Deconstruction of Female Gender Stereotypes in Tony Morrison’s The Bluest Eye

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Abstract

This article argues that Tony Morrison in her novel The Bluest Eye has deconstructed female gender stereotypes; rather than portraying Afro-American women as “marginal, docile and subservient to men’s interests and emotional needs and fears” (Abrams: 2006 p. 90), she has created brave females who do not conform to female behaviours as accepted by social norms and do not accept their “subsidiary social roles” in the patriarchal society. In fact, Morrison, the pioneer of the Black Feminist Movement, in her novel, has presented a group of female characters who being endowed with inner strength, fight back against the social norms of the uneven balance of power between men and women and establish their own identity in the white racist society. The present article, therefore, examines those major female characters to show Morrison’s deconstruction of female gender stereotypes and challenge of prevailing gender conventions in The Bluest Eye which in turn will establish the novel as a great literary production of Black Feminist Movement and a pathfinder for the black women how to resist against the social oppressive norms while forming self-concept in the sexist and racist white community.

Keywords: Gender, feminism, black African feminism, deconstruction of gender roles.

Introduction

Tony Morrison, the winner of the 1993 Nobel Prize for Literature, is conceived as one of the “most prominent contemporary American writers” (Chegeni & Chegeni, 2013, p. 915) devoted to the black literary and cultural movement. Through her novels, Toni Morrison scrutinized the prevailing social oppressive cycles against black people, specially the black women who being "black, female and poor have been victimized by racism, sexism, and classism" (Bharati and Joshi, 2009, p. 37). Her exposition of Afro-American women’s suffering in a “genderized” and “racialized” hegemonic culture (Liao, 2012 p.1) is stemmed from her desire to launch a severe indictment against that oppression and marginalization of women amidst the inferior social and economic status. In her novel The Bluest Eye, she created a group of females who epitomizes Morrison’s vision of emancipated women and who has the guts to challenge their status in a male dominated society and stand against the uneven balance of power. Therefore, the study of unconventional women in The Bluest Eye demands special attention.

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Gender vs. Sex

In all her novels Tony Morrison presented the intricate relationship between gender and society. According to *Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary* (2005, p. 644), gender means nothing but the fact of being male or female; or the ways of talking about men and women. But in social sciences, gender is an issue related to society as gender is conceived as a “social construction” (Barker, 2005 p. 283-284, Abrams, 2004 p. 89). According to that theory, gender and society are interrelated as gender is decided and differentiated according to a particular society's norms and conventions. The definition of Griffith (2006) is noteworthy to have a clearer understanding of the relationship between gender and society and the role of society in determining the gender of a particular society. As he said:

Whereas *sex* is the biological difference between males and females, *gender* is the cultural difference. Western culture . . . has ruled that certain kinds of behaviour are “abnormal” and “unnatural” for females to practice (p.191).

According to this, there is a significant difference between ‘gender’ and ‘sex’: whereas ‘sex’ is concerned with biological differences, gender is the cultural difference between men and women based on particular society’s social norms.

