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### The Diaspora Mimics: A Postcolonial Reading of Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*

**Abstract:** Mimicry is a key concept in postcolonial studies. It involves the imitation of the centre by those at the margins. It is common among diaspora communities, people who have been displaced and are trying to fit in, and to do so, they mimic the dominant ideology. They create imperfect copies of themselves and lose their identity. This paper attempts a postcolonial reading of Toni Morrison's 1970 novel *The Bluest Eye* and analyses the impact of mimicry on various characters.

**Keywords:** *The Bluest Eye*, African-American diaspora, racism, mimicry, Toni Morrison.

As a concept, the word 'mimicry' has its origins in evolutionary biology. The resemblance of one organism to another or to an object in its surroundings for concealment or protection from predators is called mimicry (Maran 8). Certain flora and fauna 'put up disguises' so as to ward off or entrap prey. The *Nepenthes rafflesiana*, or the pitcher plant as it is more commonly known, emits a floral scent to trap its prey. The *Ctenomorpha marginipennis*, or the stick insect, mimics a stick to ward off predators. The imitation is called mimesis (from Plato's terminology). In the natural world, these tactics ensure the survival of the fittest, and allow these species to continue living. It is to be noted that while these animals and plants may be mimicking a characteristic or shape of something else, essentially, they do not become the mimicked object. Rather, they live as a copy of the same, with a drastic number of differences.

In colonial discourse, mimicry is a key concept. Cultural hegemony was a byproduct of colonization. The centre decided the dominant culture and ideology, while those at the periphery had to follow. The colonized subject was expected to abandon its now deemed inferior culture and mimic that of the colonizer. Bhabha, in *The Location of Culture* quotes,

“Colonial mimicry is the desire for a reformed recognizable Other, as a subject of difference that is almost the same, but not quite” (122). The colonizer desires to see the reformed and saved colonized, and to do so, the colonized was taught to mimic the dominant ideology so as to be deemed acceptable. However, there remains a catch, in so that the mimicking colonized never actually becomes the colonizer. Points of divergence remained, and helped the colonizer assert domination. This marks for ambivalence in colonial discourse, as on the one hand the colonizer does want the colonized to become them, but also, ‘not quite’.

Mimicry was used as a key strategy for the various civilizing missions of the ‘Other’ by the colonizer. To understand this better, the illustration of the English Education Act passed in 1835, gives a clear picture. The Act granted the use of funds for education in India. Macaulay thought, and published the idea that ethnic Indian education was inferior and that there was a need for Western education curriculum as it was more superior. He wanted people who would be ethnically Indian, but live by English standards (Chatterjee 8). This created a class of Indians who would mimic the English but would be used only as pawns in their grand schemes. Even though they thought and acted like the English, they were still deemed inferior, and occupied the position of the ‘Other’. The mimicking subject thus chases an unattainable goal, escaping the status of the subaltern.

Mimicry is more evident among diaspora communities. They have been displaced from their homeland and are in a new land, a land where they will be viewed as ‘immigrants’. This automatically places the diaspora community in the position of the ‘Other’. The new land has its native culture, something which occupies the dominant role, and the diaspora community has to adhere to those principles. They are expected to mimic the cultural practices and believe in the dominant ideology of the new land, and they do so, hoping to ‘blend in’ and ‘avoid persecution’ (Nelson 55). This expectation calls for two phenomenon, loss of the self, and devaluing the culture of their homeland. Their identity becomes ambivalent as they struggle to find a balance between who they are and what they are expected to be. They become imperfect copies, and thus end up in a ‘neither here nor there’ kind of a predicament (57).

The theme of mimicry is key to understanding the dynamics of the plot of Toni Morrison’s 1970 novel *The Bluest Eye*. Lorain, Ohio, post the Great Depression, serves as the primary location for the events in the novel. Set in 1941, the novel has three crucial narrators: 9 year old African-American Claudia MacTeer, Claudia MacTeer as an adult, and a third person

narrator. The novel focuses on the predicaments of the African-American community in racial America, and recounts the tale of Pecola Breedlove, an 11 year old girl, who has been raped and impregnated by her father, Cholly Breedlove. By doing so, the novel provides a critique of the American society and its stance on racism. The novel has been removed from the syllabi of various educational institutions for its depiction of blatant racism, child molestation, and rape.

What must be kept in mind is that the African-American community depicted in the novel is diasporic in nature. They have been displaced from their homeland generations ago, and are not the native dwellers of the United States of America. Rather, the US has become their adopted homeland. As a diaspora community, the African-Americans were marginalized and penalized for their race, even after slavery was abolished in the US in 1865. They were denied high paying jobs and the racist bias they faced proved to be a constant obstacle. They were the 'Other', while the 'Whites' controlled the dominant ideology: that 'White' is beautiful and acceptable. Thus, the African-American community was expected to 'become White' in order to gain acceptance, as being Black was unacceptable.

