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DELINEATING PECOLA'S SUBJECTIVITY THROUGH MATERIAL OBJECTS: A CASE STUDY OF TONI MORRISON'S *THE BLUEST EYE*

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Abstract

This paper aims to analyse the novel *The Bluest Eye* through the lens of material culture studies by examining the relationship between Pecola and the cultural contours of material objects surrounding her. It attempts to suggest that the objects in the novel are not defunct but serve as essential signifiers of identity and reflect the protagonist's desirability, aspirations and sense of self-worth. The paper attempts to analyse objects as reflections of culture and demonstrate how they shape cultural meanings and practices for Pecola. By examining how objects- their presence/absence affects the emotional well-being of Pecola, we shall decipher how objects simultaneously act as sources of both trouble and stability. This study delves into the complex subjectivity of the protagonist Pecola by exploring the symbolic and material significance of the objects such as the Jane Dick reader, the Shirley Temple cup, dolls, candies and finally the blue eyes. The paper aims to identify these objects and discuss how they act as markers of identity for Pecola. Furthermore, it examines how the presence and absence of these objects affect her emotionally and shape her perception of self. Ultimately, this analysis contributes to a broader understanding of how material objects mediate our relationship with the world around us.

Keywords

Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*, Material Culture, Objects, Gender Rape, Ethnicity, Identity, Culture, Racism.

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Introduction:

Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, published in 1970, is a much-acclaimed African-American novel received well in literary circles. The novel has been discussed extensively from multiple perspectives of gender, class, race and identity and continues to intrigue its readers with its lyrical writing style and powerful prose (Moses, "The Blues" 623). However, the lyrical style employed by Morrison is rendered musically impotent by the series of events the protagonist goes through. Pecola, a young, black female African American belonging to the lowest rung in the social ladder, goes through the multiple traumas of racism of being a female whom her father incestuously rapes and impregnates. She delivers a stillborn baby and finally descends into inevitable psychic death. The novel mainly highlights the psychological effects of racial-social oppression and sexual violence on young girls, particularly its protagonist, Pecola Breedlove and its devastating impact on her life. This paper attempts to delineate the experiences of Pecola by thoroughly investigating the material objects surrounding her and deciphering how the two-way communication ensues between her and the material manifestations of objects.

The recent theoretical shifts from an anthropocentric world to a world of objects enable us to understand the role of inanimate objects in shaping human subjectivities. The material turn is characterised by a renewed interest in studying the material world and its non-human actors. The novels of Morrison are replete with objects that shape and influence the lives of their characters. The novel begins with an excerpt from the Jane Dick reader taught in public schools during the 1940s. The excerpt appears in three different forms and represents the lives of an idealised white household, the MacTeers and the Breedlove family. The varying forms of these excerpts acquaint the reader with what is to follow. As explained by Phyllis R. Klotman in his essay titled, "Dick-and-Jane and the Shirley Temple Sensibility in *the Bluest Eye*", the deterioration of form of the three excerpts impinges directly upon the social lives of these families. The first excerpt acts as a discursive manifesto that directs the children's behaviour and makes them conscious as to how the ideals of beauty and self-worth manifest within white supremacy. The MacTeer and Breedlove family follow this ideal quite differently, while the MacTeers, particularly their daughter, Claudia, resist succumbing to the racial discourse

manifested through the primer. Pecola, the daughter of Cholly Breedlove and Pauline Breedlove, lives by the ideals of primer and, in the process of carving a space for herself in the white society, is thrown into the abyss of madness. The Jane Dick reader is a concrete example of how cultural artefacts can embody and reinforce cultural norms and ideals. To quote Klotman from the same essay:

“Claudia is able to learn and mature because the McTeers have the inner strength to withstand the poverty and discrimination of a racist society and to provide an environment in which their children can grow. Pecola’s family, on the other hand, is without those resources. The Breedloves-in spite of the name-are unable to show Pecola the love that would mitigate her rejection by society. She lives in that version of “Dick and Jane” which reflects the chaos of Cholly and Pauline Breedlove’s world.” (Morrison 124)

