

# Resistance Against Oppression: African American Women's Opposition to Gaze in *The Bluest Eye*

Wang Yulin\* and Wang Xiaodan

**Abstract**—Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* describes the pain and tragedy the minority group of African Americans suffered caused by the abandonment of cultural traditions with her affective depiction. Focusing on the efforts made by some of the African Americans in this novel to fight against the gazes they experienced from both white oppression and male domination, this paper intends to discuss the attitudes and actions taken by those African American women in the face of double oppression from the perspective of post-colonial feminism, analyze their resistance to gaze, rejection to white aesthetics, and adherence to traditional values, in order to reveal the courageous and tenacious image of African American women portrayed by Morrison as fighters against unjust gaze.

**Index Terms**—*The Bluest Eye*, gaze, resistance, post-colonial feminism

## I . INTRODUCTION

Toni Morrison, the first African-American woman author to win the Nobel Prize, is not only a writer, but also an editor and professor who was born and raised in a working-class black family in Lorain, Ohio. She is known for her keen observations of the pain and resiliency in African American stories and works on ethnic themes that focus on trauma, survival and the search for meaning. In her lifetime, she has created many significant works such as *Song of Solomon*, *Beloved* and so on. *The Bluest Eye* is her debut novel and also one of her representative works. By narrating the story of a young African American girl Pecola and her miserable experience of being discriminated against and raped, the author intends to expose the loss of self-value caused by the internalization of the racist concept of white supremacy by African Americans under the conflicts of two cultures, as well as the harsh survival situation of African American women under the double oppression of race and gender.

*The Bluest Eye* is Toni Morrison's first work, which speaks to the loss of ethnic traditions of minority group of African Americans represented by the little girl Pecola and their twisted pursuit of white values in the conflict between black and white cultures. At the same time, this novel was constantly banned by many libraries and schools in the United States because it involves controversial and sensitive topics such as discrimination and child sexual abuse. Nevertheless, the book is worthy of profound reflection, and is still attracting the attention of the literary world.

Many scholars at home and abroad have tried to approach this work from different perspectives. In general, the number of domestic studies on this work is larger than that abroad.

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Critics abroad mainly analyze this novel from the perspectives of post-colonialism, psychoanalysis and symbolism, and the major focus is on the themes of race and identity crisis and parental violence. Shima Peimanfard and Fazel Asadi Amjad propose the danger of mimicry to absorb the imposed images of white culture and necessity of realizing and resisting the threat of being mentally colonized [1]. There are fewer feminist studies compared with domestic. Domestic scholars mainly analyze it by the agency of post-colonial theory, feminism, narrative strategy and psychoanalysis. Moreover, they pay much attention to topics of the construction of self-subjectivity. Scholars Ma Jun and Xu Dan discuss the oppression the black people suffer mainly from the miserable experiences of Pecola family and explore the possibility for African Americans to construct their self-subjectivity as the ethnic minority [2]. Critics also concern cultural hegemony. The scholar Liu Simin analyzes methods the white adopt to erode black culture and proposes the disastrous effects cultural hegemony has on the minority group of African Americans [3]. In addition, there are also some post-colonial feminist studies, which mainly explore the causes leading to the eventual tragedy of Pecola by analyzing the circumstances, and actions taken by the main characters in the Breedloves to propose feasible solutions based on their dilemma instead of leaving more space for those African American women characters who fight bravely as well as their efforts to resist the double oppression imposed through white gaze and male gaze. Guo Jiajia focuses on the analysis of the hegemony environment the ethnic minority of African Americans face. By demonstrating the different choices African American women make, she intends to put forward the appropriate measures these women ought to take to confirm their cultural identity [4].

Generally, except for showing empathy for the tragic life of Pecola together with her family, the thesis puts more attention to those marginalized women characters who courageously resist as warriors, in order to establish the image of brave African American women, and also further refine the theme of promoting African American women's resistance against oppression which echos with Toni Morrison's appeal through this work: the black community should unite, build up self-esteem and confidence, and stick to their own culture.

