



## COLOUR DISCRIMINATION IN TONI MORISON'S "THE BLUEST EYE"

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### ABSTRACT



This research article mainly concentrates on racism and cultural inferiority. Racism began in America when white masters brought the African slaves in chains and used them as labors to work on plantation. Racism means, beliefs, practices and negative discrimination against people based on their perceived or ascribed race. The basic myth of racism is that white skin brings its cultural superiority. The white are perceived as more intelligent and virtuous than the black. Blackness is associated with sin, dirt and cultural inferiority. *The Bluest Eye* portrays in poignant terms the tragic condition of the black in racist America. It examines how the marginal groups influence the identity of the black women. Bombarded by the image of white beauty, Morrison's characters lose themselves to self-hatred and their own aim in life is to be white. They try to erase their heritage, and eventually like Pecola Breedlove, the protagonist, who longs for blue eyes, have no recourse except madness.

**Keywords:** *Racial self-hatred, Cultural inferiority, Sexual violence and Oppression.*

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*The Bluest Eye* is told from the side of nine years old Claudia Mac Teer, a young black girl in Lorain, Ohio in the 1940s. Morrison's examination of the lives of different characters which form this black community presents the black experience in a Midwest town- a microcosm of the experience of black in America. The book is divided into four sections – autumn, winter, spring, and summer. Morrison's narrative weaves its way through the four sections and through flashbacks and time shifts. Morrison provides the reader with the context and history behind the Breedlove's family misery; Pecola's obsessive desire is to have the bluest eye. Claudia and other characters are taken to examine the theme of racism in *The Bluest Eye*.

The novel is cleverly structured around an opening story from the standard elementary school Dick and Jane readers of the 1940s, which is harmfully inculcated an inferiority complex in black children of their inner city by promoting the values of the homogenized white suburban middle-class family. Dick and Jane story sharpens the contrast between the ideal experience of the white world and the actual experience of blacks portrayed in the minichapters. As the story continues, this repeated quotation which portrays white America by degrees, loses its capitalization and punctuation, and all grammatical structure. From this Morrison wanted to make her readers visually see the difference of what it was like to see the white life style as another civilization from the view point of blacks.

The story of eleven years old black girl, Pecola Breedlove, who wants blue eyes, because she sees herself, and is regarded by most of the characters in the novel, as ugly. The standard of beauty that her peers subscribe to is represented by the white child actress, Shirley Temple, who has the desired blue eyes. Pecola's desire is to fit the mythical norm which is clearly understood by the friends she picks and the objects she admires. When she first comes to live with Mac Teer, Claudia and Frieda notice that she takes a specific liking to one of their "blue and white Shirley temple cup... Frieda and she had a loving conversation about how-cute Shirley temple was".

Claudia's hatred of white dolls extends to white girls, and Morrison uses this process as a

starting point to study the complex relationship of love and hate between blacks and whites. What horrifies Claudia most about her own treatment of white girls is the disinterested nature of her hatred. Claudia hates them for their whiteness not for more valid personal reasons. Ultimately her shame of her own hatred hides itself in fake love. Claudia diagnoses the black community's worship of white images as a complicated kind of self-hatred. It is not simply that black people learn to believe that whiteness is beautiful because they are surrounded by white America's advertisements and movies. Claudia suggests that black children start with a healthy hatred of the claims to white superiority but that their guilt at their own anger then transforms hatred into a false love to compensate for that hatred "I destroyed white baby dolls" (22).

In *The Bluest Eye* is the Brown dolls test developed by Kenneth Clark and Mamie Clark. Using his dolls test, in which children were asked to compare it with identical brown and white colored dolls. He discovered that of the sixteen children preferred the white dolls and eleven of the children referred to the black doll as 'bad'. While nine said the white doll was 'nice'. Seven of the children pointed to the white doll when they were asked to choose the doll most like themselves. This was the Clarks conclusion as "It is clear... that the majority of these Negro children prefer the white doll for an Claudia, however, white dolls, which were supposed to bring me great pleasure, succeeded in doing quite the opposite"(169-178).

Claudia can read the racial code, at least retroactively, understanding the white doll to be 'beautiful'. Through this Brown doll test, Claudia not only rejects the doll but also hates Shirley Temple, whom Pecola and Frieda adore: "I couldn't join them in their adoration because I hated Shirley. Not because she was cute, but because she danced with Bojangles, who was my friend, my uncle, my daddy... (19). Claudia rejects the view of Clark brown doll test, because she dislikes the white dolls.

