

TONI MORRISON'S THE BLUEST EYE AND ALICE WALKER'S THE COLOR PURPLE: COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVES

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ABSTRACT

*This paper is an attempt to analyze the compare perspectives of race, class, ethnicity and gender in two novels—Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* and Alice Walker's *The Colour Purple*. The paper assesses the treatment of sex, alienation, rape, lust, incest and gendered identity in both novels. My attempt is explore how internal racism overcomes two major protagonists, Pecola and Celie in both the novels. Pecola finds her ugly and unlucky in the world so Celie grapples with her own problems. This is an attempt how gendered identity is explored and constructed in both the novels and how concept of beauty is socially constructed. It has been analyzed how race determines the fate in Afro-American girls and ladies and how they have to live a worse life even than animals. The inhuman treatment drives them to stride outside violating the social and patriarchal rules.*

Keywords: Racial Consciousness, Resistance, Identity, Hardships, Suffocation

INTRODUCTION

Toni Morrison's novel *The Bluest Eye* is an overwhelming story of woes of an eleven year old, socially victimized and ugly girl; Pecola Breedlove fuels her desire to have blond hair, blue eyes and white skin to be beautiful like other white girls. The novel is a depiction of an ugly girl, Pecola Breedlove who is optimistic in the antagonistic white society where she is mocked at as she is an ugly girl. When we first meet her in the novel she is homeless. She is teased by her school boys Bay Boy, Woodrow Cain, and light-skinned Maureen Peal. Claudia. Pecola sister Claudia one day tries to punch Maureen for it but she unfortunately misses and hits Pecola's face instead. Just as Pecola feels inferior to Maureen; her friend, Claudia also wonders why people admire little white girls, "But the dismembering of dolls was not the true horror. The truly horrifying thing was the transference of the same impulses to little white girls. The indifference with which I could have axed them was shaken only by my desire to do so. To discover what eluded me: the secret of the magic they weaved on others. What make people look at them and say, but not at me? The eye slide of black women as they approached them on the street and the possessive gentleness of their touch as they handled them" (Toni Morrison 15). Peale, Maggie to Lucy in George

Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss*, and Jane to Georgianna in Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre* also suffer from this inferiority complex. Jane thinks that her stepmother "could not love" her as she is not beautiful. (Charlotte Bronte 13) and "if she were a nice, pretty child, one might compassionate her forlornness; but one really cannot care for such a little toad" (Charlotte Bronte 21). Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* portrays how children learn from their parents and society around them and believe everything adults do say to them. Like this in the novel Pecola's community makes her think that only white people are beautiful and she is obsessed with this thought all the time that she may also look beautiful. One day, a young black boy from her neighborhood lures Pecola to enter his house. When she goes he attacks with a cat on her and later he kills the cat and blames her for killing it so that his mother yell at her and kick her out from their house Pecola is considered scapegoat: "If she looked different, beautiful, maybe Cholly would be different, and Mrs. Breedlove too. Maybe they'd say, 'Why, look at pretty-eyed Pecola. We mustn't do bad things in front of those pretty eyes'" (Morrison 46). Like this the main protagonist of Alice Walker's novel, *The Color Purple*, is Celie whose life is also like Pecola as she is also oppressed by his supposed father and society throughout his life. She has to suffer a loss of both of her children and her sister Netty also for a long period, around thirty years due to misdeeds of her husband, Mr. Johnson. The novel is a good example on how women have been making remarkable strides to make their own identity in the patriarchal society. Celie achieves success, recognition and equality.