## II . POST-COLONIAL FEMINISM

Feminism experienced three critical waves of development in history. The first was initiated in the 1900s by white women, especially white middle-class women. Though it achieved some success and helped women obtain the right to vote, it was not won for all women. While the second wave continued to fight for more women's rights, it did not take

into consideration all the different types and experiences of women in society. "No matter how much conflict feminists have with male domination within the Western society beyond the borders feminists have turned from critics of white male domination into its docile handmaidens" [5]. Realizing that the aspiration to save themselves cannot be placed as a responsibility on white feminists, women from the third world deeply felt the injustice they suffered. "It is learning how to stand alone, unpopular, and sometimes reviled, and how to make common cause with those other identified as outside the structures, in order to define and seek a world in which we can all flourish" [6]. With the determination to make women's voices from the third world heard, they began to take action. This is how post-colonial feminism originated.

Post-colonial Feminism is a combination of post-colonialism and feminism. As one of the branches of feminism, it objects to the reality of women from the third world being placed in an inferior position and aims at bringing to the attention the experiences of individuals from the Global South influenced by the double oppression of racism and imperialism. Different from the western feminism which proposes the assumption that the movements in the western world are enough to generalize the experiences of all feminists around the world, it highlights the importance of representing experiences of the Global South into the field of feminist discourse and decentralizing the mainstream feminism with white-centered tendency.

In *The Bluest Eye*, African American women face the trouble of double oppression due to their particular identity. "Whiteness comes replete with its assumptions for what to expect of a Black body or nonwhite body" [7]. As members of the colonized world, they are backward, marginalized groups under the white gaze, and every aspect of their lives are influenced by white expectations. In the meantime, they face oppression from men. "Male gaze is that through culture women are viewed as objects for men's sexual pleasure" [8]. This is not only an aesthetic issue, but also a way of exerting power on female and making them inferior. As women living in the third world, their lives are challenged by dual gazes. Therefore, this clearly indicates that these women are burdened with essential issues that need to be resolved within the post-colonial and feminist topics.

From the perspective of post-colonial feminism, the paper intends to not only analyze the actions taken by African American women to resist gazes so as to promote the belief in sticking to national culture that Morrison emphasizes through this novel, but also establish the brave image of African American women.

### III. THE RESISTANT GAZE OF AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN IN *THE BLUEST EYE*

African American women in *The Bluest Eye* are stuck in the cultural dilemma of surviving between white and black cultures. When the tradition and values they adhere to are belittled and challenged by the white culture, and when women's life happiness can only be realized by taking men as the center, some African American women try their best to fight against both white gaze and male gaze. Through their resistance, they strive for as much freedom as they are able

to. Meanwhile, they always adhere to their own cultural identity.

#### A. *Resistance to the White Gaze under Racial Oppression*

The concept of white-centrism is popular in white society, and prevalent in black society as well. What is serious about this phenomenon is that it reflects that the black groups are colonized psychologically, so resisting assimilation is indispensable in the process of eliminating white supremacy [9]. This explains why black children and women have low levels of self-esteem and prefer to be white.

Claudia Macteer, the major narrator of the whole story, is portrayed as a brave fighter resisting the white gaze. She is a good friend of Pecola, the heroine and has a sister named Frieda. Although Claudia sisters live in the black community and suffer from both racial discrimination from white people and gender discrimination from black male, they still maintain a strong sense of cultural identity and self-esteem, and bravely resist the standard of "beauty" imposed on them through white gaze.

In the white-centered gaze, the word "black" represents stupidity, selfishness as well as evil [10]. Nevertheless, when Pecola is homeless and comes to the Macteer family, they are highly friendly and warmhearted. "Frieda and I stopped fighting and concentrated on our guest, trying hard to keep her from feeling outdoors" [11]. Claudia and Frieda do not reject Pecola as their fellows do.

Macteer also shows much kindness to Pecola. Before Pecola's arrival, she tells her daughters to get along well with Pecola and not to fight. "Outdoors, we knew, was the real terror of life. The threat of being outdoors surfaced frequently in those days" [11]. For the Macteers, they know the sense of hopelessness when being homeless, and they do not think it good to see their fellows from the same cultural group suffer and be an indifferent bystander. Hence, they try their best to help Pecola. It is their sympathy for Pecola that enables them to treat her like a family member. Furthermore, their kindness and gentleness are evidence of their precious cultural values, a powerful denial to the stereotypes imposed on the black community through the white gaze.