Pecola Breedlove family's single belief was that they were ugly. They all thought so and consequently so did Pecola. To her, the youngest in the family, it was just a fact of life. "It was as though some mysterious master had said, you are ugly



people" (39). The implication is that the billboards and movies are portraying only white as beautiful. They are flooded with images of the dominant culture and that it is corroding the family's self-esteem. The connection between Cholly and his children seems virtually non-existent. The children are affected by Cholly, at one point Sammy asks his mother to kill him. Pecola covers her head with quilt because of her parents fight. Long hours she sat looking in the mirror, trying to discover the secret of the ugliness. "The ugliness made her ignored or despised at school by teacher and classmates alike she was the only member of her class who sat alone at the double desk" (45).

Pecola walks to the grocery store to buy candy. She wonders why people consider dandelion ugly. She decided to buy Mary Jane, but she has difficulty while communicating with Mr. Yacobowski, a white immigrant store owner, who seems to look right through her. He does not understand what she is pointing at and speak harshly to her. He does not want to touch her hand when she moves over her money. Walking home, Pecola is angry but more than that she feels ashamed. She decides dandelions are ugly, whereas blonde, blue-eyed Mary Jane, pictured on the candy wrapper, is beautiful. "She holds the money toward him. He hesitates, not wanting to touch her hand", (49). The surrounding community is another cause for Pecola's insanity. The children at school would freeze her out and tease her primarily because she was dark skinned. "Black e mo. Black e mo. Yadaddsleepsnaked. Black e mo black e moyadadd sleeps naked. Black e mo..." (65). 'The Black e mo' part of the quotation means that Pecola was even more black than they were. Consequently even those who were not particularly light skinned themselves took the chance to ridicule and tease someone who was darker than they were. When they have opportunity to hit at someone who is lower on the pecking order they do.

The most popular girl in school is Maureen. Because she is half white and has the lightest skin of the colored children. Claudia the narrator describes her as a 'high yellow child'. Maureen gets the best treatment from students and teachers alike. They are all enchanted with her. She has the respect of black and white pupils alike. It seems that the only reason

for this treatment is the fact that Maureen is the whitest of the colored children and the fact that she has a lot of money. Maureen is, apart from the MacTeer sister, the only child who shows, Pecola any kindness. It does not last very long however, when the children get into an argument Maureen shouts from the street "I am cute! And you ugly! Black and ugly black e most am cute" (73). It seems as if 'black e mos' is the worst named could be called. It is an insult based on the children's degree of blackness.

Claudia is the only one who does not agree with the doctrine that white is better. When Pecola and Claudia's sister Frieda are playing and drinking milk from Shirley Temple cups she cannot see what is so attractive. At Christmas the loving gift from parents was always a doll with blue eyes and blond hair. It was expected that every girl should want one. However Claudia does not. She wants to destroy the fair-haired doll, because she taught that it is worse and also she wants to kill little white girls as well. She wonders what their secret is and how the people look at them and said 'awe' for them but not for Claudia. Claudia who is younger than Pecola and Frieda have not learned the social codes she does not understand what is so special about white girls and she is jealous of the attention. Claudia feels the same way about Maureen's popularity. She can see that she does not understand why Maureen is considered as beautiful and they are not.

Geraldine, is another black woman, takes special care of her body and her clothes. She feels affection only for the household cat, which is as neat and quiet as she is. She caresses and holds the cat in a way that she refuses to caress or hold her family. Her son Junior is one of the boys in pecola's school. Geraldine takes excellent physical care of Junior, but he thought that she had the real affection only on the cat. In response, he tortures the cat and tortures the children who come to play at the nearby school playground. Junior would like to play with the black children, but his mother, Geraldine will let him play only with upper class 'colored' people, not lower-class 'niggers'. In her view that, "The colored people were neat and quiet; niggers were dirty and loud" (87). Once Junior is isolated in his house, he decides to make a choice of pecola, who is passing through the playground. She tells him that she does not want



to play, but convince her into his home by promising to show her some kittens. Pecola is over whelmed by the beauty and cleanliness of the house. Meanwhile, Junior throws the family cat, which has black fur and blue eyes, in her face. It scratched Pecola and she tries to leave, but junior stands on the other side of the door and shuts her in.

