

ISSN.0972-8406

THE NEHU JOURNAL

*Vol III No 1,
January 2005*

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Vol. III, No. 1, January 2005

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All correspondence related to the journal may be addressed to the Editor, NEHU Publications, Bini Complex, Shillong-793003 or at tbsubba@nehu.ac.in.

Printed at : Sanyal Press
L. Sanyal and Durga Sanyal, Dispur

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Production Assistant : Surajit Dutta

Layout and Design: Shongdor Diengdoh

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NEHU

EDITORIAL

As you might perhaps have noticed, *The NEHU Journal* has started coming out regularly and with the current issue it celebrates its third birthday. I would also like to inform you that the journal is now refereed internationally the joy and pain of which I have put in my editorial of volume 2, number 2. I am positive that the journal will receive quality submissions in future not only from humanities and social sciences but also from the life and physical sciences that have so far remained outside the purview of the journal, not the least due to any policy but perhaps due to the hangover of its earlier *avatar* as the *North-Eastern Hill University Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities*, which the present journal continues to be called.

We at the editorial office of the journal are grateful that many of our colleagues have enrolled themselves as subscribers, but the number of subscribers it has today is still not enough to make it self-sustaining. This situation is certainly not desirable.

I therefore take this opportunity to request you all to send in your subscription amount at least for three years and those of you who are subscribers continue to support the journal till it becomes self-sustaining. On our part, I shall continue to try and improve the quality and reach of the journal with each issue.

T. B. Subba

Editor

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in Meghalaya

L. CAJEE, H. J. STIERLICH &

UBAHUNLANG LYNGDOH THAR*

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On *The Great Earthquake of 1897 in the Khasi-Jaintia Hills* by Reverend Robert Evans

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Narrating Gender and Representing Women in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*

DHIRA BHOWMICK

"Tell us what it is to be a woman so that we may know what it is to be a man. What moves at the margin. What it is to have no home in this place. To be set adrift from the one you knew. What it is to live at the edge of the towns that cannot bear your company."

From the Nobel Lecture of Toni Morrison, 1993.

I

In the above lines, Morrison emphatically captures the problematic of gender while underlining the condition of black women who are dispossessed, marginalized, and live at the edge. But again, not without self-reflection, she asserts, "We are not Isak Dinesen's "aspects of nature," nor (Joseph) Conrad's unspeaking. We are the subjects of our own narrative, witnesses to and participants in our own experience, and, in no way coincidentally, in the experience of those with whom we have come in contact" (Morrison 2000: 31). Experience has been the best indicator, an authentic instrument, for measuring the social condition of the African-American women and their reality. Morrison is skeptical of mainstream Western feminism's emancipatory agenda and ideological enunciations, as she notes in her essay, "What the Black Woman Thinks About Women's Lib" (1971) that the black woman "had nothing to fall back on: not maleness, not whiteness, not lady hood, not anything. And out of the profound desolation of her reality she may very well have invented herself" (quoted in Johnson, 1988: 97). Johnson contests Morrison's position arguing that she is rhetorical and not realistic. Further, he adds that Morrison refuses to take note of what he calls "social progress" of Black women that has been pursued by progressive leaders of both white and black communities. Johnson's is a sociological account that bears on the

policy of “protective discrimination” and does not address issues of autonomy and selfhood, as African-American women continue to be powerless, trapped in sexism, racism and unredeemable history. Morrison, arguably the most prominent artist-critic among contemporary Afro-American men and women of letters, is uniquely qualified to write about what racism and sexism have done to black women. In most of her works, she deconstructs racism and sexism while attempting to define a ‘racially’ formed Afro-American culture. She does not idealize this culture; she instead underlines the most disturbing and disintegrating aspects of it that takes a toll on the lives of its members. *The Bluest Eye*, among other works of Morrison, is an example of the conflict between the individual and the community that unquestioningly and assiduously imbibes white values. Following this trajectory, it is my attempt in this essay to contextualise, Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* on the premise of articulating not “Unspeakable Things Unspoken,” but spoken while exploring how racism and sexism decide the fate of black women.

Whether in theory or creative writing, Morrison’s understanding of American-Africanism is a subtext that either “sabotages the surface text’s expressed intentions or escapes them through a language that mystifies what it cannot bring itself to articulate but still attempts to register” (1993:66). Whether presented as miserable or mystifying, as in creative writing, or as part of the universalistic assumptions, as in theory, the uniqueness of African-American woman’s experience and situation has not been fully explored, for it evokes disturbing images of marginalization and disintegration. The effort to depict her is to escape the stereotypes of already-existing symbolic forms. Morrison, in most of her works, has attempted to analyze the relation between socially constructed images and their representation. Although she is critical of mainstream feminist assumptions her understanding of the condition of black women brings to bear on questions of vision, power and knowledge that are also evident in redefinitions of women as subjects in general. As Sandra Kemp and Judith Squires in the “Introduction” to their edited volume *Feminisms* maintain:

It is important that the focus of such questioning is not primarily the central question of early second-wave feminism — ‘what is to be done?’ but rather the more reflexive, ‘what is the basis of my claim to knowledge’ and ‘who is the “I” that makes such a claim?’ This shift from the overtly collectivist and the political to the more individualist and philosophical might be viewed negatively as a shift from insurrection to introspection, or positively as the coming to age of feminism as an intellectual endeavor, or perhaps more neutrally as

simply symptomatic of the 1990s. However, if one views the development, it is clear that epistemological, ontological, and representational questions currently serve as a key locus of feminist concern and the significant ground for dispute between feminists (1997: 8).

