

Social Oppression on Women in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* and Ngugi Wa Thiong'o's *Devil on the Cross*.

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Abstract: This article discusses injustices society inflicts on Pecola Breedlove and Wariinga, two defenseless female characters in respectively Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* and Ngugi Wa Thiong'o's *Devil on the Cross*. The African American writer Toni Morrison shows the disastrous impact of race prejudice on the black community, especially how it psychologically affects the most vulnerable like her protagonist Pecola. The Kenyan novelist, Ngugi Wa Thiong'o denounces male oppression through the miserable life of Wariinga, his female protagonist. The issue is to contrast how both female characters are victimized and the chances they have to overcome this oppression. From a psychoanalytic approach, this work deepens the reflection on the articulation of both characters' plight.

Keywords: Injustice, oppression, vulnerable, psychoanalytic approach, plight.

Introduction

My reading of African American literature and postcolonial African literature allows me to conclude that, to some extent, both deal with protest and revolt. According to Steven J. Ruben (1981: 12), "The literature of revolt is born from the recognition on the part of many modern writers that meaning and purpose are not an integral part of the universe in which man finds himself." This is, when man-caused upheavals threaten society's welfare, a need for redress imposes itself. So a literature of protest is the one by a people subjected to different forms of injustices, which they are struggling to get rid of.

Criticism resulting from social oppression on women in general is one form of protest literature, and is largely debated by many scholars among whom feminists come ahead. In the American context especially, African American women's conditions are so precarious, since they have to face racism and sexism at the same time. Megha Bharati and M.L. Joshi (2009: 38) present a long litany of black women's plight in the American context:

Along with racism, sexism scarred the black women mentally and physically; Sexism refers to the gender bias which exists against women in all patriarchal modes of thinking which subordinate women to men. The

patriarchal and endocentric ideologies provide women secondary roles and focus on concepts of gender differences which are not natural but man made. While the white women have been victims of these prejudices, the black woman's position has been more vulnerable. These women had to suffer at the hands of both white and black men, fighting a battle for survival both inside and outside their homes. While the whites lynched and raped them, the blacks came to look upon them as immoral beings. The black men developed a kind of aversion towards the women of their community, regarding them as loose characters which would prefer extra marital adventures to marital permanence. The black women, therefore, had no protection from the men of their own community.

A general fact is that, oppression on women is in most of the cases gender oriented, and consequently proved groundless. Concluded that, these forms of oppressions are socially made, therefore solutions should come from society itself. This paper undertakes a cross reading of two writers' works, where it explores the issue of social oppression and its impacts on women in both Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* and Ngugi Wa Thiong'o's *Devil on the Cross*. Pecola, Morrison's helpless eleven year black girl is a victim of both white racists' abuses and ill treatments within her own community. She is rather a martyr of social oppression. Ngugi Wa Thiong'o depicts Wariinga in the beginning of the story as victim of male domination, but toward the end, he empowers her to fight back. The context in which both characters evolve is quite different, and this helps understand factors that enforce oppression. Pecola is doubly rejected by both the white racist society and her own black community because she lacks "the conventional conception of beauty" which is "being white-skinned with blonde hair and blue eyes" (Mendy, 2014: 777). Wariinga on her side is sexually harassed and abused, when she was still at school and as secretary. From a psychoanalytic approach, this paper explores how social oppression on women is manifested in both *The Bluest Eye* and in *Devil on the Cross*. The essay suggests that though both characters are victims of oppression, only Wariinga has succeeded in fighting back, because of the mass revolt movement she has joined, whereas Pecola's sufferings are the result of African Americans' helpless effort to get rid of racial trauma.

