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Literary Analysis and Theory: The Response Womanism, Through The Bluest Eye Gives to
Traditional Feminist Thought

The novel of Toni Morrison's, *Bluest Eye* is a captivating one that embarks on what many, if not all societies have struggled with. Things that pertain gender, identity, and race. Throughout the critical analysis of this text, much emphasis has been put on feminist themes. This is for good reason because it details many experiences from a women's point of view and writing process. However, it is also very important to draw attention to how the novel also calls the culture of feminism to a deeper conversation of feminist themes.

The term womanism is a term that was made more popularized by Alice Walker in 1983 by her writing, "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens." Essentially, this a framework that adds a deeper level of feminism by highlighting the experiences of Black women in particular and other women of color in dialogue of social justice and social justice. Bell Hooks also adds to this conversation stating, "Womanist theory asserts that the lived experiences and traditions of African American women shape feminist theory and practice" (2). Womanism as a theoretical framework has been necessary in providing a critical lens for peering into the experiences and lives of Black women. It also highlights the intersectionality of their respective experiences in the United States.

Another point of note is that Toni Morrison wrote and published *The Bluest Eye* (1970) during the second great movement of feminism. This was a full decade plus before womanism was even considered a deeper layer of feminism. This is what could be most interesting in this literary analysis. Did Toni Morrison set out with the intention of responding and critiquing feminism with womanism? Morrison and Walker would have been contemporaries in literature at the time but it is unknown if Toni Morrison was a proclaimed womanist. However she certainly could have been aware of the rise of womanism happening in the United States at the time. This literary analysis will see how *The Bluest Eye* aligns with womanistic thought. It will also answer how womanism in *The Bluest Eye* responds to traditional feminist thought through exploring the novel responds to traditional feminist agendas and thought while having it centered around the lives of Black women.

It is imperative that before an analysis can be given, the relationship between feminism and womanism must be established. The feminist movement mostly came to light through the context and lives of women of the middle-class and regularly focused on workplace discrimination, reproductive rights, and suffrage, most notably. However, there are more layers and contexts to feminism than just the middle-class perspective. Womanism responded by noting the limitations of feminism in addressing the specific desires of all women, including those of color. “White feminist have only neglected to address themselves to the particular and specific needs of black women, but have also through their racist assumptions effectively silenced black feminists” (2), as stated by June Jordan in her essay, “Toward a Black Feminist Criticism”. In particular, womanism centralizes its argument on the experiences of Black women and other women of color, and calls feminism to a deeper sense of recognition to all when addressing these issues. Both frameworks and theories desire to address the same and very

similar injustices towards woman, there are distinct differences. Womanism is trying to argue that they should have a say at the table where feminism develops its course of action as to what to address and how to address.

One of the ways *The Blues Eye* is congruent with womanist thought is in its quest for the intersections between gender and race. Morrison highlights the two fronts that Black women face from the arguably two largest themes in the United States. The novel is set in Ohio in the 1940s. This is important to note because although feminism had progressed greatly in the 50 years prior, Black women did not have a say as to how that “progress” was to go where it eventually went at the time. So, Black women were still facing arguably twice the hill that woman of the majority in this time, in the United States would have faced from a societal standpoint. This reflects the lack of representation that feminist ideals had at the time of advancing women’s rights.

Black women are affected by both racism and sexism which interact with each other greatly. Often times, this can exacerbate each other in the Black women’s context. For example, Pecola faces immense devaluation because of not only race but her gender. She is being put into major societal boxes that do not value her, remotely. Whether Morrison intentionally had this in mind is not the issue, the mere fact is that both these intersecting forms of discrimination and oppression greatly play a part into the low self-esteem and low self-worth that Pecola continually experiences throughout the novel as she ages.

An additional way *The Bluest Eye* is congruent with womanist thought is through its telling of the interpersonal relationships between Black women. The novel clearly shows the complicated dynamics between black women, which they are all facing societal pressures and

structures that discriminate them. For example, the mother of Pecola, Pauline, does very similarly what Pecola does, which is internalizing the messages she receives and has already accepted that her femaleness and Blackness make her inferior and she had no say in that conversation of self-worth. This is also a clear indicator as to why she speaks to Pecola the way she does. It is very likely that Pauline was projecting her own trauma and mistreatment towards Pecola; making a point of how generational this can be. In contrast, the character of Geraldine, a light-skinned Black woman, uses her proximity to whiteness to reinforce the societal powers that uplift her above darker-skinned Black women like Pecola and her mother, showing the contrary side of Black women supporting each other or lack thereof.

