

CHAPTER II

**THE BLUEST EYE :
EXPLORATION OF BLACK-SELF IN
THE CONTEXT OF WESTERN VALUE
SYSTEM**

The Bluest Eye, the first novel published in 1970, highlights the people to whom no ultimate glory is possible. She gives us a close look at the lives of black people and the difficulties experienced by them in getting on in a white hostile world through character typology. Moreover the novel deals honestly and sensitively with the most subtle implications of the society's definition of beauty and shows the depth and complexity of those implications.

The Bluest Eye is a quest of a black girl, Pecola Breedlove who wants to have blue eyes, a symbol of white beauty. She believes that such eyes would make her beautiful, acceptable and admirable. However her quest for blue eyes culminates in madness.

Morrison's idea that

... the concept of physical beauty as a virtue, is one of the most pernicious and destructive ideals of the western world, and we should have nothing to do with it¹

is never known to Pecola because of the overpowering of white values.

I

Pecola : As a scapegoat

Barbara Christian comments that Pecola's story does not follow the

... usual mythic of birth, death and rebirth, from planting to harvest to planting. Hers will proceed from pathos to tragedy and finally madness.²

Pecola is a daughter of Pauline and Cholly Breedlove who are the victims of dominant white culture. The poverty and racist prejudices have broken their lives. Unlike other black people they have accepted the poverty and ugliness. And Pecola along with her parents has worn

... ugliness, ... although it did not belong to them (34).

Their ugliness is unique because the Breedloves have fully internalized their ugliness. Claudia remembers that "It was as though some mysterious all knowing master had given each one a cloak of ugliness (34)". And the Breedlove's "all-knowing master" is, of course, a white dominant culture. The Breedloves thus, are victims of racist and class conscious society which has forced them to live unnatural lives.

Moreover, the domestic atmosphere has distorted Pecola's innocent psyche. During the fights between her parents, she strongly wishes to "disappear" or sometimes

... struggled between an overwhelming desire that one would kill the other, and a profound wish that she herself could die. (38).

But Pecola can not escape from her loveless home because she knows that as long as she looks ugly, she has to stay with her parents. "Somehow she belonged to them" (39). In response to this psychological violence,

Pecola begins a quest for blue eyes which, according to her, are symbol of wealth, love and happiness.

Each night, without fail, she prayed for blue eyes. ... Although somewhat discouraged, she was not without hope. To have something as wonderful as that happen would take a long, long time (40).

Pecola often experiences a repeated rejection and brutalization. Even more chillingly, her parents, never having experienced nurturing love, do not know how to love. This predicament of her parents is also the outcome of racial injustice. There are many incidents which hurt her feelings and take her to isolation and pain. Her encounter with a fifty-two-year-old white storekeeper makes her aware that for many people, she does not really exist. Thus, "outside, Pecola feels the inexplicable shame"(43). It is her blackness that creates, the vacuum adged with distaste in white eyes.

She knows that like other white girls if she will have blue eyes, not only her parents but also her community will accept and love her. Thus, it is not merely the white beauty that Pecola is looking for, but an existential harmony which the beauty symbolizes. She also tries to find out the reasons that "made her ignored and despised at school, by teachers and classmates alike"(39). For them she is "black and ugly black e mos"(61).

The light-skinned community represented by Geraldine and Maureen also despises Pecola for her black colour. For Geraldine to get rid of "funkiness" means to get rid of blackness. For her Pecola is everything that she is fighting to suppress. When she asks Pecola to leave her house, in fact, it is her attempt to get rid of her own unworthiness and of her own shadow of blackness. There is no love for Pecola in Geraldine's house because the woman has no love for herself. Here Morrison exposes the same-race hatred, which assaults the black community.

Geraldine embodies the community's strictly codified caste system. Whereas, Pecola represents all that Geraldine and her community's commodified value system abhor. At the same time her existence in the community clearly defines the community's alienation, repression, and internalization. Hence, the humiliation from Maureen and Geraldine forces Pecola to long for blue eyes.

