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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version

Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Hosseiny, S., & Shabanirad, E. (2015). A Du Boisian Reading of The Bluest Eye by Toni Morrison. *International Letters of Social and Humanistic Sciences*, 60, 121-127. <https://doi.org/10.18052/www.scipress.com/ILSHS.60.121>

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A Du Boisian Reading of *The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison

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Keywords: The other, Eurocentrism, Race, Post-colonialism, Du Bios, Double consciousness, Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*

ABSTRACT. Due to the color of their skins, Blacks were always subject to different types of disrespect and insecurity in their society. Among different groups of people, writers and critics knew it as their responsibility to act as Black people's voice and talk on behalf of them, as these people were labeled as 'The Other' by the Whites. Du Bios created a kind of new trend of dealing with African-American culture by innovating the concept known as "double consciousness", and arguing that these black people were trapped between dual personalities. As an American writer, Toni Morrison carried this specific burden upon her shoulders to reveal all those oppressions Blacks had to bear in their life, like what she depicted in the novel *The Bluest Eye* with portrayal of the main black character Pecolla who is being blamed for the color of her skin. This article intends to elaborate some inherent postcolonial traces in Toni Morrison's outstanding novel *The Bluest Eye* and examine how European power and white people were dominating the whole system of the society and what kind of regretful complications Blacks had to endure, and at the same time working on how Du Bois's concept of double consciousness can be analyzed in black characters.

1. INTRODUCTION

Dealing with humans and humanity has been one of the most important and pivotal issues in the world of literature. Humans of different types of ethnicity and cultures were subject to scrutiny for critics and writers. One of the most crucial periods of European society was the time when issues like empiricism, colonization and domination of powerful voices of the world were little by little permeating every aspect of the society. By such significant incidents, Black people were those groups of people who were under lots of pressure, cruelty and desolation by the Whites. Being treated as the victim of the society, they were regarded as the 'Other', with no rights to have a peaceful life of their own. Toni Morrison tried to deal with different kinds of problems like erosion and isolation these black people have endured in their life with an exclusive atmosphere of regretful influences racism and colonization brings to the whole stream of Blacks' life. In this novel, from the beginning to the end the reader is confronted with Pecolla's poor situation of life as being a black and ugly girl. By reading the novel, the reader would understand the fact that Pecolla is debased by almost everybody around her who think that it would be better for her not to have any specific activities in the society and stay as if she does not live. There are two kinds of stigmas in the novel regarding the character of Pecolla: the first one as "the bodily stigma of ugliness and femininity" and the second one as "the tribal stigma of being an African American" (Jerome Bump 156). So Morrison's purpose is somehow to show the tragic influence of being both African-American and at the same time ugly in order to make the reader sympathize with her.

In the novel, the whole value of life is focused on whether a man is white or not, whether somebody has blue eyes or not. This specific kind of transformation in values has been one of the results of colonization and empiricism. Due to the location of the continent, Europe claimed that what existed within this European sphere was right, including their language, their skin color, their culture and what could not be included within it was wrong. European authority tried to exclude all those matters which seemed eccentric to them, like African people who were born with black skin.

So Black writing model is one of the significant methods of writing about post-colonial literature with emphasis on hegemonies constructed between Whites and Blacks, in opposition to Commonwealth literature (Ashcroft et al 21). African- American people had to endure different types of oppressions and inequality due to their unknown identity, one as being an American and the other as being a Negro. This double personality was called 'double- consciousness' by the American writer and critic W.E.B Du Bios who knew it as his task to talk on behalf of those poor black people, and show negative aspects of racism and colonization on people's mind.

Understanding a character's inherent personality needs close examination of his/her behavior and the world's reaction and response to their actions. Regarding Pecolla, there are many parts of the novel which unveil her true personality. First of all, it is necessary to study the first reference of the novel which creates a strange impression in the reader's mind. In page 16 of the novel, when the mother informs Claudia and Frieda that they would soon have a guest whose situation is different from theirs: "Mama had told us two days earlier that a "case" was coming" (*The Bluest Eye*, 2007). Here by referring to the "case", a picture of a strange person would be shaped in the reader's mind, and this would spark the first attitude toward black people in the novel. Not even calling her name when introducing her to the children, mother of Macteer family knows it is somehow abominable that Pecolla is similar to her own children. Black people are considered by Whites as savage or brute. They know Blacks are totally different from other people who have different lifestyle. This specific point is clear in page 18 when the narrator compares them to birds: "Propertied black people spent all their energies, all their love, on their nests. Like frenzied, desperate birds, they over decorated everything" (*The Bluest Eye*, 2007).

