

# Craving Blue: The Effect of Racism on Pecola Breedlove

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## Abstract

One of the African-American women writers to stand up for the cause of the black women is Toni Morrison. Her writing deals with themes of race, gender, appearance, feminism, gender identity, violence, oppression, sacrifice, sexism, identity struggle, love, lust, desire and passion of African-Americans in American society. She 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 profound effects of racism on 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. 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.

**Keywords:** Toni Morrison, African American Women, Racism, Internalized Racism, Racialized Beauty, Isolation.

## Introduction

Toni Morrison 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. 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, Pecola Breedlove. Pecola's desire for the bluest eye which is the symbol for her of what it means to be beautiful, clearly shows the damaging impacts of white standards and the importance on the lives of black people. Her desire symbolizes her longing for beauty, acceptance, and love in a society that devalues her Black identity.

The novel begins with the presentation of a perfect white family where Dick and Jane live with their loving parents in a pleasant and enjoyable house. This example of an ideal white family performs as the dominant power of an ideology and racial hierarchy in the society. It forces and pushes the victim to

acknowledge that they are born inferior and should learn to oppress their own black identity by incorporating the worth that set down standards of beauty. Morrison presents this racial hierarchy as she writes: “Here is the house. It is green and white. It has a red door. It is very pretty. Here is the family. Mother, Father, Dick, and Jane live in the green-and-white house. They are very happy.”(Morrison 2). The white family juxtaposes the family of Pecola, where her mother and father always fight, condemns their own daughter, Pecola and hates her that impels her to wish for a pair of blue eyes. She discovers to understand the concept of white beauty and is forced to believe that she is ugly and her misery is her ugliness and being black. She starts fantasizing that if she would have been born white then she would have never been raped by her own father, would not been hated by her mother, would not have been isolated by her own community and would rather have been admired and adored by her family and society.

### **Racism**

Race is a social construct used to group people. Race was constructed as a hierarchal 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.

Unlike the common portrayals of racism, involving white hatred against blacks, *The Bluest Eye* primarily explores the issue of racism occurring between people of color. There are no major white characters, yet racism remains at the center of the text. Because the novel involves mostly black characters, "whiteness" exists on a spectrum. Race is defined by one's place of origin, socioeconomic class, and educational background. "Whiteness" is associated with virtue, cleanliness, and value, while being black is associated with immorality, dirtiness, and worthlessness. These ideas of race, having to do with cleanliness, virtue, and value, become internalized to varying degrees by different characters. Internalizing these ideas of race ultimately leads to racial self-hatred among the characters of novel, which creates various forms of dysfunction in the lives of the characters. Mrs. Macteer, for example, is unusually harsh with Claudia when she gets sick, because sickness signifies uncleanliness, which is related to being black. Characters lacking any marker of "Whiteness" suffer the most. The theme of race and the destructive force of racial self-hatred reach a climax during Pecola's rape. This moment shows the peak of racial self-hatred. After the rape, Pecola must bear the metaphorical internalization of Cholly's racial self-hatred through the trauma she carries forward, and literally, as she carries her father's baby.

The fact that ultimately drives Pecola to insanity is getting raped by her own father and carrying her father's child in her womb at the age of thirteen. This sad story of an exploited young girl is Morrison's opposition, dissent and protest against racism. Pecola was betrayed by her own mother. She mentioned about the hateful rape but Mrs. Breedlove did not believe her. We got to know this when Pecola talks to her imaginary friend being insane: “I wonder what it would be like. Horrible. Really? Yes. Horrible. Then why didn't you tell Mrs. Breedlove? I did tell her! I don't mean about the first time. I mean about the second time, when you were sleeping on the couch. I wasn't sleeping! I was reading! You don't have to shout. You don't understand anything, do you? She didn't even believe me when I told her. So that's why you didn't tell her about the second time? She wouldn't have believed me either. You're right. No use telling her when she wouldn't believe you.” (Morrison 198)

Pecola getting raped and pregnant at the age of thirteen by her own father exposes the brutality, savagery, barbarism and inhumanity of people around Pecola inside her own family, own black community and white community. Pecola didn't get any support, assistance, comfort or geniality from anyone. She was compelled to leave school because of her pregnancy and is secluded from other children. She lives a solitary life. She is left to suffer the anguish, pain and shame all by herself. Morrison describes: "They were disgusted, amused, shocked, outraged, or even excited by the story. But we listened to the one who would say, "Poor little girl," or "Poor baby," but there was only head-wagging where those words should have been. We looked for eyes creased with concern, but saw only veils." (Morrison, 188). Pecola then is identified as 'the other' discrimination inside her own community that denounces her to an intense and ultimate ugliness. Pecola is an example of the impediment of being black. The child inside the womb of Pecola dies. At the last stage of her life and insanity, she abominates herself as she couldn't meet the standard of beauty set by the racialized society and thus fails to get accepted by the white society. Thus, she is put through racism both inside and outside her race, both by the black community as well as the white community.

