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The Element of Pathos in the Idea of Beauty: Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*

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عنصر الشفقة في فكرة الجمال في رواية توني موريسون العين الأكثر زرقة

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Abstract

This paper sheds light on the element of pathos and its combination with the idea of beauty in *The Bluest Eye* (1970). In this novel, Toni Morrison tackles the issues and problems that African Americans face in contemporary America. Morrison's novels focus on the experiences of the blacks and their struggle in their communities. Morrison also shows the sufferings of the blacks overtime. In addition to that, Morrison shows how the blacks try to deny their existence and follow the values of the whites in the American society.

Key words: whites, beauty, blue eyes , African Americans, blacks.

المستخلص

يسلط هذا البحث الضوء على عنصر الشفقة ومزجه مع فكرة الجمال في رواية *العين الأكثر زرقة* (١٩٧٠). في هذه الرواية، تتناول توني موريسون القضايا والمشاكل التي يواجهها الأمريكيون الأفارقة في أمريكا المعاصرة. تركز روايات موريسون على تجارب السود ونضالهم في مجتمعاتهم. كما ان موريسون تظهر معاناة السود مع مرور الوقت. بالإضافة إلى ذلك، تظهر موريسون كيف يحاول السود إنكار وجودهم واتباع قيم البيض في المجتمع الأمريكي.

الكلمات المفتاحية: البيض, الجمال, العيون الزرقاء, الأمريكيون الافارقة, السود.

Introduction

Pathos can be defined as an action which evokes pity, mercy, and sorrow in readers. In Greek, pathos refers to deep feelings, passions or suffering. It also evokes love, passion, anger, and grief in readers. In many modern works, the great actions of pathos donot inhabit suffering details, yet, they fulfill their effect by expressing something in a repressed manner (Abrams and Harpham 242).

Toni Morrison (1931-2019) is a famous African-American writer who is regarded as the best fiction writer in African American literature. She got the Noble Literature Laureate in 1993. She also got the Pulitzer Prize for fiction in 1988. When she was a child, she lived in Ohio and witnessed the miserable conditions that the African American people suffered at her lifetime. In white America, racism is the main reason behind the oppression of the blacks, so Morrison presents the history of those oppressed people. In all of her books, she implies that:

blackness isn‘t a commodity; it isn‘t inherently political; it is the race of a people who are varied and complicated. This is where her works become less of a history and more of a liturgy, still stretching across geographies and time… It is a project that, has allowed Morrison to play with language, to take chances with how stories unravel and to consistently resist the demand to create an empirical understanding of black life in America. Instead, she makes black life complex, fantastic and heroic, despite its devaluation (Ghansah).

Morrison always depicts the plight and the marginalization of African Americans which can be felt by both the blacks and whites. As a novelist, Morrison expresses her duty saying:

This peculiar phase of Slavery has generally been kept veiled; but the public ought to be made acquainted with its monstrous features…My job becomes how to rip that veil drawn over "proceedings too terrible to relate." The exercise is also critical for any person whoisblack, or who belongs to any marginalized category, for, historically, we were seldom invited to participate in the discourse even when wewere its topic. Moving that veil aside requires, therefore, certain things. First of all, I must trust my own recollections. I must also depend onthe recollections of others. Thus memory weighs heavily in what I write, in how I begin and in what I find to be significant…memories and recollections … [that] give me …access to the unwritten interior life of these people (Laflen 113).

Morrison argues that it is significant to write novels about black Americans as it may: "suggest what the conflicts are, what the problems are, not necessarily as a means of solving them but as a way of recording and reflecting them. 'What I'm interested in is writing without the gaze, without the white gaze'" (Ghansah). In her writings, Toni Morrison presents themes including: personal identity, reconstructing history, beauty, heritage, motherhood, and family as a part of community. In this respect, it is mentioned that: "In terms of her style, the ease and appropriateness with which Morrison, employs African-American as well as Midwestern American vernacular speech …allow her to present the particularities of these specific cultural speech patterns..." (Jimoh). So, when recording the history of African American people, Morrison sheds light on the element of pathos existed in the idea of beauty and its influence on the psyche. This element controls the minds of black African Americans.

In 1970, Morrison wrote *The Bluest Eye* which deals with the miserable experiences of Pecola Breedlove, a young black girl who is ugly and invisible to white Americans. Pecola, who dreams of having blue eyes, evokes pathos in other people as being visible to herself only rather than white Americans (Laflen 22).

