Black Skin, White Masks: A Fanonian Analysis of The Bluest Eye

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Abstract

Why white skin has remained the most cherished skin colour, and what the outcome is of this illogical devotion towards white skin for the African-American society in the 1990s are salient aspects of discussion in Literature. In order to analyze the cause as well as the effect of excessive love for white skin among the Afro-American community of the 90s, I have connected Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* (1970) with Frantz Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952). Pecola in the novel desires for white skin and not only blue but bluest eyes as she is always considered ugly by her own community which has internalized the misconception that black skin is unattractive. Also, she develops psychological crisis as she is rejected by her own people who mimic the European ideology. The paper attempts to show the detrimental impact of colorism in the lives of little girls who become an object, the other, the subaltern as they are forced to accept the Western concept of beauty in their psyche in Lorain, Ohio of the 1940s. Both Fanon as well as Morrison think that obsession with whiteness is harmful for the coloured African and Americans; Redundance and so they must decolonize their minds to keep their inferiority complex at bay. So, this paper delves into details into the reason and impact of fetishization with white skin colour among African-Americans of USA in the 1940s.

*Keywords: mimicry, inferiority, white skin, ideology, beauty, African-Americans*

Introduction

African-American people of Lorain Ohio in the 1940s has been the focal point of *The Bluest Eye* (1970) which is written by the American author Toni Morrison (18 February 1931-). She writes her novels in order to depict the lives of black people (Hoby, 2015, p. 3). As her childhood friend seeks for blue eyes (Afterword, 1979, p. 168), the novelist attempts to portray a minor black girl as the protagonist of her novel. So, Morrison remains a spokesman of all the African-American children and she tries to subvert the idea that white is beautiful. Similarly, *Black Skin, White Masks* (originally published in French as *Peau noire, masques blancs* in 1952) is an anti-colonial book by the Martinique Psychologist Frantz Fanon (20 July 1925 – 6 December 1961). He disapproves mimicking the Whites and believes that non-Whites will suffer mentally if they copy the Europeans. The love for white skin occurs as all channels like media, books and billboards are dictating that white skin means beauty. Adopting western culture means that the non-Europeans are recreating themselves in the light of their colonial masters. It is not physical domination.

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or slavery anymore in the 20th century. rather, the psyche of the African-Americans is ravaged by Western media and ideology.

**Why do Afro-Americans in the 1990s have excessive love for white skin?**

Pinkney (2014) explains the cause behind this intense attachment with whiteness and observes that as a slave, the whiter your skin the better quality of life you will have (p. 94). Generally, slaves with lighter skin were allotted coveted indoor assignments while grueling work in the fields were performed by dark-skinned slaves (p. 94). After and during slavery light-skinned people were taught to believe that they were better than their darker counterparts (p. 94). No African-Americans of 1940s try to understand that pigmentocracies or shadeism is a result of discrimination by white colonialists against other races (Lane and Mahdi, 2013, p. 170) and the maintenance of white supremacy (aesthetic, ideological, and material) is predicted on the notion that dark skin represents savagery, irrationality, ugliness and inferiority while whiteness defines beauty and superiority (Hunter, 2007, p. 238). Slave owners typically used skin tone as a dimension of hierarchy on the plantation (as cited in Hunter, 2007, p. 239). White slave owners sometimes gave lighter-skinned African slaves some additional privileges, such as working in the house as opposed to the fields, the occasional opportunity to learn to read, and the rare chance for manumission (as cited in Hunter, 2007, p. 239). During slavery, a small, but elite class of freedmen was established. These disproportionately light-skinned men and women were early business leaders, clergy, teachers, and artisans, who became economic and community leaders in the early African American community (as cited in Hunter, 2007, p. 239). Overall, it can be seen that slavery have led to the internalization of white skin ideology by the African-Americans in the 1940s.

Another noteworthy reason behind colourism is the projection of black-skinned people in a negative light by the media and books which always display white families and white models as beautiful. The white-skinned candy model Mary Jane and Shirley Temple manifest to the USA black community that they are the ideal image of cuteness and whoever is not like them are ugly. Although African slaves who lived in the south of America got freedom in the American civil war of 1861-1865, they began to copy the lifestyle of their invaders, the powerful race as they develop inferiority complex and are not proud of their ancestors.
Negative Impacts Examined

As per Fanon, Black African women are not only bleaching their skin but they also seek for white skin (Black Skin, 1952, p.29). In North of Lorain Ohio in the 1940s, the birthday gifts of all coloured girls are “big, blue-eyed Baby Doll” (p. 13). Picture books are filled with little girls sleeping with their dolls (p. 13). The colour of the dolls is pink,; the hair is yellow which is in stark contrast with the black skinned, black hair and black-eyed African girls. Mahaffey (2004) correctly infers that the plastic, sawdust and metal used to create the white doll symbolize the artificiality found in the construction of not only racial but also gender and class identities (p. 164). Therefore, the process of objectification of the African girls begins at childhood because white skin of the non-Blacks represent beauty for the Blacks.

