

TONI MORRISON'S *THE BLUEST EYE*: THE CONSTRUCTION OF AFRICAN-AMERICAN WOMEN'S IDENTITY POLITICS IN THE 1940s

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Resumen: *The Bluest Eye* describe los efectos destructivos y las dramáticas consecuencias de los modelos de belleza blanca en los Estados Unidos de los años cuarenta. La finalidad de este artículo es demostrar desde la perspectiva del feminismo de raza, etnicidad e imperialismo como esta novela contribuye a forjar políticas de identidad entre las mujeres afro-americanas en la primera mitad del siglo veinte y su repercusión en la sociedad contemporánea.

Palabras clave: Raza, género, espacio, belleza, políticas de identidad.

Abstract: Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* describes the destructive effects and the dramatic consequences of the white standards of beauty in the US of the 1940s. The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate from a Race, Ethnicity, Imperialism feminist perspective how the novel contributes to forging identity politics among African-American women in the first half of the twentieth century and its significance in contemporary society.

Keywords: Race, gender, environment, beauty, identity politics.

The search for place and the self is an on-going phenomenon in American discourse. Toni Morrison's work consistently shows that identity and place are found in the community and in the communal experience, and not in the transcendence of society or in the search for a single, private self. Morrison's first novel *The Bluest Eye* is based on the foundations of the later developed REI -Race, Ethnicity and Imperialism- feminism. It describes the devastating effects of the beauty standards of the white dominant culture in the US of the 1940s on the self-image of Pecola Breedlove, an African-American female adolescent despised by her parents for her "inherited" ugliness. Calvin Hernton describes the African-American woman of the time as ashamed of what she is: "her blackness is the antithesis of a creamy white skin, her lips are thick, her hair is kinky, and short she is, in fact the antithesis of American beauty ... in this country she is ugly"¹. In the novel's only concrete description of Pecola, the narrator gives us quite a positive one: "her teeth are good and her nose is not big and flat like some of those who were thought so cute"². Then, where does her ugliness reside? The community's hierarchy of colour and caste gives preference to those members who appear more white over those who do not. Pecola is ugly because she is blacker than the others.

¹ HERTON, C.: *The Sexual Mountain and Black Women Writers*. NY: Anchor-Doubleday, 1987, p. 38.

² MORRISON, T.: *The Bluest Eye*. London, Vintage, 1979, p. 40.

Pecola's parents moved from Kentucky to Loraine, Ohio in the 1940s looking for economic profits. Then, her mother, like many other "expatriate" women, lost her communal southern culture and painfully confronted northern standards of physical beauty and style. Rather than mitigating their frustration in a white world, their desperate attempts to become white intensified it. K. Sumana rightly notes that Morrison tends to see racism and sexism in her novels from the female perspective. At this point, *The Bluest Eye* novel makes one of the most powerful attacks on the relationship between western standards of female beauty and the psychological oppression of black women in the United States of the 1940s and later decades. The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate, first: how communal values, the prevailing concept of beauty, and the environment contributed to forging the identities of African-American women; and second: to show how their relationships with black men and other women helped forge these identities. In order to prove that, I will analyze *The Bluest Eye* from a REI feminist perspective, from an angle which clearly contributes to stressing black/white differences in the novel's context but claims recognition and inclusion for African-American women marginalized by racial ethnic hierarchy and economic differences. Various books on Morrison such as Furman's, Sumana's or Bjork's will be used to support how gender, place and race help create an identity politics and solidarity between black women.

In August 2010 I was walking through a black neighbourhood in Chicago. It was a Sunday morning and there were few people on the streets to look at, when I suddenly saw a billboard. It was an advertisement for a hip-hop radio station and contained the pictures of different types of current African-American hip-hop singers with their fashionable hair-dos, sunglasses, hoodies, gold chains and big round silver earrings. But to me, it was more than an advertisement for a hip-hop radio station. It meant how proud these individuals felt to be African-American. Of course, not all different types of African-Americans were represented there but the picture was so radically different from the homogeneous look of African-Americans in previous decades that it was worth being photographed for reasons I will explain later.