Thus Pecola's desire for the impossible blue eyes is in fact a desire that has transmitted to her by her community. Due to the pathetic circumstances, Pecola is drawn to an idealized fabrication. Claudia observes Pecola drinking milk from Shirley Temple cup. She :

... took every opportunity to drink milk out of it just to handle and see sweet Shirley's face (22).

or whenever she eats a candy, she sees Mary Jones' blonde hair and blue eyes looking at her. For her "To eat the candy is somehow to eat the eyes ... Be Mary Jane" (43). This symbolic cannibalism is a sign of Pecola's instability and madness. The desire for blue eyes is an evidence of Pecola's frustration with her identity, with her world, and of her longing for herself. As Weever comments

The desire for blue eyes is part of the inverted quality of her world; in wanting blue eyes Pecola wants, in fact, to be white.³

Winnicott observes that Pecola creates a false identify which is in fact "a defence against that which is unthinkable."⁴ Pecola lives with the dream of blue eyes because nobody, not even her mother who herself has accepted the values of the dominant culture is strong enough to temper her perspective. Thus Pecola who is victimized from within and without, has no family or community to insulate her from or fortify her against the ideology of beauty. And the result is, she starts considering herself worthless.

Pecola's feeling of worthlessness leads her to alienation from family, friends and the black community of Lorain, Ohio. The Dick-and-Jane version foreshadows Pecola's devastating alienation. Jane, in a red dress, wants to play. She approaches all the members of the family. Yet the mother who is described as "very nice", ironically, laughs at Jane's proposal to play with her. So does the smiling father. Even the cat and

dog are no playmates in the story. This picture ironically reveals Pecola's destiny. Like Jane, she is left lonely at the family level.

Pecola prefers the prostitutes because like Pauline and Geraldine, they are not influenced by the ideals of white culture. As a result they are oblivious to Pecola's ugliness. Indeed Pecola receives compliments from them. In a room where laughter resembles "the sound of many rivers, freely, deeply muddily, heading for the room of an open sea" (45), Pecola finds the balm to soothe her psychic wounds. As she has never seen happiness around her, she often wonders, "were they real?" (49)

While the prostitutes give her comfort and contentment, they cannot keep her sane. Though their affection for her is real, they cannot take place of her mother. Ironically, the only place where Pecola feels a sense of warmth and humanity is an establishment that sells love for profit. Her life is not altered or enriched by the prostitutes. Indeed, her wish to become a part of their lives turns out to be another unfulfilled dream for her.

Pecola suffers worse humiliation and degradation at the hands of her father, when he rapes her. In fact, Pecola is not rejected by Cholly but his love for her is misplaced and becomes the ultimate cause of her tragedy.

Having lost the sense of reality, Pecola visits a self-styled conjure man, Soaphead Church. She goes with her fantastic and logical request for blue eyes. Her request makes total sense to him, for he intellectualizes the pain, the self-mutilation inherent in that request. For him it is a "logical petition" :

... the one most deserving of fulfillment. A little black girl who wanted to rise up out of the pit of her blackness and see the world with blue eyes (137).

To prove Pecola that she can indeed have blue eyes Soaphead uses a dying old dog as a catalyst. He tells Pecola to feed the dog with poisoned food. He tells her,

If the animal behaves strangely, your wish will be granted ... (138).

Of course, the dog convulses and dies. And Pecola is left with her illusion of blue eyes.

In fact, Soaphead uses Pecola to give some definite meaning to his own life. He tries to substantiate his own identity through Pecola. Further he arrogantly composes a letter to God. In which he writes :

I did what You did not, could not, would not do ... And it was a very good show ! (143)

In his letter to God, Soaphead Church, challenges the religious definition of good and the origin of evil. Instead of accepting the blame for his own

act, he accuses the God, the very embodiment of goodness. He condemns God for deserting the innocent and vulnerable, Pecola. But like Cholly, he further seals her fate by permanently separating her from meaningful existence. Thus he is more destructive than the weak but essentially amoral Cholly. He promises her blue eyes which she never gets. Soaphead Church's deception destroys her last connection to being. Manipulating Pecola's faith in miracles, he violates her spiritual innocence as surely as her father abuses her physical innocence.

