Objectification of African American Women in the Bluest Eye

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Abstract

During the 1940s and 50s slavery and racial discrimination defined the lives of African Americans, also known as Afro-Americans or Black Americans. In the name of superiority in beauty and intelligence, the White Americans attempted to suppress the upsurge of resistance of the Afro-Americans against inequality and oppression. Afro-American women were victims of double oppression. They suffered both at the hands of their men and the Whites. Being a woman, they faced the oppression of race and gender. The Afro-American men hurt by the crushing domination of the Whites, gained a false sense of authority and power in domestic violence. Objectification of Afro-American women added to the misery. In certain cases they were treated as mere objects and identified solely on the basis of their appearance. For instance, the United States Census Bureau identifies African Americans as an ethnic group of Black Americans with partial or total ancestry from any of the Black racial groups of Africa. The term basically refer to the descendants of enslaved Africans in the Unites States of America.

This paper attempts to review the various levels of Objectification in Toni Morrison's The Bluest Eye. Sexual-objectification and self-objectification are pervasive in the mindsets of the characters in the novel. Also, theorists and philosophers Martha Nussbaum and Rae Langton's ideas on Objectification can be discerned in the work. The Afro-American women are blinded by the Whites’ notions of beauty and the general myth of ideal beauty after which they pursue. This is the cause for their deep-
rooted subjection to self-objectification. The central aim of this paper is to unravel how deeply have the stereotypical standards of beauty seeped into the psyche of the Afro-American women and the forms of Objectifications that cause it and also arise out of it.

**Key Words:** self-objectification, sexual-objectification, Blacks, Whites, racial discrimination.
1. **Toni Morrison and the Bluest Eye**

The Afro-Americans migrated to the land of White supremacy during the early 1900s, where they were subjected to all sorts of atrocities, subjugation and racial discrimination. The oppression and denial of equality and basic human rights were the corollary of the inferiority that sprouted from within them. Toni Morrison’s Nobel Prize winning *The Bluest Eye* (1993), portrays the lives of such Afro-Americans. The novel revolves around Pecola, an eleven year old Afro-American girl who lives yearning to possess the so-called ideal White beauty, which is symbolized by her desire to attain the bluest eye. The notion of Objectification lies starkly in the novel.

Born on 18 February, 1931 in Lorain, Ohio, USA, Toni Morrison grew to become one of the best African American novelists. She is a writer noted particularly for her depiction of the experiences of the Black females. She was born into a family that cherished love and appreciation for Black traditional culture. During her childhood days storytelling that consisted of folktales and traditional songs were a formative part. For BA Morrison attended Howard University and for MA she attended Cornell University. She was a faculty member of various universities across USA after her studies.

*The Bluest Eye* is Morrison’s first novel dealing with an adolescent girl’s (Pecola) inferiority complex as she is consistently reminded by the society that she is ugly. The adjective ‘ugly’ is used by the society, especially the Whites, for they perceive Pecola’s features to be harsh and also due to her dark skin. The reduction of a person into their body or body parts and appearance is noticeable here.

A few other novels by Morrison are *Sula, Song of Solomon, Beloved, Jazz, God Help the Child*, etc. *Beloved* won her the American Book Award and the Pulitzer Prize in 1988. And in 1993 she received the greatest hour of all, the Nobel Prize in Literature and thus becoming the first African-American to receive the same. Black-American experience forms the crux of her novels. Her characters struggle to sustain themselves and their culture in an unjust society of White hegemony. She uses fantasy and poetic style interwoven by mythic elements, which gives her texts great texture and strength.

*The Bluest Eye* was written by Morrison in 1970. The novel is set during 1941 and revolves around Pecola. She grows up in Lorain, Ohio in the years succeeding the Great Depression. The work is narrated from two points of view. The narration switches from the perspectives of the character Claudia MacTeer, the daughter of Pecola’s foster parents and a third person narrator who narrates in the first person. During the initial period following the publication of the novel there were attempts to ban it from schools and libraries due to the discussion of controversial and sensitive topics in the novel like child molestation, racism and incest.
2. Theory of Objectification

Treatment of a person or animal as a thing is called objectification in the field of social philosophy. Hence it can be categorized under dehumanization, the act of repudiating the humanity of fellow human beings, be it from any caste, creed or race. Sexual- objectification and self-objectification are the frequently seen and discussed categories of objectifications. Martha Nussbaum, American philosopher and the current Ernst Freund Distinguished Service Professor of Law and Ethics at the University of Chicago, identifies seven properties which if applied to a person, the person can be said to be objectified: instrumentality, denial of autonomy, inertness, fungibility, violability, ownership and denial of subjectivity. Rae Langton, Australian and British professor of philosophy in her work *Sexual Solipsism: Philosophical Essays on Pornography and Objectification* adds three more properties to Nussbaum’s list: reduction to body, reduction to appearance and silencing. Langton’s list is more applicable to the theoretical analysis of *The Bluest Eye*, though the first list is also relevant and detectable.

