

The symbolic blue of *The Bluest Eye*: Toni Morrison and marginalized African-American family in white America

Bilal Ahmad Kuthoo

Research Scholar, Jiwaji University, Gwalior, Madhya Pradesh, India

Abstract

This paper analyzes Toni Morrison's portrayal of suffering, poverty, familial disintegration and limitations imposed on African-Americans by White domination, in her novel *The Bluest Eye* (1970). The White values are always a consistent psychological domination, a self-defined parameter of beauty, a norm of civilized life and an achievement in itself; every aspect of influence on Black family has been highlighted by Morrison. The fragmentation of these Black families occurs due to various reasons from violence between the family members that reciprocally affect them and from outside by White values. Life is presented to these black members of American society as fair, blond and blue which is intrinsically alien to Black race. This paper glances at *The Bluest Eye* (1970) and attempts to explain the marginality superimposed on Blacks in a White society and the effect it has on the Black families and individuals in general.

Keywords: suffering, poverty, family, White values, African-Americans, fragmentation

1. Introduction

In the opening pages of *The Bluest Eye*, Toni Morrison writes that since "why" of Pecola and Cholly's situation is "difficult to handle, one must take refuge in how" (9). This admission, hardly the admission of a lack of technique or craft, is, instead, Morrison's admission that she is interested in, not questions of final causes, but questions of process, question about how process comes to be shut down. Not surprisingly, then, *The Bluest Eye* opens with tuition in closure. In a passage rendered in style of Dick and Jane series of primers of America, the novel lays bare the syntax of static isolation at the center of our own cultural texts (Wong 471).

Here is a house. It is green and white. It has red doors. It is very pretty. Here is the family. Mother, father, Dick and Jane live in the green-and-white house. They are very happy. See Jane. She has a red dress. She wants to play. Who will play with Jane? See the cat. It goes meow-meow. Come and play. See mother. Mother is very nice. Mother, will you play with Jane? Mother, laughs. See father. He is big and strong. Father will you play with Jane? Father is smiling. Smile, father, smile. See the dog. Bowwow goes the dog. Do you want to play with Jane? See the dog run. Run, dog, run. Look, look. Here comes a friend. The friend will play with Jane. They will play good game. Jane, play (Morrison 1).

These lines give the impression of a very happy family in which father and mother has a very affectionate cordial relationship of love and care with each other. This love between a father and a mother give harmony to the children living in this family. The image of family given in these lines is the picture of an ideal family in which children are safe, happy and prosperous. They enjoy being loved and cared by

their parents and a sense of security is always there. Morrison draws our attention to a house which is perfectly painted in red-and-white which adds more to the happiness and serenity of the family.

These lines at the opening of the novel impress upon the reader that *The Bluest Eye* is a novel about a family; ostensibly that family is a poor Black family, Breedlove family, thus the portrayal in the first paragraph is contradictory to what follows. Breedlove family consists of four members Cholly Breedlove, Poulina Breedlove, Pecola Breedlove and Sammy Breedlove, father, mother, daughter and son respectively. But unlike the family described in excerpt by Morrison, Breedlove family is not a happy family. And the novel tells the story "of the tragedy of the Breedlove family" (Dang & Kong 298) which is trapped in a web of quarrels. Cholly and Poulina, the ideal father and mother of excerpt, keep always fighting to each other and Pecola and Sammy feel to be wedged in a traumatic condition from which they could not escape. Morrison in an interview comments that she had "used the primer, with its picture of a family, as a frame acknowledging the outer civilization. The primer with White children was the way life was presented to Black people" (LeClair 28-29).

The ideal family described in the introductory excerpt, there a place has been secured for a dog and a cat also in it, affection in the family is so immense that the dog and the cat also acquire its share. But the Breedlove family, in every aspect, stands contradictory to this representation of ideal family. The Breedlove family is so strained that love has become a thing that only appears in dreams. Sammy attempts to run away and helpless Pecola dump her head in quilt to avoid listening to the quarrels between her father and mother. Love is not the thing that they desire now they yearn for peace in Breedlove family. Pertaining to Breedlove family, the first instance where reader

perceives the graveness of the situation is when Pecola comes to live with MacTeers because she “had no place to go” (Morrison 10). Claudia, the narrator, informs that “the Old Dog” (ibid), Cholly Breedlove, has burnt down their house and Pecola is turned “outdoors” (11). This first mention of Breedlove family makes it clear that the family that Morrison is going to portray is not the family represented in excerpt i.e. “they are happy” (Morrison 1). Instead, the family is a problematic one. Confrontation between the father and the mother has disintegrated Breedlove family and dispersed the family members in different directions. Pecola has come to live with MacTeers, Sammy has run away, Poulaine living with family she works for and Cholly gone to jail. Morrison through each character in the novel foregrounds the fact that practical life of African-Americans in this White country stands on the antonymous position.

