

GENDER AND IDENTITY AGENCY IN TONI MORRISON'S *THE BLUEST EYE*

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Abstract: *Imperialism and colonial practices dominated an entire system of representations, configuring ideological structures guided by a supposed essentialism, which, in turn, justified the oppression of women and the black population based on gender and race. This paper analyses theories that focus on a pluralistic understanding of the world. In the context of postcolonialism, the review of cultural criticism through the literature of prominent women of America proposes a critical reading about the continuity between colonial relations of domination and oppression, underscoring the dual colonisation of women. The assessment of *The Bluest Eye* (1970), by Toni Morrison reveals a socio-historical understanding of colonialism and its repercussions in contemporary times. The analysis of the authorial voice aims to identify how her perspectives reveal a literature of social engagement, allowing other subjects to become aware of social injustice still very present in the Americans, through the context of her narratives. Thus, the primary objective of this paper is to reflect upon the transformative potential of the literary text, as well as the origin and formation of the speech that expresses the subjectivity of the one who writes. Moreover, how in the relationship between writer and reader, the author's voice compromised to the most diverse social realities have the highest potential of evoking other marginalized voices through literary practice.*

Keywords: *Postcolonialism, Feminism, Identity, borders etc.*

Introduction:

Outlining the importance of gender in the process of constructing postcolonial identities, and understanding how it influences contemporaneity, becomes necessary since the concept of gender brings an essential contribution to postcolonial theory. Initially, postcolonialism did not consider the implications of gender when discussing dichotomies of power. Therefore, it is crucial to regard gender as a form of domination, a fundamental category in the institution and foundation of colonialism and the idea of modernity. From the intersection between postcolonial studies and the feminist theory of resistance, such as Black Feminism, a postcolonial feminist episteme is built. To think of colonialism as a central source of struggles and ideas of resistance in the Americas also means to consider the specific needs of women who suffer conjoined forms of oppression. Furthermore, reflecting on hegemonic thoughts on feminism and the colonialism are important exercises in times that “the coloniality of gender” (Lugones) manifests itself concretely, especially in the lives of women of colour who live on borders, and in places of social difference.

The colonial essence of these relations is evident in the various cases of domination and oppression defined by the establishment of hierarchical boundaries such as gender, racial/ethnic, class, creed, and so forth. The literary production of postcolonial individuals can respond to imperialism by bringing different views and experiences to the fore, ones that might challenge or replace a European perspective. Nevertheless, the literature produced by marginalised groups, which once had no institutional or intellectual legitimacy, was – and still is – often ignored in academic studies. Consequently, the academic environment confirms the legitimacy of Eurocentric

literature, if it does not counterbalance the promotion of the literature – anglophone literature, for instance – made outside the European thought and axis. Therefore, a study of the literature by women from the Americas effectively illustrates the conditions of peoples from different regions through the analysis of how the structured relationships between racism, class, and sexism generate common forms of oppression.

When women rise from the place of objects to become the enunciators and protagonists of their own story, they contest a part of history which silenced them. Moreover, by opening the cracks in the homogenous surface of canonical literature women contribute effectively in sparking necessary discussions and positive social changes. Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1970) echos present-day worries about political and social issues currently discussed in the region, regardless of whether these concerns are broached in an autobiographical work or dystopic fiction.

The Colonial Heritage of America:

During the colonial period of the Americas, European domination subjected more than three-quarters of the world to a complex ideological system of otherness and inferiority. The danger of the United States seizing the qualification of being American is that all other regions then are perceived as subcategories, that is, South America, Latin America, French America, and so forth. This example demonstrates the strong influence that the United States has over the continent— one that developed, in the 20th century, into a new colonial form known as Neo-colonialism.

Postcolonial Criticism:

Postcolonialism, as a term, originated in discussions about the decolonization and independence of African and Asian colonies after the Second World War, in theories produced by intellectuals who had their origins in then-known-as Third World countries. The sixteenth century demanded both the creation of a new world economy, and the emergence of the first great discourse of the modern world that would consolidate the conquest of America for the Spanish, Portuguese, French and British empires, among others. A speech that classified while subordinated Native populations, Africans, Muslims, Jews, and others. The context of modernity systematically subcategorizes the other, denying their protagonism in the hegemonic descriptions of modernity. Therefore, the first discourse that invents, classifies, and “subalternates” the other is also the first discourse of the birth of the modern/colonial world system. From a political, philosophical point of view, this frontier is established by the principle of blood/racial purity that established classifications and hierarchies among religions. This first great discourse that imposed the first colonial differences in the modern/colonial world system goes through successive transformations, colonial domination would thus be the connector between various epistemic places. The search for solutions to patriarchy, racism, colonialism, and capitalism can be sourced from the various local histories, and various epistemic perspectives, to the various contexts in which projects of resistance are staged. Within this development, we would find ourselves no longer within universalisms, but within pluralisms. An invitation to produce a rigorous, non-provincial decolonial knowledge.

