

Beauty and Black Experience: A Critical Study of Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*

¹Mrs. M. Jennifer Gnanaseeli

Research Scholar, PG and Research Department of English,
Sri. S. Ramasamy Naidu Memorial College, (Affiliated to Madurai Kamaraj University) Sattur-626203,
Virudhunagar District, Tamil Nadu, India.

²Dr. A. Padmashini

Assistant Professor and Research Guide, PG and Research Department of English,
Sri. S. Ramasamy Naidu Memorial College, (Affiliated to Madurai Kamaraj University) Sattur-626203,
Virudhunagar District, Tamil Nadu, India.

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the ways in which Toni Morrison's debut book, *The Bluest Eye*, addresses ideas of beauty, the development of identities, and societal change. This research examines how dominant white standards of beauty get established in black society, resulting in devastating internalized racism and self-hatred, drawing on Morrison's portrayal of the tragic heroine Pecola Breedlove. It talks on Morrison's deft use of narrative devices to show the terrible discrepancy between Pecola's real black identity and her unreachable dream of becoming a white woman. It also states that societies, familial histories, and textbooks greatly influence one's definition of beauty. The writers contended that Morrison's book functions as a perceptive mirror, reflecting the ways in which cultural ideals of beauty permeate communities. This research illustrates how cultural factors around beauty get ingrained in social institutions and young girls' psyche. Morrison skillfully illustrates the necessity of opposing social influences such as the media, family, and education that skew perceptions of beauty and have devastating effects on common people. It also examines the intricate relationship that exists in educational settings between cultural norms and notions of beauty, as shown in Morrison's works.

This article also makes the case for the urgent need to combat systemic racism and bigotry, which cause young black girls to experience intense self-loathing and broken identities, and to support inclusive standards of self-worth and beauty.

Keywords: The Bluest Eye, ethnicity, race, and racialized beauty.

The Bluest Eye, a critically acknowledged work by Toni Morrison, offers perceptive comments on the creation of beauty standards and their detrimental psychological effects, particularly for African-Americans. Morrison's striking novel effectively conveys the devastating results of internalized racism and self-loathing brought on by prevailing ideals of the white beauty. Her book examines the ways in which Eurocentric notions of beauty seep into Black society. Morrison paints a realistic picture of how young black girls, like Pecola Breedlove, struggle to conform to societal standards of beauty that associate virtue with being white (Mayberry, 2021).

Morrison's literary works use the mastering, molding, and challenging of ideas to examine the complex link between the desire of beauty and societal expectations. From an early age, schools and other educational establishments, such as colleges and universities, have a greater influence on how individuals see beauty through their generalized cultural perspectives.

Morrison offers strong social criticism on how racial ideas of beauty in American society permeate the black community via Pecola's account. Pecola's infatuation with blue eyes is a symbol of her yearning for inclusion in a culture that marginalizes and disregards blackness. Morrison challenges criticism of the prevailing cultural influences that create such restrictive standards of beauty.

Morrison highlights the historical and cultural significance of ethnic beauty in her research. Educational institutions, like tiny communities, frequently mirror the concepts of beauty that are popular at the time. It would seem reasonable to step in and provide Morrison a new organization. Renowned author Toni Morrison crafts an engaging tale that delves into the important impact of societal advancement, the intricate components of artistic expression, and the transformational potential of education (Morrison).

Morrison deftly examines the complex interplay between cultural norms and people's perceptions of them in her book *The Bluest Eye*, specifically examining the creation and critique of beauty standards and their effects on society. Beyond simple enjoyment, her book provides a thought-provoking perspective on these subjects. (Mayberry, 2021)

This research illustrates how cultural factors around beauty get ingrained in social institutions and young girls' psyche. Morrison skillfully illustrates the necessity of opposing social influences such as the media, family, and education that skew perceptions of beauty and have devastating effects on common people. It also examines the intricate relationship that exists in educational settings between cultural norms and notions of beauty, as shown in Morrison's works.

The Bluest Eye which depicts the biased Western standards of beauty not only shapes the protagonist's feelings and expressions but also affects the other characters. Comparisons between the novel's setting and the present generation reveal little difference other than the latter's upbringing, which has instilled in them the belief that the color "white" is invariably associated with beauty, in contrast to the usage of "black." Western customs and their idea of beauty have also contributed to the notion that certain colors are connected to particular races.

Morrison eloquently illustrates how Pecola's family, school, and church are all saturated with limited cultural notions of beauty, leading her to mistakenly associate humanity and morality with Eurocentric phenotypic features like blue eyes and blonde hair. Pecola has an insatiable longing for blue eyes, which are symbolic of whiteness and which she feels would win her approval and respect. Morrison offers insightful comments on how social beauty standards can mentally harm young black girls by tracing the roots of Pecola's warped self-image.

