

DIVIDED CONSCIOUSNESS IN *THE BLUEST EYE*

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Abstract

Toni Morrison's novel The Bluest Eye uncovers the identity conflicts between the African-Americans and the whites due to the notions of Eurocentrism, America-centrism, racism, and dominance of the west over the east. This paper explores an African-American girl Pecola's divided identity because of the reasons such as Dominance of West over the East, Being Black Immigrant, Lack of Recognition from Home and Society, Racism, and Poverty and Lack of Social security. The tragic part of their getting victimized is that due to the white standard of beauty even blacks regard themselves ugly and inferior, which gets analyzed by the use of W. E. B. Du Bois' theory of double consciousness. Though the novel shows both reasons and consequences of an African-American girl Pecola's divided identity, my paper mainly focuses on the reasons for Pecola's divided identity.

Key Words: Divided Identity, Double Consciousness, African-American, conflict, white, beauty, racism, Euro-centrism, immigrant

Introduction

Toni Morrison's master piece *The Bluest Eye* deals with the issue of the identity and divided consciousness of the central character Pecolla which is a tragic one. The conflict between blacks and whites is rooted in America in such a way that it is on the one hand debilitating the bond between blacks and whites and on the other hand it is creating fatal consequences on the psyche, identity and culture of the blacks. It was an American sociological theorist and critic and writer W.E.B. Du Bois who propounded the theory 'Double Consciousness' in his book *The Souls of Black Folk* which was written in 1903. His invention of this consciousness serves as a lens for understanding, materializing and explaining the tragic experiences of Pecolla with different black characters in *The Bluest Eye* who instead of having self consciousness suffers from double consciousness. Jose Itzigsohn and Karida Brown write: "Du Bois's theory of Double Consciousness puts racialization at the center of the analysis of self-formation, linking the macro structure of the racialized world with the lived experiences of racialized subjects" (231). Brown focuses on the racism which causes double consciousness in the blacks in America. Due to Du Bois' double consciousness, Du Bois becomes the representative voice of the marginalized and racialized blacks in America. In 'A Du Boisian Reading of *The Bluest Eye*', Sediqeh Hosseinya and Ensieh Shabanirad also regard Du Bois as a major voice for the blacks due to his theory of 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" (124). Thus, what becomes clear from the above mentioned critics' views is double consciousness becomes very applicable to reveal the divided consciousness of the blacks

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in America. Hence, to reveal Pecola's divided consciousness, double consciousness becomes an effective theoretical tool. There are different causes for Pecola to have divided identity such as Dominance of West over the East, Being Black Immigrant, Lack of Recognition from Home & Society, Racism, and Poverty & Lack of Social Security.

Dominance of the West over the East

The novel *The Bluest Eye* which takes place in the industrial Northeast of Lorain, Ohio Pecola Breedlove in the 1940s portrays Pecola Breedlove as a young African-American girl of 11 who is entirely marginalized by her white dominating community. So, she desires and appeals to God for having blue eyes "Pretty eyes, pretty blue eyes" (34). Morrison gives a clear portrayal of black families such as Pecola's family which has Pecola Breedlove, Cholly Breedlove (her father), Mrs Breedlove/Pauline Breedlove (her mother) and Sammy Breedlove (her brother), and Claudia's (the narrator's) family which has Claudia Mac Teer, Frieda Mac Teer, Mr. Mac Teer (daddy) and Mrs. Mac Teer (mama). Besides, other characters portrayed, Breedlove and Mac Teer are two black families depicted in the novel. One difference between these two black families is Breedlove family is much poorer and more downtrodden than that of Mac Teer family. Pecola plays with Claudia, Frieda and a white girl Maurel Peal. Morrison through the narrator Claudia discovers Pecola's experiences in the white dominated American society reflecting her divided consciousness, which indicates the divided consciousness of the blacks in America. I regard Pecola's being black slave/African slave as one major reason for her divided consciousness in the novel as she ignores her self & her identity, develops inferiority complex and longs to have blue eyes. Blacks have been segregated, humiliated and victimized by slavery system since the blacks were first immigrants brought to America as slaves. So, the blacks are regarded much inferior to the whites in America. To show Pecola's divided consciousness, I find Du Bois' double consciousness very contextual :