The Repression of Postcolonial Women’s Identities:

The demands for recognition in gender are associated with androcentric cultural practices and sexism that insists on privileging what is masculine and depreciating everything considered feminine. Postcolonial criticism has insisted that the colonization should not be considered one entity or a single category to all individuals affected by it, calling attention to the fact that women have a marginal place in the core of patriarchal/colonial societies. The colonial system used female bodies as sexual and reproductive means. Therefore, Indigenous and Afro-descendant women received subhuman treatment, and their sexuality was the object of curiosity of the naturalist scientific discourse.

The western feminist hegemonic discourse erases race/ethnicity, social class, and geographical location of women by universalising or culturally homogenising them, limiting women’s political potential and subordinating them to women of higher social classes. The “new” colonial discourse has represented the women of the South as the others of modernity, oppressed not only in gender relations but also by the underdevelopment of the so-called Third World.

Identity and Agency in *The Bluest Eye*:

In 1970, the author Toni Morrison began to transfigure the realities that were present in the American imaginary though mostly overlooked in its literary practice. Her debut novel, *The Bluest Eye* (1970), is a study of race, gender, and beauty – recurring topics in her novels. Born in Ohio, in the United States, into a lower middle-class family, Morrison was an avid reader. In 1949, Morrison joined Howard University, where she graduated in English in 1953. The currently internationally-known writer, publisher, and professor has won a Pulitzer Prize for her novel *Beloved* (1987) and she received the 1993 Nobel Prize of Literature for her sharp and poignant novels that chronicle the experiences of black individuals in the United States during the 19th and 20th centuries. *The Bluest Eye* is a novel told from the perspective of a female narrator, Claudia McTeer; however, at the centre of it all is Pecola Breedlove, a black girl living in Lorain, Ohio, whose greatest desire is to have blue eyes. Claudia McTeer recounts their childhood story a few decades after the times of the events she narrates; thus, there is some distance between her and the action that unfolds in the narrative. Nevertheless, the exact time of the events in the narrative is never revealed. Claudia discloses, in the first few pages, that the narrative is a way of trying to understand what happened in the spring of 1941, the year Pecola became pregnant and lost her father’s baby. Claudia says that there is no way to explain why it happened, but it is possible to explain how – and how we, the readers, can find the answer as to why it happened (Morrison 20-21).

In the 1960s and 1970s, the necessity to discuss issues related to gender and ethnicity became imperative. Indian theorist Gayatri C. Spivak, influenced by the ideas of the Marxist philosopher Antonio Gramsci, would later scrutinize these years in her work. According to Spivak, the marginal place of women in society, particularly that of black and poor ones, contributes to silencing their voices (“Can the Subaltern Speak?” 294). Black female activists denounced the double invisibility of black women, both within anti-racist movements and within feminist movements. In between these decades, Morrison makes visible in *The Bluest Eye*, the experience of those who are the most ignored subjects of the Americas. After undergoing several violent experiences, Pecola Breedlove – the central character to the plot – starts building a connection between violence and her identity, grown from oppressive beauty standard ideals. Thus, Pecola wishes to have blue eyes as a means to be loved by others. Morrison chooses a very vulnerable subject, a female child, to display how racist and sexist patterns of beauty allied to gender-based violence can be devastating to the lives of black women.

The Bluest Eye means to question the historical conditions of a society that has begun to deconstruct the naturalisation of racism and, at the same time, experienced the perpetuity of underlying racism. To tell a story which simultaneously problematizes specific aspects of US society and offers

visibility to the experience of black women, the author uses a third-person omniscient narrator that has the function of describing the events, as well as describing the physical characteristics and the emotional states of the characters, in order to convey the experiences of Pecola Breedlove. She places the events she narrates in the year 1941. How much time has passed is not explicitly clear; however, she knows it was enough time for Pecola's innocence to be destroyed along with her childish dreams. Another form of social critique also fuelled it, namely writings that focused precisely on the marginalisation of black women, such as Carolina Maria de Jesus' diaries in the peripheries and Kimberlé Crenshaw's work on in the academy on Black Feminism.