3. Analysis

In *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison has worked to expound how the beauty myth associated with a race has impinged the lives of her characters. The objectification of female characters is an underlying serious issue in *The Bluest Eye*. The protagonist herself is a victim of such encounters who is being mentally and sexually exploited by various agents in various stages of her life.

Pecola, the protagonist is an eleven year old Black girl who aspires of relishing a pair of blue eyes instead of her innate brown eyes. She wants to be fair and beautiful. *The Bluest Eye* trails her unattainable wishes and her subsequent journey through the atrocious and violent circumstances she had to grapple with before ending up in a maze of madness. Her tormented subjectivity is generated by the violent gaze of both the Afro-American men and the Whites. This eventually leads to the internalization of her trauma, ending up as a mere object and a victim of sexual violence and rape. Mrs. Breedlove (Pecola’s mother) is obsessed with Jean Harlow, American film actress and the sex symbol of the 1930s. She portrays herself as one of the victims of male brutality. Claudia MacTeer, Pecola’s friend, illustrated as a rebel, constantly makes an effort to question the relevance of idealized beauty, whereas her own sister, Frieda MacTeer, and Pecola are carried away by the glamour of Shirley Temple, Shirley Temple, who was an American singer, actress, dancer, diplomat, businesswoman and Hollywood's number one box-office draw as a child artist from 1935-38.

Most female characters in the novel are obsessed with the concept of looking beautiful and fair. They have internalized this thought and are facilitating means by themselves to oppress and subjugate. ‘Reduction to appearance – the
treatment of a person primarily in terms of how they look, or how they appear to
the senses’ is one aspect of Objectification which gets highlighted at different
situations pertaining to different female characters in the fiction. Just like
Claudia, the three prostitutes China, Poland and Miss Marie reveal their derision
for the society, by abusing and cheating men, through their occupation. The
character named Geraldine, an Afro-American woman, is unable to accept her
lineage and tries to merge in with the mannerisms of the Whites. But Rosemary
Villanucci, a White woman, and Maureen Peal, a rich Black girl, have a sense
of superiority which prompts them to suppress their inferiors. Keeping aside the
male characters, other superior female characters use blackness to suppress and
objectify their fellow female characters.

Pecola’s father Mr. Cholly Breedlove, as he was unable to succumb to his life,
burns down his own house and brutally rapes his own daughter. Whereas White
characters like – Soaphead and Mr. Henry persuade Black girls to fulfill their
sexual desires. But characters like Louis Junior and Mr. Yacobowski ill-treat
Blacks, as though these people are not worth human consideration. Sexual
objectification is a way they find to satisfy their inner insecurities and
vulnerabilities. They don’t even realize their responsibilities as a father or a
priest but ultimately they surrender to their brutal inner animosities.

The emotionally complex mind of Pecola yearns for two essential requirements
which are a simple and a peaceful life that has the ability to rescue her from
various horrendous objectifications. She wants to learn how to persuade people
to love her and also the ways to escape from the vicinity when her parents
fought brutally. Despite these wishes, she is often the victim of other’s wrath
and violence. She is used merely as an instrument to fulfill their desires.
‘Instrumentality – treating the person as a tool for another’s purposes’ is another
form of Objectification.

Naomi Wolf, in her international best seller The Beauty Myth—How Images of
Beauty are Used Against Women (1991), attempts to theorize how the myth has
worked against women in domains like— work, culture, religion, sex, and
violence.

“The beauty myth is not about women at all. It is about men’s institutions and
institutional power.” (Wolf 5)

Though Mrs. Breedlove’s longing to look beautiful remains unfulfilled, her
association with a White Fisher family provides her with employment,
satisfaction, and happiness which is otherwise denied to a Black woman living
on the land of the Whites. Unlike Cholly, Pecola’s father, Mrs. Breedlove works
hard and earns money to make both ends meet. They gratify their oppression by
diverting their minds to other domains especially in the work place.

The three prostitutes China, Poland and Miss Marie, bring out their
community’s deeply subsided sense of revolt, in order to attain freedom in
choosing their profession. They take advantage of men’s lust by abusing, cheating and expressing their hatred towards a community that does not treat them equally.

The Dick and Jane primer employed in the opening lines of the novel projects the White sense of superiority. This unfortunately compels the Blacks to believe that they are inferior, from their schooldays itself. The family name of the protagonist – ‘Breedlove’ symbolizes the lack of affection, love and care among the members. This is the reason why Pecola, Frieda and Mrs. Breedlove are in a constant quest to attain the so-called ideals of beauty. Geraldine, following White mannerisms and culture, forgets her own Black lineage. She insults Pecola by calling her, “a nasty little bitch”. ‘Reduction to appearance – the treatment of a person primarily in terms of how they look, or how they appear to the senses’ is another form of objectification which envelops the lives of every female character in the novel.

The doubly marginalized Black female characters in Morrison’s novel regret their traumatic lives in which they are deprived of equality and social acceptance. Women’s sexuality is suppressed by religious beliefs in some instances. Soaphead, a spiritual preacher and a member of the White race, uses his powers sanctioned by the church to persuade little Black girls to fulfill his sexual desires. Male anger and female guilt over women’s access to power causes the upsurge in violent sexual imageries. Toni Morrison portrays this violent sexual imagery, through sexual assaults on her characters. Cholly, Pecola’s father, is caught having sex with a girl named Darlene, at a very young age, by two White men. They force him to continue, while they relish watching. Cholly’s hatred diverts to Darlene, instead of the White men. This along with many other humiliations moulds Cholly into a cruel and violent man. This becomes a reason to subjugate his wife and objectify his daughter.

