

# Beauty as an Inverse Functional Paradigm in Toni Morrison's the Bluest Eye

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**Abstract-** *Toni Morrison's The Bluest Eye is a work of deep emotional outburst, filled with desperate enquiries on the bases of the prevalent racial disparity based on color. She deplores the Western standards of ideal beauty created and propagated with and amongst black community, and the damage done to black women through the construction of femininity in a racialized society based on whiteness as the standard of beauty. The novelist presents a situation where a lop-sided sense of value deprecates the moral fibre of the society. The attendant loses and damages are unquantifiable, exemplified in the Breedlove's family. Beauty is a physical attribute, but it is weighed higher than other more significant parameters, like moral rectitude, the bases of credible leadership on which society's development depends. This concept is highlighted by the novelist when she indicates that for Cholly Breedlove, ugliness was behavior. This study adopts Emmanuel Mounier's philosophical theory of Personalism as the critical tool to examining the moral depravity visited on the characters in the novel based on color. This theory seeks to establish and affirm the dignity of the person; it is based on the concept of the human person as an ontological whole: the nature of man as a being with a self-worth, self-esteem and unique identity. The unwholesome situation visited on the Breedlove family is an anathema to the principles enunciated in the theory of Personalism.*

## I. INTRODUCTION

"I have no doubt that if we more used to deformity (ugliness) than beauty, deformity would then lose the idea that is now annexed to it and take that of beauty .... If the whole world should agree that "yes" and "no" should change their meanings,

"yes" would then deny, and "no" would affirm" (52).

Sir Joshua Reynolds.

The concept of beauty has remained one of the controversial philosophical issues amongst the academia and philosophers alike, for the simple reason that it is difficult to outline universal criteria for the measurement of beauty, especially physical beauty, also known as extramental beauty. In this regard, Baruch Spinoza, a 17<sup>th</sup> century Dutch philosopher, considered to be one of the great rationalists of the time, is credited to have inaugurated the modern trend of questioning the objective reality of extramental, that is, outward beauty. Spinoza's thesis gave rise to what is now known as 'Aesthetic Relativism'. Arising from this, the cliché the 'beauty is in the eye of the beholder' represents the ascendancy of aesthetic relativism.

However, the requirement for mutual intelligibility in language-use provoked the need for the convocation or group conferral of definitive linguistic meanings on specific objects, attitudes and feelings within particular language environments. This eclectic view holds same for the concept of beauty. This perception avers with the contention of Joshua Reynolds in the above cited epigraph, that if the world would agree, it could transpose the meanings of "beauty" and "ugliness" or "yes" and "no" etc, so much so that the connotative meanings of these words would be deflected. This is the crux of Plato's postulation when he declared that "a rose by any other name smells the same". In essence, the beauty of the specie of the flower called 'rose' is much enduring than the label.

In *The Bluest Eye*, Toni Morrison presents the story of a young African-American girl and her family, who are affected by the dominant American culture. It tells the story of Pecola, an 11-year-old African-American girl who is described as poor, black and ugly. At the core, the novelist, amongst other things, emphasizes

that the concept of beauty transcends visual perception and realization, as it embodies the totality of an individual's disposition, coupled with ability. Writing in a color-conscious and highly racialized American society which had instituted the stereotypes that white is angelic and black devilish, Morrison dramatizes the ludicrousness of institutional classification of beauty based on skin pigmentation, and highlights the destructiveness of self-loathing and racial abnegation. *The Bluest Eye* is a story about the oppression of women. The novel's women not only suffer the horrors of racial oppression, but also the tyranny and violation brought upon them by the men in their lives. The novel depicts several levels of a woman's development into womanhood in a color-conscious society.

## II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Emmanuel Mounier was a 20<sup>th</sup> Century philosopher, theologian, teacher and essayist. He founded the philosophy of personalism. He sees modern civilization as fundamentally derailed by materialism, individualism and capitalism. Thence, he evolved the philosophical theory of personalism to redress these evils that plagued Europe around 1929 and 1933: the offenses of fascism and totalitarianism against the human person, represented as the image and likeness of God. These were times of grave socio-political, economic and financial crises. In this situation, the personalists understood the crises as a humanitarian challenge, rather than as a political or economic issue. This notion facilitated the initiation of a peaceful revolt by the personalists through Christianity to urgently rescue the human value systems usurped from humanity by the political systems operators. This was the only means of saving mankind from the some of the evils we experienced in *The Bluest Eyes*.