Sex and Rape as a Dominant Theme in Both Novels

Sex emerges as a dominant theme in both the novels where the male characters are lustful and incestuous. When they get chances outside, they use women and they don't spare their own daughters. In the novel, *The Color Purple* when Celie's mother is gone to consult a doctor for her illness, her father rapes her saying, "You gonna do what your mammy wouldn't" (Walker 3). Soon after due to her illness, Celie's mother dies and Alfonso rapes Celie more and more often. Celie considers that her father has killed her both children but in fact, he has sold them. He brings a new wife in his home. He now wants to get rid of Celie and that's why she is married to Mr. Johnson so that he may have sex with her younger sister, Netty also. Due to this fear, Netty flees from the house and takes refuge in married Celie's house. But here, too she finds that Mr. Johnson, her sister's husband and her lover want to have sex with her and she has to flee from this house also. Netty has to strive hard to maintain her chastity in the novel. But Celie's life is no better than her life with her father. Mr. Johnson is a cruel man and he considers that the best way to keep a woman in her place is to beat her. He marries her simply because he wanted someone to serve him and his two children from his earlier wife. He loves Shug Avery, a blues singer but she does not love her. The same bad happens with Celie. One day her mother was ill and she went to consult the doctor. Then her father, Cholly rapes her in the kitchen mercilessly and then he covers her with a quilt. And she lies on the floor unconscious. Her friend Pauline finds Pecola unconscious on the floor. When Pecola tells her that Cholly has raped her, she doesn't believe it and hits her. But this callousness does not stop. Her father as he was hungry for sex, he rapes Pecola again after some time. This act of rape by her father is shameful, violent, humiliating and awkward. Like him other male characters except Mr. Mac Teer, Mr. Henry, and Soaphead Church are also hungry for young girls. Soaphead rarely or never feeds his desires but Mr. Henry gropes Frieda. Pecola's father, Cholly's background also shows

how he was born and discarded by his own parents. Cholly was abandoned by his mother near train tracks when he was four days old. He was brought up by his aunt, Jimmy. But even on the day of Jimmy's funeral, Cholly shows betrayal to her aunt when he has his first sexual experience with Darlene who is a local girl. As they are having sex in a field, two white men approach there and shine a flashlight on them. They laugh at them and force them to continue having sex. They kept watching and sneering. Thus Cholly and Darlene feel humiliated but Cholly could not harm the two white men and gets angry with Darlene instead. After that incidence, Cholly runs away and pursues the life of a free man but cannot escape his painful past or live with his mistakes of the present. He moves from city to city and from woman to woman for a few years. He meets and weds Pauline in Kentucky and the couple moves to Lorain, Ohio. Tragically, he rapes his daughter in a gesture of madness mingled with affection. He realizes he loves her, but the only way that he can express it is to rape her. Thus sex and rape are recurring themes of these novels.

Similarity in Both Female Protagonists' Lives

Both Pecola and Celie have many similarities in their lives. Both are born in Black communities and both are humiliated by the society. They are raped by their fathers and both become pregnant. Celie and Pecola give birth to their father's children, Pecola one and Celie two. None of their child is left alive with them by the circumstances. Both live their lives as disappointers. Both hanker to assert their identities. But both fail throughout their lives to attain perfection. The main character, Picola starts suffering even when she was still a child in school. She is only eleven years old when she feels suffocation in that environment. She is raped by father and becomes pregnant. Her patriarchal status is somewhat similar to Geeta's, the protagonist of Rama Mehta's novel, *Inside the Haveli*, where Geeta, the protagonist is born and brought up in Bombay. She is accustomed to live a metropolitan life full of liberty. But she has to come to Udaipur as bride of Ajay Singh, a professor of science. She was just nineteen years old and she faces an immense cultural shock in a new environment where she is to adjust and adapt to the stringent, traditional and patriarchal rules of the haveli where ladies have to strictly observed *purdah* (veil). When she lands in Udaipur, she is criticize for not observing *purdah* even by the maids of the haveli who come singing to the railway station to welcome the new bride, "One of them came forward, pulled her sari over her face and exclaimed in horror, 'Where do you come from that you show your face to the world?'" (Rama Mehta 17). Not even this, the maid call her an outsider also. Her duty in the Haveli was just to keep males satisfied, "...In the haveli the men were regarded with awe as if they were gods. They were the masters and their slightest wish was a command; women kept in their shadow and followed their instructions with meticulous care." (Rama Mehta 21). What helps Geeta in that situation is only tolerance and that tolerance of Picola can be seen when she does not tell to her friends Claudia and Frieda. They learn of Pecola's pregnancy through neighborhood gossip as it has now become a public issue. Everyone else in Lorain wants the baby to take birth but Claudia and Frieda want the baby to be born. For this they plant marigold seeds in summer of 1942 in the hopes that if the flowers blossom, Pecola's baby will survive. The narrator and her sister thought that if they planted marigold seeds and said the right words over them, Pecola's baby would be born in good health. But marigolds don't grow, because she has planted the seeds too far down into the earth. This dying of the seeds is compared with the dying of Pecola's baby. Like this, the protagonist and narrator of the novel *The Color Purple*, is a fourteen-year-old black uneducated girl named Celie. She lives