1- Society: Source of Social Oppression

Maria-Magdalena Faurar (2015: 1083) argues that, especially in *The Bluest Eye*, "Love and affection stand as unattainable paradigms of prohibited humanity since society is not a vector of unity but a matrix of separation and humiliation." Her view helps conceive and extend the assertion according to which, socialization impacts much identity construction at the individual level. Whatever the context, society greatly influences members' growth

regardless gender, race and age. Interactions among society's members shape their perception of self and the other. In Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, Pecola is surrounded by a double oppressing power: the white racist society and her own black community. Pecola's tragedy derives from racist discourse which triggers self-oppression within African American community. Manuela Lopez Ramirez (2013:83) opines that "Pecola's tragedy is the dramatic consequence of the internalization of the system of values of the dominant group, the whites, which leads to the marginalization and self-contempt of the black individual. These values are perpetuated through the scapegoating of the weakest and most vulnerable members of community." Of course Pecola's young age makes her a vulnerable victim of many abuses. As a child, the family cell should be a refuge, but instead, it binds her to a perpetual degradation of self. Ramirez (2013: 79) continues that: "In her short existence, Pecola has experienced only rejection and suffering from both her family and community", and from this angle, she "embodies the black individual's history of oppression and exclusion." Society fails to ensure her a blooming adolescence that every child dreams of, and the idealization of whiteness by the Breedlove family members, disorients Pecola's construction of self. Her love for white features subjects her into an "excessive enthusiasm for Shirley Temple," and when "yawning to be Shirley Temple, Pecola denies her own identity" (Shasha, 2009: 36). Pecola develops self-hatred because she can never have blue eyes like that of Shirley Temple, "and consequently, she cannot construct a positive self-image" (Ramirez, 2013: 78).

Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* clearly condemns a society that endeavors whiteness which led to Pecola's self-degradation and madness. Unlike Morrison, Ngugi Wa Thiong'o depicts the miserable life of Wariinga, his female protagonist in *Devil on the Cross*. Wariinga is a victim of a male dominated society; from her young age to adulthood. The story tells that:

Misfortune and trouble had trailed Wariinga long before she left Nairobi, where she worked as a secretary.....On Friday morning Wariinga was dismissed from her job for rejecting the advances of Boss Kihara, her employer who was the managing director of the firm. That evening, Wariinga was abandoned by her sweetheart, after he had accused her of being Boss Kihara's mistress.¹

The account of Wariinga's misfortune leaves on the reader a blended feeling of pity and anger. Through the whole story, only men trouble Wariinga's life. The next morning after her

¹ Ngugi, Wa Thiong'o, *Devil on the Cross*. (London: Heinemann, 1985), p. 10 (The following references will be made to this edition and will be marked parenthetically in the text as (DOC) followed by the page number.)

dismissal from job and her sweetheart accusation for unfaithfulness, Wariinga is evicted from her rented room by her landlord (DOC: 10). Eviction from her room prompts her journey back to Ilmorog, her hometown, where the beginning of her troubles is introduced to the reader. Like Pecola who is oppressed by her close surrounding in *The Bluest Eye*, Wariinga suffers in the hands of men who crossed her life from her childhood up to her departure from Nairobi as an adult woman. The first man from whom came her misfortune was “Her aunt’s husband, whom she called Uncle,” who has dropped her in the hands of the “A wealthy man from Ngorika” (DOC: 142), who impregnated her and deserted her when she was still at school. The patriarchal hegemony of the period may have allowed society to endanger poor Wariinga’s bright future, because at school, she is among the best and she “had no thoughts or worries other than the sheer love to complete school with high honour” (DOC: 140). As a school girl, her uncle forces her into prostitution, which is a crime and according to Melissa Farley, (1998: 419) “Prostitution, in itself, is a form of violence against women that is intrinsically traumatizing. There are many levels of harm implicated as well as the physical harm and damage, there is the emotional and psychological harm of being sexually objectified.” Sexually exploited, impregnated and abandoned by her uncle’s friend, Wariinga saw her dreams quickly vanish, leading her on several occasions to commit suicide (DOC: 151, 152). The rich man broke her innocent heart and this burdened her mind causing a trauma, which nearly ended in suicide. Abuses suffered by Pecola and Warringa led to self-hatred.

