

TONY MORRISON'S *THE BLUEST EYE*: A CRITIQUE OF CULTURAL HEGEMONY

Ms. Maya Sitaram Salve
Lecturer in English,
Department of Science and Humanities
Bharati Vidyapeeth Institute of Technology,
Belapur, Navi Mumbai, Maharashtra, INDIA.

Abstract

This research paper analyses Tony Morrison's The Bluest Eye to demonstrate the role played by cultural hegemony in the lives of African-Americans. Through a close reading of the text and analyses of some of the important characters the paper attempts to deconstruct the cultural hegemonic forces subtly at work on the black community that make it internalize the western values and standards in every walk of its life assuming them to be its own.

Key Words: cultural hegemony, appropriation, internalization, co-opt, etc.

“If ideology were merely some abstract, imposed set of notions, if our social and political and cultural ideas and assumptions and habits were merely the result of specific manipulation, of a kind of overt training which might be simply ended or withdrawn, then the society would be very much easier to move and to change than in practice it has ever been or is.” (Williams 37).

The Bluest Eye is the first novel by the Nobel Laureate Tony Morrison first published in 1970. She began writing her novel in the 1960s when the Black is Beautiful movement was working to regain African-American beauty. The formation of the blacks as the other of the whites is the first stage in the project of cultural appropriation. The novel depicts the life of the black community at a very (later) developed stage of this project. It portrays how the members of the black community internalize the western culture and its standards in every walk of their life and live them assuming them their own. It makes a very strong statement about the damage that cultural hegemony can do and builds a very strong case against the

project and politics of appropriation of culture used to sustain and perpetuate the otherwise subtly operating hegemonic power structures.

Morrison begins the novel with a parody of the project of cultural appropriation through the school reading primer of Dick and Jane. The primer describes an ideal white family consisting of Dick and Jane and their lovely parents living in a beautiful and comfortable house with a charming dog and a cat. The Dick and Jane text serves as “the hegemonizing force of an ideology ([focused by] the supremacy of ‘the bluest eye’) by which a dominant culture reproduces [its] hierarchical power structure[s]” (Grewal 24). By parodying the primer Morrison attempts to tease out one of the cultural hegemonic forces. At the same time, she is attempting to underscore the role played by education as a hegemonic cultural force. She is conscious of the power of ideology. Donald B. Gibson argues:

The Dick and Jane text implies one of the primary and most insidious ways that the dominant culture exercises its hegemony, through the educational system. It reveals the role of education in both oppressing the victim- and more to the point- teaching the victim how to oppress her own black self by internalizing the values that dictate standards of beauty (20).

Pecola Breedlove is the protagonist of the novel. She is a delicate, passive and very fragile girl child of just eleven years. She wishes to have blue eyes because she perceives herself to be ugly. Most of the characters in the novel too feel that she is ugly. She strongly believes that the blue eyes will change how others see her and what she is forced to see. The accuracy of this belief is established by her experience of being teased by the black boys when Maureen Peal rescues her; it seems that these boys do not have the courage to misbehave under Maureen’s attractive gaze. The standard of beauty that her peers swear by is represented by Shirley Temple (a highly popular white child actress of the day), who has the much-desired blue eyes. Claudia informs that when Frieda brings Pecola some milk in a Shirley Temple cup, “She was a long time with the milk, and gazed fondly at the silhouette of Shirley Temple’s dimpled face. Frieda and she had a loving conversation about how cute Shirley Temple was” (Morrison 17). Claudia further reports about Pecola’s fascination for Shirley Temple, “We knew she was fond of the Shirley Temple cup and took every opportunity to drink milk out of it just to handle and see sweet Shirley’s face” (Morrison 21).

Her excessive and expensive milk-drinking from the Shirley Temple cup is part of her desire to internalize the values of white culture – a symbolic moment that presages her wish to possess blue eyes.