Nevertheless, the Shirley Temple Cup is another object that reinforces these beauty standards in the novel, especially among the children. Pecola is highly fascinated by the physical features of Shirley Temple, a child actress and makes every effort to be like her. As we are told by the narrator that Pecola yearns to have blue eyes like Shirley because she believes that the acquisition of blue eyes may eventually lead to her acceptance in a racialised world. Pecola’s fondness for the cup and eagerness to drink every drop of milk from it represents her desire to be like all the Shirley Temples of the world. She is overwhelmed by Shirley’s image on the mug so much that she devours the milk from it in such a way as if she drinks from the fountain of Shirley’s beauty. The visual representation on the mug represents the dominant fetishised ideals of whiteness which Pecola tries to emulate. Klotman argues:

“Whether one learns acceptability from the formal educational experience or from cultural symbols, the effect is the same: self-hatred. Pecola’s actual experience cannot be found in “Dick and Jane,” for in the school primer, society denied her existence. In yearning to be Shirley Temple, she denies her own.” (Morrison 124)

Apart from this, the circulation of dolls in the novel modelled as per the actress’s physical features puts even more pressure on Pecola to match her beauty standards. While living upto the expectations reflected through these material objects surrounding her, Pecola gradually loses herself and leads her to question her self-worth.

Pecola’s loneliness in a hostile racist environment is relieved to a certain extent by her interaction with the external world of objects. The coins she carries in her shoe, although a source of discomfort and a signifier of her poverty, are cherished by Pecola because it gives her the authority and the security to buy what she wants. They become a means of coping and survival in an oppressive system. The Mary Jane candy that Pecola intends to buy, “All Mary Janes, she decides” (Morrison 48), the desire to buy all of them can be appropriated with buying all the beauty that Mary Jane embodies. Apart from the sweet taste of the candies and the comfort they bring her, these candies act as ways to escape from the harsh realities of her life. Furthermore, as the omniscient narrator remarks:

“Three pennies are in her shoe—slipping back and forth between the sock and the inner sole. With each step she feels the painful press of the coins against her foot. A sweet, enduring, even cherished irritation, full of promise and delicate security.” (Morrison 47).

As she went on to buy these candies, the external world seemed more realistic than the world she inhabited as a young girl. She felt a sense of belonging in this external world as if it genuinely owned her. She reflects upon the cracks in sidewalks and wonders why dandelions

were referred to as weeds when they were pretty. This world seemed more real to her because she could possess its objects, like the dandelions and call them her own that otherwise were shunned by others. The narrator says:

“These and other inanimate things she saw and experienced. They were real to her. She knew them. They were the codes and touchstones of the world, capable of translation and possession. She owned the crack that made her stumble; she owned the clumps of dandelions whose white heads, last fall, she had blown away; whose yellow heads, this fall, she peered into. And owning them made her part of the world, and the world a part of her.” (Morrison 47-48)

In the essay, “Agentic Things and Traumatized People in Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*”, Quan Zhou and Qiping Liu argue that Pecola’s attraction to the object world testifies to the fact that the human/object interface can be rendered dysfunctional with the absence of any of two elements. In the case of Pecola, these otherwise banal objects, as they may seem to others, are among the very few objects to which she can relate, “these outdoor things assume a lively and familiar presence to Pecola, and through their capacity to encode and decode the material world, loom as agentic entities that arrest her attention and emotions” (113). A constant dialogue ensues between Pecola and these dandelions, a dialogue bereft of the social conventions that remind Pecola of her black skin. While quoting Sara Ahmed, these critics opine that “Pecola’s body becomes nonetheless “a body-at-home in its world” (qtd. in “Agentic Things” 113).

Her encounter with the racist shop owner, Mr Yacobowski, later disgusts her so much that it renders her speechless before him. She does not exist for him because she is black; in the narrator’s words, “he senses that he need not waste the effort of a glance. He does not see her, because for him there is nothing to see... Nothing in his life even suggested that the feat was possible, not to say desirable or necessary” (Morrison 48). Although she is not strong enough to spew back her anger on the shopkeeper, she instead splurges her frustration on the dandelions calling them “ugly” and “she trips on the sidewalk crack” (Morrison 114). The shame that she feels on account of being discriminated against and regarded as a non-entity manifests itself as anger which she then castigates on the outer material world. This is to suggest that while she finds some refuge in these objects, they also provide her with the space to vent out her innermost exasperations that otherwise would damage her further. To quote Quan Zhou and Qiping Liu, “... these agential things relieve her of shame and help her regain mental balance. Without their agentic power, Pecola would drown in the flood of unbearable shame” (“Agentic Things” 114).

