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CHALLENGING SOCIAL STANDARDS THE BLACK AESTHETICS IN TONI MORRISON'S *THE BLUEST EYE*

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Abstract---Prior to the evolution of the Black Arts Movement, the concept of “beauty” in the United States relied on specific standards, among which were being white and having blue eyes. However, this narrow definition changed over time as sociopolitical factors affected such concepts. Therefore, it is not surprising that the Black Arts Movement affected and changed the concept of beauty among Black Americans. African Americans stood not against white individuals but against everything that was unjust toward them in white American society. As a result, the literary works created by Black writers had to be built on either a political or an aesthetic framework. This paper examines the standards of beauty in *The Bluest Eye* and discusses the novel's ideological tone and its references to the Blues, Black aesthetics and Black feminism. The novel was published in the middle of the Black Arts Movement era, and it satisfies the Black Art Movement's major concern, which is how the work of art can help African Americans live a better life. Morrison's novel highlights the concept of beauty at the time and how to change it among Black Americans. This paper also sheds light on the novel's criticism of how society abuses Black women and girls. Moreover, this paper argues that in *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison protests against the violent actions and the battering of Black women by society in general and by Black men in particular.

Keywords---the bluest eye, Toni Morrison, black aesthetics, black feminism

Introduction

The Bluest Eye is an intriguing novel that illustrates many of the literary theories on African American works. Readers can easily detect its ideological tone and its

references to the Blues, Black aesthetics and Black feminism. Indeed, *The Bluest Eye* itself can be analyzed as a Black literary artwork. Before presenting such analysis, this paper will provide a brief history of the background of the Black Arts Movement, the women's liberation movement, Black feminism and an overview of *The Bluest Eye*.

The Bluest Eye was published in 1970. That era was marked by an undeniable violence against African Americans: the assassination of Malcolm X in 1965 and Martin Luther King, Jr., in 1968 are major examples. *The Bluest Eye* was published in the middle of the Black Arts Movement. Kaluma ya Salaam states that "The Black Arts Movement, usually referred to as a "sixties" movement, coalesced in 1965 and broke apart around 1975/1976" (ya Salaam, n.d.). The Black Art Movement was different from the many other artistic and aesthetic movements in America due to its focus not on critiquing the beauty or the strength of the work of art itself but on examining how that specific work of art helps improve African Americans' lives. In his book *The Black Aesthetic*, Addison Gayle (1971) argues that "The question for the black critic today is not how beautiful is a melody, a play, a poem, or a novel, but how much more beautiful has the poem, melody, play, or novel made the life of a single black man? How far has the work gone in transforming an American Negro into an African-American or black man?" (p. XXIII). Participants in the Black aesthetic sought to define African American beauty standards for themselves rather than accepting those predetermined by white people.

One example of this approach is Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, which centers on criticizing the application of white "beauty" standards on a young African American woman. This paper examines how *The Bluest Eye* works to satisfy the Black Art Movement's major concern, which is how a work of art can improve African American lives. The paper also explains the novel's critique of how society, represented by white people and also some Black people, abuses Black women and girls and tries to highlight Morrison's major points, which illustrate to readers what needs to be dealt with to help African American women live better lives.

Historical Review

The changes in the concept of "beauty" that the Black Art Movement sought to create were not unusual. After all, beauty standards change over time and between cultures. In his book *Aesthetics*, George Dickie (1971) states that "Before the eighteenth century, *beauty* was a central concept; during the century, it was replaced by the concept of *taste*; by the end of century, the concept of taste had been exhausted and the way was open for the concept of the *aesthetic*" (p. 32). Black Americans sought to combat the injustices of white American society; their war was against the mentality and behavior of a racist society and not with white individuals themselves. Arguing this point, Gayle (1971) says that "They waged war not against the society but against the societal laws and mores that barred them from equal membership" (p. XVIII). Therefore, literary works created by Black writers had to be built on either a political or an aesthetic foundation. For example, one can read almost every statement in Toni Morrison's novel *The Bluest Eye* as aesthetic because it discusses the issues of the Black community at the

time the novel was set, Black Feminism, and the problems experienced by Black youth.