The cat begins to rub against Pecola and it makes her to cry. She holds the cat when Junior opens the door. Junior angered when the cat is getting attention, he picks it up and swings it around by one of its back legs. The cat is terrified, and Pecola tries to save it. When she pulls Junior down, he lets go of the cat. At this moment, Geraldine comes home and Junior tells her that Pecola has killed the cat. Geraldine calls Pecola as "You nasty little black bitch, Get out of my house" (92). Pecola turned to find the front door and saw Jesus looking down at her with sadness. This illustrates the extent of Geraldine's isolation from her people and her association with her oppressors. Perhaps the more significant fact is that she showers love on her black cat, but not her 'black' son. Clearly, for her the blue eyes of the cat make it easier to love the animal than her own son, her thoughts, works, and actions imitate those of the ruling class.

The black girls in America not only suffered from whites but also they suffered with in their community people. Pecola's own mother reinforces the message the girls have been receiving about the superiority of whites. The white neighborhood in which Mrs. Breedlove works is beautiful and well kept, representing the connection between race and class. The kitchen is spotless, with white ceramic and white woodwork. The little white girl in fisher family is dressed in delicate pink and yellow hair. In contrast, Pecola spills 'blackish blueberries' all over the floor, underlining the connection between blackness and confusion. Her mother reinforces this connection as well.

Instead of worrying that Mrs.Breedlove's own daughter has been burned by the hot berries, she pushes Pecola down into the pie juice. She then comforts the little white girl and begins to clean the black stain off of her pink dress. When she speaks to Pecola and her friends Claudia and Frieda, her voice is like, "rotten piece of apple"; when she drops the

pie juice, Mrs.Breedlove harshly said that, "Pick up that wash and get on out of here, so I can get this mess cleaned up" (109). But when she speaks to the white girl, her voice is like, "honey in her words" (109). Her desire to reject her daughter is confirmed when the white girl asks her that who were the black children and Mrs. Breedlove avoids answering her. She has renounced her own black family for the family of her white employer. It is no longer the direct oppression of a daughter by her mother who internalizes the white standard of beauty and uses it as a tool to hurt her own daughter.

In Lorain, after getting marriage Pauline begins to miss her people. She has never lived around so many white people. She surprised that the black people living in the North are different than in the south. In the South, the communities were strongly isolated, and whites were over aggressive toward blacks. In the North, the whites and blacks are more integrated and racism is less overt and aggressive but still exists. As a result, outside pressure of white violence and attack does not connect the black community together and blacks can begin to identify the differences among themselves and racism develops among and between black's themselves and black community. "Northern colored folk was different too. No better than whites for meanness. They could make you feel just as no-concept I didn't except it from them that was the lonesome time of my life" (117).

The white family's unhappy life shows that even though they fit the ideal on the outside, being white and rich, they are still unhappy. Pauline's view of whiteness as the ideal, however, is not changed by what she witnesses. The interaction between Pauline and the white woman captures a lot of the trickiness of racism and its complicated effects on communities. The white woman's sense that Pauline should leave Cholly is almost certainly correct. But the white woman does not make it as a suggestion; she demands it, and she links that demand to Pauline's own survival by refusing to provide any money if she doesn't leave Cholly. The white woman is acting both superior and officiously, and Pauline has enough pride to not turn to such pressure. The white woman advised Pauline in the spirit of friendship, without any demand but with generosity,



the outcome might have been different. But, of course, the white woman's implied racism and sense of superiority would never allow her to even think of acting in such a way. "She said she would let me stay if I left him. I thought about that. But later on it didn't seem none too bright for a black woman to leave a black man for a white woman" (120).

Pauline gives birth to a baby boy, Samuel, but discovering the first baby did not fill the emptiness she feels, she gets pregnant again. She talks to the second baby in her womb, promising to love it no matter what it looks like. She decides to give birth to this baby in the hospital. While she is in labor, the doctor brings a group of medical students into Pauline's room. He tells the students that black women like Pauline have no trouble giving birth. Again the doctor says that the black women's are given birth right away without any pain, just like horses. The students don't acknowledge her while they examine her body. The doctors' interaction with Pauline demonstrates the shocking dehumanizing effect of racism and specifically the damage such racism inflicts on black women. "The old one was learning the young ones about babies showing them how to do. When he got to me he said now these here women you don't have any trouble with. They deliver right away and with no pain. Just like horses" (124).

When Pecola is born, Pauline is surprised because she doesn't look the way she had imagined her during the pregnancy as she talked to the baby her stomach. She is happy to have her newborn baby, but she knows Pecola is ugly. Pauline's obsession with white beauty leads her to imagine the ideal child. This ideal, however, is unattainable, and distorts her views of her own child, allowing her to believe Pecola, her own newborn baby, is ugly. Pecola's conviction about her own ugliness now makes more sense any baby brought up by a mother who thinks it is ugly is bound to come to that same conclusion about itself. So Pauline's sense of her own ugliness is passed on to Pecola. It's a vicious cycle, that "I know she was ugly. Head full of pretty hair, but Lord she was ugly" (126).