Gender Convention/ gender Stereotypes

Gender convention propagates that there should be particular differences between the behaviours of males and females. Some social and behavioral norms are generally considered appropriate for a man whereas the same norms are thought inappropriate for females. Abrams (2006) mentioned of such gender convention of the patriarchal society. He said the physical or structural difference between male and females physical forms have guided the concept of sex, but gender is something different. It is basically ‘a cultural constuct’(p. 89). In a culture, some behaviours are thought ‘masculine’ and some others are thought ‘faminine’. Again referring to Simone de Beauvoir, Abrams explained, “one is not born, but becomes, a woman’ and civilization, by this cultural process and convention, identify the males in our culture “as active, dominating, adventurous, rational, and creative” (p. 89). But the same society has unjustifiably restricted women’s behaviour and action. Women, according to this convention, should be involved in the world of domesticity: gestation, giving birth, nurturing, cooking, etc. Again, as it is conceived, women should be, “marginal, docile and subservient to men’s interests and emotional needs and fears” (Abrams, 2006, p. 90) and they must accept their “subsidiary social roles” to their male counterparts and recognize them later as more able and intelligent than them (Barker, 2005, p. 289).
Therefore, the relationship between gender and culture is intricate but obvious. The predominant gender conventions are based on an uneven balance of power and constructed to "bolster and promote male hegemony" (Holm, 2010, p.13). In fact, Western civilization is pervasively patriarchal- that is male- centered and male-controlled, and is organized and conducted in such a way as to subordinate women to men in all cultural domains: familial, religious, political, economic, social, legal, etc. Women themselves are taught, in the process of being socialized, to internalize the reigning patriarchal ideology (that is the conscious and unconscious presuppositions about male superiority), and so are conditioned to derogate their sex and to cooperate in their subordination.

Tonny Morrison is against this kind of unequal role-play of male and female gender. She is particularly against the ideas of the feminine and the masculine that are constructed in society (Holm, 2010). Like her other novels, The Bluest Eye is also concerned with the predominant gender conventions of the uneven balance of power between the sexes.

**Black women and sexism**

Alice Walker in her In Search of Our Mother’s Gardens (1984) revealed the pathetic condition of black women. Walker recognized ‘the bipartite identity of black women’ (p. 275). She said, “It is the black woman’s words that have the most meaning for us, her daughters, because she, like us, has experienced life not only as a black person but as a woman” (p. 275). Again, Walker pinpointed that women because of their double identity, were the victims of both sexism (sexual discrimination) and racism (racial discrimination).

Watkins (1981) cited by Chegeni & Chegeni (2013), also, emphasized the fact that black women were practically in a very difficult situation with no power and prestige even after the abolition of slavery. They are considered to be at the last step of the hierarchial ladder (p. 919).

So, black women were not only at the bottom of the social hierarchy but also negative myths and stereotypes were attributed to them (Watkins, 1981). Thus, they were not discriminated against and looked down upon by white males only but they became the victim of abuse and harsh treatment of the black men which aggravates their suffering more.

Tonny Morrison, who believed in equal rights for women in Black African society, wanted to launch a revolution against such a society and therefore, she gave the spark of revolution in some female characters in her famous novel The Bluest Eye.
Feminism strives to deconstruct traditional gender roles. It does not want to see women according to conventional social culture. Therefore, Morrison in her portrayal of black women in *The Bluest Eye* portrayed two different types of women. In one side, she portrayed “the restless parasite woman” (Chegeni & Chegeni, 2013 p. 919) but on the other hand, she created self-sufficient independent women who were aware of their animal-like position in the society of the United States and began their fight against masculine sexuality and uneven balance of power. In her portrayal of those independent self-sufficient black females, Morrison deconstructed gender stereotypes. Her new women did not conform to the feminine norms and behaviours as dictated by society and they were not “docile and subservient to male whims and desires” (Abrams, 2006, p. 90) and didn’t recognize males as powerful rather they revolted against the uneven balance of power and oppressive cycles of patriarchal white racist society (Chegeni & Chegeni, 2013, p. 919). Morrison represented black women as ‘complex selves’, who went through journeys from the condition of ‘victims’ to the emancipation and ‘realization of personal autonomy’ (Dias, 2009, p.1).

As a pioneer of Black Feminist Movement and a proud member of the Afro-American community, Tony Morrison frequently stimulated black women “to love themselves, their race, and their culture and not to trap in white superiority or white beauty standards” (Kohzadi et al., 2011, p. 1307). Black feminists propose that the Black women and the Black women writers should reveal not only gender discrimination against them but also racial and cultural discrimination against women (Chegeni & Chegeni, 2013, p. 919). Like them, Morrison believed that in a white racist society, women should be strong enough to resist all kind of discrimination and should be aware of their self dignity (Dillon, 2013).