2- The Tragedy of Self-hatred

The theme of self-hatred is well visible in *The Bluest Eye* and in *Devil on the Cross*. Self-hatred is a kind of dislike of oneself due to specific reasons. It is also a lack of self-esteem, which “is nothing but a favorable opinion of oneself or the fact of being appreciative of one’s physical, intellectual and moral person” (Mendy, 2014: 777). Pecola’s and Wariinga’ self-debasement comes from society’s idealization of white standards of beauty, standards which they are not naturally entitled to. Pecola thinks that, blue eyes and white skin will probably make her loved and accepted in society, whereas Wariinga, on her side complains about her physical appearance:

Whenever she looked at herself in the mirror she thought herself very ugly. What she hated most was her blackness, so she would disfigure her body with skin-lightening creams like *Ambi* and *Snowfire*, forgetting the saying:

That which is born black will never be white. Now her body was covered with light and dark spots like the guinea fowl. Her hair was splitting, and it had browned to the colour of moleskin because it had been straightened with red-hot iron combs. Wariinga also hated her teeth. They were a little stained; they were not as white as she would have liked them to be. She often tried to hide them, and she seldom laughed openly. (DOC: 11)

The white oriented discourse of beauty puts Wariinga on the margin of society, and the only solution to catch up is to lighten her skin with damaging chemical products. The awful result of her metamorphosis makes her appear much classless than before: she is neither white nor black. According to me, this state of mind makes her hate herself much than before, because her metamorphosis is irreversible. A society that endeavors foreign values to the detriment of its own culture, will never last, just like ice out of the fridge. Pecola's unfulfilled wish to have blue eyes and Wariinga's skin bleaching to become white are what I mean by the failure of artificiality. Each individual is born unique, and the essence of his/her existence is rightful, and only the learning of self-esteem and brotherhood can bring him/her accept himself/herself as he/she is, and accept other people around him/her as they are too.

Self-hatred in this context is justified by the fact that victims think society rejects them because they lack white standards of beauty, and as consequence, they cannot accept themselves as they are. Roberta Rubenstein (1993:129) conclusively argues that, "Measured against white standards of skin color and physical beauty, the black female's options, as depicted in Morrison's first novel, are accommodation, misery, or degradation, if not all three. Unless they are, like Claudia MacTeer, endowed with enough inner strength to believe in themselves." The canon of beauty being already established, women only have to pattern, and unlike Claudia MacTeer, who can transcend these "make up" the rest of women are enslaved by the idea of looking white. Claudia's dissection and destruction of white dolls illustrates her rejection of white standards of beauty (TBE: 20, 21, 22). Her rejection of white defined standard of beauty ranges from destroying white dolls to hatred toward any white girl (Cheng, 2000: 195).

Pauline Breedlove, Pecola's mother hates her own children and cares much for the Fishers, the white family where she toils. Xu Sasha (2009: 38-39) argues that "She has renounced her own black family for the family of her white employer. It is no longer the direct oppression of black by white, but oppression of a daughter by her mother who internalizes the white standard of beauty and uses it as a tool to hurt her own daughter." This is another form of self-hatred: feeling ashamed of one's own ethnic group. Pauline Breedlove stands as a pulling power that enforces the idealization of white beauty, which in turn affects

other female characters' construction of self. In addition to their feelings of ugliness forced on them by society, and which make them hate themselves, Pecola and Wariinga are subjected to other forms of abuses among which rape, sexual abuse and pregnancy.