Pauline finds a steady job working for a wealthy white family. She enjoys the work, as it fulfills her childhood need to arrange things, her

disabled foot does not make any sound on the carpets, and the cupboards are full of food. During this time, however, she begins to neglect her own home and family, and becomes increasingly harsh with them, beating the desire to run away into her son, Samuel, and the fear of growing up into Pecola. Working for the white family allows Pauline to feel like she is part of the world of white people. She is blind to the fact that her nickname marks her as uncomplimentary or inferior. Instead, it makes her feel a part of the family. She especially enjoys taking care of the white children, paying close attention to the signifiers of their whiteness, their white skin and blond hair but her devotion to the white family makes her to hate her own family, showing the negative outcomes of a black woman striving to access the white world.

The theme of whiteness meaning is virtue, cleanliness, and beauty. Yet by this logic, the black man must resemble the devil. This realization has a disturbing effect on Cholly as a young black boy. Because he is black, he feels he can never attain the goodness of God, and there for embraces his resemblance to the devil, and rejects the desire to fight for goodness. By sharing the watermelon heart with Cholly, Blue Jack demonstrates his role as a father figure but the eating of the melon for Cholly becomes a kind of satanic ritual, an embrace of hating the white world. "He wondered if God looked like that. No. God was a nice old man, with long white hair, flowing white beard, and little blue eyes that looked sad when people died and mean when they were bad" (134).

Cholly's Aunt Jimmy drinks only pot liquor and recover. Her friends spend time with her, and Cholly listens to them as they talk nostalgically about the pain they have endured during their lives. These women, now elderly, have reconceptualized their experience in their own minds. In their understanding, instead of laboring in white homes, they ran the homes, and while they beat their children with one hand they took care of them with the other. As elderly women, they are beyond the lust of men, and there for spared the dangers faced by younger women and they are 'finally free'. "Their voices blended into a threnody of nostalgia about pain. Raising and falling, complex in harmony,



uncertain in pitch, but constant in the recitative of pain". (137).

Cholly has been a victim of racism and emotional abuse since his childhood; it makes him someone who cannot show love or express his feeling. He suffers from racism when he caught having relationship with girlfriend Darlene. Two white men catch him in the act and scream, "Get on wide it, nigger... An' make it good, nigger, make it good" (148). In this racial violence and oppression, however, immediately strips Cholly's ability to be gentle, showing the way that white oppression distorts black lives and leads to misplaced hatred.

Cholly knows that as a black man he is powerless over the white men who humiliated him. Hatred against them would consume him because there is nothing he could do with it. So he directs his hatred toward Darlene because as a male he has power over her, demonstrating a chain of oppression unfolding the oppressed turn toward those who are weaker than them and become the oppressors. Cholly then follows in his father's footsteps by running, showing the way that familial disjunction passes down generationally. He believes his father, who made the same decision, will understand why he ran from Darlene. "The cultivated his hatred of Darlene. Never did he once consider directing his hatred toward the hunters", (150).

Depicting the rape through Cholly's point of view allows the reader to see how the damage of racism and racial self-hatred could allow this horrible act to occur within a family. Leaving Pecola's angle out of the rape scene also demonstrates the silencing effect of oppression in women's lives. The fury of emotions reflects the damage that Cholly has accumulated in his life. The horror and guilt at Pecola's helplessness mirrors his first sexual experience with Darlene his inability to feel love which suggests a deep self-hatred. The tenderness shows a longing to access the love he felt at first for Pauline. When he cries out, Cholly's self-hatred literally enters Pecola as she bears his child, the symbol of ugliness and hatred, and metaphorically as she will carry the burden of this hurtful experience, which leads to her own self-hatred and self-perceived ugliness.

Soaphead Church, a self-proclaimed "misanthrope", who hates people and find's the human body ugly and filthy. The closest he gets to human relationships is by collecting the items they have touched, used, and thrown away. Like Geraldine, Soaphead Church is another example of how obsession with whiteness destroys black lives. He is infatuated with cleanliness and discipline, which are indicators of whiteness. This passion leads to perverted sexual desires for children, and a feeling of superiority, which results in isolation from the community.