The present article, therefore, attempts to examine major female characters of the novel *The Bluest Eye* to show how Morrison portrayed a group of new women who do not conform to gender stereotypes rather challenge the uneven balance of power in the patriarchal society. These women can form self-concept in the face of sexism and racism prevalent in Afro-American society.

**Women in The Bluest Eye**

Tonny Morrison set her novel *The Bluest Eye* in Lorain, Ohio where black people live near their white masters. Living in the same communities, the values of white racist people had become transferred to the black community. Like their white masters, they believe that being ‘light skinned’ is a matter of much pride whereas black complexion is a matter of shame and disgrace. They feel themselves much inferior, therefore, desire to possess white bodies which may bring power and prestige in the society (Davis, 1999, p. 14).
The society that is portrayed here is patriarchal and in this patriarchal society, black people were insulted by the white, the suffering of black women was greater. As Gurleen Grewal wrote on the oppressive situation of the black women in *Circles of Sorrow, Lines of Struggle,* “although both black men and women suffer from oppression, women suffer more. Black women are subjected to different sorts of otherness—she is the other of men, and she is the other of White” (Grewal, 1998, p. 100). This situation complicated her position. Again depending on economic status, the division had been created not between the whites and blacks but among the blacks three classes also. The members of one group hated the other groups causing frustration and psychological damage. Therefore the society seemed to be entangled in the vicious oppressive cycle of race, class, and gender bias. To make the social condition clearer, Morrison vividly portrayed the predicament of eleven years adolescent Pecola, who understanding that white colour brings beauty and honour in the society, she tried to conform to the white standard of beauty. Her inability to get a pair of blue eyes deeply devastated her psyche and ultimately she became insane. Nobody stood beside her, even not her family. The whole community criticized her and their cruel attitude drives Pecola abnormal. The depiction of Pecola and her sad plight is alarming and heart-rending as it exposes the passive suffering of a black woman at the white racist society.

Fortunately, Morrison has not portrayed Pecola only; the female characters around her are sharply different from her in their inner strength and behaviours. Some characters are portrayed by Morrison who could revolt against this kind of injustice. They have learned strategies to survive, ‘punish’ or ‘protest’ against the wrongdoers (Chegeni & Chegeni, 2013, p. 917). Through them, Morrison has passed her message of reformation: women have to be confident and believe upon themselves, they have to fight back the conventional social oppressive cycles and has to stand against the patriarchal society where an uneven balance of power exists (Johnson, 2009). Otherwise, they have to suffer a lot.

The first character that epitomizes Morrison’s vision of “emerging consciousness of black women in U.S.A” to love “black identity and personality and be free from the racist white domination” (Aggarwal, 2012, p.110) is Claudia. She is nine years adolescent narrator of *The Bluest Eye* Claudia. Morrison has chosen Claudia as her mouthpiece for certain purposes. As a pioneer of the black feminist movement, Morrison needed somebody who while telling a tale of black women's vulnerability, oppression, and marginalization, will show the path of emancipation through her inner strength and capacity of resistance against racial discrimination, gender bias, and class exploitation. Therefore, Morrison has presented Claudia as a sharp contrast to other Afro-American characters, at the hand of Morrison she becomes a living example of women's path of salvation.
amidst unfavorable environment and has become a pathfinder of the black feminism movement.