Gayle (1971) argues that the core of the Black Arts Movement is the problem of the “de-Americanization” of Black people in America by white Americans: “The problem of the de-Americanization of Black people lies at the heart of the Black Aesthetic” (p. XXII). Black aesthetics function as a link between the past and the present and represent people’s determination to create a social revolution through their works of art. As Julian Mayfield (1971) states in his essay, “You Touch my Black Aesthetic and I’ll Touch Yours”: For those of us who read and write books and plays and poetry, the Black Aesthetic has to do with both love and killing, and learning to live, and survive, in a nation of killers, so that our children may breathe a purer and freer air. (p. 31)

Thus, the Black arts needed to respond to the widespread misconceptions or stereotypical views weaponized against Black people by white society. Black art aimed to portray its enemies of the era and offer a realistic picture of African American people that contradicted the false yet commonly shown picture created by contemporary white artists. Moreover, some Black writers have claimed that Black aesthetic creation was part of the tribal traditions of the Africans who were forcibly brought to America. Mayfield (1971) argues that the Black aesthetic is an inseparable part of Black culture: “It is in our racial memory, and the unshakable knowledge of who we are, where we have been, and, springing from this, where we are going. Where we have been?” (p. 27). Thus, the Black aesthetic is a result of Black Americans’ experience, their history, and the roads they were forced to travel from Africa to America.

Black authors have always wanted to show the world that Black people are never inferior to individuals of other colors or races. All they want to show is that Black individuals are human beings, just like any person of another color, who can love, want, feel, and be creative. In *Figures in Black: Words, Signs, and the “Racial” Self*, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (1987) states that Black literature is a verbal art like other verbal arts. “Blackness” is not a material object, an absolute, or an event, but a trope; it does not have an “essence” as such but is defined by a network of relations that form a particular aesthetic unity. (p. 29). In other words, Gates (1987) asserts that the word “black,” when associated with “literature,” does not have a fundamental characterizing essence but that there are many interrelated characteristics that identify a black aesthetic literary work, such as its content, such as to what degree the work can help Black people live better lives.

Moreover, African American authors and theorists during the Black Arts Movement were not satisfied with the world’s presentation of the black color and its association with exclusively negative things: for example, the “black box” in airplanes is not black in reality, it is orange, but it is metaphorically called black because it can only be used to retrieve the last recordings of passengers and flight crews in the case of a disastrous accident. This naming convention is but one of many other negative situations and elements with which the world used to associate the color black. For example, Gayle (1971) quotes an essay by Henton Helper, a nineteenth-century critic of slavery, who discusses the associations of black with bad, even “sinister” things and white with purity and goodness:

Under the first heading, Helper argues that the color black “has always been associated with sinister things such as mourning, the devil, the darkness of night.” Under the second, “White has always been associated with the light of day, divine transfiguration, the beneficent moon and stars ... the fair complexion of romantic ladies, the costumes of Romans and angels, and the white of the American flag so beautifully combined with blue and red without ever a touch of the black that has been for the flag of pirates.” (p. 44). From Helper’s points, it is clear that the issue of linking the color black with negative accidents and evil works is an old one. Many scholars have since raised this problem and have suggested disassociating the color black from negative and bad things. However, they have also argued that such changes alone would not solve the problem, because whatever negative thing that was already associated with blackness will not be forgotten if it is still commonly used.

Methodology

This study is a critical examination of the view that assimilationist impositions of a society that judges human worth on the basis of race, gender, and class cannot offer a nurturing relationship to the oppressed: As if being Black was not enough reason for oppression and abuse, being a woman and a Black is like having robbed both heaven and hell and the castigation that is to follow is adequate to kill the soul. In Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*, the adult world that ought to have offered security and protection to the child is the one that ultimately destroys the child-like innocence of the protagonist, Pecola Breedlove. The present examination visits specific places in the text that highlight all that is ugly about the American society of the latter half of the last century: Race, gender, and class discriminations that are challenging for adults and dangerously treacherous for the child. The first section delves into the Black mores prevalent at the time, because it is not only the White abuse of the Black that Morrison deals with, it is also the Black abuse of the Black, made all the more poignant by the internalization of complexities as the Black adolescent is assaulted physically by her father and mentally by Black women in the community such as Claudia who contributes to her mental disintegration.

