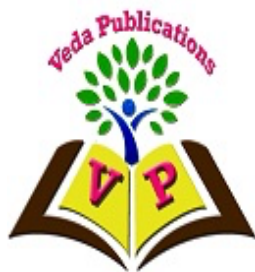




RESEARCH ARTICLE

**THE ILLUSIONS OF 'WHITE BEAUTY' AND THE POLITICS OF COLOR:
A STUDY OF *THE BLUEST EYE***

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Received on : 11-06-2024

Accepted on : 04-07-2024

Available online: 15-07-2024

The Bluest Eye (1970) is an eye-opening novel that deals with the tremendous oppression of African-Americans. Toni Morrison brings out the conception that the appetite of having white skin devours the African-Americans and their self-esteem gradually becomes self-loathing. The illusions of white beauty and the politics of color are compatible. The keenness of having white skin originates from being a victim of the politics of color. Morrison traces Pecola, the protagonist of this novel, as the scapegoat of an inter-racial society. Her extreme struggle because of having a dark complexion ultimately drives her to be an insane psyche. All the individuals also endure the agitations and agony of the racial society. Pauline Breedlove, Cholly Breedlove, Geraldine, Frieda MacTeer and Claudia MacTeer- all of them become the victim of racism along with Pecola. This paper particularly focuses on the reprimand of the African-Americans for being black and their eagerness of having white skin for escaping those social stigmas in *The Bluest Eye*. The prejudice against western standards of beauty as well as the illusions of white beauty and its effects on the lives of African-Americans are thoroughly depicted here.

Keywords: *African-American, White-Beauty, Racism, Self-Loathing, Oppression*



INTRODUCTION

In her novel *The Bluest Eye* (1970), Toni Morrison, an African-American writer, explores how Western beauty standards impact the black community. The story delves into the lives of individuals whose dark skin and African features cause them to experience low self-esteem and self-love due to society's idealization of white beauty. Morrison sheds light on the prejudice faced by black female characters in a racially divided society where whiteness is upheld as the epitome of beauty. Through her work, Morrison examines the influence of white racial dominance on the lives of black women in the 1930s United States. Morrison began writing the book in the mid-1960s, but its seed had been planted twenty years before when one of her 'childhood friends' disclosed a heartbreaking secret. She had been praying to God for 'blue eyes' for two years but had received no response. Morrison wrote this work at the peak of the "Black is Beautiful" movement. She began to wonder, "Why, although reviled by others, could this beauty not be taken for granted within the community? Why did it need wide public articulation to exist?" (Morrison XI) The characters of *The Bluest Eye* demonstrate why such a movement was necessary. All individuals place high importance on their skin color. Some suffer self-disgust and self-loathing for being too dark, while others, like Geraldine, spend their entire lives trying to maintain a certain appearance. Geraldine cannot stop thinking about how to separate black people with lighter skin like her from black people with darker skin like Pecola. All of these happen when someone lets others decide their worth.

The Bluest Eye is set in the 1940s, during the Great Depression, when many African-Americans

faced humiliation and insult from Americans who believed that being white was an instance of superiority. The book depicts African-Americans' experience in the aesthetic world of the United States. It stresses the physical differences between blacks and whites, as well as the Africans' narrow line of sexual separation. The message conveyed by Toni Morrison regarding beauty delves into how society perceives and embraces white culture, and how this impacts African-Americans, prompting them to question their own value in a racist society. The author communicates these ideas through distinct characters, symbols, and various perspectives that depict the influence of racism on the self-perception of young African-American children, highlighting it as a significant issue. Pecola Breedlove, the central character, is an eleven-year-old black girl who despises herself due to her race. The members of Lorain, Ohio's black community view her as an outsider, regarding her as submissive, unattractive, and unintelligent. She longs for blue eyes because it is just a technique for her to imagine that she is actually beautiful. Pecola becomes desperate and miserable and begins to believe more ardently that blue eyes would change her life and everyone will love her. She eagerly wants to know that how the act of love feels and looks like. The prostitutes who live upstairs from Pecola are the only ones who ever talked about love to Pecola. "What did love feel like? She wondered. How do grown-ups act when they love each other? Eat fish together?" (Morrison 57) The only act of love remains in Pecola's mind is eating fish together because one of the prostitutes has told her so. All she wants is to be beautiful, and no one has ever told her she is. Blue eye symbolises Pecola's search for happiness, love, and freedom,



which she never finds in her life. She endures the trauma of being assaulted by her father not once but twice. As a result, she loses her child and experiences deep suffering, which leads to her being misunderstood and unfairly labelled as mentally unstable.