Mounier adopted the idea of personalism based on Kantian ethical perspective of treating all human beings as ends in themselves, not merely as means of satisfying other people's desires and interests. The dire need for moral values in the society had beaten down the deep recesses of reason to rationalize the bases for all amoral accesses to good: the end doesn't justify the means! Despite its many doctrinal varieties and differences. One basic theme that is central to the concept of personalism, is the primacy of the human

person, created in the image and likeness of God. On this basic theme lies its inviolability and uniqueness (Williams and Bengtsonn, 2013). Emmanuel Mounier supports this position by explaining that: "A person is a spiritual being constituted as such by a mode of subsistence and independence in his being; ..." (84). In view of the evils perpetrated by the organs of the state against individuals and mankind, Mounier's personalism argues that "the state, political parties and other institutions adjacent to the state exist to serve the interests of their citizens and not the other way around" (Williams and Bengtsonn, 2013:45). Furthermore, Lazaro and Sganzeria aver that personalism objects to the concepts of materialism, individualism and deterministic idealism, because these will foster the extremes of individualism "... which ignores the promotion of the values of solidarity and healthy interpersonal relationships for the good co-existence between humans" (4).

The philosophical premises of Mounier's Personalism which celebrate the ground-norms of God, the Creator for humanity, such as happiness, development and progress, social harmony and peaceful co-existence, but are flagrantly denied blacks in the American society of Toni Morrison's era are what she sought to contend for in her novels: *Beloved*, *The Bluest Eyes*, *Sula* etc. Regrettably, the systems of slavery and the white masters deny fellow humans these natural rights, because of the color of their skin.

- **The Absurdity of a Racialized Beauty Standard.**  
The novel which spans the major seasons and times of the year is set in Loraine, Ohio. It opens in autumn with the nine-year old narrator, Claudia and her sister, Frieda attempting to deal with their family's pervasive poverty as well as the decrepit condition of their accommodation. By the order of the County authorities, the heroine, Pecola Breedlove is temporarily placed in the household of the narrator. Pecola and members of her family had been rendered homeless because her father, Cholly Breedlove burnt their house in a fit of anger and frustration. Suffering from incipient lack of fraternal love, Pecola is haunted by an obtuse feeling of lack of blue eyes which she regards as the cause of her problem. This obsession suppressed her good sense of beauty, and thus assumed that her possession of blue eyes will redress her handicap.

Pecola's father, Cholly Breedlove, much like his daughter, knew no paternal love. He was abandoned in a refuse bin at birth by his mother, and later rejected by his father, Samson Fuller when Cholly traced him later. Arising from these frustrations of parental and social rejections, Cholly Breedlove visits the crises of his personality on his household, finding expression in recurrent wife battering, an incestuous rape of his daughter, Pecola and the burning of his house.

Without parental care and turned into a refugee in her neighborhood, Pecola's search for blue eyes, her envisioned beauty identity, takes on a new urgency and intensity. Her obsession for blue eyes propels her to a spiritual charlatan and demagogue, Elihue Whitecomb, nicknamed Soaphead Church because of his alleged spiritual prowess. In their characteristic duplicity, Soaphead Church tricks her into poisoning a dog which had been offensive to him and manipulates her into a hallucinatory state leading to her dementia. In her insanity, she acquires a split personality within which she thinks that her ugliness had been redressed – believing that she has blue eyes now. The novel ends as Pecola gives birth to a baby, who died at birth. Pecola's father, Cholly Breedlove dies in workshop; her mother continues to work as a maid servant to a white family, while her brother, Sammy is forced to leave town.

In addition to the central thematic concern of the novel which dwells on the novelist's attempt to re-characterize the concept of beauty by interrogating color-oriented stereo-types, Morrison also explores other ancillary issues in the work as: an examination of the notion of white superiority; the challenges of absentee husbands; the resilience of the indefatigable black women who had assumed the double status of bread-winners and role models for their families and the recurrent social maladjustments of black children because of grinding poverty, unstable families and social discrimination.

