

A Postcolonial Feminist Approach to Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*

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Abstract

Postcolonial theory, as a type of literary production, emerged in the 20th century and came to be felt in many areas of society. At present, this type of thinking is most prominently represented in literature and philosophy. With feminism, postcolonialism acquired a novel aspect and came to be assessed in relation to the problem of the women in modern world. This study addresses the problem of identity formation in African American women, adopting a postcolonial perspective. With this aim, the origins of postcolonial history and its development are discussed. Historical sources support the study. This study is developed on a foundation of post-colonialism, employing the ideas of Frantz Fanon, Homi K. Bhabha, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, and Edward W. Said. The African American population originated from people who were abducted from their home countries and forced to live in a new one. The pressures and inhumane treatment they experienced, the trauma of these pressures, and the denial of their most fundamental rights are examined within the postcolonial context. The novel, published in 1970, has brought attention to the issues of race and inequality. This study mainly focuses on the women characters and examines the complexity of being a woman in society, taking into account the postcolonial theory.

Keywords: Postcolonialism, Gender, Feminism

Toni Morrison'ın *En Mavi Göz* Adlı Eserine Postkolonyal Feminist Bir Yaklaşım

Öz

Postkolonyal teori, bir tür edebi üretim olarak, 20. yüzyılda ortaya çıkmış ve etkileri birçok alanda hissedilmiştir. Günümüzde, bu düşünce türü en belirgin şekilde edebiyat ve felsefede temsil edilmektedir. Feminizm ile birlikte postkolonyalizm yeni bir boyut kazanmış ve modern dünyadaki kadın sorunsalı ile ilgili olarak değerlendirilmeye başlanmıştır. Bu çalışma Afrikalı-Amerikalı kadınlarda kimlik oluşumu sorununu ele almakta ve bu sorunu postkolonyal bir bakış açısı ile sunmaktadır. Bu amaçla postkolonyal teorinin tarihine ve gelişimine de yer verilmiştir ve tarihi kaynaklar da çalışmayı desteklemektedir. Bu çalışma, Frantz Fanon, Homi K. Bhabha, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak ve Edward W. Said'in fikirlerinden yola çıkarak postkolonyalizm temeli üzerine geliştirilmiştir. Afrikalı Amerikalılar, kendi ülkelerinden zorla yeni bir ülkeye getirilen ve bu ülkede yaşamak zorunda bırakılan insanlardan oluşmaktadır. Bu çalışmada Afrikalı Amerikalıların yaşadıkları baskılar, bu baskıların onlar üzerinde oluşturduğu travma ve en temel haklarından mahrum bırakılmaları gibi konular postkolonyal bağlamda incelenmektedir. 1970 yılında yayımlanan *En Mavi Göz*, ırkçılık ve eşitsizlik konularına dikkat çekmektedir. Bu çalışma temel olarak Toni Morrison'ın *En Mavi Göz* adlı eserindeki kadın karakterlere odaklanmaktadır. Bu çalışma toplumda bir kadın olmanın karmaşıklığını postkolonyal teoriyi dikkate alarak incelemektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Postkolonyalizm, Toplumsal Cinsiyet, Feminizm

1. Introduction

After the Second World War, the United States obtained more power than it ever had in its history, and the world was centered on America. Europe, which was previously considered more important because of its power, diminished day by day and entered a reconstruction process after the devastation of the war. Although some countries finally obtained independence, others became socially and economically dependent on other countries that had previously been authoritarian. In this context, the hierarchy of power relations was established over these countries, and these countries were forced to live under pressure

resources and workforce country were taken from them by dominant countries. Colonialism gained a new meaning in this context.

The postcolonial theory derives from these circumstances and does not encompass a single field, but it continuously recreates and maintains its interdisciplinary existence. The feeling of power and dominance is a desire for the colonizer countries. The sense of dominance and power had a new meaning in the changing world, where policies and opinions that replaced more primitive methods. In time, nations that gained power had their names written in the history books, and others tried to exist under the hierarchy of these nations. The existence of hierarchy has depleted the essence of these nations, caused them to lose their value, destroyed their unique cultures, and damaged them financially.