The dominant ideology of Whiteness as a standard of beauty is exemplified through various instances in the novel. The novel begins with lines from a primer, called *Dick and Jane*. The series, written by William S Gray and Zerna Sharp, was used to familiarize and polish the reading skills of early learners. The book depicted through illustrations a happy ideal White American family, with stereotypical depictions of the White beauty – blonde hair, blue eyes, and slender figures (Shermer Web). As children read this in schools, the concept of being White as a key to happiness became ingrained, and this had adverse affects on the Black children. They knew that these characters were nothing like them, and yet were indirectly taught to look up to them as the ideal family (Simpson 40).

*The Bluest Eye* also documents the role played by the American film industry in propagating the concept of an ideal 'White' life. In the novel, Pecola Breedlove, the protagonist, loves drinking milk from a Shirley Temple cup. Shirley Temple was one of the most highly paid Hollywood child actors. Extremely popular during the era, she began acting from the age of three and was the star of the 1934 comedy drama film *Bright Eyes* (IMDb Web). Shirley Temple embodied the essence of 'White beauty': innocent, blonde haired, and blue eyes. The reason Pecola drinks from the Shirley Temple cup is to 'become her'. It is a way for her to associate with the actress who everyone thought was the ideal beauty, something Pecola was

not. She was the 'Other' trying to mimic Shirley Temple. Later in the novel, Pauline Breedlove, Pecola's mother obsesses with White movie stars and attempts to look like them. Popular culture of the era thus sold the notion of the ideal White beauty. This results in the Black characters mimicking the Whites, thereby losing their identity.

The notion of the ideal White beauty is forced upon the Black diaspora in several ways. The novel's protagonist, 9 year old Claudia MacTeer, receives a White baby doll with blue eyes for Christmas. "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 20). The parents, having seen similar images in various media and advertisements, keep telling her it is a beautiful doll. By gifting her this doll, the parents are unknowingly trying to force the notion that the doll, White, blue eyed, blond haired, is beautiful, while Claudia is not. She fails to accept this and ends up ripping the doll apart to see where the beauty resides.

The command to mimic for the Black community in *The Bluest Eye* is subtle. Claudia's parents buy the doll because it is advertised as the ideal beauty.

"The master had said, "You are ugly people." They had looked about themselves and saw nothing to contradict the statement; saw, in fact, support for it leaning at them from every billboard, every movie, every glance. "Yes," they had said. "You are right.""(39)

The diaspora Black community had accepted the notion of White as a standard for beauty and had given up any resistance towards the same. The idea had been internalized. The centre had convinced the margin of its inferiority and its need to mimic the centre. Several characters in the novel show a tendency to mimic, and a few of these have been discussed in the following paragraphs.

### **Geraldine:**

Geraldine is a minor character who appears only in Chapter 5. She is described as a mulatto<sup>1</sup>. Socially, she is at a higher place than the Black characters because of her lighter skin. She attempts to free herself of the 'Black' part of her and refuses to associate with any of the Black people. She forbids her son Loius Jr. to play with Black children. When she sees Pecola in her house, she calls her a 'nasty little Black bitch' (82). She hates her own Blackness, and as a result, hates herself and her family who remind her that she cannot be fully White. Yet, she mimics the Whites to the best that she can.

They (women like Geraldine) wash themselves with orange-colored Lifebuoy soap, dust themselves with Cashmere Bouquet talc, clean their teeth with salt on a piece of rag, soften their skin with Jergens Lotion. (82).

A curious behaviour depicted by Geraldine is her extensive bathing rituals. She uses costly bath products as an attempt to clean off the Black in her. She keeps cleaning her house so it looks perfect, what she feels a White person's house would look like. She feels that cleaning herself and her house will make her White, an effort in vain. In the end, she has learnt to hate the 'self' and mimic, yet remains an 'Other' as the society would never see her as a White and give her the reverence she desires. She ignores her son, her husband, and has affection only for their family cat, who like herself, loved to groom itself frequently.

### **Pauline Breedlove:**

Chapter 7 focuses on the character of Pauline Breedlove and tells her side of the story. Pauline grew up in Alabama and moved to Lorain after her marriage to Cholly Breedlove. It is after this move that she gets bombarded with the images of the White beauty. With Cholly away at work, and her not having friends, she takes solace in watching movies. American movies in the 1940s had almost exclusively White film stars in lead roles. The more she watches the films, the stronger her desire becomes to mimic them. She thinks she too can lead a happy life if she looks and behaves like these White actors. Pauline starts to dress up like the movie stars, and wants to fill her house with pretty things she sees in the houses of the White characters. While one may think this is a mere obsession with pretty things, the narrator clarifies, "The sad thing was that Pauline did not really care for clothes and makeup. She merely wanted other women to cast favorable glances her way" (118). She wanted to be accepted, and so she mimics the White movie actors.

