

GALAXY

International Multidisciplinary Research Journal

Vol. 3, Issue-II (March 2014)



Editor-In-Chief: Dr. Vishwanath Bite



Managing Editor: Madhuri Bite

Rendering Resistance through Violence: Violence as a Survival Maneuver in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*

Indulekha. C

Research Scholar

PG & Research Department of English

Mercy College, Palakkad, Kerala.

Abstract:

The triple jeopardy of racism, sexism, and classism confined the social, rational, and corporeal well-being of the blacks in the Afro-American milieu since their existence. Being an illustrious Afro-American writer, Toni Morrison delineates black characters that are culturally, ideologically, emotionally and physically suppressed in a white dominated society. Almost all her creations, irrespective of age and sex opt for violence. Especially, her women generally labeled as deviant matriarchs resort to brutal aggression-- both physical and verbal. Morrison's personae resist different levels of oppression thrust upon them by inclining to violence, are often an attempt from their part to avoid further victimization. This assault, often vicious, becomes an act of resistance to the oppressive society/power for their survival thereby redirecting their powerlessness to re-define themselves as dominant beings.

Keywords: Violence, Resistance, Jeopardy, Survival

The triple jeopardy of racism, sexism, and classism confined the social, rational, and corporeal well-being of the blacks in the Afro-American milieu since their existence. Being an eminent Afro-American writer, Toni Morrison depicts coloured characters that are culturally, ideologically, emotionally and physically eclipsed in a white dominated society. She moulds them in relation to their mores and ethnicity and casts them at the core of her novels. Her men and women boarding on their subaltern status articulate their undeniable protest against the above said oppressions in their own way. Generally labeled as deviants they are prompt to violence -- physical, sexual, verbal, and psychological. Their inclination to violence is often an endeavor from their part to evade further victimization. The dominant class thrust ideological and rational violence on the oppressed, which is graver than physical violence while the latter unleash physical, sexual, and verbal violence among its members since resisting the oppressors is impractical for them. An attempt is here made to explore the maneuver of violence as a survival stratagem among the characters in the novel *The Bluest Eye* by Morrison.

“Racially exploited, sexually violated, and often emotionally humiliated for years or decades, these women [black suppressed women] [and men] often learn to coexist with their visible and invisible scars by making choices that are not easily understood” (Putnam). Morrison's personae confining to different age limits resort to violence, which unravel an escape route from their double and triple jeopardised abode. They create new patterns of resistance, especially misdirected resistance against the black and white patriarchal oppression by rendering violence on their family or community. Through this modus operandi, these characters refuse to be enclosed within the stereotype roles. This racially motivated aberration upholds them to a dominating position in their own way.

Pecola Breedlove, the heroine and 'victim' of *The Bluest Eye* pictures the story of an eleven-year-old black girl's craving for a pair of blue eyes, which itself is a further manifestation of her ceaseless wish to be adored and accepted by the black and white communities. She grabs a peripheral existence in the racist and sexist society in which she survives, "Being a minority in both caste and class, we [Breedlove family] moved about any way on the hem of life, struggling to consolidate our weaknesses and hand on, or to creep singly up into the major fold of the garment" (*The Bluest Eye* 11). This paltry subsistence falls short to provide shelter and security to its children who in turn breed domestic violence and self-disgust. The sense of bleakness and despair of the house is best described by the principal raconteur, that "the only living thing in the Breedloves' house was the coal stove, which lived independently of everything and everybody" (37).

Pecola who is born into poverty is nurtured by self-hatred and nursed by humiliation learns to abhor her black heritage. She is constantly denigrated and taunted emotionally, verbally, and physically of her external manifestation. She senses her parents' aversion towards her is for the reason that she falls short of the blonde hair and blue eyes that is always treasured in her community. "If she looked beautiful maybe Cholly would be different, and Mrs. Breedlove too"(46). Pecola, living a cloaked existence in a racially induced community often faces psychological assaults. The "white immigrant storekeeper" (48) of the candy store, spares no time to have a glance at her. He showed "distaste . . . for her, her blackness" (49) and to him, Pecola is not good enough and feels that she does not even deserve to be acknowledging even with a glance. This casual 'absentia' of Pecola signifies the moral violence of the clerk, which in turn forefingers the centuries of neglect and rejection of the coloured in the eyes of the Europeans.