When Pecola is raped by her father and then pregnant, all the people around start their gossip and contempt. "Two ugly people doubling up like that to make more ugly. Be better off in the ground" [11]. All the neighbors think that both their fellows and the matter itself are too disgraced to mention, but Claudia sisters care for Pecola and her baby's safety all the time. "If we planted the seeds, and said the right words over them, they would blossom, and everything would be all right" [11]. Their desire is fairly innocent and simple yet it shows the virtue of kindness, which is in sharp contrast to the malicious impressions of black people being selfish and evil through white gaze.

Moreover, Claudia projects a negative attitude towards dolls with endearing magic which are made through white standards of beauty. "All the world had agreed that a blue-eyed, yellow-haired, pink-skinned doll was what every girl child treasured" [11]. The dolls, which conform to typical white aesthetics, are not only popular, but they are also seen by black parents as a reward for their well-behaved children. Still, Claudia could neither like the dolls nor understand the reason why they become quite attractive. Although children

are expected to sleep with the dolls, what Claudia feels when she tries to do so is nothing but “its hard unyielding limbs” “the tapered fingertips on those dimpled hands” and “the bone-cold head” [11]. Thus, all she desires is to dissect the dolls in order to find out things making them special. She finds, however, that there is merely some ordinary stuff inside. As a matter of fact, her behavior boldly demonstrates a fact that black people and white people are not fundamentally different, let alone any supremacy.

In a nutshell, Claudia, as a young girl, displays a precious rebellious spirit. She not only treats her fellows with kindness instead of rejecting them, but also always resists things adults have imposed on her as to what is considered beautiful through the white gaze.

### *B. Resistance to the Male Gaze under Gender Oppression*

Living in the storefront above Pecola's house are three prostitutes: China, Poland and Miss Marie. As whores, they are considered a marginal group of people in society, having jobs that seem indecent and disgraceful. However, they stay true to themselves and uphold the ethnic cultural traditions in their souls even though they are not accepted by the majority. For one thing, they refuse to take all the standards infused by white-centered values. For another, they do not consider becoming anyone else except themselves.

Unlike others who despise Pecola, they treat her with friendliness, giving her special nicknames such as “dumplin” and “puddin”. They like talking to her and making up funny stories to amuse her. Therefore, Pecola frequently visits them. When China doubts if it is impossible for Marie's husband Dewey to allow her to do such a job since he loves her so much, Marie describes the feeling as “you could have knocked me over with a feather” [11]. From Marie's perspective, it is not something that requires to be inspected and decided through male gaze whether it ought to be allowed. She herself possesses the freedom to do what she wants with her body. Poland, too, thinks “he didn't owe me nothing” after being scolded by her auntie [11].

It is a misfortune for them to become whores because of low status and poverty. Nonetheless, they never give up holding the freedom they possess though they have to sell their bodies in order to survive in the unfair society with the pressure of racism and sexism. “all were inadequate and weak, all came under their jaundiced eyes and were the recipients of their disinterested wrath” [11]. They hate all men equally regardless of their race and without any shame. Despite the reality that they were made indecent by the harsh society, they kept defending their self-esteem and bear in mind their cultural identity.

For the western world, the otherness is rooted in the Oriental part. For men similarly, the otherness is rooted in women and the word women can be equivalently labeled as non-European [12]. This adds another pressure of male oppression to African American women when they have already suffered from discrimination through white gaze. Men vent their desire by trampling these whores. To make matters worse, besides white men, black men from the same ethnic community also despise these women because their control and dominance can be proved by putting women in an inferior position.

Nevertheless, these women rebel the oppression of men

with their bodies, and express their anger as women with hatred and scolding. They hate every man, and it is in hatred that they are able to preserve their identity of women and memories of their indigenous culture from being destroyed as an ethnic minority group. As African American women, they are gazed at in two aspects. Specifically, they have suffered from the discrimination caused by white oppression in society while they also have to face the pressure of male oppression simultaneously. Therefore, it is obvious that the efforts made by these three women help to set up an image of brave African American women.