In an interview Toni Morrison said that "*The Bluest Eye* is about one's dependency on the world for identification, self values, feelings or worth"³. The pervasive white standard of beauty adopted by so many characters in *The Bluest Eye* is at the heart of the cruelty and destruction that occurs because it fails to recognize and value difference. Indeed, this single standard wholly denies difference by ignoring the obvious fact that it exists. *The Bluest Eye* refers to Pecola Breedlove's only desire in life to have the bluest

³ CARMEAN, K.: Toni Morrison's Interview. Moore, Richard O., dir., "The Writer in America", Perspective Films, 1978, p. 18.

eyes which will reverse the miserable circumstances of her life. Blue eyes are the epitome of white beauty, so if you have them, you will be lovable and accepted not only by the white community but by the community in general. In my view, *The Bluest Eye* is also Pecola's friend Claudia MacTeer's story of sense of loss and reconciliation that starts in Loraine, Ohio in the 1940s. Morrison herself was born there and defines Ohio as "an interesting and complex state [which]", she adds, "has a southern and a northern disposition"⁴. The town is now comprised of over seventy nationalities who were originally attracted by work in the steel-mills and shipyards and it is used by Morrison as the setting of *The Bluest Eye*. Similarly to what happens in the novel and according to the 2000 census, 19.2% of the population had a female householder with no husband present. About the 14.2% of families and 17.1% of the population were below the poverty line.

Little Claudia, sometimes a child, sometimes an adult voice, is the narrator who stands on the periphery of most of the story's action, trying to survive the poverty and the racism that she encounters. She and her sister Frieda share much in common with Pecola Breedlove: gender, age, race, poverty, ignorance, and anger—most of which they cannot control. It would be unfair to single out the

⁴ PEACH, L.: *Toni Morrison: Contemporary Critical Essays*. Houndmills, Basingstoke and London, MacMillan Press Ltd., 1998, p. 2.

MacTeer girls and Pecola because the novel also depicts the fight of unwealthy and impressionable Midwest African-American mothers, daughters, women friends, and women enemies in their places and out of their places. Their suffering is more visible not only because they are black, but because they are poor and women. As Kwane Knrumah notes, "race is inextricably linked with class exploitation"⁵. The oppression of African-American people on racial grounds is indistinguishable from oppression for economic reasons. Pecola suffers not only because of her race but also because of her gender and her poverty. As K. Sumana points out, "the novel is not only a contrast between blacks and whites but between poverty and affluence"⁶. One can easily see this disparity in Maureen Peal, a light-skinned, middle class child idolized by the community, who cruelly insults Pecola's colour and lack of means.

Accordingly, it is interesting to highlight that in the 1940s African-American women's opportunities were mainly restricted to farm work, doing laundry or being a maid. Rearing of children and house making was a domestic trap for the white but an inconceivable luxury for working class women and women of

⁵ KNRUMAH, K.: *Class Struggle in Africa*. NY, International Publishers, 1970, p. 27.

⁶ SUMANA, K.: *The Novels of Toni Morrison. A Study in Race, Gender and Class*, New Delhi, Prestige Books, 1998, p. 63.

colour. Betty Friedan's Liberal feminist classic, *The Feminine Mystique* (1965), which focuses on the oppression of women contained in their domestic housewife roles, is an example of the limits of a white feminism that fails to attend to race or class. The 1960s and 1970s feminist movements soon split between the interests of white middle class women and African-American women of all classes. In the 1970s activists called for black dolls to help African American children build self-esteem because the identification of ugliness with blackness destroyed lovely black children and devastated their self image. In *The Bluest Eye* Morrison, who wrote the novel while raising two children and teaching at Howard, revisits Western conceptions of difference as limitative. In Wendy Harding's words, "she portrays women who are capable of making differences"⁷. The difference resides in their adaptability to the social environment. As a matter of fact, Morrison emphasizes the idea that African-American women became "both ship and harbor" in the social sphere of the first half of the twentieth century in the US⁸. Like the women in the novel, she had to nurture and to

⁷ HARDING, W. and MARTIN J.: *A World of Difference. An Inter-Cultural Study of Toni Morrison's Novels*. Westport, London, Greenwood Press, 1994, p. 63.

⁸ TAYLOR-GUTHRIE, D.: ed., *Conversations with Toni Morrison*. Jackson, University Press of Mississippi, 1994, p. 161.

provide financially to keep a family because as with most cases, her husbands had gone away⁹.

Morrison's female characters are expatriates, nomads in their own nation who live in an enclosed Midwestern community which, in the end, fails them. Why expatriates? Not only because they came to industrial cities in search of a job or ran away from somewhere else, thus losing their old roots, for good or for bad but, "perhaps", as Claudia says, "because they don't have home towns, just places where they were born"¹⁰. In the case of Morrison's own parents, the South was a region from which they had escaped, but the north barely offered any legal protection either when they moved there. All these expatriates had adopted the corrupting influence of the white community and desperately needed some element of their own race to denigrate in their new environment in order to feel superior. Pauline Breedlove -Pecola's mother- is a social failure who thinks that "white is right"¹¹. Geraldine -a "coloured" neighbour- exemplifies black middle-class hatred of poor blacks and embodies the community's strictly codified caste system. The

⁹ Toni Morrison, neé Chloe Anthony Wofford, married a Jamaican architect Harold Morrison in 1958 and later separated.

