

**DOUBLE CONSCIOUSNESS IN TONY MORRISON'S
THE BLUEST EYE – A STUDY**

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Abstract

Afro-Americans have a “peculiar sensation of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity”. They always feel “twoness - an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder”. (Bois, 2008) The term 'double-consciousness' describes the dual identity of Afro-Americans and portrays the psycho-social divisions existing in the Afro-American society. Double-consciousness is the main theme of Tony Morrison's “The Bluest Eye”. This paper analyses the double-consciousness evident in characters like Pecola, Pauline, Cholly, Maureen Peal, Geraldine, Junior, Soaphead Church, etc.

African-American literature is produced by the writers of African descent living in the United States. It deals mainly with slavery, inequality, racism, sexism, classism, cultural clash, etc. It follows the folklore tradition of storytelling and includes oral forms like spirituals, sermons, gospel music, etc. It comprises of slave narratives along with the works of writers like Phillis Wheatley, Olaudah Equiano, etc. Harlem Renaissance is one of the most significant

events in the history of black life in America. (Cotter, 1998) African-American literature becomes popular during the Harlem Renaissance of 1920s.

Throughout ages, African-American literature has been dealing with different themes. In the beginning, it deals with the evils of slavery and longing for justice and freedom. After the American Civil War, it speaks about the racist attitudes in the United States. During the American Civil Rights Movement, it discusses racial segregation and black nationalism. Recently it has been accepted into the mainstream American literature and discusses black aesthetics, black feminism, gay rights, AIDS, continuing effects of racism on African Americans, etc. (Dickson-Carr, 2005) Afro-American writers like Alex Haley, Alice Walker, and Tony Morrison have become best-sellers and are awarded prestigious prizes in the US.

Black Feminism discusses the influence of sexism, class oppression, and racism on the black women in the African American society. Alice Walker introduces the word 'Womanism' to talk about the unique problems of black women which are not experienced by the white women in the hybrid society. Weedon (2002) tries to express the similarities between postcolonial feminists and black feminists who oppose 'western feminism' as it projects the problems of white women as universal ones. Black Arts or Black Aesthetics Movement started by Amiri Baraka brings out the voices of racial and ethnic minorities in different ethnic voices.

Toni Morrison is an American novelist who writes against racism, sexism, slavery, etc. She is greatly influenced by the Black Aesthetics Movement. Though she does not call herself as a Black Feminist, she writes more about the problems faced by the black women and girls in the African American society. Her novels portray the American reality with 'visionary force and poetic import'. (Grimes, 1993) "The Bluest Eye" is her first novel. "Sula", "Song of Solomon", "Jazz", and "Beloved" are considered to be her masterpieces. She has won the Pulitzer Prize for "Beloved". She has also won the most prestigious Nobel Prize for literature.

Double-consciousness is an important term invented by W. E. B. Du Bois. Afro-Americans have a "peculiar sensation of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity". They always feel "twoness - an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder". (Bois, 2008) The term 'double-consciousness' describes the dual identity of Afro-Americans and portrays the psycho-social divisions existing in the Afro-American society.

Double-consciousness is the main theme of Tony Morrison's "The Bluest Eye". Frieda MacTeer and Claudia MacTeer are sisters who love the little girl Pecola Breedlove in spite of her ugliness. Claudia MacTeer is the narrator of the story. She narrates the story of Pecola Breedlove who is a serious victim of double-consciousness. Pecola is a little black girl 'who wanted to rise up out of the pit of her blackness and see the world with blue eyes'. She believes that everybody hates or abuses her because of her darkness. She wants blue eyes just to make her parents, schoolmates, and neighbours love her as they love white girls with blue eyes. She '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'. (166)

Afro-Americans face serious problems like 'being hated by white people' and 'being despised by their own black people'. In *The Bluest Eye*, Pecola Breedlove is treated badly both by the white people and dark-skinned people. Even her mother Pauline Breedlove hates her for being dark, dirty, and ugly. Her father Cholly Breedlove is a drunkard. He abuses Pauline and Pecola physically, mentally, and emotionally. Pecola envies the white girls with blue eyes who are treated kindly by the world. She prays to God to give blue eyes. She thinks that the way in

which the world sees her will change if she gets blue eyes like white girls. Towards the end of the novel, she gets blue eyes, but at the cost of losing her mind.

