

A Comparative Study of Pecola and Gyanoda: Sex, Violence and Beauty in the Bluest Eye and Arakshaniya

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Abstract

Saratchandra Chattopadhyay (1876-1938) in *Arakshaniya* (1916) has pictured Gyanoda, a socially abandoned and oppressed Bengali Hindu girl of 12/13 expected to be married off. Unable to endure the sexual violence and cruelties thrown upon her, Pecola in *The Bluest Eye* (1970) by Toni Morrison (b. 1931) loses her sanity. The colonial- society-constructed idea of beauty, the hurling insults of her schoolmates and neighbors, the perverted assurance of achieving beauty from the pedophile Soaphead Church and above all the sexual violence that she receives from her father leaves her in a dark world. Apart from her friends, she receives sympathy only from socially unaccepted 'ruined' women. Unlike Pecola, Gyanoda was restored to the world of love and affection primarily by her mother, younger aunt and then by Atul, her assumed love. Gyanoda, though rejected and humiliated by the family and the society, was not a total rejection as Pecola was. She managed to live on though not in a respected manner. This paper looks into Pecola's psychic procedural patterns to show how she becomes an object of perversion and violence, which along with the established idea of beauty takes her to the verge of insanity. A comparative study has been done between Pecola and Gyanoda, two characters from two entirely different ethnicities and cultures. However, surprisingly both the characters encounter social hostility for their common characteristic "ugliness." The very presumption of beauty, violence, and sex lead these young girls to the different worlds of their own. Black and female identities occupy very real political spaces of diaspora, dispossession and resistance. What is complicated is the simultaneity of suffering and power, marginalization and threat, submission and narcissism, which accrue to Black and women's bodies and their representation in racist cultures.--from "Feminism and the Colonial Body" by Kadiatu Kanneth.

Keywords: Pecola, Gyanoda, Beauty, Sex, Violence, Society, Neglect

Saratchandra Chattopadhyay (1876-1938) in his debut novel *Arakshaniya* (1916) has pictured Gyanoda, a socially abandoned and oppressed girl in undivided Bengal. During the time between the late 19th and the early 20th century, a Bengali Hindu (a Muslim was no exception) girl of 12/13 was expected to be married off, and an exception was socially neglected as well as subjugated. But Chattopadhyay, belonging to the lower middle class, was sympathetic towards them in his writing. Unlike Pecola in *The Bluest Eye* (1970) by Toni Morrison, Gyanoda was restored to the world of love and affection primarily by her mother, younger aunt and then by Atul, her assumed love. Gyanoda though rejected and humiliated by the family and the society was not a total

rejection as Pecola was. Her father with a limited income died at 36 and her mother was terrified at her husband's death by approaching poverty, hostility and anxiety of having an orphan, 'elderly' daughter of 15 still unmarried. Both her loving and caring parents supplied their only daughter with living strength. She managed to live on though not in a respected manner.

Unable to endure the sexual violence and cruelties thrown upon her, Pecola loses her sanity and withdraws herself from the real world. She is the prettiest one in her fantasy world and the most loved one for having imaginary blue eyes. The colonial- society-constructed idea of beauty, the hurling insults of her schoolmates and neighbors, the perverted assurance of achieving beauty from the pedophile Soaphead Church and above all the sexual violence that she receives from her father leaves her in a dark world. Apart from her friends Claudia and Frieda, she receives kind of love and sympathy only from socially unaccepted 'ruined' women – Marie, Poland and China. Her audio-visual hallucination acts as her repressed fear and the desperate desire seek an outlet into the conscious mind.

I have tried to look into Pecola's psychic procedural patterns to show how she becomes an object of perversion and violence which along with the established idea of beauty takes her to the verge of insanity. A comparative study has been done between Pecola and Gyanoda, two characters from two entirely different ethnicities and cultures. However, surprisingly both the characters encounter social hostility for their common characteristic "ugliness." The very presumption of beauty, violence, and sex lead these young girls to the different worlds of their own.