Not only Cholly and Soaphead are responsible for her madness but the community also has its equal share in Pecola's fate. She is throughout made scapegoat by a neighbourhood who themselves live under the gaze of the dominant culture. They compare themselves with Pecola to embolden their own worth.

Pecola suffers the consequences of the rape. She remains pregnant. But the child's child is born too soon and dies. Claudia recalls : "The damage done total" (158). Pecola tries to transcend the damage of her life :

... she flailed her arms like bird in an eternal, grotesquely futile effort to fly. (158).

Since Pecola had undergone all these traumatic experiences, she loses a balance of her mind. As Cynthia Davis comments :

Pecola is the epitome of victim in a world that reduces persons to objects and then makes them feel inferior as objects.⁵

Excluded from reality by racial discrimination and inequality, Pecola goes mad. She fantasizes that her eyes have turned blue and so fitted her for the world. Thus, Pecola's isolation is complete when she retreats into her own world of madness. In this dreamland, she finds comfort and reassurance in an imaginary friend. She loves this newly-won friend who assures her that she has the bluest eyes in the world. Here Morrison shows how the socio-economic and political oppression alienate the little black girls like Pecola from black and white world.

Claudia compares Pecola with marigold seeds that are suffocated before they could blossom. She interprets the tragic end of Pecola :

This soil is bad for certain kind of flowers. Certain seeds it will not nurture...., and when the land kills of its own volition, we acquiesce and say the victim had not right to live (160).

Thus, Claudia's comment clearly places the blame on society and not Pecola, the victim. The society is in part responsible for Pecola's miserable condition and her subsequent loss of sanity.

Pecola : As a neglected child

Along with the community, Pecola's parents are equally responsible for her madness. Hopelessly fragmented under the weight of various horrors typical of black life in America, the Breedloves remain buried as deep as the failed sacrificial marigold seeds planted by Claudia and Freida MacTeer. Her mother Pauline is burdened with physical deformity. It consistently gives her a sense of separateness and unworthiness. Yet she possesses a sensitive nature which compels her to long for consistency and purpose in her life.

When Pauline and Cholly marry, they move north to Lorain. But their happy married life is short-lived. By this geographical shift, Pauline's creative sensitivity gets thwarted by a new form of enslavement. Her countrified ways, her need for quietude and privacy clash with urban setting of Lorain.

During the days, when Cholly is working in the steel mill, Pauline is left alone and bored. She is criticised by her neighbours for her curly hair, for her pronunciation, saying 'chil'ren' and her dressing. Thus, soon, Pauline and Cholly begin to feel the community's social pressure to conform. It is the same pressure that tears them apart from each other.

They start measuring each other according to the community's expectations. Pauline expects "favourable glances" from other women. So coupled with her loneliness and boredom, Pauline finds an outlet for her replaced creativity in the "perfection" of Hollywood's silver screen. Eventually, she turns her vengeance to those who represent imperfection. And Pecola, her own daughter, becomes victim of her mother's idea of false perfection.

The movies inspire Pauline to equate "physical beauty with virtue" (97). She soon, finds a sense of wholeness in the movies which she cannot know in real life. Thus, Pauline begins to internalize images and their implied values which affect her relationship with Pecola. Engrossed in her own illusions, Pauline cannot understand that, her own identity is distorted and threatened by "the look of the other".⁶ She can neither realize the potentialities of self nor adequately confirm her identity in the community that is governed by white value system.

Pecola's alienation begins with her mother's rejection of her at the time of birth. When Pauline observes baby Pecola, she reflects :

Eyes all soft and wet. A cross between a puppy and a dying man. But I knowed she was ugly. ... Lord she was ugly (100).

Pecola's own mother thus assigns her a bottom category in the scale of absolute beauty. Pecola stands as constant reminder of Pauline's

blackness and limitations. As there is no emotional attachment between them, Pecola calls her mother "Mrs. Breedlove."

