
THE IMPACTS OF THE BEAUTY MYTH ON THE EXISTENTIAL FREEDOM OF PECOLA IN TONI MORRISON'S *THE BLUEST EYE*

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to analyse the destructive impacts of the beauty myth on the existential freedom of Pecola, the young, poor, black female character, in Toni Morrison's "The Bluest Eye." The analysis is done through feminist criticism supported by the concept of the beauty myth and beauty as well as Sartrean concept of existentialism. The result shows that the widely spread beauty myth blocks Pecola's existential freedom on the physical, consciousness, or social life level. All these lead to young Pecola's ruined existence.

Key words: beauty myth, existential freedom, Sartrean existentialism, feminist criticism

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INTRODUCTION

In practice, not everyone can have or enjoy his/her existential freedom. There are many hindrances to the freedom of existence, one of which is the ideology of the beauty myth. Operating mainly in the unconscious level and practised in many forms, beauty myth affects many levels of human existence. All these can be seen in Pecola's existence. As a young, black, poor girl she is the easy target of the beauty myth as it leads to her ruined existence.

There are some concepts used in the analysis. Each concept will contribute significantly in analyzing the main topic of the paper.

Wolf coins the term 'beauty myth' to refer to "a backlash against feminism that uses an ideology about beauty to keep women down" (1992: 3). In its practice,

beauty myth takes many forms, such as making women convinced that the concept of beauty is objective and universal instead of a socially constructed concept (Wolf, 1992: 12-14).

In daily life people unconsciously follow and practice certain beauty criteria as critically examined by Abu-Laban and McDaniel:

For the female child, to be assessed as "pretty" or "beautiful" is the highest accolade ... To be pretty is to be approved, liked, and rewarded ... Beauty norms are both prescriptive and proscriptive ... However, there can be little doubt that standards of beauty are social and historical construct ... The image of beauty that society presents to women is embodied in a female who is not only young and slim but also White

(or “Whittish”), heterosexual, and class advantaged. This is a monolithic image of appearance (1995: 107-108, 14).

Those beauty criteria obviously refer to a certain race (or skin colour), a certain social status, and a certain sexual preference in which those who possess the criteria will be accepted or respected in society.

The analysis on this paper is done using feminist criticism in which it “reads writing and examines its ideology and culture with a woman-centred perspective” (Humm, 1995: 51). Thus, using the perspective of a woman, the black female character will be analysed focussing on the entanglement of beauty myth on her existential freedom.

The term ‘existentialism’ is proposed by Sartre in which he divides existence into three modes of being. The first one is ‘being-in-itself, which is the existence without the consciousness. The second one is ‘being-for-itself’ which is the existence of humans with their consciousness. The third one is ‘being-for-other’ which is the existence of humans in their social life involving the conflicts to be subject over the others (Sartre, 1992: 800).

The Sartrean modes of being do not include the existence of women, even less the existence of black women. For the sake of analysing the existence of black women, two modes of ‘being’, namely, ‘being-for-itself’ and ‘being-for-other’, are modified because those two directly concern the human existence. The result is the ‘black-woman-being-for-herself’ which is the existence of a black woman with her critical consciousness as a black woman in the world commonly dominated by white perspective and the ‘black-woman-being-for-other’ which focuses on the conflictual social life of a black woman because of her

sex, race, social status, etcetera (Asmarani, 2010: 51-52).

Since a woman’s existence can not be separated from her body, it is necessary to include Sartrean categorization of human body. Bearing in mind that body and consciousness are one unity, Sartre divide the body into three levels. The first is body as a form to be in the world in which the consciousness is not dominant yet. The second is body as seen by other in which the consciousness follows the other’s evaluation of the body. The third is body as evaluated by other in which the evaluation makes the critical consciousness grow (Sartre, 1992: 404-461).

METHODOLOGY

The data being analyzed in this paper is focused on a novel entitled *The Bluest Eye* written by Toni Morrison (1931 - ...), the first black woman to receive the Nobel Prize in Literature¹. The qualitative analysis is done through library research using printed and electronic references. In analyzing the chosen topic, contextual analysis which is basically an analysis borrowing theories from outside the field of literature and its intrinsic elements is used (<http://www.unl.edu/english/sbehrendt/StudyQuestions/ContextualAnalysis.html> accessed February 17, 2014). Since the topic is concerning the impacts of the beauty myth on the existential freedom on the black female character, feminist criticism is used as the frame of analysis. This frame of analysis is supported with the concepts of existentialism such as Sartre’s modes of being, Asmarani’s black

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http://www.math.buffalo.edu/~sww/morrison/morrison_toni-bio.html accessed 6 January 2016

women's modes of being, and Sartre's concept of human body. Wolf's concept of beauty myth and Abu-Laban and McDaniel's beauty concept also integrally support the analysis.

