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ORIENTALISM AND THE SELF-EFFACEMENT OF PECOLA BREEDLOVE IN TONI MORRISON'S *THE BLUEST EYE*

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In this paper I examine and explicate how dominant White discourse like Orientalism occludes African Americans. It is the source of Pecola Breedlove's self-effacement in Morrison's first novel, *The Bluest Eye*. In fact, in this novel Morrison charts the teleological furtherance of hegemonic discursive ideas and stereotypes and tries to subvert those notions through a brilliant foray into the psyche of the main characters, the Breedloves, especially their daughter Pecola. The Breedloves' quotidian experiences illustrate how Orientalist ideas can percolate deep into the minds of the subjects who are constantly 'othered' at various levels: socially, politically and ontologically. The colonization of the minds of the Breedloves provides an important evidence for the bad effects of Orientalism.

Keywords: Orientalism,Self-Effacement,Pecola Breedlove,Toni Morrison's, *The Bluest Eye*

The negation of the community's spirituality and its core values, such as love, bonding, rootedness, etc., lead to the complete failure of the Breedloves to nurture and protect each other. With no other anchor to save them, they are forced to accept the idealized Western concepts of family, beauty and social status. The result is the tragic downfall of each of the members of the Breedlove family.

Orientalism and the Self-effacement of Pecola Breedlove in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*

In his path breaking book *Orientalism* (1978), Edward Said explicates the Hegemonic Eurocentric discourse which has been successful in creating and maintaining teleological binary distinctions like the Orient/ Occident, West/East, Black/White, Self/Other etcetera. He calls it Orientalism which is "a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between the "the Orient" and (most of the time) "the Occident"" (*Orientalism* 2). In the last section of the third chapter, he describes how America has incorporated the orientalist notions and ideas for its own benefits after the World War II (Ibid 284-328). As he is concerned mainly with the problem of the

Orient [especially the Muslim world] he does not discuss about the orientalist attitudes that are manifested in the U.S. racism against the African Americans.

A perusal of Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* makes us aware of such hegemonic practices that were successful in occluding, devaluing and subjugating the world view and experiences of the black community in America in general and specifically in Lorain, Ohio, Morrison's place of birth, in the 1940s. Morrison charts the effects of such discourse on the psyche of a young black girl named Pecola Breedlove whose self-effacement is mainly the result of such orientalist attitudes. The Breedloves' quotidian experiences illustrate how these ideas can percolate deep into the minds of the subjects who are constantly 'othered' at various levels: ontologically, socially and politically. The colonization of the minds of the Breedloves provides an important evidence for the bad effects of Orientalism. The negation of their community's spirituality and its core values, such as love, bonding and rootedness lead to the complete failure of the Breedloves to nurture and protect each other. With no other anchor to save them, they are forced to accept the idealized Western concepts of family, beauty and social status. The result is the tragic downfall of the members of the Breedlove family through self-effacement.

The basic premise of the novel is the dominating ideology of white supremacy that is furthered through the cultural assertions of superiority by making the blacks feel inferior. Morrison succinctly contextualizes the history of the blacks in America through the framework of slavery, World Wars, depression, Civil Rights movement, Black art movement and capitalism. She picks up the standardized notion of a happy nuclear family with two kids, a stable economic background and affectionate family that are incorporated in the children's textbooks through the Dick and Jane primer. As the novelist puts it, the ideal world of the primer forms a part of the "master narrative" of the white supremacy (In Bill Moyers 262). Lovalerie King and Lynn Orilla Scott also provide important insights about the Dick and Jane primer and opine that the idea of happy nuclear family was "promulgated in the national media" of U.S. as "an antidote" to the hardships of the Great Depression and the instabilities of World War II. (97-98)

Morrison succeeds in subverting the idealized white standards of beauty, love and family through a remarkable foray into the psyche of her characters. The deconstruction of the white standards is quite evident in the novel as it completely negates them through the Breedloves' tale of rejection, helplessness and tragic downfall. The novel opens with the three different versions of the Dick and Jane textbook primer. The first one is grammatically correct with all punctuation marks, the second one has no commas and the third one is structured with sentences with no punctuation marks and periods. Most critics are of the opinion that the three versions depict the discursively idealized white family, the Mac Teer family and the Breedlove family respectively. Raymond Hedin points out to this narrative technique and opines that, "The seven central elements of Jane's world-house, family, cat, mother, father, dog and friend- become, in turn plot elements, but only after they are inverted to fit the realities of Pecola's world" (36). Further, the novel is divided into seasonal sections that are also reversed to depict the lives of the characters- autumn, winter, spring and summer.

