

## Nothing Good Ever Comes of Violence\*

As soon as one starts reading *The Bluest Eyes*, Toni Morrison's first novel, one cannot help but notice the continuous discrimination and seclusion caused to Pecola, who acts as an epitome of all the members of the black community. She is continuously exploited and called "ugly" due to her black skin colour. Needless to say, racism, indeed, becomes a dominant factor in this novel. This novel has been studied by several critics at different times and analysed critically from different points of view. In fact, there is no dearth of critical reading when it comes to *The Bluest Eyes*. But, if one tries to have a close look at the critical readings done so far, one would notice a lack of in-depth analysis on the theme of violence in this novel (though some critics have indeed skimmed through a kaleidoscopic view of the same). Their treatment of the topic of violence has been predominantly restricted to the domain of psychological violence imposed on the Black community by the Whites, though few critics have also analysed the novel from feministic, psychoanalytic and Marxist point of view. This paper will not only attempt to look at the gendered nature of violence within the home but also try to trace its wider implications. This paper will look at the oft discussed types of violence like physical, sexual and emotional along with the not-so discussed verbal violence pertaining to gender.

But, before we move on to see the snippets of violence in Toni Morrison's first novel, it is mandatory we look at the different lexicons of violence. The Oxford Dictionary defines violence as "unlawful use of force, violent conduct or treatment." Having said that, we realise that the domain of violence is actually quite broad. It might refer to a trifle between two people, a mob assault or even a bomb blast that takes away millions of lives. We come across a beautiful definition of violence put forward by WHO (World Health Organisation). They present it quite widely stating

"[t]he intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or against a group or community that either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, mal-development or deprivation."

In order to illustrate, we will contemplate on different people's views on violence. Rajbir Singh sees violence as an extension of conflict. He states,

Conflict may be defined as escalated natural competition between two or more parties about scarce resources, power and prestige, whereas violence could be defined as a form of severely escalated conflict. It occurs when two opposing parties have interests or goals that appear to be incompatible which can occur anytime.

Anderson and Bushman arrive at their definition of violence by putting it in sharp contrast to that of aggression. They say,

Behaviour intended to produce deliberate harm to another and violence having extreme harm as its intent. Violence can be defined as the physical attack on one person or group by another in the context of aggressive behaviour.

Monahan defines violence as:

overtly threatened or overtly accomplished application of force which results in the injury or destruction of persons or property or reputation, or the illegal appropriation of property.

However, all the quotations mentioned so far do not convey exactly what violence is, as if we can claim, whatever is stated as violence is violence and all that is not stated is clearly non-violent. Similar thoughts have also been stated by Monahan. The common factor that we come across all these definitions are that each one of them tries to designate anything, be it any particular word, gesture or action which is carried out with the intention of hurting, injuring, harming or killing anyone, human or animal, as violence. It can be a desire or a reciprocation of some action which is deemed as a distorted, misappropriated, misapplied behaviour or force, which effectively brings out the instinctual, barbaric, malicious intent of the doer. It is pertinent to mention here once that, though I had distinctly classified the different forms of violence this paper will be dealing with violence pertaining to gender. Strict lines cannot be drawn segregating the different forms of violence as they will continuously overlap or intersect each other, be it physical, sexual, verbal or psychological. We cannot talk of physical violence in totality leaving out sexual violence. When we are talking of physical, verbal or sexual violence, snippets of psychological violence too peep in because each kind of violence affects the psyche. Yet, an effort will be made to draw attention to the different forms of the violence.

Physical violence, as the term suggests, can be used to hurt or damage someone physically by the use of power mediated through the use of a stick, gun, any heavy, sharp objects or even hands. Sexual violence can be defined as fulfilling sexual pleasure from non-consenting individuals or animals forcefully. Forced prostitution or fellation can be even termed as sexual violence. Sarcastic, satiric or abusive language directed at someone can be deemed as verbal violence and anything that hurts or brutalises the emotions, feelings or sentiments of someone, even to such an extent that it inflicts a sense of fear in someone can be termed as psychological violence.

The writings of Toni Morrison are replete with themes of violence. In the fictions of Morrison, we not only come across different forms of love between characters but we also get to witness different forms of violence like racial violence, gender violence and class violence. Each form of violence mentioned above encapsulates the different types of violence already discussed.

To begin with, we take the gendered nature of violence carried out within the house as portrayed in Morrison's *The Bluest Eyes*. We will also look at how this gendered violence results in the disintegration of the family, leading to loneliness in each individual. Some characters are seen to adapt to this loneliness deftly by changing themselves as demanded, others were forced to perish. The house is seen to both resist as well as revolt to such violence according to circumstances.

If we talk about physical violence, then both genders have a dominant role to play in it.

