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Racism and Women in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*

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Abstract : *It is believed that man is a social being and as such cannot live apart from society. But when it comes to interaction the question which remains to be addressed is what actually plays a pivotal role in it? What is to be put on priority our looks or what is within ourselves? Can we say combination of these two is the need of our? It is our physique which sums up our personality. This can be taken as one side of the coin. What works behind it is the notion of race, where certain characteristics may be found common in one group but not in other. If we go to the history of racism it has a broad connotation. The yardstick is applicable to both males and females. By and large we always associate the word beauty with woman and words like handsome and dashing with man. But what if a woman's beauty is not up to the mark? Is she not a woman then? Does it mean that she should put herself on the back foot? What keeps human relationship strong? The paper would focus on all these questions. Many a times we attach so many parameters with beauty without giving a deep thought that this cannot work for all. Individually we all are different. How we look next person is always there to assess but what is more important is that we should give consideration to our own self. The drive for self sustains us even during odd circumstances. But what if we fail to inculcate it? It is obvious that repercussions would be severe. Same thing happens to Toni Morrison's heroine. She succumbs to the demoniac power of racism. Toni Morrison in *The Bluest Eye* narrates a heart rendering tale of an innocent black girl who yearns for blue eyes throughout her life. She is living in a society where demarcation line is drawn between whites and blacks. Blacks are described as marginalized class due to their complexion. The worst hit in this bargain is black woman. Her oppression becomes two fold because of patriarchy and then due to color of her skin. So keeping these factors into consideration the focus of paper will be on consequences of racism as well as remedy to overcome it.*

Keywords: *Woman, Racism, Race, Personality.*

The origin of human life started with first man on earth, possessing certain characteristic traits. What worked behind it was the notion of race, which was confined not only to one place instead it became universal. The word race needs to be defined in detail. Anthropologists have given different notions about race:

At its broadest race refers to a family, tribe, people or nation sharing a set of common interests, beliefs, habits or characteristics. However a pre-eminent African American literary and cultural critic Henry Louis Gates alerts the reader to a number of important details concerning the thinking and reading of race. To begin with, to speak of different races such as black or Jewish is, says Gates to speak in biological misnomers and more generally metaphors. Despite this error, such usage persists in both everyday language and in literary texts. What the idea of race and its mobilization point to for Gates is the articulation of a sense of difference which is dynamic inasmuch as race has both described and inscribed differences of language, belief system, artistic tradition and gene pool, as well as all sorts of supposedly natural attributes such as rhythm, athletic ability, celebration, usury, fidelity and so forth....Race has become a troupe of ultimate, irreducible difference between cultures, linguistic groups or adherents of specific belief systems. Thus as a discursive, political and ideological term, race functions frequently as

a means of definition based on binary oppositions between self and other, civilized and savage and so on (Wolfreys et al. 69).

The dichotomy of binary oppositions paved the way for racism a concept which is quite prevalent in Third World. The color of skin cannot be concealed it is to be accepted the way it is. Then why binary oppositions? The answer lies in the power of dominance which has turned the dichotomy of black and white into a mere social practice. If we go back to the history of racism the struggle was between dominating (whites) and dominant (blacks) forces where former always tried to supersede the latter through all possible ways and means. The origin of blacks goes back to African countries like Kenya, Nigeria, Uganda and South Africa. In contemporary times blacks have liberated themselves from the clutches of imperialism but no one can deny their brutal past.

