

THE NATURE AND EFFECT OF PANOPTICON IN TONI MORRISON'S *THE BLUEST EYE*

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Abstract

The *Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison explores how the mechanic of 'panopticon' internalizes white ideology and hegemonic disciplinary on African –American community thought various technical processes that adversely affect the black psychology and black community. The so-called 'culture' and 'civilization' are identified by some standards introduced by the powerful or privileged group of a society. And these standards like social values , norms, rules and regulations are naturally adopted by other people without any questioning and finally these rules and so called 'standards' work as watch-guard of the society and monitor others' lifestyle, activities, etc. Similar to this is the mechanism 'panopticon', which monitors the African-American blacks and thus constructs their identity, affects their psychology. The results are loss of identity, disillusionment, self-hatred, sense of anger, inferiority complex, even violence regarding the text *The Bluest Eye*.

Foucault uses the term 'panopticon' on the discussion of various forms of power especially on 'disciplinary power' which suggest the association with 'technologies of regulation, monitoring and surveillance,' to operate continuously by changing patterns of behavior and tends to take place through some institution like person, school, church, media and some other modern technologies. And Jeremy Bentham, a utilitarian philosopher means by the term 'panopticon':

“an architectural form in which a guard in a central tower could see into surrounding cell but not be seen by themselves. Prisoners would be subject to the gaze being watched. As a result they would have to constantly monitor their actions and be on their best behavior”.

So, panopticon is a surveillance system. In the context of *The Bluest Eye*, it is not merely a visual device like the watch tower of the prison house: it subtly works through the life of an individual. Another term that goes with the mechanic system of panopticon is 'gaze'. Both the mechanics of 'gaze' and 'panopticon' function in the social level by enforcing an identity of inferiority. The way of admiration, acceptance and praise for any human being can simply be

understood by other men's 'look', at the same time disgust, unworthiness, abandonment, rejection for some person can also be understood through 'gaze'. Thus, by 'panopticon' and 'gaze' people are automatically identified and controlled. Panopticon thus focuses on Marxist views of class relations and capitalism. Marxist Louis Althusser in working to reproduce capitalism made use of two kinds of system. One of them is 'ideological state apparatus' consisted of institution that 'promulgated illusion about the nature and organization of society'. In the process of enabling capitalism, class awareness and true freedom is handicapped. Trying to get out of this is not easy and proves to futility and isolations as the whole world is now bound to be observed by the watchdog named capitalism. And, in the same way, the white cultural value spears all over the black society itself becomes senseless about their own originality and without questioning accept the white ideology through oral negation of him/ herself. This is the hegemonic status and here panopticon internalizes this hegemony in *The Bluest Eye*.

Now, the function of panopticon in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* is an adverse effect on the African-American people living in a traumatic situation in America. The African-Americans were brought to America as slaves and soon they are deprived of the language, symbols, beliefs, traditions, religion of their own by being overtly surrounded by the white authority. But, even though the slavery is abolished they are the victims of racial conflict, class exploitation, and cultural hegemony of the whites. Thus, grows a kind of 'peculiar sensibility' of measuring one's self through the eyes of 'others', here the whites. The functions of panopticon, controlling the blacks and constructing their identity, have been explored in the novel through the techniques, language, and characters. The structure of the novel contains a primer which is sharply in contrast to the real situation of the story. The ideal happy life of the white father-mother-Dick-Jane family is contrasted with the miserable situation of Pecola's family. Pecola is here the metonymy of the blacks living in America. Texts, scriptures, language and literature build a pattern of living an ideal happy life. They idealize and almost shape the feelings, emotion, behaviors, desire and other basic instincts of humanity and bind the whole society to adopt the dominant ideology.

The mechanism of panopticon works through the disciplinary power like the media, church and especially the school. The central authority that works behind all these sources is the state which constitutes ideologies by these institution that promulgated illusions about the nature and organization of society. School is an important tool of the panopticon mechanism. It provides training to become a passive, complaint workforce of panopticon and assures one to have reliable income which will bring a nice apartment, luxurious life and all the boons of modern technology. But this white educational system is invented only to exploit the people like black in a capitalist enterprise. Black people entering this system are actually losing their capability of choosing their goal by being obsessed with the idea of white life style. So, when the black people go to these schools they actually accept the master's policy:

'They go to land-grant colleges, normal schools and learn how to do white man's works with refinement; home economics to prepare his food; teaching education to instruct black children in obedience; music to soothe the weary master and entertain his blunted soul'. [Morrison. 1920:64]

In *The Bluest Eye*, media policy also plays a vital role as 'panopticon'. The master people construct a standard of ethic, beauty, happiness and attitude and project them through the media confirming the authenticity of the white authorship:

"Adults, older girls, shops, magazines, newspapers, window sign-all the world had agreed that a blue-eyed, yellow-haired, pink-skinned doll was

that every child treasured. ‘Here’ they said this is beautiful, and if you are on this day worthy you may have it’. [Morrison, 1920:64]

In Pecola’s obsession with Shirley Temple Cup, we find a desire to be something different. Unloved by Cholly, Pauline starts to go to movies to escape loneliness, and at the movies, she tries to identify herself with those characters. So, the beauty of women is suggested through the white actresses called Shirley Temples, Mary Jane, Greta Garbo, Ginger Rogers, emblem of pure beauty. The white skin, sharp nose, blue eyes, blonde hair become the standard of beauty. ‘Black people’ and ‘blackness’ is not at all considered as beauty. Morrison says, “The concept of physical beauty as a virtue is one of the dumbest, most pernicious and destructive ideas of the Western world, and we should have nothing to do with it... Its absence or presence was only important to them, the white people who used it for anything they wanted”. [Morrison, 1920:64] Morrison identifies the media policy and wants to create awareness of it.

