

The relationship between gender and postcolonial politics with reference to The Bluest Eye by Toni Morrison.

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Postcolonial studies have been thriving since the late 20th century. Postcolonialism generally refers to either the historical conditions following Western colonialism or the branch of academia and its related interdisciplinary studies which aim to illuminate and debate issues associated with the historical context of colonialism and the political context of globalisation (Young⁴). In particular, Frantz Fanon's postcolonial text, *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952), investigates the psychology of colonialism and examines the dominance of whites and inferiority complex of black people inculcated by colonialism (Sardar X). The concept of mimicry, formulated by Homi Bhabha, illustrates how and why the colonised imitate the coloniser (126). In this essay, postcolonial politics refer to a dominant ideology that empowers white people yet subjugates black people. According to Robert Young, postcolonial work should foreground its interventionist possibilities, especially concerning gender so that postcolonialism may offer a political ideology, as opposed to simply a coherent theoretical methodology, that is directed towards strategic material needs and addressing inequalities (4, 5). Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak can be regarded as a trailblazer for postcolonial-gender research. In her influential essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?", she identifies the plight of subaltern women who are doubly oppressed by both patriarchy and colonialism (28). Judith Butler also advocates for the application of Spivak's theory and posits gender identities as a topic for political debate (222). Thus, gender issues should be included in debates and discussions regarding postcolonial political concerns. Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1970) demonstrates how gender issues are interwoven with postcolonial politics through the traumatic life experiences of an African-American girl, Pecola Breedlove, and her family in 1941. Therefore, this essay argues that gender and postcolonial politics, as shown in *The Bluest Eye* (1970), are intertwined and interact with each other. Firstly, this essay illustrates how postcolonial politics empower whites and subjugate black men in *The Bluest Eye* (1970)

by directing black men to develop an inferiority complex, with reference to Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952). Secondly, this essay discusses how black women, exemplified by Pecola, are oppressed by both postcolonialism and patriarchy into the lowest strata, which later results in her exhibiting mimicking behaviours. This is discussed with reference to Spivak's theory regarding the subaltern and Bhaba's concept of mimicry. Finally, this essay examines how black people, particularly black women, can impact the dynamic and evolving politics of postcolonialism to a certain degree, and inspire contemporary readers for further discussion.

The inherent hierarchy of postcolonial politics empowers white men and induces an inferiority complex in black men. This is articulated by Fanon who claims that "regardless of the area I have studied, one thing has struck me: the Negro enslaved by his inferiority, the white man enslaved by his superiority alike behave in accordance with a neurotic orientation" and "it is the racist who creates [black men's] inferior" (43, 69). This is also evident in *The Bluest Eye* (1970). When two white hunters encounter Cholly, Pecola's father, having sexual intercourse with a black girl, Darlene, instead of taking a detour, they stop and say "Go on and finish. And, nigger, make it good" (Morrison 42). Rather than stopping, Cholly, terrified and astounded, capitulates and continues to have intercourse with Darlene while they watch (Morrison 162). In this case, Cholly behaves like an animal; he instantly forsakes his dignity and manhood. This demonstrates the postcolonial politics which enslave white men into a superior position, and makes Cholly develop an inferior psyche, fearing whites and enslaving himself. Moreover, when Cholly later contemplates this event, he still refuses to direct his hatred towards the white men, for "they were big, white, armed men. He was small, black, helpless" (Morrison 165). Thus, this statement unveils how racism causes him to deeply internalise a sense of inferiority.

Further to being afraid of white men, black men also attempt to please white women. This can be regarded as an attempt to discard their blackness and obtain partial white male power. Fanon analyses this psychology, stating that black men believe "by loving me [white woman] proves that I am worthy of white love. I am loved like a white man" and thus "I am a white man" (45). Otherwise stated, black men believe that by having relationships with white women, they will be perceived as powerful, like white men, thereby transcending their inferior positions within the hierarchy of postcolonial politics. This is also embodied in *The Bluest Eye* (1970). Claudia, a black girl and the narrator,

ironically remarks that the black actor Bojangles “who was my friend, my uncle, my daddy, and who ought to have been soft- shoeing it and chuckling with me” instead enjoys a dance with Shirley Temple, the white child star with blue eyes (Morrison 19). Thus, postcolonial politics empower whites with superiority while black men, who are viewed as inferior within this mechanism, develop an inferiority complex; they become afraid of white men and attempt to displace their black selves and acquire white masculinity by pleasing white women.