Claudia Mac Teer, the nine year old narrator, begins to tell the tale of Pecola with the climax of the latter's molestation by her father and her descent into madness after the baby's death. She compares the "unyielding" earth which fails to nurture the marigold seeds with Pecola's rape and

consequent abortion (*The Bluest Eye* 5) [*TBE* henceforth]. The predicament of the black people in Lorain, Ohio is summed up brilliantly thus- “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, or to creep singly up into the major folds of the garment”. This is mainly due to the migration of many black people after the Great Depression from the South to the northern parts of the United States in search of better opportunities. It symbolizes their loss of rich cultural heritage and their forced but inevitable contagion and confrontation of the white world and implies a transition in their social class. Then it is quite natural that the fear of being bankrupt or “outdoors” (*TBE* 11) is ingrained in the working class blacks mainly due to the discourse of capitalism prevalent in the industrialized Lorain. We also are told that Cholly had failed to live up to the white standards and had put his family “outdoors” (Ibid12). Claudia also introduces the cultural supremacy and stereotypical notions furthered by the whites in their idealization of the white baby dolls with blue eyes as the ultimate standard of beauty and acceptance for the blacks in the white world. Pecola’s yearning for the blue eyes is the sole reason for her suffering in the novel.

After providing a thematic background to the novel, Morrison sets out to describe the reasons for the downfall of the Breedlove family. One cannot miss the irony in naming the family which fails to generate any sort of love and care as ‘Breedlove’. What breeds there is self-loathing and negation of their black self. The section begins with the one of the phrases of the Dick and Jane primer “HERE IS THE HOUSE. . .” and gives the bleak picture of Pecola’s family in Lorain and interestingly it omits the part of the original primer where it says that the family members are ‘happy’ (24). The idealized reality of the white family of text book is criticized in the next section that uses another element in the primer – the ‘family’ through the total negation of such possibility in the lives of the Breedloves, who, under the burden of white orientalism and loss of their cultural heritage, finally disintegrate and perish. The description of their house, “an abandoned store” (28) tells us about their horrid living conditions and their poverty. Nothing in their house invokes good feelings or memories. They seem to have got accustomed to the pale surrounding and live without hope or happiness. What is more important is their internalization of the white stereotype of black ugliness:

You looked at them and wondered why they were so ugly; you looked closely and could not find the source. Then you realized that it came from their *conviction*. . . The white master had said, “*You are ugly people*”. They had looked about themselves and saw nothing to contradict the statement; saw, in fact, *support for it leaning at them from every billboard, every movie, every glance*. (Ibid) (Italics mine)

The above quoted lines are very crucial in understanding the causes for the degeneration of the Breedloves. Under the oppression of the white “master” they are faced to accept the negative categorization of being ugly while other discursive tools cement their “conviction” of being inferior to the whites. The Breedloves, unable to assert their black identity due to rootlessness, poverty and social status are forced to accept the white standards of living and eventually sacrifice their identity at the altar of Orientalism.

Morrison makes Pauline Breedlove the scapegoat of movies and both Cholly and Pecola the victims of the oriental gaze, which will be explained later. These lines sum up the orientalist attitudes and hegemonic furtherance of racial stereotypes to degrade and suppress the natives. The constant discursive formulations of white superiority and the black inferiority are done at the cost of

conscious negation and occlusion of the spiritual, ontological and epistemological realities of the blacks. This supports the Saidian position about how Orientalism imbues certain negative characteristics in the minds of the colonized people for its own furtherance and efficacy.

In a society bedecked with capitalist and racist values, the Breedloves cannot fit due to their poverty and their race. Working at a steel plant Cholly fails to provide economic security to the family and Pauline begins quarreling with him frequently which makes him take turn to alcohol to escape. The children have to face the brunt of this situation- Sammy tries to run away almost for “twenty seven times” (32) and Pecola wishes fervently to “disappear” (33). This section also informs us about how Pecola feels unloved at home due to her parents’ frequent quarrels and hated at school by her classmates and teachers for her ugliness. Yearning for the story book blue eyes, “Each night, without fail, she prayed for blue eyes” (35). In her innocent imagination, she thinks that by eating Mary Jane candies she would turn into a white skinned, blue eyed beautiful kid that is loved by all (38). It is here that she experiences the rejection in Mr. Yacobowski, the candy store owner’s refusal to acknowledge her because he cannot validate a black girl mainly due to his firm belief in the inferiority of the blacks. Pecola becomes acutely aware of her worthlessness in the white world and the reiteration of the image of dandelions as ugly (35, 37) is the novelist’s way to show how black people were convinced of being ugly and useless as the weeds.