We come across a scene where we notice the physical tussle between Mr Breedlove and Mrs Breedlove. A dispute sprang up between Cholly and Pauline over bringing of some coal to keep the latter warm whereas the former had returned home late the previous night, drunk. This dispute sparked off, with Pauline pouring a pot of cold water over Cholly while he was sleeping and it prolonged till both got severely involved to the point that they fell on the ground, slapping each other till it ended with Mr Breedlove being unconscious after getting hit by the stove lid hurled at him by Mrs Breedlove.

Another instance of physical violence gets demonstrated when Pecola's mother physically abuses her. Pauline had asked Pecola and two of her friends Claudia and Frieda to wait till she returned with her laundry, when the three girls had gone to meet Pauline at her workplace. The pan containing boiled blue berries somehow got tilted by Pecola resulting in the spillage of the

entirety on the floor. As a result of this, Pecola's feet got scalded. Pauline, on finding out, violently thrashed Pecola down on the floor and later shooed the three away from there. Morrison states,

“...in one gallop 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, and in a voice thin with anger, abused Pecola directly and Frieda and me by implication”.(p. 109)

This violence is not really directed against Pecola but rather at her own miserable condition. In Pecola, she sees her own discontentment. In Pecola, she finds another Pauline. This time however, Pecola is weaker and more vulnerable than she herself was. In the absence of the true targets of her vexations she, by beating up, her own image punishes herself. She tries to exorcize the ghost of violence. In her effort to do the same she actually engages in the same process. That is invariably the problem of violence. It is a never-ending process and it keeps giving birth to itself. Pauline has grown up seeing violence in all its forms – racial, domestic, sexual, psychological and has been trained in the discourse of the same. It is but only natural that she will unconsciously teach her daughter whatever skills she has learnt over the years.

If violence in Morrison's novel gets presented in different ways, so is the cause of such violence. Still, one can agree that violence is also present there in a different way. Sometimes, violence is seen as a residual reaction against some mishap, which certain characters have been victims of. Violence is also seen to be used as a weapon or a tool of dominance, to exhibit over, that of the superior over the inferior. Violence is also seen to be exhibited as a method of self-defence in some cases, especially physical violence.

We get to see a glimpse of the afore-mentioned statement in the scenario which depicts

“Pecola bolt[ing] straight up, her eyes wide with terror .....Blood was running down her legs. .... A brownish stain discoloured the back of her dress”.

Frieda stated that Pecola had started “ministration” and hence had dragged her behind the bushes to help her “hold the cotton thing between her legs” and “bury the soiled pants”. It is during this time that Rose Mary discovers them behind the bushes and shouts for Mrs McTeer with an intention to complain about the girls. Fearing trouble, Claudia gets defensive and scratches the nose of Rose Mary out of sheer anger. Justifying her intention to see how the white dolls are made, Claudia dismembers them and finds satisfaction in it as if it is through this metaphorical act, that she reacts against the physical violence caused to her or her community by the Whites.

Again, when Mr. and Mrs. MacTeer learn about how Frieda, their youngest daughter has been malevolently assaulted by Mr. Henry, the enraged duo goes to the extent of hitting him with a broom, a cycle and even shooting him only in a fit of exasperation.

Instances of physical violence are also seen when Frieda beat up Rose Mary on being threatened that her father would be taken to jail. Though women were confined within home and dominated and subjugated by men, we see various situations where it is not men who inflict physical violence on women alone, it is quite the vice-versa scenario. The three prostitutes Mary, China and Poland threw the Jew away from their window after pouncing on him and making him forcefully get rid of all his wealth. We notice women implementing violence on members of the same gender as well.

Physical violence, as we have seen so far has been permeated equally by both the gender, in fact more by the women. The role of women gets reversed from a perpetrator to a prey when it comes to sexual violence. Violence seen from the perspective of gender takes on the colour of self-defence. Violence when engendered by the so-called softer gender seems to be a defence mechanism.

Sexual violence is also an innate characteristic of Morrison's novels. In this particular novel, we get a glimpse of Mr. Henry, the new paying guest of the Mactears, taking advantage of the situation of finding Frieda alone at house. He showed the audacity of touching the breasts of Frieda by going down on his knees and coming close to her.

Another instance is of Cholly ravaging his daughter. One Saturday afternoon, drunk Cholly returns to see Pecola bending over the sink, busy washing the dishes and at times scratching her calf with her toe. This very image reminded Cholly of the first time he had seen Pauline. Not only did the image bear stark resemblance to a previous image of Pauline in Cholly's mind but also the mental state of Cholly at both the times. Cholly was as free today as he was at that time. He had no one, he cared about no one and hence was free to do anything whatsoever his heart desired. Moreover, he could not bear to tolerate the way Pecola appeared to him- unhappy and helpless because he possibly could not see a reflection of his state in her. And hence, he ended up touching her "fatally", as the narrator remarks. He ended up raping her.

