

Toni Morrison's the Bluest Eye: A Critical Analysis

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Abstract

The Bluest Eye is the first novel of Toni Morrison published in 1970., and it gives a glimpse of Toni Morrison as a writer, as a writer of black culture. I have chosen *The Bluest Eye* because this novel is challenging to me. The controversial nature of the book, which deals with racism, incest, and child molestation, has made it one of the most challenged books in America's libraries. People have complained about or asked it to be removed from the libraries. On the other hand, the story of *The Bluest Eye* is interesting because the story tells about an eleven-year-old African American girl who hates her own self due to her black skin. She prays for white skin and blue eyes because they will make her beautiful and allow her to see the world differently, the community will treat her better as well. The story is set in Lorain, Ohio, against the backdrop of America's Midwest during the years following the Great Depression.

Keywords: Black Culture, Racism, Incest, Persecution, White Dominance, Struggle for Existence.

Introduction

Toni Morrison is one of the most celebrated writers of America. Toni Morrison was born on February 18, 1931, in Lorain, Ohio, U.S., and she left for heavenly abode on August 5, 2019, in Bronx, New York. She was an American writer famous for her examination of Black experience, particularly Black female experience within the Black community. She received the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1993.

Toni Morrison, a black literary legend, pushed the black world to the forefront with her writings. Morrison, who was born and raised in the North, a free state where neither slavery nor racism thrived in their fullest form, was unaffected by the reality of racial segregation. When Morrison moved to the South for higher school, she was surprised to observe separate drinking fountains for blacks and whites, as well as seats separated by bars on buses and railroads. Morrison once stole a wooden bar used in the back of a bus to divide black and white passengers and sent it to her mother as a sorrowful keepsake. Morrison recognised that reality is ambiguous, and the truth is usually impossible to comprehend. Though the Emancipation Proclamation (1863) granted freedom to chattel slaves and the Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution (1865) prohibited bonded labour, blacks remained marginalised and excluded from the mainstream. They were assigned the lowest ranking in all economic, political, and commercial fields. Even though the Fourteenth Amendment (1868) guaranteed ex-slaves the right to citizenship, they remained aliens in their own land. Morrison's novel *Beloved* is a successful challenge to remember the sixty million Africans who lost their lives in the transatlantic slave trade. The evolution of "Bench by the Road" project is to keep alive the experience of slavery which the ancestors have gone through to make their descendants a part and parcel of the American Dream of success.

THE BLUEST EYE

The Bluest Eye is the first novel of Toni Morrison, and it gives a glimpse of Toni Morrison as a writer, as a writer of black culture.

• Background of Writing

I chose *The Bluest Eye* since it is a tough novel for me. The book's contentious nature, which addresses racism, incest, and child molestation, has made it one of the most debated books in American libraries. People have complained and asked that it be removed from libraries. On the other hand, the story of *The Bluest Eye* is intriguing since it relates to the story of an eleven-year-old African American girl who despises herself because of her black skin. She prays for white skin and blue eyes because they will make her more beautiful and help her to perceive the world in a different light; also, the community will treat her better. The story is set in Lorain, Ohio, against the backdrop of America's Midwest during the years following the Great Depression. *The Bluest Eye* is Toni Morrison's first novel published in 1970.

• Purposes of Writing

First and foremost, the novelist's goal is to provide readers with a portrait that encourages them to stop hating themselves for all they are not and instead love themselves for everything they are. Toni Morrison's plot line in the novel is captivating, despite the fact that it has sparked a great deal of controversy due to the novel's strong language and sexually explicit nature. The novel reveals Toni Morrison's talents and imperfections as a writer of black culture.

