



## A review about Racial discrimination in *The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison

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**Abstract :** In Morrison's words, the bluest eye is a "story of female violation revealed from the vantage of the victims or could-be victims...the girls themselves" (Afterward). The young black girls in the novel constitute the powerless and the most vulnerable, but they also pose as a site to understand power, internalized racism and redress. What happens if you center those who have been ex-centric to the normative formation? I chose to focus on the way that Pecola's body, her yearn for blue eyes, and her longing for community, constitutes means for redress and resistance, rather than internalization of self-hatred. In the position of a black child, drinking milk, purchasing candy with Mary Jane on it, and sipping out of a Shirley Temple mug become ways to articulate not only her identity as a black girl, but an understanding of her position of a black girl in a white society. Blue eyes represent a remedy for the structural violence that she experiences – poverty, domestic violence, and hunger. These different forms of redress may be ways to articulate her blackness in relation to whiteness, a form of temporary relief from the pain of the extreme violence that she endures, and a means to forge a new politics.



**Key words:** The Bluest Eye; internalized racism; cultural ideals; white-defined beauty; cultural influence

**Introduction :** Knowledge of American history is an important factor in understanding *The Bluest Eye*. The novel was written during the 60s and 70s, but is set during the 40s. Despite the setting, her novel reflects the happenings of the late 60s and early 70s in which African American culture was becoming well defined and recognized as a part of the once dominantly white American culture. However, racism was and still is quite common in American society and in fact, racism was taking new forms in 1940s America. In *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison took a different approach to the traditional white-versus-black racism. She acknowledged that most people are unaware of the racism that exists within a culture and often the racism that exists within themselves.



Morrison's essay describes a world free of racial hierarchy as "dreamscape" and unrealistic ("Home" 3). Instead of such an imaginary place, her works acknowledge cultural divides and the racism that exists within them. The middle class black society and the lower class black society, for example, are quite different from each other and are constantly conflicting. In *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison distinguishes these divisions and their tensions through characters like Geraldine, Junior, and Maureen Peal, who represent the privileged division of black culture. On the contrary, the less privileged division is represented by the MacTeer family and the "relentlessly and aggressively ugly" Breedlove family (*The Bluest Eye* 38). Tension between the divided African American society is clearly represented by such characterizations throughout Morrison's novel. Morrison presents her central character as the inevitable target of Lorain's deeply ingrained and multilayered racism, of a community that has absorbed and now replicates destructive dominant cultural myths about beauty and value. This is witnessed very vividly in Pecola's very household. Pecola's mother, Pauline, feels isolated and disconnected from her community. Her dysfunctional and violent relationship with her husband Cholly reaffirm her belief that she is ugly and that romantic love is reserved for those who are beautiful and valued in society. Ideas that her blackness is marked by ugliness and worthlessness get reproduced to her daughter, from the moment that Pecola was born. In the novel, she reflects back to the moment that Pecola was born and was breastfeeding her. She characterizes Pecola as a "right smart baby" who knew "right off what to do...[she] knewed she was ugly. Head full of pretty hair, but Lord was she ugly" (Morrison, 126).

### **Racial discrimination in *The Bluest Eye***

Toni Morrison, one of the major literary figures in contemporary Afro-American literature, was awarded the Nobel Prize for her outstanding contribution to English literature. Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* is a very well-known manuscript which has this sort of beauty as its theme. Morrison challenges Western norms of beauty and presents the concept of beauty that is socially constructed. Morrison also reveals that if whiteness is used as a standard of beauty or anything else, then the value of blackness is diminished. *The Bluest Eye* tells the story of an eleven year old black girl, Pecola Breedlove, who wants to have blue eyes, because she sees herself, and is regarded by most of the characters in the novel as ugly. The novel examines the tragic effects of imposing



white American ideals of beauty on the developing female identity of Pecola during the early 1940s. Toni Morrison demonstrates how such social standard defines little black girl's perspective, making people of colour feel weak. The novel initially brings up the predicament of a black woman in the predominantly white American society in 1930's and 1940's, since it was the time of racial tensions which were evident and extreme. At that time, the standard of white colour's people is set that black and white are unequal and will never be equal in every aspect of living.