How blacks came in contact with whites? The answer lies in colonialism. Africa was colonized. It was taken as Dark Continent where there was only illiteracy, ignorance and poverty. These factors in a way ignited the spark of dominance. So far as African men are concerned they worked as slaves and danced to the tunes of their master (white). The condition of African women had gone from bad to worse. "Many women successfully combined all roles of being wife, mother, prostitute and extra bread winner of their household. The economic pressure often forced husbands and fathers to encourage spouses and daughters to take to prostitution" (Chibber 206). On the whole African women lived a life of oppression. It was racism which led to physical violence. Moreover it was with the passage of time the germ of racism engulfed most of the African countries. In South Africa it was given the label Apartheid. Racial injustice was inflicted in all walks of life. It was prevalent in the division of labor. If we see this with reference to South Africa:

White and Black workers cannot belong to the same union. Mixed unions are forbidden by the law called the Industrial Conciliation Act. Africans were not allowed to be out in public streets to enjoy fresh air or to visit their friends after ten o'clock at night without written permission from their employers stipulating how late they permitted them to be out. The Urban Areas Act forbids Africans in the urban area from making or brewing beer to their natural tastes to drink it or possess it in their homes without the permission of the Municipality under which they live. Apartheid to the black means that he is a helpless stranger in his own land. He cannot sell his labor at a fair market price, he cannot develop skills above a certain level, he is given no real share in the civilization he sees around him. He is being persecuted for his convictions. He is made to believe that might is right and since the white man is able to exert so much might, he is right (Mehta and Narang 19).

Even after independence it had been all together an uphill task for Africans to overcome the scar of colonialism. The very fact is that "African who was born and has lived in police states takes a long time to get convinced that he is as good as any other human being regardless of color and language" (Mehta and Narang 24). Such has been the plight of Africans.

It is pertinent to mention that during colonial times in Africa the transportation of slaves was just an order of the day. America as such too remained an active participant in it. If we see

America from all perspectives it had been a land of immigrants but it's involvement in slavery gave further impetus to racism. *American Literature: The Essential Glossary* provides us with the detailed description of slavery. "In colonies and later in the United States slavery was distinguished from other forms of bonded labor by being for the life of the individual, by being hereditary and eventually by being based upon racial identification. The hereditary aspect of slavery in the United States was crucial in increasing the number of slaves. Slavery followed the condition that is if a person's mother was slave then that person was also a slave, the status and race of father being irrelevant" (Matterson 12). What was the status of African slave in America? African slave appeared to be lost looking for his own self. W.E.B. Dubois an African American essayist points out:

It is a peculiar sensation feels this double consciousness....One ever feels his two-ness, - an American, a Negro two souls two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife-this longing to attain self into a better and truer self. In this merging he wishes neither of the older selves to be lost.... He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows without having the doors of opportunity closed roughly in his face (Matterson 67).

The unfortunate part is that things were not conducive. Blacks were unable to resist exploitation. Consequently whites gained an upper edge. No doubt there have been several movements in American History to revoke racism. Civil Rights Movement led by Martin Luther King can be taken as one of the example. Likewise the purpose of Abolitionism was to put an end to slavery but equally severe was the impact of racism on blacks. The emergence of racism in America can be well traced from "1600-1945." The era has been described as "The Black Experience in America" (Brackett 12). It provides an authentic evidence about the portrayal of blacks in American Literature. What blacks (Poets, Novelists and Dramatists) felt personally is reflected in literature they wrote. It is a literature of agony, nostalgia and confrontation with European power. The message which is send across is that literature written by blacks should be acknowledged. Racism paved the way for several terms like Miscegenation and Passing which dominated the locale of American Novels. Richard Wright's *Native Son* and James Fennimore Cooper's *The Last of the Mohicans* have dealt with the theme of Miscegenation. Passing is one of the prominent themes in William Faulkner's *Intruder in the Dust* and Mark Twain's *Light in August*. Who can forget about Lynch Law and One-drop rule that shattered the psyche of blacks in America?