• Summary of the Novel

The Bluest Eye tells the narrative of a young African American girl and her family, who are touched in every way by the dominating American society. It relates the narrative of an eleven-year-old African American girl named Pecola, who is described as impoverished, black, and ugly. Pecola adores the concept of having white skin and blue eyes, which she says are the pinnacle of the "ideal" of beauty. Pecola has had unhappy periods in her life, and her mother, Mrs. Breedlove, neglects her. She doesn't care about her and instead chooses to work and care for the baby in a white family. Pecola's father, Cholly Breedlove, is an abusive drinker who rapes her until she becomes pregnant. Her parents fight on a regular basis, and these altercations lead to physical violence. This is why Pecola's brother, Samuel, copes with the violence by running away. The reader learns that Pecola's parents had tragic lives too, which has led to their dysfunction as adults. Her father, Cholly Breedlove, was abandoned as a baby and later turned away by his father after searching him out. During Cholly's first sexual experience, two white men force him and the girl he was with to continue the sexual act as they watch. Her mother, Mrs. Breedlove, has a lame foot and has always felt isolated and ugly. As a young woman, she loses herself in movies. She starts to believe she is ugly because of the attractive white actors. So, in a desperate move, Pecola goes to see Soaphead Church, who says he can perform miracles, and begs for blue eyes. By pretending that the dog's strange behaviour is a sign that Pecola will get her desire fulfilled, Soaphead Church deceives her into poisoning the dog he has long intended to kill.

• Analysis of the Novel

It is evident from Sunanda Pal's analysis that *The Bluest Eye* is a melancholic story about Pecola's longing for blue eyes. The book also looks at how Black women create their "selves" in accordance with White beliefs. Pecola's situation amply illustrates how the identity conflict brought on by racial shame can result in emotional fragmentation. The American media's portrayal of beauty, derived from a variety of cosmetic goods, is unattainable for Black women. Because their parents force their children to internalise White values, children in this group begin to dislike characteristics unique to their own race. The education

system, cultural agencies and mass media play a significant role in reinforcing the values of the White community onto the Blacks. Sadly, this is exactly what happens to Pecola. She is made to believe that she is ugly because of her color. According to Morrison, measuring the worth of a woman based on her physical beauty could be extremely detrimental for the growth of a woman's identity. Pecola and her mother Pauline, rely heavily on the White standards to evaluate themselves. The three fold suppression of sex, race and class becomes a threat to the psychological survival of Pecola. The *Bluest Eye* portrays self-rejection. We see the child's response to the 'big, blue-eyed baby doll' that she used to get as a 'loving gift' from her family: If I pinched them...their cry would ...be...a fascinating cry of pain. When I learned how repulsive this disinterested violence was...my shame floundered about for refuge. The best hiding place was love. Thus the conversion from pristine sadism to fabricated hatred, to fraudulent love. It was a small step to Shirley Temple. I learned much later to worship her, just as I learned to delight in cleanliness, knowing, as I learned, that the change was adjustment without improvement. (*The Bluest Eye* 48) Just like Sartre, Morrison too felt that, withdrawal from life would indicate the failure of an individual. The *Bluest Eye* forcefully portrays the plight of a whole community of Black people, who have been denied recognition of their 'self' as individuals and as a community. Many characters prefer to remain as 'objects', knowing that they are personally and communally vulnerable. In *The Blues Eye*, Claudia comments: Being a minority in both caste and class, we moved about anyway on the hem of life, struggling to consolidate our weakness and hang on, or to creep singly up into the major folds of the garment. (*The Bluest Eye* 11) Hence, "images that cause alienation, excluded them from the real world and are paradoxically received and imitated as confirmations of life". (Cynthia 327) As a child, Pecola becomes aware of the undue importance that her own community members attach to White values and images. She knew the force of alien cultural images. But Claudia, the adult narrator, sees the dolls of the White culture as just images that lack an authentic self. Cynthia holds the racist society responsible for completely eliminating the Black reality and substituting it with external factors for defining the Black self. Unfortunately, Pecola does not realize that the movie stars, who represent the White culture, are not the appropriate models for the self to evolve. Pecola, in her attempts to ape them, disowns her responsibility in shaping her identity. Not having any one to guide, the young and vulnerable Pecola, gets trapped in the maze presented by the White culture and succumbs, unable to escape.

Women in Morrison's novels discover that 'freedom and triumph are forbidden to them' (Sula 44) Most often, the identity of women in a patriarchal society is made, to feel realistic only when it has a physical manifestation. We experience this when we see Nel and Sula being referred to as 'pig meat' by some boys, as they pass by. As the Black women are constantly defined as failures and outsiders, they become natural scapegoats of emotions that are displaced. Thus, when Cholly is sexually humiliated, he vents his hatred onto his wife and not his tormentors. What needs to be noted is that, his partner is not just an image for him, but, his White tormentors too. It is only by denying her selfhood that he is able to restore his own self. The displacement of the humiliation that a Black man undergoes, on to his partner, is clearly depicted by Morrison in those scenes where, Cholly subjects Pauline to repeated physical abuse. Simone de Beauvoir's remark that woman in a patriarchal society is "the inessential who never goes back to being the essential...the absolute Other, without reciprocity" (*The Second Sex* 159) sounds very apt in this context. The Black woman thus becomes the perfect scapegoat. Anne Anlin rightly points out that what gets lost in the education of discrimination is effective, even subjective distinction. Pecola follows the footsteps of her mother and aunts, when she tries to ape Shirley Temple. Her self-objection through an enforced identification with Shirley Temple thus signals perversely, a strategy of self-making, forging a