Pecola in the Bluest Eye (1970)

By the end of *The Bluest Eye* (1970) Pecola becomes insane. In the prologue Morrison says "since why is difficult to handle one must take refuge in how" (Morrison 4). Described from an innocent point of view of a 13 year-old Claudia, Morrison shows how Pecola becomes a total victim of the people and circumstances around her.

The Dick and Jane primer in the novel symbolically presents the perfect image of a happy white family as we find in the Fishers. But this primer family is an alien - a complete stranger to Pecola, a black and ugly girl. It is not only the people around her who thought Pecola to be ugly, she herself did so....

"Long hours she sat looking in the mirror, trying to discover the secret of the ugliness... she was the only member of her class who sat alone at a double class"(Morrison 34).

Because Pecola has dark skin and authentic Afro-American features, black and white societies conditioned her to believe that she is ugly. Therefore, Pecola also believes that if she were beautiful her parents could have a peaceful relation. "May be they'd say, 'why, look at pretty-eyed Pecola. We mustn't do bad things in front of those pretty eyes.'" The word "beauty" comes up with the words 'blue-eye, yellow hair, pink-skin'. "Each night, without fail, she prayed for blue eyes...she was not without hope." She firmly believed in the magical power of the blue eyes that would bring love and admiration of her classmates, teachers and neighbours and most importantly peace and harmony in their family, the harmony that Dick and Jane enjoyed.

The small eyes, narrow foreheads, nearly met straight & heavy eyebrows, keen crooked noses with insolent nostrils, high cheekbones, shapely lips pronounced their peripheral existence in the world of beauty after the white standard. The pedophile Soaphead Church, the representative of religion in the Afro-American life, makes a false promise to this child, and the girl returns with a firm belief of owning the long awaited blue eyes e.g. beauty. Claudia, even though a bit younger than Pecola revolts against the concept of blonde beauty. Her strong aversion to the society's definition of beauty is expressed when she "fingered the face,... picked at the pearly teeth,... traced the turned-up nose, ...poked the glassy blue eyeballs,... twisted the yellow hair" (Morrison 14) of the white baby dolls. To her, these dolls became an emblem of the manipulative order of the whites to be obeyed in order to belong in their society. The dismembering of the doll creates an anxiety among the adults of the audacity that Claudia showed through this destructive act and thus introduces colourism into the society through their tender- hearted children. Colourism as defined by Alice Walker is a "prejudicial or preferential treatment of same-race people biased solely on their colour" (Lobodziec 35). The natural home of the blacks cannot possibly be a white-nation state. Race always had a notion of biological foundation. Pecola's physical features ensure her to be a victim of racism with the notion that "physical ugliness of blackness is a sign of a deeper ugliness and depravity" (Taylor 16). The accusation of bullying Pecola and other black girls continued to be regularly made. Non-white minorities along with their colour, body-shape and culture were undoubtedly inferior. Pecola was desperate to be in the mainstream of the white society. And for this reason she could ignore the "inexplicable shame ebb" that engulfed her while taking Mary Jane candies from the shopkeeper Mr.

Yacobowski as “he scoots three Mary Janes toward her - three yellow rectangles in each packet. She holds the money toward him. He hesitates not wanting to touch her hand” (Morrison 37). To her “to eat the candy is somehow to eat the eyes, eat Mary Jane” (Morrison 38). She was marginalized by the icons of beauty that the white world approved of: Mary Jane candies and Shirley Temple cups. Here Morrison deals with the desire among oppressed people to comply with the hegemonic ideal of their “oppressors:” to become white. To make us understand this desire she brings out the oppressive situation that has been characterized by Oliver as the “colonization of Psychic Space,” to indicate the way that oppression “operates through a debilitating alienation based on estrangement from the production of value in a hierarchical system of values through which some bodies are valued and others are devalued or abjected” (Oliver 13).