The dispute within feminism concerning “epistemological, ontological and representational questions” may be difficult to resolve, but what is significant is the recognition and context of the theoretical-critical debate in that Derridian deconstruction, Lacanian psychoanalysis and Foucauldian discourses of power and corporeality are found valuable either as supplements or positions of contestation. It is this theoretical restlessness that underlines the multi/inter-disciplinary stance of contemporary feminism. However, in spite of the multiplicity of feminisms, some feminists feel that the ‘first-wave’ and the ‘second-wave’ feminist movements and theories are overtly dominated by white, middle-class women who are theorizing and generalizing from the perspective of their own personal experiences. Thus, white, middle-class western women are claiming to speak not only for all women in their societies that carries an Euro-centric veneer but for women everywhere, universalizing their own experiences and life-situations and ignoring the effects of capitalism, racism and colonialism which proved decisive in the lives of many other women.

One of the key challenges to the Euro-centric and essentialist nature of some feminist positions has come from black feminists who have challenged white women’s ability, and indeed their right to speak for black women. An important black feminist whose works have underlined this problematic is Bell Hooks. In her work *Ain’t I a Woman* (1981), she writes about the history of black women in the United States. She argues that the rape of and brutal assaults on black women during slavery led to a devaluation of black womanhood that permeated the psyches of all Americans and shaped the social status of all black women once slavery ended. Thus even now, over a century after the abolition of slavery, US society still perceives and represents black women as ‘fallen’, as whores and prostitutes. The importance of this specific history of racial and sexual violence and the ways in which it has conditioned their lives and experiences in the United States has not, however, been fully taken into account by white feminists.

Differences in the nature of work and family experiences grounded in African-American culture suggest that African-Americans, as a group,

experience a world different from those who are not black and female. But lack of control over any kind of ideological apparatus has made expression of self-defined standpoints difficult for blacks. It depends on their ability to forge the individual, unarticulated yet potentially powerful expressions of everyday consciousness into an articulated collective standpoint. As Audre Lorde points out, "it is axiomatic that if we do not define ourselves for ourselves we will be defined by others — for their use and to our detriment" (1984: 45). Though race and gender are social constructs yet they are not constructed in the same way for both blacks and whites. African-American women intellectuals, including Morrison, have favoured the view that black women's struggle is part of a wider struggle for dignity and empowerment. Thus the black women struggle together with black men against racism, and fight against black men on sexism. This struggle, Morrison feels, draws its sustenance from varied ideological, cultural and literary contributions made by historical women like Sojourner Truth, Harriet Tubman, Frances E.W. Harper, Ida B. Wells, Barnett and Mary Church Terrell, and many others who had a shared awareness of how their sexual identity combined with their racial identity make their life situation the focus of their political struggle. As a grateful inheritor of this heritage, Morrison has been an interlocutor and interrogator of the past, as she depicts the present. In an interview with Sandi Russel, Morrison says:

I write for black women. We are not addressing the men as some white female writers do. We are not attacking each other, as both black and white men do. Black women writers look at things in an unforgiving/loving way. They are writing to repossess, re-name, re-own.

(Russel 1988: 54 and 46)

Morrison's own effort at writing herself is to "re-possess, re-own and re-name" (re-invent) black woman's selfhood and identity. Her representation of black women characters has invoked mixed responses from critics. Each one of her fictional works depicts women of colour in different roles. In each of her novels the voice of women reaches out very clearly and powerfully. Right from the first novel *The Bluest Eye* where the silence of the dispossessed protagonist Pecola emphasizes the relationship between voice and empowerment to the magical, powerful women of *Song of Solomon* who call Afro-Americans back to their lineage "Morrison's novels celebrate the feminine potential, the reclamation of legacy, and the beauty and righteous acknowledgement of a vision of things past" (Holloway 1987: 27).

Morrison's strength, as an author, lies in her authorial impersonality, crucial to any narrative, as she maintains, there is no all knowing, infallible black woman or matriarch; she is "flawed here, triumphant there, mean, nice, complicated woman and some of them win and some of them lose." (1993: 419). What is crucial to her is the vacancy in literary representations and this vacancy is she herself as well as all those black women she knows. It is the literary vacancy that Morrison is concerned with that explains her focus on Pecola, Claudia and Frieda in *The Bluest Eye* and Sula and Nel in *Sula*, as she wants to fill that vacancy in focussing on the relationship between black men and women that fulfills one another making or being prevented from wholeness by things that arise from the conflict of values.

From this it follows that representations of women in Morrison's fiction revolve round the questions of 'race' and 'gender'. Her writing is interventionist in the sense that her thematic preoccupation, while deconstructing white theories of 'race' and 'gender,' is to recover the conflicting and contradictory formation of black representation. One of the important vectors in understanding 'gender' within African-American feminist discourse is the representation of an identity that is coherent and fragmented at the same time. This simultaneity is placed at the intersection of 'race' and 'gender,' in an inter-subjective space of her narrative.

II

The Bluest Eye is a product of Morrison's interest "in racism as a cause, consequence, and manifestation of individual and social psychosis." ("Home" in *The House that Race Built* edited by Waheema Lubiano). Morrison explores in the text the disastrous consequence of the western notion of physical beauty. The idea of physical beauty which is a product of male 'gaze', according to her, glamorizes the female body and smacks of racist connotations. Such a construct privileges physical beauty over personal worth and virtue. Applicable in the context of the African-American women who traditionally do not qualify to be called beautiful, for they do not have fair skin, blue eyes and blond hair - all necessary parameters of the white sense of being beautiful. In a racist society like the United States, the concept of the beautiful is a 'site' of cultural and ethnic difference. Morrison does not favour the appropriation and substitution of the expression 'white is beautiful, with the Civil Rights' slogan, "Black is beautiful." This counter construct, according to her, is to accept the white values at the cost of black values.