In *Culture and Imperialism*, Said (1994: 9) defines imperialism as “the practice, the theory, and the attitudes of a dominating metropolitan center ruling a distant territory”. While the target adopted in colonialism is settled, imperialism became a capital-oriented formation due to its context, and helped systems based on capitalism. Although colonialism seems to come to an end by the end of the 20th century, it only changed in meaning, it then found a place to gather under the roof of capitalism. While colonialism means preponderance in a particular region, it ceased to be applied regionally under the hierarchy of imperialism and was replaced by a global understanding.

The colonial approaches to imperialism focusing on the interests of developing countries are damaged, and the interests of each country share common ground with the work of African American intellectuals. Africa is regarded as a developing region, and its labor and resources are thereby exploited. Culture and language were severely damaged under the hierarchy of a more dominant culture and language. The assimilation policy was successful, and the subsequent impact led to

identity problems. In the context of the slave trade, subgroups formed with purpose, as Gayatri Spivak mentioned in her article called “Can Subalterns Speak?” Subalterns, according to Spivak, are those who suffer under someone. They cannot speak up, as they are discriminated by gender, class, caste, region, religion, and other features. These divisions do not allow them to stand up in unity.

Although they were born in American lands and raised according to American ethics and culture, an African American was never recognized as an American, and was instead condemned to be the “other”. However, the self-identity of Africans vanished in the cultural, sociological, and linguistic context, and they are forced to form a new identity. “Hybridity”, a concept created by Homi Bhabha, emerges from two primary cognitions: the colonizer and the colonized. This colonized/colonizer association emphasizes their independence and the mutual construction of their subjectivities (mimicry and ambivalence). Bhabha contends that all cultural statements and systems are constructed in a space called the “third space of enucleation”. Identity, which is cultural, always emerges in this contradictory and ambivalent space. An African American is no longer an African, nor an American. They are condemned to live with this identity. This process of identity formation became a more arduous process for female African Americans. Women had to deal with more complicated situations when compared to men when in another country and were deprived of their physical liberty in more brutal ways.

Postcolonial feminism is a theory that criticizes the status of non-Western women being placed in a secondary position by social, cultural, or economic structures. The goal of postcolonial feminists is a struggle against the portrayal of third world women as ignorant, uneducated, and victims of religions, through the Western notions of freedom and progress. The Eurocentric perspective is not for understanding the problems of third world women, but for establishing the authority of

Western humanist discourse. Therefore, with third wave feminism, the problems of third world women since the 1980s have been emphasized, and a criticism of mainstream feminist theorists (white, middle class, and Western women) has been made.

During the years of slavery, women were viewed as possessions, and the treatment they were subjected was shaped correspondingly. African American women, who were taken from their countries, started to be used in the sex trade. They were also employed in fields and factories without freedom and subjected to sexual and verbal abuse. It is an undeniable fact that it was all part of the white man's effort to dominate other people. Even in the post-slavery period, the living conditions of African women have always been severe. The white male established his hierarchy over white women and then African American women.

Toni Morrison's works can be considered in a postcolonial feminist context. In her works, Toni Morrison touched on the constant anxiety and stiffness that women feel and addressed the problem of black women in a postcolonial and imperial context. Morrison uses the "time" concept in many ways; she combines the effect of the past that damages the future. In Morrison's works, the past becomes the greatest enemy of the future. Morrison often examines slavery and the social and material destruction it causes. Reflections of the damage are seen in Morrison's works in ways like alcoholism, rape, murder, and incest. This context is apparent in Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*. The novel also considers the post-slavery period and its effects, as well as rape and incest.

The Bluest Eye describes a little, black-skinned girl (Pecola Breedlove), who grew up in the middle of domestic violence. The white society and the perception of beauty constructed by them remind Pecola how ugly she is. Pecola believes that in order to win her mother's affection and the respect of the community, she must first have blue eyes and blond hair.