Claudia is a sharp contrast to Pecola, who being black plagued herself to self-destruction. Claudia doesn’t believe in the mythical norm, she doesn’t believe in the white standard of beauty in American society where women have to be ‘beautiful in an ornamental way’. Claudia is an obsolete anti-thesis of this image- she doesn’t strive to gain status in the society through physical charm (Bharati & Joshi, 2009, p.38). According to K. Sumana (1998), Morrison believes that “the concept of physical beauty as a virtue is one of the most pernicious and destructive” (p.7). Therefore Morrison has placed the racial hatred based on women’s beauty and complexion at the center of the incidents of The Bluest Eye. In the U.S.A, women have to fair-skinned, ornamental, and beautiful whereas black women are different from that standard of beauty. Claudia accepts who she is, she knows that she doesn’t fit in the “mythical norm” (Lorde, 2007, p. 116) of beauty according to which norm “power resides,” and those “who stand outside that power” are discriminated against and made “different” from society (Lorde, 2007, p. 116). Not being a part of the mythical norm or white like Maureen or Shirley Temple, Claudia like Pecola does not destroy her life emotionally and physically (Johnson, 2012). Claudia has never plagued herself for not having white complexion rather she “resented the fact that the world needed her to be” (Friedman, 2010) like that.

As evidence suggests, Claudia hates Shirley Temple who possesses conventional beauty with blue eyes and golden locks of hair. Claudia also hates the white baby doll that she gets as a gift. Though adults expect that the gift will fill her with ecstatic joy, to their utter surprise, Claudia instead of playing with the doll, destroys the doll which symbolizes the western standard of beauty. Everybody is surprised by her action and gets perplexed to understand the cause behind her destruction of the baby doll which is a dream to achieve by the other members of her society. Claudia’s destruction of the doll illustrates the protest of her against the conventional attitude of the society where women mean beauty and their beauty is the secret of love and honor towards them. The adults here represent the society’s attitude towards female stereotypes, whereas Claudia embodies the revolutionary attitude to female stereotypes. Morrison, a proud member of the Afro-American community believes that black women should love themselves and should respect their individuality. To challenge the conventional norms of beauty in the black society, Claudia is therefore represented against the white, blue-eyed doll, together with Shirley Temple (Rubenstein, 1993, p.129). Claudia hates all the stereotypical attitudes of society. Fortunately, she has got a loving and stable family beside her; therefore she could remain firm against all kinds of social abuses.
Contrary to the female gender characteristics, Claudia is not “passive, acquiescent, timid, emotional, and conventional” (Abrams, 2006, p. 89). She is not only able to save herself from the white racist society, but she fights with the male counterparts and saves Pecola from racial abuse. As instances suggest when Pecola gets harassed by the boys because of her dark skin and naked father, Claudia along with Frieda and Maureen breaks in and defends Pecola and rescues her. Claudia guards Pecola against Maureen's suggestive insult by her integrity. In the fighting scene between the girls, Claudia becomes enraged and outbursts her anger saying: "You think you so cute! I am cute! And you ugly! Black and ugly black e mos. I am cute!" (p. 56). Holloway (1987, p. 41) says that “Claudia, who survives this story, has the attitude that enables her survival. Here Claudia’s stand against Maureen and boys portrays her as a definite difference from female gender stereotypes. She is confident, outspoken, revolutionary and endowed with great inner strength, able to defend sexist, racist, and classist society.

Though stereotypically white is associated with civilization, purity, and mannerism, Claudia being black proves that there is no correlation between skin complexion and human nature. The ability to love and care that Claudia displays towards Pecola serves as an example of how compassionate she is to other people.

Though society expects women to be silent about sex and sexual oppression, Claudia's attitude to them is quite contrary. When Frieda tells Claudia how Mr. Henry has touched her breasts, Claudia was annoyed and expressed her annoyance strongly. Again, Claudia has the courage to stand against social perspective towards a raped victim. When Pecola becomes pregnant, she is ostracized by society and has to quit school. Whereas all the other men criticize and insult Pecola, Claudia along with Frieda moves forward to help her. The girls even “make the sacrificial act of planting seeds in the ground which, in turn, they believe, if they grow, will mean that Pecola’s baby will live” (Friedman, 2010). Claudia earnestly desires Pecola's unborn child to take its birth 'just to counteract the universal love of white baby dolls, Shirley Temples, and Maureen Peals' (p. 149).