Morrison uses a language that blurs the frontiers of academic thought, politics, and aesthetics to question the values of American society and the content of canons of so-called universal literature. She presents the theme of her novel on the first pages: Here is the house. It is green and white. It has a red door. It is very pretty. Here is the family. Mother, Father, Dick, and Jane live in the green-and-white house. They are very happy. See Jane. She has a red dress. She wants to play. Who will play with Jane? [...] Here is the house it is green and white it has a red door it is very pretty here is the family mother father dick and jane live in the green-and-white house they are very happy see jane she has a red dress she wants to play who will play with jane (Morrison 18-19).

This passage of the text represents books popularly used at that time in the United States to teach literacy to children. The educational material presents Dick and Jane as prototypes of model citizens who are part of a white, patriarchal, and bourgeois family. This sort of text is the material that girls such as Pecola Breedlove used in their schools. Thus, to highlight the racist and sexist discourse that permeates the text of the booklet, Morrison turns the language of Dick and Jane's story from perfect to chaotic, a strategy that translates into words the social patterns of exclusion that engender the experience of black girls and women. In the chapter, "Autumn," there are episodes narrated by Claudia that show, albeit subtly, Pecola's desire to be physically different, which is a subterfuge to her desire to be loved. Thus, there is in this desire for physical change a negation of self. She believes that an apparent and superficial change would cause people to treat her with love and care.

In a later episode, during Pecola's first menstruation, we witness her self-doubt and loathing. Pecola does not understand what is happening to her and thinks she will die. However, Frieda explains, "Noooo. You won't die. It just means you can have a baby!" (28) At the end of that day, these words of Frieda still echoed in Pecola's mind. She asks Frieda how this happens, and Frieda answers that someone must love her. Then, Pecola Breedlove asks, "How do you do that? I mean, how do you get somebody to love you?" (32).

Throughout the book, Morrison recounts Pecola's daily abuse by her father as well as at school and in her community. Consequently, there is no safe place for her. The narrative then connects the construction and deconstruction of Pecola's identity to the textbook fragment presented on the first pages. Just as the fragment mentions Dick and Jane's house, the narrator goes on to describe Pecola's house. The description of the Breedlove house's physical space reflects all the obscurantism and apathy of their lives. Beyond the simplicity and poverty described, its most impressive feature is the absence of life. Morrison here subtly suggests that ugliness is not an inherent quality of the family, but something they were made to believe they represent. In this case, the all-knowing master is the standard, and the cloak of ugliness is the prejudice that they absorbed from others.

In the chapter, "Winter," Claudia recounts an episode that shows the racial contempt of blacks for their colour. As children, they already have rooted in their minds the plague of racial prejudice that consumes and weakens them, without them realising it. The treatment of a black person at that time, and even today, was directly related to the tone of their skin. The darker they were, the more despised and humiliated they would be. Maureen Peal is a light-coloured mestiza, with long brown hair, and is considered wealthy by the other children. She is respected and admired by the other boys and girls, and the teachers treat her kindly. With Pecola, the opposite happens; they treat her without the least respect. Pecola is trapped by the boys like a fragile animal that is about to be devoured by predators as they form a wheel that surrounds her and begin to insult her. These boys, who share Pecola's skin colour and background, use her ethnicity as the central theme of their insult. Therefore, their insults become a form of self-denial, of what they are and what they represent. Frieda defends Pecola and confronts the boys to help out her friend. Claudia also finds in herself courage to defend her friend.

In the chapter "Spring," Cholly Breedlove is presented as a drunken and violent man; however, even more contemptible than his drunkenness or his violence is the fact that he rapes his own daughter. Pecola, then eleven-year-old, is brutalised by the person responsible for her wellbeing. This is a form of Cholly enforce his masculinity, a crucial issue in the construction of gender and racial identity.