In an authorial post-note to the novel, she called *Afterword* published in 1993, twenty-three years after the publication of the novel, Toni Morrison expressed what can be regarded as the literary manifesto of the novel, when she declared that "Beauty was not simply something to behold; it was something one could do. *The Bluest Eye* was my first effort to say something

about that; ..." (*Afterword, 1993*). Following the above self-declared thematic opus to the novel, critics have come to opine strongly that *The Bluest Eye* emerges not only as a metaphorical paradigm for an examination of the concept of beauty, but as the bases for the exploration of racial consciousness in the American society.

Employing the quest motif as a preponderant artistic device, the novelist makes the heroine's search for blue eyes as the epicenter of her inferiority complex inveighed denunciation, and foregrounds the futility of Pecola's absurd quest and craving with the attendant tragedy of the illusory desires, resulting in the heroine's dementia. If an individual or a group is constantly harassed with the demeaning complex that directly affects their self-esteem; they are told that they are not good enough, they themselves begin to believe it, this provokes Ruth Rosenberg's inference that "in centering her story on an ordinary girl who is taught by colonialist culture that she is ugly, Toni Morrison portrays the cruel ground which forecloses Pecola's longing to be loved" (437).

The self-destruction caused by the quest for an ideal beauty in this novel is apparent from the beginning of *The Bluest Eye* as Morrison prefaces the text with a primer that stands for the American Dream. The novel opens with the Dick and Jane story that most children are familiar with in the late 1940s and 1950s: "Here is the house. It is green and white. It has a red door. It is very pretty. Here is the family. Mother, Father, Dick and Jane live in the green and white house. They are very happy" (1). The imagery deplored in the Dick/Jane is important because of the symbolic role the primer had on Americans' psyche during the era: it had a profound impact on the self-esteem of Pauline (Pecola's mother) and Pecola. Timothy Powell foregrounds this notion, and infers that the primer was capable of bringing about negative effects of the white's standard in the life of colored women, and determines their self-worth:

The Dick-and-Jane primer comes to symbolize the institutionalized ethno-centricism of the white logos, of white values and standards are woven into the texture of the fabric American life. And for the

protagonist of Toni Morrison's first novel, *Pecola Breedlove*, it is precisely these standards which led to her tragic decline (747).

Donald B. Gibson argues that the Dick and Jane text implies "one of the primary and 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 internalising the values that dictate standards of beauty" (20). Gurleen Grewal reaffirms Gibson's opinion when he says "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)" (24) is what the primer story does in the minds of its readers.

Black women of the period are depicted in the novel as being compliant to values that encourage their self-destruction, and imbibe "assumptions of immutable inferiority originating in an outside gaze" (Elizabeth Ann Beaulieu, 2003). This complex on the psyche of these women is perpetrated by the vile system of servitude that completely destroys their sense of self-esteem. Paule Marshall in her essay "From the Poets in the Kitchen" affirms that "My mother and her friends were after all the female counterpart of Ralph Ellison's invisible man. Indeed, you might say they suffered a triple invisibility, being black, female and foreigners. They really didn't count in American society except as a source of cheap labor" (630).

Right from the beginning of the novel, the novelist inaugurates a counter poise between the teenage narrator, Claudia and the heroine, Pecola on their contentious perception of the concept of beauty. For instance, Claudia is outraged and revolted that without seeking her preference, she is always given blue-eyed dolls as Christmas presents. She is revolting to the fact that the world takes for granted "...that a blue-eyed, yellow-haired, pink-skinned doll was what every girl child treasured." (14). To underscore discomfiture, Claudia proceeds not only to systematically destroy the white baby dolls, but transfer such murderous impulse to white baby girls also: "I destroyed white baby dolls" (15). In this regard, the novelist deflates the stereotypical complex of the white-society for the blue-eyed babies as symbols of racial superiority.

On the contrary, Pecola is relentless in her obsession for blue eyes. She believes that the squalor of her family's existence is traceable to their blackness and "ugliness". She believes that it is this ugliness that sets her apart in school and makes her an object of scorn and ridicule amongst her peers; therefore, she craves for blue eyes which would make her cute and acceptable. (34-35). Arising from Pecola's desperation to acquire blue eyes, she loves to eat Mary Jane candies, believing that by eating such candies, she would vicariously acquire the blue-eyed prettiness of Mary Jane to whom the candies are named after (38). The counterpoint impulses between Claudia and Pecola symbolize Morrison's attempt to demonstrate that beauty is a matter of individual perception, and that whiteness and blue eyes are not necessarily coterminous with beauty or blackness, nor ugliness. Beauty, she indicates is much more than this!