Pecola Breedlove is an example of the damaged appearance who is deficiently surrounded by the standard of beauty, a criterion is being raised up in a community where black are considered as inferior. The standard of beauty that her peers subscribe is represented by the white child actress, Shirley Temple, who has the desired blue eyes. It keenly shows the psychological devastation of a young black girl, Pecola Breedlove, who searches for love and acceptance in a world that denies and devalues people of her own race. She is a neglected, abused and even hated child. She and everyone around her think that she is ugly and useless. However Pecola thinks that she has found the cure for her ugliness. If she were granted her wish for blue eyes she would certainly be regarded as beautiful. Pecola is subjected to racism both within her own race and by whites.

Pecola's belief that she will become loveable through changing her appearance; it is indeed evidence of racial self-hatred. Pecola firmly believes that only blue eyes can be remedy for her distracted condition. She is very lonely and shunned girl and the most important reason for her desire for blue eyes is that she wants to be treated differently by her family. There is an excerpt in the volume that exemplifies this 'If she looked different, beautiful, maybe Cholly would be different, and Mrs. Breedlove too. Maybe they'd say', 'Why, look at pretty- eyed Pecola. We mustn't do bad things in front of those pretty eyes.'"(Morrison 44)

Pecola's pregnancy reveals the cruelty and irresponsibility not only of parents but also of the community towards black lives. Morrison foreshadows on Pecola's pregnancy as stated: "We had dropped our seeds in our own little plot of black dirt just as Pecola's father had dropped his seeds in his own plot of black dirt." (Morrison 10)



The community feels no compassion for Pecola and offers her no help. Pecola is forced to leave school because of her pregnancy and is isolated from other children; moreover, she becomes a subject of gossip by the adults. As Morrison explains, “They were disgusted, amused, shocked, outraged, or even excited by the story. But we listened to the one who would say, “Poor little girl,” We looked for eyes creased with concern, but saw only veils.” (Morrison, 190)<sup>10</sup> Additionally, Pecola is being recognized as “‘the other’ owning to the facts that a standard of beauty, that a society applied, condemns her to an extreme ugliness.” (Bloom 86)

### **Exposure of Community :**

In the beginning of the novel, Claudia brings Pecola some graham crackers and milk in a blue and white Shirley Temple mug, which Pecola drinks ferociously. Claudia witnesses that Pecola “was a long time with the milk, and gazed fondly at the silhouette of Shirley Temple’s dimpled face. Frieda and she had a loving conversation bout how cu-ute Shirley Temple was. I couldn’t join them in their adoration because I hated Shirley” (Morrison, 19). Pecola may be obsessed with Shirley Temple, because she sees something that she does not see in herself- beauty, purity and innocence. Shirley Temple embodied the ideal image of American girlhood. However, what is more significant about that scene is the milk inside of the cup. We later learn in that chapter that Pecola drinks three quarts of milk. Milk has come to represent whiteness. Claudia and Frieda’s mother, Mrs. MacMeer, calls Pecola greedy and claims that her excessive drinking of milk symbolizes her desire for whiteness. If Pecola continues to drink milk, then she will become white – this whiteness will somehow make her more beautiful. I want to intervene and argue that this ingestion of whiteness is actually a means of reversing the gaze. Drinking milk out of a Shirley Temple mug and eating candy with Mary Jane on them is consuming whiteness, not in the sense to become white, but as a form of responding to the black position constantly being under the white gaze for consumption and objectification. Her desire to “eat the candy is somehow to eat the eyes, eat Mary Jane” may even be perceived as a form of symbolic cannibalism (Morrison, 50).

### **Conclusion**

In distinction to Pecola, Morrison demonstrates that there is an action to challenge the white beauty construction through the character of Claudia. She struggles to change the



perception of ideal beauty of the Whites which often acknowledges that beautiful means those who are blue-eyed, blonde-haired, and white-skinned, into the perception that the Blacks also deserve to be identified as beautiful. To convey her message, she tries to adore her blackness and poverty, but still, all the things she have done does not contribute significantly to change the White beauty construction in that era. The power holder of the society is still the Whites; which makes it impossible for Claudia to challenge the power of dominance in her surround. Morrison challenges Western norms of beauty and presents that the concept of beauty is socially constructed. Morrison also reveals that if whiteness is used as a standard of beauty or anything else, then the value of blackness is diminished.

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