Blacks and whites were described under different parameters. Blacks were taken as marginalized class. The message was clear-cut that blacks cannot be a part of mainstream line. Racism is not only about exploitation of blacks, it also refers to the assimilation of blacks with whites and the resultant outcome of it. Particularly with America racism attained a broad connotation:

There are three major circles of reality in American society which reflects degree of power and powerlessness. There is a large circle of which people most of them men experience influence and power. Far away from it there is a small circle of narrow space

in which black people regardless of sex, experience uncertainty, exploitation and powerlessness. Hidden in this second circle is a third small enclosure in which black women experience pain, isolation and vulnerability. These are the distinguished marks of black womanhood in white America (Sumana 22).

No matter whether it was Africa or America the oppression of black women was same everywhere. There are several reasons behind the oppression of black women in America. Primarily it was patriarchy where woman had no right to raise her voice. Consequently she became a victim of domestic violence. Even at workplace she was assaulted by none other than her own master (white). Her life was turned into hell. The color of her skin too prepared an authentic ground for discrimination.

American literature has a broad canvass. If we trace the origin of American literature it gets connected with terms like Native American, Asian American, Jewish American and African American. The roots of racism can be well traced from African American Literature. Particularly period of Slavery, Harlem Renaissance and Black Arts Movement played an instrumental role. The period of Slavery prepared a platform for Slave Narrative (the first genre to dominate African American Literature). William Wells Brown's *Clotel*, Harriet Wilson's *Our Nig or Sketches from the life of a Free Black in a Two-Storey White House North* can be taken as examples of Slave Narrative. Poets like Lucy Terry, Olaudah Equiano and Phillis Wheatley are well recognized under Slave Narrative. Novelists like James Baldwin, Ralph Ellison, and Richard Wright raised their voice on racial atrocities. James Baldwin's book *The Fire Next Time* presents in details the problems faced by blacks in America. Ralph Ellison's novel *The Invisible Man* describes in details the disturbing relationship between whites and blacks. Even Autobiographies like *Nigger* by Dick Gregory and *Coming of Age in Mississippi* by Anne Moody deserve to be mentioned for their racial inequality. Same is the case with Alice Walker's novel *Meridian* which revolves around Civil Rights Movement. African American Literature provides us with ample examples of racial atrocities. However Harlem Renaissance and Black Arts Movement always stressed on recognition of literature written by blacks. By and large both black men and women had to face odd circumstances so as to put their work into mainstream line. The journey was from margin to centre. W.E.B. Dubois speaks about "Talented Tenth" (Matterson 15) a term which highlights the potential of black man and woman. The writing on the wall is clear that blacks too can work for the upliftment of their native country. He has raised several questions. "Can the masses of the Negro people be in any possible way more quickly raised than by the effort and example of this aristocracy of talent and character? Was there ever a nation on God's fair earth civilized from the bottom upward? Never it is ever was and ever will be from the top downward that culture filters. The Talented Tenth rises and pulls all that are worth the saving up to their vantage ground" (Matterson 36).

Black women writers right from Paule Marshal, Alice Walker, Toni Cade Bambara and Gayle Jones have dealt in detail with racism and gender bias. Novels like *Iola Leroy* or *Shadows Uplifted* (by Frances E.W Harper) *Quick stand* (by Nella Harsen) *The Street* (by Ann Petry) *Brown Girl Brownstones* (by Paule Marshall) can be taken as excellent examples of racism. Even Black women writer Bell Hooks in *Ain't I a Woman* expressed agony over racial discrimination of black women. Majority of black women writers have stressed on sisterhood which can nurture them at the time of crisis. Alice Walker comes up with the term womanist which is the only

remedy to overcome gender bias and racial discrimination. She defined it as “A woman who loves other women sexually or non-sexually. Appreciates and prefers women’s culture, women’s emotional flexibility (values tears as a natural counterbalance of laughter) and women’s strength” (26). One of the major tasks of black women writers was to overcome the color bar so that they can live a life of dignity. Black woman writers like Alice Walker and Zora Neale Hurston always encouraged black women to come forward. The color bar was prevalent in Feminism. It was on account of color bar that Black Feminists came in conflict with American Feminists. The purpose of Black Feminists was two-fold. First to break the shackles of patriarchy and then to overcome the color bar. The very fact is that white woman was always put on the pedestal of beauty. In every social gathering she preferred to be in limelight. What was black woman at the end of the day? She was hardly given an opportunity to excel in life. She had to live a life of isolation among her own kith and kin.

