Lecture Sheet

The Bluest Eye

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"Mirror, Mirror, who is the most beautiful woman in the world?" Mirror answers, "The Whitesnow Princess is." Besides the Whitesnow Princess, Shirley Temple, Mary Jane, and even Barbie are the myths of white beauty created by the mainstream aesthetic ideology. White skin, blue eyes, and blonde hair are the symbols of woman's body beauty which visually mold ideal body images, and implant the normal aesthetic ideology in mind. Beauty, that is to say whiteness, is what the mainstream ideology acknowledges, while ugliness, represented by other ethnic characteristics, such as blackness, is regarded as the repulsive and disdained otherness. By the media of mass communication, the norm of body beauty not only imperceptibly influences the individual consciousness and ideas, but also leads to the identity crisis of the groups who do not conform to such a norm. For them, especially the adolescent, they hardly resist the corruption of the mainstream aesthetic ideology, so that they know themselves and construct their identity under the gaze of other people. Thus, in the mirror that reflects the white aesthetic standard, Pecola (*The Bluest Eye*, 1970) found the secret of being rejected, Nel (*Sula*, 1973) discovered why her mother bowed and scraped before a white train conductor, and Hagar (*Song of Solomon*, 1977) realized the reason of being abandoned by "Milkman". All is about the ugly blackness.

Toni Morrison, winner of the 1993 Nobel Prize in Literature, is one of the African

American writers who have received the international fame. By exposing the plot hidden in the discourse of "ugliness", she profoundly expounds the *harm of* body beauty in the mainstream aesthetic ideology to the black women in their progress of understanding self and constructing identity. Morrison indicates that the black female body is the site where gender discourse and race discourse interact. Gender discourse emphasizes the ambivalence about black female body, beautiful but dirty, charming but dangerous. In such a discourse, the body is turned into an other object and a spectacle, which induces the black women to an anxiety about not measuring the ideal of the white beauty. As a result, a split self is gradually formed due to the constant visual self-subjugation, as John Berger notes, "a woman must continually watch herself. She is almost continually accompanied by her own image of herself."[1] The binary division of the physical and imaginary body brings about the self detachment of the black women, which further pushes the black female individual into the disintegration of self-consciousness and the confusion of self-identity.

Race discourse fabricates the derogatory "blackness" in order to advocate the superiority of the white. Morrison repeatedly criticizes the race discourse of American literature, and suggests that "blackness" functions as the necessary otherness for the white to unite and devalue the African American and other ethnic groups. In *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, Morrison discusses the relationship between the existence of the black and the construction of race discourse. She points out, " Race has become metaphorical-a way of referring to and disguising forces, events, classes, and experiences of social decay and economic division far more threatening to the body politic than biological 'race' ever was."[2] By the means of economic stereotype, metonymic displacement, metaphysical condensation, fetishization, dehistoricizing allegory and explosive, disjointed, repetitive language,[3] race discourse invents the primitive and barbaric "blackness" which offers a site for the white to show their national identity and practice their subject consciousness. In the sense, "blackness" is the shadow of whiteness whose existence can not be neglected. The black body embodies the so-called "blackness", and becomes the container of the anxiety and terror felt by the white outside and inside them.

Beauty and ugliness are the lies which gender discourse and race discourse collude to advocate the ideas of patriarchy and racism. Deceived by such collusive lies, Pecola, a 13-year-old black girl, thought her ugliness was the chief reasons for her parents' disputes and her family split as well as her neglected and disdained position in the black school and black community. Since the doll with a pair of beautiful blue eyes was

always lovable, she longed for the bluest eyes, and hoped that if the miracle happened, all would be changed: she would be quite different, and her mother Pauline and father Polly would be in perfect harmony. Because she lacked the warmth of family, the supports of her parents, Pecola was unable to resist the corruption of gender discourse and race discourse. What she could do was only to depend on the visional blue eyes to change her destiny and her family relationship. Finally, the gender discourse of the female beauty and the race discourse of the black inferiority internalized in her immature heart and led to her schizophrenia.