3- Sexual Abuse and Early Pregnancy

The discourse of sexual abuse is common to both fictional works. In this context, "Sexual abuse occurs when an adult uses a child for sexual purposes or involves a child in sexual acts" (Prahba, 2016: 22). This kind of sexual relation is prohibited by society which calls for child protection. Pecola and Wariinga have been sexually abused and impregnated by people who normally should care for them. While Pecola's own father raped and impregnated her (TBE: 162, 163), Wariinga, on her side, suffered from sexual abuses, early pregnancy and desertion, inflicted by the "wealthy man from Ngorika" (DOC: 142) who promised her a sweet life. Wariinga has been attracted by the old man's promises, and finally found herself abandoned with a pregnancy. Cholly, Pecola's father, is unable to realize that, actually the sexual relation he entertained with his daughter was incest, and socially prohibited. From the scene of rape, Morrison digs secrets many female victims of sexual abuses have hidden deep in their hearts because of shame. In many cases, sexuality has been handled as a tool of oppression over female and mostly defenseless characters by a male dominated society. R. M. Prahba (2016: 22) complains that, instead of condemning and reprimanding Cholly's rape, "The whole community, both the blacks and whites starts to hate her for carrying her father's baby." This controversy around Pecola who is blamed by the whole community materializes hatred that was killing her. It looks like the scene of the adultery woman in the Bible, who is about to be lynched and whose partner is kept untroubled. Pecola is unable to bear a child and as evidence, her baby died in the process of delivery. The baby's death illustrates the hostile environment, where only strong people can survive.

Whether in *The Bluest Eyes* or *Devil on the Cross*, the reader witnesses society's indifference before some of the greatest crimes against defenseless characters. Society is twofold responsible for these crimes that stain victims' lives forever. The consequences of sexual trauma are much destructive on teenagers, especially when the family cell is scattered and unable to protect its members like the Breedlove in *The Bluest Eye*. Through the development of the theme of sexual violence, Toni Morrison and Ngugi Wa Thiong'o highlight the degree of male unfair domination over women. Both authors chose teenagers as

male victims to turn this domination ridiculous. People in power can only oppress others if they do not behave accordingly or in a proportionate way.

4- Reaction to Male Oppression

This portion is where Morrison and Ngugi diverge in the outcome of their victims' reaction to social oppression. The authors just paint the prevailing atmosphere of the social environment of their time. Pecola's case is hopeless because of her young age, the hostile white racists' abuses and the unbearable life at home. This has locked her in a tour of silence where she finally disintegrates into insanity. Her gradual growth from trauma to nearly madness is the result of a wicked society that bred neither love nor self-esteem. Morrison writes: "This soil is bad for certain kinds of flowers. Certain seeds it will not nurture, certain fruit it will not bear, and when the land kills of its own volition, we acquiesce and say the victim had no right to live" (TBE: 206). Actually, Pecola could not sow the seeds of her dreams in a barren soil, where nothing can grow and bring back happiness in people's lives. Morrison could not construct Pecola as she actually did, because the issue of social ostracism resulting from race prejudice has done more victims than what the reader could imagine, and Pecola's example becomes a reference. For Louis Mendy, (2014:781), Pecola's case significantly impacts society's consciousness, since "She becomes a reminder of human cruelty and an emblem of human suffering." Pecola symbolizes the real victim of injustice, and finding no way to escape social hatred, she finally succumbs like a victim lynched by an angry mob. Both the American white society and her own black community do not care for her, so this could not instill in her a spirit of resistance.

Unlike Pecola, whom society forces into resignation, Wariinga struggles hard to cope with social injustices. Wariinga has quickly "... understood that those who despise their own selves are bound to lose their whole selves through insanity or even death" (Mendy, 2014: 781). From then, Wariinga's reaction to men who hijacked her sexuality started by accepting her own self. Emily Ann Brumley (2007: 7-8) argues in the same vein that

In order to break from her imprisoned identity, Wariinga must go on a quest for the identity she desires by rejecting the cultural voice that tells her she is ugly and weak and discover her power as a woman and an individual. Through a journey and adventure to her hometown of Ilmorog, Wariinga gradually changes and becomes impassioned with a nationalist spirit. Her experiences change the way she views herself and how she operates in her society; she becomes a feminist. The battlefield for her is not only the reclamation of her sexuality, but also the rejection of what she has assumed

to be true about her identity in terms of Christianity, the work force, and the war for national Uhuru (independence).

