

THE FEMALE CONDITION IN MORRISON'S *THE BLUEST EYE*: FROM CHILDHOOD TO ADULTHOOD

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ABSTRACT- The novel *The bluest eye* (1970) written by the Afro-American novelist Toni Morrison (1931-) is a portrayal of black families in the first half of the XX in the United States. Issues involving the female roles and condition of women and the influence they suffer from the white ones are decisive to the path the black women take in life. They are excluded from a universe of love and understanding where only madness and silence are present. It is in this world that Pecola - the main character, a child - deals with the figure of the man who violates her and condemns her to madness. It is this man who has voice in the novel, while the black women are locked in submission and exclusion.

KEY-WORDS- Black women, condition, place, madness.

Feminist critics, like Seldon (1993) have said that "black feminists have long been concerned with problems of identity, in which race and sexuality are interlocking systems of oppression" (p. 231). Another important feature is the fact that they use motifs of interlocking racist, where sex and the social class are shown as ways of oppression. Black feminist portray black women as complex selves, showing their journeys from the condition of victims to the realization of personal autonomy or even creativity, besides family and community personal relationships.

For the American people, radical Protestantism, Constitutional democracy, and industrial capitalism are the white American trinity of values. In contrast, black American values emanate from a cyclical, Judeo-Christian vision of history and of African-Americans as disinherited, colonized people, a vision their resilience of spirit and pursuit of social justice...an extraordinary faith in the redemptive power of suffering and patience (GUERIN, 1992. p.210).

These values, themes, forms and character are present in the African-American novel, especially because their writers have the consciousness of being black and female in a white male society, sharing and escaping from their own interiority.

Toni Morrison (1931-) as a black woman writer, shows how the standards of the mainstream culture cause suffering and fracture in the lives of her black female characters, especially in *The bluest eye* (1970), where those standards cannot be reached, once they are alien to black people. The racism inherent in both ideals destroys those who struggle to reach them, causing the inner destruction; sometimes this suffering leads to madness.

In *The bluest eye*, black women are portrayed in relation to the influence they suffer from the white ones and from society in their search for their own selves. These black women are excluded from a universe of love and tenderness where the figure of man is a key element for their imprisonment in madness, silence, sexual oppression and lack of hope. Silent, desperate, and isolated, these women cannot escape a life of unfulfilled desires. The novel has some of the recurring points that would become decisive in all Morrison's following works. According to Davis (1999) her characters

exist in a world defined by its blackness and by the surrounding white society that both violates and denies it. The destructive effect of the white society can take the form of outright physical violence, but oppression in Morrison's world is more often psychic violence. She rarely depicts white characters, for the brutality here isles a single act than the systematic denial of the reality of black lives (p. 07).

The characters - especially children - suffer the prejudice of the white ruling class and also feel the uncomfortable feeling of invisibility imposed upon the black people reducing them to the condition of failures and outsiders so that they lose the sense of respect for themselves and for their own color, since they can never satisfy neither society nor themselves.

In spite of *The bluest eye* being focused on black women and their family, the white women have a strong and surprising role in the novel, since their condition in society influences the behavior of the black ones once they are representative of the ruling class and surprisingly are taken as models. The first recurring role of white women is that of the movie star, and linked to it that of the child movie star. Although these women are not characters in the novel, they affect the black ones due to the mass circulation of their condition and role in society. In the novel, children are always in disadvantage in relation to adults. When Mr. Henry comes to live in the narrator's house he breaks this paradigm and greets Claudia and her sister Frieda in a friendly way: "Hello, there. You must be Greta Garbo, and you must be Ginger Rogers" (*The bluest eye*, pg. 17). To win the girls he does some magic tricks with some coins and gives them to the girls who at this point are happy and embarrassed by the apparent kindness. His attitude will echo some time later when he wants the girls out of the house so that he can spend time with two prostitutes. The action of giving money reduces the children to the condition of objects that can be bought converge to align their interaction with the prostitutes under the condition of prostitution. Money buys them somehow for a certain period of time, besides, this incident suggests a way of mass circulation of female condition and role which in a negative way affects the attitudes of people with whom they interact.