However, although Fanon provides penetrating insights into the relationship between whites and black men, he considers the situation of black women much less. He confesses that “those who grant our conclusions on the psycho-sexuality of the white woman may ask what we have to say about the woman of color. I know nothing about her” (138). This is further demonstrated by Homi Bhaba who suggests that Fanon “simplifies the question of sexuality” as he considers gender as subsidiary to race; however, they are intertwining issues (Bhaba 147; Bergner 84). Thus, the situation of black women has been somewhat overlooked.

Compared with their male counterparts, black women suffer under much severer circumstances within postcolonial politics; they are suppressed by both postcolonial and patriarchal practices. This is demonstrated by Spivak in her essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?” She claims “it is, rather, that, both as object of colonialist historiography and as subject of insurgency, the ideological construction of gender keeps the male dominant. If, in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow” (28). She defines the subaltern as people who are “removed from all lines of social mobility” (475) and emphasises the plight of subaltern women which has been largely overlooked (28). In her essay, Spivak uses examples of subalterns that she has taken from Indian culture; however, the same concept can be adapted to analyse various groups within different regions. Spivak’s theory identifies general problems regarding representation and uses an anti-essentialist methodology, insisting that subalterns can have different desires and interests (Riach 51). Therefore, in the context of *The Bluest Eye* (1970), Pecola can be regarded as a subaltern woman who suffers from the double subjugation of postcolonialism and patriarchy through the way she is suppressed by the postcolonial and patriarchal society of America. The postcolonialism of 1940s America is transformed by capitalism into racialised norms of beauty. Eurocentric beauty aesthetics have been imposed upon consumers through

advertising and diverse forms of commercial products, such as dolls and films, which aim to convince consumers that white is beautiful and black is ugly (Jha 1). Pecola is constantly oppressed by both the patriarchal system and these racialised beauty constructs. This Anglicised beauty standard is imposed upon Pecola through white patriarchy. When Pecola is buying products at the store of Mr Yacobowski, a white man, he “senses that he need not waste the effort of a glance. He does not see her, because for him there is nothing to see” (Morrison 48). Although Pecola is initially irritated by his dismissal of her, she later hypothesises that, due to her blackness, she is not worthy of a white man’s gaze (49). Because of her exposure to racialised beauty standards, she gradually develops such a sense of inferiority. Later, black men also exacerbate Pecola’s suffering from her feeling of ugliness. After school, black boys circle and mock Pecola for her blackness. She drops her notebook and covers her face with her hands as she cries silently (Morrison 67). Their cruel attitudes reveal the aforementioned self-loathing of black men and debunk the idea that black men protect their female compatriots, as here they join the white males in contributing to their suppression, intensifying Pecola’s suffering from both patriarchy and racialised beauty norms and devaluing her. Therefore, for Pecola, since society and people around her have agreed that a blue-eyed, pink-skinned girl is the ideal standard of beauty, she internalises the racialised beauty standards and convinces herself of her ugliness. This beauty standard is pivotal in maintaining white supremacy and the hierarchical social stratification which naturally places Pecola into the lowest stratum (Burcar 140, 147; Tate 4). Hence, postcolonial domination epitomised by Anglicised beauty constructs and a multilayered patriarchal system have deprived Pecola of her subjectivity of aesthetics, tortured her with the accusation of ugliness, and made her a silent victim in the lowest stratum of society suffering double subjugation.

Because of Pecola’s severe persecution, she develops a strong desire to detach from her black identity and pursue a white self. For instance, she is extremely fond of Shirley Temple doll and takes every opportunity to drink milk out of the Shirley Temple cup just to see and touch her face (Morrison 23). She wishes for a couple of blue eyes like Shirley’s and even requests assistance from the preacher, Soaphead (Morrison 176). It is perceivable that her tastes and demands embody mimicry. According to Bhabha, mimicry is a compromise made by the colonised in colonial discourse and is undoubtedly a “partial” presence, in that “to be Anglicized, is emphatically not to be English” (126, 128). Otherw

is stated, although Pecola subscribes to the Anglicised tastes and opinions, due to her identity as a black female, she can never become a white girl with blue eyes. And this is demonstrated by Soaphead's refusal of her request as well. He states, "I can do nothing for you, my child. I am not a magician" (Morrison 174). Thus, postcolonial politics empower whites, particularly white men, with superiority so that they can control white women through traditional patriarchal systems and black men and women through postcolonial dominance. Black men are conferred an inferior status by this system which increases their desire for whiteness, which they conflate with power. However, it is black women who are oppressed as the subaltern in the lowest stratum, voicelessly and helplessly suffering from both postcolonial dominance and multilayered patriarchy.