Pecola's ugliness is further underscored by the fact that she perceives that every part of her body disappears except for her eyes, fulfilling her wish partially every time her parents quarrel. She thinks that as long as she is ugly and looks the way she does she cannot run away from her family like her brother Sammy. She tries to find out the secret of her ugliness, the ugliness that made her ignored or despised at school, by teachers and classmates alike. She is the only member of her class who sits alone at a double desk. Her teachers never even glance at her and call on her only when everyone is required to respond. Whenever any girl wants to insult a boy, she will tell that the boy loves Pecola as if loving Pecola is the biggest insult that can be inflicted upon a person.

Mr. Yacobowski, a white immigrant, does not treat Pecola well because of her blackness. She sees lurking in his eyes vacuum edged with distaste for her which she always perceives in white eyes. He talks to her with phlegm and impatience mingled in his voice. When she holds money towards him, he hesitates, not wanting to touch her hand. In one of the incidents in the novel some black boys tease Pecola calling her 'blackemo'. The contempt for the blackness of these black boys gave more teeth to this insult. By calling Pecola 'blackemo' they were demonstrating their self-hatred and self-loathing. It is interesting to note that it is only when Maureen Peal, a light skinned rich immigrant girl intervenes that these boys leave the scene. Junior says that nobody ever plays with Pecola probably because she is ugly. She is wrongly blamed for killing Geraldine's cat who asks Pecola to get out of her house calling her 'a nasty little black bitch'.

One may still understand the way Pecola is treated by others but it is shocking to know that her parents treat her equally badly. It is the treatment meted out to her by her parents than by others that makes Pecola go mad. Pecola is also a symbol of the black community's self-hatred and belief in its own ugliness. Others in the community, including her parents and Geraldine, give vent to their own self-hatred by expressing hatred toward her. At the end of the novel, we are told that Pecola has been a scapegoat for the entire community. Her ugliness has made them feel beautiful, her suffering has made them feel comparatively lucky, and

her silence has given them the opportunity for speaking. But because she continues to live after she has lost her mind, Pecola's aimless wandering at the edge of town haunts the community, reminding them of the ugliness and hatred that they have tried to repress. She becomes a reminder of human cruelty and an emblem of human suffering.

The narrator of the novel *Claudia MacTeer* is an independent and determined nine-year-old black girl. She is a fighter and rebels against adults' tyranny over children and against the black community's idealization of white beauty standards. She has not yet learned the self-hatred that infests her peers. Like Pecola, she too suffers from racist standards of beauty. She fights back vehemently when she is abused. She explains that she is brave because she has not yet learned her limitations- most important, she has not yet come to learn the self-hatred that plagues so many adults in her community. She hates Shirley Temple. Instead of having a blonde, blue-eyed baby doll for Christmas she prefers to indulge her senses in wonderful scents, sounds, and tastes. She is baffled as to why everyone else thinks such dolls are adorable, and she pulls apart her gifted doll to locate its beauty. This outrages the adults but she points out that they never asked her what she wanted for Christmas. She explains that her hatred of dolls turns into a hatred of little white girls and then into a false love of whiteness and cleanliness.

Claudia's life is affected in subtle yet profound ways by racism, especially in the sense that it distorts her standards of beauty. Morrison very effectively uses the cultural icon of Shirley Temple and the popular children's dolls of the 1940s to illustrate mass culture's influence on young black girls. When Claudia states that, unlike Frieda, she has not reached the point in her psychological "development" when her hatred of Shirley Temple and dolls will turn to love, the irony of the statement is crystal clear. She candidly assumes that the beauty others see in the doll must be physically inside it, and so she takes apart the doll to search for its beauty. She has not yet learned that beauty is a matter of cultural norms and that the doll is beautiful not in and of itself but rather because the culture she lives in believes whiteness is superior.