[A] sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and 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. One ever feels his two-ness—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body. (8)

Throughout the novel black characters mainly Pecola looks at herself through the eyes of others. So, she follows the western mindset and regards herself ugly, but finds white people such as Maureen Peal as beautiful. Why the blacks are dominated and how they have developed inferiority complex become clear from the Historical Perspectives of Whiteness Paul R Carr has given:

From the middle of the 15th century, the enterprise of slavery saw the dramatic and horrific dislocation of 12 to 15 million Africans to the Americas, and as the slave trade was enacted and orchestrated by White Europeans, there have been many debates regarding the complicity of those selling slaves based on the premise of natural superiority, xenophobic beliefs, religious inspiration, and the brute force of weapons and torture (Dei & Kempf, 2006). (57)

Thus, the major cause for blacks getting dominated in America is that they are regarded as the other by whites as they were slaves of whites in the past. The whites still have that sort of mindset. As for the blacks, they still judge themselves from the whites' perspectives as Du Bois says "It is a peculiar

sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others . . ." (8). Why blacks have divided consciousness is they suffer from veil as Du Bois writes, which indicates blacks' lack of clarity to see themselves outside of what white America wants them to know about them.

Being Black Immigrant

Being black becomes the major cause for Breedlove family to have irritation, dissatisfaction, poverty and family fragmentation. Why they are dissatisfied is they compare themselves to the whites and find themselves shattered, battered and othered. So, they idealize whites and desire to be like the whites. Husseiny and Shabanirad write: "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" (123). Both of these critics want to say that blacks regard whites as ideals of life style.

The construction of dichotomy such as black vs white and white vs non-white is caused by racism which leads blacks to have double consciousness instead of single consciousness. America is the land of immigrants. Today's white Americans were yesterday's Europeans. But, because of the concept of Euro-centrism and America-centrism, today's America is regarded as white America. As a result, non-whites or blacks such as Pecola are discriminated in America, which Morrison reveals in the novel. Morrison writes how even a group of black boys ridicule and humiliate Pecola pointing out lesser quality of being black and doing color discrimination while she is walking with Frieda and Claudia, "Black e mo. Black e mo. Yadaddsleepsnekked. Black e mo black e mo ya dadd sleeps nekked. Black e mo . . ." (65). The reason behind the boys behaving so with Pecola despite themselves being black is they follow the canon of beauty as whiteness. Pecola's/ a black girl's ugliness and her own beauty/ a white girl's beauty are pointed out by a white girl Maureen Peal whose remarks hurt Pecola and other blacks: "she screamed at us, "I *am* cute! And you ugly! Black and ugly black e mos. I *am* cute!" (73). Why Pecola is segregated and humiliated in an American society is due to racism. The trend of racism appears to be dominating and segregating the blacks so badly that they also regard themselves ugly as Du Bois says "this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others" (8). In this context, Bina Khat, who shows the painful effect of racism upon blacks, writes, "The racist culture fostered by the whites for centuries in American society has touched the consciousness of blacks to such an extent that Pecola's mother Pauline who works as a domestic servant in a white family's house hates the ugliness of her house, her daughter, her family and herself (71). Besides, Maureen's superiority complex and regarding herself beautiful are because of American mindset. Du Bois' line "The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line" (15) reflects how racism has affected non-whites creating the conflict between whites and non-whites, which is sure to weaken American government as Martin Luther King, jr also says in his historical speech 'I have a Dream'.