The role of the movie star woman represents an unattainable ideal of beauty since it is fabricated and not totally real if compared to the daily life of the black women. It is this ideal the black women in the novel seek, like Mrs. Breedlove did for a while. In order to escape from reality she develops an obsession for the movies and begins to reject her appearance as a black woman by wearing make up for white women, and straightening her hair. Her standards of female beauty, condition and role become the ones broadcasted by the cinema. The novel also documents the effects of images of femininity, for even Mrs. Breedlove's sexual pleasure depends entirely on the ability to feel a power that comes from a sense of herself as desirable. In the early days of her marriage when she had pleasant moments of intimacy with her husband, the words she uses to describe those moments are deeply connected to the ideas spread by the wide screen: "When he does [has an orgasm], I feel a power. I be strong, I be pretty, I be young" (*The bluest eye*, p. 101). Thus, she feels powerful only when submerged in flesh mainly because that was the kind of physical love she learned from the movies, where sex and power elevate women to a pedestal Mrs. Breedlove could never reach but in sex.

She also defines strength, beauty and youth solely in the terms she has learned from films, and somehow so does Pecola, her daughter and main character. Their standards become the ones created by mass white society. This interaction of black women with mass culture creates a kind of colonization. Their beauty standards - if any after such a legacy of oppression was left - would not do anymore when compared to the ones of the ruling class which colonizes them especially concerning the loss of identity which represents submission and lack of power. The black women then, start to identify themselves and wish to be like those women who have "got the power," who are beautiful. They want to be accepted and loved like those movie stars. Ironically, the white movie star women are also exploited and reduced to the condition of objects, however, the black women in the novel do not perceive this reduction.

When Mrs. Breedlove was pregnant, she still used to go to the movies, and along with "the idea of romantic love, she was introduced to another - physical beauty. Probably the most destructive idea in the history of human thought. Both originated in envy, thrived in insecurity, and ended in disillusion" (*The bluest eye*, pg. 97). Romantic love and physical beauty are defined by what they exclude and both are destructive. However, Mrs. Breedlove after two pregnancies "was never able, after her education in the movies, to look at a face and not assign it some category in the scale of absolute beauty, and the scale was one she absorbed in full from the silver screen" (*The bluest eye*, pg. 97).

In the book "The American woman" (1958), Dingwall analyses - during the boom of cinema - cinema itself and consequently the presence of women in it and what it represents to the imaginary of women in general, largely composed of housewives. Women like Pecola's mother, who is also a servant in a white family home; that was for a long time the standard job and the most common role and condition of black women in white society. According to the writer, "the world of the moving picture is a fantasy world, a world in which one can escape from the drab reality of everyday life and can oneself take part in the glamorous scenes that are unfolded" (pg. 190). Going to the movies, Mrs. Breedlove escapes from her own self and maybe unconscious image of failure: black working class woman in a white dominating society, poor, illiterate, handicapped, missing some of her front teeth, and whose marriage is a disaster. It is exactly in this period, the Forties, that the movies, according to Dingwall (1958, pg. 191), shows

woman not as the civilized and patient American housewife doing her domestic chores and attending her church and club, but as a wild, wild woman who lives a life of barbaric splendour and sexual joys.

are The issue of physical beauty has a major role in the novel because the black women not sure about their own identity and in parts, physical beauty is the cause of the dark episodes that involve Pecola, for since her birthday her life has become an endless battle between her real appearance and her desire of having blue eyes, which are the ultimate symbols of the hegemonic white beauty. While Pecola, who is a child, is the ultimate symbol of the black appearance, so rejected by white society. In the novel, the reader is constantly reminded of how ugly she is, and that reinforces her desire to be beautiful, loved and accepted. Even her mother, right after her birthday puts her into a frame from which she will never recover: " I used to like to watch her. You know they [babies] makes them greedy sounds. Eyes all soft and wet...But I knowed she was ugly. Head full of pretty hair, but Lord she was ugly" (*The bluest eye*, pg. 100).

Because of being black, poor and considered ugly by everyone she knows, Pecola grows up in humiliation, her only way out is to pursue beauty. She is scorned by the children from the school, by the owner of a market where she buys candies, by everyone, even by her mother whom she calls Mrs. Breedlove. She develops then a kind of obsession for the most loved child in her country, the child actress Shirley Temple. Pecola begins to drink milk several times a day, as a ritual, in a cup decorated with the picture of the young actress, besides, she also begins to eat some candies called Mary Jane, also pictured with the image of a beautiful white girl. This "cannibal" ritual is done everyday as a kind of transference of substance. When Pecola drinks the

white milk in the cup containing the picture of the white actress Shirley Temple, she is drinking the white color; she is denying her own self that besides being rejected by society it is also by herself, so she drinks the features of what is culturally admired. Her real identity of a black girl is denied by herself who is, like her mother, contaminated by the hegemonic white standard of beauty as a result of years of alienation and oppression that wipe out the black culture and its features.