Besides she does not valorize everything black, as she depicts black men and women not as idealized figures but human beings with inherent strengths and weaknesses.

The Bluest Eye is the disturbing story of a young girl, Pecola Breedlove who is obsessed with possessing a pair of blue eyes that she thinks will help her to overcome her ugliness. In a multi-layered narrative, the novel attempts to deconstruct the contested values of white and black cultures while looking at the problematic of how values external to a community unleashes disaster on its members. In the novel, the entire Breedlove family believes that they are ugly. It was as though some mysterious all-knowing master had said, "You are ugly people" (p. 29). Even if slavery has ended, the master's voice rings in the consciousness of the blacks. It is a voice of power and authority. Each black dreams of being the master, the possessor of authority, ironically, that aspiration eludes him. The members of Breedlove family look about themselves and see nothing to contradict the statement made by the master, as they find support for it from every billboard, every movie, every glance: "Yes", they had said, "You are right" (p. 28). They thus inherit and internalize the myth of unworthiness associated with ugliness not from the realization of their inner worth or worthlessness, but from the display of notions of beauty by others. The assertion of racial beauty is put against the damaging internalization of assumptions about one's inferiority originating from outside. Pecola's obsession with blue eyes is an external influence that she internalizes in order to redeem her ugliness. She thinks that if her eyes, "those eyes that held the pictures and knew the sights — if those eyes were different ... she herself could be different" (p. 34). The 'radical alteration,' that Pecola aspires for is a direct consequence of the ostracization she suffers from her own society which, moved by white values, decrees her ugly and considers her unworthy of love, affection, encouragement and self-esteem. Morrison works at multiple levels of social representation where 'alterities' show the fissures that arise from the fault lines of social acculturation. *The Bluest Eye* is a tale of negative influences of the community on one of its most vulnerable members, an eleven-year-old black girl. The society thwarts each of her attempts at discovering a means to self-definition. Raped by her father Cholly Breedlove, she gives birth to a stillborn child, loses all sense of *self* and descends into madness. Implicit in Pecola's desire for blue eyes is a sense of racial self-loathing. Importantly enough, Morrison raises some disturbing

questions in the 'Afterword' of the novel, "Who made her (Pecola) feel that it was better to be freak than what she was? Who had looked at her and found her so wanting, so small a weight on the beauty scale?" and then says, "The novel pecks away at the gaze that condemned her".

The "unspeakable" story of Pecola does not remain "unspoken". Although Pecola's story may be considered unrepresentable to many it is "represented" because she is her own revealed text. Pecola does not tell her story. It is Claudia, the omniscient narrator, who overhears the unfortunate things that happened to her, as the story of her victimisation circulates in gossips and innuendos. Claudia is sympathetic to her and provides the protective alliance to save her, but is unsuccessful. From the beginning, Pecola has to battle her way through "dragons" of abuse heaped on her at home, in the school and by members of the society. No sooner is she born, her mother, Pauline Breedlove, laments, "... Lord she was ugly" (p.98) and knows that she is going to be on the periphery for the rest of her life. The mother-daughter bond, which is so central to feminine identity, and affirmation, is denied to Pecola. There is no bond that could heal Pecola's family life, as it is defined by the degree of violence that her parents perpetrate on each other. "Cholly and Mrs. Breedlove fought each other with a darkly brutal formalism ... They did not talk, or groan or curse during these beatings" (p.32). As if, "Tacitly they had agreed not to kill each other" (p.32). During such violent moments, Pecola would whisper into the palm of her hands, "Please God", "Please make me disappear" (p.33). Patterns of caring never reach Pecola strongly enough to help her to define a positive self-image or form a positive opinion about herself. Morrison says in the Afterword "The extremity of Pecola's case, stemmed largely from a crippled and crippling family" (p.168).

Both Pauline Breedlove and her husband Cholly Breedlove are miserable failures as parents. The narrator comments "Cholly Breedlove, ... a renting black, having put his family outdoors, had catapulted himself beyond the reaches of human consideration. He had joined the animals" (p.12). Like any other black man he is a victim of racism and the rape of his daughter is to be viewed in the light of his past. "Abandoned in a junk heap by his mother, rejected for a crap game by his father ...", his life, till the time he meets Pauline is a series of broken ties with people and society. He is a man of scarce emotional resources and the novel focusses on his past to explain how what appears to be a totally shocking, immoral behaviour, is actually a result of unnatural experiences suffered by him at the hands of the white

people. His self-image suffers a jolt when a leering voyeur humiliates him during his sexual initiation. Cholly first withdraws into infantilism and then becomes “dangerously free unable to give coherence to the pain as well as the few pleasures of his life” (p.125) Disconnected emotionally from his own folks, he seeks consolation in the stories of Blue Jack to save him from the trauma of his victimization in the hands of the whites and his father but even this bond gets broken again and again rendering him an emotional wreck. Fatherhood shoves him from the brink of indifference into dysfunction since he has neither any model to emulate nor any expectations. Acting on momentary whim he rapes his daughter thus abandoning all moral and familial responsibility.

The inner dislocation suffered by the blacks is a consequence of the imposition of white values that inhibit personal growth and take away their nurturing abilities. Nowhere is it more evident than in the case of Pauline Breedlove, Pecola’s mother. Pauline suffers from a kind of social and spiritual dislocation as she moves North from South and falls prey to the destructive concepts of ‘romantic love’ and ‘physical beauty’ both of which, the narrator comments “originated in envy, thrived in insecurity, and ended in disillusion” (p.95). Distancing herself from her family members whom she considers ugly she seeks to find “beauty, order, cleanliness, and praise” (p.101) in Mrs. Fisher’s (the white woman) home. Thus, Pauline, as a mother and wife, fails to provide any kind of emotional sustenance to her family.

