



# A Study of Longing for Belonging in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*

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**Abstract:** Toni Morrison is one of the most powerful voices of African-American literature. Morrison's fictive world is replete with the black characters that have to suffer immensely on account of their race, gender, class, fragmented identity and other social factors on which they have absolutely no control. *The Bluest Eye* is an epoch creating debut novel of the Nobel Prize winner Toni Morrison which unfolds the multiple layers of American society. The novel emphatically brings to light the issues of racism, gender discrimination, alienation, self consciousness, domestic violence and social injustice through the life of the protagonist, an eleven year old girl named Pecola Breedlove. Pecola becomes the victim of the combined cruelty of society and her own family. She suffers from low self esteem owing to her black complexion and unstable family life on one hand and on account of being a female on the other. The present paper aims to explore the inner turmoil faced by the protagonist in respect to her longings mainly harboured to secure a sense of belonging to the society that contributes almost directly in sealing the terrible fate of Pecola Breedlove.

**Keywords:** Racism, Fragmented, Gender Discrimination, Alienation, Self Consciousness

Toni Morrison has secured a formidable place for herself in the realm of African- American fiction with her sensitive presentation of the traumatic experience of the blacks living in the society that was marred by its notions of race and gender discrimination. Toni Morrison explains her viewpoint as a writer, "I write for black women. We are not addressing the men, as some white female writers do. We are not attacking each other, as both black and white men do. Black women writers look at things in an unforgiving, loving way. They are writing to responses, rename, re-own (Nellie, 64). The publication of Morrison's debut novel, *The Bluest Eye* in 1970 created a sensation among the literary circles on account of its poignant presentation of the tragic plight of the protagonist, Pecola Breedlove. The novel focuses mainly on the devastating influences of social concept of the standards of beauty and its subsequent role in wrecking the self confidence of an innocent

eleven year old girl. The notion of beauty is engrafted very early in the tender minds of young children. Their idea of self worth is influenced profoundly by the social benchmarks of beauty. Morrison highlights this fact by introducing Dick and Jane primer used by children to learn reading in the 1940s as the epitome of a happy family. The book acts as a subtle comment on the yearnings of the Black families for the ideal state of happiness not available in real life. These books for small children uphold a beautiful, secure, perfectly managed world full of parental love and care which is completely contrary to the actual life lived by the children of middle class working black parents. The contrast between the ideal and the real leads to dissatisfaction and disapproval of their own situation and longing for the elusive happiness. Donald B. Gibson also remarks, [t]he Dick and Jane text implies one of the primary and most insidious ways that the dominant culture exercises its hegemony, through the educational system. It reveals the role of education in both oppressing the victim – and more to the point – teaching the victim how to oppress her own black self by internalising the values that dictate standards of beauty. (Gibson,20)

The novel is a sharp comment on the inherent racial prejudices of the society which are greatly responsible for the discrimination on the basis of social standards of beauty and ugliness. *The Bluest Eye* is the pioneer work of the Nobel Prize-winning author Toni Morrison which was published in the year 1970. The plot of the novel unfolds in town of Lorain, Ohio, in 1940–41. “*The Bluest Eye* is the story of a young black girl Pecola, her inability to either understand or adjust to the ways of the world around her and the consequences thereof. She is pitted against two hostile worlds: one the white world that entices her with values unnatural to her, via blue eyes, and then ruthlessly rejects her, the other, her own people, her own culture.”(Bhatnagar,216)

The novel opens with the tragedy befalling on Pecola Breedlove, an African American girl. Toni Morrison has deftly handled the tragic plight of an eleven-year-old girl Pecola whose life revolves round the desperate longing for beautiful blue eyes which according to her can ultimately win for her a sense of social acceptance and security. *The Bluest Eye* explores the "difficulty of achieving individuality and full humanity in an objectifying and manipulative society." (Byerman, 62) In the short life that she had seen, she had developed this clear understanding that whiteness of the skin is essential for beauty and beauty is essential for social acceptance. The present paper attempts to explore the mental anguish suffered by a black child who longs to have “the blue eyes” as she firmly believes that her fair complexion and blue eyes will serve as panacea for all her personal and social problems.