legacy in the face of endangered maternal transmission. This demonstrates that the construction of selfhood and the deconstructive effects of objectification can be intimately connected. Pecola's family has been ripped apart by alcoholism and anger. Happiness is not even an occasional visitor to the Breedlove house. When Pecola's father lands in jail, the Breedlove are made to stay outdoors, which Morrison sees, as a clear margin drawn, precariously positioning them, at the edge of the precipice.

Being put out and being put outdoors are two different things. If you are outside, you have nowhere to go; if you are pushed out, you go somewhere else. The difference was little but decisive. The outdoors signified the conclusion of something, a concrete, irreversible fact that complemented and defined our metaphysical state. As members of a minority caste and class, we struggled to overcome our weakness and persevere as we advanced through life. (Chapter 18, *The Bluest Eye*) It is heartbreaking to see how Pecola withers away after experiencing sexual assault from her own father and being cheated on by her parents. The Breedlove family is only able to see what the White culture shows them: "It was as though some mysterious all-knowing master had given each one a cloak of ugliness to wear, and they had each accepted it without question". (*The Bluest Eye* 34) Pecola anticipates obtaining blue eyes since she believes they will be the solution to all of her issues, in contrast to Claudia who defies White culture's rules. According to Timothy Powell's article *Toni Morrison: The Struggle to Depict the Black Figure on the White Page*, Pecola believes that the only way she can be accepted by the outside world is if she has Shirley Temple's blue eyes.

Pecola represents the fate that can befall women who are subject to suppression at all levels – physical, emotional and sexual. The impact of abuse, at such a young age, is so severe that she ends up being a mental wreck. Pecola is unable to decide things about her life, or question anything around her, as she gets swayed by the standards of beauty set by the White community, which is what, unfortunately, her family too indoctrinates her with. She also represents those women, who without realizing their intrinsic worth, run behind values set by extrinsic factors and perish unable to achieve those unrealistic goals. Love and care from near and dear ones is what children yearn for and which is what contributes to the formation of a healthy self in individuals. Pecola embodies a childhood that is deprived of all positive factors of nourishing and nurturing. Her life also reveals the possibilities of what could happen to children who grow up in an environment that is insecure and filled with hatred, which forces them to suppress their needs and desires, thus denying them the scope for the development of an authentic 'self.'

Conclusion

A woman's true beauty is mirrored in her soul rather than in her outward appearance. If you have good intentions towards others, you will always seem lovely, regardless of the colour of your skin, hair, or eyes. A person's heart is what really counts, rather than their outward appearance when determining their beauty. Accept and love who you are, regardless of your ethnicity, as self-love is the biggest revolution. Toni Morrison delivers an intriguing approach in *The Bluest Eye*, but it's also visually appealing. Morrison's writing becomes one of the book's strongest points. Her utilisation of various points of view keeps readers from becoming disinterested in reading the entire book.

In addition, the way Morrison puts the Dick and Jane in the opening of the novel story, which is extremely in contrast with Pecola's life, makes the readers feel the pain of Pecola in the novel. However, there are some weaknesses found in the novel. First, the language that is used by Toni Morrison in the novel is black slang terms, so it is hard to be understood by the readers. Second, Toni Morrison's criticism through the novel *The Bluest Eye* can cause misunderstanding for the readers who are not critical. It can be an

invitation to be a white beauty that will make them imitate the white beauty concept which means having blue eyes, white skin, and blonde hair. Finally, with many strengths and weaknesses, The Bluest Eye is a recommended novel especially for those who like shades of racism or colonialism of beauty standards. Toni Morrison successfully makes the readers feel the pain felt by main character. The story gives us message to accept and love ourselves, as no one is going to love you if you do not love yourselves first.

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