Frieda MacTeer, Claudia MacTeer, and Pecola Breedlove study in the same school. Pecola comes to Frieda's house, and Frieda gives her biscuits and milk. Pecola is not interested in the milk, but the 'blue-and-white Shirley Temple cup'. She drinks three or four cups of milk just to see and hold the Shirley Temple cup in her hand. Mrs. MacTeer scolds Pecola indirectly for drinking too much milk. Pecola and Frieda discuss how 'cu-ute' Shirley Temple is. (*The Bluest Eye*, 13) Claudia doesn't like the conversation because she dislikes Shirley. She does not envy her white skin and blue eyes. But she grudges her for dancing with Bojangles who is her favourite uncle.

Unlike the dark girls like Pecola, Claudia hates the black people's admiration for white beauty. For this reason, she hates white girls and white dolls. When black girls admire and adore white dolls with blue eyes and blonde hair, Claudia examines the white doll's nose, blue eyeballs, and yellow hair to find out 'what it is that all the world said is lovable'. Being unprejudiced and rational, she doesn't find anything but 'a mere metal roundness' in the white dolls. (16)

Claudia destroys white dolls and abuses white girls. She wants to know what makes people admire white girls and say "Awwwww" and ignore black girls on the streets. (17) She strongly believes that dark girls are as beautiful as white girls. When everybody hates Pecola for her darkness, Frieda and Claudia love her and provide her with good friendship and emotional support. Their white neighbour Rosemary Villanucci spies the girls and make frequent complaints about them to their mother. Frieda and Claudia manage to scold or beat the white woman to take revenge.

Claudia has a lot of sympathy for the Breedloves who suffer from self-hatred and double-consciousness. She explains that they live in a storefront not because of their poverty, but because they think that they are ugly. "Their poverty is traditional and stultifying; it is not unique. But their ugliness is unique." (30) She wants to find where their ugliness lies but couldn't find the source. She further says, "It comes from conviction, their conviction. It is as though some mysterious all-knowing master had given each one a cloak of ugliness to wear, and they had each accepted it without question." (30)

Pecola Breedlove wants people to love her as they love white girls. She goes to a white shopkeeper. He looks at her angrily, and this makes her sad. She thinks that he hates her for her blackness. "It has an edge; somewhere in the bottom lid is the distaste. She has seen it lurking in the eyes of all white people. So. The distaste must be for her, her blackness." (40) She buys Mary Janes candy and admires the beauty of the white girl printed on the wrapper. She eats the candy as if she is eating her eyes. She wants to be as beautiful as Mary Jane. Her passion for blue eyes and white skin is described obscenely by the narrator: "Three pennies had bought her nine lovely orgasms with Mary Jane. Lovely Mary Jane, for whom a candy is named." (42)

When black girls are disgraced, light-skinned rich girl Maureen Peal is considered superior in the school. Frieda and Claudia hate her and try to find mistakes in her. All the others in the school seem to respect her for her light-coloured skin. "When teachers called on her, they smiled encouragingly. Black boys didn't trip her in the halls; white boys didn't stone her, white girls didn't suck their teeth when she was assigned to be their work partners; black girls stepped aside when she wanted to use the sink in the girls' toilet, and their eyes genuflected under sliding lids." (50)

Maureen Peal saves Frieda, Claudia, and Pecola from the abuse of school boys who feel hatred and shame for their own blackness. Pecola is attracted towards her while Frieda and

Claudia become angry at her comment that they are black - "Black? Who you calling black?" "You!" "You think you so cute!" (59) They try to hit Maureen and shout her nickname "Six-finger-dog-tooth-meringue-pie!" (59) They hate her for being light-skinned, speaking about blackness to them, and talking about nakedness to Pecola.