In *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison depicts one of her childhood memories of being a black child who is "the most vulnerable" individual in the community. She presents a real childhood picture of her classmates who liked blue eyes instead of her dark ones. This situation encourages Morrison to engage with the movement of the Black Arts in 1960s. The members of the movement tried to change the idea of how Blacks are depicted in literature just to keep their beauty. Eventhough, Morrison wonders why those black people had to regain blackness and why they think of the kind of beauty which is dominant (22).

The Bluest Eye is greatly influenced by the 1960s Black Arts Aesthetics Movement, particularly their question about hegemonic construction of ideas in western culture. It specifically deals with the ideas and systems that function to present black people as inferior. So, this novel further works as a reaction to the challenge among members of the Black Movement to oppose these delimiting influences. Moreover, the novel aims at creating African-Americans' identities which can be called "reconstituted identity" (Jimoh).

The Element of Pathos in the Idea of Beauty: Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*

In *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison presents a picture of a teenager girl who is in conflict to gain wholeness in a complex and hostile world. Morrison also tackles the influence of psychological trauma on Pecola Breedlove's selfhood. Pecola represents an outstanding example of this influence. From the beginning, It is noticed that the novel deals with the pathos created in the hearts and minds of the readers as a result of victimizing and oppressing Pecola. The novel also shows that Pecola's secret is shared early saying: "The intimacy I was aiming for, the intimacy between the reader and the page could start up immediately because the secret is being shared" (Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* 211). All the subsequent quotations references to the novel are taken from this edition, with the abbreviation (*TBY*) and the page number (s)

As much as pathos is concerned, Pecola's quest for beauty stems from the concept of the colonization of blacks by the prevailing culture which leads to self-hatred. In this way, Morrison sheds light on the interial psychic wounds of minorities, and it is mentioned that:

the traumatic effects of oppression …are not necessarily overtly violent or threatening to bodily well-being …but that do violence to the soul and spirit. Social and racial minorities experience insidious trauma as a result of the cruelty inflicted by the dominant group, usually the whites. Hence, they internalize feelings of inferiority and self-contempt, which are projected onto them by the patriarchal Western discourse. Systemic racism, like other types of marginalization and social exclusion, determine the forms which the transgenerational transmission of trauma takes within the family and community. Colonized members of

minority groups become oppressors themselves, reproducing the values of the hegemonic group, of which they are victims (Ramirez 76).
Being marginal, minorities are turned to be inferior objects and this causes damage to their psyches. The female teenager Pecola, the victim, is vulnerable and is not completely developed. Pecola is the representative of all the blacks in a racist society,: "Abjection erodes their self-esteem and provokes self-loathing, destabilizing them emotionally. Trauma, self-contempt and ostracism, at a critical stage of the identity formation, might make their victims cross the border from sanity into insanity" (77).
Pecola particularly represents the penetrating negative effects that existed in black children by the influence of racial prejudice. Such negative effects cause insanity. In Black history, Pecola is a symbol for the oppressed and excluded minority. Moreover, the identity of Pecola is like that of other members of her community, determined by the idea of beauty of having blue eyes and white colour. For her, to construct a positive self image, depends on being white and having blue eyes. In fact, for teenagers, society's gaze is highly estimated. Through other people's look, Pecola can view herself. Therefore, to hallucinate her "self", Pecola turns to be visible rather than being invisible (Ho 5).
As much as deprivation is concerned, Pecola is not given love and concern needed by her parents to form "a positive sense of her worth" (5). On the contrary, the idea of being ugly is imposed upon Breedlove's family as they are black and poor:
The Breedloves did not live in a storefront because they were having temporary difficulty adjusting to the cutbacks at the plant. They lived there because they were poor and black, and they stayed there because they believed they were ugly. Although their Poverty was traditional and stultifying, it was not unique. But their ugliness was unique. No one could have convinced them that they were not relentlessly and aggressively ugly. Except for the father, Cholly, whose ugliness (the result of despair, dissipation, and violence directed toward petty things and weak people) was behavior, the rest of the family… Mrs.Breedlove, Sammy Breedlove, and Pecola Breedlove wore their ugliness, put it on, so to speak, although it did not belong to them (*TBE* 38).

Thus, Cholly and Pauline, Pecola's parents, exclude themselves from their self value and estimate the whites standards of beauty. In addition to that, the worse situation of Cholly is highly made by his unemployment and this leads him to be drunk. On one hand, Cholly doesn't know how to treat his two children, Sammy and Pecola. He is an orphan since he was little, therefore, he becomes helpless father. He cannot express his love for his children properly. As a result, once in 1941, getting back home drunk, Cholly finds his daughter alone, making a gesture which reminds him of his first meeting with his wife. This promotes the state of raping her leaving her mad.