2. AFRICAN- AMERICAN MOTHERHOOD

According to Andrea O' Reilly's attitude, issue of motherhood is central in studying African- American culture. How a mother treats her children and the whole family is of great significance. In Macteer's family, there is a mutual love and care between family members that keeps them united while in Breedlove's family, there is a specific segregation and desolation between family members, especially regarding Pecolla's mother, Pauline. She is more enthusiastic to work outside than showing affectionate care and attention toward her family. Another pivotal aspect in studying African-American culture is that "Mothers and mothering are what make possible the physical and psychological well-being and empowerment of African-American people and the larger African- American culture (O' Reilly 4).

This is clear in the novel *The Bluest Eye* when Claudia's mother's great attention and care toward the family makes her a lovely mother who is even convinced to take care of an unknown girl named Pecolla. This motherly behavior with too much care and emotion would cause her children, Frieda and Claudia, to show sympathy toward Pecolla and to be strong and confident. But the reader is confronted with the reverse situation in Breedlove's family. Because the mother does not feel a strong responsibility to show respect and kindness toward the people around her, especially Pecolla or even her husband, how Pecolla's personality would shape is not like Macteer children. Pecolla is not a self-confident girl. All the time she wishes to be a beautiful one with blue eyes. She is so fearful from different persons or situations, so she is being teased easily by the people around her. She is deprived from her mother's affectionate love, and the result would be her inability to resist and stand against all kinds of oppressions and injustice imposed on her by racist or white people. But to solve the lack of affectionate motherhood in the novel, Claudia and Frieda's mother helps to fulfill this task of mothering for Pecolla. Or to look at the situation from another aspect, issue of 'other mothering' was common in African- American culture. This concept of other mothering is defined "as acceptance of responsibility for a child not one's own, in an arrangement that may or may not be formal" (O'Reilly 5).

This is clear in the novel of Morrison when Claudia's mother accepts and tries to support and guide Pecolla toward a right path to fill the void of her mother. What really matters about black mothering is that it helps children to construct a static identity for themselves, or it is a tool for black children to nurture their self-actualization and also a motivation for social activism (O'Reilly

9). But the reverse of this concept is depicted in the novel. The black girl Pecolla does not have a fixed identity of her own. She feels herself swaying between an ugly, black African person and a beautiful, white American who would have blue eyes. To talk about Pecolla's mother in another way, a significant point about black motherhood can be understood. What is discussed in O'Reilly's book is that "the majority of African-American women had to work and could not afford the luxury of motherhood as a non-economically productive, female 'occupation' (qtd. In O'Reilly 10). This is also evident in the novel when Pecolla's mother tries to go outside the house and work in order to support the family economically. So the atmosphere of Pecolla's house does not let her become a complete person. She does not get "lovedsense of self and high esteem" from the side of her parents (O'Reilly11). Instead she sees disrespect and ignorance of her father toward her mother. Their house is not one to "nurture their spirits" (O'Reilly 11). Instead she is confronted by her father's strong sexual desire to herself which eventually led to her pregnancy. Toni Morrison's purpose of depicting Macteer's and Breedlove's family was to show how atmosphere of the house and parents' behavior would shape and affect children's future. Because Pecolla is disconnected from her family especially her mother, she does not consider herself as a mature woman and also a mother in the near future, but only imagines how it would be different if she were a girl with blue eyes. This kind of knowing oneself as a white girl is depicted in page 46 of the novel: "It had occurred to Pecolla some time ago that if her eyes, those eyes that held the pictures, and knew the sights- if those eyes of hers were different, that is to say, beautiful, she herself would be different"(The Bluest Eye 2007).

3. NOTION OF WHITE GOD IN BREEDLOVE FAMILY

Breedlove family are not satisfied with their life. All family members identify themselves with White Americans and yearn for their luxurious way of life. The blatant and tangible comparison between Breedlove and White American family is described in the novel which would clarify this point,

"Pecolla, Pauline, and Cholly Breedlove fall victim to their failure to transcend the imposing definition of 'The Other's' look. Reduced to a state of objectness (thingness), each remains frozen in a world of being-for-the-other and consequently lives a life of shame, alienation, self-hatred and inevitable destruction" (qtd. in O'Reilly 50). This specific kind of feeling in poor African-American families especially Breedlove is clear when Morrison describes their austere situation of life in page 38 of the novel: "They lived there because they were black and poor, and they stayed there because they believed they were ugly"(The Bluest Eye 2007). Or in another part of the novel, when the narrator refers to God who has created these black creatures: " It was as though some mysterious all-knowing master had given each one a cloak of ugliness to wear, and they had each accepted it without question"(ibid 39). By bringing the word "master", it might refer to God who has intentionally created them with black skin and made them to live under such inequality.