The national spirit is the power that moves Wariinga from self-hatred to self-celebration. As a victim of male and Western cultural dominated society, she has joined the group of nationalists and fought for freedom. When fighting for national liberation, Wariinga is at the same time freeing herself from all sufferings. She evolved from an innocent victim to a freedom fighter as the following passage reads:

This Wariinga is not the one we met two years ago. This Wariinga is not the one who used to think that there was nothing she could do except type for others; the one who used to burn her body with Ambi and Snowfire to change the colour of her skin to please the eyes of others, to satisfy her lust for white skins; the one who used to think that there was only one way of avoiding the pitfalls of life: suicide. No, this Wariinga is not that other Wariinga. Today's Wariinga has decided that she'll never again allow herself to be a mere flower, whose purpose is to decorate the doors and windows and tables of other people's lives, waiting to be thrown on to a rubbish heap the moment the splendor of her body withers. The Wariinga of today has decided to be self-reliant all the time, to plunge into the middle of the arena of life's struggles in order to discover her real strength and to realize her true humanity (DOC: 216).

Wariinga's rebuttal is a demonstration de force, and nothing can stop her from achieving her goals. She decided to take a three year course of engineering at the Polytechnic, and also attended training sessions of judo to defend herself in case of male attack. She is now working "as a self-employed mechanic at Mwihotori Kiwanja Garage, near Munyua Road" (DOC: 219). She gains financial autonomy and physical strength as if she was preparing to head a crusade against her former oppressors. Ngugi, when endowing Wariinga with masculine features, knows that her twofold struggle (debunking gender biased discourse and gaining financial autonomy) takes more than a mere construction of self-esteem. She evolves as a guardian of women rights, when she kicked a man who touched her buttocks one day when she was repairing an auto engine. The story tells that, she "turned like lightening, and in a twinkling of an eye, she had assaulted him with so many judo kicks and karate chops that for a time he saw stars" (DOC: 221). Wariinga grows to the peak of her struggle when she killed the rich man from Ngorika, the same man from whom all her misfortune came from. She shot him dead with a pistol, which means that, her revenge is bloody than nobody has expected. Ngugi's protagonist has evolved from an innocent victim of male domination to a committed national liberation fighter, and this makes all the difference with Morrison's Pecola who did not recover from her traumatic experience as an abused child.

Conclusion

This paper offered to explore social oppression and its impacts on both Pecola and Wariinga, who are respectively Toni Morrison's protagonist in *The Bluest Eye* and Ngugi Wa Thiong'o's in *Devil on the Cross*. The comparative purpose of this study is to understand how Morrison (an African American feminist writer) and Ngugi (an African Marxist writer) handle the issue of male domination over women in contemporary discourse of gender relations in literature. From the study, society that idealizes white standards of feminine beauty and dictates its laws from male point of view has greatly harmed Pecola's and Wariinga's lives. Whereas Pecola yawns for blue eyes, drinks milk when admiring Shirley Temple, Wariinga bleaches her skin to look white. Both characters' unsuccessful dreams turn to a misconception and hatred of self. In addition to this psychological burden imposed on them by society, they experience sexual abuses and early pregnancy when they were still at school; Pecola from her own father and Wariinga from the rich man from Ngorika. The reaction of victims against social injustices and especially male abuses is where the writers' approaches diverge. Trapped between white racists' hostility and a scatted family cell where neither love nor affection is bred, Pecola has no chance to recover from her wounds. Her retrenchment in a kind of asylum toward the end of the narrative reflects American society's guilty indifference before injustices some minority groups, like black people are victims of. Wariinga, defies male domination through her evolvment as a freedom fighter and later on as punisher of her oppressors.

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