The narrator of the novel says, "She [Pecola] also knew that when one of the girls at school wanted to be particularly insulting to a boy, or wanted to get immediate response from a boy, she could say 'Bobby loves Pecola Breedlove'" (162). Girls use her name when they want to insult boys. Interestingly she is bullied in the school by not only white kids, but by her own clan, as well. Her schoolmates pass on verbal assail by calling her "black e mo" (162), can be comprehended as an act of transferred oppression. Her episodes in life reinforce her attitude that beauty is the only way through which she could gain respect and adoration from others. This ideological violence reaches its acme when she comes across the greatest damage of racial prejudice from her own parents. Her family sardonically named Breedlove is a shattered one, which breeds hatred and neglect among children. Even her mother Pauline acknowledges her daughter as an ugly child by the very first sight of the newborn. "[Pecola has a] head full of pretty hair, but Lord she was ugly" (98).

Pauline, whose vocation as a 'black mammy' to a wealthy blonde girl, consciously and unconsciously breeds alienation and self-hatred in her progeny, particularly in her daughter. She passes on her rage and disillusionment in life towards her children by showing maternal negligence and violence—both verbal and physical. Her emotional violence is envisaged poignantly in the scene in which Pecola inadvertently spills a blueberry pie onto the newly cleansed floor of the white employer's kitchen. In the process, she startles the employer's daughter. Pauline gets exasperated with this pandemonium and,

“...with the back of her hand knocked her [Pecola] to the floor. Pecola slid in the pie juice, one leg folding under her. Mrs. Breedlove yanked her up by the arm, slapped her again, and in a voice thin with anger, abused Pecola directly and Frieda and [Claudia] by implication”. (109)

Pauline flings Pecola out of the doors of her white employer’s house yelling callous and insulting comments: “Crazy fool . . . my floor, mess . . . look what you . . . work . . . get on out . . . now that . . . crazy . . . my floor, my floor . . . my floor” (109). Then turns to “the little girl in pink that started to cry” and whispered “Hush, baby, hush. Come here.... Don’t cry no more Polly will change it” (109). The critic J. Brooks Bouson explains, “While Pauline dotes on the little white Fisher girl, she neglects and physically abuses Pecola, transferring to her daughter her deep-rooted contempt for her own blackness” (Bouson 34). This aggression, often brutal, becomes an act of resistance to the oppressive society/power thereby redirecting her powerlessness to re-define herself as dominant woman. Pauline willfully acknowledges her daughter’s role as a scapegoat of the community. This perception of Afro-American motherhood is drastically different from that of dominant culture where the former has been used as a conspicuously complex ideology to control Black women.

Pecola’s parents’ relationship is detrimental to her growth and survival. Bouson points out that Pecola is “a total and complete victim [...] not only of racial shaming but also of her crippled and crippling family” (25). In the bedroom that all four members of the family share Cholly,

“leaped from the bed, and with a flying tackle, grabbed his wife around the waist and they hit the floor. [...] [S]he began to hit at Cholly [...] he put his foot in her chest [:] he struck her several times in the face. [...] Mrs. Breedlove [...] struck him with two blows, knocking him right back into senselessness.” (*The Bluest Eye* 44)

Roberta Rubenstein explains, “The Breedlove family’s sense of utter hopelessness and helplessness is externalized in their appearance: both literal and spiritual poverty manifest themselves as ugliness in a world in which beauty is equated with success” (Rubenstein 127).

Pauline in her childhood always played the role of a homemaker and cherished for a prince to turn up in her life. When Cholly Breedlove came across her life and cared for her lame foot, she sensed her long awaited soul mate in flesh and blood. Cholly on the other hand saw the marriage as a personal gain. He views Pauline as a tangible object to be exploited because of her maimed foot. Nevertheless, after their marriage, they began to have more problems, and Pauline began to impart her anger for Cholly onto her issues. Her lame foot and black skin made her imperceptible in the society. Their liaison was gorged with verbal, physical, and emotionally violent abuse. In the quarrelsome household, Pauline feels that he is “getting meaner and meaner and wanted to fight me all the time” (*The Bluest Eye* 118). “Home, then, becomes a place to learn pain, while community becomes a place to act it out” (Putnam).

