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**The Paradox of Black Female Corporeality/Corporeality: A Review of Toni Morrison's
*The Bluest Eye***

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ABSTRACT

Within the patriarchal discourse centered around the binary categories of “man” and “woman” the so-called “inferiority” of the latter is located upon her corporeal body itself. Set against the normative “phallic male”, the “non-phallic female sexuality” comes to be cast as a conspicuous “absence” or an “inherent lack”. In fact, the devalued “womanhood” that a “woman” is said to embody is projected as an inevitable manifestation of her “lacking” female body. The “woman” is thus reduced to a mere sexed body with her “realities” firmly inscribed upon her physical body or her corporeality/corporeality. However, the interaction of gender, race and class ideologies within diverse social contexts constructs a female subject whose corporeality/corporeality is also marked by class and racial dimensions. Hence, in such a context, the Black woman being non-male and non-White, her body is characterized as “doubly-lacking”. In fact, the gendered and racialized corporeality/corporeality of the Black woman constitutes a paradox for it is her very physical body, which is said to be a *visible* embodiment of her “dual inferiority”, that renders her *invisible* within the normative White patriarchal discourse. Thus, the aim of this paper is to examine the paradox of the Black female body which simultaneously occupies an “Othered” presence and an ideologically fabricated absence/invisibility within the gendered and racialized social discourse. This paper draws upon Toni Morrison’s novel, *The Bluest Eye* in de-constructing the constructed paradoxical corporeal/corporeal existence of the Black woman. It focuses on how the Black female characters in Morrison’s novel grapple with the constructed social “reality” that “femininity”, which is very much located in the female physical body itself, is one that is “essentially” White.

Keywords: construct, corporeality, womanhood, absence, paradox

Introduction

Within the patriarchal discourse, constructed around the binary categories of “man” and “woman”, the so-termed “inferiority” of the latter is projected as her “biologically endowed” destiny. Her devalued “womanhood” is thus located upon her “corporeal body” itself. Set against the normative “phallic male”, the “non-phallic female sexuality” comes to be defined as a conspicuous “absence” or an “inherent lack”. The “inferior womanhood” that a woman is said to embody is then cast as an inevitable manifestation of her “lacking” female body. For instance, patriarchy’s attempt at casting female sexuality as some “inherent lack” is very well reflected in Sigmund Freud’s psychoanalytic conceptualization of woman. Inquiring into “how a woman comes into being”, Freud states the following: They at once notice the difference and, it must be admitted, its significance too. They feel seriously wronged, often declare that they want to “have something like it too”, and fall a victim to “envy for the penis”, which will leave ineradicable traces on their development and

the formation of their character and which will not be surmounted in even the most favourable cases without a severe expenditure of physical energy. (as cited in Ma, p. 05)

Freud's act of defining woman in terms of what he refers to as "penis envy" echoes the patriarchal attempt at reducing her to a mere sexed body. It is suggested that a woman's "reality" constitutes exclusively of her corporeality/corporeality – the "reality" which is inscribed upon her "physical body" itself. Hence, commenting on the patriarchal tradition which restricts a woman's "realities" to what is marked on her corporeality, Jingchao Ma expresses:

It is not her being feminine that the little girl discovers when she recognizes the difference between her sexual organ and that of little boys, rather it is her not being a man, not being born with the important penis and thus complete. (p.05)

Thus, it is evident how the female experience of "inferiority" is attributed to, and thereby validated or justified through the female "realities" constructed into her female corporeality itself. In fact, what is erased out or negated through such binary body politics, which reduces woman to a mere sexualized physicality, is what Shoshana Felman (1997) calls, "woman's actual Difference":

Theoretically subordinated to the concept of masculinity, the woman is viewed by the man as *his* opposite, that is to say, as *his* other, the negative of the positive, and not, in her own right, different, other, otherness itself... Female sexuality is thus described as an absence (of the masculine presence), as lack, incompleteness, deficiency, envy with respect to the only sexuality in which value resides. This symmetrical conception of otherness is a theoretical blindness to the woman's actual Difference. (p. 136)

Indeed, it has been contended that "woman's actual Difference" can only be asserted by de-constructing the binary male-female corporealities/corporealities fabricated through the patriarchal discourse. To cite Toril Moi (1997), for instance:

The feminist task *par excellence* becomes the de-construction of patriarchal metaphysics (the belief in an inherent, present meaning in the sign). If, as Derrida has argued, we are still living under the reign of metaphysics, it is impossible to produce new concepts untainted by the metaphysics of presence. (p. 111)