As a black writer, Toni Morrison has become the voice for black people. Her writings serve as records of racial oppression in a patriarchal society dominated by whites. Morrison learned early in her life that racism has become the biggest adversary for black people. In her writings, she argues that reclaiming black identity is the only way to fight racial discrimination. "In an interview with Guardian reporter Emma Brockes, Morrison said, "I feel totally curious and alive and in control. And almost ... magnificent, when I write.'" (David X). David also states that "Morrison's books are like the ocean: the surface is beautiful but everything that gives them life lies beneath" (02). There is a growing concern that African-Americans have started to believe that Euro-Americans have greater beauty, morality, and intellect. Toni Morrison, celebrated for her African-American heritage, has extensively examined the complex experiences of black slaves and other marginalized individuals in the United States. These individuals not only face discrimination from white Americans but are also mistreated within their own communities, living in extremely neglected and backward conditions. Morrison is considerably more concerned with the black community's well-being and advancement. *The Bluest Eye* is a powerful statement towards the suppressed voice of disheartened black people in a marginalized society. This paper focuses on Toni Morrison's portrayal of

white people's indifference toward black people, stemming from racial animosity. It also explores and emphasizes the subjugation of the white beauty standards as well as the politics of color on the life of African-Americans. According to Givanna Munafo, "Morrison's achingly painful and acutely perceptive first novel indicates whiteness, as opposed to white people, as complicit in a system of racial domination which oppressively shapes its black characters' lives" (01).

THE ILLUSIONS OF WHITE BEAUTY

The illusions of white beauty refer to the fictitious belief and irrational adoration towards the white beauty standards. Every character in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* strives to conform to a specific beauty standard. The standard of beauty is defined by society and upheld by its members. Neither those who meet the standard nor those who strive to achieve it are ever truly content with themselves. The relentless pursuit of beauty has detrimental effects on relationships and self-esteem. *The Bluest Eye* delves into the harmful effects of society's perception of white beauty on a young black girl who longs for fair skin, blonde hair, and blue eyes while despising her own dark complexion, "Each night, without fail, she prayed for blue eyes. Fervently, for a year she had prayed. Although somewhat discouraged, she was not without hope. To have something as wonderful as that happen would take a long, long time" (Morrison 46). She believes that having white skin will prevent others from behaving aggressively towards her. Her desire for blue eyes stems directly from her need to be seen differently within her family, as shown in the book, "If she looked different, beautiful, maybe Cholly would be different, and Mrs. Breedlove too. Maybe they'd say "why, look at pretty-eyed Pecola. We must not do bad



things in front of those pretty eyes" (Morrison 46). This indicates that her main concern is to overcome the mistreatment and neglect she experiences in her household. Pecola's yearning is the outcome of an American society's misunderstanding of race. Black people are subjected to a great deal of persecution and horrors because of their racial inferiority. Pecola's mother, Pauline Breedlove, constantly abuses her because of Pecola's dark skin, black eyes, and woolly hair. That is why Pecola considers herself unattractive and blames her harassment on her physical looks. She considers the white girls around her as superior to her just because of their fair skin. Sugiharti argues that,

Maureen Peal, a light-skinned girl at school, also thinks that she is pretty and Pecola is ugly and Morrison sets up a hierarchy of skin tone marking proximity and distance in relation to idealized physical attributes. As "[a] high-yellow dream child with long brown hair braided into two lynch ropes that hung down her back" (03).

Morrison also states in this regard how Maureen has been treated, especially in the school, just because of her fair skin:

She enchanted the entire school. When teachers called on her, they smiled encouragingly. Black boys didn't trip her in the halls; white boys didn't stone her; white girls didn't suck their teeth when she was assigned to be their work partners; black girls stepped aside when she wanted to use the sink in the girls' toilets, and their eyes genuflected under sliding lids (62).

Pecola represents the impact that a shattered self-image may have caused by racism. Pecola is influenced to adopt white beauty standards by consumer goods, the media, and adults' preference for fair skin. Toni Morrison tells regarding the real-life girl who was the model for Pecola in the foreword of *The Bluest Eye*. "Implicit in her desire was racial self-loathing. And twenty years later I was still wondering about how one learns that. Who told her? Who made her think that it was better to be a freak than what she was? Who had looked at her and found her so wanting, so small a weight on the beauty scale?" (Morrison XI) Not only Pecola but also all the individuals in this novel have the extreme illogical devotion towards white skin. They all are devoted and marginalized by the "cultural icons portraying physical beauty: movies, billboards, magazines, books, newspapers, window signs, dolls, and drinking cups" (Gibson 19-20). Pecola's mother, Pauline Breedlove, gets to know about physical beauty from the movies. Morrison demonstrates Pauline in this manner, "along with the idea of romantic love, she was introduced to another physical beauty. Probably the most destructive ideas in the history of human thought. Both originated in envy, thrived in insecurity, and ended in disillusion" (122).