Claudia's hatred of white dolls extends to white girls, and Morrison uses this process as a starting point to study the complex love-hate relationship between blacks and whites. What horrifies Claudia most about her own treatment of white girls is the disinterested

nature of her hatred. She hates them for their whiteness, not for more justifiable personal reasons. Ultimately, her shame of her own hatred hides itself in feigned love. By describing the sequence of hating whiteness but then coming to embrace it, Claudia diagnoses the black community's worship of white images (as well as cleanliness and denial of the body's desires) as a complicated kind of self-hatred. It is not simply that black people learn to believe that whiteness is beautiful because they are surrounded by white America's advertisements and movies; Claudia suggests that black children start with a healthy hatred of the claims to white superiority but that their guilt at their own anger then transforms hatred into a false love to compensate for that hatred.

A light-skinned, wealthy black girl, Maureen Peal enralls the entire school because of her light skin. Claudia and Frieda dislike and search for flaws in her. They are relieved to discover that she has a dog tooth and stumps where her sixth fingers are removed. When the MacTeer girls see black boys harassing Pecola they try to protect her but it looks as if the boys will beat up them when Maureen turns up. The boys immediately leave the scene. Later when the girls argue Claudia accuses Maureen of being crazy for boys and Maureen tells the girls they are black and ugly. Pecola is pained, and Claudia secretly worries that what Maureen has said is true.

Maureen Peal underscores that whiteness is beautiful and blackness is ugly. At first, Claudia responds to Maureen with jealousy- she simply wants the pretty things Maureen possesses. But this jealousy makes way to a more destructive envy, as Claudia begins to doubt that in order to possess the things that Maureen has, she must look like Maureen. She remains puzzled, however, by what Maureen has and what she lacks. Maureen heralds the self-hatred that will come with the onset of womanhood, when physical beauty becomes more important and the body becomes easier to shame. Claudia is not afraid of Maureen but whatever it is that makes her cute and the MacTeer girls ugly.

Maureen Peal demonstrates mass media's preference for whiteness and the effect this preference has on the lives of young girls. In a revealing moment, Maureen relates the plot of a movie she has seen in which the light-skinned daughter of a white man rejects her black mother but then cries at her mother's funeral. It is clear that Maureen revels in the melodramatic, without recognizing that it may be a reflection of her own assumption of

superiority and perhaps her own relationship with her mother who has seen the movie four times.

Pauline (Polly) Breedlove is Pecola's mother, who believes that she is ugly; this belief has made her lonely and cold. She has a deformed foot. She finds meaning not in her own family but in romantic movies and in her work caring for a well-to-do white family. Pauline inflicts a great deal of pain on her daughter. She experiences more subtle forms of humiliation than Cholly does- her lame foot convinces her that she is doomed to isolation, and the snobbery of the city women in Lorain condemns her to loneliness. In this state, she is especially vulnerable to the messages conveyed by white culture- that white beauty and possessions are the way to happiness. Once, at the movies, she fixes her hair like the white sex symbol Jean Harlow and loses her tooth while eating candy.

Though her fantasy of being like Harlow is a failure, Pauline Breedlove finds another fantasy world- the white household for which she cares. This fantasy world is more practical than her imitation of Hollywood actresses and is more socially sanctioned but it is just as effective in separating her from her family she should love. In a sense, Pauline's existence is just as haunted and delusional as her daughter's. Pauline prefers cleaning and organizing the home of her white employers to expressing physical affection toward her family. She feels most alive when she is at work, cleaning a white woman's home. She loves this home and despises her own.

Thus, Morrison teases out and exposes the project and politics of cultural appropriation of the blacks by the white dominant racist culture.

Works Cited:

Gibson, Donald B. "Text and Countertext in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*". LIT: Literature, Interpretation, Theory, Vol. 1, No. 1-2, 1989, p. 20.

Grewal, Gurleen. *Circles of Sorrow, Lines of Struggle: The Novels of Toni Morrison*. Louisiana State UP, 1998.

Morrison, Tony. *The Bluest Eye*. Vintage Books, 1999.

Williams, Raymond. *Problems in Materialism and Culture*. Verso, 1980.