### **Racialized Beauty**

Beauty is measured on how a person sees, contemplates and presumes. The standards of beauty keep changing as per the environment and society. In African American heritage and society, racialized beauty has damaging impacts in the lives and relationships of the people. *The Bluest Eye* deals with this discrimination particularly of beauty and race which is the core themes in the novel. The young girl protagonist, Pecola Breedlove in the novel is too young, and as she grows up, she realizes her ugliness and blackness, which is the extreme despicable fact of race relations.

*The Bluest Eye* is the story of a black girl, Pecola Breedlove, who aspires to have a pair of blue eyes which symbolises beauty according to her. Thus the novel assesses the tragic impact of white beauty standard on the maturing and expanding female identity of Pecola. Morrison indicates how such manufactured social standard of beauty shapes the little black girl's opinion, thereby making her feel inferior, weak and repulsive. The black characters of the *The Bluest Eye* have been taught to believe that whiteness is the epitome of beauty. The characters are constantly subjected to images of whiteness offered through movies, books, candy, magazines, toys, and advertisements. Early in the novel, Pecola and Frieda gush over Shirley Temple's beauty, and later, Mrs. Breedlove spends her days at the movies admiring the white actresses, wishing she could access their world. The association between beauty and whiteness pushes the idea of beauty beyond the body's exterior, making it a signifier of one's value and worth. Many characters in the novel believe that their beauty or ugliness defines their value or lack of value in society, community, and family.

Characters establish their sense of self-worth based on these ideas of beauty. In turn, beauty and ugliness become internalized conditions, which have devastating effects on the lives of the novel's characters. The narrator suggests that The Breedloves are fixed in poverty because they believe they are ugly, and Pecola believes she deserves the abuse and neglect she experiences at home based on her self-perceived ugliness. Pecola Breedlove is an instance and model of the injured and hurtful image who is inadequately encircled by the standard of beauty, where black are contemplated as unworthy and inferior. She thinks that the only solution for this problem and remedy for her ugliness is a pair of blue eyes. She wished for a pair of blue eyes that the white girls have. Pecola's conviction that she can be loved, admired and accepted by people around only by changing her appearance is quite evident of racial

self-revulsion and hatred. She feels lonely, isolated, secluded and stray. Thus she realizes that a pair of blue eyes can treat her equally with the whites. This evidently justifies that her foremost anxiety and botheration is to break free from delinquency from inside her home. Morrison writes: “It had occurred to Pecola some time ago that if her eyes, those eyes that held the pictures, and knew the sights- if those eyes of hers were different, that is to say, beautiful, she herself would be different.” (Morrison 44). She was compressed into self resistance, an emptiness denoting nothing, a complete lack of acceptance as a human being. The sensibility of ugliness propels her to a tenacious childhood speculation that she might someday wake up and find herself blonde and blue-eyed. So, by understanding the psychology of a young black girl, it clearly indicates that black people are fighting against the forced standards by white-dominated society, and are struggling to fix their own ideal accomplishment and security. Deprived of the white societal acceptance, Pecola frames her own world in her insanity by the end of the novel and breaks free to the sphere where she finds herself beautiful. Her imagination creates her own community, detaching her from brutality that she experiences in her real life, and thus triumphs in shielding herself from pain, suffering and heartbreak. At last, the insane mind of Pecola attains a pair of blue eyes, in her imagination.

Contrary to the incapacitating effect of internalized ugliness, beauty endows certain characters with power. The power that comes along with beauty leads Pecola to believe that possessing blue eyes, the quintessential signifier of whiteness and beauty, would allow her to transcend the misery of her situation. As her life becomes more and more brutal, her obsession with blue eyes leads her to madness—and in the isolation of that madness she comes to believe that she does in fact have blue eyes. In the end, the novel suggests that beauty and ugliness in and of themselves are not destructive or dangerous. Instead, it is the internalization of the idea of what makes beauty that holds immense destructive power.

## Conclusion

In *The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison, racism deeply scar Pecola Breedlove's psyche and sense of self, leading to a tragic unraveling of her mental health and identity. As a young Black girl, Pecola internalizes a belief that she is ugly and worthless only because she is black. This internalized racism, shaped by a culture that equates beauty and value with whiteness, leaves her desperate for love and acceptance, ultimately leading her to wish for blue eyes—a symbol of the beauty and worth she feels denied. Her desire for blue eyes symbolizes 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, symbolizing the devastating effects of internalized racism on Black individuals in a society that denies their dignity and humanity.

Essentially, the impact of racism on Pecola Breedlove is a harrowing portrayal of how systemic oppression and pervasive racial prejudice can destroy a person's self-image and lead to profound psychological harm. 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. Morrison shoots up from the conventional heritage of African-American society, culture and literature and thus represents racism as an explicit evil.

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