in the South. She tells all her woes and suffering by writing letters to God because her father, Alphonso, beats and rapes her. He makes her pregnant two times. Celie gives birth to a female baby first time but she thinks that her father has presumably killed her in the woods. Celie gives birth to another baby, this time a male one whom her father also abducts.

Shattering of Dreams in the Novels

Pecola and Celie's dreams of life are badly shattered. Her parents fight verbally and physically and make the domestic environment disturbed. Picola holds herself responsible for her parent's fighting and relates it to her ugliness. She thinks if she were beautiful her parents also loved each other. Sam is Pecola's older brother and only son of his parents. Sam's part in this novel is relatively low-key. Like his sister Pecola, he is affected by the disharmony in their home and deals with his anger by running away from home. When Picola becomes pregnant, she visits Soaphead Church one day and asks him to give her blue eyes. Soaphead also makes her fool and sinner. He makes her kill a dog innocently by giving meat to eat. But the dog after eating poison begins to act strangely due to pain and starts gagging and limping around. Innocent Pecola does not understand that she has committed a sin by offering meat to dog, rather she thinks that her wish of blue eyes will be fulfilled. When Claudia later learns to love Shirley Temple, she comes to know that "the change was adjustment without improvement" (Morrison 16) and adjustment made by black people remains an illusion. After that Pauline and Pecola move to the outer part of the town and Pecola begins to lose her mind. By the end of the novel, Pecola has completely lost touch with reality. Unable to process and accept the fact that she has been raped by her father, she becomes convinced that everyone in town is looking at her strangely because she received her wish of blue eyes. She acquires an imaginary friend whom she talks to almost exclusively about her Pecola can be seen looking into a mirror, talking to herself about her blue eyes Pecola is convinced that she really does have blue eyes and goes insane as a result, "She spent her days, her tendril, sap-green days, walking up and down, up and down, her head jerking to the beat of a drummer so distant only she could hear. Elbows bent, hands on shoulder, she flailed her arms like a bird in an eternal, grotesquely futile effort to fly. Beating the air like a winged but grounded bird, intent on the blue void it could not reach—couldn't even see—but which filled the valleys of the mind" (Toni Morrison 204). Claudia's last words about Pecola indicate another aspect of the black community. Due to her ugliness Pecola was considered as a scapegoat in town of Lorain. As Gurleen Grewal also argues, that blackness "is not enough, for such counter-rhetoric does not touch the heart of the matter: the race-based class structure upheld by dominant norms and stereotypes" (Grewal 21). Quest for beauty is also seen in American novels as well as in British Literature. Heathcliff, in *Wuthering Heights*, compares himself to Edgar Linton and says "I wish I had light hair and fair skin" (Bronte 54). When Mr. Earnshaw introduces him into the household he says "you must e'en take it as a gift of God, though it's as dark almost as if it came from the devil" (Bronte 39). Sometimes Heathcliff is considered of low tribe and his ugliness a stigma, he is hatred by other characters also. Even a servant says that Heathcliff "looks an out-and-outer! . . . the villain scowls so plainly in his face, would it not be a kindness to the country to hang him at once, before he shows his nature in acts, as well as features" (Bronte 48–49)?

