

ECHOING CASCADES

*GOMEZ SOPHIA
U. ANAMICA*



DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH
Jayaraj Annapackiam College for Women
(Autonomous)
Periyakulam, Tamilnadu, India

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Periyakulam-625601, Theni Dt, Tamil Nadu.
Web:jaceng@annejac.com
(Affiliated to Mother Teresa Women's University, Kodaikanal-624102,
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PECOLA BREEDLOVE'S QUEST FOR IDENTITY IN TONI MORRISON'S *THE BLUEST EYE*

R.MANO SOWMIYA

"The search for a personal identity is the life task of a teenager."

- Haim Ginott

African – American Literature is the body of literature which has produced in the United States numerous writers of African descent. Toni Morrison is regarded as one of the greatest living writers who has brought new life to African American literature. She has created remarkable characters and explored the emotional trauma of racism, identity, colour, discrimination, gender bias, injustice, oppression and slavery in her novels. Toni Morrison is a sensitive novelist, to project the Afro-American consciousness in her writings. With her deep rooted faith in Afro-American traditions, Morrison believes that freedom, justice and moral responsibility are the conditions of survival. Therefore, in her novels there is an inversion of traditional motifs such as quest for identity, freedom and love, desire for acceptance etc. She knew the singularity that characterised the black women in American life and literature. *The Bluest Eye* portrays the complexity of colonial relations and the identity crisis of the marginalized between blacks and whites.

Toni Morrison brought recognition to the genre of African American literature, having won many honours, including a National Book Critics Circle Award, the Pulitzer award and Nobel Prize award. Toni Morrison's first novel, *The Bluest Eye* written in 1970, prominently expanded African- American Literature. The novel is about a naive girl whose quest for self-esteem, self-definition and self-value ends in identifying ugliness with blackness.

The novel *The Bluest Eye* has been written to deliver a depressingly sad message about an innocent girl Pecola. All through the novel the author brings to brim the perceptions of Pecola- the young black girl. It also probes deep into the realities of racial prejudice. The ruptured

internalization of negative representatives of beauty and blackness are Toni Morrison's major focus in *The Bluest Eye*.

Pecola Breedlove, an unloved, eleven year old black girl, believes that the absence of blue eyes is central to her ugliness. Pecola's story shows how her complete victimization by both white and black culture. The colour of the black people have lead to so many misfortunates their complexion and their skin reflect their humiliation. This paper demonstrates Pecola's search for self- identity.

In this novel, "*The Bluest Eye*", the main theme of this novel is the Quest for Individual Identity. Pecola Breedlove is a young girl growing up black and poor in the early 1940's. she is repeatedly called "ugly" by nearly everyone in her life from the mean kids at school to her own mother. This constant criticism makes Pecola lead to seek escape from her misery by fantasizing about becoming more beautiful. Pecola begins to believe that if she could just achieve physical beauty, her life would automatically improve. This false belief turns out to be utterly destructive to Pecola, consuming her whole life and eventually, leading to her sanity.

"The distaste must be for her, her blackness, all things in here are flux and anticipation. But her blackness is static and dread". And it is the blackness that accounts for, that creates, the vacuum edged with distaste in white eyes." *Bluest Eye* (49).

Being an African American girl, who is constantly victimized and humiliated. When we first meet her, Pecola is homeless. Life continues to be miserable for her throughout the novel. Claudia accidentally punches her in face; she gets piping hot blueberry juice all over her legs; and young junior throws his cat in her face. All these events build toward the ultimate victimization of Pecola. She proves to be a foil against which the more privileged blacks admire their own advantages.

"We were so beautiful when we stood astride her ugliness." (205). Her simplicity decorated us, her guilt sanctified us, her pain made us glow with health, her awkwardness made us think we had a sense of humor.

Her inarticulateness made us believe we are eloquent. Her poverty kept us generous.

Her mother refused to show any love to Pecola because it might interfere with more important things. For a little girl, the love of her mother is the most important love she can receive. Without that, love she could think that she is worthy of anything at all. Finally the brutal rape by her own father pushes her to believe completely that she is an ugly, unlovable girl.

Pecola even believes that beauty can have a moralizing and sobering effect on those who tend to be wild and immoral in their behavior in the absence of beauty: It had occurred to Pecola sometime ago that if her eyes, those eyes that held the pictures, and knew the sights-if those eyes of hers were different, that is to say, beautiful, she herself would be different. If she looked different, beautiful, may be Cholly her father would not say, 'Why, look at pretty-eyed Pecola. We must not do bad things in front of those pretty eyes.(92).

Pecola suffers all through the novel. She is pictured as a blind victim of racial hostility and dehumanization. She is born with total helplessness. She is abused both by her father and mother. Her mother Pauline favours and loves the white children whom she takes care of. The white household is her world and she ignores her own children. Pecola feels that she has neither love or space, she feels that she is hopeless and is an absurd failure. When Pecola who is barely twelve becomes pregnant, she is blamed, Gossips around wish the baby dead. Pecola is voiceless and moves without a will of her own. She has no desire of her own except Shirley Temple, she loves to play with dolls. She loves candies with a wrapper of Mary Jane a beautiful white girl with blond hair and blue eyes. Pecola wishes to be like her. She imagines that if she tastes, the candy she would somehow become Mary Jane.

At some level, Pecola knows she does not have blue eyes. Hence her need for constant reassurance and her need to have the blue eyes, also her, eyes are not fabricate the expected response, general acceptance and

her mother's love; she is still ignored and her mother gives her strange looks. One explanation for this situation could be that her blue eyes of all (like the queen who wants to be the fairest of them all) then her eyes are perfect and she is unquestionably beautiful.

"A little black girl who wanted to rise up out of the pit of her blackness and see the world with blue eyes". One of the "The Bluest Eye" principal themes is that black women's absorption of white standards of beauty perpetuates a destructive value system. Yearning for the blue eyes throughout the novel at the end of the book she believes that she has those blue eyes. She believes that people treat her funny because they are jealous of her blue eyes and she has learned to happily accept that.

The Bluest Eye is about the difficulty of achieving individuality and full humanity in an objectifying and manipulative society to refuse that state of tension and negation is to madness. In *Bluest Eye* Morrison has not failed to furnish the hurts inflicted on the blacks by blacks. Pecola suffers most from white beauty standards- she strongly believes that if she possesses blue eyes, people would start loving her and her life will throb with love and affection. Tormented and tortured from all sides Pecola never gets angry. This suggests that Pecola has functioned as a scapegoat for the black community's own Self-esteem and Self-loathing.

Pecola stands as a symbol of the black community's self-hatred and belief in one's own ugliness. Toni Morrison through the role of Pecola highlights the mental strain of the oppressed community. Her treatment in the novel becomes a reminder of human cruelty and mark of human suffering. Her longing for blue eyes makes her believe that if she possess blue eyes, she could change others outlook and what she is forced to see. But the novel ends with Pecola's belief that she has been granted her wish but at the cost of her sanity.

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