The aim of the researcher is to demonstrate from the text how the cocoon of safety that Pecola finds in the adult world is burst by the disturbing voices of adolescent Black girls as they struggle to grow in an adult environment that is nothing but hostile to them. The study also highlights how Pecola’s Black compatriots would do anything to conform to white standards to make their assimilation complete, a fact that Pecola’s young mind is unable to grasp as she constantly faces ostracization and abuse because nothing about her seems to fit the bill. Manipulation of the young Black women is the other motif that this paper highlights. Textual references to the ‘price’ that Pecola pays to the Soaphead Church that promises her the blue eyes that she is almost obsessed with, forcing her hand into violent crime, further show the rot of the adult world that promises phony freedom and dignity and extracts an exorbitant price for these dreams. At the same time, Pecola’s brush with the issue of race ironically occurs within her community that is too eager to internalize the racist ideas of White superiority and menatla and physical ‘ugliness’ associated with the color black. Hence the space given to Black Aesthetics in this study because though it may be politically

gratifying to blame it on race, the truth would have remained half told if the oppression of the Black by the Black were not to be analyzed as done by Morrison along with the self-loathing and degradation of self-identity that Morrison, like much of the other African-American literature focuses on (Trisnawati, 2016).

The Black Aesthetics in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*

The paper now turns from this very brief historical overview of Black aesthetics to its discussion of *The Bluest Eye* and its Black aesthetic moments. The novel participates in showing how, historically, Black women have suffered abuse, oppression, tyranny, and misery because of both their gender and their race. Unlike white women, Black women were not protected or supported by the men in their society. In addition to the dangerous possibility of being sexually assaulted by white people (by enslavers in the nineteenth century and by white supremacists in the twentieth), Black women of the mid-1920s also faced the danger of possible sexual assault from Black men as well. Due to these dangers, many Black women along with Black men migrated from the Southern states to the Northern ones, which offered a gleam of hope of better lives. Nonetheless, the benefits of moving north for Black women were hardly what they had expected. Barbara Christian (1985), in her book *Black Feminist Criticism: Perspectives on Black Women Writers*, quotes historian Florette Henri, who states that:

Black women, of course, had made that migration to the city looking for a new life and found that the substance remained the same, though the apparel looked different. Instead of being house-keepers, cooks, and cotton pickers, they became domestics, garment factory workers, prostitutes — the hard bottom of the labor market. (p. 8). Some of the issues Henri mentions also appear in Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*. The novel shows that the cultural and social prejudice against Blackness is not the only problem that African American women and girls face; there are other equally disappointing and pressing problems, such as powerlessness and Black poverty, which were significant difficulties for Black women at the time in which the novel was set and which continue today.

In *The Bluest Eye*, Pecola Breedlove is an eleven-year-old African American girl who is presented as poor, ugly, and emotionally unstable. Pecola's parents are among the Black people who migrated to the North in search of better living opportunities. The novel starts with an ironic comparison for readers that contrasts a happy and unified white family with Pecola's family, who are tragically forced to leave their modest house because her father burned it down when he was drunk. In the novel, Morrison shows the American standards of beauty at that time, which included whiteness and, as the title of the novel suggests, blue eyes. Morrison challenges those standards and makes it clear that if the standard of beauty necessitates whiteness, then the value of blackness will be underestimated. One of the most important themes Morrison tackles in *The Bluest Eye* is the lack of love of Black men for Black women. This lack is caused, she argues, in part by racism, the influence of which on Black individuals and families she portrays in the novel. One way she does so is by showing the reactions of Black women to white beauty standards. Commenting on this approach, Ron David (2000) states:

Every black person in America is forced to struggle against a standard of beauty—and by implication (beauty is never just beauty), everything else, from goodness to worthiness of love—that is almost exactly the opposite of what they are...and the consequences can be deadly. The novel suggests that the oppressive standard of beauty peddled by movies and advertisements ravages white self-esteem as well...but it isn't just a matter of degree. Low self-esteem is an entirely different creature than self-hate. (p. 43)