In the novel, *The Color Purple*, Celie's pretty girl Netty learns that Mr. Johnson wants to marry Nettie. Alphonso refuses for this proposal and instead he wants to physically exploit Nettie also and he offers Mr. Johnson Celie, an ugly woman as his bride. Mr. Johnson eventually accepts the offer, but this marriage does not prove successful and drives Celie into a difficult situation. She has to face many difficulties when she has to work for Mr. Johnson's kids as she is not their biological mother. Nettie, now without Celie does not stay at her father's house and runs away from Alphonso. She also comes at Celie's house to live with her. Mr. Johnson still desires for her. She flees from there when Netty advances to her. She promises her Celie that she will write to her as only death can separate them. Netty does not hear from her as Mr. Johnson hides her letters from her. Nettie is taken in by Samuel and Corrine, a missionary couple, with whom she travels to Africa as a missionary. While in Africa, Nettie becomes the caregiver of Samuel and Corrine's children. Nettie marries Samuel after Corrine's death and moves back to America with Celie's children after thirty years with her other members including two adopted children Olivia and Adam. Nettie finds that while there is not racial disparity in Africa, gender disparity exists. The women of the tribe are not treated as equals, to and are not permitted attend school. Such kind of impartiality is done with the upper class women in the novel *Inside the Haveli* where upper class women could see their husbands only at night while these rules are not applicable to the maids and servants. They could talk freely, "In their courtyard there is no dividing wall, the maids are free to talk to their husbands; they don't have to wait till the darkness of night settles over the haveli to share their thoughts with them" (Rama Mehta 06). But her resistance can be seen in the incidence when Dhapu, her personal maid, reminds her to restrain herself in showing affection towards her newborn daughter Vijay publicly. She scolds her there and then, "Stop lecturing me, I am fed up with all the pretence that goes on here' . . . I hate all this meaningless fuss! Don't tell me what I should do with my own child" (Rama Mehta 32)! But this kind of protest is missed by both the African girls Pecola and Celie when their fathers rape them. Celie does so to some extent but not in the form of speech but letters that she writes to God, and later to her sister Nettie. These letters make this work an epistolary novel. She keeps all her letters to God only to her and later when Netty writes letter to her, makes her hopeful to get united with her sister again. She thinks that the letters are the only way she can represent her true feelings and despair when she is physically and mentally abused.

Journey from Despair to Hope

Though the end of the novel *The Bluest Eyes* is not good for Pecola but in the book, *The Color Purple* there is an optimism and successfulness in Celie's life when there is a time when Celie opens her eyes. She does not tolerate Mr. Johnson's tyranny anymore. She is also fiercely angry with Mr. Johnson when she comes to know that he has hidden her letters written by Netty. When he tries to beat her she threatens him with knife. Her quote "that's it. Pack up your stuff. You coming back to Tennessee with me" (Morrison 183) and her standing up to Mr. Albert "You a lowdown dog is what you is what's wrong, I say. It's time to leave you and enter into the Creation. And your dead body is just the welcome mat I need" (Toni Morrison 207) show that now she has gained confidence and maturity to cope with the odd situations. She moves with Shug to Memphis and makes a new start with her business of making pants that she established living in Shug's house. She makes custom pants for her family and then everyone wanted a pair. Through work, she has money and also she dressed

well. Her business is booming and everyone is ordering pants from her. This also shows that element of pants. The pants of her business provide Celie with her own identify; now people see her as a master at something and not some housewife. Celie states: "I don't know nothing about it, I say to Shug. I don't know much she say." (Toni Morrison 118). Celie has now an identity of her own and now there is no need to live with men and do what they tell her. This job gives him financial as well as personal freedom. She has now her own house and her sister Netty also visits her with her husband. In the end, Celie's father dies and she run her business in that house. Celie's husband is also changed now and they are both united. He says to her, "I start to wonder why us need love. Why us suffer. Why us black. Why us men and women. Where do children really come from. It didn't take long to realize I didn't hardly know nothing...The more I wonder, he say, the more I love (Walker 289).

CONCLUSION

Afro-American women have gained consciousness and they have emerged as an independent woman fighting for their rights. Pecola and Celie could not get justice due to the home, societal and community pressure. Their race does not allow them to spread domestic abuse against the males and that's why they do not raise their voice against injustice done to them. Later Celie gains perfection in life but that is a compensatory achievement in the face of her problems. She befriends with her changed husbands and lives a satisfactory life after her father's death running her business.

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