

An Intersectional Analysis of Race, Gender, Beauty Myth and Trauma in Toni Morrison's *the Bluest Eye*

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ABSTRACT

Toni Morrison wrote her first novel, *The Bluest Eye* in 1970. This novel was an enlargement of a short story she wrote for a writer's workshop. It is about the negative aspect of white's concept of beauty on the black psyche particularly on a young black female. In *The Bluest Eye*, Toni Morrison delves into the complex interplay between racial identity and self-perception, particularly through the experiences of Pecola Breedlove. The novel examines how societal standards and systemic racism shape the identities of Black individuals, leading to internalized racism and a distorted sense of self-worth. Toni Morrison's portrayal of Pecola serves as a powerful critique of the systemic racism that dehumanizes individuals and distorts their self-worth. This paper explores the intersectional analysis of race, gender, beauty myth and trauma through the experience of Pecola Breedlove, the protagonist of the novel. Pecola's desire for blue eyes symbolizes her longing for beauty, acceptance, and love in a society that devalues her Black identity. The paper also argues that Pecola's struggle for identity is marked by internalized racism, leading to feelings of inadequacy and isolation. It further examines how patriarchal oppression and sexual trauma structures within both Black and white communities contribute to the psychological fragmentation of Pecola. The study concludes that Pecola's desire for blue eyes is not merely a childish wish but a tragic response to systemic racism, sexism, and societal neglect.

KEYWORDS: Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*, Intersectionality, Internalized Racism, Gender, Patriarchal Oppression, Beauty Myth, Trauma

1. INTRODUCTION

The Bluest Eye (1970) is Toni Morrison's first novel. She is regarded as the most recognized first African American to receive a Nobel Prize for bringing into light the oppression, marginalization, suffering and struggle of the Black community. Her novels focus on the torment and distress of the blacks. She wrote *The Bluest Eye* while being in a depressive and unhappy phase of her life after separating from her

husband, Harold Morrison, in 1964. This novel was an enlargement of a short story she wrote for a writer's workshop. The origin of the novel lay in a conversation she had with a childhood friend in the elementary school who prayed hard to God to grant her blue eyes:

The novel is set in Morrison's hometown of Lorain, Ohio, in 1940–41, and tells the tragic story of Pecola Breedlove, an African American girl from an abusive home. Eleven-year-old Pecola equates beauty and social acceptance with whiteness. Therefore, she longs to have "the bluest eye." Although largely ignored upon publication, *The Bluest Eye* is now considered an American classic and an essential account of the African American experience after the Great Depression. *The Bluest Eye* is divided into four sections, each named after the four seasons. The novel begins with Autumn and ends with Summer. The four sections are further divided into chapters: Autumn into chapters 1, 2, and 3; Winter into 4 and 5; Spring into 6, 7, 8 and 9; and Summer into 10 and 11.

Pecola Breedlove is an 11-year-old innocent child who has done nothing wrong, but the whole society, community, and family put all their own self-hatred, frustration, ugliness, and guilt onto one innocent child to make themselves feel better. The white society takes Black people as ugly and the community accepts it. The Black community feels inferior to whites, and so they insult darker people like Pecola to feel superior. Pecola's mother, Pauline Breedlove, hates her own life and takes out her frustration on Pecola and beats her. Pecola is also a victim of her own father's trauma and shame. Eventually, he rapes her. At the end of the novel, everyone says "poor little Pecola," but no one helps her. Thus, Pecola functions as the community's scapegoat, absorbing the collective ugliness and sins of a society while remaining entirely faultless.

2. INTERNALIZED RACISM AND THE MYTH OF BEAUTY

Race is a social construct used to group people. Race is constructed as a hierarchical human-grouping system, generating racial classifications to identify, distinguish and marginalize some groups across nations, regions and the world. Race divides human populations into groups often based on physical appearance, social factors and cultural backgrounds

The central theme of the novel is the Eurocentric beauty ideal. In 1940s America, beauty was defined as white skin, blonde hair, and blue eyes. This ideal was propagated through Shirley Temple movies, Mary Jane candies, and white baby dolls. Morrison examines how socially constructed ideas of beauty influence the way individuals perceive themselves and others. In the novel, *The Bluest Eye*, beauty is not presented as an objective quality but as an ideology shaped by race, colour, class, and cultural power. The dominant white standard of beauty, which is the image of the blue-eyed, fair-skinned girl, becomes a measure against which Black characters are judged.

Pecola Breedlove is the clearest victim of these constructed myths. She believes that possessing blue eyes would make her beautiful, lovable, and worthy of acceptance. Her desire for blue eyes is therefore much more than a wish to change her appearance, it reflects her internalization of a society that teaches her that Blackness is inferior. She associates whiteness with beauty, goodness, happiness, and social acceptance, while her own dark skin becomes a source of shame.

The myth of beauty also affects Claudia MacTeer, although she responds differently. Claudia initially does not understand why white dolls are considered beautiful. She instinctively resists the idea that whiteness represents the highest form of beauty. Her resistance provides a contrast to Pecola, who gradually accepts the dominant standard and turns its judgment against herself.

