geraldines of her society, and also from the neglect of her own mother. The shroud of madness protects Pecola from her psychopathic ugliness. It offers to transcend the dissecting and contemptuous white racist gaze. George Yancy analyses this aspect of Pecola's psychopathology and says that

Pecola's identity, as we shall see, is dynamically constituted and shaped by an already existing racist narrative.... If it is Pecola as embodied, as epidermalized, that is subject to the weight of the white racist gaze. It is her *dark* body, objectified by the white gaze, that is the indelible and indubitable mark of her existence and ontological contemptibility. (Yancy 304)

Pecola carries the burden of internalized white racism. The weight of which becomes too heavy for her. Under the aspirational ideals of whiteness, she knows the deficits of her black body all too well. Standing within the purview of the white gaze, her black self is stripped, as it were, of its capacity for transcendence. In the light of this theme of prefixity Lewis Gordon writes in *Her Majesty's Other Children* that

I am overdetermined from outside. I am not the slave of the 'idea' that others have of me but of my appearance. I move slowly through the world, accustomed to aspiring no longer to appear. I proceed by crawling. Already the white looks, the only true looks, are dissecting me. (38)

Pecola's insecurity is shared by all the members of her community and causes an existential anxiety in them. For they can neither come to terms with nor dismiss their predicament. Most of them are precariously poised with a foot each in the much desired white value system and the unwanted yet inevitable black culture. They are unbalanced and desperately hold on to the idea of an imaginary superiority inside the black community. They know that their destruction is imminent, that "the line between (illusion and reality) ... was not always clear; subtle and telltale signs threatened to erode it, and the watch had to be constant" (68). Maureen Peal, a hybrid Negro, is almost a perfect imitation of the white stereotype of beauty. She is worshipped by the old and the young of the community. The grown-ups excuse her faults, while they abuse other black children for their slightest fault.

This attitude of the elders disturbs the young black children, and they grow up with a complex that they should be ashamed of being black. They feel slighted. Hatred and a negrophobia or racism is generated in them as they fail to understand the disparity. They grow pessimistic about life and become destructive. The two sisters, Frieda and Claudia, are groomed to respect their own culture. They believe that "our own pride must be asserted by refusing..." (5) the values of another culture, but are shaken when they confront the contradictions in the world outside. They become anxious as they introspect for an answer that they can use to dismiss the Maureen Peals of the society. After an argument with Maureen, they walk back home from school "sinking under the wisdom, accuracy, and relevance of Maureen's last words" (57). They begin to analyse a universal problem:

If she was cute ... then we were not. And what did that mean? We were lesser. Nicer, brighter, but still lesser. Dolls we could destroy, but we could not destroy the honey voices of parents and aunts, the obedience in the eyes of our peers, the slippery light in the eyes of our teachers when they encountered the Maureen Peals of the world. What was the secret? What did we lack? Why was it important? And so what? Guileless and without vanity we were still in love with ourselves then. We felt comfortable in our skins, enjoyed the news that our senses released to us, admired our own dirt, cultivated our scars, and could not comprehend their unworthiness. Jealousy we understood and thought natural—a desire to have what somebody else had; but envy was a strange, new feeling for us. And all the time we knew that Maureen Peal was not the Enemy and not worthy of such intense hatred. The *Thing* to fear was the *Thing* that made her beautiful and not us. (57-58)

The black children are uneasy because they cannot comprehend what they lack and cannot locate the focus of their "unworthiness". They do not understand if being different is important at all. They only know that they must fear an invisible "Enemy" that is responsible for their suffering. This invisible enemy disturbs the deep metaphysical stability of Pecola's life. Juda Bennet comments that

In the final scene, as she descends into an irretrievable madness, Pecola seems an odd cross between Ellison's Invisible Man and Larsen's Clare Kendry: She becomes invisible to herself (except for the blue eyes) and invisible to others, while also becoming the center of attention. Her unique delusion, disembodied blue eyes, seems a fitting metaphor for this paradox of being highly visible and invisible at the same time, about which the narrator reminds us when she tries 'to see her without looking at her'. (207)

This problematic relationship between the individual and the world is exemplified by Pecola. She suffers from subjective dislocation which derives from her existential anxiety. Pecola's anxiety stems from her inability to separate her ideal from reality. She is bewildered and hurt in a world where everybody rejects her as ugly. She craves for love and happiness and holds her brown eyes responsible for her misery. She strongly believes that if her eyes "were different, that is to say, beautiful, may be Cholly would be different, and Mrs. Breedlove too. May be they'd say, 'why look at pretty eyed Pecola. We mustn't do bad things in front of those pretty eyes'" (*The Bluest Eye* 34). Pecola's desire for blue eyes disturbs her ability to perceive and comprehend reality. It becomes an obsession with her and results in hallucination. She dislocates herself from reality and believes that her desire for the ideal of the white romantic myth of blue eyes, has become palpable, that she has really acquired the bluest eyes, which is an impossibility. Convinced by the godman, Soaphead Church, that God has granted her the blue eyes she most fervently sought, she merges into the self she has imagined. The dividing line between the self and the other dissolves for Pecola and she steps "over into madness".

We can conclude with George Yancy's comments that "although the textual foreground of *The Bluest Eye* explicitly portrays the psychological and bodily deformation of Pecola, ... Morrison demands that we uncover the secret of Pecola's 'ugliness', the hidden etiology of her

psychopathology, by turning her critical gaze towards the constituting activities of whiteness" (301).

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