Again, Cholly and Pauline's sexual life can be deemed as violent, as evident from the details mentioned in the novel. Cholly made sounds as if somebody is almost strangulating him whereas Pauline remained silent, she made no sound at all. Pauline had diminished to an object which acted as an outlet for Cholly where he could effectively vent out his anger and frustrations as it suited him.

Verbal violence strongly permeates Morrison's novels as well. Here, in this novel, Pecola's inability to answer the question of a young boy makes her fall victim to an instance of "Black e mo. Black e mo. Yadaddsleepsnekked. Blacke mo black e moyadadd sleeps nekked. Black e mo . . . ." (p. 65) In the novel, we come to know about an instance when Cholly engaged in a physically intimate moment with Darlene in an open field, is confronted by two white men who first flashes light on Cholly's back and then hurls verbal abuses at him insisting him to continue with the usage of words like, "I said, get on wid it. An' make it good, nigger, make it good". (p. 148) Sometimes, the Afro- Americans are seen speaking in a satiric, mocking and disdainful manner. Their remarks are so formidable and mordacious that they almost traumatise the hearer. For instance, Maureen Peal yells insolently at Pecola, Claudia and Frieda, "I am cute! And you ugly! Black and ugly black e mos. I am cute!" (p.73). Again, Pecola's inferiority gets sedimented with Geraldine's snobbish way of speaking. When Pecola was falsely accused by Geraldine Junior of killing the cat, Geraldine hurls abuses at Pecola by stating "You nasty little black bitch. Get out of my house". Verbal violence much like physical violence mediates between both the genders.

When we talk of psychological violence, we have to include snippets of other violence in it as well because each and every kind of violence affects the psyche of an individual. We notice how continuously Pecola's psyche gets affected by the treacherous behaviour of people around her. She is not liked or trusted by her mother. Her father considers her as an outlet for satisfying his sexual hunger. He rapes her. Her best friends avoid her, others humiliate her. Her brother disapproves of her company. She goes unnoticed even to a shop-keeper. Pecola's rape by Cholly surely accelerated her journey towards madness as this had left her pregnant and hence disowned by her community. The verbal abuses hurled at Cholly during his intimacy

with Geraldine had affected Cholly's psyche in such a manner that it damaged his psyche completely forever. It left a permanent stain in his mind. It made him feeble and made his existence powerless and thus meaningless to him. Wilfred D. Samuels and Clenora Hudson Weems thus rightly comments, "Cholly, too, is bruised in a visual confrontation that involves the negating glance of 'the Other'". This intense oppression, instead of making the native submissive, turns him/her into a creature who understands only one language – that of the whip and the gun. The native gets desensitized, he gets familiar with the daily violence and accumulates the poison slowly but steadily only to spill it on their tormentors. Thus, the chain of violence which is started by the colonizer stops momentarily at the brutalization of the perpetrators. The same is true of a non-colonial society. Violence is everywhere, though in different forms. In a developed country like America the violence is homicidal and not genocidal. Sartre, using a Jungian principle, tells us that the mad impulse of the native to murder is the expression of the oppressed natives 'collective unconscious anxiety. The violence is often a kind of jungle fire which burns the dead and rotting as well as the new born and the innocent. The native muscle always charged up with the anticipation of violence automatically hits his own image, i.e., his own countryman and kin, at the slightest of the provocation. In a colonial situation however, the violence often gets channelled out on the innocent in its absence of bursting forth upon the real criminal – the colonizer. The same happens to the colonial people. Thus, violence often turns things upside down. This may be true to the revolutionary ideals as well. The traumatized can hardly distinguish between the face and the mask. If one has ever tried to rescue an animal which is cornered, one could recall that the poor animal attacked its saviour with the same vigour as it would have had attacked its tormentor. In the same vein the colonized could barely manage to distinguish between the white face from their black masks of violence. Fanon points out to the recent trends of violence in the neo-colonial world when he says that the Capitalist first world countries would not decimate the colony's population for, they would lose both their capital in the form of labour and consumers that way. The superpowers would use violence only to scare the native men and women and then one should not be able to gather courage and fight back with violence. The violence is used to demoralize them. Therefore, Fanon says that, "The colonized man finds his freedom in and through violence". (Carroll)Pauline, Cholly's wife, also experiences similar psychological violence at her workplace. Her mistress gets enraged at Cholly landing up in her workplace in a drunken state to claim money. The mistress puts forward the condition to Pauline of forsaking her husband if she wants to receive the eleven dollars due to her. Refusal to leave her husband makes Pauline lose her job, nailing the damage to her psyche. Psychological violence got depicted at her best when Cholly set fire to the house not thinking even once about his entire family. It was a huge psychological blow to all the members of the family who got affected due to such an act. The entire family got scattered and disintegrated. Cholly was taken as a prisoner, Pauline stayed up at her work place, Sammy was taken by a family and Pecola went to stay with the MacTeers. Even this did not put an end to the psychological violence faced by Pecola. She was fascinated by the Shirley Temple mug which was given to her, for her to drink milk. She got lost in the beautiful depiction of the image of Shirley temple so much that she ended up finishing three quarts of milk altogether. When Pauline comes to know of this, she remarks,