In the US in the 1940s, the little daughter of a poor black family, Pecola, prays God every night for her eyes to be blue. According to her, if her eyes were blue, she would be a very beautiful girl, her father would stop drinking and not beat her mother, her brother would not escape from the house, everything in Pecola's life would change. Pecola begs God to have white skin and blue eyes. Throughout the novel, it is understood that not only Pecola but her parents (father Cholly and mother Pauline) also had a distraught and difficult life. This painful life extinguishes the love that once existed between them and set the ground for frequent discussions that lead to physical violence.

The culmination of the violence is when her father Cholly rapes Pecola and impregnates her. The reason behind the rape is vague and complex. It is probably a combination of the sense of worthlessness and self-hatred. This tragic rape incident is a turning point for Pecola, whose life is already so adverse. Her self-hatred deepens. At the end of the novel, Pecola goes mad. There are two reasons for this; The first is the desire of identification of being white with beauty. Whiteness is a standard that blacks will never have. The situation is even more desperate and grave, especially for Pecola, who is even more black than the others. Pecola always associates beauty with love. According to her, if her skin was white and her eyes were blue, she would be loved very much, and all the negativities in her life would be replaced by beauties. It is not her own view of beauty. Blacks have such a great respect for being white that Pecola calls whiteness the essence of beauty. *The Bluest Eye* is a striking description of racism and its consequence, psychological destruction. White people created such a perception that when black people look at a white person, they see their own ugliness. Beauty is a concept created by Western and white people.

Not only Pecola and Pauline but all the female characters in the novel, suffer in many different ways: First, black women are despised by the white society, and they are exposed to both physical and psychological

violence by men. Secondly, we can see that women are despised and humiliated by women. This is called the queen bee syndrome. Thirdly women in the novel become victims of the beauty standards set by the West. These issues will be discussed in detail in other sections.

2. The Double Oppression Experienced by Black Women in *The Bluest Eye*

In this novel, black women are both ostracized by the white community and by men in their own black community. Therefore, they experience double oppression. This situation led to a mental breakdown for them. The issues of race, gender, and class created by the white world were issues that black women had to struggle with. These three major problems illustrate the traumatic conditions they experienced in white America. Women's characters' life was full of torture. While white women are also victims of social judgments, the situation of black women has always been worse.

“The blacks have suffered due to their status in society, as a poor, marginal group. The black women, like the black men were also working women. The black women had to work on plantation farms as laborers and also as —mammys or maids in the kitchens of the white households. They were generally looked upon as menials” (Seraman: 2011: 38).

One of the biggest crises in Pauline's life was the day Pecola was born. When Pauline first saw Pecola, she thought that she was very ugly. Pauline has developed a hatred for her since the day she gave birth to Pecola. On the same day, Pauline experienced inequality. In the hospital offensive words were spoken by the doctor. “When he got to me he said now these here women you do not have any trouble with. They deliver right away and with no pain. Just like horses” (Morrison: 124-125). These words hurt and shocked her. She was not treated as a human being because of her skin color. This race discrimination was very humiliating for Pauline.

Pauline cannot show love and affection to her children. According to Collins (1991:55), Pauline has reasons. “For far too many black mothers, the demands of providing for children are so demanding that affection must often wait until the basic needs of physical survival are satisfied”. Struggling for survival with the problems such as pressures, class differences, racial and gender issues, Pauline fights both with her husband and with the white community.

Women are not only subjected to racial but also gender discrimination. The behaviors expected from women and men in society are different. In other words, the gender perception of the society determines male and female behavior. Pecola’s brother, Sammy, and his attitude towards his parents is another example of gender in *The Bluest Eye*. While Pecola must stay at home, Sammy is able to resist and leave home. “He cursed for a while or left the house or threw himself into the fray...Pecola, on the other hand, restricted by youth and sex, experimented with methods of endurance” (Morrison: 32). According to Cixous (2000:265), this is “a male privilege, which can be seen in the opposition by which it sustains itself between activity and passivity”. As Cixous points out, men are active, and women are passive. One of the narrators of the novel, Claudia tells the women as the victims suffering in silence because of the discrimination created by white society, especially males. Black women judge themselves based on the forms of appearance constructed by a society, which makes them feel inferior.

