

# Racism: Toni Morrison's The Bluest Eye a Mouthpiece of Cloured People

Nisar Ahmad Dar<sup>1</sup>, GH. Mohd Mir<sup>2</sup>, Javaid Ahmad Ganaie<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1,2,3</sup>Research scholar , Jiwaji University, Gwalior (M.P) (India)

## ABSTRACT

Racism is basically a belief in the superiority of one race to another which results in discrimination and prejudice towards people based on their race or ethnicity. The life of African-American coloured people have been affected by racism. These so-called systems of social and psychological restrictions make coloured people to feel inferiors. Toni Morrison has gained reputation internationally with the publication of her first novel *The Bluest Eye*. This novel mirroring us the terrible consequences for blacks personalizing the values of a white culture that rejects them both directly and indirectly. Even though slavery is abolished legally through the tough efforts of eminent leaders but still the African-Americans are not considered equal to the whites. The Black people are trying to identify themselves with the white and their cultural ways. Toni Morrison insists on Black cultural heritage and solicits the African-Americans to be proud of their Black identity. This paper presents the nature of the coloured people's struggle for their race and endurance in a predominantly multicultural post colonial white America.

**Keywords:** Atrocity, Black Identity ,Psychological Haunt, Racism, Racial Discrimination

## I. INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Racism

Racism is basically a belief in the superiority of one race to another which results in discrimination and prejudice towards people based on their race or ethnicity. But, today, it does not fall under single definition. It covers the ideology that humans can be subdivided into different groups because of their different social behaviour and their innate capacities as well as can be ranked as inferior or superior. There are many examples of the ideology which lead to the genocide of millions of people in South Africa. Although though it was mostly practiced in 19<sup>th</sup> century but racial discrimination and the atrocities against the coloured people are still on the rise in its worst form in the U. S. Even though The Emancipation Proclamation was signed by the American President Lincoln in 1863, which brought an end to the slave trade in the U. S but the deplorable condition of the coloured people remains the same till now. Martin Luther King Junior, an eloquent black Baptist Minister played a crucial role in the South and other parts of the U. S in order to annihilate the racial discrimination. Martin Luther King organized an interracial assembly on 28 August 1963, at Lincoln Memorial in Washington to demand equal rights for all. He addressed the interracial assembly by pointing out the disgraceful condition of the Negroes as:

But one hundred years later, the Negro still is not free. One hundred years later, the life of the Negro is still sadly crippled by the manacles of segregation and chains of discrimination. One hundred years later, the Negro lives on a lonely island of poverty in the midst of a vast ocean of material prosperity. One hundred years later, the Negro is still languishing in the corners of American society and find himself an exile in his own land.<sup>1</sup>

Basically, Racial discrimination began with the arrival of colonialism. The European forefathers had started their expedition to various countries with the purpose of establishing trade and commerce. They imprinted their foot-marks on various countries as a source of autonomous power in the name of civilizing the East and purify them from barbarity. The Europeans established political order to carry out the administration in new colonies that was executed either by force or by hegemony -called colonialism. Walia has described the strategic plan of colonialism as:

Colonialism is accompanied by exploitation, annexation and conquest. Its hegemonic power rests on creating the binary opposition of self/other, white/black, good/evil, superior/inferior, and so on. Thus, a part of the world was able to enjoy supremacy because it convinced the rest of the world about the 'white man's burden' and his 'civilizing machine'.<sup>2</sup>

This binary opposition lead to the conception of racial discrimination between the white settlers and the natives. As native elites tried to identify themselves with the white settlers which became more complicated issue, at the same time the white settlers took advantage of this situation in exploiting the country. Even though they joined their hands in executing various programmes to oppress the native subalterns. The white imperialists advocated the policy of 'Divide and Rule' in order to carry out the smooth functioning and to meet their ends. With the result, the native elites whole hearted supported to the white settlers in suppressing the insurgency of the subalterns. Sartre says in the preface of *The Wretched of the Earth* as:

The European elite undertook to manufacture a native elite. They picked out promising adolescents; they branded them, as with a red-hot iron, with the principles of western culture; they stuffed their mouth full with high-sounding phrases, grand glutinous words that stuck to the teeth. After a short stay in the mother country they were sent home, white-washed.<sup>3</sup>

As the colonies strengthen in many parts of the world, the white settlers had to face firm opposition from the natives. But the native elites found it below their dignity to support the uprising voice of the lower classes. It resulted racial superiority or inferiority was on the basis of colour and wealth. The native elites joined hands with the white settlers and discriminated the subalterns in order to get share of European colonialism. The society was divided on the basis of racial issues as Fanon says:

The world divided into compartments, this world cut in two is inhabited by two different species. The originality of the colonial context is that economic reality, inequality and immense difference of ways of life never come to mask the human realities. When you examine at close quarters the colonial context, it is evident that what parcels out the world is to begin with the fact of belonging to or not belonging to a given race, a given species. In the colonies the economic substructure is also a superstructure. The cause is the consequence; you are rich because you are white, you are white because you are rich.<sup>4</sup>

Interiorly or exteriorly the subalterns were made to believe that they belonged to an inferior race and are not able to make any real contribution to the society. The white settlers always emerged as champions of the superior race and so subjugated the will and aspirations of the coloured.

In the colonial period, the settler-native relationship could be compared to that of a master and a slave. Even though the natives are conscious of their rights and free will about their own land but they being treated as secondary citizens in their own land and such subjugation is made possible in the name of racism like Indians were referred to as 'brown' and Africans as 'black'. The subalterns tried to strike back against the white supremacy but the authority could not have the patience to listen their plea.

In the colonial countries, the natives suffered a lot as they were being considered not equal with the so-called whites and were never able to threaten their ruthless leadership. Apparently, although the colonization is abolished but its outcome is that the 'West' still occupies the position of an ideal state in the minds of the colonized people.

Ashcroft in his book *The Empire Writes Back*, makes a distinction between colonialism and post-colonialism. He states that Colonialism is used to denote a "period before independence" and post-colonial is used to "cover all the culture affected by imperial process from the moment of colonization to the present day".<sup>5</sup> Racial subalternity continues to evolve its consequences even after the colonial rule. In the post-colonial studies, the term 'race' has brought way for 'ethnicity' so as to account for human variation in terms of culture, social patterns, traditions and ancestry. Ashcroft has enumerated the significance of 'race' as:

Race continues to be relevant in post-colonial theory for two reasons: first, because it is so central to the growing power of imperial discourse during the nineteenth century, and second, because it remains a central and unavoidable 'fact' of modern society that race is used as the dominant category of daily discriminations and prejudice. (Ashcroft, 207)

## II. DISCUSSION

### 2.1 The Bluest Eye: Toni Morrison v/s Racism

The racial discrimination in post-colonial literature became the main issue of most of the novelists. African American writers have not only represented themselves but also their race and culture. They try to establish their Afro-American identity through their magnificent writing. Among them Toni Morrison, the Afro-American novelist raises this issue in her novels on behalf of racial victims. In America racism is a reality. In the post-modern context, the voices against racial discrimination get more focus and prominence. Toni Morrison has become the mouth-piece of the coloured people. Her writings are tales of the coloured people's oppression in a white dominant patriarchal society. Toni Morrison has realized very early in her life that racism has become the greatest enemy of the 'coloured' people. She has tried in her writings to justify that 'getting back the black identity' is the only way to check the racial discrimination. She knows a problem specific to groups targeted by racism that Afro-Americans begin to believe about themselves and imagine that Euro-Americans are superior in beauty, morality, and intelligence. Toni Morrison is very well known for her Afro-American identity and she tried to discover the complex life of the black slaves, other men and women who are living in a highly backward and neglected conditions in America. They are not only hated by the white men and women of

America but they are also treated in a manner worse than animals. She is much more concerned with the life and improvement of the black community. Once, she said the significant words in an interview with Salman Rushdie that:

I am not sure what the word “Negro” means, which is why I write books. What is black child/woman/friend/ mother? What is a black person? It seems to me that there are so many that inform blackness. One of the modern qualities of being an Afro-American is the flux, is the fluidity, the contradictions.<sup>6</sup>

In *The Bluest Eye* Morrison focuses on this problem as it affects blacks and their psychological mechanism. Her first novel *The Bluest Eye* is a moving portrayal of a black Woman’s quest for ideal self. The novel is based on Morrison’s conversation with a black girl during her childhood. Morrison endorses that her thoughts about why that black girl beseeches for blue eyes are stimulated when the racial beauty of “Black is Beautiful” is reclaimed. She says that, “ it wasn’t that easy of being a little black girl in this country--it was rough. The psychological trick you have to play in order to get through--and nobody said how it felt to be that. . . And I wanted to explore it”.<sup>7</sup> *The Bluest Eye* strongly speaks of the voice of the demoralized black females in the insignificant society which has become muted. It is racial bigotry which is an obvious indication of Toni Morrison’s concern to describe creatively the insensitivity of the white folk towards black. The novel is about a young girl Pecola who desires to have white skin, blond hair and blue eyes against her dark complexion as:

Each night, without fail, she prayed for blue eyes. Fervently, for a year she had prayed. Although somewhat discouraged, she was not without hope. To have something as wonderful as that happen would take a long, long time. (Morrison, 35)

Pecola’s desire is the result of a misconception regarding race in the American society. The black people have to undergo a lot of oppressions and atrocities on the basis of racial inferiority. Pecola, the chief character, is the most woeful creation who consistently suffers from racial discrimination. She is always being abused by her own mother Pauline Breedlove Pecola treating the white girl of her employers as superior to her just because of the colour. She has never felt the love of her mother and perceives that it is because of her colour; her dark skin, dark eyes, and woolly hair. She develops that she is not seen as beautiful, and from these thoughts she begins to hate the beauty of the white children. She thinks of herself ugly and attributes their mistreatment of her to her physical appearance. She develops a thought that no one would behave badly in front of her if she were beautiful. Blue eye which Pecola desires for is used basically a metaphor that is easily understood. When Pecola desires for blue eyes she is really saying that she want to escape her life and herself. She has defined herself only by her degree of blackness. Even , at only eleven years of age, she finds the feeling of inferiority and worthlessness acquiring the symbol of beauty in her community. Blue eyes are regarded as a beautiful by all the characters including mother and children who collectively admire Shirley Temple. Pecola is not appreciated and cared by her family. Furthermore Pecola has no other person or place where she is safe valued. In the surrounding community she is subjected to consider inter-racism by grown-ups and even her peers. Desiring blue eyes she is becoming more and more obsessed. The desire is made because of she wants to escape her life by becoming something she is not. Pecola thinks that only blue can be the solution for her distressed situation. She is shunned and very lonely. The most important reason for her to desire blue eyes is that she wants to be

treated differently in her family as it proves from the text like, “if she looked different, beautiful, maybe Cholly would be different, and Mrs Breedlove too. Maybe they’d say “why, look at pretty-eyed Pecola.. we mustn’t do bad things in front of those pretty eyes”.(Morrison,34) This shows that her primary concern is an escape from abuse and negligence within in home. The racism which penetrates every aspect of society is an important factor in understanding the actions of Pauline and Cholly, and most of their actions are the reactions to the oppression and racism. Pecola has not witnessed love and affection at home. she reacts about love as, “what did love feel like? She wondered how do grown ups act when they are in love? Eat fish together?”( Morrison, 44) Even One of the most traumatizing event in Pecola’s life is the moment when she is raped by her father, gets pregnant and loses her sanity.