Pecola Breedlove's perceived "presence" in the consciousness of readers of *The Bluest Eye* is really symbolically due to her lack of original identity: *her invisibility* (my emphasis). Malin Lavon Walther affirms that "Pecola's ugliness, defined *visually* (my emphasis) by white standards, forces her into a position of invisibility and absence, which in turn becomes her only mode of presence" (777). Very few people see Pecola in the novel. In fact, they spend much of the time not looking out for her, engrossed in the narration of Claudia and the MacTeer girls. Morrison employs this multi narrator approach to eclipse the personality of Pecola, her protagonist. At one point in the novel, Mrs. MacTeer refers to Pecola as *something*, not someone (24). This apparent obscurity of the protagonist could be because Pecola decides to hide behind her ugliness, "peeping out from behind the shroud very seldom, and the only to yearn for the return of her mask" (39).

Symbolically, Claudia's attempts at destroying blue-eyed dolls, foreshadows the destruction that awaits Pecola, or other black persons. Furthermore, the introductory conversation between Pecola Breedlove and Maureen Peal when they made their first acquaintanceship in school is tellingly instructive. When the heroine told the white girl her name, Maureen replied thus: "Wasn't that the name of the girl in *Imitation of Life*?" Pecola further replied questioning: "I don't know. What is that?" (52).

Maureen had actually captured the personality of Pecola. Indeed, figuratively speaking, the crises of her personality and her quest for blue eyes make her an imitation of life. As we all know very well, imitations of all kinds are neither authentic nor enduring, thus explaining Pecola's coming dementia.

In her article, "Re-membering the Body: Body Politics in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*", Elisabeth Mermann-Jozwiak states that the "pervasiveness of images projecting physical perfection reflects the subtle workings of ideology: as we learn this language, we become part of the social order" (194). Thus, Pecola is apparently bombarded with images whereby she learns that as long as she is black, she isn't entitled to be beautiful, to be loved, or to rise above poverty. For example, as Pecola, the MacTeer girls (Claudia and Frieda), and Maureen Peal walk home from school, they pass by Dreamland Theatre seeing the faces of Betty Grable and Hedy Lamarr staring at them at the large advertisement billboard. The name of the theatre is a sound remark to the girls' dreams of looking like Grable and Lamarr on the billboard, or the lifestyle the duo lead. Pecola and the MacTeer girls do not reflect the western standards of beauty, so they have learnt through these visible icons and others that according to Malin L. Walther, "One's visibility depends upon one's beauty" (777).

Throughout the novel, Pecola is preoccupied, with heartfelt lamentations over her black color and its associated ugliness, and her desperate attempts to redress it. She is so much obsessed that the writer indicates that she spent "long hours ... looking in the mirror trying to discover the secret of her ugliness..." (35). Conclusively, she convinced herself that the only means to redress the seeming incapacitation of her blackness is by acquiring blue eyes. She decided to approach the roguish spiritual demagogue, Soaphead Church with a singular desire and petition: to make her eyes blue (138). In her single-minded obsession, she fell for Soaphead's manipulative and dubious prescription, poisons an innocent dog, and lapses into insanity, even as she now believes that she had acquired blue eyes and is the most beautiful person alive. In the end, the cost of acquiring blue eyes becomes Pecola's hubris and false sense of victory. The novelist closes the story thus: "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).

Although the novel, *The Bluest Eye* was published in 1970 during the era of the Black Feminist/Womanist impulse, the critical issues it addresses are equally reflective of the Renaissance tempers which sought to extol and romanticize the virtues of blackness as opposed to the dominant belief before then that 'white is beautiful and black is ugly'. By redefining the concept of beauty, Morrison demonstrates that beauty is not only subjective but the enduring beauty is transcendental of physical appearances, and that unmitigated self-abnegation amounts to an imitation of life which stands unequivocally to be destroyed at the quicksand of insanity. Furthermore, beyond the dramatization of the needlessness of racial self-contempt, the novelist also condemns the mindless demonization of the black race by implicating the white race in Pecola's tragedy for instituting the stereotypes that formed what Allen Alexander describes as "an indictment of the white cultural framework that has become her guidepost for living" (293).