3. Queen Bee Syndrome in *The Bluest Eye*

In the queen bee syndrome, to be the woman who holds power is to classify another woman in terms of weakness. According to Mavin (2008:75), “The Queen Bee is commonly constructed as a bitch who stings other women if her power is threatened and, as a concept, the Queen Bee blames individual women for not supporting other

women”. The female characters in the novel not only suffer from racial harassment but also from the oppression and abuses of the male-dominated society. As if that were not enough, some women face additional oppression from the hierarchal system led by the queen bee.

Pecola’s mother, Pauline, may be given as one of the best examples of women who have queen bee syndrome. Pecola is exposed to unjust treatments even by her mother. Pauline always beats her. Even the black mother, Pauline, acts as oppressive whites and despises her black child. Pauline feels alienated from society. She is surprised to see the strange behavior of other women and feels worthless. Feeling this way, she hates her daughter, Pecola. She turns into a person who cannot love and is afraid to show love.

When Pecola was raped by her father, she was treated hostile by her mother. At first, she only feels bewilderment, and she realizes her mother isn’t going to believe her when she tells her. Pauline does not believe Pecola, and Pecola is raped again. As Pecola struggles with her feelings, her mother hates her. She sees Pecola as a threat because she is pregnant by her husband. As a result, Pauline develops “queen bee syndrome” in terms of social constructs and self-hatred.

The most interesting part is that Pecola, the victim of rape, has been rebuked by women in society. Their neighbors claimed that Pecola was responsible for this rape.

- *Well, they ought to take her out of school.*
- *Ought to. She carry some of the blame.*
- *Oh, come on. She ain’t but twelve or so.*
- *Yeah. But you never know. How come she didn’t fight him?*
- *Maybe she did.*
- *Yeah? You never know.*

- *Well, it probably won't live. They say the way her mama beat her she lucky to be alive herself.*
- *She be lucky if it don't live. Bound to be the ugliest thing walking.*
- *Can't help but be. Ought to be a law: two ugly people doubling up like that to make more ugly. Be better off in the ground.*
- *Well, I wouldn't worry none. It be a miracle if it live (Morrison: 149).*

Pecola's pregnancy is so cruelly criticized in society, especially by women that it reveals the cruelty and irresponsibility of women in society. The society has no compassion for Pecola and does not help her. Pecola is forced to leave school due to her pregnancy and is isolated from other children; moreover, she is the subject of gossip by women.

4. *The Bluest Eye* and Western Beauty Standards

Throughout history, the concept of beauty has always been based on the values of the dominant culture. The main reason for the ever-changing concept of beauty is imperialism. The West's perception of beauty has a uniform standard: only white, tall, blue-eyed, and skinny women are beautiful. In *The Bluest Eye*, female characters are influenced by this image. Because they do not have Western beauty standards, they hate themselves, and their only goal in life is to be like whites. Because being white means being beautiful. The protagonist Pecola Breedlove eventually drifts into madness because of her obsession with blue eyes.

“The experiences of black children growing up amid the standards of white beauty are conveyed through a number of images. The tangle Shirley Temple mug has blue eyes, so does the little Fisher girl. The Shirley Temple mug and the Mary Lane Candies allow Pecola to carry the image through her very being. The dolls presented to black girls like Claudia are to the parents, their own unfulfilled longings of childhood and Mrs. Macteer cannot understand Claudia's destroying them” (Seraman, 2011: 3).

Pecola, who continually questions her appearance, is defined as “other” and “ugly” by white society. This feeling is imposed on her in an insinuating way. According to Pecola, the only way to get accepted is to have blue eyes. She is in a state of constant paranoia and is almost hysterical. Pecola believes that if she had blue eyes, all her problems would be solved and she would be able to see the world in color. “Here was an ugly little girl asking for beauty” (Morrison: 174). Pecola is a child who is not valued by society, in addition to not being loved. She is also subjected to psychological and physical violence. Pecola’s first concern is to earn respect and love. She considers blue eyes to be a status symbol; she beseeches God for blue eyes. Whenever she sees a blue-eyed person, she remembers how ugly she is. The most striking point is that Pecola is not ugly, she is “other” because she does not fit into Western beauty standards and dominant white culture made her believe that she is ugly. She even so obsessively believes that she is ugly, and she is the main reason for her family’s arguments.