Toni Morrison too comes up with the same issue in her debut novel *The Bluest Eye*. Toni Morrison has a word of praise for black community but most of her novels deal with the oppression of black woman in a racist society of America. What we see in *The Bluest Eye* the same thing gets repeated in *A Mercy* and *God Help the Child* with a slight alteration. “As a black woman writer Morrison is a double outsider in the patriarchal white culture, a position which allows her to criticize the white and the black worlds” (Sumana 153). It is because white woman too became a soft target in it. Morrison questions about the rights of woman. Every woman has a right to live the way she wants. But who has suppressed her right? It is again patriarchal society which has turned women into puppet. The crux of *The Bluest Eye* lies in racism. Morrison describes “...how something as grotesque as the demonization of an entire race could take root inside the most delicate member of society a child, the most vulnerable member, a female” (206). The story of oppression begins right from the day she is born. It is an amalgamation of internal as well as external which leads to dehumanization of this innocent black girl. If we see human life at the very outset certain things are always inherent and others are to be acquired and polished. “Individuals are obviously influenced by things that happen around them in their physical and social environment” (Locke 16). The roots of influence can be well traced from family. Parents can be well compared to a gardener. It is the responsibility of a gardener to water and nourish the tiny sapling so that it can grow into a tree. Parents ought to play a responsible role. They should not take their children as burden on their shoulders. All children (whether normal or abnormal) need love, care and grooming which in a way helps them to understand their own self as well as others. Apart from parents social institutions need to play an important role towards children. Moreover it is a human behaviour that one always wishes to be loved and admired by others. But Pecola Breedlove (the central character of the novel) remains devoid of such affection. Who is to be blamed for it? The answer is her parents. Biologically they have produced her. It would be a mistake if we describe them as responsible parents. Pecola has to do all sorts of menial work at her home. It is all horror for Pecola when she attains puberty. Her mother has hardly any concern for such issues. Pecola Breedlove (the name sounds ironic) yearns for blue eyes and in the meantime loses her sanity. Why she yearns for blue eyes? What is so fascinating about blue eyes? Why she feels her life is incomplete without blue eyes? For this we need to go back to the plot of the novel. Morrison in *The Bluest Eye* has plunged deep into child psychology where it is normal for children to ask questions out of curiosity but the tragedy is that they never get relevant answers. She opens the narrative with three girls Claudia, Frieda and Pecola and peeps into their psyche especially when they encounter whites.

The Bluest Eye has been divided into several chapters like autumn, winter, spring and summer named after seasons of the year. The prevalent doom in nature goes parallel to the plot of the novel. Autumn and winter can be placed on one platform because both symbolize death and decay. What goes with it is Claudia MacTeer's (the narrator) statement about the failure of marigolds to sprout in time. Likewise spring symbolizes freshness and rebirth. Even summer presents intensity of things. Nothing pleasant happens in summer. What is more heart rendering is that Pecola loses her baby. Baby's father is Pecola's father too. How can a father commit such heinous act? The question arises on parenting. Pecola's father (Cholly) before marriage got involved in several sexual escapades. He is neither a reliable husband nor father. Pecola could have been warned about the wrong intentions of men. But who is there to counsel her? Obviously no one, she yearns for love and gets trapped in lust. Morrison describes this encounter as "Love is never any better than the lover. Wicked people love wickedly, violent people love violently, weak people love weakly, stupid love stupidly, but the love of a free man is never safe" (204). There are some women characters other than Pecola who have turned into prostitutes. Pecola's rape by her own father is a clear instance of patriarchal society where man has no control on his limitations. Even Frieda's encounter with Henry Ford (the white man) represents the same story. Primarily, it was white man who was always looking for his carnal pleasure.