¹⁰ MORRISON, T.: *The Bluest Eye*. London, Vintage, 1979, p. 63.

¹¹ FRANKEL, H.: "Review of *The Bluest Eye*". NELLIE Y. M. (ed.): *Critical Essays on Toni Morrison*. Boston, Mass., G. K. Hall & Co., 1998, p. 75. Rpt. *New York Times Book Review*, 1 Nov. 1970, p. 46-47.

little black girls, Pecola, Claudia and Frieda, are easily the pariahs of that close-minded society.

Unlike Pecola, Claudia loves herself and is loved by her parents and sister Frieda. She lives in a house big enough to have a lodger, Mr Henry. The little girl just wants to tell her own story and wants it to be justified. Claudia is anything but impartial and represents an automatic rejection of external standards that were impossible for her to meet, at least in the 1940s. Ironically, as a token of love from her family, Claudia is given a blue-eyed baby doll. Instead of loving the doll, she dismembers it, searching for the secret of its beauty, its desirability and what makes the world treasure such beauty. She seems to say, if the doll is perceived as pretty, I'm not. But Claudia is capable of making differences and At the beginning of the story she tries to find someone or something to blame for Pecola's destruction. At the end she learns to feel her responsibility for the fate of the others and has a different and richer sense of the relation between the individual and the community. In Lynne Tirrell's words, "Like William Dean Howells, she wanted to know who was good and who was bad"¹². Claudia concludes that we are guilty for Pecola's death and that of her stillborn child. It is not the fault of the

¹² TIRRELL, L.: "Storytelling and Moral Agency". MIDDLETON, D. (ed.): *Toni Morrison's Fiction: Contemporary Criticism*. New York and London, Garland Publishing, Inc., 1997, p. 18.

earth, the land or our town. Claudia and the community have failed Pecola, but the first is strong enough to tell her sacrificial story which "serves as a point of departure in her own search for an authenticating self"¹³.

Relationships between sisters, female friends, mothers, and daughters are central to the novel. Pauline is taken away from her native Alabama to Kentucky and then to Ohio, from rural to industrial America. In the new land she is ridiculed for her provincial speech and village manners. Having lost her emotional ties and bonds of relationship with the land, she looks for an education in the cinema at a time in which few black characters were featured in films. In America of the 1940s, the white ideal of beauty and behaviour was mainly engendered by cinema. Movie theatres were the new land of adoption, the unofficial school for these inner immigrants. They were *the* place to dream and to be educated in new values. Mr Henry calls Claudia and Frieda Greta Garbo and Ginger Rogers despite their blackness. Jean Harlow, Betty Grable, and Shirley Temple were the only icons to be imitated in those years as there were no Beyoncé, Halle Berry or Rihanna to follow. The movies inspire Pauline to equate physical beauty with virtue, finding a world she cannot have in real life. Doing her

¹³ BJORK, P. B.: *The Novels of Toni Morrison. The Search for Self and Place Within the Community*. New York, Peter Lang, 1996, p. 54.

hair like Jean Harlow's, Pauline fragments herself and finds a refuge at her work place, the Fishers' house. The lovely white people's house represents the world of beauty and relevance, so different from the abandoned storefront where she lives an ugly life. At the Fishers' she orchestrates a substitute life as the black mammy and invents a surrogate daughter, the family's "pink and yellow girl", because her own child reminds her of the shabby reality of her life¹⁴. The world of the whites means protection and self-confidence—a new Pauline. However, Pauline's fantasy expresses Morrison's strongest criticism of a white standard of beauty that "excludes most black women and that destroys those who strive to measure up but cannot"¹⁵.

Most of the damage inflicted on Pecola comes not only from African American adults who have internalized racist standards such as her parents or Geraldine but also from children. If adults act individually, at school children bully Pecola as a horde. Let alone the whites, even the blacks mock Pecola. Even teachers ignore her

¹⁴ MORRISON, T.: *The Bluest Eye*. London, Vintage, 1979, p. 87.

According to Missy Dehn Kubitschek, before the 1970s there were three black women stereotypes: the bossy and comic mammy, who nurtures everyone; the mulatta, a mixed race woman whose life is necessarily tragic; and the shappire, who dominates and emasculates black men. KUBITSCHKEK, M. D., *Toni Morrison. A Critical Companion*. Westport, Connecticut, London: Greenwood Press, 1998, p. 17.