If Pecola’s mother finds her too ugly to love, her schoolmates find the darker shade of her skin too repulsive. The only kindness she receives is from the three prostitutes, China, Poland and Miss Marie, themselves outcasts who could not intervene to stop the destruction that visits her.

In the school, Pecola is called out of her name, which become negatively powerful as it denies her a confirming identity. Cruel school children shout at her, calling her “Black e mo. Black e mo ya dadd sleeps nekked” (p.50). Her colour and features are used for negation and exclusion, as she is denied admission into their society. They extemporise a verse made up of couple of insults to tease Pecola. Maureen Peal, the light skinned girl indulges Pecola to discover if the insults hurled at her father are really true. Not satisfied with the kind of answers she gives, Maureen draws a circle around her leaving the other three girls, Claudia, Frieda and Pecola outside and shouts: “I *am* cute! And you ugly! Black and ugly black e mos. I *am* cute!” (p.56) Pecola is unable to return the insults to Maureen as Claudia and Frieda do

because she is conscious of her ugliness, as her rejection reaches an irredeemable level.

All sections and all age group combine to reinforce Pecola's belief that the only way to escape this stultifying pain and humiliation is to become beautiful by acquiring bluest eyes of all, for that will reverse the bleak circumstances of her life, and will dazzle everyone into loving her or at least tolerating her presence. She is thrown into a "blinding conviction that only a miracle could relieve her" (p.35). The community's point of view about Pecola is flawed, as no one ever thought of her vulnerability in the hand of her own father, never allowing her to realize her inner worth. She continues to exist on the periphery where emotional support and love are denied to her. Claudia and Frieda learn a "secret, terrible story" from overheard conversations centring round Cholly Breedlove and Pecola; they overhear 'pregnant', 'her daddy' and 'dirty nigger' (p.148). They piece together the information and feel the ugliness of the event what Pecola in her traumatized state fails to feel. Although Claudia and Frieda try to provide a protective alliance to Pecola, they fail to rescue her from the speechless insanity into which she finally descends.

The novel is not only about Pecola's tragedy alone, but is also about a larger tragedy in which people waylaid by beliefs that are adopted from outside become the cause of cruelty and destruction. Morrison connects Pecola's story to the story of Claudia and her sister Frieda, and Maureen Peal and Geraldine. If Claudia's family has remained rooted in the black ways of life with its strong nurturing and caring abilities, Maureen and Geraldine have consciously abandoned black values and adopted white ones. In both cases, Pecola is the point of contrast and a reminder to the blacks as to where they have gone wrong as a community.

In fact, Mrs. MacTeer, mother of Claudia and Frieda, has a place in the novel as "the spark of healthy fertility in the world of stagnation and a light in so much spiritual darkness" (Harris 1991: 41). A positive image of the familial bond is evident in the MacTeer family. In spite of the struggle for survival Mrs. MacTeer does care for her children and "part of Claudia's life urge is in the tactile memory of her mother's hand on her feverish forehead in the middle of the night — a loving mother's touch that belies the antagonistic angry mother of the daytime" (Holloway 1987: 33). For Claudia, "Love, thick and dark as Alaga syrup ... I could smell it — taste it — sweet, musty, with an edge of wintergreen in its base — everywhere in that house" (p.7) is

important as a nurturing force. Claudia's father is silent but protective. When Mr. Henry attempts to sexually molest his daughter Frieda, he goes into a rage and has to be restrained from killing him. These strong and caring adults in Claudia and Frieda's childhood help them to define a positive self image about themselves. The girls learn from their mother the lessons of life, learn of their blackness and their femaleness by listening to the songs that Mrs. MacTeer sings:

If my mother was in a singing mood, it wasn't so bad. She would sing about hard times, bad times, and somebody-done-gone-and-left-me-times ... Misery colored by the greens and blues in my mother's voice took all the grief out of the words and left me with a conviction that pain was not only endurable it was sweet (pp.17-18).

On the other hand, the negative consequences of embourgeoisement of black culture become evident in the novel in the characters of Maureen Peal and Geraldine. They are the people who try to accommodate themselves into the white society by consciously following white values. Claudia describes light skinned Maureen Peal in ironic, bitter tone. "A high yellow dream child with long brown hair ... she was rich, at least by our standards, as rich as the richest of white girls, swaddled in comfort and care" (p.47). With her "green eyes, something in her complexion, and a rich autumn ripeness in her walk" (p.48), she casts a magical spell over the community:

She enchanted the entire school. When teachers called on her, they smiled encouragingly. Black boys didn't trip her in the halls; white boys didn't stone her, white girls didn't suck their teeth when she was assigned to be their work partners (p.48).

But she is vicious and cruel. She senses power and freedom that her colour and features have given her. She is scornful of black people, insensitive towards their plight and is egotistical. In the kind of vicious insults that she hurls at Pecola she uses her power to reject those who seek to identify with her. If Pecola blindly internalizes the insults, Claudia sees clearly Maureen's hatred towards her own folks in which colour of the skin is considered important. Being more analytical, Claudia realizes that "... Maureen Peal was not the Enemy and not worthy of such intense hatred. The *Thing* to fear was the *Thing* that made her beautiful and not us" (p.58). She realizes that they have been kept out of the mythology of beliefs that has shaped cultural norms of beauty in America.