Pecola imbibes her fascination for the blue eyes from the elementary school primer; she believes that despite being black, her other physical features were quite accommodative and could render herself acceptable in society, only if she had a pair of blue eyes. Pecola’s psychological disintegration is subject to the presence/ absence of this material object in her body. La Capra, in his essay, “Trauma, Absence, Loss”, while distinguishing between loss and absence, argues that the trauma caused by absence is more cryptic than loss; a loss is a spatiotemporal event that in the past has a physical manifestation of “being”, and can be traced within the coordinates of time and space and can be mourned over. However, in case of an “absence” of an object, there is no question of reworking it as it never existed in the first place. An absence leaves the victim in a fragmented and chaotic state of mind, devoid of any physical form and bereft of any mourning (699-700). For Pecola, her obsession with blue eyes is directly linked to her identity; she does not deem herself acceptable in society as her desire for

blue eyes is rooted in the cultural belief that the presence of blue eyes is the only way of social acceptance and recognition in a racist society. Their absence, for her, is not only emblematic of how others perceive her as a black but, more importantly, how she perceives herself.

The absence of blue eyes affects Pecola beyond measure; she feels a deep sense of isolation, shame and self-hatred and finally loses her sanity. Even after being left deranged entirely, Pecola does not relinquish her desire to possess blue eyes. Soaphead Church, a self-acclaimed religious healer moved by her passion and desire, manoeuvres her into believing himself, having granted her the blue eyes she always wanted. In his letter addressed to God, he says:

“I, I have caused a miracle. I gave her the eyes. I gave her the blue, blue, two blue eyes. Cobalt blue. A streak of it right out of your own blue heaven. No one else will see her blue eyes. But she will. And she will live happily ever after. I, I have found it meet and right so to do.” (Morrison 182)

He easily tricks Pecola taking advantage of her madness into believing she now has her pair of blue eyes. Although Pecola feels satiated by the fact that she possesses blue eyes, it does not unfetter her from the dungeon of madness. However, the sheer self-assurance of her having them sets her free and elevates her sense of self-worth to some degree. To quote from the text:

“The damage done was total. She spent her days, her tendril, sap-green days, walking up and down, up and down, her head jerking to the beat of a drummer so distant only she could hear. Elbows bent, hands on shoulders, she flailed her arms like a bird in an eternal, grotesquely futile effort to fly. Beating the air, a winged but grounded bird, intent on the blue void it could not reach—could not even see—but which filled the valleys of the mind.” (Morrison 204)

In the essay, “Black Naturalism and Toni Morrison: The Journey away from Self-Love in *The Bluest Eye*”, Patrice Cormier-Hamilton comments that Pecola Breedlove is not only the victim of a racist community but also suffers due to the lack of parental love especially from her mother (Morrison 121). The problematic character of Pauline Breedlove as opposed to her name breeds everything but love for her children. The private cosmos of motherly love which is rendered barren by Pauline corresponds directly to the barren space in which they live. As described by Anat Hecht in the essay, “Home Sweet Home: Tangible Memories of an Uprooted Childhood”, a home is, “invested with meaning and memory, a material testament of who we are, where we have been, and perhaps even where we are heading.” (123). In case of Pecola, there is nothing like home, as the narrator says, “There were no memories among those pieces. Certainly no memories to be cherished” (Morrison 36). The dilapidated condition of home reflects the identity crisis that each member of Breedlove family carried within themselves. Thus, any retrospective examination of the house therefore entails memories that are cumbersome to carry.

Conclusion:

As a reader, one cannot deny how some of these material objects are discursive and unsettle the life of the marginalised groups in the novel, particularly Pecola. However, from her point of view, attaining these objects/features is the ultimate solution to being accepted in an otherwise hostile environment. These objects then do not remain the mundane objects as such but, as D. Winnicott would call them, “transitional objects” with agential capacities beyond their functionality. In the case of Pecola, material objects are harbingers of pain and relief. At times they refurbish pleasant memories, whereas sometimes, they bring to the surface the

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heavy, cumbersome memories. Nevertheless, the emotions and memories that arise from these objects characterise Pecola's identity.

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