BEAUTY MYTH ON PECOLA'S EXISTENTIAL FREEDOM

Pecola, the young, black female main character in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, faces a specific problem in having existential freedom. The basic problem is the operation of beauty myth. To analyze the impacts of beauty myth on Pecola's existential freedom, the discussion is divided into several parts covering the triggers, the supporters, and the impacts of beauty myth, as well as the specific resistance done by Pecola.

The Triggers of the Practice of Beauty Myth in Pecola's Existence

The beauty myth, with its imposing beauty criteria, operates in and around Pecola's existence. There are several factors that trigger the operation of beauty myth. Those factors can be classified into two parts; namely, the physical characteristic of Pecola and the social factors surrounding Pecola.

Pecola Breedlove, the twelve-year-old black girl, is portrayed as having specific facial features. These facial features are shared by all the members of the Breedlove family.

The eyes, the small set of eyes set closely together under narrow foreheads. The low, irregular hairlines, which seemed even more irregular in contrast to the straight, heavy eyebrows which nearly met. Keen but crooked noses, with insolent nostrils. They had high cheekbones, and their ears turned

forward. Shapely lips which called attention not to themselves but to the rest of the face (Morrison, 1972: 34).

The description indicates that Pecola and her family can not be considered as having interesting or beautiful physical appearance. Certain facial features which fulfill the beauty criteria; namely shapely lips, ironically make the other facial features already labelled not beautiful look worse.

The whole physical appearance of Pecola is described by Geraldine, a rich, tidy, fair-skinned black woman.

Saw the dirty torn dress, the plait sticking out on her head, hair matted where the plaits had come undone, the muddy shoes with the wad of gum peeping from between the cheap soles, the soiled socks, one of which had been walked down into the heel of shoe. She saw the safety pin holding the hem of the dress up (Morrison, 1972: 75).

Pecola's physical appearance indicates not only poverty, but also indifference, carelessness, and slovenliness. All these characteristics can not be accepted as things that belong to the beauty criteria.

The living place of the Breedlove family also supports their deviation from the standard of beauty. The four of them—Pecola, her parents and brother—are crowded in one room without a partition on the third floor of an abandoned shop. The location of the shop itself is an eyesore to the surroundings: "It does not recede into its background of leaden sky, nor harmonize with the gray frame house and black telephone poles around it. Rather, it foists itself on the eye of the passerby in a manner that is both irritating and melancholy"

(Morrison, 1972: 30). It is not only poverty that keeps them in the improper place, but also their own belief that they deserve to live improperly because of their physical condition which does not meet the beauty criteria: “they stayed there because they believed they were ugly” (Morrison, 1972: 34).

So, there are at least three things that serve as the triggering factors for the emergence of the operation of beauty myth in Pecola’s existence; namely, her facial features, her physical appearance, and her living place. Those three factors are worsened by the widely spread beauty myth in the community where Pecola lives. All imposing representations of beauty myth reflected in “every billboard, every movie, every glance” (Morrison, 1972: 34) directly emphasize the ugliness of Pecola and her family.

The Supporters of the Ideology of the Beauty Myth in Pecola’s Existence

The beauty myth as an ideology will not thrive if there are no supporters that practise or spread its beauty criteria. In the case of Pecola, the supporters of the beauty myth and its criteria can be grouped into three: her own family, other people around her, and Pecola herself.

Pecola’s family, especially her mother, Pauline, is a blind supporter of the beauty myth. Black, poor, uneducated, and having physical defect, Pauline adores beauty. She longs for elegance, wealth, and romanticism portrayed in films starring white film stars. Pauline absorbs all those non-real white beauties in order to escape from the boring routine of her poor family life. From those films, Pauline learns one lesson: “She was never able, after her education in the

movies, to look at a face and not assign it some category in the scale of absolute beauty” (Morrison, 1972: 97). This indicates that Pauline is not only a passive follower, but she also actively applies the beauty standard to the people around her, especially her own daughter, Pecola.