The movies that Pauline goes to sell to her the image of a life that is ideal, filled with White people. She sees that White actors romance their heroines, something that she misses from her marriage to Cholly. She idealizes the White life. Apart from the notion of romance, Pauline also starts to focus on the physical aspects of the White actors. First and foremost, African-American women had a different body type, a type which was deemed unsuitable by the dominant culture. As she sees the 'beautiful' actresses on screen, she starts to internalize the notion that she herself is ugly as she does not look like them. "Along with the idea of romantic love, she was introduced to another—physical beauty" (122).

The movies then go on to provide for Pauline a scale to measure beauty.

She was never able, after her education in the movies, to look at a face and not assign it some category in the scale of absolute beauty, and the scale was one she absorbed in full from the silver screen (122).

Pauline has been 'educated' about beauty in these movies, and thus she has been overpowered by the cultural hegemony. Now all that remains for her is to try and become like these actors. She ends up overspending in clothes and other items, something which causes the rift between her and Cholly to grow. She curls her hair. However, one day in the movie hall, she loses a tooth while munching on candy, and realizes she will always be 'ugly', in spite of her mimicry. This is reminded to her during her pregnancy with Pecola. When she gets admitted in the hospital for delivery, a White doctor treats her like an object and says, "*They deliver right away and with no pain. Just like horses.*" (124-125). She is reminded that she will always be the undesirable 'Other', no matter how hard she tries to mimic the Whites.

### **Pecola Breedlove:**

Pecola Breedlove is Pauline's daughter. She is 11 years old and yearns to look 'White', so as to be deemed beautiful. Her parents constantly fight, and these fights are ugly. Her life would improve - "If she looked different, beautiful, maybe Cholly would be different, and Mrs. Breedlove too." (46). She feels that if she becomes beautiful, as per the White standards, her life would improve and everyone would treat her differently. As mentioned earlier, she loves drinking milk from the Shirley Temple cup, which can be metaphorically understood as her desire to absorb all the whiteness she can. Pecola goes to school, where illustrations in her books remind her of the fact that she is not beautiful. She sees images of happy White families, and thus internalizes the concept that White means beauty, and whiteness will lead to happiness. The children in these books have blue eyes, and so she desires to have blue eyes too. "*Pretty eyes. Pretty blue eyes. Big blue pretty eyes. Run, Jip, run. Jip runs, Alice runs. Alice has blue eyes. Jerry has blue eyes.*" (46). In the books that she studies, the image of blue eyes as an indicator of beauty is reinforced. She thus attempts to mimic the Whites.

Another instance of her mimicry would be her desire to eat Mary Jane candies. Mary Jane candies originated in 1914 when they were manufactured by Charles N Miller Co. Later, Stark Candy Co. picked up production. It is described as a peanut butter and molasses flavoured taffy-type candy. The wrapper has an image of a little White girl. "Smiling white face. Blond hair in gentle disarray, blue eyes looking at her out of a world of clean comfort" (50). Pecola likes the Mary Jane candies because she loves the image on the wrapper. She

wants blue eyes to look like the culturally approved and sanctioned beauty. .“To eat the candy is somehow to eat the eyes, eat Mary Jane. Love Mary Jane. Be Mary Jane.” (65). It is clearly an attempt to mimic, whereby she feels she ‘becomes’ the beautiful White Mary Jane when she eats the candy.

However, her obsession to mimic allows her to be used by Soaphead Church, a minor character, to kill a dog he hates. She unknowingly poisons the dog, and takes the convulsions from the animal as a sign that she will be granted blue eyes. She eventually gets raped by her father, Cholly. The final chapter of the novel presents an interior monologue where the readers finally get to hear Pecola’s thoughts. She has become mentally unstable as a result of the rape, and imagines her reflection in the mirror to be her friend.

Just because I got blue eyes, bluer than theirs, they’re prejudiced.

*That’s right.*

They are bluer, aren’t they?

*Oh, yes. Much bluer. (197).*

She finally gets the blue eyes she wanted, and her mimicry is complete. She has become beautiful. However, this is only in her imagination, a result of her insanity. Thus, her mimicry is faulty and incomplete, and she remains an ‘Other’.

### **Conclusion:**

The characters face an identity crisis because of their mimicry. They are alienated from themselves. Geraldine’s desire to mimic leaves her hating herself, her family, and showing affection only for her cat. Pauline hates herself, her family, and shows affection only for the White family she works for. Pecola hates herself, and ends up insane after her rape and subsequent pregnancy. Claudia is the only one who is depicted to be immune to the compulsion to mimic. However, as the prologue suggests, everyone will lose their innocence and in time, she will also come to accept the notion of White supremacy.

*The Bluest Eye* thus depicts the folly of mimicry. The diaspora characters are under the spell of cultural hegemony. They mimic the dominant ideology to be ‘accepted’, but end up being flawed versions of the Whites. Mimicry only creates duplicates. They learn to hate the self, lose it, and remain the ‘Other’. It is this mimicry which ultimately leads to the downfall of these diaspora characters.

**Endnotes:**

1. Mulatto is a term used to refer to persons born of one white parent and one black parent or to persons born of a mulatto parent or parents.

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