Pecola's experience of sexual abuse by her father stems from his unworthy childhood experiences which turn to be abuse, that: "She was washing dishes. Her small back hunched over the sink. Cholly saw her dimly and could not tell what he saw or what he felt. Then he became aware that he was uncomfortable; next he felt the discomfort dissolve into pleasure. The sequence of his emotions was revulsion, guilt, pity, and then love" (161). When being pregnant, Pecola is excluded by society and has to leave school. Thus, the act of rape influences and is influenced by moral, religious, legal and cultural aspects of life.

Cholly cannot differentiate between sexual lust and parental love, nor he can control his feelings of both anger and love that he would express for his daughter. Cholly victimizes Pecola by his mixed sensations. After being raped by her father and not believed by her mother, Pecola turns to be silent and involves in a trauma. In addition to that, the process of burning down the family house by the drunk father, Cholly, reflects his irresponsibility results from social inequality within community (Ho 8).

On the other hand, Pauline, Pecola's mother, rejects her daughter because of self-disgust and self-contempt by being "ideal servant". She also doesn't give Pecola and Sammy love and attention. She also despises her daughter. Pauline can only give attention and love to the Fisher's children as she works for their family. The Fisher girl names her Polly, where as her daughter names her Mrs. Breedlove. Pauline also considers her daughter ugly, saying: "I knowed she was ugly. Head full of pretty hair, but Lord she was ugly" (*TBE* 126).

Feeling ashamed of her daughter, Pauline always abuses her especially when she accidently splatters a hot juice at her leg, that: "in one gallop she was on Pecola, and with the back of her hand knocked her to the floor. Pecola slid in the pie juice, one leg folding under her" (108-109). Hence, instead of helping her

own daughter, Pauline helps the little white girl. So, Pauline instucts Pecola to deny herself by protecting the Fisher child.

Pauline is fond of the Fisher family and their possessions. Pecola concludes that love and respect result from whiteness due to her mother's act of preferring a white girl on her. So, black and ugly people are victimized by racism and it is: "just as dangerous as being among racist whites" (78). In addition, when visiting Pecola at the Fisher's house, Claudia and Frieda find out that: "Pauline kept this order, this beauty, for herself, a private world, and never introduced it into her storefront, or to her children" (128). According to psychologists, mother's contribution to form children's self-contempt is significant. Pecola is not raised properly by her mother and is exposed to a condemning society gaze. Pauline fails in bringing up her daughter. She even cannot protect her from her father's sexual assault. Pauline is also dominated by the thought of transforming herself to look like the actress Jean Harlow. She wishes to be white to match the beauty of the whites. She even believes that every desirable feature is matched with whiteness. Where as vices are matched with blackness (Ramirez 78).

Pecola argues that the frequent abuses she confronts is the consequence of her black colour. She interprets that if she isn't black and ugly, she is loved by other people in the society. She also thinks that aquiring blue eyes is the solution for the problem that: "why looked at the pretty-eyed Pecola. We mustn't do bad things infront of those pretty eyes" (quoted in Fanon 46). Besides, the struggle that Pecola confronts at home as the violent treatment by her parents combines her complexes that her parents: "fought each other with a darkly brutal formalism" (43).

When getting married to Cholly, Pauline lives in Ohio, in the north. She feels lonely there. Pauline tries to consolate herself by going to watch movies which leads her to internalize the romantic love and physical beauty of the whites, "the most destructive ideas in the history of human thought. Both originated in envy, thrived in insecurity, and ended in disillusion" (*TBE* 122). So, Pauline returns back home with white standards and ideas that: "she was never able…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" (97).

Generally speaking, Pecola's worthlessness increases in society when she is at school. She is bothered by a group of black boys. She is harassed by a brown boy and thrown out of her house by her mother. In another situation, she is looked by a white shopkeeper but is not seen. However, the most shocking situation in her life is the rape by her father when she is twelve years old. Pecola is raped twice and becomes pregnant. The other terrible situation is when she is used by the priest to poison his landlady's dog to get blue eyes. Finally, she decides to escape her real world, and imagines herself with blue eyes that she only sees. Moreover, in the "Afterword", Morrison mentions that Pecola looks at herself in the mirror and: "She is not seen by herself until she hallucinates a self". In this way, Morrison succeeds in making Pecola a sympathetic figure.

In Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, the place and language play a clear role due to the beliefs and customs of African-Americans. Pecola's desire of getting blue eyes exists in the magic of her tribe. She thinks in magic and this belongs to their folklore. In this respect, it is mentioned that: "In Western African tales, conjurers alternately reward or thwart protagonists' attempts at self-fulfillment and acceptance in society. In Pecola's case, her isolation and madness…becomes, in West African folkloric tradition, an expected outcome" (Wilcots).

The narrators of the novel are Pecola's friends who lived the events of 1941 and understand the conditions properly. In a way or another, they protect Pecola, try to enable her accept the changes happen to her after being raped and become pregnant. In the "Afterword", the narrators are depicted looking back at the events of 1941 as they are adults and recognize:

Thus, the opening provides the stroke that announces something more than a secret shared, but a silence broken, a void filled,an unspeakable thing spoken at last. And it draws the connection between a minor destabilization in seasonal flora and the insignificant destruction of a black girl…both phenomena are earthshaking depositories of information they spend that whole year of childhood…trying to fathom, and cannot. If they have any success, it will be in transforming the problem of fathoming to the presumably adult reader…if [such]… then the book can be seen to open with its close: a speculation on the disruption of "nature" as being a social disruption with tragic individual consequences in which the reader, as part of the population of the text, is implicated (*TBE* 214).

Claudia always revolts and resists the white standards of being superior over the inferior black people. On the contrary, Pecola is fond of having not only blue eyes but the bluest eyes. Pecola is obsessed with Shirley Temple, a beautiful actress, and desires to drink the white milk, thinking that she would be white and cute. In this respect, Claudia MacTeer says that: "the thing to fear was the thing that made her beautiful" (74). Unlike Pecola, Claudia encourages resisting and transcending the situations that cause pain and pathos to the blacks. According to Paul C. Taylor, black women destroy themselves when conform to the white standards of beauty that:

one of the cornerstones of the modern West has been the hierarchical valuation of human types along racial lines. ... The most prominent type of racialised ranking represents blackness as a condition to be despised, and most tokens of this type extend this attitude to cover the physical features that are central to the description of black identity (16).

Though Geraldine is black, she considers herself better than Pecola as the latter possesses all the negative features of black girls, that:

She looked at Pecola. Saw the dirty torn dress, the plaits sticking out on her head, hair matted where the plaits had come undone, the muddy shoes with the wad of gum peeping out from between the cheap soles, the soiled socks, one of which had been walked down into the heel on the shoe. … She had seen this little girl all of her life. Hanging out of windows over saloons in Mobile, crawling over the porches of shotgun houses on the edges of town, sitting in bus stations holding paper bags and crying to mothers who kept saying 'Shet up!' (*TBE* 71-72).

Besides, Geraldine adopts the white standards of life and is well educated. She tells her son the characteristics of coloured and black people, saying: "Coloured people were not neat and quiet; niggers were dirty and loud" (67). In addition, Maureen Peal is treated well at school that:

She enchanted the entire school. When teachers called on her, they smiled encouragingly. Black boys didn't trip her in the halls; white boys didn't stone her, white girls didn't suck their teeth when she was assigned to be their work partners; black girls stepped aside when she wanted to use the sink in the girls' toilets, and their eyes genuflected under sliding lids (47-48).

So, Claudia dislikes the thing that leads Maureen be beautiful rather than light-skinned Maureen herself: "[a]nd all the time we knew that Maureen Peal was not worthy of such intense hatred. The Thing to fear was the Thing that made her beautiful, and not us," (58) and that: " the 'Thing' Claudia learns to fear is the white standard of beauty that members of the African American community have internalised, a standard that favours the 'highyellow' Maureen Peal and denigrades the 'black and ugly' Pecola Breedlove (Bouson 31). Claudia thinks of the reason behind treating Maureen well by people as they are satisfied with her beauty, saying:

Dolls we could destroy, but we could not destroy the honey voices of parents and aunts, the obedience in the eyes of our peers, the slippery light in the eyes of our teachers when they encountered the Maureen Peals of the world. What was the secret? What did we lack? Why was it important? And so what? (*TBE* 57).

Claudia feels that following western standards of beauty is dangerous. She is depicted as ignorant to both Shirley Temple and white dolls. Moreover, Claudia and Frieda are satisfied with their blackness saying that: "We felt comfortable in our skins, enjoyed the news that our senses released to us, admired our dirt, cultivated our scars, and could not comprehend this unworthiness" (ibid). Claudia criticizes the black community blaming them for adopting: "a white standard of beauty ... that makes Pecola its scapegoat" (Furman 21).