Mrs. Breedlove and Her Broken Dream

The frail condition of Breedlove family is demonstrated by the fact that Pecola “comes with nothing” to MacTeer Family (Morrison 12). She has only that much clothes that she is wearing. Even Poulaine and Cholly make efforts to find excuses to confront each other. One cold morning, when Poulaine gets-up and finds the coal stove in the middle of the room coalless and heatless. She expresses her anger by producing “noises with doors, faucets, and pans...the noises in the kitchen became louder and hollow. There was direction and purpose in Mrs. Breedlove’s movements that had nothing to do with the preparation of breakfast” (Morrison 29). Noise in the kitchen keeps increasing along with the anger in Poulaine’s head. Toni Morrison says “Cholly had come home drunk” (ibid) and this morning he was not willing to get-up. Yet, on contrary, Poulaine resolved not to let him sleep. She becomes ready to break his sleep on the cost of breaking the peace of her home. As soon as Poulaine throws the pan of cold water on Cholly’s face he bangs her on the floor. She missed one from Cholly’s hand or “she might have succumbed earlier” (Morrison 33). These instances of violence prove that the love has disappeared from the Breedlove family to that extent where Poulaine feel relieved after inflicting pain on Cholly, physical as well as psychological.

The sense of togetherness and emotional bond were undermined in Breedlove family, Morrison demonstrates it through the character of Sammy who runs away from home more than twenty-seven times before he was fourteen. So, Sammy’s attitude towards his family was escapist. The tension and trauma in Breedlove family forced Sammy to find a way to escape it. The love and attachment towards parents has disappeared. Their quarrels have made the home sickly; both the children seem helpless before the entanglement of their parents who are least bothered about the lives of their children. The emotional rift between the members of Breedlove family has extended to that proportion that Pecola does not call her mother “mummy” but she calls her Mrs. Breedlove. On the part of Pecola it seems compulsory that a sense of formality should be maintained. The relation is not intimate, but strained. Poulaine has dedicated all her time to care the Fisher family. The love which is due to Pecola is offered to the little girl of Fisher family, complications are brought in Breedlove family, and love has broken relation

with life there.

Disturbance is evident from the different stuff in the house; nothing could be expected to be orderly in Breedlove family. The fire stove out of heat, no coals at home but Poulaine has maintained the warmth of her love in Fisher family. The kitchen, there in Fisher family, is a large room with “white porcelain, white woodwork, polished cabinets, and brilliant copperware” (Morrison 83). All these things cannot be expected in Breedlove family which has poverty that does not allow these luxuries. Poulaine does not only maintain material aspect of kitchen but she also maintains love and emotions towards Fisher family which is evident from Poulaine’s care towards little Fisher girl.

Claudia, the narrator of *The Bluest Eye*, observes the injustice and gets agitated, when little Fisher girl comes in kitchen and calls “Polly” to Mrs. Breedlove. Claudia says, “The familiar violence rose in me. Her calling Mrs. Breedlove Polly, when even Pecola called her mother Mrs. Breedlove seemed reason enough to scratch her” (Morrison 84). The relation between Breedlove family members seems conditioned. How does it appear when Pecola calls her mother Mrs. Breedlove? It demonstrates that their relationship is a mechanical thing. They are not bound to each other with love but compulsions. The members of Breedlove family are separated yet ‘un-separated’ from each other. In Fisher family kitchen, when Pecola touches the pan full of berry cobbler and it falls down on floor, Mrs. Breedlove neglects the fact that “most of the juice was splashed on Pecola’s legs, and the burn must have been painful” (ibid). Instead of being caressed by maternal affection, Pecola is “knocked to the floor” (ibid). Trudier Harris comments that “the caring touches... [of a mother] was never available, as with Pecola”. Mrs. Breedlove showers a volley of curses on Pecola, “crazy fool” etc. she keeps saying different words. Claudia says “her words were hotter and darker than the smoked berries” (ibid). Pecola is not offered a single word of comfort. Instead, she is not only instructed to leave the place so that the dirty floor could be cleaned but she is also asked to pick-up the wash and get out.