Geraldine is an extreme version of Maureen, who has internalized white

values to the extent of hating blacks, her own people. Product of a land-grant college, she is an example of middle class black women who have divorced themselves from African-American roots. In these colleges, Geraldine is taught thrift, patience, high morals and good manners. She is also taught to get rid of "the dreadful funkiness of passion, the funkiness of nature, the funkiness of the wide range of human emotions" (p.64). The word 'dreadful' conveys the view of the land-grant colleges that inculcate white values in black students. Geraldine's loss of passion is indicative of her loss of identity as a black woman. Cleanliness to the point of blandness, houses made into artifacts, children becoming possessions to be pointed out are pitfalls of this middle class status to which she aspires. Morrison seems to condemn those who fit into this mould, who allow individuality to be consumed by the notions of progress. Trudier Harris says, "Their status becomes another of the wedges splintering the community into almost unsalvageable pieces. As Pecola finds her way through the splinters she can only reap cuts and bruises, not a pattern for healthy growth." (1991: 29) The only truly free people in this victimized and bleak world are the old Black women like Aunt Jimmy and her friends who have carried a world on their heads. Their freedom is their reward for having survived life, for having carried its immense burdens and not having abandoned responsibilities. These women who,

... beat their children with one hand stole for them with the other. The hands that felled trees also cut umbilical cords; the hands that wrung the necks of chicken

... also nudged African violets into bloom; the arms that loaded sheaves, bales, and sacks rocked babies into sleep (p.108).

Morrison describes these culture bearers as "free" but the freedom that they experience is one wrought in nurturing their children and grandchildren, not in defiance or destruction of them.

Beauty is as much a political as an aesthetic concept in America. Ugliness is not merely a matter of outward appearance, it is also considered to be a manifestation of an inner ugliness, one indicative of spiritual and moral failure.

That which was 'white' (or Anglo, male, Christian, wealthy) was extolled and infused with connotations of benevolence and superiority, while that which was not white (or not Anglo, female, non Christian, poor) was debased and associated with malevolence and inferiority.

(Braxton and McLaughlin 1990: 153)

As a mature narrator, Claudia condemns the white concept of beauty as one of “the most destructive ideas in the history of human thought” (p.95). Pecola’s unquestioning surrender to a standard that denies her value makes her invisible. Morrison stresses more on the universal female invisibility than just depicting black invisibility. Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* is “the original and powerful introduction of this black self concept into American consciousness” (Holloway 1987: 34). But his protagonist knows at least that he is invisible. Pecola, on the other hand, is cut off from this self-knowledge because she is abused to the extent of being made insensitive. Further, she is obstructed and deflected from reaching a higher consciousness of self because she is a female. “Pecola stands for the triple indemnity of the female, Black, child. Children, Blacks and females are devalued in American culture” (*ibid*, 34). In this context, Pecola’s encounter with Mr. Yacobowski, the white migrant assumes tremendous importance. When Pecola goes to his shop to buy candies, he does not see her because “How can he see a little black girl? Nothing in his life even suggests that the feat is possible, not to say desirable or necessary. Not wanting to touch her hands he takes the pennies while “His nails graze her damp palm” (pp.36-37). Black people otherwise remain invisible, only to be made visible to the whites in so far as they fit into the white frame of reference. This frame is deconstructed through dismemberment of the American Dick and Jane mythology: essential features of white world — house, family, cat, mother, father, dog and friend. They are separated from each other and their ideological significance is probed through their inclusion and recontextualization, as elements in the Breedlove narrative. This process of dismemberment bears on Claudia’s dismemberment of the white doll in an attempt “to discover ...[its] beauty, [and its] desirability ...”(p.19) that has escaped them:

I fingered the face, wondering at the single-stroke eyebrows; picked at the pearly teeth stuck like two piano keys between red bowline lips. Traced the turned up nose, poked the glassy blue eyeballs, twisted the yellow hair. I could not love it. But I could examine it to see what it was that all the world said was lovable (p.14).

Claudia’s destruction of the doll and Pecola’s standing before the mirror “trying to discover the secret of ugliness, the ugliness that made her ignored or despised at school, teachers and classmates alike” (p.34) goes on to show as McLaughlin says how western culture “inspires hatred toward and among people of African descent, inducing destructive behavior and an equally adverse disconnection from anything not western” (Braxton and McLaughlin

1990: 170). Claudia is a survivor because her anger is directed towards her white adversary. She hates Shirley Temple, the white child and everything associated with her and her cruelty. Instead of embracing white values like Pecola does that erases her completely and makes her invisible. Claudia rejects them and survives.

In the novel both working class and the middle class families fail to nurture the life sustaining values. To Sammy and Pecola, the home that should provide them the space for growth turns out to be a prison. The failure to instill a healthy self-conception along with negative examples of parenting and the absence of role models worthy of emulation keep the characters stranded in their own world without any escape route. No values are passed on to either Sammy or Pecola. In Geraldine's home there is no family relation to break down because she has already built holes into it. Her husband becomes an appendage rather than a personality and she becomes the centre of control and activity. She is wholly responsible for the failure passed on to Junior, her son. Junior, the little boy from the stifling home, kills his mother's cat and blames it on Pecola. Geraldine drives Pecola away from her house after hearing what her son says about her. But that is not the only reason for her hatred towards Pecola. She sees Pecola as a representative of a class for whom she nurtures only contempt and disgust:

They were everywhere. They slept six in a bed ... Grass wouldn't grow where they lived. Flowers died. Shades fell down. Tin cans and tyres blossomed where they lived ... Like flies they hovered, like flies they settled (p.72).