Nevertheless, although postcolonial politics oppress the subaltern women, as exemplified by Pecola's situation, many black women are attempting to become empowered to impact postcolonial politics and enforce sociopolitical changes. This is demonstrated by Spivak; although her initial answer to "Can the Subaltern Speak?" seems to be "No", she gradually concedes that through education, subalterns may increase their visibility and opportunities for their voices to be acknowledged (Riach 75). In *The Bluest Eye* (1970), Claudia is a representative of pioneering black women. Unlike Pecola and the adults in the novel, she dislikes Shirley Temple and even destroys the blue-eyed doll which her parents instruct her to treasure (Morrison 19, 20). Furthermore, she recognises that it is not the fault of any individual but the structure of postcolonialism that harms black people. As she states, although Maureen Peal, the part African-American girl with green eyes, is disdainful towards black girls and regarded as beautiful by black people, "we knew that Maureen Peal was not the Enemy and not worthy of such intense hatred. The Thing to fear was the Thing that made her beautiful, and not us" (Morrison 74). Therefore, although Claudia does not enforce practical changes to break the prevailing postcolonial ideology in *The Bluest Eye* (1970), her resistance against Anglicisation and her pride in her black identity empower her to become a pioneer of autonomous black women in the novel. Claudia's 10-year-old sister Frieda also occasionally showcases an independent will to protect her black sisters against the patriarchy and postcolonial dominance. For example, when black boys are bullying Pecola for her ugliness, it is Frieda

who "snatched her coat from her head and threw it on the ground" to break the circle and save Pecola (Morrison 66). Thus, although black women are positioned by postcolonial politics in the

lowest strata and their power may seem slight, some of them embody a sense of autonomous awareness against patriarchal and postcolonial oppression. Moreover, this novel also shows the empowerment of a black woman, Toni Morrison, as the production of her political writing and voice of the oppressed. She claims in an interview that her aim in writing this novel is to alert her readership to the damaging consequences of racialised beauty constructs, to extricate blacks from racial self-contempt and to expose the mental effects of postcolonial and patriarchal discourses on black women (“Toni Morrison”, 01:00:00-03:10:00). Besides Toni Morrison, considering the dynamics of postcolonial politics, many black women have made progress in affecting it. For example, following the shooting of Trayvon Martin in 2013, at least three black females, including Opal Tometi, Alicia Garza and Patrisse Cullors, co-founded the Black Lives Matter (BLM) campaign to combat racism and police violence and to raise awareness of racial issues (Langford and Speight 78). Black female representation in politics is continuing to expand. For example, Kamala Harris has been elected as the first female and first African and Asian American Vice-President in US history (Kalita 2020), demonstrating the increasing might of black women in American politics. Hence, although postcolonial politics impose an inferior ideology upon black people, especially black women, their growing sociopolitical might demonstrates their progress in striving for their rights, justice and equality in the dynamic and evolving postcolonialsphere.

In conclusion, this essay has illustrated how the issues of postcolonial politics and gender interact. Postcolonial politics authorise white men’s superiority, allowing them to control white women through the established patriarchy and govern black men and women through postcolonial discourse. Black men are placed as inferior to whites within this hierarchical system. They attempt to gain white male power by pleasing white women and oppressing black women through patriarchal practices. Thus, subaltern black females are positioned by postcolonial ideology into the lowest sphere and denied a voice. However, although the oppression is strong and overwhelming, considering the dynamics of postcolonial politics, black power, particularly black female power, is emerging and fighting for sociopolitical justice for black people in contemporary society, thereby impacting postcolonialpolitics. Therefore, it is perceivable that, the postcolonial politics are experiencing enormous transformation and black female would be a potential strong force in the future.

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