Pecola knows only a life of traumas and rejection which reaches its peak being raped by her father who ironically interprets his attitude as an act of love for his daughter, which contributes to her emotional disintegration. Her rape occurs in her own house which increases its horror, and the writer does not use any metaphor to mask it. Pecola looks for help and tells what happened to her mother who does not believe her or at least tries not to. Silent, isolated and pregnant of her own father, she eventually miscarries and remains childless, and starts to give signs of insanity, especially when she decides to change the color of her own eyes from black to blue. She loses the sense of reality completely after visiting a kind of male urban wizard, for she believes he was able to make her dream come true. Pecola now can identify herself with Shirley Temple and her blue eyes.

Shirley Temple also affects another little black girl but in different way. The only character who expresses her dislike for the young actress is the narrator, Claudia. She, as a child does not understand the reason for hating that beloved girl, but believes that it is because the actress dances with an actor she, Claudia, considers in her fantasy, her uncle, friend, and father. She recognizes the diversity of feelings of herself and of her world only based on white values which are emphasized by repetitive references to white dolls, children and movie stars. As a child, the narrator was fascinated by those images simply because they were appealing to anyone except for herself. She gets the habit of dismembering white dolls, but at the same time feels embarrassed for her lack of feelings in relation to this attitude. Claudia seemed to know that those alien white images denied her reality by forcing her to judge herself based on those strange forms of appearance, experience, condition and role. It is only as an adult that she understands that Shirley Temple cannot be neither loved nor truly imitated because she is only a doll, an image who lacks a real self. However, Morrison shows that Pecola does not notice that, she does not want that condition of black little girl that society has imposed upon herself, but at the same time, has taught herself to hate it. She is a symbol of the victim in a society which reduces black people to the condition of objects at the same time that makes them feel as inferior as objects and where "light-skinned women can feel superior to dark ones, married women to whores, and on and on" (DAVIS, 1999, p. 14).

According to Weever (1991), it is common in Afro-American women writers to show the suffering that the ideals of the mainstream culture can cause in black women, since these

ideals cannot be reached, being existentially alien to black people - for example, the ideal of blond beauty or the ideal enshrined in the cult of true womanhood. The racism inherent in both ideals destroys those who strive to achieve them, and the inner destruction expresses itself in the form of striving for the ideal. The standard of beauty that exalts the blond woman is everywhere in American society. The black woman is thus, by definition, excluded from the beautiful (p. 97).

Both Pecola and her mother have similar understanding related to the female condition and role they believe in, since their understanding comes from the movies, so that despite somehow recognizing themselves as victims of the white society, they face whiteness as good and desired, and the latter one feels more at home as a servant in the house of a white family than in the rundown house she shares with her violent husband, and children. At the house of the white family, Mrs. Breedlove has the false feeling of being loved, for it is only those white people who gave her a nickname, Polly - her first name is Pauline - something she desired all her life. As Byerman (1990, p. 57) states "her work in such homes makes possible a control in her life that is impossible in her own existence as a poor black woman with a family suffering under the manipulations of that very white world she loves." In the house of white people, Morrison shows that Pauline feels surrounded by order, beauty, cleanliness, calmness, like in the movies, while in her own house she sees only chaos, ugliness and dirty things besides lack of peace.

The movie star women sell illusion of a glamorous life, but there is another important group of women in the novel: that of those who sell the illusion of company and affection, the prostitutes. According to Ferguson (1986, p. 07), "in another biological role the woman [sexual object] is the opposite of the all-powerful woman on a pedestal: the sex object is man's prey, the fulfiller of man's sexual needs, a receptacle for his passions." Reducing women to the condition of an object is common in patriarchal societies, and the fact that Morrison portrays the prostitutes as sensitive, funny, somehow naïve and kind is decisive to their relation to Pecola, since they are the only people who do not reject the girl, but treat her in a tender way. This is also an alternative to the standard of victims that haunts this kind of character. They are portrayed as women who do their job without illusions, anger or guilt. They

respect only the innocents, like Pecola, and truly religious women, for they understand that those kind of women have the same honesty and integrity they do have.