Pecola disturbs Geraldine because she sees in her the ghost of all that she has left behind — poverty, disorder, “funkiness”: “Hair uncombed, dresses falling apart, shoes untied, caked with dirt” (p.72). Pecola reminds Geraldine the necessity of building a home against intruders even if they are from within the home itself. The society thus mirrors back to Pecola the same ugliness that she sees in her own family. In the novel, the image of the dead cat with its blue eyes closed “leaving only an empty, black and helpless face” (p.71) suggests the cultural vacuum in which blacks who aspire to be like whites are trapped. Cultural dislocation also brings about emotional and sexual dislocation for Geraldine, for she never experiences the kind of passion that Pauline experiences with Cholly. The three prostitutes: China, Poland and Miss Marie provide the counter point to Geraldine. Although they contribute to the local colour yet they have a significant role to play in the narrative.

While rejecting the norms of the community they have enjoyed sexual independence that Geraldine has not, as she has surrendered to the white norm.

Raised to fear life, Pecola is unable to challenge the cruel realities and bleak circumstances of her life in the form of “implicit racism inherent in the Shirley Temple icons and explicit acts battering her submissive ego”(Carmean 1993:25). She sees herself as a problem and wishes for some kind of transformation. First she prays to God for blue eyes, then timidly approaches Soaphead Church, a man said to possess supernatural powers. Soaphead is struck by Pecola’s request: “Of all the wishes people had brought him — money, love, revenge — this seemed to be the most poignant and the one most deserving of fulfillment (p.138). He identifies Pecola as the victim of God’s absent mercy. Then he himself victimizes her by having her poison the dog he detests and making her believe that she has got blue eyes – eyes that only she will be able to see. Although emphasis is laid on Claudia’s point of view as the narrator, there is also a stream-of-consciousness section that presents Pecola’s version of what actually happened to her. This adds to the complexity of the narrative. “One has to visit the immured insanity of Pecola’s dialogue with her invisible friend, a dialogue that displaces her sense of blame onto a desire for blue eyes that would redeem all “ugliness” (Holloway 1987: 35). Claudia realizes that the entire community is responsible for the tragic disintegration of Pecola. She sees that Pecola’s submissiveness has made her a scapegoat. She concludes:

All of us — all who knew her felt so wholesome after we cleaned ourselves on her. We were so beautiful when we stood astride her ugliness. Her simplicity decorated us, her guilt sanctified us, her pain made us glow with health We honed our egos on her, padded our characters with her frailty, and yawned in the fantasy of our strength.” (p.163)

She considers the community hypocritical as it has taken advantage of Pecola’s situation. “... we rearranged lies and called it truth, seeing in the new pattern of an old idea the Revelation and the Word” (p.163). Claudia understands as to ‘why’ instead of only ‘how’ Pecola has become a victim. The marigold seeds that did not sprout in the prologue re-emerge in the final imagery of the sunflowers around mad Pecola - “this form insists that this female victim, with her poetic, inward nature, is lost, expunged forever, her voice and story lost” (Holloway 1987: 35).

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Book Reviews

Agrarian Structures and Land Reforms in Assam by M. N. Karna, North-Eastern Hill University Publications, Shillong and Regency Publications, New Delhi, 2004, 103p, Rs. 250/-.

A brief review of peasant movements in India from 1860 to 1950 clearly reflects the changing trend of agrarian structures and land tenure/land reforms in the country. It identifies the changing features of Indian agrarian societies, which show more of discontinuity than continuity.

Initially, the East India Company's trade with India was insignificant. The decisive moment came in 1765, when the financial sovereignty over Bengal, Orissa, and Bihar went to the hands of the Company with the concession for levying taxes in exchange for a sum of Rs. 2.6 million per annum. In 1793, Cornwallis' Permanent Settlement brought a final regulation on the procedure for levying taxes, which led to decisive changes in land tenure. The British did all this as if the land belonged to the state and was thus at their disposal.

The objective of the British was to establish their commercial interests firmly in India. Since the textile industry played an important role in the beginning of industrialization in England, very large amounts of cheap products manufactured by mechanical looms were exported to India and this soon led to a collapse of her home textile industry. A large number of weavers became unemployed. In order to secure a basis for existence, they migrated to rural areas and tried to lease land for cultivation. The monopoly over the means of livelihood soon shifted to the hands of *zamindars* who were able to extort more and more taxes as the demand for land increased. This led to peasant indebtedness and even loss of their occupancy and usufructory rights. This was compounded by rise in prices of agricultural produce between 1860 and 1950. The landlords asserted their proprietary rights by evicting tenants while the latter claimed, and were occasionally granted occupancy rights. Over the century, the peasants' ability to resist landlords increased and landlordism stood considerably weakened by the end of British rule.

Consequences of the changes in the land tenure brought about by the Permanent Settlement undermined the rural stability. More and more cultivators became indebted, lost their occupancy rights, and dropped in status

to tenants-at-will or agricultural labourers. On the other hand, the wealth of *zamindars* increased on account of the income they earned from the difference between the amount of taxes and the rentals, increase in cultivated areas, money lending, and expropriation of debtors. In the course of time, the *zamindari* areas were characterized by marked difference in wealth, power, and prospects in life between the two distinct rural classes.

More liberal *ryotwari* system was introduced in Madras, Bombay, and Assam. Under this system, the government claimed property rights to all of the land and allotted the same to cultivators with the proviso that they paid taxes. They could use, sell, mortgage, bequeath, and lease the land as long as they paid taxes. Otherwise, they were evicted. This direct tax relation between the government and the cultivators was meant to prevent sub tax collectors. It sought to increase purchasing power, and, widen the market for British products in rural India. Taxes were pre-determined and fixed in a temporary settlement for a period of thirty years. It was revised and the tenure was extended.

Communal rights to land were common in North and North-West India. This system ideally fitted with the *Mahalwari* system. Tax was imposed on the village community, which distributed the same among the cultivators. Everyone was liable for the others' arrears. A village inhabitant - the *lambardar* - collected the tax and remitted it to the state. Tax assessment was also revised at intervals.