Africans living all around the world are following denegrification (Black Skin, 1952, p.83) and they believe in whiten the race, save the race (Black Skin,1952, p.33). Colonizers portray the slaves’ body as unattractive and backward only to depict themselves as virtuous, beautiful and lovable (Julien, 2014, p. 5). This false view of beauty is blindly followed by the Blacks. In a culture dominated by a Euro-centric standard of beauty, dark complexioned Black women are considered unattractive as compared to those with blonde hair and blue eyes (Sutherlandp. 367). Thus, African women living in Africa and USA straighten their hairs, copy the Western style of English pronunciations and wear high heels. As Pauline moves from the South to the North, she also begins to care about clothes and makeup only to make other women cast favourable glances her way (p. 92). The movies use fair-skinned American actor and actresses like Clarke Gable and Jean Harlow. Pauline fixes her hair like Jean Harlow’s magazine photo. She begins to condemn her own eleven-year-old daughter Pecola as “ugly” (p. 98). Unlike Frieda and Claudia’s mother who rubs “Vicks salve” (p. 6) on the chest of her sick nine-year-old daughter Claudia and beats Henry when he sexually abuses ten-year-old daughter Frieda, Pauline beats Pecola as she knocks down the blackish blueberries. She calls Pecola “crazy fool” (p. 84) but she soothes whie-skinned “the frozen doll baby” (p. 150) Fisher girl as she begins to cry by saying “Hush, baby, hush. Come Here” (p. 85). Ironically, this Fisher girl calls her “Polly” (p. 85) but her own children Sammy and Pecola call her “Mrs. Breedlove” (p. 32). By contrast, Mrs. MacTeer gives Pecola bath and washes her clothes as she is initiated into womanhood. Pauline does not address the two MacTeer sisters and Pecola by their names as they have no existence in her life. Valarmathi (2016) thinks that Claudia’s mother communicates to her daughter the beauty of the African American folk tradition of storytelling (p. 1253). However, Pauline neglects her kitchen and her family but she does not leave the Kitchen until everything is in order in the Fisher house where she gets power, praise, luxury, beauty, cleanliness and a nickname “Polly” (p. 99). In this way, she
becomes an “ideal servant” (p. 99), and she rejects her family which is Black and savage to climb up into society (Black Skin, 1952, p. 115). Unlike the nice mother of the Dick and Jane Primer who laughs (p. 1), we can see no emotional connection between Pecola and her mother. Collins (2002) suggests that a mother can foster her children’s oppression if she teaches them to believe in their own inferiority (p. 50-51). Here, Pauline who gets no nickname by her family due to her crippled foot fails to communicate with her two children. When she gives birth to Pecola and the doctor insults her that black women deliver right away without any pain just like horses (p. 97), Pauline is angry but when she begins to live in the North Ohio, she becomes a mimic character succumbing to the notions of the Whites.

It can be noticed that Pecola craves for white skin and prays to God as “Please make me disappear” (p. 33) just like Fanon’s colonized people who want to either “turn white or disappear” (Black Skin p.75). Pecola’s world is fragmented, disorganized as she suffers from lack of recognition in a loveless family whose name ironically is Breedlove. She gazes fondly at the cup containing the silhouette of white Shirley Temple’s dimpled face and drinks “three quarts of milk” (p. 16) from it only to become white or “cu-ute” (p. 13). She thinks erroneously that if she has lactification and gets blue eyes she will be accepted within her family as well as the society. Frieda also adorns Shirley. In contrast to them, we can see Claudia who dislikes Shirley. She dismantles the dolls to find the beauty and the reason why people look at them and say “Awwwww” (p. 15) but not her. The split doll reflects the split psyches of the characters (Akhtar, 2014, p. 5). Biko emphasizes on the role of a healthy and positive self-image as it can create solidarity amongst the oppressed and in empowering one’s self to resist oppression (as cited in Hook, 2004, p. 104). Pecola has no positive self-image as she internalizes the concept that black is ugly in her community which does not resist the wrong concept that white skin is beautiful. Inger- Anne Softing notes that Claudia is the only character in the novel who consciously makes an attempt at deconstructing the ideology of the dominant society (as cited in Moses, 1999, p. 627). Still, it can be observed that she being a child is not at all engulfed still by the racial ideas of her society but she will obviously accept the norms later.