¹⁵ FURMAN, J.: *Toni Morrison's Fiction*. Columbia, South Carolina, 1996, p. 19.

because they are repelled by the ugly. She becomes the scapegoat for their own humiliation and pain. In this context, Geraldine exemplifies black middle-class hatred of poor blacks. She belongs to an African-American family who, for its social status and economic and political advancement, wants to “become close to the ruling class”¹⁶. This milk-brown woman, who lived in quite a beautiful ordered green house, prevented her son from playing with dark-skinned children like Pecola, but he is ostracized by whites and hates both worlds. Then Pecola turns to the prostitutes who live in the upper floor of the storehouse. China, Marie and Poland stand in opposition to the Geraldines in the community. As Jan Furman notes, “they make no apologies by themselves and seek no sympathy”¹⁷. Pecola loves these women who are eager to teach the lessons they have learned. However, they cannot teach Pecola how to be loved by a community and by society. They cannot take her to a place where she belongs because they do not care about belonging.

The Bluest Eye anticipates later theories. It shares concerns with the two most powerful social forces in the US during the 1950s and 1960s, the Black Power movement and the Feminist movement. The

¹⁶ SUMANA, K.: *The Novels of Toni Morrison. A Study in Race, Gender and Class*, New Delhi, Prestige Books, 1998, p. 55.

¹⁷ FURMAN, J.: *Toni Morrison's Fiction*. Columbia, South Carolina, 1996, p. 21.

novel is the perfect base for Race/Ethnicity/Imperialism feminists and perhaps that is why Morrison wrote it in the 1970s. They focus their attention on relations between women and have been at the forefront of discussions about the meaning and practice of a feminist political solidarity in the light of women's diversity. But what about men? Are they not significant enough in the book? Modernist REI feminism initially displaced a singular emphasis on the notion of difference between men and women. From the late 1980s, bell hooks increasingly outlined a more broadly postmodern interest in acknowledging differences within "race" (African-American) as well as within gender identity. This inclination can be seen in her critique of black "macho" men.

Black women writers are the only writers who focus primarily on black women and black men. Cholly, Pecola's father, becomes the first of Morrison's various travelling black male characters, whom she valorizes in later novels. Except for Cholly's physical violation of his daughter, there are no scenes in the novel which depict any interaction between Cholly and herself. He is absent, almost invisible, such as all the male characters in the novel. When they appear, they serve as sexual agents and performers of fear, hate, or madness. Nevertheless, Morrison shows sympathy for him because he chooses to physically give of himself as it is all he has left to give. Morrison does not absolve him of his crime in any possible way but

explains to the reader that his act, however repugnant, “is born out of his own desperate sense of invisibility”¹⁸. There is not tenderness and protectiveness in his betrayal of Pecola but lust and rage directed towards her own daughter and those like her who contemplate failure. Morrison has an interest in the deep complexity of black men, in their freedom, their spirit of adventure and their tremendous possibility for masculinity among them, but not the way Cholly connects sex with power, violence and hatred. Perhaps the women in the novel obsessively looked for models but Cholly is indifferent and dysfunctional as a consequence of the lack of archetypes that stop him from finding balance. Despite her efforts, Morrison does not succeed in constructing positive images of black men. In fact, Cholly is a failure unable to provide protection. Women in the novel are “exemplary survivors” who, “in the end survive without men”¹⁹.

Now in the twenty-first century we live in a world in which people still keep looking for models or perhaps they are looking for the self more intensely than in earlier decades. Young people are psyched by football players and top models. One might ask, “are

¹⁸ BJORK, P. B.: *The Novels of Toni Morrison. The Search for Self and Place Within the Community*. New York, Peter Lang, 1996, p. 51.

¹⁹ HARDING, W. and J. MARTIN.: *A World of Difference. An Inter-Cultural Study of Toni Morrison's Novels*. Westport, London, Greenwood Press, 1994, p. 63.

they real models to imitate? *The Bluest Eye* hyperbolizes the obsession of blacks with a western standard of beauty and way of life as well as with the psychological oppression of black women in a hostile environment that seems both inescapable and destructive. Perhaps the right thing to do would be to try to assimilate the positive aspects of an "invading" culture because at present we look forward to a multicultural society. Morrison is highly critical of the African-American community's guilt of its own inability to recognize itself. Although African-Americans live in a white America on which they mainly depend economically, I strongly believe, little proud African-American Claudia MacTeer achieves her goal: to transcend the image imposed on minorities and to develop a strong self-image which also leaves an imprint for the new America that believes that black is also valuable or beautiful and has risen from passivity to consciousness. That is what I think they achieved in the picture I took in Chicago and that is why I like it.