Physically battered from her own spouse, Pauline never let pass a chance to make Cholly comprehend his failures in life and her own successful efforts to earn bread for her family, “You sure ain’t bringing in nothing. If it was left up to you, we’d all be dead” (*The Bluest Eye* 41). But this verbal battle is fought in futile, as Cholly in return unleashes his “inarticulate fury” on his wife and their fights were conducted with a “darkly brutal formalism” during which they

did not “talk or groan or curse”. The omniscient speaker comments, “To deprive her of these [verbal] fights was to deprive her; all the zert and unreasonableness of life” (31).

Quickly, the Breedlove household inclines to abhorrence and that circumscribed hatred was unleashed against the innocent children. Instead of making her children obedient and good human beings, Pauline was incorporating “into her daughter a fear of growing up, fear of other people, fear of life” (128). Morrison extends the issue of black motherhood by politicizing it amid the wide discourse of racism in the United States. Sammy, Pecola’s brother, often ran away from the house because of their parents’ hostility. In her urge to become “an ideal servant” (127), Pauline willfully debts her maternity.

As Alice Walker puts it, “the violence the men, women, and children of the Breedlove family inflict on each other, is the direct outcome of the internalization of racist hatred” (72). Cholly Breedlove, the father of Pecola is a renounced child who after the fourth day of his birth was jettisoned by his mother, “When Cholly was four days old, his mother wrapped him in two blankets and one newspaper and placed him on a junk heap by the railroad” (*The Bluest Eye* 133). His father left his mother even before Cholly was born. The latter bequeaths this paternal violence from his father and transmits it to the next generation. After being “abandoned in a junk heap by his mother, rejected for a crap game by his father, there was nothing more to lose” (126) for Cholly. “Having no idea of how to raise children, and having never watched any parent raise himself, he could not even comprehend what such a relationship could be” (160). Since he never had a father figure in his life, he never learned to become a father, which consecutively promoted for his raping of Pecola in addition to his psychological downfall.

As majority of Morrison's heroes, here too Cholly never in the novel acts anything stereotypically as a real man or as a loving father. Dissolving the sanctity of paternity, he brutally molests his own daughter.

Following the disintegration - the falling away - of sexual desire, he [Cholly] was conscious of her [Pecola] wet, soapy hands on his wrists, the fingers clenching, but whether her grip was from a hopeless but stubborn struggle to be free, or from some other emotion, he could not tell. Removing himself from her . . . cholly stood up and could see only her grayish panties, and limp around her ankles. Again the hatred mixed with tenderness. The hatred would not let him pick her up; the tenderness forced him to cover her. (128-29)

After this reprehensible act, Cholly (like his father) leaves his family. “He feels a mix of tenderness and hatred as he rapes Pecola, the tenderness confused and misapplied. Ultimately, any tender feelings Cholly has for Pecola are transformed into a desire to consume her” (Walker 73).

Cholly’s sexual violence towards his wife and daughter is the misdirected anger of his looted manhood. His masculinity has been robbed and rescinded when the two white men ‘caught’ Cholly and his first love, Darlene while having sex for the first time. They force him to continue his act with Darlene while they hilariously watched,

Cholly, moving faster, looked at Darlene. He hated her. He almost wished he could do it - hard, long, and painfully, he hated her so much. The flashlight wormed its way into his guts and turned the sweet taste of muscadine into rotten fetid bile. He stared at Darlene's hands covering her face in the moon and lamplight. They looked like baby claws. (*The Bluest Eye* 148)

Instead of showering hatred on white men, he pass on his anger towards Darlene and later towards Pauline, his wife. His violence towards his wife and children articulates his survival strategy in a double jeopardised black community. He realizes that showing disgust for those two white men are out of his reach and will not be the smartest thing to do in a racially domineering world. "Never did he once consider directing his hatred toward the hunters. Such an emotion would have destroyed him...that hating them would have consumed him, burned him up like a piece of soft coal, leaving only flakes of [a]sh and a question mark of smoke" (119).