The reason why Morrison began creating novels was the lack of the works of the Black and the sense of lacking among them. What's more important, she used the novels as weapons to respond to the Black civil rights movement. The important political movement in the African American history proposed a self-affirmative slogan that "black is beauty" and tried to turn over the racial prejudice that the Blacks are ugly, horror and disgusting. However, the simple replacement of "white" with "black" in aesthetic standards cannot overthrow the complicated and ingrained race discourse. Morrison remarked the vigorous political movement as follows: "If the best thing happened in the world and it all came out perfectly in terms of what the gains and goals of the *Movement* were, nevertheless nobody was going to get away with that; nobody was going to tell me that it had been that easy. That all I needed was a slogan: 'Black is Beauty.' It wasn't that easy being a little black girl in this country — it was rough."[4] Showing the misery a little black girl, Morrison deeply reveals in her first novel *The Bluest Eyes* that the searching for individual identity and self-consciousness is very hard for the black adolescent in a racialized country. She also demonstrates that the racial prejudice and discrimination led to a permanent harm to the Black.

Pecola suffered from incomparable violence, such as the abuse of her mother and the violation of her father. Morrison broke the social taboos, opened the family privacy and disclosed the harm of racialized identity to the small and weak. Family should be the first defense for children against the external harm. However, under a circumstance of a racial discrimination and violence of men, family becomes a latent site for violence and violation. Pecola's family is a typical black nuclear family that struggled on the verge of the society. It is not only full of poverty and quarrels, but also the resource of "ugly" ideas. Pauline, Pecola's mother, has a sense of inferiority because of her lameness. Moreover, after the migration to the North, her self-humiliation and self-hatred are deepened by the differences in class and culture. Thus, she indulges in the films and longs for the body beauty created by those films. According to Laura Mulvey's

analyses for the impulsion during watching films, Pauline's fascination in films is similar to the happiness of a child when he/she sees his/her image in a mirror. Under such a condition, the viewer intends to project himself/herself into the personae and to regard them as the embodiment of the ideal. The disintegration of ideal and reality is sharpened by the birth of her daughter Pecola who is black as well as ugly. Pauline feels extremely insulted when she hears that a white nurse says there would be no pain when a black mother gives birth to her child because they do it as the animals do. As a result, she unconsciously treats her newly born daughter as a filthy and disgusting egesta. From then on, Pauline can realize her self-value only when she serves the white families as an ideal maid. She tidies up her host's house in order to free herself from her ratty house, and regards her host's daughter as the apple of her eye while ignoring her own daughter Pecola. From Pauline, Pecola knows her ugliness, and gradually forms the ideas of self-inferiority.

In contrast to the ugly sense transmitted from Pauline, Pecola's father Cholly brought her trauma and insult. Cholly has a sense of shame and disappointment because callously abandoned on a garage dump by his mother in infancy, years later he searches for the father who also discards him. Moreover, at age 14 he is caught and threatened by white-men during his first sexual encounter. Cholly displaces the emasculation and powerlessness first onto the girl he is with, and then onto his daughter. In a sense, Pecola becomes the scapegoat for Cholly who disgusts the female body as well as his own emasculation. However, Morrison does have sympathy for Cholly, though she does not minimize his crime against his daughter. In fact, she describes the power of gazes to subjugate, such as the voyeuristic gazes of Maureen Peal, Rosemary Villanucci, Geraldine and the rest of the black community, to prepare for the climatic scene where Cholly rapes Pecola. In an interview with Claudia Tate, Morrison stated that "I tell you at the beginning of *The Bluest Eye*, on the first page what happened, but now I want you to go with me and look at this, so when you get to the scene where the father rapes the daughter, which is as awful a thing, I suppose, as can be imagined, by the time you get there, it's almost irrelevant because I want you to *look* at him and see his love for his daughter and his powerlessness to help her pain. By that time his embrace, the rape, is all the gift he has left."[5] By constructing Cholly's motivation in this way, Morrison ironically reflects on his desire to love and Pecola's to be loved. In the sense, love is de-romanticized, because it cannot transcend the patriarchy authority of the white male.