Once Pecola walks to the grocery store to buy candy, Mr. Yacobowski, the shopkeeper, cannot bear Pecola’s presence and he cannot look at her because of her blackness “How can a fifty-two-year-old white immigrant storekeeper... see a little black girl?” (Morrison, 36) .This shows the influence and phobia of the white-beauty. Claudia, the 11 year old girl, narrator of the story apprehends white beauty as terrible. She doesn’t like the admiration of Frieda and Pecola towards Shirley Temple who is an icon of white beauty. There is another evidence of racism in *The Bluest eye* which is Young Junior’s wicked deed towards Pecola. Geraldine the mother of Young Junior is also a Black (light skinned) does not allow her son to play with other black children which made him dislike his own race. Once Young Junior have seen Pecola many times standing alone at recess and taking shortcut through play ground. Nobody is ready to play with her because she is very black and ugly. By observing this One day Young Junior talks to her so gently and invites her to his home as to show her something at home. Pecola easily believes and follows him. She is scared to get in home but still she goes because she finds a big red-and-gold coloured Bible on the dining-room table and a colour picture of Jesus Christ on a wall. Hence it satisfied her to not befall any disaster. But Young Junior discloses his original wicked character by pulling her into another room and throws a big black cat right on her face. He laughs cruelly and runs around the room by saying “You can’t get out. You’re my prisoner,” (Morrison, 89). Even his mother Geraldine insults her emotionally when she sees the girl trapped in her house. She speaks pinching and full of racial words which tell much more than words as:

“Shut up!” Hair uncombed, dresses falling apart, shoes untied and caked with dirt. The end of the world lay in their eyes, and the beginning, and all the waste in between. They were everywhere. They slept six in a bed, all their pee mixing together in the night as they wet their beds each in his own candy-and-potato-chip dream. “Get out,” she said, her voice quiet. “You nasty little black bitch. Get out of my house.”( Morrison, 90)

It is not only Pecola who feel racial discrimination but even her father, Cholly, has also been a victim of racism and emotional abuse since his childhood; it makes him person who cannot show love or express his feelings. He feels racial discrimination when he is caught having sex with his friend Darlene. He is caught by two white men, act and scream, “Get on wind it, nigger. . . . An’ make it good, nigger, make it good” (Morrison, 148). Toni Morrison intellectually enlightens the sufferings of colored people in a white society in *The Bluest Eye*. The novel shows “racism’s damaging effects on the black community at large and on black families”.<sup>8</sup> Pecola Breedlove realizes the supremacy of white society and longs to have the features of white females. Her strong

desire to have the bluest eye in the world itself reveals the eagerness to have even more finer features than white women.

### III.CONCLUSION

Even though slavery is abolished legally through the tough efforts of eminent leaders but still the Afro-Americans are not considered equal to the whites. The Black people are trying to identify themselves with the white and their cultural ways. Toni Morrison insists on Black cultural heritage and solicits the Afro-Americans to be proud of their Black identity. Toni Morrison through her writing make blacks to understand that black identity is not inferior to white in any way. she make her point that physical appearance and culture may be different but that doesn't mean servitude of the entire race.

### REFERENCES

- [1]M. L. King Junior, *I Have a Dream. Collage: An Anthology of English Prose*. Calicut: University of Calicut, 2003, 26 – 34.
- [2] S. Walia, *Postmodern Encounters: Edward Said and the Writing of History*, U. K: Icon Books, 2001,77.
- [3] J. P. Sartre, *Preface. The Wretched of the Earth*. By Frantz Fanon. London: Penguin, 1990, 7 – 26.
- [4]F. Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, London: Penguin, 1990, 30-31.
- [5]B. Ashcroft, G. Griffiths, and H. Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures*, 2nd ed. London: Routledge, 2002, 2.
- [6]S. Russel, 'It's Ok to say Ok', *An Interview Essay: Critical Essays on Toni Morrison*, Ed. Nelliey, Boston: Y. Mcka, 1988, 36.
- [7] T. Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*, New York: Rinehart and Winston, 1970, 17.
- [8] K. Missy Denn, *Toni Morrison*, London: Greenwood Press, 1998, 27.