Pecola Breedlove is a victim of racial, gender and social discrimination rampant in American society. The novel is a moving account of the damage caused by such prejudices and reiterates the importance of familial love and social security for the healthy growth of an individual. The very opening of the novel reveals the odious fact about the injustice meted out to Pecola. Her whole family is compelled to disintegrate when her father burnt the house. At the outset of the novel Pecola Breedlove is denied her identity and individuality as she is referred as —a girl who had no place to go, “The county had placed her in our house for a few days until they could decide what to do, or, more precisely, until the family was reunited.”(Morrison, 31) The novel explores the theme of identity crisis suffered by a little girl on account of an inferiority complex engrafted in her by the racial perception. Her life becomes a desperate and rather a painful quest for belongingness. She faces absolute rejection by the society because she does not fulfil the standard norms of beauty. She is disliked by all and denied the basic human rights of love and acceptance. To the innocent eleven year old Pecola, the situation results in self hatred. She considers her rejection by the people around her quite seriously and develops a strong sense of self loathing. Pecola weaves a web of negative self perception and is entangled in it and strangled to death.

Toni Morrison has brilliantly captured the racial issues as prevalent in American society through the comments and experiences of nine year old narrator, Claudia MacTeer. Claudia observes the deep adoration of Pecola and her sister Frieda for the white skinned American child star Shirley Temple. As a grown up Claudia later recalls her hatred for Shirley Temple, “What I felt at that time was unsullied hatred. But before

that I had felt a stranger, more frightening thing than hatred for all the Shirley Temples of the world”(Morrison,19) She reminisces the attitude of society when she received a doll with blue eyes as Christmas gift. “Adults, older girls, shops, magazines, newspapers, window signs—all the world had agreed that a blue-eyed, yellow-haired, pink-skinned doll was what every girl child treasured. “Here,” they said, “this is beautiful, and if you are on this day ‘worthy’ you may have it.” (Morrison,20-21) Claudia as a child fails to discover anything impressive in the doll and breaks it. This act of her is severely condemned,” Grown people frowned and fussed: “You-don’t-knowhow-to-take-care-of-nothing. I-never-had-a-baby-doll-inmy-whole-life-and-used-to-cry-my-eyes-out-for-them.Now-you-got-one-a-beautiful-one-and-you-tear-it-upwhat’s-the-matter-with-you?..... The emotion of years of unfulfilled longing preened in their voices.”(Morrison,21) The unfulfilled desire of the parents, their longings are unknowingly passed on to the next generation to strengthen their idea of beauty.

Toni Morrison has effectively outlined the physical and psychological trauma suffered by the little black girl. Her longing to find belongingness and acceptance from family and society drives her to negate herself and develop a desperate wish to have blue eyes. She develops a delusion that if she gets blue eyes, she will also get a right to be treated, loved and wanted as a human being. She expected some love, care and attention from the people around her but receives series of insults instead. Her life becomes an endless struggle to find love and acceptance. The narrator tries to figure out the difference in attitude of people when they treat a white girl, “What made people look at them and say, “Awwwww,” but not for me?”(Morrison,22) As a small girl Claudia could sense the difference in treatment extended to a white girl and a black girl. The white is superior to black is emphatically projected by movies, toys, advertisements and society. These racist ideas get unconsciously internalised with time and shape the preferences of society. Pecola is continuously exposed to the contempt of society because of her black skin which completely distorts her self- image. Pecola internalizes the racist concept of associating black with ugliness. As Toni Morrison writes in the Foreword of the novel,” When I began writing *The Bluest Eye*, I was interested in something else. Not resistance to the contempt of others, ways to deflect it, but the far more tragic and disabling consequences of accepting rejection as legitimate, as self evident.” Pecola is devastated under the load of socially constructed ideals of beauty resulting in her rejection by her family as well as society. It is this idealization of white beauty that made Pauline Breedlove, Pecola’s mother call her ugly at her first sight, “But I knowed she was ugly. Head full of pretty hair, but Lord she was ugly.”(Morrison,126) The perception of ugliness greatly harmed her natural growth and pushed her in the world of isolation and exclusion. The family failed to provide any solace to her bruised heart. Later, when Claudia and Frieda visit Pecola at her mother's workplace, she was brutally treated by her mother because she accidentally dropped the cobbler to the floor. Although Pecola was also injured but her mother displayed no love and care for her daughter rather abused her physically and verbally, insults her and hits her twice. The incident shatters the world of Pecola, completely because she witnesses her mother showing more concern about the well being of the little yellow-haired Fisher girl and ignoring Pecola. Pauline's actions give a clear cut message that she valued the white Fisher girl more than her black daughter Pecola. This rejection by her own mother painfully isolates Pecola, further reaffirming the societal values. The MacTeer girls discover surprisingly that Pecola always addressed her mother as Mrs. Breedlove whereas the little Fisher girl called her ‘Polly’ suggesting a greater degree of intimacy. Pauline accepts the white standard of beauty to find belongingness to the outer world. She rejects her family as ugly to belong to the beautiful world of Fisher family. While doing so she finds some acceptance for herself but destroys the sense of emotional bonding, security and trust in her family.