Morrison in, *The Bluest Eye*, portrays Black women as suffering by trying to fulfill the beauty standards established by white people. In doing so, the Black female characters in *The Bluest Eye* are mistakenly mistreating themselves and underestimating their own beauty. They have experienced such social pressure that they have forgotten that it is unfair to judge themselves according to other group's values; to judge someone by another's cultural values is similar to blaming the fish for not being able to fly. The novel shows how some Black women and girls experience difficulties in figuring out their cultural or even personal identities. Pecola, the poor girl, has always wanted to have blue eyes because she thought that having blue eyes—a white beauty standard—would make her beautiful and lovable. She thinks that having blue eyes would make her a respectable person and that her parents would not start fights in front of her blue-eyed self out of respect for her signified whiteness. She often sits for a long time in front of the mirror, trying to find out the secret of her ugliness that makes her different from the others she sees as beautiful:

Long hours she sat looking in the mirror, trying to discover the secret of the ugliness, the ugliness that made her ignored or despised at school, by teachers and classmates alike. She was the only member of her class who sat alone at a double desk. The first letter of her last name forced her to sit in the front of the room always. (Morrison, 2007, p. 45). Pecola suffers from psychological, social, and economical problems; she is poor and the other students and even her teacher make fun of her. Thus, she is always searching for (white) beauty, which she believes will solve her problems. Indeed, Pecola needs not only beauty but her own sense of identity as well. She prays to be beautiful, and she also wants to be an idealized figure of beauty that girls recognize and respect. Christian (1985) states that “the beauty searched for in the book is not just the possession of blue eyes, but the harmony that they symbolize” (p. 25). Since Pecola sees the white girls with blue eyes as ideal representatives of beauty because they are accepted and not ostracized like her, she believes that she too will be an ideal example of beauty when she gets blue eyes.

Black women, as this paper briefly discussed earlier, suffered discrimination not only from white men but also from Black men. In *The Bluest Eye*, Pecola suffers misery and rejection from Black society as well as from white society due to her failure to meet the (white) beauty standards of her time. Even worse, Pecola is sexually abused within her own family, a place that should be a source of safety for her; her own father sexually assaults her. Black women in the novel are not even respected by society, as reviewer L. E. Sissman (1971) writes in *The New Yorker*: Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*...is dealing with children, not men; she is dealing with the forties, not the present; she is dealing with the black subculture,

not the military one. But the biggest difference is that she is dealing with people to whom no ultimate glory is possible. (as cited in Gates & Appiah, 1993, p. 4).

Readers of *The Bluest Eye* can easily observe how most of the characters, even the other Black children, are abusive of Pecola, but Morrison also shows that they might, in turn, be abused by others. Pecola's father sexually abuses her, but when he was young, he was abused by two white hunters who forced him to get naked and have sex with his first girlfriend in front of them. Of course, he is criminal when he sexually assaults his own daughter, but his actions do not mean that readers forget that he was once a victim too. In *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison protests against the violent actions and the abuse experienced by Black women from society in general and from Black men in particular. She shows the consequences of the Breedloves' family culture of physical abuse. Pecola Breedlove fantasizes about having blue eyes because she thinks that blue eyes will solve her problems. She does not have a private bedroom like most white girls of the era but must share her bedroom with her brother, Sammy.

She lives with a disabled mother and a drunkard father who has always been a source of danger for the family. He usually batters Pecola's mother in front of her children, and when he finds his daughter alone in the kitchen and sees her scratching her leg with her other foot, he rapes her on the kitchen floor. Tragically, she becomes pregnant—the most horrible thing that might happen to an innocent young Black child and, worse still, by the man who is supposed to protect and support her the most, her father. Pecola's sexual assault is the most tragic type of sexual abuse towards Black women of that time by Black men. Generally speaking, almost every Black woman in the novel suffers from an attack on her female dignity.