Soaphead Church's passion with whiteness begins with his family. The family has constructed their identity based on their white heritage. The "white strain" becomes their most important asset, as it allows them limited access to the white world. This desire, however, leads to a hatred of their black ancestry, self-hatred, and even incestuous marriages to preserve the white heritage. Education becomes another defining characteristic of the family's whiteness, and through education they are able to attain positions of power. These positions of power, however, allow the family to continue the legacy of racial oppression "He had been reared in a family proud of its academic accomplishment and its mixed blood" (167).

Soaphead Church's upbringing contributes to his hatred of his own black heritage. The hatred of disorder and decay instilled in him by his father later translates into a hatred of blackness, which he associated with these things. The interest with cultivating whiteness makes Soaphead Church unable to leave his habits and seriousness, which spoils his relationship with Velma, his chance at love in the real world. He turns to his studies, which allow him to move toward whiteness, and simultaneously avoid the pain of losing his marriage or of living in the real world. He remains unable to live up to his father's request to "find himself", since self-discovery would mean confronting his black heritage. Instead, he moves to Loraine and assumes a role that allows him to feel closer to his white ancestry, as an educated, superior, supernaturally inclined "leader" of sorts.

His deep hatred of Bob's (dog) uncleanness, which he associates with his own blackness, inspires him to wish death upon the dog. His views distorted



by the self-righteousness, which in reality masks his self-hatred and make him unable to see the cruelty of this wish. This same thinking later allows him to trick Pecola into killing the dog. Soaphead Church's self-righteousness and vanity, which serve as defences against his own racial self-hatred, become so extreme that he believes he is superior to God, demonstrating the way that worship of whiteness distorts black views of them and the world. Soaphead Church, like his ancestors, abuses the power he has gained through his white heritage to exploit Pecola for his own ends. Pecola's deep desire for blue eyes driven by her own self-hatred, which has only increased after her father, raped her. This drives her to accept Soaphead Church's dubious solution without question. Pecola's response to the dog's death and it shows the way that exploitation of black individuals by whites is deeply hurtful.

Claudia's fantasies of her mother symbolically represent the situation in town after the community becomes aware of Pecola's pregnancy. The community members wanted Pecola to remove from school because of her pregnancy. They curse that "She be lucky if it don't live. Bound to is the ugliest thing walking" (189). It results in racial self-hatred, self-perceived ugliness, sexual violence, and oppression, exposes these underlying facts in their Black Community. The baby's death would provide the ultimate solution to this problem, removing the symbol of their hidden reality so everyone can comfortably ignore it. Unlike the community, Claudia and Frieda have not been damaged by racism and violence. This comes in part by their age, but also perhaps because of the stability of their home and family. They do not fear the symbolic meaning of Pecola's baby, because they are not burdened by racial self-hatred and self-perceived ugliness, and have nothing to hide. At the same time, Claudia's belief that the birth of a black baby will create a change in the way, the community worships white beauty and hates blackness as innocent, naïve, and perhaps desperate. The futility of this wish is represented symbolically when the baby dies. These issues are too enormous and deeply rooted to counteract.

Pecola's outcome represents the ultimate destructive force of black obsession with white

beauty standards. As the result of her obsession and the traumas she has experienced, Pecola slips into a psychosis, and becomes totally self-consumed, as shown by the conversations she holds with her imaginary friend (which is really she) and her obsessive gazing in the mirror. She is removed from the community and her family, she is completely isolated, and in her illusion, believes others ignore her not because they hate what she reveals about themselves but rather because they envy on her blue eyes.

After Cholly's rape, Pecola embodies the ugliness of racial self-hatred. She moves with her mother to the outskirts of town, representing symbolically how the community has pushed her to the fringes of society. The community uses Pecola as a reference against which they measure their own worth and develop a sense of superiority. Claudia knows that these comparisons are used as an attempt to cover their own self-contempt. The idea of love is complicated at the end of *The Bluest Eye*. While the love of whiteness deforms the black characters, and love paired with anger allows Cholly to rape his daughter, Claudia, who is not as deformed by racism and white beauty standards, possesses the capacity to love Pecola and her baby, which is shown by her desire for the baby to live, and in a larger sense, through the compassion with which she tells Pecola's story.

Claudia took responsibility for all her failure, but it was neither rational nor accurate for her loneliness. She knows that the terrible guilt is shared by everyone in her community, including herself. She punishes herself for her part in the failure and makes clear that she will never be at peace with what she has witnessed. Morrison said about her novel that she wants her readers (white and black) to feel the victimization of Pecola's life, not for the purpose of congratulating themselves for having compassion but rather for accepting their own responsibility for it. The tragic victim is neither a king nor even one little girl, but the entire black people.

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