Pauline works in the home of a white family where she finds "beauty, order, cleanliness and praise" (101). For her, whiteness is goodness. She hates her existence as a poor black woman having a family suffering under the manipulations of the white world. As Pauline cannot get financial and emotional stability from Cholly, she becomes the breadwinner of the family. Pauline bears the burden of her drunken husband as penance for her imagined sins. She prays for the salvation of her family. Her motives are simply to seek some affirmation of her worth even if it is at the expense of her family. She starts going to the Church. The Church allows her to bear the ugly Cholly like "a crown of thorns" and her ugly children "like a cross" (100).

She has never introduced this 'orderly' world to her children. Instead, she instils in Pecola all that she fears and hates in herself. She herself has lost her identity in the white society and therefore, in her own distorted way, she "teaches" Pecola how to survive denying the "self". Thus, instead of flourishing under the nurturing love of her mother, Pecola becomes a victim of Pauline's compulsion to punish her own blackness.

Once when Pecola goes to meet Pauline, she accidentally smashes a fresh-baked berry cobbler onto the kitchen floor and splatters the white

girl's new pink dress. Pauline immediately knocks Pecola to the floor and consoles the white girl as if she were her own. She denies even knowing who Pecola is. Though Pecola gets burned, Pauline shows more concern for the white girl than for Pecola. Thus Pauline refuses to offer her daughter any motherly attention.

Since her childhood, Pecola is never loved by her parents. She has no idea how to "get somebody to love" her. She has always seen her parents fighting which has affected her psyche and so she wishes herself into invisibility :

Please, God ... Please make me disappear (39).

Thus, here Morrison exposes the demoralizing and dehumanizing effects of western standards of beauty. For her, embracing the idealized beauty is one of the most dangerous societal constructs. Through Pecola, Morrison wants to suggest that idealized beauty can disenfranchise a child of mother love. It takes an individual to an impasse which forces him/her to forget communal identity. So Pauline who herself is a victim of idealized beauty prefers the white standards and hates her own shabby blackness. She is even ready to discard her own child for the sake of inhuman white world. Dehumanized by poverty and having restricted opportunities for growth of the self, Pauline and Cholly have lost the capacity to love their children.

Pecola's father Cholly, having been abandoned by his parents is both antisocial and asocial. Ostensibly a child of chaos, he makes others' lives chaotic. Moreover, Cholly's first sexual experience is distorted by the intrusion of two white men. They turn it as a public pleasure show. Cholly can do no more than make believe and hates not the white men who humiliate him but the black woman Darlene. He blames her for creating the situation : "the one who bore witness to his failure, his impotence." Thenceforth, he lives with the feeling of impotence. Thus he has no sense of socially acceptable behaviour because he has been denied primary socialization; and being parentless, he is incapable of appropriate fatherly behaviour. As a result he has become "dangerously free" :

Free to feel whatever he felt --- fear, guilt, shame, love , grief, pity. Free to be tender or violent ... (125).

Usually, his reactions are based on what he feels at the moment. Cholly's rage at his inability to shelter Darlene from the humiliating gaze of the white male hunters releases itself years after on Pecola. He realizes that he could not and cannot protect his women or even himself from the bluest eye.

Drunk one day, when he watches Pecola, he senses her love for him. It confuses him :

What could he do for her --- ever ? What give her ? What say her? ... How dare she love him ? ... What was he supposed to do about that ? Return it ? How ? ... (127)

And he expresses his love for Pecola in a very unimaginable way. In this arena of convoluted love Cholly rapes Pecola, his daughter. It is an act of displaced love that Morrison asks not to forgive but to understand, insisting on its frightening ambivalence. Though it is the most disgraceful act for others, for Cholly it is all that he is left with to give to his daughter. Cholly's acts, however repugnant, is born out of his own desperate sense of invisibility, his sense of impotence and guilt. "Father" Breedlove, from birth, has been locked away from a culture and a neighbourhood, the neighbourhood which prizes and aspires to the myth of the 'Dick-and-Jane' primer. Like Pauline or even Pecola, he does not have an opportunity to achieve purpose - however illusionary it may be.

So when Cholly rapes Pecola he does so without any sense of right or wrong-a distinction he has never been taught or experienced. But it leaves Pecola bereft of presence and takes her into a fully silenced world of madness. So like the version of 'Dick -and-Jane', Cholly, intrudes and violates the child's space. Pecola's life is wrecked as the structure of the version is wrecked.