So to look at another aspect of the situation, a specific point which can be elicited from the above passage is that God and the angels are white who give their blessings to white people and abandoned all those non-Whites to live with their own vigor. This specific notion of White God is also described in page 134 of the novel when Cholly, Pecolla's father, describes his love of black devil: "God was a nice old white man, with long white hair"(The Bluest Eye 2007). So black people believe that all kinds of disrespect and ignorance which they bear in their life is rooted from God's own will who made them to be emancipated and do whatever they want. That's why Cholly does not follow morality in his life and religious sanctum, which eventually led to his sexual relationship with his own daughter.

4. DIFFERENCES BETWEEN WHITES AND BLACKS AND CONCEPT OF DOUBLE-CONSCIOUSNESS

Seeing black people as ‘Other’ and just paying attention to their own profit, white people try to disrespect and harass their black fellows. This is clear in different parts of the novel when Breedlove family feel a kind of lack of love and attention from the side of the Whites. Pecolla who is being subject to different kinds of ignorance and lack of affectionate love wishes to be a beautiful girl. This is clear in page 45: “long hours she sat looking in the mirror, trying to discover the secret of ugliness, the ugliness that made her ignored or despised at school” (*The Bluest Eye* 2007). So what matters mostly in the society is European or Western’s way of life and what is not included in this domain of society is marginalized like what Pecolla is bearing in her life. This feeling of being ignored by others is also clear when Pauline talks about the time she was in hospital and wanted to give birth to Pecolla. Being a black woman, Pauline was not under doctors’ monitoring, while white pregnant women took benefit from nurses’ and doctors’ care. This kind of ignorance and marginalization or Othering would definitely affect the embryo’s consciousness in Pauline’s womb that is depicted in page 125 of the novel: “They never said nothing to me. Only one looked at me. Looked at my face, I mean. I looked right back at him”. Or when she says that doctors talked to white women warmly: “I seed them talking to them white women” (*The Bluest Eye* 2007).

A particular point which can be implied from black people’s speech is that they do not pronounce words correctly or do not pay attention to their making sentences properly. For example in page 120, when the narrator says: “Nasty white folks is about the nastiest things they is”, this shows how westerners tried to dominate Africans from different aspects and claim themselves as superior to others. This kind of domination is clear even in their language. All these kinds of self-hatred and shame drives from the fact that African-Americans suffer from double-consciousness. This particular kind of consciousness was invented by American critic and writer W.E. Du Bois who knew it as his responsibility to talk on behalf of poor African people and act as their voice to reflect all of their attitudes and feelings. What he asserts in his famous book titled “*The Souls of Black Folk*”, is that:

"The Negro is ... gifted with second-sight in this American world – a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity" (Du Bois 1-2). So black people suffer from not having a stable identity for themselves. This is clear in the novel whenever Pecolla imagines herself as a white girl who is being loved by everyone around her.

What Lewis Gordon believes is that this kind of double-consciousness has two particular aspects to be analyzed. The first one is about negative and psychological impacts of being a black person. So after comparing themselves with white people, blacks try to see themselves through the lens of Whites. The second one which Gordon refers to is that after finding themselves different from others, they realize that they are not treated the same as Whites (78). This is clear in page 46 of the novel when Pecolla identifies herself with her white fellows and imagines how her situation of life would be different if she were a white girl. So in that way she would be revered as a respectable girl: “If those eyes of hers were different, that is to say, beautiful, she herself would be different” (*The Bluest Eye* 2007).

This feeling of twoness in one’s personality would reveal the assumption that black people will be offended from “a synthesis of African survival (Africanism) with European cultural norms, giving blacks a double consciousness or making them hybrids or bicultural” (Paul C. Mocombe 7). In page 47 of the novel, Morrison referred to the plant dandelion which would have a particular significance. Being a wild plant, dandelion is considered as a useless flower which later becomes a white ball of seeds. This can be attributed to Pecolla who is being ignored by white people: “Nobody loves the head of a dandelion. Maybe because they are so many, strong, and soon” (*The Bluest Eye* 2007). So maybe Pecolla wanted to refer to her own situation and convey the message

that although she is not a beautiful girl right now, later she will be a girl with a white skin and blue eyes who would be praised by everyone.