"Summer," the last and the shortest chapter of the book, is comprised of an introductory part narrated by Claudia, an extended dialogue between Pecola and her imaginary friend, and, finally, Claudia's considerations about what happened to Pecola. That summer, Claudia and Frieda leave the neighbourhood houses to sell seed packs. They receive a promise that if they sell all the seeds, they will win a bicycle. As they pass through the houses, they hear snatches of a terrible story. Thus, the girls discover that Pecola is pregnant with her father's baby and had been beaten by her mother for the same reason, actually "they

say the way her mama beat her she lucky to be alive” (Morrison 189). In addition, people also consider her guilty for what happened and wished that her baby will not survive. Claudia and Frieda are moved by the lack of sympathy from their community, for they want the baby to be born well. They still do not understand the process of having a baby from a man, particularly when this man is a girl’s own father. The girls, in their natural childish solidarity, decide to make a promise, so that Pecola’s baby will not die. They give up the seed money, and they plant the seeds in the back of the house; if the seeds happen to sprout, they will know that everything went well (Morrison 192). However, those seeds never sprout. To conclude this chapter, Claudia analyses and evaluates what happened to Pecola.

Toni Morrison reveals that to circumvent dualisms, an author must write with utmost sensitivity. Thus, writing is conceived as a practice that seeks the intricacies and contradictions inherent in the processes of identification. Pecola is a girl with no voice in the novel. She is a girl who idolises the blue-eyed child actress Shirley Temple; who is bullied at school by virtually all her peers; who has a father with a severe drinking problem and a neglectful mother; who sees her parents having constant violent fights; and yet who will not be helped by anyone, even if they do not actively contribute to her humiliation. Morrison’s narrative form and content are inseparable. The way the author approaches the subject compels her readers to contemplations. As such, there is not an inherited essence in the characters. At the same time, the white majority in the community of Lorain, Ohio is not characterised as the main antagonist. Instead, the author points out to a collective responsibility for the victimization of Pecola.

In Morrison’s narrative, established meanings are transfigured so that the experiences of black women become visible in the author’s representation of ever-changing bodies, instead of prefixed identities. Toni Morrison challenges her readers to distrust the way that we, as a society, perceive these experiences. If the abuse of innocent dark-skinned girls looked upon as sensual objects becomes so natural that we are no longer appalled by it, then who would have the courage to look into Pecola Breedlove’s eyes and acknowledge her humanity?

Furthermore, Morrison shows inventiveness in dividing the chapters into seasons of the year to describe, through the recurrent use of metaphors and symbols, a theme still considered taboo at the time of the book’s publication. Nonetheless, they are a part of reality that needs to be urgently addressed. That is one of the main reasons why literary works such as Morrison’s are essential to the advancement of equality and fair representations in society. Although the author has been fairly recognised for her contribution in the advancements of civil rights through her literary work.

The literary works of Toni Morrison raise awareness of the intersections of topics such as class, gender, and identity

that speaks directly to the legacy of colonial intervention in the region. Whether autobiographical prose or in dystopic fiction, these works combined create a panorama of the typical struggles of women throughout the Americas and the significance of their voice in pursuit of civil rights and equality through their storytelling. This research revised established postcolonial concepts and their intersections with Cultural and Feminist Studies through a critical reading of the continuity of colonial relations of control and oppression. Women from the Americas, mestizas and marginalised, suffer combined intersections of prejudice. When women rise from the place of the subject to become the enunciators and protagonists of their own story, they contest a part of history.

The literary production of postcolonial individuals can respond to imperialism by bringing a variety of views on their history and experiences that can challenge stories of their culture told from a European perspective. However, the literature produced by marginalised groups, which once had no institutional or intellectual legitimacy, was – and still is – often ignored in academic studies. Consequently, the academic environment validates the legitimacy of Eurocentric literature, if it does not counterbalance the promotion of the literature – anglophone literature, for instance – made outside Europe. There lies the importance of diversity in literature. Racism – and, in fact, any prejudice – arises from the assumption that homogeneity is the natural state of things. Therefore, literature cannot be limited to a single perspective when it is not solely intended for a specific audience.

The effects of colonialism are still present in the Americas. Regions throughout the Americas have often shown a higher level of multiculturalism as well as inequality in countless ways. The colonial essence of these relations is apparent in the numerous cases of domination and oppression defined by the establishment of hierarchical boundaries such as gender, racial/ethnic, class, or sexual orientation. Therefore, identifying what causes the interconnectedness between diversity, gender, and pronounced inequality, and to what extent colonial legacy and the associated institutional structures have been impacting the postcolonial societies of the Americas is an effective way to revise historical representations that inspire more inclusive cultural identities.

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