However, while seeking to subvert the patriarchal metaphysics which posits female "realities" as that inscribed upon her corporeality, one should also examine the racial and class dimensions which condition those "realities". Patriarchy, it should be noted, is not an isolated monolithic ideological body, but one which very much intersects with race and class. As Judith Butler (1990), for example, points out:

If one "is" a woman, that is surely not all one is; the term fails to be exhaustive, not because a pregendered "person" transcends the specific paraphernalia of its gender, but because gender is not always constituted coherently or consistently in different historical contexts, and because gender intersects with racial, class, ethnic, sexual, and regional modalities of discursively constituted identities. (p.03)

The interaction of gender, race and class further complicates the patriarchal discourse of female corporeality/corporeality through the construction of a female subject whose corporeality/corporeality is also marked by class and racial dimensions. Hence, in such a context, the dilemma of the Black female subject is one which merits close attention. The Black woman comes to occupy a triply-subalternized position within a social context fraught with gender as well as racial and class politics. The focus of this paper, however, is on the

close interaction of gender and race in determining and defining the Black female corporeality/corporeality.

The Black woman, being non-male and non-White, her body is characterized as “doubly-lacking”. Moreover, her gendered and racialized corporeality/corporeality constitutes a paradox for it is her very physical body, which is said to be a *visible* embodiment of her “dual inferiority”, that renders her *invisible* within the normative White patriarchal discourse. This paper then deals with the paradox of the Black female body which simultaneously occupies an “Othered” presence and an ideologically fabricated absence/invisibility within the gendered and racialized social discourse. This paper draws upon Toni Morrison’s novel, *The Bluest Eye* in de-constructing the constructed paradoxical corporeal/corporeal existence of the Black woman. It examines how the Black female characters in Morrison’s novel grapple with the norms of “femininity” laid down by the White patriarchal society.

Claudia, the female narrator in *The Bluest Eye* is often confronted with the cold “reality” that “femininity”, which is very much located in the female physical body itself, is one that is “essentially” White. She reveals how, within the White-supremacist society, it is taken for granted that fair complexion, blue eyes and blonde hair are the “inherent” criteria of “ideal feminine beauty”:

Adults, older girls, shops, magazines, news papers, window signs – all the world had agreed that a blue-eyed, yellow-haired, pink skinned doll was what every girl child treasured. “Here”, they said, “this is beautiful, and if you are on this day ‘worthy’ you may have it”. (Morrison, 1999, p.14)

Claudia’s narrative foregrounds how the essentialized projection of the White female body as the universal standard of “femininity” discounts the existence of the Black woman. Within an ideologically constructed ontological system where White “femininity” is the only female corporeality that exists, Black woman, Morrison’s novel points out, is relegated to a status of mere non-existence. The Black woman’s position within the patriarchal, White-dominated social milieu, Morrison illustrates, is one of inevitable paradox, for in such a gendered and racialized context, she comes to represent a *present absence*, a *visible invisibility*. Indeed, Pecola’s experience in trying to buy candy from a shop owned by a White male, which Morrison narrativizes in *The Bluest Eye*, very well captures how patriarchy allies with racial norms in discriminating against the Black woman:

He looks toward her. Somewhere between retina and object, between vision and view, his eyes draw back, hesitate and hover... He does not see her, because for him there is nothing to see. How can a fifty-two-year-old white immigrant shopkeeper 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. (Morrison, 1999, p. 36)

The White patriarch, Morrison states, does not *see* or chooses not to *see* the little Black girl. This encounter between Pecola and the White patriarch allegorically depicts the alliance between patriarchy and racial politics which transforms the Black woman into a *visible invisibility* within the gendered and racialized social structure.

Thus, *The Bluest Eye* exposes the irreparable damage caused to the psyche of the Black woman as a result of her being repeatedly cast as a non-entity. The novel traces the subtle ideological processes through which Black women are rendered victims of self-hatred. Morrison shows how Black women, through a constant reminding of their “Othered”

(non)existence, develop a self-defeatist yearning for White “femininity”. Pecola desperately longs for a pair of blue eyes, and this yearning stems from her repeated subjection to psychological as well as physical violence on account of her triply-disadvantaged status as a poor Black woman:

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 were different, that is to say beautiful, she herself would be different... If she looked different, beautiful, maybe Cholly would be different, and Mrs. Breedlove too. Maybe they’d say, “Why look at pretty-eyed Pecola. We mustn’t do bad things in front of those pretty eyes”. (Morrison, 1999, p. 35)