Lack of Recognition from Home and Society

In one way, as Pecola's self is negated throughout the novel, her consciousness is divided. Her self of being a young girl Pecola is not appreciated and loved by her parents Cholly and Pauline who in place of loving her keep on abusing and neglecting her, which is opposite to the quotation "charity begins at home". On the one hand, her own parents show abusive and negligent attitudes towards her; on the other hand the racist white society negates her which becomes clear from the novel. Her encounter with whites at the store shows their inhuman behavior towards Pecola. When she reaches the store to buy candies, Pecola observes:

How can a fifty-two-year-old white immigrant store keeper with the taste of potatoes and beer in his mouth, his mind honed on the doe-eyed Virgin Mary, his sensibilities blunted by a permanent awareness of loss, *see* a little black girl? Nothing in his life even suggested that the feat was possible not to say desirable or necessary. . . She has seen it lurking in the eyes of all white people. So. the distaste must be for her, her blackness. (50)

The main store keeper at the store was Mr. Yakoboswki who neglected and negated Pecola regarding her as an inferior black girl. So, to justify Pecola's bitter experience, a classical theorist Charles Horton Cooley's argument "people need "fellowship and that appreciation by others which gives his self social corroboration and support"(261). Why Cooley argues so is lack of recognition weakens self formation. Like Cooley, a sociological theorist George Herbert Mead also regards attitudes of social processes very important for the complete self. Mead's argument: when an individual "takes the attitudes of the organized social group to which he belongs . . . does he develop a complete self" (219). Both Cooley and Mead focus on the role of society and other people for the formation of an individual's self. Nadia Tanveen also comments: "In the text, racist attitude toward blacks is shown as a lack of recognition, a perspective in which the idea of blackness removes human identity" (571). Thus, for Pecola's divided consciousness, lack of responsibility of her family and society appears to be the major cause.

Racism

On the one hand, like Itzigshon's and Brown's view "For the racializing subject, the racialized subject is invisible" (233) which is like Du Bois' concept of veil, which indicates white Americans' lack of clarity to see blacks as true Americans. Itzigshon and Brown further explain "Whites project their own constructions of Blacks onto the veil, and in this way the veil works

as a one-way mirror: those on the dominating side of the veil see their projections of the racialized reflected on it" (233). The damaging interracial humiliation Pecola faced at Geraldine's home is because of veil. Once in Jeraldine's absence, her son Junior took Pecola to his house and started playing, but when she entered the house, she observed her son and Pecola playing "She looked at Pecola. Saw the dirty torn dress, the plaits sticking out on her head, hair matted where the plaits had come undone, the muddy shoes with the wad of gum peeping outfrom between the cheap soles, the soiled socks, one of which had been walked down into the heel of the shoe" (91). Gerldine immediately reacted and forced her to leave by saying ""Get out," she said, her voice quiet. "You nasty little black bitch. Get out of my house" (92). Geraldine's such remarks damaged the delicate and innocent self of Pecola who being unaware of social prejudices caused by racism and wealth always desires whiteness. But, on the other hand, Morrison has delineated Claudia a black girl as a narrator and protagonist who unlike Pecola is conscious of racism and so does not desire whiteness, but appears to be contrary to those black characters in the novel like Pecola who desire and glorify white beauty or whiteness. She is like one who is against white supremacy. Carr's biological perspectives of whiteness which do not regard white supremacy "With the introduction of DNA analysis and other scientific measures, it can now be acknowledged that racial purity is a myth. All people, regardless of racial origin, have the same four blood types (A, B, AB, and O) and largely share similar genetic traits" can be suitable for Claudia and really good to get rid of racism.

Pecola desires blues eyes due to white standard of beauty. According to the racial ideology of beauty, everything related to white is beautiful and anything which is related to blacks is ugly. Tanveen's statements "In *The Bluest Eye*, the dominant racial ideology is that everything related to the color of whiteness is beautiful and blackness is ugly. Thereby the identity of the African Americans is terminated through the interpellation of the western ideological thoughts. Most Americans are stimulated by the rules or ideologies set by the white Americans" (570) explain white standard of beauty. Chitra Pegu comments on Pecola "Beauty, according to Pecola, was to have a pair of blue