The female leads in every Disney tale that young children are exposed to are portrayed as tall, fair-skinned, with high cheekbones, thin lips, long, silky hair, and a sharp nose—a feature that is now frowned upon. Morrison, on the other hand, takes great delight in portraying her black female protagonists as exceptionally attractive. Morrison attempts to alter the way that communities view beauty and learn how to perceive it throughout their lives in his novels.

During the Great Depression, the book *The Bluest Eye* was written and released. The economic crisis caused divisions among the populace into several classes and social groups. The weakest and least desirable members of the society were adversely affected by the consequences that the society established. There was a noticeable shift in how people saw the outcasts and those in lower social classes. Morrison presents two things that are out of context in her descriptions of Pecola and the white family Dick and Jane (Higgins, 1997).

The individuals of these eras were obviously unhappy, irritated, and angry about their skin tone and physical characteristics since society at the time had established certain assumptions about color and attractiveness. Pecola's love for Shirley Temple and her sense of beauty in the book represent her dissatisfaction with the way she looks and how much she wants to change to become someone who looks

at least something like Shirley Temple. Pecola claimed that having blue eyes and blonde curls was the absolute definition of beauty and the only thing needed to appear good. If the truth existed, the fugitives were blamed for society's judgment. Pecola's tragic destiny was caused by the poisonous seed of pretending to be beautiful that was ingrained in the brains of not just the adults but even the young children in the community.

While "color of the skin" is one condition that Morrison effectively highlights in his book, Pecola's identity as a "female" is another factor that contributes to her inability to fight against the injustice she endured. Black folks were subjugated by the White clan throughout the Great Depression. They used to mostly target and drag Black men and children, but Pecola's identity as a Black lady made her obedient and complies with everyone, regardless of sexual orientation. Since Pecola belongs to a lesser fraternity status, nobody seems to care when she is abused, advantaged of, molested, and raped throughout the book. The majority of the characters in the narrative have their deportment changed by the community's merciless pennant patterns of charm and beauty.

The entire concept of beauty has been consumed and altered from the start of the book. Morrison's central protagonists, Claudia and Pecola, are presented as being fixated on changing who they are in order to conform to the community's ideals of beauty. Pecola and Claudia are both depicted as having characteristics of being unhappy with their own qualities and appearance. Both characters are influenced by society in that they will do whatever it takes to fit in and be accepted by others. They truly don't love or admire anything about themselves.

The novel's message has a resonance that modern women can completely identify with. The work discusses self-worth and self-identity via the characters of Pecola and Claudia, even if its main goal is to provide a connection and bridge between the ideas of race and body image distortion. The novel's two protagonists suffer because of their looks, which they both want to modify in order to blend in with traditional society. Pecola hates her appearance so much that it hurts to be in her own flesh because of how society and other people treat her.

Pecola starts to mix up virtue, acceptability, and humanity by obtaining phenotypic features linked with whiteness through her compulsive yearning for blue eyes, the iconic symbol of Eurocentric beauty norms. Self-worth and self-perception are age-old problems. Since then, they have triumphed and will do so in the future. Every stage of life is marked by doubts about one's value, which are mostly raised by those in one's immediate vicinity. The protagonist of *The Bluest Eye* ultimately desires the impossibly difficult because of a lack of self-love and self-esteem. To be liked and appreciated by others, one must first learn to love oneself.

In the text *The Bluest Eye*, the idea of self-love is undermined and criticized from the very beginning. Since the first chapter, when we see Claudia playing and adoring white dolls with blue eyes and blonde hair, the characters have been imbued with an ideal of beauty. In the book, Pecola also begins to think that if she has blue eyes, everyone will like and approve of her. In contrast to the issue of preconceived beauty ideals and harming one's self-esteem, the tale finishes on a tragic yet practical note. Due to the unstable mental condition, she is left in towards the end, Pecola begins to believe that she has blue eyes.

In academic contexts, a person's perception of beauty is influenced by their family, community, and culture. Pecola thinks that adhering to conventional beauty standards will make her issues go away, which is why

she wants blue eyes. But Claudia is strong against social pressure because of her family's values, and she feels empowered.

In regard to this, students find that characters like Pecola and Claudia have a strong emotional connection to them throughout their education. It promotes critical thought on the sources that impact one's own conception of beauty. It's clear that the experiences of the characters and their own lives are similar. It challenges pupils to consider where their sense of beauty comes from and how it affects their self-worth. Students may interact with one another and learn how to handle these difficult ideas in their lives and society in a more inclusive and critical way by bridging the literary universe of *The Bluest Eye* with the classroom.