- Stylistic Devices

The novel is a work of tremendous emotional, cultural and historical depth. Its passages are rich with allusions to Western history, media, literature and religion. Morrison's prose was experimental; it is lyrical and evocative, and unmistakably typical of the writing of the era.

Using a highly convoluted plot structure combined with appropriate characterization, *The Bluest Eye* tugs at the conscience of the society which created the circumstances that devalued Pecola's sense of self-worth and subsequently destroyed her. Of very special stylistic significance is the author's creative use of ironies and symbolisms. At the very onset, we notice that contrary to her own self-perception, Pecola is a beautiful girl "with head full of pretty hair" (98), however, and regrettably, both herself and her parents are convinced that she is ugly. Again, we notice the family or surname of Pecola signifies love-breeding (Breedlove), a very significant and emotional feature in human nature. Ironically, rather breeding love amongst themselves, her household consistently bred hate, rejection and self-abnegation. Coupled to the

above psychological trauma, instead of parental love and care, Pecola gets paternal rape; instead of a protective home, she is a vagabond. To cap it up, her father, Cholly Breedlove is just the facilitator of his daughter's loss of self-worth, but also an accessory to the eventual tragedy that befell her, resulting in her loss of her sanity. It is obvious that he sees nothing in blackness, being convinced that even "God was a nice old white man, with long-flowing white hair, flowing white beard, and little blue eyes..." (105). Little wonder then that Pecola views the quest and need for blue eyes as a mission that must be accomplished.

In addition to the significance of the theme, the successes of the novel rest centrally on the poignancy of the language of the novel. With an ambidextrous use of lucid and turgid prose with evocative poetry, the novelist succeeds in blending the medium and the message. Morrison confers credibility on the work through a creative blending of standard English and American provincial Creole, thereby matching language with the status. Throughout the novel, Morrison applies her skill at musicality and poesy through an intelligent craft of the numerous interior monologues. For instance, notice the use of sentences, repetitions and rhythm as Pauline Breedlove nostalgically recalls her love-making scenes with her husband:

... I know he wants me to come first.  
But I can't. Not until  
                                  he does. Not until I know that my  
flesh is all that be on his  
                                  mind. That he would die rather take  
his thing out of me. Of  
                                  me. Not until he has let go of all he  
has, and give it to me. To  
                                  me. To me. (101).

The form of the novel was also experimental and highly innovative. Toni Morrison built on the "shattered World" to complement Pecola's experiences. She changed narrators and focal points within and between the four sections. The narration itself alternates between the first person and third person omniscient. Although the events of the novel are, as Morrison wrote, "held together by seasons in child-time" (44), they are narrated nonchronologically.

## CONCLUSION

In *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison succeeds in demonstrating that the chemistry of love does not depend solely on physical beauty nor should personal worth be measured by outward appearance. Katherine Stern affirms that "the concept of physical beauty as a virtue, is one of the dumbest, most pernicious and destructive ideas of Western World, and we should have nothing to do with it" (77). Toni Morrison assents to Stern's opinion in her novel, so rather than idolizing the concept of physical beauty, *The Bluest Eye* treats beauty as a paradigm for racial consciousness, transcending outward appearance, but emphasizing capacity and virtue.

Morrison concludes *The Bluest Eye* with Claudia indictment of the society which cleaned itself on Pecola as the girl, "searching the garbage - for what? The thing we assassinated?" (163) (herself). Claudia reflects that "this soil is bad for certain kinds of flower. Certain seeds it will not nurture, certain fruits it will not bear, and when the land kills of its own volition, we acquiesce and say the victim has no right to live" (163). The novel thus comes full circle to the images of infertility with which it began, thus this search for a whole self is finished. It seems through the action of the novel that Pecola's doomed quest is but a heightened version of that of her parents, of the Church, and of countless others in her world. Pecola's demise represents what happens when a society pushes its unobtainable standards onto an already worked-over persons. Perhaps, this novel affirms a segregationist's dictum clearly expressed by Calvin Hernton that "if you are white you are right; if you are brown, you can stick around; but if you are black...get back" (quoted in Chinwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi, 115).

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