eyes. Her ideal kind of beauty was to have the features of the then popular White American actress, Mary Jane- beautiful white face with wavy blonde hair and a pair of the bluest eyes” (4). Pecola has forgotten that she is black, but she acts like a white girl at the end of the novel described by Morrison because of the veil and her sense of two-ness, about which Du Bois writes “One ever feels his two-ness,- an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body” (8). Morrison has beautifully described Pecola’s strong desiring whiteness as “Long hours she sat looking in the mirror, trying to discover the secret of the ugliness, the ugliness that made her ignored or despised at school, by teachers and classmates alike” (45) and “Each night, without fail, she prayed for blue eyes. Fervently, for a year she had prayed. Although somewhat discouraged, she was not without hope. To have something as wonderful as that happen would take a long, long time” (46). Pecola’s desires of blue eyes indicates her desiring whiteness which has devastated herself in such a way that taking help of soaphead church she starts having hallucination and thinks she possesses a pair of blue eyes, but in reality it is only her imagination, about which Pegu writes “She moved freely with dignity and pride. But for society she became a young girl gone mad” (4). Thus, white standard of beauty and racism have a tragic impact on Pecola’s self.

Due to the tragic impact of the white standard of beauty on the blacks like Pecola, which reflects racism, Morrison writes *The Bluest Eye* to show the negative consequences of such a trend of racism. In ‘White Standard of Beauty in Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*’, Md. Minhazul Islam writes:

Toni Morrison depicts the tragic effect of imposing white ideals of beauty in the developing female identity of a young African-American girl during the early 1940s.

Morrison portrays the psychological devastation of Pecola Breedlove who searches for love and acceptance in a world that denies and does not value people of her race (blacks). The whites established European standard of beauty: white skin, blond hair, and blue eyes. This Eurocentric standard of beauty which the black girl lacked was used in judging and qualifying beauty, thus causing blacks to develop disdain for their own black skin as it counters the dominant ideals. (189-190)

Islam argues how Morrison’s novel *The Bluest Eye* reflects psychological impact of white standard of beauty on the African-Americans.

Poverty and Lack of Social security

One reason for the negation of self of blacks like Pecola is lack of social security and poverty. The entire novels shows how insecure socially black characters are and how poor they are particularly Breedlove family. Geraldine’s reading Pecola in her house “She looked at Pecola. Saw the dirty torn dress, the plaits sticking out on her head, hair matted where the plaits had come undone, the muddy shoes with the wad of gum peeping out from between the cheap soles, the soiled socks . . .” (91) indicates Pecola’s extreme poverty, which causes Geraldine to humiliate Pecola. Parents are the symbol of security for children, but Pecola gets raped by her father Cholly and her mother instead of punishing her husband scold her daughter. So, regarding social security of Pecola, she is completely insecure and victimized by her own father besides others. Pecola’s pathetic plight due to her rape by her father and discrimination, hatred and negligence shown to her by her family and society has completely torn and devastated her. So, in ‘Contemporary Fiction’, Jago Morrison, writes “The depiction of incest and child abuse which Morrison takes as her subject in this text gives an initial impression, certainly of depression and anger” (119).

Apart from the reasons mentioned above for Pecola’s divided consciousness, her being a colonized immigrant also emerges as a powerful cause. Since African-Americans are colonized immigrants in America, they are under dominance and hegemony of white Americans. Pegu’s statements

“Colonization and slavery established the white American more politically superior than the blacks. As a result, white standard of beauty became dominant. In America black skin colour is associated with thick lips and kinky hair whereas, the white complexion goes with the straighter hair and blue eyes” (3) support the idea of white supremacy, white standard of beauty and ugliness of blacks.

Besides, if Pecola’s family were rich, they would be economically and socially secure. Pecola’s mother would not have to work at the white’s house and they would not have to depend on others then. Mainly, Pecola would be properly fed, brought up and dressed. They would not have inferior complex and others/whites would not dominate them, too. Primarily, Pecola would not have divided identity, then. So, the poverty of blacks or African-Americans is one major reason for them to be segregated, dominated and being mentally divided.

Conclusions

In this way, this research article on the one hand shows how African-Americans suffer from the identity crisis such as divided identity in America, which causes their pathetic plight as despite being American citizens, they are regarded only as blacks/Africans. On the other hand, the research paper mainly focuses on the root causes of African-Americans’ divided identity, which are their being immigrants, being blacks, racism, dominance of the west over the east and lack of economic and social security of the blacks.

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