Geraldine's is a wealthy neat black woman who loves only her cat for its 'cleanliness'. She instructs her son Junior to play only with white kids and not niggers. "She had explained to him the difference between colored people and niggers. They were easily identifiable. Colored people were neat and quiet; niggers were dirty and loud." (70) According to her, she and her family belong to the first group as they are rich and neat. Though Junior wants to play 'King of Mountains' with his black friends and feel the dirt while rolling down on the soil, he avoids everything for the sake of 'cleanliness'. Initially he likes Bay Boy and P. L. Slowly he convinces himself that Ralph Nisensky is good for him and remains doing nothing. (71)

Junior wants to be a nigger, but he is compelled to behave like a white boy. He longs for true affection from his mother and hates her cat. Getting frustrated, he develops the habit of abusing vulnerable black children. He calls Pecola to his house and throws his mother's cat on her. He enjoys a lot by torturing her. He laughs heartily on seeing her getting frightened and crying. When his mother Geraldine enters the house, he tells her that Pecola tries to kill her cat. She gets terribly angry and shouts, "You nasty little black bitch. Get out of my house." (76) Pecola is deeply offended by the physical and verbal abuse in the wealthy black household of Geraldine.

Frieda and Claudia go to see Pecola in the white household where Pauline Breedlove works as a maid. Pecola becomes sad while hearing a white child calling her mother 'Polly', even when Pecola calls her mother Mrs. Breedlove. (85) Out of anger or nervousness, she drops the silver dish with boiling berry cobbler on her feet. Instead of applying medicine on her burn or consoling her, Pauline beats her and warns her to leave the room immediately. She curses her for making her 'clean' room 'dirty' with berry cobbler. "Crazy fool... my floor, mess... look what you... work get on out now out crazy... my floor, my floor... my floor." (85) A little white girl in the white household cries and Pauline convinces her by saying that she will make fresh berry cobbler for her. She utters 'honey' words to the white child after throwing words like 'rotten pieces of apples' on her own black child and her black friends. (86)

Pecola's mother Pauline Breedlove herself is a victim of double-consciousness. Her sense of beauty is shattered by her deformed foot and broken tooth. When Cholly makes love with her, she feels young, pretty, strong, and powerful. After marriage, they go to a distant place for livelihood. She grows disappointed with Cholly's blackness and behaviour. She develops the interest for buying costly clothes to seek constant attention from her neighbours. She adores white people even when she remembers her delivery experience in a hospital where a white doctor explains his juniors that black women 'deliver right away and with no pain... just like horses.' (101) She explains that it doesn't mean that black women don't have pain as they don't 'hoop or holler' in pain as the white women. (101) Being attracted towards whiteness, she becomes a maid, neglects her house, children, and husband, and finds 'beauty, order, cleanliness, and praise' in her white master's household. (104)

Pecola's father Cholly Breedlove is an orphan brought up by Aunt Jimmy. He is compelled to make love with his girl friend Darlene in front of two white men who come in search of their dog during hunting. He believes that the white men are strong and armed, and his anger on them may destroy him forever. So he diverts his anger towards the black girl Darlene. Later he seeks innocent country-love in Pauline. Pauline who adores beauty and cleanliness loves

Cholly as she feels beautiful, strong, and powerful in Cholly's presence. Slowly she hates him for his unclean behaviour. Being attracted towards 'whiteness and cleanliness', she couldn't love the 'dark and dirty' Cholly fully and becomes a maid in a white household. Cholly becomes a drunkard and tortures Pauline and Pecola.