"I don't mind folks coming in and getting what they want, but three quarts of milk! What the devil does anybody need with three quarts of milk?" (p.23)

Such verbose was extremely excruciating and it left a deep hollow in the psyche as the narrator confesses,

Mama never named anybody, just talked about folks and some people, extremely painful in their thrust. She would go on like that for hours, connecting one offense to another until all of the things that chagrined her were spewed out. (p,24)

Even the words voiced by Maureen Peal were so vigorous that they might have sedimented Pecola's journey towards dissolution.

It is only from parents that one expects a bit of mental support and solace. But when parents deny that and are keener on destructing the peace of their children's lives, then there can be no respite from that as no one has such close access to children as their parents. Such is the case for Pecola. She is violated more by her parents than by others. Consider the psychological violence inflicted on her when her mother makes it very evident that she prefers a white girl over her, finds excuse of taking her out of school and also makes it very prominent that she does not trust Pecola. Cholly Breedlove, much like Pecola also suffers deep set psychological violation from his parents. He was supposedly dumped on a garbage heap by his mother in his infancy. His father behaved like a surrogate one. Pauline Breedlove, too, is not relieved of such a treatment from her parents at home. She was not even loved in the least to bear a nickname. She neither had anyone to confide in nor anyone to continue her conversations with. Such was the state of her loneliness and such is the psychological blow that she received.

Psychological violence mediated not only among both genders affecting the other in return. Animals too fell victim to violence or rather were chosen to be violated to bring about psychological violence in humans. Geraldine Junior invited Pecola to his house and on her arrival threw the cat on her. Astonished that the cat did not harm her, he took the cat and threw it towards the window. The cat fell from the window and died. Geraldine, on enquiring about the noise, got to hear from her son that it was Pecola who was the miscreant. Geraldine hurled abuses at Pecola which harmed her psyche whereas this act of the cat dying infected Geraldine's psyche. Geraldine's son thus, not only violated the cat, but also Pecola and his own mother. This is an instance where some people consider the act of harming animals as an effective way of taking revenge and achieving justice. Their revolt which is actually registered against their authorities, in this case, parents, get directed towards animals helps in achieving the needful vengeance.

As far as psychological violence is considered, it cannot be separated from the physical aspects of the same but it is interesting to associate the two. *The Bluest Eyes* explores the disastrous consequences of the western notion of physical beauty on a young poor impressionable black girl, Pecola. The idea is essentially racist because the features it glamorises – white skin with blue eyes and blonde hairs – are Caucasian in origin, and it is particularly dangerous because it equates white skin with personal worth and virtue and implies that those who do not have these features are not beautiful and are therefore inferior.

Toni Morrison goes to the extent of saying that the equating of physical beauty with virtue "is one of the dumbest, more pernicious and destructive ideas of the western world, and we should have nothing to do with it. Physical beauty has nothing to do with our past, present, future." (Freeman) More specifically, it can damage one's self-image, destroy happiness and kill off creativity. This quest for beauty leads Pecola to do untold violence upon herself. It is this violence that ultimately leads her to madness. As too much violence to the body makes it disgruntled, too much psychological violence makes the psyche disgruntled.

What we effectively notice after the depiction of the different types of gendered nature of violence that this violence takes place in a cyclical pattern of stimulation and ramification. It

has far reached and widespread effect. The most dominant of it being the disruption of the home and fragmentation of family. John Duvall aptly puts it:

“[L]ife in the Breedlove household is anything but restrained. The ritualized violence of Cholly and Mrs. Breedlove’s relationship emotionally scars their children, who repeatedly witness parental fights....”

The home, as we have seen, revolts and resists such violence parallel finally leading to catastrophe. What we find in the novel is not strictly literature but a spectre of violence in the garb of literature. As this violence stands exposed, it suspends the senses of the readers, and brings them (as much as the victimised characters) to the point of helplessness and despondence, all the time appealing for recognition and retaliation. Hence, violence begets violence and encompasses individuals into a vicious cycle much to the aptness of Martin Luther King’s observation, as stated in the title of this paper.

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