“A high yellow-dream child” like Maureen Peal enjoyed a preferential approach from the teachers, white boys as well as girls. She was also aware of her ability (both for her skin and money) to have an upper hand. She didn’t hesitate to hurl the words ‘I am cute! And you ugly! Black and ugly e mos. I am cute’ (Morrison 56). Like the stone-throwing boys these words of Maureen pushed these three dark skinned girls into a cruel, darker world of self-hatred and contempt for their colour and race. Geraldine another light-skinned black woman struggles hard to have the life of the whites. She keeps her son’s hair “close to his scalp as possible to avoid any suggestion of wool” (Morrison 67). Though the child sometimes recognised himself with his own peers, he was forced to keep himself away from the “dirty and loud niggers” and to play and laugh with the “neat and quiet coloured people.” His confusions turns into self-loathing that gave expression showing violent acts for the race where he basically belongs.

The blacks were an embodiment of high unemployment, drug-taking, crime and unsafe neighborhoods. Black children grew up in an environment that systematically undermines their aspirations. The result is that the black communities remain at the bottom of the American generations after generations. Cholly Breedlove (ugly also in behaviour that resulted from “despair dissipation and violence directed toward petty things”) represents a negative form of freedom. Cholly was deserted by his father and was thrown on a “junk heap by the railroad” after four days of his birth by his mother. Although Great Aunt Jimmy brought him up with care and affection, Cholly had difficulty connecting himself to her as a real parent, possibly for the cold reminder of his past. The novel explicitly expresses violence, exercise of power and freedom, a revolt against the oppressive culture towards the “black and poor.” When an individual (here Cholly, Junior) is unable to express his frustrations or aggressions against the too powerful real oppressors or exploiters, the aggression becomes displaced onto weaker or lower-status individuals or groups unable to defend themselves. We can for example say that Cholly rapes Darlene but he is also pictured as being ‘raped’ by the flashlight of the white men and gun and that by not allowing Junior to associate with the people of his own race his mother causes much turmoil inside him. The target (in both cases Pecola) is often ethnically distinct communities, especially if they are minorities, who are then attacked or discriminated against in some aggressive manner. At the individual level, the psychological mechanism involved is often referred to as “projection” for which there is research evidence, whereby Cholly and Junior displaces bad feelings about themselves onto Pecola as an unconscious defense and survival strategy.

Gyanoda in Arakshaniya (1916)

In a feudal society during the British Raj, it was impossible for women to have proper rights. The existing patriarchal society suppressed them socially and economically. The traditional custom of the society forced the girls to get married as soon as they reached puberty. Gyanoda was a pet child of a low income father who had a premature death and left the family in a state of terrible financial crises leading them to utter despair. In the era when the novel *Arakshaniya* (1916) was written, a society still did not accept a bride without beauty and dowry. Moreover the girl was supposed to get married at 10 years....

“Most of the girls at that time were married when they attained the age 10 or 12. In some cases, they were married much earlier, even when a few months old.... Sometimes the child- wife attained her puberty a few years after her marriage.” (Murshid 127)

The young Gyanoda very soon became a burden to his only living paternal uncle. The mother being a complete dependant had to move to her brother’s place who was also not well off and more than that reluctant to keep relations with her sister even at this time of distress. He was horrified having seen “15 years old shomotto magi” (i. e. marriageable girl) still a spinster. Very soon he managed a marriage proposal with his drunkard, addicted brother-in-law who was suspected of the murderer of his 8-month pregnant wife in hope of some cash and kind.

Be it the mercy of the omniscient writer or her sheer good luck that she was rescued by Atul, the man whom she believed to be her would-be husband. When Atul had been suffering from a deadly disease like Beriberi, Gyanoda nursed the bedridden Atul and saved him from the clutches of death without caring for her getting

affected by Beriberi. For this reason, her mother had an explicit claim over him, and Gyanoda claimed him silently in her body and mind. But Sharnomonjury, the elder widowed aunt had a good command over Atul as they were relatives and could never think of getting him married with this black, ugly and poor girl. Atul, a well-educated probable groom had a good demand in the marriage market. But his attitude clearly showed a keen sense of affection or to some extent love for this poor soul. Being a reasonable fellow, he did not make any whimsical commitment at the deathbed of Priyonath, her father. Keeping God and Durgamoni as the witnesses, Atul assured him of Gyanoda's responsibility. It could be because of Gyanoda's loud cry and repeated pleas to relieve her dying father, even with a false hope. However, we see Gyanoda and her mother having full faith in him. Durgamoni was happy that she would not need to get her daughter married to a man of 60 as her neighbor, Girish Bhattacharya did. Gyanoda, an archetype of repulsiveness, longed for the beauty she never had but this lack of beauty was frequently mentioned to her. Durgamoni said:

O God! If you sent this wretched girl onto my lap, why didn't you make her fair-skinned? No one even wants to give her shelter as she is dark-skinned. Everyone wants a fair girl. (Chattopadhyay 434)

She thought of beauty as a dream-bridge that would bring her a worthy groom to ensure status and position in the society. The society was extremely unmindful of the desire and need of a woman. Woman was considered the tool of producing children and rearing them up. Saratchandra Chattopadhyay set the character of Gyanoda against a backdrop of ugliness and poverty. She belonged to the judgmental era when a girl was evaluated on her beauty and the tenderness of her age. Like Pecola, not only the society humiliated the girl but also her own mother Durgamoni asked for her death fearing the caste and the religion that forbade the unmarried girl to do the funeral activities of a dead mother.

Atul came running from Kolkata to stop them from going to Haripal, Gyanoda's maternal uncle's home at this beginning of Ashwin in the Bengali calendar – the proper time of spreading Malaria. He did not think much even to reply to his hostile aunt Sharnomanjuri

"You will be angry hearing the truth, Mashima, but none comes to have your food unless they are in dire need.... I do not mind taking them home, if they agree. I do not care whether the village folk will praise me or be ashamed of me " (Chattopadhyay 439)

It was a great blow both to Gyanoda and her mother that at this same Atul changed his opinion so easily and decided to settle with Madhury, a relative of Gyanoda's younger aunt. Atul did not take much time even to insult them in public.

Did I give them a word to marry her? She did not let go of my feet and started knocking her head on them, Please promise my father that you would. (Chattopadhyay 446)

Loosing the hope of Atul, Durgamoni was desperate to get her daughter married off even to a man of her father's age. We hardly find her in any active role, she did what she was told to do. She was a girl without any desire, demand or anger. The only expression she had was tears. The smile that we have seen on her face at the first entry of Atul with the bangles was never found. The only prompt self-initiated act was making untidy hair and putting on a rough make-up to please a "ghater mora" (i. e. an old man almost nearing death) old Gopal Bhattacharya. The humiliation and disgrace that were showered on this poor girl were too much for her to go on with. She wanted to free her mother of the dishonor of having an elderly, black, ugly, unmarried daughter.

The close reading of the histories, cultures and experiences of these two black girls confronts the problem of gender bias and analyses the ways in which they are presented as "other" to black women and non-black women. Being colonised corresponds to being deemed racially inferior by the hegemonic powers within one's society. The antagonistic ideals of the colonisers have been internalised by the colonised.

The sufferings of Pecola are not the sufferings of an individual. She becomes a representative of the poor and black community who are supposed to be feared and oppressed. Pecola had no option left except being an insane, a patient of psychosis having audio-visual hallucinations. Unlike Gyanoda, no one had shown love and affection for this poor child. So, Pecola made an imaginary mother figure to be loved and adored by her. She was happy with the knowledge that her capability to be a mother just after her menstruation would be possible with the love of some valiant hero. Now when she was expecting her baby, it was an unwelcome one to the society. Even her mother refused to console her own child; rather she beat her – an act which is no less cruel.

Because of being surrounded by multiple negative forces (her parents, peers, teachers and the whites) Pecola failed to combat these horrifying forces and could no longer keep herself in the shell of self-love. Eventually she was engulfed into the world of colourism and shuts herself down from the entire society. Gyanoda, on the other

hand, also plunged into the world of colourism but had her mother consoling her even though the entire society (including her paternal and maternal uncles and aunts) was harsh towards her. Primarily her assumed lover Atul expressed his feelings that kept her psychologically safe and sound in the end. We cannot say what could have happened to her after her mother's death if Atul did not dare accept her. She could have the same fate that Pecola had. The love and affection she received (though from a very few people) let her be sane in the world of "insane exploiters."

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