“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. Her teeth were good, and at least her nose was not big and flat like some of those who were thought so cute. 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: 34).

As can be seen from the above excerpt, the only one who is beautiful is the one who has blue eyes. There is no way for a black-skinned girl from a third world country to be beautiful. It is also the Western masculine point of view that puts the woman in the second position that makes the perception of beauty so important.

“Everybody in the world was in a position to give them orders. White women said, “Do this” White children said, “Give me that.” White

men said, "Come here." Black men said, "Lay down." The only people they need not take orders from were black children and each other" (Morrison: 138).

The novel ends with a conversation between Pecola and her imaginary friend. They are having a conversation about Pecola's blue eyes, and the only concern of Pecola is that if there is someone who has more beautiful or bluer eyes than her.

"If there is somebody with bluer eyes than mine, then maybe there is somebody with the bluest eyes. The bluest eyes in the whole world. That's just too bad, isn't it? Please help me look. No. But suppose my eyes aren't blue enough? Blue enough for what? Blue enough for... I don't know. Blue enough for something. Blue enough... for you! I'm not going to play with you anymore. Oh. Don't leave me. Yes. I am". (Morrison: 203).

In the novel, women, especially black women, are always considered as the second sex. The dominant white male hegemony kept its power. Berger (1972: 47) states in *The Ways of Seeing*, "the surveyor of woman in herself is male: the surveyed female. Thus, she turns herself into an object - and most an object of vision: a sight". Berger mentions about the oppression of women. All women in the novel are potential prey for men. Because they are not safe in a sexist society where they are seen as commodities. These traumas that the female characters have been gone through reflects their life. There is such a brutal white society, and men of this society that black females are susceptible to all types of oppressions.

5. Conclusion

In Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, all women characters suffer from being a woman, and in the same concern, they want to be only one because of their oppressed feelings and suffering. The expectations created by

male-dominated society is that women must adapt to survive under the pressure of never-ending hierarchy, and they need to create themselves every day and each second, to exist in the unmerciful world. In Toni Morrison's novel *The Bluest Eye*, the passive resistance of women toward men is the primary topic throughout the entire story. While I have referred to it as passive resistance, the cause is a male-dominated African American society in which women have no right to express themselves as individuals. The concept of individualism is, however, controversial, and the concept of freedom may change from culture to culture. On the other hand, in African American society, there is an ongoing identity crisis, which was previously explained in an article by referring to the term in-betweenness. The concept itself creates another form of diversity, which is expected, through in-between identities and individuals themselves, especially in locales where immigration takes place. Migration is a process which can possibly affect the mental health of people. However, the problems and traumas that men and women experience before, during and after migration may differ. Psychological violence against women adversely affects them before, during and after migration, with unique manifestations.

“This constructed notion of “whiteness” in the minds of the women characters can be affiliated with the concept created by Roland Barthes. Roland Barthes defines the myths today as it can be seen that to purport to discriminate among mythical objects according to their substance would be entirely illusory: since myth is a type of speech, everything can be a myth provided it is conveyed by a discourse” (Barthes, 1957:107).

Women are always affected by a pre-existing male-dominated culture. This situation led to the alienation of women, especially black women, from society. In *The Bluest Eye*, all of the women, suffer from past traumas related to their own race and also seek to be accepted into existing culture and society. The differences between women and men in this society can be explained in terms of dominant power.

During this time in history, women had no right – or space in which-to express or reveal themselves. Morrison tells about the unfortunate life conditions of black women in American society through characters. Thus, the author only gives information about the common experience of women, not individuals or individual experience. In this work, we come across a war of self. This is especially the battle of all black women, which can be observed through the Pecola character. They also want to live freely with their own identity and to be accepted by the society. In the novel, black women accept being ostracized by society and begin to live in their loneliness.

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