"Mirror, Mirror, who is the most beautiful woman in the world?" Mirror answers,

"The Whitesnow Princess is." In *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979), Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar reanalyze the fairy tales of the Whitesnow Princess from the point-view of feminism. They indicate that the woman images in the story are all the reflective object of the Mirror that represents the authority of the hidden white male. Under the gaze of the Mirror, the bodies of the virtuous Whitesnow Princess, the evil Queen, and even all the women become the embodiment of the aesthetic values in the patriarchy systems. They are subject to the authority and have no right to evaluate their own physical appearance and express their own ideas. The female body is the captive of the male gaze, while it is the main cultural site for Morrison to ovestep the white patriarchy's authority. Compared with Pecola's self-hatred, Claudia, another black little girl in the novel, interests in her own puke which is "so neat and nasty at the same time".[6] Moreover, she dismembers the doll that Pecola likes so much just to see what it is that all the world say is lovable. Why are the two teenaged black girls quite different? The reason mainly lies in the different family atmosphere. Claudia's family offers her a refugee from the racialized white world and the dysfunctional black community. In the warmth and safeness of her mother's kitchen room and the tweedle of violin her father played only for her, Claudia experiences the beautiful things with her sense organs. Here, Morrison replaces the visual oppression with the sensual pleasure, which overthrows the authority of patriarchy represented by the white male gaze. Only recollecting the oppressed sensual senses can the black female reorganize their body fragments, and construct a special way of experiencing self, especially the way of touching. "Woman takes pleasure more from touching than from looking, and her entry into a dominant scopic economy signifies, again, her consignment into passivity: she is the beautiful object of contemplation."[7]

Like Claudia, the three whores China, Poland and Marie are the ones who are the power of resisting the patriarchy authority. As whores, the three black women, especially their bodies, are often violated by the male power. From the point-view of Morrison, they are the main battlefields against Fascist power. In the abandoned storehouse above Pecola's family, they create the special female space that is full of body pleasure and sensual enjoyment. Compared with Pecola who thinks her black body is the chief reason for ugliness, the three whores regard their body as the source of happiness. Laughing is the most active elements in their bodies: "(Marie's) laughter came like the sound of many rivers freely, deeply, muddily, heading for the room of an open sea. China giggled spastically. Each gasp seemed to be yanked out of her by unseen hand jerking an unseen string. Poland, who seldom spoke unless she was drunk,

laughed without sound. When she was sober, she hummed mostly or chanted blues songs...."[8] Influenced by the happiness in the female space, Pecola experiences the warmth and comfort she has never tasted. Poland's singing makes her taste the "sweetness" and "hardness" of the new strawberries, Marie's epithets chosen from menus and dishes lets her feel satisfied and kind, and the "breezy and rough" romantic love stories concocted by Marie guides her to the free and vast space. The three whores created by Morrison successfully show the pleasure and enjoyment of Bakhtin's carnival theory which transcend the aesthetic ideology of patriarchy capitalism by expressing the authentic, free and pleasant body senses.

The lie of body beauty colluded by the gender discourse and race discourse in the patriarchy system destroys Pecola's small and weak heart, anaesthetizes the frangible mind of the black community members. The soil of the whole Unites States is hard for the African American to survive. However, Morrison plants the seeds of the black female own beauty in the black female body. Those Claudias with such hopes will experience their own existence.

Notes:

[1] John Berger, *Ways of Seeing*. London: British Broadcasting Corporation and Penguin Books, 1972, p.46.

[2] Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*. Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London, England: Harvard University Press, 1992, p.63.

[3] Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*. ibid. pp.68-69.

[4] Gloria Naylor, "A Conversation: Gloria Naylor and Toni Morrison" in Danille Taylor-Guthrie, ed. *Conversations with Toni Morrison*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1994, p.199.

[5] Claudia Tate, *Black Women Writers at Work*. New York: Continuum, 1983, p.125.

[6] Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*. New York: A Washington Square Press, 1970, p.13.

[7] Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*. translated by Catherine Porter, Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1985, p.26.

[8]Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*. ibid, p.45.