What Mocombe believes is that this kind of being a black person behaving in a way which does not attract White's attention is part of their "innate sense of blackness or Negro blood" which caused these poor African- American people different from their white fellows (59). But in most parts of the novel, the reader is confronted with black's honesty and true love to one another. For example in page 71, when boys and girls discuss what happens if somebody sees a naked man, Pecolla suddenly says: "nobody's father would be naked in front of his own daughter, not unless he was dirty too" (*The Bluest Eye* 2007). Unlike black people, they explicitly express their emotions to their friends. What is totally apparent in the novel is Westerners' domination over Blacks' life, culture, education, and language. And this kind of paying attention to the people of their own races is described in a way that would make the reader sympathize with Black people. Regarding their language, Whites or Europeans forced Africans to speak English. But Blacks' usage of English is in a way which is achieved through their improper use of words, or when Morrison describes the girl Maureen Paul in page 62 to 65 of the novel, and explains how she is being treated respectfully by her classmates which is in complete contrast with Pecolla's condition: "When teachers called on her, they smiled encouragingly", but when children wanted to call Pecolla they called her: "Black e mo Black e mo Ya daddy sleeps naked" (*The Bluest Eye* 2007).

What Braden Kendhammer argues in his article about Du Bois's concept of double-consciousness is that, because of feeling a special duality in their personality Blacks should have a satisfactory state of life and live in a way to take advantage of modern education (57). But we see that the reverse of it exists in the novel. Instead of building their life upon education and construction of their identity, Breedlove family is deprived of ordinary education and there is no clear and stable relationship among family members. There is no portrayal of any special love or understanding between Pecolla and her parents. Even Pecolla's father works for his own profit and his only trouble is his own survival. Even his sexual relationship with his own daughter might be a revolutionary act against God's injustice and a justification of his ignorance about any sanctimonious and religious values of society.

All of those kinds of discrimination and inequality caused a blatant cultural 'hegemony' which was the regretful result of western colonization (Clovis E. Semmes 484). But actually there should be a harmonious and equal state of life in the universe with every creature in his/her own place. For example in page 103, Morrison points to a particular wheelbarrow: "That big white house with the wheelbarrow full of flowers" (*The Bluest Eye*, 2007). By talking like this, maybe the writer wanted to refer to William Carlos Williams's poem 'The Red wheelbarrow' which talks about the necessity of simple things like wheelbarrow in the life of people. So Morrison wanted to say that Black people have their legal right to live in the world and have their own way of life, with no interference. One particular aspect in considering Du Bois's double-consciousness is the concept of 'veil'. This specific veil refers to "race itself and its impact on the lives of Black American, the racial lens through which White Americans view Black Americans (Richard T. Schaefer 3).

By analyzing the novel, it would become clear that Pecolla's family suffers from such veil in their life, for example, when the poor condition of Pecolla's life is described in page 39 of the novel: "And Pecolla. She hid behind hers. Concealed, veiled, eclipsed- peeping out from behind the shroud very seldom, and then only to yearn for the return of her mask" (*The Bluest Eye*, 2007). Black people have to conceal behind their ugliness, blackness or their originality and be marginalized. Actually a great distance and gap or a vast dichotomy turns up between these two groups of society, Whites and Blacks, and the result of such discrimination or empiricism and western colonization would be unequal propagation of allotment destined by God. Another part of the novel which talks about existing veil between Whites and Blacks is in page 49 when it says that the true and primordial obstacle which does not let white people build a good relationship with their black fellows is their skin color and also their ugliness: "And it is the blackness that accounts for, that creates, the vacuum edged with distaste in white eyes" (*The Bluest Eye*, 2007). Throughout the novel, references to people's eyes are of great significance, for example, in the above sentence

“white eyes”, or in page 45 when Pecolla sees herself in the mirror: “Long hours she sat looking in the mirror, trying to discover the secret of the ugliness”, Morrison intentionally made references to people’s eyes, especially those of Blacks’. She wanted to say that people’s eyes act as a medium for one’s expression of feelings and attitudes. Eyes are the most powerful organ of body by which people can communicate with each other. One can understand a person’s pain or happiness by looking at their eyes. For example in the case of Pecolla, depicted in page 66, her eyes act as embodiment of defiance against those people who bother her: “Pecolla edged around the circle crying. She had dropped her notebook and covered her eyes with her hands”(The Bluest Eye, 2007).

