

Ethnic Discrimination in *The Bluest Eye*

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Abstract

Ethnicity is one of the most debatable topics in contemporary times. Human culture is divided along ethnic and national lines. Ethnicity and Race function as most powerful language of human difference and human community. An ethnic group that is dominant often tends to make its own culture specific traits normative in that society. *The Bluest Eye* is one of the landmark novels of Toni Morrison in which the markings of ethnicity play a great role. The aim of this paper is to explore the traces of ethnic discrimination of the African Americans at the hands of dominant White Americans in the novel *The Bluest Eye*. It illustrates how ethnic stereotypes propagated by White Americans for their selfish purposes victimised the black people at that time. Particular emphasis is given on the psychological effects of the oppressive environment on the protagonist Pecola. Morrison portrays Pecola as a marginalized and oppressed character who yearns to have blue eyes to have a respectable position in the community.

Keywords: Ethnicity, Ethnic Group, Eurocentrism, Race, Ethnic Discrimination, Ethnic Stereotypes, Psychological Crisis

Ethnicity is one of the most talked about topics today. The English word 'ethnic' or 'ethnicity' is derived from a Greek word 'ethnikos' which means 'gentile' or 'heathen'. Ethnicity in the simplest sense is a "matter of identification or a sense of belonging to a particular ethnic group" as defined by Yetman in 1991 (qtd. in Yang 39). Most of us probably identify ourselves with one ethnic group or other. Ethnicities are breeding patterns that over time generate a similarity of external traits. They are sustained by social practices of marriage and reproduction usually within geography specific communities. And ultimately, they fall in one 'single' group also called Ethnic Group and share similar racial, cultural, physical and national characteristics.

Ethnic Groups become racist when they tend to dominate the 'other'. In the United States especially Ethnic Groups such as African American, Native American, Asian American, and Latino American are marginalized. These ethnic groups remained marginalized due to 'Eurocentric' perspective. Because of their minority in terms of number, language, and culture, they were not taken as part of 'mainstream'. Not only in United States, Ethnicities pervade throughout the world such as in Yugoslavia, Northern Ireland, Qubec and other European countries.

We live in a society where we tend to assume that the external traits such as colour of the skin or shape of eyes, convey internal truths. We consider these as a natural reason of their being 'other'. A 'black' coloured person is frowned over because we consider him as someone who is different in terms of colour. Whereas in reality black skin is as relevant as blonde hair as an indicator of an internal biological reality. We often mistake these biological evolutions or breeding as something 'other' than ordinary. Our opinions and even law relies more on this assumption rather than reality. This is why Ethnic difference persists most probably as economic difference, since race was often compared in the past to the economic exploitation of one group by another. Slavery is probably the most obviously example.

Ethnicity and race are the indelible markers of individual identity. They function as the most “effective and compelling determinants of cultural difference.” (Ryan 148) *The Bluest Eye* is one of the landmarks works by Toni Morrison which reflects “what it meant to be a black and African descendent in a largely white dominated America” (Ryan 148) during those times. It presents the ethnic discrimination of blacks at the hands of dominant whites. Morrison employs vivid imageries and symbols to highlight the pitiable situation of blacks. In the very beginning she compares them to birds:

“Like frenzied, desperate birds, they overdecorated everything; fussed and fidgeted over their hard-won homes; canned, jellied, and preserved all summer to fill the cupboards and shelves; they painted, picked, and poked at every corner of their houses.” (18)

Morrison explores the stereotypes propagated by whites that contributed towards segregation and exclusion of blacks from the mainstream culture. Ethnic Stereotypes play a great role in empowering the dominant group over the other. She symbolizes the Breedlove family as the African society which became the victim of white ideology. They handed down the false ideology that only white is pure, gold, beautiful and universal for beauty. On the contrary, black is a symbol of ugly, bad and impurity. They made this myth of black inferiority in order to serve their purposes, but it became embedded in the minds of black people which they can't get rid of. It became a strong belief for them. They began to harbour feelings of inferiority right from the very beginning. They accepted themselves as outsiders from the main stream; though they have their prestigious culture. The Breedlove family are not contented with their life. All family members specially Pecola, Pauline, and Cholly literally struggle to fit in the culture of White Americans and yearn for their luxurious lifestyle. There are various instances which present a wide contrast between white world and black world. The Breedloves live in a house which is nothing less than a shabby abandoned storefront. They live in extreme poverty. They work in the houses of White Americans as servants. There is no feelings of love

and affection between them. The only thing common among them is the feeling of low self-esteem and self-hatred. They identify themselves as ugly creatures and pine for everything that is white. They strongly believe that only white people are lucky enough to be loved. Also, their inability to have an alternate ideology to counter the dominant one intensifies their sufferings. They not only suffer from the false stereotypes but also identity crisis.

“It was as though some mysterious all-knowing master had given each one a cloak of ugliness to wear, and they had each accepted it without question.” (39)

As O’ Reilly says: “Pecolla, Pauline, and Cholly Breedlove fall victim to their failure to transcend the imposing definition of ‘The Other’s’ look. Reduced to a state of objectness (thingness), each remains frozen in a world of being-for-the-other and consequently lives a life of shame, alienation, self-hatred and inevitable destruction” (50).

Pecola emerges as the embodiment of the deepest psychological crisis triggered by the oppressive environment. She suffers the most from the markings of ethnicity. Pecola blindly believes in the white notion of beauty and considers blue eyes and white skin to be the ideal beauty. She has a mad quest for it. Right from the childhood she lives a life devoid of love and affection. She concludes that there is no one out there who really cares for her not even her own parents. She feels like an abandoned, careless and unnoticed child in society. Her misery is aggravated by her belief that the cause of hatred towards her is colour of her skin and eyes. She mistakes her ethnic identity: black skin and black eyes to be a sign of ugliness. She yearns for blue eyes to achieve an acceptable position in the society.