At school this awareness about the ugliness of black becomes more defined for Pecola. She remains the butt of ridicule owing to her lack of socially recognised beauty and low self esteem. She has no will to retaliate against those who talk behind her back and torment her. When boys at school harass Pecola and dance round her calling her black, she has no strength to stop them. She remains a silent victim of the boys’ insults and makes the least effort to defend her. Her lack of awareness about her own inner beauty makes her submissive. Her passivity is indirectly responsible for her own destruction whereas on the other hand Maureen’s

confidence about her superior physical appearance gives her an upper edge. “Maureen appeared at my elbow, and the boys seemed reluctant to continue under her springtime eyes so wide with attention.”(Morrison,67) Later when Maureen Peal shows her true colours and screams, “I *am* cute! And you ugly! Black and ugly black e mos. I *am* cute!” (Morrison,73) the MacTeer girls are forced to analyze their situation :

“We were sinking under the wisdom, accuracy, and relevance of Maureen’s last words. If she was cute—and if anything could be believed, she *was*—then we were not. And what did that mean? We were lesser. Nicer, brighter, but still lesser. Dolls we could destroy, but we could not destroy those 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. What was the secret? What did we lack”(Morrison,74)

It becomes very clear to them that those who conform to the social standards of beauty get easy recognition and acceptance from society. Pecola becomes obsessed with the desire to have blue eyes because that is the image that she observes, easily wins the love, respect and adoration of people. The novel highlights the fact that physical appearance is directly connected to the treatment one receives in society. Barbara Christian regards Pecola's desire an example of cultural mutilation. She claims Morrison challenges the "unnaturalness of a belief system in which physical beauty is associated with beauty and love is romance" (69).

The novel brings forth many episodes where Pecola is abused by the people because she passively endures the pain. Her disintegrated family status makes her an easy bait for those who wish to use her for their own benefits. This situation is evident in the episode related with Geraldine and Louis Junior, a young mother and son in Lorain, Ohio. Geraldine is a hypocrite who associates worth of an individual with the colour of the skin. She follows a strict code for propriety and cleanliness isolating herself with other working class people displaying her racial contempt for the blacks and the poor. She hates dirt and disorder and remains cold towards the emotional needs of her family. “She cannot even emotionally relate to her child, only to his and her husband's physical needs. Yet, she made a choice; she separated herself, rejected her history. She continually denies her blackness in order to maintain her place in society” (Otten 15). She showers all her love and affection on her cat and neglects her son. Her son develops a feeling of intense hatred and jealousy for the cat. One afternoon, Junior calls Pecola to his house and he throws his mother’s beloved cat at her face. Junior appears to be a sadist when he enjoys the pain suffered by Pecola. He calls her his ‘prisoner’ and does not allow her to leave. Junior then picks up his mother’s cat and swirls it around his head. When Pecola tries to save it, both fall to the ground. The cat, released from the grip dashes forcefully at the window. At this point Geraldine appears, and Junior promptly tells her that Pecola has killed the cat. Geraldine calls Pecola a “nasty little black bitch. Get out of my house.”(Morrison,92) It is important to note that Geraldine insulted Pecola because she was a lonely, black, poor, helpless child completely neglected by her family. Otten further explains the behavior of Geraldine and remarks “(She) sees in Pecola the other self she has so long fought, the black self she fears herself to be” (15). Pecola suffers immensely because of her overpowering desire to be loved and respected. She is an innocent girl who accepted Junior’s invitation to be at Geraldine’s house primarily because of her loneliness and lack of friends. Her loneliness was basically due to her social exclusion on account of her ugliness which gave everyone a right to insult her.

