



A Zizekian Analysis of Violence Portrayed in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*

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Abstract :- The paper is supposed to make a comprehensive analysis of different facets of violence portrayed in the select piece of literature by Toni Morrison from Zizekian perspective. In this work, the author presents the theme of discrimination and marginalisation of women in American society on the basis of colour and race as well. The protagonist of the novel *Pecola Breedlove*, a teenage black girl comes across a series of torturous experiences both inside her home and outside it whether in school or at market just because of her black colour as a result of which she begins to hate herself and suffers from the inferiority complex and low self-esteem as well. Consequently, in order to get and enjoy equal treatment, love and care, she aspires to have blue eyes which she thinks a very essential element of beauty. She wants to look herself beautiful like other girls because she thinks that by only after having blue eyes and possessing the beauty standards, she can change her fortune and can get love and respect in society. This is her belief system and though this is quite wrong and illogical, this is also true as we can see that the girls possessing fair-skin, blue eyes and other related attributes are given more love and care, pampering, respect as well as preferences than those who lack these attributes. Now, from Zizekian perspective, the standards of beauty set by the West or the White people, such as having fair-skin, blue eyes, long grey hair, slim body and so on are meaningless. All these features associated with the beauty standard are nothing to do with beauty as beauty is an internal quality which is reflected by the nature and behaviour of a person and not just how a person looks. If we apply the theory of objective violence propounded by Slavoj Zizek, to this theme, we would realise that these standards of beauty discussed above are a kind of mechanism to subordinate the women of colour in white-dominated society. They have intentionally created these tools to keep them at the lower pedestal of society by not giving them equal rights and opportunities. These can be understood as the superstructures of society which function like agents of violence but indirectly as well as silently, and this is the main reason people fail to realise the fact that whatever they accept and follow by their free choice is actually being thrust upon them indirectly with some motive and which is causing harm to themselves.

Keywords : violence, discrimination, colour, race, beauty etc.

Slavoj Zizek, a Slovenian philosopher, is one of the greatest philosophers living at present. He is very bold in his attitude, outspoken and critical and humorous as well. He is often busy with producing his books, and in conferences and interviews presenting his ideas on various contemporary issues which are very complex to be understood but they

are highly intellectualized and thought provoking. He is particularly known for his style of communicating his critical views with the help of popular jokes in a very simple and interesting way. And perhaps for this reason, he is widely acclaimed as “the most dangerous philosopher of the west.”

In his most acclaimed book, *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections* (2007), he provides a theoretical analysis of violence and talks about the two types of violence namely Subjective violence and Objective violence. The subjective violence refers to the physical forms of violence that we can easily notice because they are visible such as rape, murder, loot, mob-lynching, terrorist attack and so on. On the other hand, the objective violence includes all forms of invisible and indirect violence that are internalized in socio-political systems. It can be understood as the super structure of society and what Louis Althusser calls ‘ideological-state-apparatuses.’ The example of such kind of violence are patriarchy, male domination over female, casteism, racism, nepotism, prejudices etc.

Now, all this whole idea has been condensed in this particular work by Toni Morrison entitled as *The Bluest Eye* to give some fresh insight into the study of violence. From the start of the novel till its end, there is a gruesome description of such incidents which contain direct and indirect violence based on the notion of race, colour, gender, and so on. Here, the author primarily throws light on the destructive effects upon black girls caused by the western standards of beauty which is generally characterized by having fair-complexioned skin, blue eyes, long grey hair and so on. From Zizekian perspective, this standard of beauty set by the West, is actually a kind of objective violence or mechanism to marginalize the Black women in American society. The main protagonist of this novel is an eleven year old Black girl named Pecola Breedlove who has been described as the victim of discrimination, torture and maltreatment both inside her home and outside it mainly because of her gender and colour. In school, like other students, she also has some hope and aspirations to be treated equally. She wants to make friendship with her classmates, talk to them, share her views to them, and play with them but unfortunately, she has to sit all alone on a separate bench, neither her classmates nor her teachers like her and they do not behave in a proper manner with her as they do with fellow students. Some classmates even go to the extent of bullying and dominating her. Thus, she is unconsciously being punished for the wrong which she has never committed and which she has no control over. This is just one example of the disturbing experiences drawn from her school life. There is a long list of such experiences which she goes through all her life. Again, when she goes to nearby shops to buy some chocolates, the shopkeeper lady scolds her, forbids her not to touch the jar and whatever to make her realise that having black skin means a person does not deserve respect and equal treatment. Thirdly, the author has presented a contrasting picture at every level of the story. Pecola has some other girls of the same age group in her neighbourhood who belong to the White community as a result of which she has all the looks and charm, well pampered and all the resources to enjoy and entertain herself. Seeing all this, Pecola curses her fate for not making her so loving and charming, for not blessing her with such caring family as the other girl has. So, she likes that girl and wants to make friendship with her but unlike her, the other girl hates her because of her colour and wretched condition. She often tries to quarrel with her and dominates her but she dares not to retaliate because of fear and insecurity which surrounds her all the time. All such discriminatory incidents and painful experiences discussed above have a very destructive impact on her mind as a result of which she suffers from a sense of low self-confidence and insecurity. She begins to hate herself as the others do and does not think herself worthwhile. And all this happens just because of her black colour. Her deep hatredness of her ugliness is reflected when she utters these words,