Thus, both Pauline and Cholly Breedlove cannot give their daughter a sense of self, a feeling of safety and worthiness, as they themselves do not possess it.

III

Claudia's Sense of 'self' in contrast with that of Pecola's

In the novel, Morrison deals with three young girls : Claudia, Freida MacTeer and Pecola Breedlove. They are living in the steelmaking Cleveland suburb of Lorain. Claudia and Freida face the same world that Pecola faces. However, their responses and reactions are different than that of Pecola.

In fact, Claudia as a narrator, tells her memories, personal experiences, girlish desires and fears, as she and her sister Freida try to make sense of the often confusing world around them. Claudia does not experience the gravest effects of the myth of beauty as Pecola does. But she does know that blue eyes and blonde hair are admired by all and that she does not possess them. She is also aware that her family is the victim of expectations and assumptions of the dominant culture. She says,

Being a minority in both caste and class, we moved about anyway on the hem of life, struggling to consolidate our weaknesses and hang on,... (18).

When Claudia becomes aware of herself as an outsider, she starts hating the emblems of the dominant white culture. She resents the Shirley Temple mug and white baby-dolls she receives at Christmas. She confesses :

I destroyed white baby dolls. ... The truly horrifying thing was the transference of the same impulses to little white girls. The indifference with which I could have axed them was shaken only by my desire to do so. ... What made people look at them and say, "Awwwww," but not for me ? (22)

In Claudia, there is as Lacan calls a perfect "dialectical synthesis"⁷ of the internal self and the external reality which enables her to feel whole and happy. In fact this symbiosis with self and community is what Claudia has inherited from her mother. Like Pecola, she has not learnt to "take her anger down". Rather, Claudia feels, and rightly so, "an awareness of worth" in anger.

Thus Claudia fights back to make sense of the contradictions she finds around her about love and beauty. But soon she accepts the "reality" and can spare her from total acquiescence to oppression. She says :

... the change was adjustment without improvement (22).

In fact, Claudia can do so because her parents have instilled "uniqueness of self" that enables her to "live out" Pecola.

Unlike Claudia, Pecola cuddles the images of blue-eyed and blonde-haired girls that dominate her world. As a girl-child, Pecola has understood and witnessed the difference between the life of a white girl with blue eyes and life of a black girl without blonde hair and blue eyes. She internalizes the white values and lives in her own world full of illusions. However, she cannot succeed in getting the bluest eyes. On the contrary, she becomes a victim of her false values which do not belong to her and her community. Since her own mother is a victim of the ideals of white society, Pecola along with her mother suffers from self-hatred. Like Claudia she is not taught to know the "self". Claudia's self-consciousness protects her from the destruction but Pecola cannot evade the destruction.

Thus, through Pecola and Claudia, Morrison reveals how white Eurocentric standards of beauty and self play havoc with the lives of innocent children. Morrison also shows that a conscious black woman can evade the extreme effects of racism and sexism if she trusts herself.

IV

The Breedloves as Foil to the MacTeers

The novel opens with the three versions of the "Dick and Jane". Morrison uses these versions to juxtapose the fictions of the white educational process with the realities of life for many black children. The

world shown in the version is secure, suburban and white and complete with dog, cat, non-working mother and leisure-time father. The first version constitutes simple sentences but later on it is repeated without punctuation, and then without spaces between the words.

Klotman has pointed out that the three versions of the "Dick and Jane" version are symbolic of the life styles of the Fisher family, MacTeer family and the Breedlove family."⁸ The first version indicates the Fisher family which indirectly affects the black children.

Here is the house. It is green and white ... it is very pretty
Here is the family ... They are very happy (7).

The black children are led to believe that others are happy because they are white and pretty. It confuses the innocent child's life and the child starts yearning for the beauty and happiness of the dominant white society depicted in the first version. The second version is without capitals and punctuations. Its world is still recognizable :

Here is the house it is green and white ... it is very pretty ...
here is the family... they are very happy (7).