Bayerman (1990, p. 60) says that the prostitutes "are also primary folk figures in the novel. Even their names - Poland, China, Maginot Line - suggest larger-than-life characters." Maginot Line entertains Pecola by telling stories about old lovers and about the man she never sold herself to. China spends time with verbal dueling trying to bring Maginot Line out of her sentimentality, while Poland is always singing the 'blues' and ironing clothes. Bayerman (1990, p. 60) states that these folk arts enable them to transcend the private obsessions of other characters. The world may well be a place of misery and doom, but folk wisdom dictates the one adapts to circumstances rather than resignedly move toward evasion or self-destruction. Blues and folk tales imply that trouble is both personal and communal and that life is a matter of adaptation and survival rather than resignation and death.

The prostitutes are portrayed as women who do not have either hope, despair, anxiety, traumas or frustrations. They are presented in opposition to the condition of the movie star, since they are not faced as models to anyone. Morrison introduces these women confined in their home in opposition to the movie stars who somehow are confined and exist only in the silver screen. In fact, there is a relation of visibility versus invisibility between the female condition and role of the movie star, the prostitutes and Pecola. The latter ones doubly represent the idea of "the other" excluded and denied by society, the ultimate image of what society wants to hide, while the movie star is attractive and admired.

The condition and role of the prostitutes and the black women/child can be considered as twice "the second sex," as it is described by Simone de Beauvoir (1980, p. 9; my translation):

Nobody is born a woman but becomes a woman. No biological, psychological, nor economic defines the shape that the female human takes in society; it is the whole civilization that elaborates this intermediate product between the male and the castrated that they call female. Only the mediation of another can constitute an individual as the "Other."

The prostitutes like Pecola and her mother are definitely outside "the center of the system - excluded from 'reality' by race [they are all immigrants], gender, class, age, and personal history" (DAVIS, 1999, p. 14). However, the prostitutes refuse to submerge themselves into the depths of society, they keep on going and face what life has left for them, while Pecola submerges in madness and silence, and her mother in silence and resignation. The black women in the novel have what Guerin (1992) called

"triple consciousness," since they understand what is to be "black and female within a white male society" (p. 210).

Like many Afro-American feminists, Toni Morrison explores in her work motifs of interlocking racism, sexism and class oppression. She portrays black women as victims who - like in this novel - do not reach personal autonomy, especially due to the fact that in their own homes the personal relationships are far from being supportive.

Pecola, her mother and the prostitutes are turned into the invisible aspects of the ruling society; they are somehow ignored because society has transformed them into failures, degenerated, ugly and insane women. They become visible for them only when they want to hide their own negative aspect, so that they project themselves on the excluded. They doubly represent "the other," for they are black, immigrants and female. Morrison portrays them as the antithesis of the American ideal of women widely spread in the movies: they are black in a society where the ideal of female beauty for a child is a blond, blue-eyed white "doll" called Shirley Temple, and for the women, Greta Garbo or Ginger Rogers are the symbols of successful and beloved women, opposite from Mrs. Breedlove and the prostitutes. Morrison shows that the movie star woman and child have a female condition and role that is unattainable to the common women; they are also a false myth that reduces, misinterprets and distorts reality causing everlasting disappointment for those who do not reach that level, once they are inappropriate or impossible models.

The black female characters in *The bluest eye* are constantly bombarded by female condition and roles which exclude them and which do not provide them with any sense that they really exist, so that they are injured in their deepest selves. Claudia tries to escape from her suffering by dismembering Shirley Temple dolls. Mrs. Breedlove swallowed the cultural definitions and rejects her own self and family for they do not fit into the hegemonic condition and role. Pecola turns to prayers and communion, pushing herself to an imaginary world where her wish comes true. But this world is the world of schizophrenia that Morrison ironically shows as an extension of the tradition that portrays women as schizophrenic and mad. The American patriarchal society represses the gifts and potential of its black women and black citizens in general, so that, women are driven mad by adoption of the ideals of the dominant culture, once they are inappropriate for black women.

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