Mrs. Breedlove is the major victim of Cholly’s drunken sexual abuse and violence. She explains, “Most times he’s thrashing away inside me before I’m woke, and through when I am. The rest of the time I can’t even be next to his stinking drunk self.” (Morrison 129)

Pecola is impregnated by her father, Cholly. The incestuous relation is one of the turning points in Pecola’s life and that of the narrative. Though the society blames the culprit, they scapegoat the victim as well. But the most atrocious of all is the reaction of her mother; Mrs. Breedlove beat Pecola, almost to death, on hearing the news. The form of objectification called ‘Reduction to body – the treatment of a person as identified with their body, or body parts’ can be viewed here as well. Throughout the novel, female characters are mainly considered as instruments to satisfy male fantasies and desires.

“Child sexual abuse, of course, links sex to force very early in a quarter to a third of the female population.” (Wolf 160).
In a survey conducted by Kinsey in 1953, a quarter of the women he surveyed had survived rape or attempted rape by adult men when they were children. Oppression faced in childhood crushes the self-esteem of a person, at an early age. Edna St. Vincent Millay’s words, “Childhood is the kingdom where nobody dies” is inapplicable to the lives of children like Pecola.

The three local whores, China, Poland and Miss Marie scorn the notions and standards of beauty set by the society. They regard these notions as a myth. Their occupation is an outlet of their disgust and hatred for the society, especially the men, obsessed with the White superiority in all aspects, especially beauty.

Violence once began, escalates, prove studies of abusers. Cholly is a violent and impulsive fellow, who is also vulnerable, having suffered a great deal, in his early life. The bitter brawls between Cholly and Mrs. Breedlove are survival tactics for each other. Mrs. Breedlove requires it to shape her otherwise mundane life, and for Cholly it is an outlet of his abhorrence for women, induced in him, having been abandoned in a junk heap, and humiliations faced from the White men and his father. “……as though some mysterious all-knowing master had said, “You are ugly people.” ………and they took the ugliness in their hands, threw it as a mantle over them, and went about the world with it.”(Morrison 37). Morrison suggests that, the Breedloves live in the storefront, not because they are poor and ugly, but because of their own conviction that, they are ugly. It was as if, the masters—referring to the Whites—had told them that they were ugly, and they blindly believed it.

Violence is prevalent in *The Bluest Eye*, when Maureen, a young girl, eve-teases Pecola, saying, “I am cute! And you ugly! Black and ugly black e mos. I am cute!” (Morrison 3). In this context Noami Wolf’s words, “Unfortunately, the beauty backlash is spread and reinforced by the cycles of self hatred provoked in women” (Wolf 73), is apt. Sexual violence and Objectification reigns throughout the novel through the characters Cholly, at his wife and daughter, Soaphead, as he uses Black girls to fulfill his sexual desires, and the three whores, as their prostitution is their expression of defiance and hatred for societal norms of beauty and superiority. All black characters in the fiction are used as objects for satisfying others’ frustrations and inner turmoil in many ways especially the women characters. All these clearly assert the concept of objectification theory reflected in the lives of several characters and its significance with respect to the text.

4. Conclusion

Cosmetic surgery has been one of the highly practiced medical specialties from the twentieth century. Atleast eighty-seven percentage of American women had undergone cosmetic surgery by 1988. A large number of such surgeries were undergone for the sake of the so-called beautification. Pain and objectification were inflicted upon people from the beginning of history. Naomi Wolf says,
Maybe the less pain women inflict on our bodies, the more beautiful our bodies will look to us. Perhaps we will forget to elicit admiration from strangers, and find we don’t miss it; perhaps we will await our older faces with anticipation, and be unable to see our bodies as a mass of imperfections, since there is nothing on us that is not precious. Maybe we won’t want to be the ‘after’ anymore. (Wolf 291)

Objectification of the most ruthless and brutal kind of the Afro-Americans led to their internalization that they are ugly. Their conviction that they are ugly inadvertently led to their conclusion that they are repulsive and repugnant. This is a classic example of self-objectification. The marginalization and double oppression of the Afro-American women led to their sexual-objectification by the society and Afro-American men as well. Colourism thus tags along Objectification in The Bluest Eye. Instead of reprimanding the hegemony of the White Americans, the Afro-Americans succumbed to the hegemony silently. Thus Langton’s concept of ‘silencing’ as a property of Objectification is evident here.

The paper does not intend to objectify Americans by segregating them as Whites and Blacks, but simply follows the official terminologies used by the United States Census Bureau. Also the paper does not intend at deprecating the appearance of Afro-Americans by calling them Blacks, instead prefers to magnify the beauty of the dark skin by advocating the adage that “beauty lies in the eye of the beholder.”

Works Cited