
TRANSCENDING - A Choice or a Need? A study in Elena Ferrante's 'Neapolitan Series' and Toni Morrison's 'The Bluest Eye'

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That very old tale about a crow decorating its butt with vibrant peacock feathers rings a thousand bells in today's climate of consistent transcendence. There is a subtle, murky line cutting right through the definitions of transgression and transcendence. One is considered a positive aspect of character, the other a flaw. One is expected out of ambition, the other should be avoided. One is what an individual strives to act upon in an entire lifetime, the other simply happens in the process. What truly strikes as the unsuitable note is when one process metamorphoses into the other, without any former acknowledgement of the doer. The crow managed to appear the way it wanted to, long slender feathers hanging loosely underneath its black shiny coat. However, through its newly branded costume, it had barely managed to cross a limit and never go beyond it. This is only one of the easiest explanations of what might result in if transgression is confused with transcendence. A murky zone from where escape is nearly impossible, a place which is so bleak in appearance that its identity can be easily deemed dubious. It is in this murky zone between transgression and transcendence that Elena Ferrante and Toni Morrison neatly place their characters, and let them either take a step ahead or change their entire course of action.

Both Ferrante and Morrison have treaded upon the path of subtle but evident Class discrimination within one's own Race. The characters, their decisions, choices, and the conclusion of all that they decide to do and discard, are constantly driven by the urge to transcend. Go beyond what the limit is and sometimes unknowingly, though willingly, they begin to cross the limit. In this study of Class discrimination within Race, every character's role has been taken to account and an attempt has been made to decipher the authors' own journey beyond the line in order to be and not to be who they are.

The central characters in both the authors' works are bound by limitations that come with gender, race, and class. The central subjects of the novels deal with the revolting aspect of a character's digression from social conformity into an unending battle to break the wheel, and transcend. We see them digressing; for the most part the authors make sure they are greedy for what they should not be. When we meet Raffaella Cerullo in the 'Neapolitan Series' (2011-2012), more commonly addressed as Lila, Elena Ferrante puts her character under the spotlight of a watchfully gazing narrator, Elena Greco, or Lenu. Growing up in a poverty-stricken Naples, Lenu is constantly mesmerised by anything the girl-genius does. She says of Lila, "*She took the facts and in a natural way charged them with tension; she intensified reality as she reduced it to words, she injected it with energy*". Lila was a constant transcending force for Lenu that on a minute yet crucial level compelled our narrator to go beyond what was set as a limit for her. Other than drawing the picture of a girl who is intricately folded in her expression but is crystal clear about her intentions, Lenu also pinpoints the flamboyant rule of men in the neighbourhood and the constant victimisation of one gender by the other- even if the other is a victim itself.

Lila is presented to us as a genius with no money, a woman with an extreme zeal for power, and a girl thirsty for a pure form of love that

she well knows does not exist in the world around her. Since the beginning she is the potential power that outranks the impotency of class structure around her. The daughter of a shoemaker who is beaten by the boys in the locality, hunted by the powerful Solaras, and thrown out of the window by her father, Lila- whether expectedly or unexpectedly- is the most ethereal representation of transcendence. Lenu gives out the hint in the very first pages of the series, where she writes, *“She meant something different: she wanted to vanish; she wanted every one of her cells to disappear, nothing of her ever to be found. And since I know her well, or at least I think I know her, I take it for granted that she has found a way to disappear, to leave not so much as a hair anywhere in this world”*. Lila’s transcendence takes place across four books, but in the first book itself, Ferrante lets us know that she is not one of the “plebs” in their penurious neighbourhood. She is already beyond everything that exists. She taught herself to read and write at the minimum age of four, she designed her own collection of men’s leather shoes when she was merely a teenager, she chose to give away her doll and go beyond her age to purchase a book and read it cover to cover. And yet, Lila chose the most conventional method to climb up the social ladder- marriage. In her teacher’s words, *“The beauty of mind that Cerullo had from childhood didn’t find an outlet, Greco, and it has all ended up in her face, in her breasts, in her thighs, in her ass, places where it soon fades and it will be as if she had never had it”*. For a good part of the first two books in the series, we see Lila stagger through her early adulthood while Lenu manages to establish herself as an author of merit. Transcendence here begins to take a sinister turn when in spite of earning prestige, Lenu finds herself incapable of the greatness that Lila had once commanded her to achieve, *“you’re my brilliant friend, you have to be the best of all, boys and girls”*. While there’s a lot of instances which can be given in order to justify

the two girls' urge for a transcendental living, it can all be accumulated to one factor that both of them wanted a better world than what their parents had lived in- a world torn apart by the Second World War.