Individuals or small groups of people around Pecola are also the practitioners of beauty myth. This is obviously reflected in the school area where Pecola studies: “the ugliness that made her ignored or despised at school, by teachers and classmates alike” (Morrison, 1972: 39). The fair-skinned black women belonging to the middle class and following the white standard of living, represented by Geraldine, do not want to associate with Pecola, much less have the dirty black girl in their immaculate house: ““Get out,” she said, her voice quiet. “You nasty little black bitch. Get out of my house”” (Morrison, 1972: 75), because she equates poor, dirty, and ugly black people like Pecola with flies: “Like flies they hovered; like flies they settled” (Morrison, 1972: 75). Pecola’s blackness and dirty appearance also make her invisible in the eyes of the old, white man, the owner of a small candy shop where Pecola sometimes comes to buy candies: “She ... sees the vacuum where curiosity ought to lodge. And something more. The total absence of human recognition—the glazed separateness (Morrison, 1972: 42). Even Geraldine’s little son, like the mother, also despises blackness and slovenliness as indicated by his bad conduct to Pecola who is much older than him.

Along with those two parties, Pecola herself also adores the beauty criteria. As a victim of beauty standard, Pecola gradually despises her physical condition and sees no

hope to avoid it: "As long as she looked the way she did, as long as she was ugly, she would have to stay with these people. Somehow she belonged to them" (Morrison, 1972: 39). On the other hand, she uses her physical ugliness and her shabbiness as a nest to hide and to save her from the imposing beauty standard that surrounds her: "She hid behind hers. Concealed, veiled, eclipsed" (Morrison, 1972: 35).

The Impacts of the Beauty Myth on Pecola's Existential Freedom

Undeniably, the beauty myth has certain impacts on Pecola's existence, especially her existential freedom. Here, the impacts of the beauty myth on Pecola's existential freedom will be analyzed on three different levels of existence: on her physical freedom, on the freedom of her personal consciousness, and on the freedom of her social life.

Pecola's body suffers certain treatment triggered by the operation of the beauty myth. Her male class mates make fun of Pecola's body and her father's habit of sleeping naked: "A group of boys was circling and holding at bay a victim, Pecola Breedlove ... they gaily harrassed her" (Morrison, 1972: 55). Actually, there is no ill-feeling or hatred between them. They themselves are black and poor like Pecola, and like Pecola they are the victims of the beauty myth. They too, like Pecola, secretly adore the beauty standard. Their action is triggered by their frustration of being excluded from the beauty circle. Thus, they just try to find a victim to save them from the inferior feeling as the outcasts. Pecola is the perfect target because she looks defeated, hopeless and friendless. This event indicates that because of her physical ugliness, Pecola's freedom of movement is

limited. She is not free to go as she wants. She loses the freedom of her own body.

Pecola's body also suffers mistreatment from her mother, Mrs. Breedlove. Mad at Pecola's clumsiness that makes her white master's kitchen dirty and her white master's little child cry, Pecola's mother hurts Pecola's body: "she was on Pecola, and with the back of her hand knocked her to the floor. Pecola slid in the pie juice, one leg folding under her. Mrs. Breedlove yanked her up by the arm, slapped her again" (Morrison, 1972: 86). Pecola's mother's preference to her white master's kitchen and child than to her own daughter who is black, dirty, and ugly obviously shows her blind adoration to white life style and white people. For the sake of white beauty standard which she can not meet, Pecola's mother is willing to put aside her own daughter. She does not care about the part of Pecola's body that is badly burnt by the hot berry juice. For her, Pecola's body does not mean anything, it is just a black dirty body that reminds her of her own blackness that she herself despises and tries to avoid. Thus, Pecola loses the right of her body because her body is not considered valuable in the eyes of her own mother.

Pecola's freedom to her body also disappears when she meets Geraldine's little son, Junior. Persuaded to have a look at a cat, the lonely Pecola becomes trapped in Junior's house. Teasing and frightening her with her mother's beloved cat he hates so much, Junior throws the cat at Pecola, resulting in painful scratches all over her face: "The clawed face and chest" (Morrison, 1972: 73). Junior, much younger than Pecola, dares to do mischievous things to Pecola because Pecola is friendless and looks hopeless. Here, Pecola not only loses

her freedom of movement but also gets hurt as well. Thus, it can be said that on the level of physical existence, Pecola suffers from unfair and/or painful treatment due to her physical condition and appearance that do not meet the criteria of beauty adored by people around her.