Over a period of time the *ryotwari* region was no longer a self-cultivator area. More than one third of the land was leased and in many districts more than two thirds. Indeed, it was not possible to transfer land to the people who were not from the locality, but the result was that landed property became concentrated in the hands of a few wealthy people, whereas the others lost their rights. A constantly increasing number of people became landless. While in the middle of the nineteenth century there were no landless persons, in 1931 and 1945, respectively 33 and 70 million landless labourers were registered. Others succeeded in renting some land, but on less favourable terms. Share tenancy increased greatly.

After Independence, economic situation in rural India changed very differently. A large part of the population remained poor and landless. A complicated relationship between landlords, cultivators, and landless emerged based on mutual rights and obligations.

Assam is a miniature replica of the Indian subcontinent. It has noticeable

diversities and variations in demographic and economic characteristics. It has a wide range of human responses to natural-ecological settings and historical compulsions. Within the confines of this region, a variety of people with diverse ethnic origins, representing different racial strands, speaking different languages and professing diverse religions have migrated and settled. The modes of living of the people, their lifestyles, and material basis of culture and consumption behaviours are diverse.

There are communities in the valleys whose agricultural calendar keeps them busy most of the year while those in the hills and mountains raise a single *jhum* crop. Then there are communities who are partly agrarian and partly dependent on forest produce. In the river valleys of the region, particularly the Brahmaputra and Barak valleys, the peasant communities live in a state of dynamic equilibrium with nature and are surrounded on all sides by tribal groups. The varied ecological-environmental settings in the region encourage a variety of agricultural practices and cropping patterns to emerge. The natural factors also influence the human choices in two crucial areas—land and its quality and water and its availability. These greatly influenced their responses and settlements.

A littoral and East Indian model of the Asiatic monsoon regime with dominant wet conditions prevail over a longer duration in the year, and demand prolonged spell of work in the fields in North-East India. In this wet region paddy has emerged as the most dominant crop. The diversities in the crop ecology and the resultant cropping pattern engendered differences in the social division of labour, the absorption of women in the agricultural labour force, in the quantum of agricultural work and leisure available to the agrarian communities. Female labour force participation rates varied strikingly between the hill-mountain and plains-valley communities.

In an area like Assam, with a variegated politico-administrative set-up, there are significant inter-regional differences in the landownership patterns and tenurial relations. In fact, the British policy, like in the rest of the country, was so designed as to accommodate multiple forms of landownership in the hills, mountains and plains regions, depending on agro-climatology, social custom and local tradition. These types of landownership evolved in the course of social history of the various peoples within the niches provided by their respective ecology.

It is in this background that the book under review assumes significance. This book is an outcome of a series of three lectures by Professor Karna

delivered as Professor H.K. Barpujari Endowment Lectures at Dibrugarh University, Assam. It is an attempt to study agrarian structure and land reforms on all India level. Karna raises the issues of peasant mobilisation, policy decisions and their implementation in a broad temporal framework. He has also traced the peasant uprisings such as Phulaguri uprising and No-Rent agitation. He has been successful in providing wider canvas on which land reforms in India can be better understood.

He provides a broad assessment of the land reforms adopted since Independence. With the abolition of intermediary interests the ownership of land is broader based and the erstwhile superior tenants acquired a higher social status.

Karna argues that while abolition of intermediaries brought about a measure of uniformity in the agrarian system of Assam, tenancy reforms provided a new confidence to the disgruntled tenants. He states that a preponderance of tenants with virtually no ownership rights on land characterises the Assamese agrarian structure. He adds that this has been further complicated by the religio-feudal establishments like *Satras* and *Maths*.

Under the prevailing socio-economic condition in the country no tangible progress can be expected in the field of land reforms. Wherever effective mobilisation of beneficiaries has taken place the result has been positive. The beneficiaries of land reforms, especially sharecroppers and landless labourers, are crippled by social and economic disadvantages. By tradition they are inarticulate, passive and unorganised. They do not constitute a homogenous social and economic category. Hence, a deliberate attempt at mobilisation is needed to generate an appropriate political and administrative climate for implementation of land reform measures. Such a change leads to better implementation of agrarian laws.

Those who believe in a liberal market-oriented path of development may come to accept the necessity of enforcing any package of land reform measures to foster sustainable agricultural growth, a pre-condition for rapid industrialisation and steady economic development. Undoubtedly an outmoded agrarian structure characterised by absentee ownership, widespread tenancies, persisting religio-feudal land control, and scattered holdings is a grave impediment to the optimum utilisation of land and water and to the adoption of improved technology and modern farming practices in the otherwise agriculturally well-endowed plains districts of Assam. Thus, the

need of the hour is to complete the unfinished task of reforms, which should include abolition of absentee landownership, identification and protection of *adhiars* (sharecroppers) effective and efficient enforcement of ceiling laws, speedy distribution of acquired surplus land, and consolidation of holdings and provision of supporting facilities to enforce minimum standards of cultivation. If these steps are integrated with development programmes related to surface irrigation and ground water, soil conservation, social forestry and such other activities, Assam should be able to come out of the vicious cycle of poverty and backwardness.

*R. Gopalakrishnan, Professor,
Department of Geography, NEHU, Shillong.*

The Great Earthquake of 1897 in the Khasi-Jaintia Hills translated by Basil Moris, North-Eastern Hill University Publications, Shillong, 2003, pp.40 + xiii, Price : Rs. 95.00 (SB), US\$3.