Sammy and Pecola are definitely most affected, and caught in a traumatic situation even though Poulaine also was not free from it. She diverted her attention towards movies spending more and more time in theater. The White people in these movies fascinated her. She attempted to imitate and imitating the “pictures gave me (Poulaine) a lot of pleasure” (Morrison 95). On the one hand Poulaine saw an ideal family in pictures and on the other hand her own family life was a disaster. For Poulaine “it made coming home hard, and looking at Cholly hard” (Morrison 96).

The violence between the husband and wife is accelerated when a front tooth of Poulaine is up rooted and Cholly pokes fun at her. The up rooted tooth was the death of a dream, diverting attention from family problems, Poulaine had tried to look like Jane Harlowe, a Hollywood actress. It was reason enough before Cholly to make fun of her wife with whom he had already deteriorated relation. Debra T. Werrlein suggests that “she (Toni Morrison) evokes the forgotten domestic tension” (Werrlein 56). The uprooted front tooth was the end of dreaming for a perfect family life.

Cholly and His Double Homelessness

At one stage, Poulaine devotes herself completely to her two children, "holding Cholly as a model of sin and failure, she bore him like a crown of thorns, and her children like a cross" (Morrison 98). The image of father was turned in an evil and Poulaine viewed Cholly as a person who failed to discharge his duties. Cholly indulged in drinking, spent most of the time with other men and came home less and less. All the expenses of family at this stage were managed by Poulaine's day work. The Breedlove family lost balance, it remained dependent more on Poulaine and less on Cholly. But at the same time Morrison pains takingly explains that Cholly himself from his childhood suffered from a sense of isolation and depravity. He was only four days old when he was thrown on junk heap by his own mother. It was only Aunt Jimmy who saved him and then brought him up. Cholly, who did not ever see his father, even not any parental care, it created a parental vacuum in his life and later on in the lives of his own children.

Cholly suffers to become homeless several times; first left by her mother on junk heap and no one knew where his mother went, on the other hand his father had already disappeared before his birth then it was only Aunt Jimmy who took care of Cholly. "When Aunt Jimmy was alive, there is a positive influence upon (Cholly's) behavior" (Harris 2003). After the death of Aunt Jimmy the immediate issue was that Cholly had again become homeless. From his childhood several times homed and homeless, Cholly wanted to find out whom he belongs to. About other things that belonged to Aunt Jimmy, "the quarrels about who gets what had seethed down to a sticking gravy on everybody's tongue, Cholly sat on the back porch waiting" whether he too belongs to someone (Morrison 119).

Cholly's venture to find out his father resulted in despair. After Aunt Jimmy died, he found it reasonable to join his father. He had heard from Aunt Jimmy that his father is one Mr. Samson who went to Macon after impregnating his mother. Cholly finds out the money that Aunt Jimmy had concealed in a stove flue, twenty-three dollars in all. But after reaching Macon he is not recognized, rather not accepted by his father. "Cholly's abandonment by his parents radically disconnects him from the time of family" (Wong 476). His desire to belong to his father vanished, his desire to feel a touch of parental love was not fulfilled and the trauma of being abandoned by his father takes the shape of shame. His all hopes vanished with a single jerk. Toni Morrison makes Cholly a figure that does not belong to anyone or anywhere, but abandoned.

Cholly's condition was really pathetic after Aunt Jimmy's death. He belonged to no one, "Cholly was truly free. Abandoned in a junk heap by his mother, rejected for a crap game by his father, there was nothing more to lose" (Morrison 126). With the death of Aunt Jimmy Cholly was "dangerously free" from all human relations and social connections. Only "Blue has been one of the few people, besides Aunt Jimmy, who cared for Cholly, who responded to him as a human being" (Harris 2003). There was no family to control Cholly or to direct him. His sense of being alone overrides him and tears start to flow down his eyes when he thinks of Aunt Jimmy "handing him a bit of smacked hack out of her dish. He remembered just how she held it - cling - like, in three fingers,

but with so much affection" (Morrison 125).

Toni Morrison makes Cholly rape Pecola, his own daughter. Whole his life Cholly did not give her anything. And Morrison wants Cholly to deprive her from the things she has. The violence that is made by Cholly by raping Pecola, it metaphorically represents that Pecola is deprived of everything by her own father. What significance this act of Cholly raping her own daughter has? Vanessa Dickerson argues that Cholly is a "naked father", an emasculated figure incapable of accumulating wealth or playing the patriarchy (111, 116-17). Throughout the novel the parental presence seems to be a trauma for both the children, Pecola and Sammy

Pecola and a pair of blue eyes

After Cholly makes Pecola pregnant, on the one hand people kept talking about it and on the other hand Pecola was held responsible by her mother for the act she has not done. Pecola was not only a victim of a "violent love" made to her by her own father but she was subjected to psychological agony. On the one hand people whispered "she (Pecola) carries some of the blame" (Morrison 149) and on the other hand Poulaine her own mother "beats her she lucky to be alive" (ibid). The punishment is physical as well as psychological, she is put on the brink of insanity and pushed on the periphery of the society and unfortunately there is no place for her to go.