Besides mistreatment on the physical level, Pecola also suffers mistreatment on the consciousness level leading to certain damaging impacts. The first impact is that Pecola's critical consciousness does not develop. Being young, alone, and surrounded by the many representations of the beauty myth, Pecola is an easy target for the imposing practice of the beauty myth. She is not mature enough to be able to develop a critical perspective of her own. She also does not have her family's support or a friend's love to enable her to develop her own opinion. The many layered forms of the beauty myth around her make her unable to escape from its influence. The result is predictable, Pecola does not have her own critical consciousness concerning the beauty myth and its imposing criteria, due to her lack of the opportunity.

Inevitably, Pecola is unconsciously influenced to adopt the beauty myth which permeates the community's consciousness. She begins to use the community's perspective in seeing everything, especially her own condition. Despite criticizing the beauty myth, Pecola, like others including her own mother, becomes the follower and worshipper. However, she uses her false consciousness to evaluate herself: "... she would never know her beauty. She would see only what was there to see the eyes of other people" (Morrison, 1972: 40). This makes her consider her physical condition as

not beautiful and eventually this leads to her despising herself.

In her desperation, Pecola makes self-destructing choices concerning her existence. At first, Pecola wants to make her unbearable existence disappear: "'Please, God,'" she whispered into the palm of her hand. "Please make me disappear" She squeezed her eyes shut. Little parts of her body faded away ... Only her tight, tight eyes were left ..." (Morrison, 1972: 39). This effort fails because she can not erase her eyes which represent her perspective as a human being. This indicates that physical existence is easier to destroy but not personal perspective loaded with personal experience.

Failing to erase her perspective, Pecola then tries to strengthen her perspective which follows the community's perspective, especially concerning the adoration of everything that belongs to the criteria of beauty. In her naivete and desperation, Pecola comes to the conclusion that she will belong to the community which so far has abandoned her, only if she possesses some elements of beauty. She concludes that part of her body which must be beautiful is her eyes: "if those eyes of hers were different, that is to say, beautiful, she herself would be different ... Each night, without fail, she prayed for blue eyes" (Morrison, 1972: 40). She thinks that having beautiful, blue eyes will lead her to a happy and free life denied from her so far. Naively, Pecola assumes that beautiful, blue eyes will make her able to see things beautifully, including herself. In other words, beautiful, blue eyes are the solution to becoming beautiful and to belonging to the beautiful world.

Pecola's dream to be beautiful, happy, and loved, is portrayed in her adoration of

Shirley Temple, the well-known and adorable white child actress in the era of 1920s. She sees the picture of Shirley Temple on the mug from which she drinks the milk when she lives temporarily with the MacTeer family: "She was a long time with the milk, and gazed fondly at the silhouette of Shirley Temple's dimpled face" (Morrison, 1972: 19). The MacTeer family is a poor, black family who is willing to save her from the prospect of living as a tramp after being abandoned by her own family. Since then, Pecola's dream grows stronger and unshakeable. She dreams to be beautiful through the possession of blue eyes.

Her effort to realize her dream, however impossible it seems, is carried out in an unusual and shocking way. Having no one to consult, Pecola dares herself to ask the help of Soaphead Church, a man who claims the ability to realize dreams. In reality, he is a liar who earns his living by cheating people who believe in his words (Morrison, 1972: 131, 136). Pecola's straightforward but simple statement about her eyes: "'I want them blue'" (Morrison, 1972: 137) indicates her strong desire to be a valuable person, meaning a person considered beautiful. It also indicates her desperation to be able to exist, although just in the periphery, in a world which allows beautiful people only in its suffocating embrace.

As a liar and manipulative person, Soaphead Church plan to use Pecola for his own benefit. Disgusted by the old dog but does not want to do dirty job by himself, he gives Pecola a piece of meat, already poisoned, for the dog. He wickedly tells Pecola that if the dog shows any reaction after eating it, it is a sign that her strong wish is granted. Blinded by her desperation and supported by the reaction of the

poisoned old dog (Morrison, 1972: 139), Pecola really believes that now she already possesses blue eyes. This false consciousness makes Pecola, who is so happy and proud of her imaginary blue eyes, unable to stop admiring and talking about them. Having no one to listen to her incessant chatting about her blue eyes, Pecola talks with an imaginary friend who emerges as soon as she believes she possesses a pair of beautiful blue eyes:

...

No. Really. You are my best friend. Why didn't I know you before?

You didn't need me before.

Didn't need you?

I mean ... you were so unhappy before. I guess you didn't notice me before.

I guess you're right. And I was so lonely for friends. And you were right here. Right before my eyes.

No, honey. Right after your eyes.

... (Morrison, 1972: 152).