Therefore “Claudia like Pecola never denies her own race and let race, economics, and sex dictate her life” (Friedman, 2010), she stands against all the oppressions and resists through her inner strength against the patriarchal and racist Afro-American society. Through her character, Morrison has certainly portrayed a black feminist who has the guts to see the world through her own ideas and to repress all the antagonistic forces that come around her.

The second character through which Morrison depicts black women’s struggle and resistance towards oppression is Pauline. She is a wife and the
mother of two children but “she performs neither the role of a mother nor that of a wife” (Aggarwal, 2012, p. 110). She doesn't confine herself to domestic chores rather she finds her own place in the outside world. She is not “marginal, docile and subservient to men’s interests and emotional needs and fears” (Abrams, 2006, p. 90) or she doesn’t want to accept “subsidiary social roles” (ibid) in a patriarchal society. She is neither dependent on her husband for her living nor she has acknowledged the latter’s superiority over her. In her day to day living or in her quarrel or even at the time of sexual intercourse, she never allows her spirit to fail or to assert her own identity.

Pauline and her husband’s brutish and oppressive behaviour towards each other reveal that both are using the other to vent his/her rage against life and racial oppression. Cholly ‘needs’ Pauline, though he hates her, so that he can ‘pour his inarticulate fury’(p.31) towards society and whites through her. Similarly, Pauline needs Cholly to vent her anger on her husband, which is rooted in despair and frustration for being black and poor. Again Pauline's sexual intercourse with her husband is not submission to male superiority and sexuality; rather she uses her to satisfy her physical desire as well as to assert herself in a patriarchal society. As it is found in the novel, Pauline likes her physical relationship with Cholly: “When he does [has an orgasm], I feel a power. I be strong, I be pretty, I be young” (p. 101). She wants to see a man praying her, adoring her, as in the sexual intercourse a woman is venerated and idolized by a man. According to Dias (2009 p.6), Pauline’s enjoyment in sex doesn't stem from physical pleasure rather it satisfied her thirst for self-recognition in male-dominated society. According to Ferguson (1986), "in a 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" (p. 07). Thus, Pauline though in the male dominated racist society like the other black females underwent acute sufferings; nevertheless, she seems to find her own resistance against the social evils of the society.

Like her daughter Pecola, Pauline doesn’t fit into the “mythical norm of beauty” (Lorde, 2007). Unlike her daughter, she is never plagued by overwhelming self-hatred rather she tries to “find meaning and fulfillment in a different way” (Bharati & Joshi, 2009, p. 44). Her visit to the movie theatres is also her trial to come into terms with the oppressive forces around her. By watching movies she escapes from her own self and maybe she finds her unfulfilled dream of being a different Pauline, a wild woman “who lives a life of barbaric splendor and sexual joys” (Seraman & Selvakkumar, 2013 p 5; Yasmin, 2012 p.78). In fact for Pauline, a black, working-class, poor, illiterate, handicapped woman has nothing to do in a white dominating society than to make a dream world for her through watching movies and cherishing life and beauty like the film stars.
Pauline is the embodiment of a self-sufficient independent working woman who earns her livelihood by herself. She works in the house of white people which is considered as the most prestigious job at that time for a black woman (Roshan & Gholipour, 2012). There she finds beauty, dignity and order which is impossible to experience in her ugly and chaotic household. Therefore, her job gives her a new identity and makes her existence worthy to herself (Byerman, 1990).

In fact, Morrison has created the image of an independent black woman in Pauline who carries the responsibility of the home, earns bread, and endures her pain alone. Her inner strength for survival is strong. Toni Morrison had profound respect for women like Pauline and a great sympathy.

Therefore Pauline is the personification of Black females through all her disillusionment and cruel struggle in the racist society. Again in her, Morrison has depicted a brave female among the black who has such kind of inner strength to oppose the norms of the white racist society.