At the very outset Morrison dwells deep into the racist society of Ohio (the locale of the novel) which comprises of several white and black families like Dick Jane and Breedlove a battered family. She even speaks about some minor African families. Each family has its own tale of woe which in a way makes them more prone to racism. Claudia MacTeer describes it as "Being about...on the hem of life struggling to consolidate our weakness and hang on or to creep singly up to the major folds of the garment" (Morrison 18). It is a financial trouble which has compelled every black family to work under whites. This is a clear indication "...to prove that racism is a byproduct of capitalism." (Sumana 43). The other side lies in the imitation of white culture which deteriorated the condition of blacks. This goes well with Pauline. She wants to be like her employer's family and in the meantime forgets her own family. It is the glitter of whites which has dehumanized her.

The Bluest Eye revolves around American standard of beauty like fair complexion, golden hair and blue eyes. Pauline hates Pecola (who is her own child) but dotes upon little white girl due to her beauty. Pauline takes Pecola as an ugly child because she is black. If we see this bias in terms of medical terminology it has proved to be fatal. "Black Psychiatrists have analyzed the crippling effects of such double consciousness of the black woman. Her blackness is the antithesis of a creamy layer skin, her lips are thick, her hair is kinky and short. She is infact the antithesis of American beauty. . . . There can be no doubt that she will develop a damaged self contempt and impairment of her feminine narcissism which will have profound effect consequences of her character development" (Sumana 30). The same thing happens to Pecola. She becomes obsessed with blue eyes and loses her sanity.

Morrison has analyzed in detail of what it meant to be a black woman in a racist society of America. Morrison has used several symbols and images to highlight the agony of blacks particularly black women. Black symbolized non-existence and dirt. Blacks are addressed as nameless. The three girls Claudia, Frieda and Pecola are addressed as folks. These girls suffer

humiliation at the hands of their white classmates. No one can forget the encounter of Pecola with a white storekeeper. Even when Pecola has to pay the amount (for candy) the white storekeeper is reluctant to touch her hand. It is because she has not got fair complexion and blue eyes. Pecola represents every black girl of Ohio who yearns for blue eyes. The anecdote connected with the character of Soap head Church (who represents clergy) repeats the same story. Soap head Church has remedy for every problem. He is taken as a savior of mankind but he fails to give blue eyes to a black girl. What is more surprising is that confectionary items too are named after white woman. Marry Jane is always seen on the cover of candy. Similarly we see the picture of Shirley Temple on the cup. So when Pecola has to drink milk she is given Shirley Temple cup. White woman as such has left her footprints everywhere. It is a common belief that dolls are the most precious possession of girls. Despite the fact that Claudia MacTeer makes an effort to tear them but preference is given to blue eyes and golden hair. This clearly speaks about the extent of racism where black woman is left with no opinion but to follow the word of whites.

If we see the racist society of America the tragedy is that blacks were unable to preserve their own culture because of compulsions. The trend of false imitation passed from generation to generation and moreover it was degradation of values (especially moral) which lead to dehumanization of blacks. Race has lot to do with our physical attributes but we grow with the passage of time. Physical attributes as such cannot be everlasting. So why to run after it? The fact is that human relationship can be sustained provided we make no distinctions on the basis of race. Distinctions should be done in a constructive manner. It is the peer competition which always leads to complexities. Of and On Pecola is made aware of her lack that she has not got blue eyes. It is true that she has not got blue eyes but still she is a human being. Had she been given an opportunity to exercise her own self, she would have never slipped into madness. Her tragedy is an eye opener for all. She craves for a happy life, but that too is denied to her. Pecola suffers because of her parents and then due to society where there is no one to support her. Craving for self does not mean that we become egoistic and forget about others but what is within us needs to be respected and valued with a bold heart.

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