“A little black girl yearns for the blue eyes of a little white girl, and the horror at the heart of her yearning is exceeded only by the evil of fulfilment.” (181)

She lives for the maximum time in her own make-believe world. In order to avoid reality, she tries every possible way to get blue eyes. She thinks that a pair of blue eyes will be the passport for love and affection. Each night she prays for blue eyes.

“Pretty eyes. Pretty blue eyes. Big blue pretty eyes. Run, Jip, run. Jip runs. Alice runs. Alice has blue eyes. Jerry has blue eyes. Jerry runs. Alice runs. They run with their blue eyes. Four blue eyes. Four pretty blue eyes. Blue -sky-eyes. Blue – like Mrs. Forrest’s blue blouse eyes. Morning- glory – blue- eyes. Alice-and-jerry-blue-storybook-eyes.” (44)

She is not able to go at public places out of fear of shame and embarrassment. Pecola thinks that Soaphead is the messenger of God, so she pathetically urges him, to replace her black eyes with blue. Soaphead Church’s letter to the God effectively underscore the dominant power of ethnicity in African American society. She wants to become like a white doll with blue eyes, fair colour and blunted hair. Toni Morrison describes her imbalance and effort to be white in detail. She daily takes three quarters of milk. She thinks that if she takes milk in cup with pictures of Shirley Temple, then she will become as beautiful as she is. She idolises Mary Jane and her beauty. In order to acquire beautiful features like her, she eats candy like her. She becomes insane.

She feels herself as powerless, neglected, alienated and rootless. She is humiliated by everyone be it her parents, friends, teachers, friends or neighbours; which severely damages her psyche. Pecola being poor and ugly is harassed by boys at school. They composed even a verse made up of two insults: the color of her skin and speculations on her father’s habit of sleeping naked. Though Claudia and Frieda come in rescue of her, it is the appearance of affluent Maureen Peal that actually saves those three poor black girls from those bullies. Later Pecola is demoralized when Maureen throws distasteful remarks at her specifically in relation to nakedness of her father. Maureen claims her supremacy over her by denouncing her as ‘ugly’ and ‘black’. But unlike Pecola, Claudia realizes that Maureen is not the enemy but “the thing to fear is the thing that make her beautiful and not us.” However, Maureen is beautiful not because of her appearance but because she is rich and they are ugly because they are poor. (Lakshmi 43)

Pecola not only experiences racial discrimination within the dominant group but also within their own ethnic group. Pecola's encounter with Geraldine is one of the vivid examples which intensifies her self-hatred. Geraldine, being the daughter of propertied blacks, lost her funkiness by adopting white, middle class values. She raises an immoral son Louis Junior, who brings Pecola in his clean and Christian house with an evil excuse of cute kitten. He beats her with his mother's cat and gets the sadistic pleasure. As soon as Geraldine enters the room, he kills the cat by throwing it in radiator and puts the blame on Pecola. Geraldine expresses more her disgust at the sight of a poor black girl over sadness at the death of her kitten. She began insulting the black girl's community as the one who live like animals, and pee together on one bed. She calls Pecola "a black bitch" and throws her out of the house. Thereafter Geraldine counsels his son about the difference between coloured people and niggers.

At every turn Pecola is confronted with attitudes and images based on the myth of white superiority that reinforce her tendency towards self-hatred. The most blatant expression of racial inequality comes to forefront in the episode with white shopkeeper. When Pecola encounters Mr. Yacobowski, a white man whose religious sensibility," honed on the doe-eyed virgin Mary," is alien to the world she inhabits, she is struck by the "total absence of human recognition" on his face. When Pecola looks at him for a candy she sees not only apathy but also a streak of intense hatred in his eyes towards her. The shopkeeper initially ignores her presence but then is forced to give her candy. He hesitates to even touch her hand while taking money as she is a black poor girl. The treatment almost crushes her little heart.

"she has seen interest, disgust, even anger in grown male eyes. Yet this vacuum is not new.... She has seen it lurking in eyes of all white people. 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." (49)

Towards the ending of novel Pecola is depicted in a pathetic condition. She is brutally raped by her father, bears a child that dies and retreats into madness believing that her eyes are not simply blue but the bluest of all. She retreats to a state of complete isolation i.e., cut off from town and society not only physically but also emotionally. Beaulieu uses correct words to reflect upon the factors responsible for the tragedy of Pecola: “The Bluest Eye explores white beauty standards and their devastating effect on one small black child, Pecola, who learns that because she is black, she will never be beautiful, never be loved, never be worthy.... Her belief is dangerously reinforced by her family and peers, most of whom are victims of the white beauty myth themselves.” (50)

Conclusion:

In the light of above discussion, we can confidently conclude that in any country the validity of ethnicity is undeniable. It affects the opportunities of members of different ethnic groups in schools, jobs, income, housing and politics. *The Bluest Eye* vividly portrays not only the ethnic discrimination of the African Americans at the hands of dominant White Americans but also the false ideologies that played a considerable role in the process. At the heart of the novel lies the psychological effects of ethnic discrimination on the characters confronted with an oppressive environment and their hopeless struggle against the false stereotypes. From the very beginning to the very end Pecola desired blue eyes and blond hair to like a white girl, but she is unable to find her self-esteem, self-identity and self-image in racial society. It gives the ultimate message that racists mistake accidents for essences, traits for truths, and meaningful markers of chromatic distinction for meaningful expressions of natural difference. The need of the hour is to avoid such false ideologies and to respect all human beings regardless of their ethnicities.

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