Cultural crystallization (Black Skin, 1952,p. 157) as well as colour prejudice (Black Skin 1952, p. 89) is practiced by Pecola’s society. In “Beauty and Body Image Concerns Among African American College Women” (2005) the writers unfold that the notion that Black Women are less attractive is a message that is transmitted daily from multiple external forces or social institutions like the media, family or peer groups (p. 2). Collins (2002) mentions that Morrison portrays the internalized oppression that can affect a child who experiences daily assaults on her sense of self (p. 158). A child will suffer from shame as her peers, community as well as society
do not value her dark skin (Nittle, 2017, p. 4). That is why Pecola sits alone on a double desk in her class (p. 34) in her school. The teachers hardly glance at her, and they call her only when everyone is required to respond. If any girl wants to be insulting to a boy, she associates the name of that boy with Pecola like “Bobby loves Pecola Breedlove” (p. 34). Even the boys harass her by saying “Black e mo” (p. 50). It is striking to notice that these boys are themselves Black but they neither feel pity nor sad about the distress of Pecola. Bessie Jones rightly observes that Pecola is a composite of many fairy-tale heroines like Cinderella and she is an ugly duckling who does not change into a swan (as cited in Bump, 2010, p. 155).

Pecola has developed into a “phobogenic object” (Black Skin p.117) as she has not been taught the language of resistance (as cited in Mahaffey, 2004, p. 163). Because dark skin is associated with poverty, low class and ugliness, African-Americans develop an aversion towards dark skin (Gabriel, 2007, p.21). Under racial colonial regimes, light skin was a socio-economic, political and class marker (Hall, 2017, p. 2) and even after its end African-American boys are full of adoration for Maureen Peal, a high-yellow dream child who is as rich as the richest of the White girls. Teachers respond to her “encouragingly” (p. 48). She can always get the company of all not only in the class but also in the cafeteria because she represents the White race, the superior race. This social acceptance of Maureen makes the MacTeer sisters jealous and they criticize Maureen as “six-finger-dog-tooth-meringue-pie” (p. 48). During their arguments with her, Maureen attacks their ugliness by saying “I am cute! And you ugly! Black and ugly black e mos! I am cute!” (p. 56). Notably, Pecola does not confront Maureen bravely but both the MacTeer sisters angrily lodge against Maureen’s insult.

As the Blacks want to elevate themselves from their “jungle status’ (Black Skin, 1952,p.9) of black skin colour, women from Aiken, Marietta, Mobile and those places straighten their hairs. They are manipulated by the distorting elements of whiteness as they are detached from the realities of their historical and collective identity as an African (Gabriel, 2007, p. 87). Geraldine wants her son Junior to stay from dirty and loud niggers (p. 67). Because of this, Junior enjoys pushing black boys in the dirt and bullying girls. He kills the cat of his mother and puts all the blame on poor Pecola. Instead of listening to Pecola, Geraldine despises her straightforward “You nasty little black bitch” (p. 72) because ugly Pecola is wearing “dirty torn dress” (p. 71). Pecola becomes a nonbeing as her sense of self is poignantly attacked by Geraldine. Surprisingly, Geraldine who keeps Bible and the picture of Jesus in her house feels no emotional connection with Pecola who belongs to her own race. Haakon Chevalier (1964) is right as he says that the North African-Americans are so detached from their roots that the cultural mummification leads to the mummification of individual thinking (p. 34).
In the words of Fanon in Black Skin, White Masks, white men consider themselves superior to black men (p. 3). Although colonialism has ended, Mr. Yacobowski the “fifty-two-year old white immigrant Shopkeeper” (p. 36) has total absence of human recognition (p. 36) as dark-skinned Pecola goes to his shop to buy Mary Jane candy. Becky Hall (1996) connects the experience of Fanon where a white child is frightened to see him, a negro and Fanon tries his best to escape from the situation like Pecola (p. 162-163). This adverse situation makes Pecola hate the dandelions as “weeds” though before this incident she considered them “pretty” (p. 35). Srima Nandi (2015) in “An Ecofeminist Reading of Toni Morison’s The Bluest Eye” comments that “clearing of the dandelions is another form of raping the earth” (p. 172). She compares the dandelions with Pecola and points out that just like Pecola is unwanted by the Whites as well as by her own community but is utilized for other jobs allotted for the Blacks as domestic servants, the heads of the dandelions are thrown away but the leaves are utilized for making soup and wine (p. 171). The “unyielding earth” (p. 4) where no marigolds bloom as per Ms. Sharifa Akter (2015) hints at:

...the outcome of prolonged oppression, the psychic barrenness of a community whose vitality and resourcefulness have been sapped by the constant pressure and stress of a hostile environment. (p. 35)

It is, however, seen that the three whores, Marie, Poland and China who are “Sugar-coated whores” or “whores in whores’ clothing” (p. 43) are free with Pecola as they are with each other. Although they like good Christian coloured women who tend to her family (p. 43), we can find that both Pauline and Geraldine who are like this have no love for Pecola.