'Dirty black' Cholly rapes her daughter Pecola while the 'clean old man' Soaphead Church misuses young girls who come to the church. Soaphead Church is a 'cinnamon-eyed West Indian with lightly browned skin' from mixed ancestry. His original name is Elihue Micah Whitcomb. He is a misanthrope, but he works as a priest and declares himself as the 'Reader, Adviser, and Interpreter of Dreams'. (139) He hates 'flesh on flesh'. He lacks the courage to become a 'homosexual'. He hates 'bestiality' and 'sodomy'. "His attentions gradually settled on those humans whose bodies were least offensive—children... Since little boys were insulting, scary, and stubborn, he further limited his interests to little girls. They were usually manageable and frequently seductive." (139) He doesn't feel guilty for his actions. Instead he justifies his actions by saying that the young girls too enjoy and don't make complaints. In his letter to God, he says, "And there wasn't nastiness, and there wasn't any filth, and there wasn't any odor, and there wasn't any groaning--just the light white laughter of little girls and me... No look that makes you feel dirty afterward. That makes you want to die. With little girls it is all clean and good and friendly." (153)

Pecola goes to Soaphead Church with the wish of getting blue eyes. He directs her to poison a weak dirty dog in his landlord's house. Pecola goes with the satisfaction that God will grant her wish as she has done what the priest has asked her to do. In the meanwhile, she is impregnated by Cholly. Instead of sympathising her, the whole neighbourhood curses her. "Can't help but be. Ought to be a law: two ugly people doubling up like that to make more ugly. Be better off in the ground." (157) Frieda and Claudia can not fully understand the situation. But they pity Pecola and pray for her child. 'More strongly than her fondness for Pecola', Claudia wants the baby to survive "just to counteract the universal love of white baby dolls, Shirley Temples, and Maureen Peals". (158)

During her pregnancy, Pecola becomes mentally unstable. She believes that God has granted her blue eyes through Soaphead Church. She keeps talking to her imaginary friend about her blue eyes. Because of her illicit pregnancy, her mother and neighbours don't look at her or talk to her. But she thinks that they avoid her as they are jealous of her blue eyes. She questions whether her imaginary friend is also jealous of her blue eyes. She asks whether her eyes are bluer than those of Joanna, Michelena, and other white ladies.

In spite of Frieda and Claudia's prayer and sacrifice, Pecola's still-born child dies. Pauline Breedlove moves to the edge of the town. She continues doing housework. Cholly dies in the workhouse. Claudia comments that Cholly loves Pecola a lot. But his love is fatal. "He, at any rate, was the one who loved her enough to touch her, envelop her, give something of himself to her. But his touch was fatal, and the something he gave her filled the matrix of her agony with death." (168) She adds that "Love is never any better than the lover. Wicked people love wickedly, violent people love violently, weak people love weakly, stupid people love stupidly, but the love of a free man is never safe." (168) She says that the lover alone enjoys and the loved one suffers. "The lover alone possesses his gift of love. The loved one is shorn, neutralized, frozen in the glare of the lover's inward eye." (168)

After all these incidents, Frieda and Claudia never see Pecola. They feel sad that their wish and sacrifice have become a waste and regret that 'it's much, much, much too late'. (168) Claudia reflects that the little, black, ugly girl has made the neighbourhood look beautiful and

decent. “All of our waste which we dumped on her and which she absorbed. And all of our beauty, which was hers first and which she gave to us. All of us--all who knew her--felt so wholesome after we cleaned ourselves on her. We were so beautiful when we stood astride her ugliness. Her simplicity decorated us, her guilt sanctified us, her pain made us glow with health, her awkwardness made us think we had a sense of humor. Her inarticulateness made us believe we were eloquent. Her poverty kept us generous. Even her waking dreams we used--to silence our own nightmares. And she let us, and thereby deserved our contempt.” (167) Claudia comments that the whole neighbourhood feels happy and relieved on seeing the sufferings of Pecola.

Double-consciousness hurts the feelings, thoughts, and behaviour of the black people. They develop self-hatred and begin to long for whiteness. They adore white people even though they are abused or insulted by them. Pecola is hated by white people, despised by her own mother, raped by her own father, tortured by black children, and cursed by her black neighbourhood. She is deserted by Frieda and Claudia too. The little black girl who is a victim of double-consciousness wants to get blue eyes just to be treated kindly like the white girls. She is betrayed not only by the white people, but also by her dark-skinned parents and neighbours who themselves suffer from double-consciousness. Mentally deranged, she lives alone with the satisfaction that she has got the blue eyes. “No one else will see her blue eyes. But she will. And she will live happily ever after.” (154)

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