

Folding and Unfolding of the Black American Woman: Applying Triple Consciousness Theory to Tony Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*

Ria Chopra

PAMAENG303
6th September 2022.

Abstract: *It is a strange lot to be a black woman in American society. She was brought to this country to be an unpaid worker, a concubine, and a broodmare. Her body and her sexuality have been reviled and experimented on but from the various brilliant shades of brown black people come in, is curiously loved. Her face has been used as the poster child for poverty and welfare and she must deal with the dismissal and contempt from everyone, from her own people to society at large. Despite everything, she is filled with fire. A swirling contrast of fire, salty tears wept, and strength. Morrison's The Bluest Eye is a tragic narration of black American girls and women for whom the society does not seem to have any dram of existence, let alone fundamental rights or respect. Morrison's characters, although unusual, voice stories that are not unique to only them. These are black men who have been oppressed by white men and black women who have been crushed by white women, who now inhabit a community struggling for an identity, love and belongingness.*

Keywords: double consciousness, triple consciousness, folding

1. Introduction

Published in 1970, Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* is based in the town of Lorraine, Ohio, Morrison's hometown. The narrative of the novel revolves around a little coloured girl,

Chopra 2

Pecola Breedlove who hails from a poor, abusive and an overall dysfunctional family with a drunkard father, a brother who could not care less and a mother who is too far conditioned into believing herself ugly. While the word 'ugly' is too harsh and blatant, it is the central theme around which Morrison's first publication revolves. To justify this theme, the writer relates the plot around Pecola, who in her impressionable adolescence is time and again, made to feel grotesque by white and black friends at school, male peers as well as her own mother. As the title suggests, she is compelled to desire blue eyes for herself to feel noticed, to feel beautiful, to decipher the world around her better, a world that pushes on her the image of a yellow-haired, blue eyed blinking doll as the epitome of beauty and her black skin deserving the abuse and rape she endures at the hands of her father.

"It had occurred to Pecola 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." (Morrison 44)

Triple Consciousness Theory

It was W. E. B. Du Bois, the American sociologist and activist that gave the concept of double consciousness as applicable to a coloured man. It poses that an African American man looked at himself in two, often contrasting ways, individually as a man of colour and also as a part of a collective American society.

"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. One ever feels his two-ness, —an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body" (Du Bois 14)

Chopra 3

Claudia Jones in her essay "An End to the Neglect of the Problems of the Negro Woman!", throws in another aspect of gender in this narrative. A sort of Triple Consciousness, it in turn infers that an African American woman has three aspects of viewing herself, a race, a nationality as well as a gender and thus is vulnerable to all three types of oppression. Deborah Gray White, a historian and professor of gender studies puts forth:

"In any society where men are not yet free, women are even less free because we are further enslaved. Because we are enslaved by our sex. Many African American women turned towards feminism in their fight against oppression because there was an awareness that they were being treated as second class citizens within the civil rights movement of the 60s. Many women felt that they were being asked to choose between a black movement that primarily served the interest of Black male patriarchs and a women's movement which primarily served the interests of racist white women."

Looking through the lens of triple consciousness, we focus more on the character of Pecola's mother, Polly Breedlove. Being the ninth out of eleven children, she grows up quite neglected, to the point where, punctured by a rusty nail, she is left disabled in one foot. Over the years, growing up believing herself to be vile and ugly, she accepts the love that Cholly gives her which eventually turns abusive and violent. Now as a middle-aged woman, she gives up on her husband, calling herself a Christian woman and a martyr for

suffering Cholly's blows. She works as a diligent, maybe too diligent maid for a well - to do white family. While isolated from the rest of the community by self - proclaiming that she is ugly, she also looks up at the white woman in the movies as the beautiful object of male desire. Unable to attain that, she chases yet another delusion, that of a white woman's household with fancy furniture and spacious shiny kitchen counters. That is perhaps the very reason she loathes her own cramped house and her ugly children, and puts in her life effort in the white one.

Chopra 4

The particular incident to be referred to here is the same that happens in the kitchen of the white family. Pecola's friends visit her while she is accompanying her mother at work in the white family's house. While leaving though, Pecola accidentally drops a freshly out - of - the - oven made blueberry pie on the floor. She herself slips in it and a lot of the pie splashes on her legs causing painful burns. Polly seeing this immediately starts shouting and abusing Pecola, even hitting and slapping her twice or thrice. During all this chaos, the little white girl who Polly takes care of, starts wallowing as well. Polly orders Pecola and her friends to leave immediately and picks up the child in her loving arms and hushes this pink and yellow girl with the sweetest voice.