The prostitutes China, Poland, and Miss Marie portrayed in The Bluest Eye need special attention. They are the lowest at the social order among the black women in a society where the ideal of female beauty is fair skin and chastity. Nevertheless, the three prostitutes are found as happy and satisfied with their life. They are portrayed as ‘strong and confident’ (Holm, 2010, p. 50) too. Morrison has definitely deconstructed the gender stereotypes by portraying them as “comfortable with their bodies and sexuality” (p.180). They are not timid, emotional and conventional but they are endowed with such inner spirit that is scarce in any other female character in The Bluest Eye. Pecola loves them for their attitude to life, their gaiety, and their strength of character and expects to have that carefree laughter. The narration of their laughing indicates how despising the society and oppressive social rules, they have created a hilarious world for them. The prostitutes can laugh spontaneously and their laughing enlightens Pecola's mind with delight and joy. Bayerman (1990, p. 60) states that all three prostitutes are not only happy in their life but they help others to transcend the private obsessions of other characters.

The prostitutes are not subservient to male dominance rather they oppress their customers. They view males as weak or not powerful enough or superior, rather they use males for their monetary gains. Whereas society expects women to be confined in domestic chores and keeping hush to sexual issues and desires, these women have taken prostitution, the most derogatory position of females in society, as their profession. Nevertheless, they are confident, strong, and not ashamed of their profession. Keeping the unsympathetic hostile world and the
social abuses, they have made a little world for themselves (Samuels and Hudson-Weems, 1990, p. 20).

The portrayal of the prostitutes as independent and sexually confident, suggests that “their occupation have, in some paradoxical sense, liberated them from the oppressive norms of society” (Holm, 2010, P.50). Prostitution is against the conventional gender roles of women, but in the world of the novel, the women are paradoxically portrayed as powerful and with self-worth. They are portrayed as women who do their job without illusions, anger or guilt.

Prostitutes are portrayed as more humane, good-natured, compassionate, loving, and caring in their hearts than other people of the society (Dias, 2009). Whereas the world is hostile to Pecola, these women give her that impetus for living life ‘whose quest for it elsewhere is futile” (Suranyi, 2007, p.17). Pecola loves them, gets enchanted by them, and desires to have their zest for life inside her. Her emotion overwhelms when she looks at them. These three ladies are the only adults in Pecola’s life who treat her decently. "Aware of being outcasts in society, the women perhaps recognize how Pecola is an outcast too, and feel no need to put her down" (Holm, 2010, p. 50).

Claudia, Pauline, and the prostitutes all are portrayed to have continuous struggle for establishing their identity in the patriarchal racist society. They are discriminated, marginalized, and repressed, nevertheless, these women do not fall into despair, anxiety, traumas, or frustrations. The condition and role of the women in a racist society are described by Simone de Beauvoir in “the second sex”(1980, p. 9; translated by Dias, 1):

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.” (p. 1)

The difference and discrimination towards women is therefore shaped by society. The society with its oppressive social forces has excluded woman from “the center of the system - excluded from ‘reality’ by race [they are all immigrants], gender, class, age, and personal history” (Davis, 1999, p. 14 cited by Dias, 2009, p.1). However, the women like Claudia, Pauline, and the prostitutes have refused to accept the conventional role of the society, revolted, kept on their endeavours to find what life has left for them, while Pecola became mad.
Therefore Tonny Morrison in *The Bluest Eye* successfully deconstructed gender stereotypes in the major female characters as Claudia, Pauline and the three Prostitutes. As a pioneer of Black Feminist Movement, she intended to draw some unconventional female characters who would be the embodiment of her dream, the personification of independent black women who had enough confidence and inner strength to defy the social taboos of class, race and gender and who from the condition of victims would reach the realization of personal autonomy or even creativity. Morrison a proud member of the black community believed that women’s belief on themselves, struggling against the demeaning gender conventions, resistance against all oppression were the ways of the emancipation of women. Her portrayal of women characters is really great as they will act like the pathfinder of emancipation for not only the Afro-American women, but all women in general.

**References**