Despite all sympathy for his abused wife, the black man gradually developed a kind of aversion to her,

The stigma attached to the black woman by her white slaver ironically received the black man's sanction. He felt sexually neglected and took his woman to be his enemy. Hence, the black woman was deprived of a strong black man on whom she could rely for protection. (Gerda)

"The sexual incident with the white men resembles his abuse of Pecola. Raping her, he feels the same emotions of guilt, embarrassment, and hatred that he experienced when he was fourteen" (Singh). Cholly dumps Darlene when he found out she might be pregnant, since he was abandoned by his father as a child. Abandonment of the females is a common phenomenon under taken by majority of Morrison's men folks, "He had to get away. Never mind the fact that he was leaving that very day...Cholly knew it was wrong to run out on a pregnant girl, and recalled, with sympathy, that his father had done just that to him" (*The Bluest Eye* 120).

Morrison has vehemently placed the MacTeer family in contrast to that of Breedloves. The novel opens with Mrs. MacTeer scolding Claudia for her relentless vomiting, but the latter also recalls her mother's affection, "Love, thick and dark as Alaga syrup, eased up into that cracked window. I could smell it—taste it—sweet, musty, with an edge of wintergreen in it base—everywhere in that house" (12). Although Mrs. MacTeer embodies somewhat harsh tone of voice, Claudia feels the presence of her mother's love. Claudia ruminates on the night she went sick, and remembers, "... in the night, when my coughing was dry and tough, feet padded into the room, hands repined the flannel, readjusted the quilt, and rested a moment on my forehead. So when I think of autumn, I think of somebody with hands who does not want me to die" (12).

Mrs. MacTeer, who is deemed a 'loving' mother, seldom talks to her daughters directly. "My mother's voice drones on. She is not talking to me. She is talking to the puke, but she is calling it my name: Claudia" (7). However, her songs and soliloquies equip her daughters to learn self-esteem and pride in one's own black identity and culture. Jill Matus states, "Claudia's mother may be tough and often angry, but she nevertheless communicates a fierce and protective love (Matus 38). Bouson asserts, "although Claudia is subjected to maternal shaming [...] she

still feels in a deep-rooted way that she is loved and secure” (33). Mrs. MacTeer has correlated the experience of motherhood with her struggle against racism and sexism and her resistance to oppression. This, in turn, confirms that Claudia is able to grow and survive in an Afro-American society.

The mother-daughter bonding is an extension of the necessity of female bonding which brings attention in the wake of the feminist movement of the 1960s. Mothering in their stance, is fundamentally and profoundly an act of resistance, essential and integral to black women’s fight against racism. They also prove that the state of black motherhood has more depth than any other stereotype. The power of motherhood and the empowerment of mothering are what make possible the better world they seek for themselves and their children.

The issue of molestation looms both the MacTeer and the Breedlove households. We hear from Claudia again about the roomer Mr. Henry sexually harassing Frieda. The MacTeers violently attacked the perpetrator in their household. Her sister describes her father’s reaction to the incident,

When daddy saw him come up on the porch, he threw our old tricycle at his head and knocked him off of the porch. [...] Daddy shot at him and Mr. Henry jumped out of his shoes [...] momma hit him with the broom and told him to keep the Lords name out of his mouth. (*The Bluest Eye* 100)

In contrast, when Pecola approaches her mother to complain about her father’s molestation, “[s]he [Pauline] didn’t even believe me when I told her” (200). Mrs. Breedlove’s maternal abandonment and lack of compassion lets Pecola to be raped by her father the second time.

Taking Breedlove family Mr. Breedlove, is “a renting black, [who] having put his family outdoors, had catapulted himself beyond the reaches of human consideration. He had joined the animals: was indeed an old dog, a snake, a ratty nigger” (18). Mrs. Breedlove “neglected her house, her children, her man--they were like the afterthoughts one has just before sleep, the early morning and late evening edges of her day” (127). Whereas Mrs. Macteer edifies her children about their black femininity, enriches them with their innate positive black heritage, which gradually inculcates self-esteem and self-veneration in the MacTeer children. Pauline on the other hand has never taught Pecola any additional mothering lesson on the true existence of a black girl in an Afro-American backdrop.