Pecola is rejected because she is ugly, pregnant, and mad. She is an object of disgust that:

All of us –all who knew [Pecola] – felt so wholesome after we cleaned ourselves on her. We were so beautiful when we stood astride her ugliness. 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 humour. Her inarticulateness made us believe we were eloquent. Her poverty kept us generous. Even her waking dreams we used – to silence our own nightmares (*TBE* 163).

So, Pecola is not free because of the white standards imposed on her, and: "individuals collude in their own oppression by internalising the dominant culture's values in the face of great material contradictions" (Grewal 21). So, Pecola is the victim of this oppression which cannot be challenged. Yet, it is important to free: "ourselves from ourselves" (ibid).

Generally speaking, every human being should be satisfied with his own colour and there is no specified colour for beauty. Yet, the whites have generated the idea that they are the most beautiful ones in the American society. Since the white colour is biological and unattainable, the feelings of self-hatred are generated among the blacks as they are unable to be beautiful. In addition, the whites use their evil intentions of using the white colour and the blue eyes for controlling the blacks in America. As a consequence, the blacks' reaction would be pitied by other people who are against racism. On the other hand, beautiful white women have the right to get everything and fulfill their desires and dreams. Where as the blacks are dominated by the concept of beauty used by white Americans.

In the novel, Claudia reveals the white's politics, mentioning: "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. Here, they said, this is beautiful, and if you are on this day 'worthy' you may have it" (*TBE* 14). The white beauty concept is spread in America that the white is beautiful and the black is ugly. So, the blacks are completely satisfied with this idea.

However, the blacks are enslaved, tormented and tortured by the whites that: "In *The Bluest Eye* the dissociation of the female adolescent identity stems from the colonization of Blacks by mainstream culture and the internalization of its standards of beauty, which engender self-hatred" (Ramirez 82). Pecola thinks that by getting blue eyes, she can pass this struggle of self-hatred as Claudia mentions that: "Each night, without fail, she prayed for blue eyes. Fervently, for a year she had prayed" (*TBE* 35). Even in school, Pecola cannot meet the white students except Frieda and Claudia; and Pecola is humiliated and mocked by the whites saying: "Booby loves Pecola Breedlove! Booby loves Pecola Breedlove!" (34).

In school, black children are neglected by the teachers in order not to be educated in a proper way. Where as white children get the priority in class and they try to hegemonize the blacks as they are unable to be equal to them in every domain of life. Moreover, Pecola is never glanced by her teachers that: "They tried never to glance at her, and called on her only when everyone was required to respond" (*TBE* 34). Among the whites, Pecola is the only child that sits alone, considering that all the children are more beautiful than her.

It is worth mentioning that through *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison expresses the sufferings of African Americans. It is revealed that the element of pathos is evoked when the blacks think of nothing but beauty of light skin and blue eyes. Morrison also shows that as American citizens, the blacks are deprived of getting their rights of respect, education, good treatment and other opportunities, just because they are considered ugly. So, throughout writing, Morrison tries to reclaim African American identity, shedding light on the blacks' psychological mechanism of wishing beauty to be visible.

Conclusion

Morrison craftily presents the story of the African American teenager girl, Pecola to appeal to the reader's pathos. Pecola's idea of beauty can turn her life upside down, leading her to madness. Through the negative effects of society's views, Pecola's life is changed forever. However, the element of pathos is specifically traced in Pecola who wants to be beautiful just by getting the whites' standards of beauty. Through her teenager female character, Pecola, Morrison depicts the sufferings and destruction of the blacks.

In fact, Morrison's aim is not to forget the past with all its atrocities and ugliness, yet she warns the victimizers and oppressors of keeping their own ideas of destruction. She also tries to show that if teenagers, the African American children are marginalized and victimized, they would lose their identities.

However, Pecola's trauma starts since childhood when her mother laments that she has an ugly daughter. Pecola confronts negligence and denial, then she becomes pregnant when she is raped by her drunk father. She is also brutally tormented by her parents as well by her American society. Thus, Pecola decides to defend herself by living a kind of reality that she imagines to live. She claims that she has blue eyes to be loved and respected, stimulating the element of pathos in others.

Morrison argues that any society is built first by family itself. So, she suggests that inside the African American family, parents should reclaim their thoughts by accepting themselves as well as their children. In this way, they would be accepted by their society despite their dark skin.

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