Alternatively, *The Bluest Eye* also displays the moments of support and solidarity among Black women. The character that befriends Pecola, Claudia, is a distinct example of this. Claudia on multiple occasions rejects profusely the societal pressures to conform to what the world tells that her Blackness and femaleness make her inferior. She reverses the standard and uplifts and supports Pecola. This has an impact on Pecola as the novel progresses. Many conflicts arise for Pecola if she should accept her Blackness or try to strive for assimilation that would be forced. Even though it is only one sided support in this instance, the portrayal of Black women supporting one another in the heat of facing oppression is a foundational building block of womanist thought.

Even though *The Bluest Eye* is congruent with feminist thought at its core, it also greatly opens dialogue to question and challenge traditional feminist thought. It does not simply agree with all that feminism stood for at the time. It challenges it to pursue things deeper than white, female issues. A way which Morrison's novel does is through critiquing the white feminist movement at the time. The novel makes evident where feminist ideals often fall short in

excluding or marginalizing the experiences of women of color. For example, Geraldine is a member of a white, middle-class feminist organization, which she uses as an echo chamber to solidify her view on social hierarchies and what her role is in this. She places herself above other Black women like Pecola and her mother. Criticizing portions of the feminist movement that could be greatly helped if recognized. *The Bluest Eye* greatly makes an effort for this: Identification of the holes in the collective of furthering women's equality in the United States. Also, calling feminism to focus more on the experiences of minorities in dialogue of social justice.

One of the ways Morrison challenges traditional feminist thought is through one of the main characters in this novel, Pecola Breedlove. She is a young Black girl who has internalized societal pressures and expectations that her physical complexion and more particularly, her Blackness, makes her less than, is a major display of challenging feminist ideals. This is because Pecola's life experiences draws the reader closer to the way Black women are regularly marginalized, exploited, and oppressed by the dominant class. Therefore, Pecola is a reflection of the reality that it is to take on these self-demeaning ideals towards the self while being thought of as less than.

Expanding on this point is how Morrison details how white supremacy and Eurocentric beauty standards have warped self-esteem and self-worth for Black women and Black children. It is also a deeper critic of beauty standards because beauty standards are not only reserved for individual, micro level preference or desire, but more of a manifestation of race, gender, and class. Morrison seems to suggest that to challenge the way beauty standards affect Black women, it must first be acknowledged that the systemic forces at play are dictating the Eurocentric beauty standards. For example, Pecola longs for blue eyes as a method to be

appeasable to the dominant, white class of the time. However, she and everyone around her fails to notice that the other half of this pressure is coming from the dominant, white class that has set the standard for beauty. In Clenora Hudson-Weems details in her article “Toni Morrison and the African American Experience: A Womanist Perspective,” “Morrison illustrates how Pecola’s wish for blue eyes is really a wish for a transformation of herself into a white female that is to be loved, honored, and respected in American society” (181). Indicating that there is a clear misconstrued way of self-acceptance for minorities. Relying on assimilation to grant oneself a positive attitude toward themselves.

In addition, *The Bluest Eye* also challenges traditional feminist thought by its depiction of motherhood. Morrison makes the case that motherhood is very complicated and often oppressive experience for Black women, at large. This is largely due to what was expected by the dominant society at the time. The expectation for Black mothers to raise children that would be acceptable for White America, while also fighting the ever present issue of systemic oppression from race and gender. While Paula, Pecola’s mother, loves her daughter, the love is often very hurtful towards Pecola as Paula herself has been a victim of systemic oppression herself. This compounds the fact that in the way Black women have been oppressed by dominant structures, Black women can be a contributor to oppression by what they were victims of in their own oppression.

In conclusion, *The Bluest Eye* is a declamatory example of a womanist perspective in action, permeating the experiences of African American women and critiquing dominant societal structures and traditional feminist thought. It calls feminism to a deeper level to consider all that there is to be a Black women and/ or a women of color in the United States, not just a women of the dominant and controlling structures. This is done by approaching themes such as addressing

the personal struggle, traditional, Eurocentric beauty standards, the intersection of race and gender, interpersonal relationships between black females, motherhood by raising questions of how this should be carried out against the traditional feminist thought of motherhood.

Works Cited

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