The psychological trauma caused by society’s denial to acknowledge the existence of the Black woman is further personified in the character of Pauline, Pecola’s mother. Brought up in a society where “being Black” is denounced as a state that is more akin to non-existence, Pauline has nothing but contempt for the things which remind her of her “Blackness”. She finds that she cannot love her own daughter, for as she has been conditioned to think, “Blackness” is “intrinsicly” ugly, and should therefore be dismissed as unworthy of notice: “But I knowed she was ugly. Head full of pretty hair, but Lord she was ugly” (Morrison, 1999, p. 98). Accordingly, Pauline’s way of coming to terms with her self-hatred is by devoutly adoring the White family she serves:

The creditors and service people who humiliated her when she went to them on her own behalf respected her, were even intimidated by her, when she spoke for the Fishers. She refused beef slightly dark or with edges not properly trimmed. The slightly reeking fish that she accepted for her own family she would all but throw in the fish man’s face if he sent it to the Fisher house. Power, praise, and luxury were hers in this household. (Morrison, 1999, p. 99)

For Pauline then, her role as an ideal servant for the Whites becomes more appealing and vicariously empowering than her humiliating position as a Black woman. Morrison, of course, enlists our empathy for Pecola and Pauline. Nevertheless, despite her empathetic portrayal of their predicament, Morrison does not endorse their passive self-effacement before a society which refuses to regard the Black woman as a self-respecting individual. The fact that Pecola finally loses her sanity seems to imply that craving for White “femininity” is sheer madness. “A little Black girl”, Morrison writes, “yearns for the blue eyes of a little White girl, and the horror at the heart of her yearning is exceeded only by the evil of fulfillment” (1999, p. 162).

On the other hand, through the narrative voice of Claudia, Morrison stresses the necessity of subverting the arbitrary conventions of gender and race that (mis)represent the Black woman as a mere non-being. The “quintessential ugliness” which is associated with “being Black”, Claudia emphasizes, is not some inborn deficiency, but one that has been ideologically constructed. As she rightly states:

We felt comfortable in our skins, enjoyed the news that our senses released to us, admitted our dirt, cultivated our scars, and could not comprehend this unworthiness. Jealousy we understood and thought natural – a desire to have what somebody else had; but envy was a strange, new feeling for us. And all the time we knew that Maureen Peal was not the Enemy and not worthy of such intense hatred. The *Thing* to fear was the *Thing* that made *her* beautiful, and not us. (Morrison, 1999, p. 57-8)

Claudia, unlike Pecola, refuses to give into the colour prejudices of her community that consign the Black woman to a state of invisibility. Claudia's sense of self-worth, then, derives from her daring to counter the universal valorization of the models of White beauty:

The loving gift was always a big, blue-eyed Baby Doll. From the clucking sounds of adults I knew that the doll represented what they thought was my fondest wish... I had only one desire: to dismember it. To see of what it was made, to discover the dearness, to find the beauty, the desirability that had escaped me, but apparently only me. (Morrison, 1999, p. 14)

Claudia sets herself apart from the likes of Pecola and Pauline by seeing the idealized White "femininity" for what it is – an artifact of the White supremacist patriarchal society. She highlights the importance of dispelling the socio-historically forged illusions of "White beauty" and "Black ugliness". In so doing, she asserts the Black woman's right to take pride in her own being and her own self. Moreover, through her symbolic act of dismembering the White doll, Claudia also expresses her defiance at the patriarchal order which situates and constrains a woman's "realities" to what is ideologically etched upon her body.

Finally, White female corporeality/corporeality, Morrison underlines, is not the sole female "reality" which is available. To emerge out of her ideologically enforced invisibility, the Black woman, Morrison suggests, needs to destabilize the absolute "realities" posited by the White patriarchal society, and create alternate female "realities" that transcend the mere physical body. She, in fact, directs her criticism at those like Geraldine who contribute to the reinforcement of discriminatory racial, gender and class hierarchies by servilely assimilating the White middle-class "realities". For Morrison, such desperate efforts at gaining recognition and acceptance of the White patriarchal society by disavowing one's "Blackness" are self-defeatist and merely generate self-contempt.

The Black woman, Morrison signifies, should make herself visible not through a self-effacing mimicry of White values, but by refusing to be lost within an artificially constructed devalued female corporeality/corporeality. Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* then epitomizes the author's refusal to be thwarted and victimized by the discriminatory values of her White patriarchal society. As Morrison remarks in her afterword to *The Bluest Eye*, "beauty was not simply something to behold; it was something one could *do*" (1999, p. 167). Hence, by recounting the tragedy of Pecola, Morrison *does* lay bare the injustice of a socio-political system which discriminates against the woman, especially the Black woman, by situating her "realities" on an ideologically fashioned female corporeality. Thereby, Morrison gets us, the reader, to question and re-conceptualize the parameters of "femininity", "womanhood" and "beauty" prescribed by the hegemonic White patriarchal order.

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