Physical and psychical oppression on Pecola’s mind are further described in the ‘winter’ section. She is again rejected by a light skinned black girl named Maureen Peal, whose actions prove the intra-racial prejudices that are the result of white hegemony. Maureen Peal imitates the white girls in her dress and manners just because she can afford it. She is accepted and revered by her teachers and classmates alike. Her feeling of superiority stems from the fact of her class background and her imitation of the white. By suggestion, Morrison here wants to point out that conformity to the white standards of either beauty or living standards were some of the several rites of passage for some blacks. But as she has already clarified, neither the Mac Teers nor the Breedloves can do so because of their poor class background. Their vulnerability to fall prey for extremities is thus hinted at and Pecola chooses to take that dangerous leap towards getting the ‘bluest eyes’ at the cost of her self- effacement to get acceptance in both the white and black worlds.

The following section is aptly titled “SEETHECAT. . .” (*TBE* 63) where Pecola encounters physical oppression at Geraldine’s home by her son Louis Junior and her search for the blue eyes is fortified by the black cat’s eyes. Geraldine and her son epitomize the rich perverted blacks who worship whiteness consciously to be accepted in the society. We are made to know that she has modeled her home upon the white standards – “red-and-gold Bible”, “lace doilies”, “potted plants”, “color picture of Jesus Christ” and a cat (69-70). What is more striking is her attempt to hide her son’s blackness – she makes him dress formally like the white kids and gets his hair cut so close to the scalp to avoid being recognized as a negro. She also makes him feel terribly lonely by such discipline and thwarts his wish to play with fellow black kids. Louis Junior brings Pecola to his home from the playground and humiliates her by force and throws the black cat in her face and it falls down and gets badly hurt. Pecola picks it up and is enchanted by “The blue eyes in the black face” of the cat. (70).

In her desperation Pecola just wants the blue eyes like the black cat to be acceptable and lovable for her parents, classmates, teachers and the dominant white American society at large.

Geraldine comes in, looks at her wailing cat [which is dearer to her than her husband and son] and at the ugly black, poor girl who reminds of her own blackness and says to Pecola, "Get out"... "You nasty little black bitch. Get out of my house" (72). What is of relevance in all these experiences of Pecola is the fact that she is being 'looked at' and judged from a racist/Orientalist perspective- both by the blacks and the whites. Jean Paul Sartre in his *Being and Nothingness* brilliantly explains how the formulations of self and other happen through the look or gaze. It needs to be quoted at length to explicate the effects of the orientalist gaze on its subjects. Sartre quips:

One way that I acknowledge the existence of the 'Other' is the le-regard or the 'Look' which means the 'Look' of the Other defines me, puts me in the context of his vision, and grants me an identity, the 'Look' makes me aware of 'my self' as perceived by the 'Other'. I become aware of the fact that to the other I am an 'object', I am a 'thing'. It serves as a vehicle through which I am judged and labeled. The look threatens by ignoring my free subjectivity. . . .
[As quoted in Wilfred D. Samuels, et al. 18]

Pauline's inability to hold fast to her black identity is again jeopardized by the white hegemonic culture- as described in the "Spring" section through a depiction of Breedloves' past. It is also in this section that Morrison shows us the reasons for Cholly and Pauline's inability to care and love their kids. Her parents, Ada and Fowler Williams move from Alabama to Kentucky at the beginning of the World War I, which symbolizes their loss of cultural heritage and roots. Her adoption of white value system is hinted by the novelist when we come to know that Ada Williams worked at a white minister's home as a servant (87). Later when Pauline falls in love with Cholly, they move further north to Ohio thus completely losing touch with their black heritage. The overpowering presence of whites, the lack of bonding and communal feeling make her depend on Cholly. But he does not like it and avoids her. She gets a job as a domestic and works outside the home to alleviate their poverty and craves for more money-which becomes the reason for frequent quarrels (89-92).To kill the loneliness she begins visiting the movie theatres which imbibe in her concepts like "romantic love" and "physical beauty" and the cultural ethos of the white world like-responsible husband, comfortable home, cleanliness, good/evil, white/black etcetera. She inherits these notions and develops "self-contempt" and feels insecure of being a black woman married to an alcoholic husband (95-96). And during the birth of Pecola, these insecurities come to fruition as she regards her daughter as "ugly" (98). George Yancy argues that, "Caught within a world of filmic hyper-reality, Pauline . . . hides from her blackness. She has also become a prisoner of whiteness. . ." (Yancy 312)