Like any other eyewitness account of an event of importance, this one by the Reverend Robert Evans, who was a missionary to the Mission Field in the Khasi and Jaintia Hills between 1878 and 1901, makes interesting and fascinating reading, as indeed anything about the Great Earthquake of 1897 is. With the epicentre in the Shillong Plateau, and with a magnitude of 8.5, a report of the Meteorological Department says: "It is one of the major earthquakes in the seismic history of the world. Lasted about 2.5 minutes and completely ruined an area of 150,000 square miles and was felt over an area of one and three quarter of a million square miles. Caused landslides, fissures, vents and disrupted normal communication line. It was followed by a large number of after-shocks. The epicentre tract was within a cot-shaped area covering the entire Shillong Plateau". The severest shock might not have lasted for less than one minute but the devastation was complete.

To the Welsh Presbyterian Mission, originally named the Welsh Calvinistic Methodist Mission, the event was of particular significance as the areas most severely affected were those within the Sohra (Cherrapunji) area, where the Mission had established the first church and schools. One may understand the concern that the 'Mother Church' must have felt when news of the devastation reached England. The Reverend Dr. John Roberts,

whose name will always be linked with the development of Khasi literature, was in his country at that time. He had, in fact, just been nominated Moderator of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Mission of Wales. The scene of devastation that they saw on their return, with most familiar landmarks beyond recognition, and roads and paths on which they had often travelled drastically altered, was almost beyond belief. The Deputy Commissioner of the Khasi and Jaintia Hills at that time, Mr. J. C. Arbuthnot, whose report to the Government of India was perhaps the most detailed and graphic of the reports submitted, bears out the fact that no comparable natural disaster has ever taken place, perhaps for centuries! This is what he had to say: "In my tour of the district, I have been much struck by the way in which the ancient Khasi monoliths, often of immense size, the antiquity of which unknown, have been levelled with the ground and in many cases snapped off two, three and four feet from the base."

Eyewitness accounts agree that during the two minutes or so when the full force of the earthquake was felt it was impossible for anyone to remain standing. It was said that two women cyclists who were riding past the old All Saint's Cathedral fell down and from where they lay, they saw the church building collapse. The Chief Commissioner of Assam and his wife, who were preparing to go for a ride, had a narrow escape when their residence, the Government House, met a similar fate within minutes of their leaving the porch!

Although Shillong was well within the area most affected, it got off comparatively lightly, with only 23 deaths including Mr. McCabe, the Inspector General of Police, who was buried under the debris of his bungalow on the near side of the Umkhrah River opposite the Polo Ground. It is worth mentioning that the memorial that was erected on the spot has unfortunately been built over by unauthorised constructions during the past few years, which is a stark reminder to the state government to take more interest in what happens in the city than what it has been doing, in order that historical sites are not obliterated as has been done in this and other cases.

By contrast, it was the area closer to Sohra that was more grievously affected, the reason being in the nature of the topography, with steep slopes and cliffs everywhere. The village of Laitiam in the deep valley below the Mawsmat falls accounted for 86 deaths, all lost when the overhanging cliff broke off to overwhelm the habitations below. With these casualties, the Sohra Syiemship lost a total of 237 lives. The Khyrim Syiemship lost 146 lives mainly in the villages on its southern slopes.

Literally, earth shaking events such as this one do arouse strong reaction, and impressions upon those who experienced them. All of them suggest that the earthquake was a form of devil. Retribution for the wickedness of men, which at this point of time may conflict with the belief held by many, in a merciful, forgiving God. Who would extend His compassion not only to His noblest creation, Man, but even to animals, as may be seen in the Book of the Prophet Jonah (Ch.4:13).

Over the next few decades, however, there would be many eyewitness accounts left to various people in the form of newspaper articles, or even in poems published by individual authors, as by the Reverend Morkha Joseph, many of which bring to mind the destruction that overwhelmed places like Shella, the wealthiest village in the Khasi Hills at the time, but today reduced to a shadow of its original self. The once prosperous village of Shella Circle lost a total of 217 lives of which 117 were from the Shella village itself. This village, which was perhaps the most prosperous in the district at that time, with a population in 3658 in the Census of 1891 never recovered from this disaster having been reduced within minutes to a shadow of its former condition.

As one goes through Reverend Evans' account, one will appreciate that primarily, Robert Evans prepared this account for the Mission Board which would want to know how the earthquake affected the new church in the Khasi and Jaintia Hills, and more especially upon the believers. This account would appear to have been a vindication of the faith that God would not abandon His own in times of crises, but give them strength and ever greater faith, as one can see from the short personal experiences of local pastors and their flocks. What will impress the reader even more is the effect upon the young, who never lost their faith but carried on in the belief that was the time when they would declare how their faith had sustained them even at the worst moments of their young lives.

The account left by the Reverend Robert Evans will therefore be better appreciated if also read against the background as provided by official records.

I. M. Simon,
Retired Professor, Khasi Department, NEHU, Shillong.

DECLARATION

Form IV Rule 8

- | | | | |
|----|--|---|--|
| 1. | Place of Publication | : | Bijni Complex, Shillong-793003 |
| 2. | Periodicity | : | Biannual |
| 3. | Printer's Name | : | Deputy Director, NEHU Publications |
| | Address | : | Bijni Complex, Shillong-793003 |
| 4. | Publisher's Name | : | Deputy Director, NEHU Publications |
| | Nationality | : | Indian |
| | Address | : | Bijni Complex, Shillong - 793003 |
| 5. | Editor's name | : | T. B. Subba |
| | Nationality | : | Indian |
| | Address | : | NEHU Publications, Bijni Complex,
Shillong 793003 |
| 6. | Name and Address
of individuals who own the
journal and partners or
share-holders holding more than
one percent of the total capital | : | North-Eastern Hill University,
Permanent Campus, Umshing,
Shillong- 793022 |

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T. B. Subba

Indexed in the Guide to Indian Periodical Literature

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