Or to look at the eyes from another aspect, it is worth discussing that eyes are the first and most efficient organ of body through which man can penetrate and understand one’s soul. So what Morrison might have wanted to claim was that no matter what is the color of people’s skin, they can realize each other’s needs just through looking at each other’s eyes. But in the novel the reverse of this situation is depicted. There is no respect or love between White and Black. The whole novel describes Pecolla’s and even her mother’s desire to be in the shoes of Whites and be white and beautiful like them. Actually “both the mother and the daughter are the poor victims bewitched by the illusory models of beauty” (Shirshankar G Bhanegaonker 381).

This is what Du Bois describes as ‘double-consciousness’. Black people’s identity is trapped between a kind of twoness and divergence which would make them not preserve their primary personality and wish for something ruling in the society, which is white skin. Pecolla’s time is spent with consideration of the reason of her ugliness while Pauline is always working in the house of the Fishers and knowing this family as yardstick of an ideal family. But what remained for Pecolla at last was her madness although she got blue eyes. Instead of constructing a new identity for herself, Pecolla destroyed it. Or what Bhanegaonker says regarding her situation is that such voluntary need to be a beautiful girl led to Pecolla’s despair, frustration, disintegration and insanity (389). Pecolla thought that by having blue eyes she would be praised by everyone and do whatever she wanted, but what is actually depicted in page 206 of the novel was death of her baby which was concomitant with her madness: “She, however, stepped over into madness, a madness which protected her from us simply because it bored us in the end” (The Bluest Eye, 2007).

This kind of seeing themselves through the eyes of Whites reveals another aspect of Du Bois’s concept of double-consciousness, the relation between individual and community and also past and future of blackness (ShaoYuh-Chaun 550). They all think about their future life and imagine how their life would change if they were white, and they also consider themselves in opposition to the whole society. They are always afraid of not being accepted by the community and have a disillusioned feeling which makes them alienated and dissociated from other people. To look at the other side of the matter, Morrison “dramatizes the devastating effect of chronic shame on her characters’ sense of individual and social identity, describing their self-loathing, self-contempt, their feelings that they are, in some essential way, inferior”(qtd.in Chaun 556). This kind of feeling about one’s ‘self’ in Blacks is clear in page 128 of the novel when the narrator talks about Pauline’s treatment toward her family: “Into her son she beat a loud desire to run away, and into her daughter she beat a fear of growing up, fear of other people, fear of life” (The Bluest Eye, 2007). Actually Pecolla’s insatiable desire for having blue eyes results in becoming an invisible figure in the society who eventually becomes mad. She not only wanted a great transformation in her life like being a white and beautiful girl but also wanted the bluest eyes in the world. This kind of transcending beyond her capacities caused her tragic destiny. This kind of double-consciousness has its effect on Frieda and Claudia too. In page 22, for example, when Claudia asked herself: “what made people look at them and say, “Awwwww”, but not for me?” Or when she destroyed white baby dolls (The Bluest Eye, 2007). It shows that they are also suffering from dominant hegemony existing between Whites and Blacks. And finally the most apparent part of the novel which talks about Pecolla’s double-consciousness is in page 49 when the narrator talks about Pecolla’s appearance: “So the distaste must be for her, her blackness. All things in her are flux and anticipation. But her blackness is static and dread. And it is the blackness that accounts for, that creates, the vacuum edged with distaste in white eyes”(The Bluest Eye, 2007).

5. CONCLUSION

Toni Morrison as a black writer tried her best to reflect all the oppression and cruelty Blacks had to endure in their life. Being trapped between two poles of Africanism and Americanism, African-Americans could not establish a unique and permanent identity for themselves. They were under the influence of double-consciousness which made them become keener toward white people's world and an insatiable desire to be in their shoes like having white skin, speaking fluently or taking advantage of modern education. What Toni Morrison tried to depict in her novels is that great barrier or wall or what Du Bois called it a veil between Whites and Blacks which does not let each faction understand each other and penetrate to the other's culture and civilization. This kind of hegemonic situation in society would lead to a state where white group of people feel superior and dominant while Blacks are doomed to be ignored and alienated from their "self". This state of being detached from community will create a special feeling of self-loathing and shame in Black people and force them to transcend their current personality and desire something unachievable like what is depicted in the novel. Pecolla's desire to attain blue eyes caused her madness. Effects of western colonization on black people's lives especially their mind are in a way that they spend their life trying to imitate western state of life and imagine themselves as one of the Whites. Their main purpose of doing so is that they believe all these kinds of modernity and advancement belongs to Whites, and they are like toys in the hands of Whites and their existence is based on how much they provide profit and advantage for the Whites like Pecolla's mother who is just working in the white people's house instead of showing affectionate care and attention to her own family.

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