Pecola's mental stress is revealed through her prayer. She prays god to make her disappear; "please make me disappear" (Morrison 19). She does not want to witness the quarrels between Cholly and Poulaine who has been fighting all the time. Morrison comments on her disappearance that "she squeezed her eyes shut. Little parts of her body faded away. Now slowly, now with a rush. Slowly again. Her fingers went, one by one; then her arms disappeared all the way up to elbows. Her feet now. Yes, that was good. The legs all at once. It was hardest above the thigh. She had to be real still and pull. Her stomach would not go. But finally it, too, went away. Then her chest, her neck. The face was hard, too. Almost done, almost. Only her tight, tight eyes were left. They were always left" (Morrison 33). Pecola wanted to escape from the condition that prevailed in her house.

Pecola's desire for blue eyes has only significance to bring peace in her wretched home. At the one stage she thought that a pair of blue eyes will stop her parents from fighting. When she comes to ask Soaphead Church for blue eyes, it is the only moment Soaphead Church was disappointed. During a conversation with an imaginary friend we come to know that Pecola has got blue eyes, bluer than everyone else. This state of acquiring blue eyes seems to have returned the peace of Pecola's life. The life she spends with her parents was full of tensions. The instability of their family disintegrates them, nothing in Breedlove family was orderly, "all conventional ordering has been collapsed," (Wong 476) chaos had surrounded their days and nights. Cholly every time comes home drunk; Sammy could not bear the tension caused by the every time fight of his parents thus he preferred to escape from the Breedlove household.

For Pecola, the situation is made worse not only by her father by raping her but her mother has also an equal part in it. The situation does not make them, Cholly and Poulaine, nurture Pecola "but turns them from nurturers to oppressors"

(Werrlein 56). When Poulaine finds Pecola unconscious on the kitchen floor after being raped by Cholly, her own father, Pecola is beaten and made to suffer further. Sammy who went away does not suffer like Pecola, running away from Breedlove family seems to run away from suffering, trauma and tensions. Kenneth Millard argues that family is “perceived as fundamental to the happiness and success of individual” but in the novel “Pecola is shown to be the victim of, even the product of, violent tension in the family, the Breedlove” (8). It is not only Pecola who was gripped in the tensions but every member of Breedlove family suffers. Morrison seems to make the point in the novel that family is the basic unit of all the successes as well as tensions and traumas. Cholly and Poulaine could not ever lead a peaceful life with a better understanding that led them towards the perpetual disintegration of Breedlove family.

The instability of the Breedlove family and fight between Cholly and Poulaine has affected the mind of Pecola to that extent that she thinks if she got blue eyes her parents would stop fighting. She considers her parents would think that “we should not do bad things in front of those pretty eyes” (Morrison 40). Pecola has an intense desire that her parents should stop fighting. She craves for peace in Breedlove family. When Cholly and Poulaine are about to fight, she innocently whispers “don’t Mrs. Breedlove don’t” (Morrison 33). But Toni Morrison presents Pecola “a little girl as a total and complete victim of whatever was around her” (Robert Step). She is pressurized and tortured by the situation that she faces. In the words of Ding Yang and Kong Xiangguo Pecola becomes a “mental orphanage” (313). On certain occasions it seems difficult for her to maintain the sanity.

Poulaine, at one stage becomes aware that her role in the Breedlove family has not been positive. When she was pregnant with Pecola she resolves to be committed to her family. Ding and Kong argues,

She (Poulaine) feels uneasy for what she has done to her family, she feels sorry for her husband and son and tries to change the situation. So, when she is pregnant for the second time, the coming birth of her second child provides her with another chance for conforming her identity as ‘mother’. When she gets her second child, Pecola, Poulaine tells herself to love the girl no matter whether she is beautiful or not. She wants to rebuild a harmonious family with the coming of this child (309).

But all her resolutions vanish when she realize that Pecola was “really ugly” yet her attitude was somewhat ironical. She considers that she has fulfilled all the responsibilities that she has towards her family and perceives Cholly irresponsible and complete contrast to herself.