Pauline wants to follow Christian values of suffering, sacrifice and goodness along with the manners of white women to the core. She joins the church, becomes a member of a ladies club thinking herself as the suffering Christ. This is how certain Orientalistic binaries work on the psyche of the suppressed. They create an ontological despair and make the victim accept the categorically superior element in the binary. She gets a permanent job at the white Fisher home and plays the "ideal servant" to the masters (*TBE* 98). She is also called "Polly" a nick name intended only to the whites by the child at Fishers' house (99). Her complete rejection of her black identity and false transformation is acutely evident in beating of Pecola for spilling the pie and consoling the white child instead. Pecola is rejected by her mother who fuels her craving for acceptance even more through possessing the blue eyes.

Morrison continues her deconstruction of the idealized white culture through the story of Cholly Breedlove- whose story is fraught with racial discrimination, rejection and despair. He is completely antithetical to the ideal father of the Dick and Jane primer who is modeled after the “bad nigger” image that was perpetuated in the dominant discourse of the times (Bryant 181). He is left to the care of his Aunt Jimmy, never feels secure at home and school as he quits it after six years and takes to working at a grain store (*TBE* 104). It is interesting here to note that in his boyish imagination, he thinks of God as having “little blue eyes” (Ibid 105). Abandoned by his mother at birth, rejected by his supposed father, Cholly's insecurity is cemented during the episode in which his love-making to Darlene on a fateful evening is turned into a spectacle by the white hunters. The Oriental gaze of the hunters is evident their use of flashlights and guns which symbolize power and hegemony. He feels extremely humiliated as he is “forced to turn his spontaneous copulation into performance before the . . . white hunters” (Davis 34). This experience leaves him shattered and he cannot come to terms with this racial discrimination and helplessness.

Being rejected by his parents and humiliated by the masters he never learns how to provide security and love to his wife and family as he fails to “comprehend” the nuances of relationships (*TBE* 126). His sense of failure and worthlessness are reiterated by the capitalist society of Lorain- which force him into drinking. It is in such a state that he commits the horrendous act of raping his daughter Pecola, unable to show his love for her. Morrison explains, “I want here, to talk about how painful it is and what the painful consequences are of distortion of love that isn't fructified, is held in, not expressed” (In Bakerman 558). This episode also draws a finale to Pecola's rejection by the society, friends and her own parents which force her to take the dangerous yet desperate decision to get the blue eyes to be acceptable.

So Pecola comes to the doorsteps of Soaphead Church, a quack who has imbibed the white culture to the hilt. Being unable to succeed in the white dominated society, he takes up the profession of curing ailments through spiritual healing by targeting young black girls and women. Pecola begs the impostor for the impossible blue eyes which she has been yearning for so long (*TBE* 138). He also, in his insecurity like Cholly, feels a “surge of love” for the dejected young girl and falsely agrees to pray for her blue eyes (Ibid). He makes her poison his land lady's old dog and tells that she will get her wish fulfilled. She in her desperation believes it as true and goes mad- thus ending her search in complete negation and self- effacement. The final section of the novel describes her schizophrenic talk with an imaginary friend wherein she recounts her rape and the final attainment of blue eyes [at the cost of the loss of her selfhood] and as Claudia feels “the horror at the heart of her yearning is exceeded by the evil of fulfillment”. (162)

Thus we see how Toni Morrison succeeds in depicting the lives of blacks under the white orientalist cultural hegemony which negates and thwarts their world view. The oriental discourse's working is finely described in the novel through the charting of its cultural supremacy, stereotypical thinking, and its racial othering process through the ‘Look’ or gaze that makes the blacks feel inferior. The tale of Pecola's self-effacement and “unbeing” as the novelist opines (Afterword 171) remains as one of the most poignant tales which deal with the horrible effects of discourses like Orientalism.

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