It shows the life style of the MacTeers who love their children and are trying desperately to survive the poverty and racism. The life style of the Breedloves and their daughter Pecola, is like the third distorted run-on-version which reveals their deformed world and psychic confusion. It is completely run together. It has no boundaries of spacing or punctuation.

Here is the house it is green and white... it is very pretty here is the family... they are very happy (8).

The Breedloves and MacTeers have different value systems and ambitions as well as different ways of coping with the pain of experience.

The name Breedlove itself is ironical. It is a self-hating family in which no love is bred. The Breedlove family survives at the fringe of society, where the "hem" begins to unravel. Their poverty and failures at every level have destroyed the emotional bonds within them. The Breedlove home shows the emptiness and despair of their domestic life, which is epitomized by their furniture :

The furniture had aged without ever having become familiar. Pecola had owned it, but never knew it. ... There were ... no memories among those pieces. Certainly no memories to be cherished (31-32).

Thus, unlike the stability of the MacTeer household, the Breedlove furniture reflects the emotional stasis in their lives. They live a futile and rootless life devoid of affirmative values. The Breedloves are victims of a racist, class-conscious society that has forced them to live unnatural lives. Claudia says that although for the Breedloves

... Poverty was traditional and stultifying, it was not unique. But their ugliness was unique (34).

The sense of worthlessness makes Pauline and Cholly violent towards each other. In fact, it is their attempt to display their pent-up, inarticulated

fury toward a hostile world. This domestic atmosphere distorts the psyche of Pecola and her brother.

The economically and emotionally bankrupt Breedloves are set against the intact MacTeer family. Mrs. MacTeer's grudging love for her daughters exposes the absence of such affection in Pauline's attitude towards Pecola. The MacTeers live without illusion as much as possible. They face and live life as it is. Though they suffer in poverty and endure hardships, they are bound together with love. No one in the family defines themselves by a lack of whiteness. In fact they have accepted their difference from the whites. They survive with the sense of self. Like Pauline and Cholly, they have not retreated into the world of illusion of movie theatres and the bottle. Instead of keeping themselves away from the community, they give shelter to the people like Mr. Henry and Pecola. Unfortunately, they do not have energy and money to adopt the homeless child like Pecola.

Though sometimes poverty makes Mrs. MacTeer angry, she is capable of soft music, worm laughter and an abiding love; which is totally absent in Pauline Breedlove. Unlike Pauline and Geraldine, Mrs. MacTeer, fights with the conditions of her life and self-pity. Because the MacTeers are not obsessed with the need to be beautiful, wealthy or white, they can concentrate their efforts on their family and community. When they take

in Pecola, they voluntarily accept the burden of the additional mouth to feed. Though sometimes Mrs. MacTeer gets angry, her anger is not directed at Pecola but at her family which has abandoned her. Poverty has muted their affection for their children, but in many ways they show their children that they love them. Thus, in spite of the stress and tension that Mrs. MacTeer encounters in white society, she displays

Love, thick and dark as Alaga syrup ... sweet, musty, with an edge of wintergreen in its base-everywhere ... (14).

Mrs. MacTeer provides Claudia enough sustenance and security to allow her to develop a voice that surfaces from the crisis of adolescence and blackness.

As a result, even Claudia and Freida live with the feeling of 'self' and in the world of reality. They are taught to resist the notion of white superiority and to feel connections with their own community. So Claudia says proudly :

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 (62).

The protection that the MacTeers offer to their daughters help them grow into healthy beings, on the other hand, the absence of protection forces Pecola to take refuge in the world of make-believe. Thus unlike the

Breedloves, the MacTeers can make themselves into a family despite all the odds : economic, psychological and social forces.

Thus, in The Bluest Eye, Toni Morrison shows that a reversal can occur when a black woman creates her own sense of alienation by succumbing to what soon becomes a distorted reality. The untenable desire to conform the white values leads to frustration and eventually incapacitates black woman to the degree that her sense of identification becomes distorted. This is what Morrison wants to suggest through Pecola Breedlove. Pecola tries to explore her 'self ' through adopting western value system. However, it is her futile attempt to establish her identity in the world that is dominated by white values.

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