Pauline sang no empowering or didactic songs to her children. No soliloquies or moralizing dialogues were articulated between them. Further, she vehemently indulges in verbal fencing with her own family as an attempt to regain her control over her deteriorating life. Since parents are incapable of shielding their children from the racism and violence of the outside world, most of the times, they surrender which is the case with Pauline. She fails to nurture the feeling of self worth in Pecola because of the lack of self-esteem in herself which further results in her dissatisfaction as a mother and she carries motherhood as a burden.

Many readers see the book as a story about Claudia MacTeer, the principal narrator of the book, whose narration has a candid tie to Pecola’s life. Claudia, another black girl of about nine doesn’t make out anything iniquitous with her black legacy. She seldom fascinates for an alien white identity. She mutilates and destroys the new white doll, which she receives as a Christmas gift. Instead of embracing it, as most other children would have done, she disfigures it. By dismembering the doll, she disrupts the white ideological oppression.

Adults, older girls, shops, magazines, newspapers, window sign - 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 (20-21).

Emily Prager in her essay "Our Barbies, Ourselves", further substantiates, "the damaging effect of a doll that establishes such an impossible standard of physical perfection for little girls" (Prager 353). She knew that she was erroneous for obliterating the doll, but she could not desist herself from doing it. The doll imprints the notion of ideal beauty, and she knew she is afar from looking like the Barbie. Usually young girls receive Barbie dolls to play with when they are younger. They enjoy its beauty and believe that they are expected to look like her. This causes self-hatred, which in succession induces insecurity among them.

Claudia, who has an emancipated thinking of her own, learns from her family to become a gladiator to fight against the psychological violence thrust upon her and her society by the dominant culture. At the age of nine, she realizes the need to defy these suppressive forces. She takes in from her mother how to be a strong black female and decodes the positive black heritage from her mother's songs and soliloquies. Hence, she shows revulsion for the doll and its blonde hair and blue eyes, which epitomize the 'perfect girl', since she could impart nothing of herself with the blue eyed Barbie. As Amanda Putnam puts it, "Claudia's feelings of black invisibility are magnified via the white baby dolls she receives as gifts" (36).

Claudia and her sister Frieda exercise verbal assault against Maureen Peal, a "high-yellow dream child," (*The Bluest Eye* 62), ultimately culminating into a shrieking dispute about skin colour. Maureen cuddles white beauty standards being a light-skinned, straight-haired black child and beguiles dark-skinned girls. She uses "black" as a derogative description and the extreme offense from her part crop up by the acute awareness of her own highly preferential light skin color, "I *am* cute! And you ugly! Black and ugly black e mos" (73). Hubbing on Maureen's weaknesses—her six fingers and a "dog tooth,"—Claudia and Frieda knock down the power politics associated with the skin colour. Even though they suffer from the realization that their dark skin is not as valued as Maureen's light skin, their verbal attack turn out to be their own enactment of rebellion, countering society's oppression on them.

Claudia again shows abhorrence for the white Shirley Temple, who danced with Bill "Bojangles" Robinson, a famous black tap dancer, in various films, "I couldn't join [Freda and Pecola] in their adoration [of Shirley Temple] because I hated Shirley. Not because she was cute, but because she danced with Bojangles, who was *my* friend, *my* uncle, *my* daddy, and who ought to have been soft-shoeing it and chuckling with me" (19). The performance pairing the adult black male and the small white girl emphasizes the absence of a black girl performer. This obscured existence of a black girl results in a transferred aversion onto Shirley Temple, who is out of reach and yet within view. Surprisingly Pecola showed her hatred in a unique way. Instead of hating people that were beautiful, she hated herself for not being the 'ideal woman'.

Another female character in the novel *Geraldine*, a middle-class African American woman loves her blue-eyed cat more than her own son, Louis Junior. Junior sees Pecola and invites her into the house to supposedly show her some kittens and give her one. He kills his mother's

beloved cat and blames it on Pecola. Geraldine spares no time to judge the veracity of the incident and jostles Pecola out of the house roaring, “Get out. You nasty little black bitch. Get out of my house” (93). Calling an eleven-year-old girl a “black bitch” by an African American hurts even more than being called by a white person since they both belong to the same race.