The Breedlove family is a prime illustration of how racial injustice and poverty warp perceptions of beauty. Abusing and jobless, Cholly Breedlove is unable to provide Pecola with the fatherly care that she needs. Serving a white household as a servant, Pauline Breedlove comes to value white beauty standards more than her daughter's needs. Pecola internalizes the idea that she may gain acceptance and affection if she possessed white phenotypic characteristics like blonde hair and blue eyes after taking in these problematic familial dynamics.

The black population in Lorain, Ohio, has been socialized by widespread racism to prioritize Eurocentric characteristics above Afrocentric ones. Pecola and Maureen, two young girls, are positioned against one another in an attempt to achieve physical closeness to whiteness. The value of having fair skin, long hair, and blue eyes is personified by Maureen. This illustrates how a group that is repressed can become deeply embedded in dominant cultural beliefs. The self-love and racial pride Claudia MacTeer needs to shun white beauty standards, on the other hand, comes from her family. Morrison provides evidence of the crucial role that community values and family messages have in shaping young people's conceptions of themselves.

Effectively, *The Bluest Eye* promotes a novel method of aesthetics instruction in order to foster transformational educational practices. With comprehensive strategies, educators may impart a stronger sense of acceptance of themselves and appreciation for variety. Students are inspired to challenge preconceived assumptions by characters such as Claudia, who question society standards. This produces a generation that appreciates elegance in all its manifestations. Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* encourages alternate viewpoints, motivates reform in education, and challenges readers to think critically about difficult subjects. Morrison encourages criticism of the internal and outward maintenance of Eurocentrism by sensitively presenting people such as Pecola.

The Bluest Eye exhibits Morrison's outstanding storytelling talents in addition to its social critique. Her evocative depictions of figures such as Pauline and Cholly Breedlove highlight the intricate relationship between personal psychology and social forces. Deeper thematic resonance is provided by Morrison's rich symbolic language, which includes her metaphorical usage of the Dick and Jane primer. Her nonlinear story structure skillfully combines a variety of voices and viewpoints to create a coherent whole. Morrison's brilliance as a novelist is highlighted by these literary strategies, which also amplify her subtle societal commentary (Kubitschek, 1999).

Morrison's novel's characters get a great deal of inspiration from the education their families provide for them. For example, Pecola in *The Bluest Eye* has been trained to believe that everything black is inherently ugly. Today's educational system places more emphasis on a person's personality and social attitude than on their IQ. Studies have indicated that under the current global educational paradigm, pupils require more emotional than physical shaping. Early childhood experiences shape a child's psyche.

As a result, the information society imparts to children about behavior, culture, and customs will have a significant impact on how they develop as individuals. The majority of the instruction we get in life drives and shapes social conduct. Morrison deftly illustrates how the idea that morality and humanity are synonymous with Eurocentric phenotypic features is ingrained in society through a combination of family problems, biased school curricula, community dynamics, and larger cultural narratives. As a result, weak people like Pecola experience destructive self-loathing in their pursuit of an unreachable ideal.

REFERENCES

- [1] AbuHamda, E., Ismail, I., and Bsharat, T. (2021). Understanding quantitative and qualitative research methods: A theoretical perspective for young researchers. *International Journal of Research* 8(2):71-87. DOI: 10.2501/ijmr-201-5-070
- [2] Higgins, T. E. (1997). Relating Word to Image in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*. In B. Christian (Ed.), *Critical Essays on Toni Morrison's The Bluest Eye* (pp. 47-54). G.K. Hall & Co.
- [3] Ismail, I. A., & Sharan, V. (2020). Teaching Writing Skill Through English Literature: Palestine as an Example. *International Journal of Science and Research*, 9(9), 274–278. <https://doi.org/10.21275/sr20828165839>
- [4] Kubitschek, M. D. (1999). Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*. *Explicator*, 58(1), 44–46. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00144949909596051>
- [5] Lester, N. A. (2008). Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*: Notes on History, Community, and Beloved. In *Toni Morrison and the Idea of Africa* (pp. 23–50). Cambridge University Press.
- [6] Mayberry, S. N. (2021). *The Bluest Eye* (1970). In *The Critical Life of Toni Morrison* (pp. 7–46). Boydell & Brewer. Morrison, T. (1999). *The Bluest Eye*. Vintage.
- [7] Young, V. A. (2008). Women on Lynching: Toni Morrison and the Empirical Lynching Tradition. *African American Review*, 42(3-4), 629-641. <https://doi.org/10.1353/afa.0.003>
- [8] Sweeney, M. (2004). Racial House, Big House, Home: Contemporary Abolitionism in Toni Morrison's *Paradise*. *Meridians: Feminism, Race, Transnationalism*, 4(2), 40–67. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40338901>

Copyright & License:



© Authors retain the copyright of this article. This work is published under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY 4.0), permitting unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.