

Violence in Toni Morrison's The Bluest Eye

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Abstract – Violence affects all of us. So, I asked myself – what is the structure of this subject, violence? What are the elements therein? How does violence configure in various genres of literature, how does literature respond to violence? What are the literary possibilities of literature on / on violence and what kind of exploration is to be made in the context?

The word 'violence' came in English language via Old French from Latin 'Violentia' which refers to behaviour involving physical force or power intended to harm, damage or kill someone, or oneself or a group or a community. According to sociologists and legal experts, the use of unfair exercise of power or force broadens the scope of our conventional understanding of violence to include those acts which result from power relationships such as neglect or acts of omission or more obvious violent acts. But it is also true that violence against women, children or elderly does not always result in injury or death. Psychologists argue that sometimes its consequences become important. The consequences can be latent and last for years in the unconscious realm of human mind causing psychological and social damage. Therefore, we should understand the implications of experience of violence from several perspectives. If we examine literature of violence, we will find that various manifestations of states of violence represented in literature include, injury, death, fear, apprehension, dislocation, cruelty, depression, deprivation, painful projection, indifference and despondency.

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Violence is inherent in humans. Researches show that among the pre-historic humans, there is archeological evidence for both contentions of violence and peacefulness as primary characteristics. Violence and suffering are essential elements of western world marred by the Original Sin. Much of classical literature, epics and folk literature do verbalise the impact of violence on individual, communities and society at large.

Toni Morrison, a winner of Nobel Prize in literature is a novelist of extraordinary gifts. The world of Toni Morrison's fiction is one that tries to restore the African-American's past from her recollections of childhood memories. The aura of violence created by Toni Morrison surpasses the writings of many writers. Here is a world surrounded by the three aspects of violence – external, domestic, and emotional. S. Balasubramaniam depicts, "Toni Morrison's novels tell us what it means to be human, a condition not entirely determined by genetic makeup but is also comprised of conscious volition. As a result her fictional dignity and emotional sensitivity is an impersonal, alien and frequently threatening world." (145)¹

Undoubtedly, with these types included, no corner of the novel remains without violence. One incident after another creates the more misery inflicting iota as well as whirlpools of violence. As Sunita Sinha

says: "Her novel reveals the attempts of the black people to sustain their mental sanity and spiritual health, social life and political strife, in the midst of a slave holding and dominating white civilization." (46)². As goes the background of the novelist, she writes in appropriation with that. The desire to get blue eyes symbolizes the belief of attaining beauty. This idea is given in the novel on the basis of factual incident of her life. An African girl friend of Toni Morrison always craved for beauty by having blue eyes. The similar emotionally perturbed girl is included on the land of white Americans as the central figure of the novel, Pecola. Being a black girl, she is considered ugly and to be rid of ugliness, she wants blue eyes. As Sunita Sinha remarks: "It reveals the tragic effect of racial prejudice on the black girl, Pecola Breedlove, yearning to assert her individuality in a community which fails to recognize her identity." (47)

The Bluest Eye is concerned primarily with hatred, which is at the centre and causes violence. Primarily the violence is thrust onto a community and then to a particular girl. This hatred is of two types – first, that the black community is hated by the Whites, and second is the hatred developed by this self-loathing community for itself. First type of hatred gives rise to racial violence, which is one of the main themes of the novel. Through the

various incidents of violence being inflicted on the blacks, Toni Morrison creates a sea of sadness. The reader is forced to think of the plight as of a nonentity. This misbehaviour goes down to the level of children. This is also expressive of the fact that such an imbalance cannot subdue easily. The change is not close by and even if conditions change, that is going to take many generations. Pecola in childhood faces racial violence at the hands of a young American boy who suffers deeply from racial superiority. The worst aspect of this racial violence is that nowhere, does the novelist show any sign of improvement, affection or intermingling of the two races.

Domestic violence which goes side by side with the racial violence is based on the hatred developed by the race under complex. Pecola's parents have a rough relationship and that reflects on the children often. As a representation of racial and domestic violence, the child abuse is created in the novel. Emotional insecurity and lack of conservation becomes the root of emotional violence. As Sunita Sinha puts, "The novel presents the psychological and social effects of a black girl trying to live according to the white standard. In order to get rid of her unworthiness, she prays each night with a haunting passion for the blue eyes beauty of Shirley Temple so that she will also be beautiful, so that people will look at her, so that her world will be different." (48)

All these are practiced at internal and external levels. The deep delved trench of racial violence emits racialism, hatred, emotional juxtaposition, self-inflicted disgust, humiliation and many more vices to run on a dead end road. Violence terminates growth, talent of society as well as an individual. The ultimate is being thrown into a fathomless black hole. Thus the extremities of violence, spread with the reactions, jeopardize entire bio in the surrounding area to its futurity. The invigoration of a society under suppression of violence has negligible chances and deformities in association are bound to deteriorate further. In *The Bluest Eye*, Toni Morrison, projects racial complexes as a causative factor of domestic, emotional and external violence.