“Please God, make me disappear.” (*The Bluest Eye*, pp.- 45)

So, she has only one wish in her life and that is to have blue eyes which is generally associated with the standard of beauty. By having blue eyes, she thinks that her condition would change. People would start loving her and she would be able to enjoy her life as other people do. But this is just her futile imagination and nothing else. As beauty is an inward attribute of a person which gets reflected in his or her nature, behaviour and how he treats others. It has nothing to do with the outward appearance. In the words of Toni Morrison,

“Beauty was not simply something to behold ; it was something one could do.”

The most gruesome and shocking experience is yet to be experienced by her which completely ruined her life. When she is alone in her home doing something in the kitchen, her drunken father comes closer to her, clutches her and finally rapes her. This shameful incident breaks her psychologically and makes her life a hell. Moreover, when she becomes pregnant, the society begins to torment her, not her father. The surroundings become quite unfavourable for her to survive. So, she decides to somewhere else and gives birth to her baby but since the baby is premature, so it does not survive. This is again a shocking experience for her. Not only this, her father Mr Cholly Breedlove also discloses a very shocking incident from his childhood days in which he was harassed by the two white men. And this incident leaves a very deep mark on his psychological state forever which gets reflected in his nature, behaviour and his treatment of family members.

The main purpose of describing the above incidents is not just summarising the whole story of the book, rather to see it in a new light. According to the theory of Slavoj Zizek, the forms of subjective violence are nothing in itself rather they are the just the reflections of objective violence. Thus, objective violence is more important than the former. This is a general phenomenon that people try to stop the physical acts of violence they see around them without going in its background where the root cause lies. Thus, stopping of physical violence by the people is not a permanent solution. It works like a pain-killer which relieves pain only for some time, and there is a high likelihood of same situation to come again and again. Though it will restore peace in society but this is actually negative peace. Johan Galtung, the founder of conflict and peace studies, in one of his articles, talks about the two types of violence i.e. positive peace and negative peace. The former is characterized by the absence of indirect violence which is found in socio-political and cultural systems and practices whereas the latter is characterized by the absence of direct violence that we see taking place around us. Now, it is upto us what kind of peace we actually want to restore in society.

Secondly, it also throws light on the fact that even in the 21st century, in the age of globalization, science and technology, when women are coming out of the closet breaking the boundaries, and making their own individual identity in the world, the cases of violence and discrimination against them are still found in the news. They still have to face discrimination based on colour, gender, race, community, and of course, when they come from rural and poor background. Today, women like Avni Chaturvedi and Sania Mirza are making the nation proud but they are limited in numbers because of age old traditions, prejudices and conservative mindsets of the society. So, it is very important as well as necessary to educate them, encourage them, provide them equal opportunities without any biases and discrimination. It can be possible only when the conservative mindsets of the people, the ideologies of patriarchy and superiority of men over women should be eliminated completely. Women should not be considered as the second being. The word 'woman' should not be taken as someone weak, helpless and neglected rather it must taken as someone very powerful, respectable and moreover as the equal wheel of family and society as well.

Finally, it shows that stopping physical violence by force or by punishment will not work, rather going into the background, finding its root cause, eliminating the prejudices, and changing the mindsets of the people will certainly normalize the current situation.

Now, I would like conclude with a famous remark made by Amrita Pritam,

“सभ्यता का युग तब आएगा जब औरत की मर्जी के बगैर उसे कोई हाथ नहीं लगा सकेगा।“

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