Church is another instrument to watch over and control a community of a group. God is an extremely panopticon guard who keeps us alert of sin and punishment and through His omnipotent characteristics shapes our everyday life full of fear, and confusion and confession. Being a believer of God we do not want to question and justify His presence and authority. Church is the medium of God for the people who unquestioningly accept His rules and authority in a word. In *The Bluest Eye*, Soaphead Church is this kind of institution which itself despises blackness. So it becomes dangerous and gives false guidance to person like Pecola for whom it is the only reliable source of knowledge. All these sources described above work through ‘interpellation’ and ‘internalization,’ to complete the fatal endings of panopticon.

Results of panopticon are mostly fatal, bringing up loss of identity, disillusionment, creating alterity, marginality, and anger, self-hatred and violence among the African-American people. And, we find these in all black characters in the novel, including Pecola, Cholly and Claudia in an extreme point.

Morrison’s story is actually about a young black girl, Pecola’s growing self-hatred. Pecola Breedlove inherits a crushing sense of inferiority and ugliness from her family. She considers if she had the ‘blue eyes’ like the whites she could change the odd situation of her parents quarrel to a happy one and can get their love. Thus, Pecola internalizes the white standards of beauty. School also encourages Pecola’s self negation about her. For all these, the desire for blue eyes tends to be her obsession. And finally, being humiliated by the rape of own father, Pecola desperately goes mad and craves for not ‘blue eyes’ but the ‘bluest’ ones. Pecola, suffering from a sense of self-loathing and false identity being raped by her father, rusticates into schizophrenia. Finally, she goes insane and in her split personality talks to a friend, alter-ego about her having the ‘bluest eye’. It is the white ideology and hegemony that finally leads her to be blind to accept the reality.

Through multiple narrators – each from a different social class – Morrison represents how pervasive scapegoating is. These streams of consciousness – random strands of thoughts running across each narrator's mind – this disparate chaos emerges to create a distinct sense of dichotomy, suggesting that racism pervades every strata of the society and leaves no one untainted. Cholly Breedlove is another prime example of self-hatred. Abandoned by mother, Cholly is brought up by Aunt Jimmy in his childhood. And being humiliated by two white hunters who enjoy the blacks sexual intercourse, Cholly becomes violent not to the whites but to Darlene. So, the blacks are now angry with their black identity and blackness in this situation of America. Finally, Cholly’s rape of his own daughter is his misconception of love which takes

place due to the white humiliation; it is the ‘panopticon’ effect to shape the psychology of the black.

Pauline and Geraldine have their own response to the white ideology and hegemony. Pauline, being a black tries to follow the characters on the movie screen. It is Pauline who looks at her daughter’s eyes and sees only ugliness and later becomes a ‘perfect servant’ consoling the little pink and White Fisher girl at expense of her own confused and injured daughter’s feeling. Concept of ‘beauty’, as her concept of cleanliness is the result of desire to be white. And her quest for upward social mobility encompasses a self-hatred that makes her avoid all reminders of her originality, individuality and African heritage. So under the influence of white ideology and hegemonic disciplinary, the African-American grow the sense of self-hatred and self-negation, in losing their own identity became violent.

But Morrison shows a different kind of response to the hegemonic situation through the character of Claudia. Through Claudia, Morrison gives us subtle suggestions for how to overcome the situation created by the white society and state through ‘panopticon’. In the section ‘After words,’ she directly speaks of her view of reclaiming racial beauty and identifying the machination behind losing it. Claudia is an exception who survives the entire predicament upon the African-American people to recognize their own true identity. Claudia’s dismembering the white doll reflects on her negation to the white concept of beauty, and white ideology. She frequently asks why white is always beautiful and black is always ugly. She gets angry towards the system and adopts her own ideology of her black self. Through the sisterhood of Claudia, Frieda and Pecola and the ‘nonauthoritarian and nonhierarchical’ laughter of China, Poland and Rosemary who assert their identities through prostitution, Morrison tries to hint what is to be achieved by the women themselves from coming out double humiliation by the whites and their own black men.

In the novel ‘beauty’ is very specifically (de)constructed as something that unfortunately not everyone achieve. And in the story not being beautiful is equitable with not being loved. Toni Morrison tries to figure out the nature of panopticon and its consequent effect on the black psychology and thus give some subtle suggestions for the blacks to overcome the adverse situation. And, Morrison’s theory is also immensely applicable for any community or society, as the root of panopticon lies under any society or state. ‘Panopticon’ is a hegemonic power policy to fulfill the power system by making the unprivileged slave or inferior. So, by being aware of his, one should avoid the dangerous ending like self-destruction.

Workcited

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