Morrison also demonstrates that the myth of beauty is connected with class and social status. Characters such as Geraldine and Maureen Peal have internalized the belief that lighter skin, cleanliness, attractive appearance, and middle-class respectability make a person superior. Thus, colour prejudice operates not only between Black and white people but also within the Black community itself. The Breedlove family reflects the destructive effects of this ideology. Pecola's parents have themselves been damaged by poverty, racism, social exclusion, and internalized ideas of inferiority. Consequently, Pecola grows up in an environment where she receives little affirmation of her beauty or worth. Her belief that blue eyes would solve her problems shows how deeply the myth of beauty has entered her consciousness. Her desire for blue eyes can therefore be understood as a desire to escape a society in which her Black female body is treated as inferior.

Through Pecola's experience, Morrison exposes the damaging nature of socially constructed beauty standards that compel her to internalize self-rejection. Her tragedy shows how racialized standards of beauty can become a form of psychological oppression. The novel therefore challenges readers to question who defines beauty, whose appearance is celebrated, and how such standards affect the construction of identity.

Thus, the myth of beauty in *The Bluest Eye* shows how white beauty standards become a measure of worth, causing Black characters—especially Pecola—to experience self-hatred and alienation. Through this novel, Morrison exposes the connection between beauty, racism, class, and power.

3. GENDER AND PATRIARCHAL OPPRESSION

Pecola is not just Black; she is a Black girl. Morrison shows triple oppression. Alongside racism and poverty, Morrison examines how patriarchal structures shape the lives of Black women and girls. The novel reveals that female characters are often subjected to male authority, violence, sexual exploitation, and social expectations that restrict their freedom and sense of self-worth. Morrison therefore presents Black female experience as being shaped by the intersection of race, gender, and class.

Pecola Breedlove represents the most tragic consequence of gendered oppression in the novel. As a young Black girl, she is vulnerable not only to racial discrimination but also to patriarchal violence within her own family. Her father, Cholly Breedlove, subjects her to sexual violence, demonstrating how patriarchal power can become particularly destructive when combined with racism, poverty, and psychological trauma. Pecola is deprived of the protection and affection that a child should receive from her family, leaving her increasingly isolated and psychologically vulnerable.

Pauline Breedlove also experiences oppression through her unhappy marriage, economic dependence, racial discrimination, and restrictive expectations of motherhood and femininity. The novel shows how racialized beauty standards contribute to the oppression of Black women by presenting whiteness and conventional femininity as ideals. In contrast, Claudia challenges these standards through her refusal to accept white beauty as inherently superior. Through these characters, Morrison demonstrates how patriarchal and racial structures can undermine women's identity, dignity, and sense of self-worth.

The character of Cholly Breedlove also reveals the destructive effects of patriarchal expectations on Black men. He has experienced racism, humiliation, and the denial of his dignity, but instead of overcoming these structures, he reproduces violence within his own family. His violence towards Pecola illustrates how racial and patriarchal oppression can intersect within the family.

Thus, *The Bluest Eye* presents patriarchal oppression as interconnected with racism and class inequality. Morrison shows that Black women and girls experience oppression not simply because they are Black or

because they are female, but through the interaction of these social forces. Pecola's tragedy ultimately exposes how racism, patriarchal violence, poverty, and imposed standards of femininity can combine to destroy a young woman's sense of identity and self-worth.

4. CONCLUSION

Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* shows that racism deeply scars Pecola Breedlove's psyche and sense of self, leading to a tragic unravelling of her mental health and identity. As a young Black girl, Pecola believes that she is ugly and worthless only because she is black. This internalized racism leaves her desperate for love and acceptance, ultimately leading her to wish for blue eyes, which symbolise beauty and worthiness she feels denied. Her desire for blue eyes also exemplifies her wish to escape her racial identity, reflecting a desperate hope that possessing blue eyes will allow her to transcend her suffering. By the end of the novel, Pecola has been mentally shattered by this unattainable longing, signifying the devastating effects of internalized racism on Black individuals in a society that denies their dignity and humanity.

Through Pecola's tragic story, Morrison exposes the destructive effects of a society that defines beauty and worth in terms of whiteness, highlighting the human cost of racial inequality and the urgency of recognizing and affirming diverse identities and definitions of beauty. Pecola is unable to cope with the tragic suffering of life as a child and goes mad at the end of the novel. Through the character of Pecola, Morrison describes how the internalized racism can damage the people of a community.

Through an examination of her family dynamics and societal pressures, the study highlights how systemic racism and Eurocentric beauty standards profoundly shape Pecola's self-perception. The paper also argues that Pecola's struggle for identity is marked by internalized racism, leading to feelings of inadequacy and isolation. The study explores how the protagonist Pecola Breedlove experiences triple marginalization as a Black, female, and poor child in 1940s America. Through critical analysis, the paper argues that Morrison deconstructs the Eurocentric myth of beauty symbolized by blue eyes, which leads to internalized racism and self-hatred. It further examines how patriarchal oppression and sexual trauma structures within both Black and white communities contribute to the psychological fragmentation of Pecola. The paper reveals how Morrison uses fragmented narrative and seasonal symbolism to critique American society. The study concludes that Pecola's desire for blue eyes is not merely a childish wish but a tragic response to systemic racism, sexism, and societal neglect.

Morrison's novel teaches us that racism is not just external discrimination; it is most dangerous when it becomes internalized. When a child begins to hate her own skin, her own eyes, the oppression is complete. Through Pecola, Morrison gives a voice to all the silenced Black girls who were told they were ugly. The novel is a call for self-love, for Black is beautiful, and for a society that protects its children instead of destroying them. Pecola did not get her blue eyes but she lost her mind and thus represents racism as an explicit evil.

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