Growing up in the 1950s Naples, torn to pieces by the Nazis, Lila and Lenu find themselves born in the city's restoration phase. They come in a generation, which has been deemed as young and angry by an entire host of poets and writers, a generation who found themselves in a dilapidated world without any resource, any promise, only the waste of war as a reminder of what the human race has been. According to Rutgers University Associate Professor Paola Gambarota, "*the socioeconomic situation in Naples...was worse than anywhere else...Poverty there [in the '50s] meant you lived seven people to one room, and that there was nothing to eat. People with no shoes*" and education was certainly a luxury- one luxury that marked Lenu's transcendence beyond the boundaries of Naples, and Lila's transgression within the limits of Naples. It is almost like a blatant confession made by the narrator about the deserving one not having the privilege of achieving what they deserve but Fate deciding upon the non-deserving one to lead a better life. However, speaking of transcending engendering roles, it becomes quite clear about who actually transcends the social structure. Lenu leaves Naples, finds a family in the city, has her own daughters, a failed but prosperous marriage, and the fame of a recognised author whose voice is considered of relevance and importance. However, in Lenu's own words it is only Lila who lives a life beyond anything mortal. Transgressing for a brief while within the city's own limits, Lila climbs up the social ladder, staggers to her failure but once again returns with a blazing trail flamed by knowledge, conviction, and an utterly incorruptible mind. She teaches herself the daily use of modern technology, she runs her own business, unlike any other

woman of her generation, she gives birth to a daughter who is already brighter than all the kids her age, and finally she leaves it all behind and calmly dematerialises in her own existence. Lila stands as a perishable instance of modification that perhaps an entire gender went through in order to establish a fact as simple as Equality For All. Lila is, subjectively speaking, the only character in the book who comes across as humane in all her impulsive aspiration, and at the same time, she is the only character who stands as an illustrious representation of Ferrante. Elena Ferrante, a pseudonym for a woman who has kept herself under garbs from the ever transparent fame of the 21st Century, can be counted as a transcendental concept of the author who not only surpassed the ideas of race and class but moulded the concept of identity and let it lurk in the secretly comfortable zone between reality and fiction.

What strikes as a common aspect in the works of both Ferrante and Morrison is the transition from resistance to transcendence. In Morrison's 1970 novel, 'The Bluest Eye', transcendence subtly mixes with transgression when talking about the concerned central character. Like Lila, Pecola Breedlove, is constantly perceived under the watchful gaze of the narrator- only this time the narrator is kind. A little black-skinned girl who is constantly scrutinised as an ugly creature by her community, Pecola's plight is often a consequence of victimising the victim by another victim. A concept Ferrante notoriously explores in the first instalment of her Neapolitan Series. The men in Ferrante's work are immediately tumultuous in their approach, the men in Naples are hungry for food, for water, for space, for power. These are the men coming from the post-war generation, the angry young men whom John Osborne immortalised in his 1956 play, 'Look Back In Anger'. Jimmy Porter is a man very about everything around him, and although the play seems to make an attempt to justify this man's abusive tone, his chauvinistic approach

is quite easily recognisable. Dan Rebellato, Professor of Contemporary Theatre at Royal Holloway, University of London, commented about the play in his essay, ‘An Introduction to Look Back In Anger’, “Jimmy’s targets are not carefully selected, and his spirit seems more anarchic than anything else”. The point to be noted here is the fact that Jimmy’s targets are not carefully selected- neither are the men of Naples’ nor is Cholly Breedlove’s.

Cholly’s story takes us on a parallel journey where we see him as a regular man, lustfully in love, but threatened by those with lighter skin tone. He is ordered to behave like a creature, to go wild with his desires, and what he later does to Pecola, is a vengeful act breeding out of his own embarrassment. Pecola wanted a pair of the bluest eyes, a beauty feature to be owned only by the Oppressor; similarly, Cholly too wished to be beyond the limit set for him by the Oppressor. However, as trained as his mind could be, he never once blames the Oppressor for the ill of his life. He, instead, chooses the “Second Gender” to flung his wrath upon. Morrison mentions in the book, *“Never did he once consider directing his hatred toward the hunters. Such an emotion would have destroyed him. They were big, white, armed men. He was small, black, helpless. His subconscious knew what his conscious mind did not guess—that hating them would have consumed him, burned him up like a piece of soft coal, leaving only flakes of ash and a question mark of smoke”*. Cholly’s transgression takes a sadistic turn when the old laws of chauvinism take over him- he the man, the ruler of the “Second Gender”, a man who is a slave to other men even a slave to the white-skinned “Second Gender” but he is after all a man. One who is destined to forcefully take upon the weaker creature of the weaker, more minor, community of society. Cholly, a victim of discrimination, chooses to avenge his own ill-fate by victimising someone weaker than him. Weaker not by the physical sense of the term, by weaker by definition, weaker by