"The little girl in pink started to cry. Mrs. Breedlove turned to her. "Hush, baby, hush. Come here. Oh, Lord, look at your dress. Don't cry no more. Polly will change it. " She went to the sink and turned tap water on a fresh towel. Over her shoulder she spit out words to us like rotten pieces of apple. "Pick up that wash and get on out of here, so I can get this mess cleaned up." (Morrison 107)

In such another instance, in the novel we see her employer, a white lady, telling her to leave her husband and get alimony as he beats her and that she should have more respect. But at the same time she also refuses to pay her the salary of the last few weeks that she has worked. We thus witness the ignorance of the white woman who assumes that Polly's husband had any money to even give something like 'alimony.'

"All such simple stuff. What was he gone give me alimony on? I seen she didn't understand that all I needed from her was my eleven dollars. I thought she's give me my money if I said I would, so I said 'Yes, ma'am. ' 'Can I have my money today?' 'No, only when you leave him. I'm only thinking of you and your future." (Morrison 118)

Chopra 5

Folding

Another concept closely related to triple consciousness is Folding, a term coined by Gilles Deleuze, one of the most significant French philosophers of the twentieth century. In laymen terms. A fold or folds allows one to create a space inside, according to one's needs and desires, away from the outer world. Although the French philosopher posed the fold in context with metaphysical thought, one could build upon it in the socio - cultural context of the existence of the black

American woman. While today in the twenty first century, the black American woman tries to 'unfold' her space in order to fit and exist within all possible spaces, resulting in more and more representation in mainstream media, this was not the case in the twentieth century and the literature produced in that period reflects the same.

Not just in *The Bluest Eye*, but also in other novels like *Sula*, by the same writer, *The Help* by Kathryn Stockett and *The Colour Purple* by Alice Walker, all represent black American women, who have folded their existence into this small space where they feel secure and barely survive. Polly in our novel similar to Minnie and Aibileen in *The Help* are women who work as maids for a white family, presiding over their kitchen and household and raising their white sons and daughters with way more love than their own white parents provide, and these same children grow up and learn to hate their skin colour and oppress them. Their own homes are at the very other ends of these towns of Mississippi, their own houses in dingy and shabby conditions, husbands beating them and children lost to the wars of white men. So, in a manner, these women create a fold for themselves where they keep their heads bowed, work themselves to death in order to barely sustain their family and all in all numb themselves to the overt discrimination and isolation at their workplace and home. We also see *Sula* in another of Toni Morrison's work, who tries to step out of this fold, asserting her choices in career and sexuality and as a result getting essentially boycotted from her own community left to die alone.

Chopra 6

2. Conclusion

The voice of the black woman gets lost somewhere between the racial and gendered spaces of existence. She does not belong to the mainstream women's feminist movement because it is predominated by and provides priority and protection to white women, and she also gets neglected within her own - coloured community as it is overpowered by the hypermasculinity of the black man. In the words of Deborah Gray White, "African American women are confronted with an impossible task, if she is rescued from the myth of the negro, the myth of the woman traps her. If she escapes the myth of the women, the myth of the negro ensnares her."

Chopra 7

References

- [1] Morrison, Toni. *The Bluest Eye*.1970. London Vintage, 2019.
- [2] "Triple Consciousness and the Black Woman. " *Beyond Black & White*, 11 Feb.2013, www.beyondblackwhite.com/triple-consciousness-black-woman/.
- [3] Welang, Nahum. "Triple Consciousness: The Reimagination of Black Female Identities in Contemporary American Culture." *Open Cultural Studies*, vol.2, no.1, 1 Oct.2018, pp.296-306, www.degruyter.com/view/j/culture.2018.2.issue-

1/culture - 2018 - 0027/culture - 2018 - 0027. xml,
10.1515/culture - 2018 - 0027.

- [4] Bois, W. THE SOULS of BLACK FOLK. files. libcom.
org/files/DuBois. pdf.
- [5] LitCharts. "The Souls of Black Folk Plot Summary
from LitCharts." LitCharts, 2016, www.litcharts.
com/lit/the - souls - of - black - folk/summary.
- [6] "What Is Black Existentialism?" Www.youtube. com,
www.youtube. com/watch?v=mPasL4O11 - k