The most painful incident of her life occurs when her own father rapes her and leaves her unconscious on the floor. This was the height of cruelty faced by the little child and points at the complete collapse of the family unit. All possibilities of regeneration of her relationship within the family get completely shattered. Her own father who is supposed to be her protector becomes her predator. Pecola tries to express her pain before her mother but is brutally beaten by her as she does not believe her. She gets pregnant but the child dies. She suffers an acute sense of loss of belongingness. In her distress Pecola desperately longs to have blue eyes as she imagines that the blue eyes will act as shield for all her problems. Pecola lives under the illusion that blue eyes will transform her into a beautiful girl, loved and admired by all. She believes that her blue eyes will procure recognition for her and will give her authority to lead her life on her own terms. The intensity of her pain can be imagined by the fact that to get blue eyes she goes to misanthropic and self-proclaimed spiritual healer Soaphead Church who has the reputation of being a child abuser. He is a deceptive man known to be performing miracles. He feels sympathy for poor Pecola when she goes asking for blue eyes. “Here was an ugly little girl asking for beauty...A little black girl who wanted to rise up out of the pit of her blackness and

see the world with blue eyes. His outrage grew and felt like power. For the first time he honestly wished he could work miracles.”(Morrison,174)

Soaphead plays a decisive role in sealing the fate of Pecola Breedlove. He plays a trick on her and gives her a piece of poisoned meat to feed his property owner’s dog. He tells her that if the dog behaves strangely then her wish will be granted. When Pecola sees the dog die after eating the meat, she believes her wish to be granted and her connection with the real world is broken forever. Soaphead “validates Pecola's wish for blue eyes, affirming the correctness of her rejection of her race” (Demetrakopoulos 33). After Soaphead validates her wish, Pecola loses her grip on reality. Her fragmented self emerges as her close friend and confidante, drowning her in the world of insanity. Soaphead’s assurance about the possibility of fulfillment of her wish enables her to escape to the ideal world of acceptance, love and care. In this context, Raymond Headin opines that “Pecola Breedlove is a young black girl driven literally... by the pressure toward absolute physical beauty in a culture whose white standards of beauty...are impossible for her to meet, though no less alluring and demanding. Surrounded by cultural messages that she is ugly by definition, she can achieve peace only by retreating into schizophrenia.” (Headin,49)

The neighbours' gossip after her rape and pregnancy highlights their inability to understand Pecola's sufferings. They blamed Pecola for her painful plight and showed no concern for Pecola or her unborn child:

“Well, it probably won’t live. They say the way her mama beat her she lucky to be alive herself”

She be lucky if it don’t live.

Bound to be the ugliest thing walking.” (Morrison,189)

No one wanted the baby to live except the MacTeer girls. Claudia explains her viewpoint, “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.”(Morrison,190) Even when Pecola retreats into madness she cannot get rid of her sense of insecurity. She needs continuous confirmation from her other self that her eyes are bluer than others and that she has the bluest eyes. Miner observes, "tragically, even when combined, the I and 'You' do not compose one whole being" (181).

Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* is a heart wrenching story of an innocent girl who becomes victim of her longing for blue eyes as she is forced by her circumstances to believe that it will ensure her belongingness and acceptance in the society. Her pathetic plight is the outcome of her desperation to receive love, respect and admiration in her domestic and social life. This basic need of Pecola pronounces her doom. She is subjected to continuous rejection and humiliation for the simple fact that she lacked white skin and blue eyes and failed to conform to the western standards of beauty. She is tormented to the extent that she hates her self- image and considers possession of blue eyes as the only key to unlock the beautiful world of social security and recognition. Pecola’s longing for beauty manifested in blue eyes reflects her endless quest for belongingness.

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