In spite of being looked down upon, these three women have lived their lives the way they want. Some of them enjoy laughing freely. Meanwhile, some love to sing the blues, an ethnic traditional music form of African American culture. They never pursue the white beauty presented in the film and believe that the natural charm of body is worth respecting rather than changing. They have empathy for their fellows and lead a carefree life. “Pecola looked and looked at the women. Were they real? Marie belched, softly, purringly, lovingly” [11]. Indeed, they are real. Though misunderstood and rejected by most of their people, their spirit of resistance to oppression is what most people lack.

Generally, their actions and attitudes do not seem to follow suit for what the majority do is “took the ugliness in their hands, threw it as a mantle over them, and went about the world with it” because their ugliness comes from conviction, not reality [11]. Although they are still the marginalized “other” as African Americans in mainstream society, they refuse to lose themselves and try to establish a belief that being black is beautiful.

For the three whores, they do not surrender to oppression and white standards. Their courage to resist gazes and preserve their ethnic values is supposed to be praised and promoted. Although life is not fair to them, they have been struggling to live the way they want.

### *C. The Brave Opposition to Gaze VS. the Silent Recognition in Evasion*

When faced with the pressure of dual oppression, the African women represented by Claudia and the three prostitutes chose to bravely reject what was imposed on them by the white society and the surrounding male group, while some women chose to accept the white aesthetic and tried to erase the cultural labels that were considered ugly on themselves, like Pecola and her mother Pauline.

For Pecola, she is a fragile young girl who suffered from ridicule and discrimination from her classmate Molly and even her own mother, which gave her sense of inferiority. Hence, she likes Shirley Temple and longs for a pair of blue eyes, thinking that she is able to win the love of everyone including her mother.

“Pauline did not really care for clothes and makeup” [11]. Unlike Poland, she dresses up to obtain other women's appreciation to further confirm her pursuit of white beauty. She abused and slapped Pecola when Pecola turned over blueberry juice and hurt her legs, but she was gentle and patient with the white employer's daughter for she mistakenly thought she could find so-called dignity in the white family. Compared with Pauline, Mrs. Macteer accepted Pecola into her family and took care of her patiently during her period. In

fact, Pauline as a mother never offers any maternal love. Besides, her husband Cholly is addicted to alcohol and always batters Pauline, "He sure ain't give me much of a life. But it wasn't all bad" [11]. As a victim, her blind denial of reality merely keeps her life moving in an endless vicious circle. This not only destroys her life, but also directly leads to Pecola's insanity after being raped by father Cholly because of Pauline's inability.

Instead of resisting gazes, making compromises can merely make their life and fate deteriorated. Generally, resisting the gaze is the sincerest call from the African American women community, and it is the real way out to save their lives.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

In *The Bluest Eye*, under the oppression and cultural erosion of the white culture, the black group is deeply trapped in the cultural dilemma of two cultures. Meanwhile, they face the challenge of traditional cultural aesthetics. On the one hand, black which represents their own culture is considered ugly. On the other hand, the white which is distant from them can be so beautiful and graceful that it seems to be a symbol of respect and reputation.

Thus, some African Americans abandon their cultural traditions and begin to pursue what is thought to be beautiful based on the white standards in order not to be isolated and discriminated against, but only ending up with twisted minds. There are also some brave African American women like fighters. Although they are the marginalized "other" living in the periphery of the society, they always adhere to their own cultural values and do not abandon their cultural identity as the minority group of African American women. With their actions and attitudes, they express their dissatisfaction with the discrimination under the white gaze and call for the freedom of women under the male gaze.

In conclusion, the efforts of African American women establish the image of women who struggle bravely, criticize the distortion of minds caused by discarding one's own traditions and advocating white culture to praise women's resistance, and further demonstrate Morrison's deep concern for the survival of African American women.

#### CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

#### AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

This paper was completed with the participation and efforts of two authors. Wang Yulin is mainly responsible for

the writing and revision of this paper. Wang Xiaodan coordinates and communicates with Wang Yulin constantly during the writing process, providing guidance and suggestions for further revision and polish. All authors had approved the final version.

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