Pecola likes to visit three prostitutes, Poland, China, and Maginot Line, because she believes that those characters represent a revolution against social roles. People in the novel warn their children not to talk to those prostitutes, but Pecola visits them regularly and listens to their stories about their previous love experiences. Moreover, the three prostitutes are associated in the novel with beauty. Yvonne Atkinson (2000), in her essay "Language That Bears Witness: The Black English Oral Tradition in the Works of Toni Morrison," states that: The three whores are striking and they are associated with beauty: "Poland singing—her voice sweet and hard, like new strawberries." They are associated with the Black English oral tradition and are controllers and extollers of the power of the spoken word. The whores' conversation is very aural. (p. 16)

These three prostitutes live in an apartment above Pecola's family. They are the only female characters in the novel who can manage their own lives the way they want. However, the price of this freedom is that they have no regular familial lives, and they are forsaken and hated by society because they abide by no societal laws. Throughout the novel, Morrison seems to be appealing to the Black community and the readers as well to act against the racism, rape, and other sexual abuse to which Black women are subjected. Pecola, an innocent young Black girl, falls victim to the social norms that judge people according to their colors and races and to her father's animalistic desire for her, and ultimately goes mad as a result of this prejudice and abuse. She starts to talk to an imaginary

friend, whom she shows her blue eyes in front of the mirror. When she looks at the mirror, she does not see real blue eyes but imaginary ones that she gets from Soaphead Church, who ultimately gives Pecola the final push toward madness. She asks him to write a letter to God to ask him for blue eyes, and he promises her that she will get them—but under one condition, which is to give his landlady's dog a piece of meat and see if something changes in the dog, which he says will be the sign that she will be given blue eyes. He overwhelms her with his powerful words and self-description until she believes that he has the ability to do whatever she wants him to do. He says:

If you are overcome with trouble and conditions that are not natural, I can remove them; Overcome Spells, Bad Luck, and Evil Influences. Remember, I am a true Spiritualist and Psychic Reader, born with power, and I will help you. Satisfaction in one visit. During many years of practice, I have brought together many in marriage and reunited many who were separated. If you are unhappy, discouraged, or in distress, I can help you. Does bad luck seem to follow you? Has the one you love changed? I can tell you why. I will tell you who your enemies and friends are, and if the one you love is true or false. If you are sick, I can show you the way to health. I locate lost and stolen articles. Satisfaction guaranteed. (Morrison, 2007, p. 173)

In reality, he does not give her what she asked for, instead deceiving her into the violent crime of poisoning the landlady's dog. He actually enslaves her mind and manipulates her actions when he encourages her to submissively poison the dog. The problem here is that some people try to weaponize the goodness of Black women and girls, regardless of the fact that they migrated to the North to seek more freedom and dignity. Soaphead Church makes use of Pecola's need for blue eyes and manipulates her actions as he orders her to poison the dog. In an interview about the issues and concerns of the Black women, Toni Morrison mentions that she thinks that

Black women are in a very special position regarding black feminism, an advantageous one. White women generally define black women's role as the most repressed because they are both black and female, and these two categories invite a kind of repression that is pernicious. But in an interesting way, black women are much more suited to aggressiveness in the mode that feminists are recommending, because they have always been both mother and laborer, mother and worker, and the history of black women in the States is an extremely painful and unattractive one, but there are parts of that history that were conducive to doing more, rather than less, in the days of slavery. We think of slave women as women in the house, but they were not, most of them worked in the fields along with the men. (as cited in McKay, 1988, pp. 48–49)

Although the novel concentrates on the relationship between Pecola and her society, the aesthetic concern of the novel also includes issues far beyond that relationship. It presents many "unpresentable" incidents, such as Pecola's abuse by her father; inspiring characters, such as Maureen and Geraldine, who are African American women who believe in their class and attractiveness even though they do not have the white beauty signifiers of blond hair or blue eyes;

and awful and almost supernatural incidents, such as when Soaphead Church deceives Pecola into poisoning a dog. Conner (2000) states:

Thus, Morrison's work reveals an aesthetic progression that is simultaneously ethical as well. This progression is defined by a cohesive and nurturing sense of love, which Morrison herself has stated is the best, perhaps only, hope for healing a devastated world: "Love," she has stated, is the metaphor most in need today: "We have to embrace ourselves".... Thus, Morrison's work is an ongoing and passionate effort at healing the divisions that quite literally haunt the scarred individuals and fractured communities of late twentieth-century America; it is an effort to heal sublime wounds and to constitute beautiful worlds. (p. 74)

Pecola has always been rejected and was many times physically thrown outdoors into peril. When her father burns their house down, the owners throw the family out; when she is invited over by a boy who lives near the schoolyard, he throws the cat out of the window and tells his mother that Pecola did it, and the mother kicks her out as a result. She is not accepted even among her community but scorned and almost hated. When Geraldine sees Pecola in her house, she saw the dirty torn dress, the plaits sticking out on her head, hair matted where the plaits had come undone, the muddy shoes with the wad of gum peeping out from between the cheap soles, the soiled socks, one of which had been walked down into the heel on the shoe. (Morrison, 2007, p. 91)

As described through Geraldine's eyes, it appears that Pecola represents all of society's negative stereotypes about Black women to Geraldine. Although both are Black women, Geraldine does not want to be equal to Pecola. Therefore, she "explained to [her son] the difference between colored people and niggers." She claims that "They were easily identifiable. Colored people [are] neat and quiet; niggers [are] dirty and loud" (Morrison, 2007, p. 87). In drawing these distinctions, Geraldine conveys to her son that there is a vast difference between Pecola and them because they conform to white standards and she does not. This adds salt to the wound for Pecola because even some Black people, who should be expected to share color and "beauty standards" with her, are considering her as an unwanted Other due to the self-hatred instilled by white prejudices.

Thus, Pecola is not to be blamed for trying not to be her own self. She wants to have blue eyes to force people to respect her. She wants to be even better than Maureen, the girl who, as Claudia describes in comparison to Pecola, enchanted the entire school. 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' toilets, and their eyes genuflected under sliding lids. (Morrison, 2007, p. 62)

All Pecola needed was respect and dignity, nothing more—things that all humans deserve. She is a victim of her own community and people as well as the white community. Indeed, the white community is not as aggressive to her as her Black community, which shows how deeply entrenched white standards are even in her Black culture. She suffers considerably due to the treatment of her relatives and people of her race, and at the end, she exiles herself to the edge of town, alone,

with no one to help her. Claudia states that she realized at the end that she and the people of her community were wrong when they did not help Pecola, but it is now “much, much, much too late” (Morrison, 2007, p. 206).

Conclusion

This paper finds that *The Bluest Eye* is a rich source of examples of African American literary theories. Indeed, Mahaffey (2004) notes that Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* qualifies as the most poignant of adolescent literature as it discusses how a young mind is deeply affected by conflicts of race, gender and class. Kim (2019), on the other hand, claims that Morrison critiques ‘modernist purification’ in this novel as an intellectual practice. In the novel, a critic can easily detect its ideological tone and its references to the Blues, Black aesthetics and Black feminism. The novel was published in 1970 and, around that time, there was undeniable violence against African Americans, perhaps most familiarly exemplified by the assassination of Malcolm X in 1965 and Martin Luther King, Jr., in 1968.

The Bluest Eye was published in the middle of the Black Arts Movement and satisfies its major concern, which is how the work of art can help improve African Americans’ lives before it is “much, much, much too late,” as Claudia states at the end of the novel (Morrison, 2007, p. 206). The novel criticizes how society abuses Black women and girls, showing that it is not only the white people who insult and abuse poor Black women but also other Black people (men and women), who have bought in to white standards that oppress them. Pecola’s father’s sexual abuse of his daughter and his common, brutal fights with her mother are excellent examples that show the oppression of Black women at the time the novel was set. In future research, it would be interesting to examine the reasons behind Morrison’s heaping of problems and pressure on the character of Pecola: Is it to clarify that people in general tend to underestimate and disrespect individuals whom his/her own community does not dignify? Morrison’s rich works offer many answers yet to be found but as Shehrezadee and Ladani (2014) claim, these answers may be found in the ancestry and history of the characters.

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