Fanon mentions that the non-Whites feel that the White man is superior to him in every aspect (p. 134). Even after the end of colonialism, Pecola’s father Cholly never ever hates the two “hee-hee-hee” (p. 118) White men who sees his physical relationship with a little Black Country girl Darlene on the bush and mocks him “Go on and finish. And, nigger, make it good” (p. 31) as he is afraid of them. The presence of these White men is terrifying to him as he has internalized the concept that he is subservient than them. As he is neglected by his father Samson Fuller who criticizes Cholly’s mother as “Tell that bitch she get her money” (p. 123) and his mother abandons him after four days of his birth, Cholly never gets the proper concept of a family. He develops aggression within himself, neglects his family, kills four white men and burns his own home abandoning his role of a father and husband. He rapes Pecola as he has never understood the meaning of a family. Shockingly, the month of Spring which symbolizes joy becomes for Pecola the month of sheer distress as she gets raped in Spring. In contrast to Frieda and Clau
dia’s father who shoots at Mr. Henry who abuses Frieda, Cholly is himself the abuser of his daughter. So, Morrison points out that Pecola is not only the victim of racial shaming but also a crippled and crippling family (Afterword, 1979, p. 168). Many dark-skinned people suffer from psychological crisis as well as identity crisis as per the book of Fanon. As a result of her obsession and the traumas she has experienced, Pecola slips into a psychosis and she becomes totally self-consumed (Raj, 2016, p. 26). She suffers from split consciousness as she fetishizes for bluest eyes. Micah Elihue Whitcomb or Soaphead Church who abuses little girls uses her to kill the “old” (p. 136) dog Bob of the old woman Bertha Reese. Rather than advising Pecola about the impracticality of her wish, he lies that she will get blue eyes. It is notable that she is not at peace when she thinks that she has blue eyes. Her deluded imagination makes her want for “the bluest eyes in the whole world” (p. 161). Passive Pecola has absorbed all the ugliness of her community which is not at all proud of their race. In summer, the season of storm, Pecola has to endure the storm inside her psyche. Just like the Martinican who are crucified (Black Skin, 1952, p. 168), Pecola’s innocence is scarred by her own society whose members think that “she carry some of the blame” (p. 149) of her rape. Although Frieda and Claudia want Pecola’s baby to live to counteract the universal love of White baby dolls, Shirley Temples, and Maureen Peals (p. 149), the baby dies. The baby’s death symbolizes the ultimate loss of the future (as cited in Mahaffey p. 156). No one wants to see her baby alive and no one says “Poor little girl” (p. 149) and “Poor baby” (p. 149) because she will give birth to the “ugliest thing walking” (p. 149).

Although Fanon wants to bring an end to all such myths regarding Negro which calls them savages, brutes, illiterate (Black Skin, 1952, p. 88) by proudly asserting that “I was not a primitive, not even a half-man, I belonged to a race that had already been working in gold and silver two thousand years ago” (Black Skin, 1952, p. 99), the Afro-Americans are imitating Whites. Noticeably, this influence of white skin has not ended after the demise of slavery. So, the novel serves as a warning to all African-American people that it is “too late” (p. 164) already and if they continue to do so, they will suffer from distorted life like Pecola. The novel’s title manifests that the desire of Blacks for white skin and blue eyes is unachievable and so they must not run after it. The Afro-Americans will live a gibberish life if they emulate and internalize concept of white beauty. They must decolonize their mind from the belief that black is ugly.

Conclusion

It is assumed that Morrison has fictionalized the ideas of Fanon in her novel to a great extent. In this process she highlights that adoration for white skin has negative effects on the psyche of African-Americans, especially little girls. Pecola
wrongly thinks that she will be accepted in her society if she gets white skin and blue eyes. Fanon does not want the dark-skinned individuals to mimic the Whites as it distorts the psychology of those who become the mimic man. Here, Pecola loses her mental sphere as she is devoured by the meaningless notion of skin colour. Geraldine and Pauline neglect their own race as they become more attached to the West. Fanon and Morrison believe that before it is too late the Africans must develop solidarity among themselves in order to counteract White notions. This denial of one’s own race is destructive for the African-Americans as per both the writers. Hence, the African-Americans must decolonize their minds so that their descendants can feel proud of their skin colour, their race and on top of all, their lives.

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