construct. His immediate transgression, his act to not go beyond but merely cross the limit, makes him take the backseat alongside Pecola but it is only through the chief narrator, Claudia that Morrison finally seeks transcendence beyond engendering definitions. Claudia is what sets the yardstick between an entire community that forgets to admire itself under the rule of the Oppressor, and one human being who is destined to be just the Oppressed, and nothing more.

On a similar ground as Lila, Pecola did not have to wait for a separate community to abuse her for being different. That discrimination started way earlier at home, and continued with neighbours, teachers, classmates, and lastly parents. While in Lila's case the narrator hovered upon her like an absent presence, commenting on every move she made, Pecola falls under the gaze of multiple narrators all of who try to justify their own reaction towards the so-called "ugliness" of the little black girl. Claudia takes note of the fact, *"Dolls we could destroy, but we could not destroy the honey voices of parents and aunts, the obedience in the eyes of our peers, the slippery light in the eyes of our teachers when they encountered the Maureen Peals of the world..."*. Claudia, thereafter, justifies Pecola's greed for a pair of the bluest eyes- the paramount feature of beauty. But where does Pecola's greed take her? It is not the pursuit of brilliance like Lila, nor is it a scheme that can ultimately help her rise above everything else around her. It is nothing more than that very humane urge to fit in- an urge similarly shared by Cholly, the men of Naples, Lenu, and to some extent Lila, too. That's all that Pecola perhaps ever wanted- to fit in, to belong, to be recognised, to be among the conventional pretty ones who are easy in the eyes. Raped by her father, shamed by her community, Pecola's ultimate descent to madness is exactly what takes form out of a misguided transcending act that converts itself to the dismissive act of transgression.

Unlike Lila, who chose to break out of the role imposed upon her by

society, Pecola- a lot like the crowd- chose to put on a different appearance. She wanted a pair of the bluest eyes there is, and her desire to be a little like the oppressor is neatly foiled by her father, Cholly Breedlove's transformation into the Oppressor from the Oppressed. In her book, *'Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism'*, bell hooks claims, "*in patriarchal society, men are encouraged to channel frustrated aggression in the direction of those without power—women and children*". What can this act be called? Transcendence or Transgression?

Claudia is the only one who manages to draw a fine line between the standardised definition and a more lucid form of definitions. Unlike her fellow narrators, Claudia does not despise black or white; Pecola is just as important as the other white girls who make appearances throughout the novel, and whose attractiveness serve as the perfect scale to measure beauty. Claudia transcends in the truest sense of the term when she gives up on any definition, and deems beauty as something that lies in the eyes of the beholder. We find her concerning over an unborn child who will receive the similar hatred as its mother if society does not alter the way it judges beauty. Claudia quietly confesses, "*More strongly than my fondness for Pecola, I felt a need for someone to want the black baby to live—just to counteract the universal love of white baby dolls, Shirley Temples, and Maureen Peals*". Claudia remains impassive in her treatment of the situation but at the same time, just like Lenu, she is incapable of keeping herself away from the impending doom that is about to set upon a friend.

To transcend perhaps does not mean to indulge in disobedience or revolt. To transcend perhaps only means to make the best of whatever limit has been set in your way. But why the urge to transcend? Why the urge to be a little better than they already are? Is it only a selfish desire loosely hanging upon a virtuous need to prosper or is it an

inflicted resolution resulting out of years of torture, abuse, maltreatment and misery? Perhaps the latter. Why would Lila teach herself to read and write in the first place when her parents couldn't? Why did Lenu dream of a nicer home, better clothes and a sharper mind when her parents were ordinary, good people? Why did Pecola wish for the bluest eyes when her kind clearly possess their own set of shining dark eyes? Why was it so important for Cholly to impose his power when he clearly knew what power did to people? These series of rhetorical questions are what lead the act of choosing to go beyond. Discrimination is nothing but putting aside a particular kind. The ones with less wealth, the ones with different skin tone, the ones with a shorter height, the ones with a lower pitch- all put aside in a margin. Perhaps that is why the crow's story isn't exactly right for the moral it teaches us- be comfortable with what you are- but more about letting one remain comfortable in what they are.