

REDEFINING BEAUTY IN TONI MORRISON'S *THE BLUEST EYE*

*Vimalan. A., Research Scholar, Dept. of English and Foreign Languages,
Alagappa University, Karaikudi*

*Prof. S. Subbiah, Former Professor of English, Dept. of English and Foreign Languages,
Alagappa University, Karaikudi, TN*

Abstract:

*Physical beauty, the major determiner of love and respect that one receives, is set mostly according to the ruling class standards. The whites, who once conquered the whole world, set the beauty standards in line with their convenience. White coloured, blue eyed, yellow haired, rosy lipped girls and women are considered beauty princess and queens, whereas the black girls and women, however cute they are, are treated with hostility. Toni Morrison, the only African American Noble prize winner, highlights how the poor black women are ill-treated in the hands of the ruling Whites. Especially, her first novel *The Bluest Eye* deals with the humiliations and hostilities faced by the poor black girl, Pecola. It narrates how the young girl is attacked from all the sides, due to her supposed ugliness.*

Key words: *Physical beauty, ugliness, humiliation.*

Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* was published in 1970. It has the backdrop of 1940's, when the dominance of white was at the peak in every sphere of life. The novel, at first, received no considerable attention. Later, it gained currency, due to its controversial viewpoints. It has been studied by various scholars from various viewpoints such as race, class, gender, resistance, motherhood, etc. Concept of beauty in *The Bluest Eye* is also discussed elaborately. Nur Afyah and Inayatul Fariha from the State University of Malang studied the construction of Beauty in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*. The paper "supports the analysis of three important concepts of colonial problems, including constructed concept of beauty by colonizer, power of dominance, and also concept of inequality" (1).

The present study entitled "Redefining Beauty in *The Bluest Eye*" focuses on how the beauty standards set by the Whites of the 1940's are challenged by the emergence of young black beauties like Claudia, the child narrator. Morrison attempts to redefine the beauty yardsticks using two different voices. One from the known narrator, Claudia and the other one is Pecola.

Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* is constructed based on three different scales of beauty-1) Scale set by the white, 2) Scale set by the coloured and 3) Scale set by the black. The first two scales are established and accepted readily whereas the third one, scale set by the black-i.e. black is beautiful, is the subject of controversy till date. As Ogunyemi says the black people's state is terrible because all the white American ideals are unattainable for the black man and the improbability is symbolized by the idealism of the primer contrasted with the brutal reality of Pecola's life. Blacks suffer severe psychological impacts because of white supremacy which forces dominant standards of beauty on them. He charges both blacks and whites for Pecola's obsessive desire for blue eyes because right from her childhood she has been made to play with toys and admire movie stars that uphold the values of the white world (Qtd. in Ahmed 31).

The undeniable ground reality is that the black skin of the Afro-Americans forms the basis of racism in America. The whites corner the black merely for their physical appearance, for being black, for which they are not responsible. "The concept of physical beauty as a virtue is one the dumbest, most pernicious and destructive ideas of the western world", says Toni Morrison (qtd. in Menon 11). In *The*

Bluest Eye, it is “this deliberate perpetuation by the larger society of a physical Anglo-Saxon standard of female beauty as a measurement of self-worth” that plays havoc in the life of several characters (qtd. in Menon 11). According to this belief, women who are not Anglo-Saxon, who do not have a fair skin and blue eyes are not beautiful and hence are inferior. Morrison clearly challenges the white beauties with the noteworthy view of the child narrator Claudia, who hates Shirley Temple. In her words,

...I hated Shirley. Not because she was cute, but because she danced with Bojangles, who was *my* friend, *my* uncle, my daddy, and who ought to have been soft-shoeing it and chuckling with me. Instead he was enjoying, sharing, giving a lovely dance thing with one of those little white girls whose socks never slid down under their heels. So I said, “I like Jane Withers” (Morrison 17).

The loathing in Claudia for Shirley Temples extends to the level of destruction. The hated is not self-created, but socially imposed. “Adults, older girls, shops, magazines, newspapers, window signs-all the world had agreed that a blue-eyed, yellow-haired, pink-skinned doll was what every girl child treasured” (Morrison 18). Once, Claudia *treasured* a white doll. She traced its face with her fingers, exclaimed at the thin, well defined eyebrows. It's well organised white teeth resembles piano keys between the rosy lips. But Claudia did not like it. The girl dismembered the doll in order to know “what it was that the entire world said was lovable.” (Morrison 19). She wants to know “What made people look at them and say, “Awwwww” but not for me?” (Morrison 20)

The Breedloves are considered ugly not only by the scale set by the white but by all the three scales mentioned above. The white shop-keeper did not acknowledge Pecola as a human being. The vacuum in his eyes pierced the tender heart of Pecola considerably. Coloured like Geraldine and Junior humiliated Pecola both for her outward appearance and poverty. Even the little black boys teased her for her appearance. But, all these hated are socially imposed. In reality, Pecola loves dandelions, the symbol ugliness and worthlessness: “The dandelions at the base of the telephone pole. Why, she wonders, do people call them weeds? She thought they were pretty. But the grown-ups say Miss Dunion keeps her yard so nice. Not a dandelion anywhere. Hunkie women in black babushkas go into the fields with basushkas go into the fields with baskets to pull them up. But they do not want the yellow heads-only the jagged leaves. They make dandelion soup. Dandelion wine. Nobody loves the head of a dandelion. Maybe because they are so many, strong and soon” (Morrison 45).

But later when the dandelions do not return the love that she gives, she starts hating them. The dandelions stand for the black who are strong and useful labourers, but who earn hatred for their black skin.

The high yellow dream child Maureen Peal is the favourite of all the teachers and students. “She 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 step aside when she wanted to use the sink in the girl's toilet, and their eyes genuflected under sliding lids” (Morrison 60). But in the view of Frieda and Claudia, she is a “Six-finer-dog-tooth-meringue-pie” (Morrison 61).

The third type of beauty scale set by the Black also alienated Pauline and her children. Besides these three scales, the ugliness the Breedloves believe in is self-assured. In the words of Morrison, “Although their poverty was traditional and stultifying, it was not unique. But their ugliness was unique” (Morrison 36).

By narrating the controversial family happenings of Geraldine and Breedloves, Morrison set a powerful scale of beauty. As per the measurement shown by the powerful scale, the house of Geraldine is no superior to the Breedloves in terms of child care and inner values. The novel highlights genuine beauty with the illustration of the Mac Teers: What is beauty? Balanced motherhood is beauty, replies the characterisation of Mrs. Mac Teer. What is beauty? Protecting fatherhood is beauty, establishes the life of Mr. Mac Teer. What is beauty? Self - confidence and rational thinking are beauty registers the life of

Claudia. What is beauty? Friendship is beauty illustrates the story of Frieda and Claudia. What is Beauty? Love and care is beauty prove the Mac Teers, as a whole.

Works Cited:**Primary Source:**

1. Morrison, Tony. *The Bluest Eye*. Vintage Books, New York: 1999. Print.

Secondary Sources:

1. Ahmed, Soophia. "Race-Conscious Tragic Heroines in the Novels of Toni Morrison." Thesis. Aligarh Muslim University, 2000. Print.
2. Menon, Valsala. "White Racism on Black Psyche: Beauty as a Measurement of Self-worth in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*", *College English Review* Vol2, No.2, n.d: n.p. Print.
3. Afyah, Nur and Inayatul Fariha. *THE CONSTRUCTION OF BEAUTY IN TONI MORRISON'S THE BLUEST EYE*, State University of Malang. Web. 11 Sep 2018.