Domestic violence is raised in the novel on the basis of hatred, which has been learned by a race under complex. They feel disgusted for each other. This feeling of disgust is deep rooted in Cholly. The story of Cholly's childhood, without a father, living with his aunt Jimmy, who is his saviour, as his mentally disturbed mother had "placed him on a junk heap by the railroad" (TBE 103)³. Cholly, first time, develops desires for a girl, Darlene on her behest only. This is an incident which is to bear long lasting impact on his psyche. The two go to a forest and their love making is disturbed by two white hunters who flash torch light on them and also force to complete the intercourse. This he does but as a befooled person. Since this relationship was from a woman's corner, he somehow develops a dislike for this. The impact

reflects when he married Pauline. He is, also, unable to develop affection in case of Pauline for the mental deformity as caused by those hunters: "Cholly moving fast looked at Darlene. He hated her. He almost wished he could do it - hard long and painfully, he hated her so much." (TBE116). Soon his dislike for her takes the place of hatred and violence. He becomes violent to his wife as well as children. The lack of any change as is possible in married life, drives him to despair and freeze his imagination.

The hatred and neglect, Pauline receives from her husband make her a chronic moviegoer and she takes a job in a house of Whites. After that she starts neglecting her own children and household. As Suman Lata and Arvind Kumar Sharma say: "Pecola is rejected by Pauline who embraces the blond haired child of her white employees. Pecola internalizes the notion that the black is not beautiful. Pauline, though she is also back, wishes to sweep out all the things which are not beautiful as she rushes to embrace the rich white child" (198)⁴. She starts taking pleasure in her job. There she builds a small world of her imagination. Consequently, her relationship with her husband becomes fierce and severe. In the house of Breedloves, i.e. Cholly and Pauline, hatred and violence run parallel. The struggles between them torment the children. Pecola, the daughter prays for her own invisibility: "Please God.... Please make me disappear" (TBE33), and Sammy, the son becomes violent after seeing the struggle between his parents and screams to his mother: "Kill him! Kill him!" (TBE33).

There is another side of communal hatred for itself. A group of boys which also belongs to African-American community but teases Pecola: "Black e mo, Black e mo. Yadaddsleppnekked. Black e mo black e mo yad add sleeps necked. Black e mo...." (TBE50). This verse is inspired from two humiliating experiences. First, her black skin and second, the above mention sleeping habit of adults of African-American community and this incident shows that they have developed self-hatred. Pecola an innocent girl becomes the victim of that group of boys and they tease her for the matters, which they would have also faced sometimes.

This puts a question mark as to know the reason of the development of self-hatred. It is the hatred that leads them to self-destruction. The answer of the question is given by the writer in the novel. She shows effect of Western ideas of Physical beauty and romantic love not only on the black woman, but also on the black community and perceives its worth in general. As Suman Lata and Arvind Kumar Sharma define: "Beauty is a deeply problematic concept in Morrison's works. In fact the omniscient narrator of *The Bluest Eye* succumbs that Physical beauty and romantic love are probably the most destructive ideas in the human thoughts". (200)

As the hatred for black community gives the way to the racial violence in the novel, a little innocent girl,

Pecola is being the victim of racism many a times in the novel. She is considered the ugliest girl in her school too, so whenever any girl wants to insult some boy, she says: "Bobby loves Pecola Breedlove! Bobby loves Pecola Breedlove!" (TBE34). All this torments her internally and she starts craving for beauty. She always learned from the society that the blue eyes, blond hair and fair complexion is the standard of beauty and that's why she wants blue eyes. Thomas March defines this: "Pecola's mother is a primary source, in addition to Shirley Temple milk mugs and the startling beauty of pretty girls like Maureen Peal, of the ideology of beauty that torments Pecola." (42)5. She thinks that everybody will love her if she becomes beautiful; and this leads a little girl to the destruction of her mental health.

Apart from racial and domestic violence, there are a number of incidents of physical violence with little innocent girls. First of all, Pecola is physically harassed by her own father. Secondly Frieda is in the same way assaulted by Mr. Henry and then there is a character named Sophead Church who insults and humiliates physically the young girls. The irony lies in the fact that Sophead Church is a self-proclaiming religious man who can fulfil the unfulfilled dreams of man and Pecola appeals to him for blue eyes. On this Thomas March comments: "Pecola's wish for eyes is granted by a reluctant prophet only when he sees the opportunity to use Pecola to get rid of his landlady's dog. It is an exchange of expedience, on both parts. And she does not live happily ever after; she gives birth to her father's child." (43)

As mentioned above, child abuse also takes place in the novel frequently. Pecola, the central figure of the novel faces it many a times. In an incident an American white boy calls Pecola to his house just for his amusement and locks her with the cat in a room and kills the cat. His mother comes and rebukes Pecola and abuses her. She says: "Get out... You nasty little black bitch, Get out of my house" (TBE72). This incident of the novel consists of two types of violence. First, she shows racial superiority by calling Pecola black and second, she abuses the little innocent girl. All the mistakes are committed by that white boy. For being a black and poor girl she is blamed for mishap at the house of the white American. This incident proves the condemnation of the blacks and the poor.

Every chapter and each character is somehow connected to Pecola in the novel. She is the actual victim of emotional violence and her emotional insecurity takes her steps towards her ruin. As he omniscient narrator of the novel, Claudia clarifies: "A little black girl yearns for the blue eyes of a little white girl, and the terror at the heart of her yearning is exceeded only by the evil of fulfilment" (TBE162). At the end of the novel she says she has got the bluest eyes but everyone knows except Pecola that her wish cannot be achieved.

To conclude, the most dominating factor of this classic on violence is not a surface level work but sprouts suffocation and consequential self-inflicts hopelessness because of surroundings.

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