Geraldine is married by her husband only because of her hygiene and does not expect anything more from her. In order to safe guard her marriage she worked her entire life to achieve and uphold the white standard of beauty. Their mutual relationship is purely clinical and is far distant from a conjugal one. It has ill effects on their child Junior. He is not allowed to cry and is always kept clean by brushed, bathed, and oiled. Geraldine feels that it is her sense of duty to have an immaculate and honest child. Junior is trained from home that he is superior to the other kids and his relation with them is valued beneath his dignity. This isolates him from the other kids. His self-seclusion not only affects his relationship with the classmates, but also with his mother as well. However, this maternal overwhelming deteriorates to a point, when Geraldine loves her blue eyed cat more than her own son. Accomplishing alien standards, Geraldine is washing herself of her true culture and identity, and gets metamorphosed to an anonymous member of the society.

Morrison herself has also utilized the resistance strategy dispensing strict narrative chronology in the novel and by violating the integrity of language within the text. *The Bluest Eye* opens with three citations from the 1940s American elementary school primer that features the All-American, white family of Mother, Father, Dick, and Jane. The first citation is an authentic replica, the second falls short of all capitalization and punctuation marks, and the third pastiche suspends into linguistic chaos by discarding its spacing and alignment,

Hereisthehouseitisgreenandwhiteithasareddooritisveryprettyhere
isthefamilymotherfatherdickandjaneliveinthegreenandwhitehou
setheyareveRyhappyseejanesheshasareddressshewantstoplaywho
willplaywithjaneseetHecatitgoesmeowmeowcomeandplaycomep
laywithjanethekittenwillnotplays. (2)

Klotman Phyllis points out, “First and foremost it serves as a synopsis of the tale that is to follow revealing the psychic confusion of the novel.” There is chaos in the symbolic order and it represents the disorder in the family. The nursery book citation shows that familial bliss can be attained only through good looks. Students unconsciously perceive the gender role expectations and stereotypes for not only Dick and Jane but also Mother and Father in general. They also notice the absence of colored people in the picture of a perfect family.

Thus Morrison’s characters unleash violence in various degrees and forms, but remain dominant and authoritative in an intrigue way. They cope with dreadful oppressive circumstances from where they create new endings to them, which their oppressors can hardly believe. Almost in all the novels of Morrison, she depicts ferocious and violent characters, especially female characters who engage in power politics in unconventional ways. They redirect their fragile positions, transforming themselves into girls and women of fortitude. Accordingly, these violent men and women provide a new understanding of violence and its liaison to personal power and community. However, they survive, and readers come to understand the power of violence and its price.

Works Cited:

1. Bouson, J. Brooks. *Quiet As It's Kept: Shame, Trauma, and Race in the Novels of Toni Morrison*. USA: State University of New York Press, 2000. Print.
 2. Gerda, Lerner. *Black Women in White America*. New York. New American Library, 1969. Xxiii. Print.
 3. Matus, Jill. "Shame and Anger in *The Bluest Eye*." *Toni Morrison: Contemporary World Writers*. New York: Manchester UP, 1998. 37-54. Print.
 4. Morrison, Toni. *The Bluest Eye*. London: Vintage, 1970. Print.
 5. Phyllis, Klotman, "Dick and Jane and Shirley Temple Sensibility in *The Bluest Eye*," *Black American Literature Forum*, 13. 1979. 124. Print.
 6. Prager, Emily. "Our Barbies, Ourselves." *Interview Magazine* Aug.2005: 353-356. Print.
 7. Putnam, Amanda. "Mothering Violence: Ferocious Female Resistance in Toni Morrison's *the Bluest Eye*, *Sula*, *Beloved*, and *a Mercy*." *Black Women, Gender & Families* 5.2 (2011): 25-43. Print.
 8. Rubenstein, Roberta. "Pariahs and Community." *Baker* .126-55. Print.
 9. Singh, Rajbir. "Conflict, Violence and Peace: Biopsychosocial Perspective." *Violence and Conflict Resolution: Contemporary perspectives*. Ed. Neelam Rathee. 9-22. Print.
 10. Walker, Alice. *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*. Orlando: A Harvest Book. 1970. Print.
-