The quote indicates how Pecola now lives in a world of her own, created by herself, and lived in by herself and the imaginary friend.

Her false consciousness and how she carries it out in a daily life result in certain impacts on her social life. Generally considered insane, the common reaction of the community is to avoid her. She is expelled from school: "I don't know. After that first day at school when I had my blue eyes. Well, the next day they had Mrs. Breedlove come out. Now I don't go anymore. But I don't care" (Morrison, 1972; 153). The school, its teachers and students, which formerly ignore her and/or ridicule her physical condition and appearance, now completely ban her from their environment.

Her deep involvement in her own imaginary world makes her lose contact with the 'natural' social life. She shuts herself out from the outside world, leaving her alone in her own imaginary world. However, in her own created world, Pecola is also finally left by her sole imaginary friend. This happens when the imaginary friend finally felt fed up by the only topic of their chatting, namely the imaginary blue eyes of Pecola:

I'm not going to play with you anymore.

Oh. Don't leave me.

Yes. I am.

Why. Are you mad at me?

Yes.

Because my eyes aren't blue enough?

Because I don't have the bluest eyes?

No. Because you're acting silly.

... (Morrison, 1972: 158).

Pecola's obsession and its imaginary fulfilment leave her utterly alone in the end. Nobody, real or imaginary, wants to be her friend.

The final impact of being completely cut off from social life, real or imaginary, is that Pecola's existence now—the physical level, consciousness level, or social life level—is jumbled confusingly with no more coordination among the three levels:

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, 1972: 158).

Like a completely broken, unwanted, thrown away thing, Pecola is stranded in the place for such undesirable things, the garbage area. Her unnatural physical movement like a bird trying to fly indicates her unconscious effort to transcend her unworthy real existence. The futility of this action represents the futility of her effort to escape from her devastating existence. The sound heard only by herself and made her obsessed shows the confusion in her mind being invaded by the idea of beauty myth that she can not meet but desires so much.

Pecola's Resistance of the Beauty Myth on her Existence

As a human being with emotion and a sense of pain, Pecola shows certain resistance to the implication of the beauty myth. However, her resistance falls into one category, namely passive resistance. This can be seen from the following incidents.

When Pecola is insulted by her schoolfriends on two occasions, she only cries and covers her ears or eyes: "... crying ... and covered her eyes with her hands ... pulling in of her neck, as though she wanted to cover her ears ..." (Morrison, 1972: 55, 60). She also cries when entrapped by Junior and scratched by the panicked cat: "The tears came fast, and she held it shut with her hands" (Morrison, 1972: 74). There is no retaliation or other forms of active reaction. Her passive resistance is driven by her situation. Feeling inferior to her physical condition and appearance as well as feeling friendless, Pecola feels helpless to resist the insults. That is why she just accepts all the unfair treatment although it hurts her, both physically and mentally.

When she is ignored by the owner of the candy shop, she is overcome by an intense

shame: "Outside, Pecola feels the inexplicable shame ebb" ((Morrison, 1972: 43). When she is thrown out rudely of Geraldine's house by Geraldine herself, she feels so inferior: "Pecola backed out of the room, ..." (Morrison, 1972: 76). She does not show any strong reaction or active resistance at all. She keeps her emotional hurt to herself feeling that it is useless to show it.

The same resisting reaction is shown by Pecola when she is avoided by the community because of her physical ugliness. She just accepts all the humiliation, the gossips, or the avoidance. She becomes apathetic and thinks that her ugliness cannot be avoided forever.

And Pecola is somewhere in that little brown house she and her mother moved to on the edge of town, where you can see her even now, once in a while. The birdlike gestures are worn away to a mere picking and plucking ... She, however, stepped over into madness, a madness which protected her from us simply because it bored us in the end" (Morrison, 1972: 159).

Thus, Pecola is the helpless and hopeless victim of the beauty myth.

CONCLUSION

Pecola's existential freedom is blocked by the widely spread beauty myth. Black, poor, and dirty, Pecola is not at all considered beautiful by those worshipping the beauty myth. Not beautiful equates not valuable as a human being and not accepted in social situations, while beautiful means having the power to be seen and admired. Classified as not beautiful, Pecola loses the freedom in her existence. On the physical level, she experiences physical pain, insults, and abandonment. On the consciousness level, she has no chance to develop her critical thinking. On the social level, she suffers social avoidance. The combined impacts of the beauty myth result in Pecola's totally broken existence which finally lands her together with the other thrown away things in the garbage area outside the community's supposedly respectable living place.

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