At prayer meeting she moaned and sighed over Cholly’s ways, and hoped God would help her to keep the children from the sins of the father...holding Cholly as a model of sin and failure, she bore him like a crown of the thorns, her children like a cross (Morrison 100).

Here Poulaine fails to recognize the fact that both Cholly and she are equally responsible for the trauma created in Breedlove family. Ding Yank and Kong xiangguo argues “although it is Cholly that physically raped Pecola, Poulaine has ravaged the child’s self-worth and left her vulnerable to assaults of various proportions” (314).

A significant element which causes confusion in Breedlove family is that they live in a society which is dominated by White values. They overvalued the white social norms and their way of life. They also perceived that the Black people, their way of life and their morality do not have anything worthwhile in it. This type of mentality has a strong effect on Black social life which also affected the family life of Black people in America as we see in the case of Breedlove family in *The Bluest Eye*.

Pecola and Frieda love Shirley Temple. Pecola is given milk in blue-and-white Shirley Temple cup, when she comes to live with MecTeer family. This White actress has dominated the psyche of Pecola to that proportion that “she was a long time with milk, and gazed fondly at the silhouette of Shirley Temple” (Morrison 12). In Toni Morrison’s words it is “long-term psychic effect” (Surani 11). The White beauty was presented as norm of beauty to Black people also. It was not possible for Black people to achieve the standard of beauty because, after all, they were born Black. The only way before them was to yearn for such beauty, admire it and remain socially as well as psychologically dominated. Pecola drinks all the milk available in the MecTeer kitchen. They knew that it is not milk that she wanted but “she was fond of Shirley Temple cup and took every opportunity to drink milk out of it just to handle and see sweet Shirley’s face” (Morrison 16).

Pecola is also fascinated by Mary Jane. She goes to Yocobowski’s Veg. Meat sundries store to buy the candies which have Mary Jane on its cover. Mary Jane with white face, blond hair, blue eyes make a strong psychological impact on Pecola. These conventions of having a silhouette of Shirley Temple on a cup or the picture of pretty Mary Jane on the cover of a candy have a cultural as well as Psychological dominating function like the primer that Toni Morrison has introduced at the beginning. These things make Black children like Pecola and Sammy to inculcate this order of beauty in them. But the situation turns out to be traumatic, when they do not reach to the White values and on the other hand they have a disturbed family system.

Conclusion

Toni Morrison interestingly demonstrates that poverty causes the disintegration of Black families. For Morrison Black men are irresponsible towards the family and women are dedicated, but in spoiling the relation in family both are equally responsible. Morrison exhibit that if the man divert the attention from the children, women divert attention from the husbands. For Morrison children are over all victims of the traumatic situations prevailing in the families as in the case of Pecola and Sammy in *The Bluest Eye*. Morrison also makes the point in this novel that Black children are double victims, White culture dominates them and family makes them suffer psychologically.

References

1. Dickerson, Vanessa. The Naked Father in Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*. *Refiguring the Father: New Feminist Reading of Patriarchy*. Ed. Patricia Yeager and Beth Kowaleski-Wallace. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP. 1989, 108-56.
2. Harris, Trudier. *Reconnecting Fragments: Afro-American*

- Folk Tradition in *The Bluest Eye*. Critical Essays on Toni Morrison. Ed. Nellie Y. McKay. Boston: G. K. Hall & Co. 1998, 68-76. Rpt. in Contemporary Literary Criticism. Web. 27 Oct. 2011.
3. LeClair, Thomas. The Language Must Not Sweat. New Republic. 1981; 184:25-29 (interview).
 4. Millard, Kenneth. Contemporary American Fiction: An Introduction to American Fiction. Oxford: Oxford University press. 1970.
 5. Morrison, Toni. *The Bluest Eye*. New York: Vintage International. 1970-1999.
 6. Werrein, Debra T. Dick and Jane: Reimagining Childhood and Nation in *The Bluest Eye*. MELUS. 2005; 30:53-72. Jstor. Web.15 Dec. 2011.
 7. Wong, Shelley. Transgression as Poesis in *The Bluest Eye*. *Callallo*. 1990; 13(3):471-481. The John Hopkins University Press. Jstor. Web. 05 Dec. 2011.
 8. Yang, Ding, Kong Xiangguo. Tragedy of the Self-Splitting – A Psychological Reading of Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*. *Front. Lit. Stud. China*. 2010, 4(2):298-320.