Black people feel that the ideal Christmas present is a 'blue-eyed Baby doll', while adults say it should be their 'fondest wish'. As a result, the young black girls adopt their ancestors' conception of white beauty. The most terrible aspect of this novel is the children learn from adults and trust what they say, but the adults themselves are filled with self-hatred and encourage them to follow the same white paradigm. Claudia depicts Maureen, a white girl with blue eyes and golden hair, which seems to be the ideal of beauty for everyone. Claudia's family, the



neighborhood, and the marketing strategies all uphold this standard. Both Frieda and Pecola admire Shirley Temple and like playing with dolls that imitate her. Their culture firmly embraces the notion that beauty is only determined by those specific attributes, leaving little room for doubt that anybody else may possess attractiveness. Claudia says, "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" (Morrison 20). Claudia also narrates Pecola's attraction for Shirley Temple, "She was a long time with the milk, and gazed fondly at the silhouette of Shirley Temple's dimpled face. Frieda and she had a loving conversation about how cute Shirley Temple was" (Morrison 19). Furthermore, Geraldine is continuously suppressing her blackness and wants to adopt the white standards of beauty. She strives "to get rid of the funkiness" (Morrison 83) and teaches her son the difference between colored people and black people: "Colored people were neat and quiet; niggers were dirty and loud" (Morrison 87). Geraldine is one of the colored women who is devoted to the illusions of white beauty and tries hard to keep up appearances.

In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon mentions a Martinique woman Mayotte Capecia, who is self-destructively obsessed with the whiteness of a man she loves. "Mayotte loves a white man to whom she submits in everything. He is her lord. She ask nothing, demands nothing, expect a bit of whiteness in her life. When she tries to determine in her own mind whether the man is handsome or ugly, she writes, "All I know is that he has blue eyes, blond hair, and a light skin, and that I love him" (Fanon 29). Although Mayotte is a Martinique Black woman, There is still an underlying relatability

among Mayotte, Pecola, and all the characters of this novel. They all are obsessed with blue eyes, blond hair, and fair skin, which indicate the internalized white beauty standards as well as the illusions of white beauty.

THE POLITICS OF COLOR

Toni Morrison's remarkable novel *The Bluest Eye* introduces the western prejudice that skin color is the first thing to demonstrate a human being. We cannot overlook how frequently this idea is reflected throughout the novel. The black characters in this book have undergone enormous oppression and brutality. The foremost reason of their oppression is the politics of color both inside and outside of the African-American communities. The most surprising question of Morrison was why black is considered as ugly, she could not find any reason behind it. "You looked at them and wondered why they were so ugly; you looked closely and could not find the source. Then you realized that it came from conviction, their conviction" (Morrison 39). The novel begins with a portrayal of an ideal white family in a style resembling that of a basic educational text. We are introduced to the characters Dick and Jane, along with their loving parents, living in a delightful and tranquil home with a wonderful dog and a cat. The Dick and Jane primer operates as "the hegemonizing force of an ideology the supremacy of 'the bluest eye' by which a dominant culture reproduces hierarchical power structure" (Grewal 07). Donald B. Gibson also demonstrates that, the 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 internalizing the values that dictate standards of beauty"



(20). Unlike the hegemonic identity, the main black characters are portrayed as a diverse group of individuals belonging to three hierarchical families: “first Geraldine’s (a counterfeit of the idealized white family), further down the MacTeers’ and at the bottom the Breedloves” (Ogunyemi 115).

Pecola, the protagonist of this novel has faced all the oppression from her surroundings because of her dark complexion. Her family does not value or care for her. She also has no other people or places where she can feel comfortable. She is facing discrimination from adults and even her classmates in the neighborhood. She is getting increasingly fascinated by desiring blue eyes. She has this urge because she wants to run away from her life by pretending to be someone else. She is despised and lonely. One of the key contributors to Pecola’s predicament is the neighborhood. They have all at some point taken the part of using Pecola as a scapegoat. Intra-racism is pervasive in the neighborhood. She experienced both isolation and bullying at school, mostly due to her dark skin:

“Black e mo. Black e mo. Yadaddsleepsnekked. Black e mo black e mo ya dadd sleeps nekked. Black e mo ...” They had extemporized a verse made up of two insults about matters over which the victim had no control: the color of her skin and speculations on the sleeping habits of an adult, wildly fitting in its incoherence. That they themselves were black, or that their own father had similarly relaxed habits was irrelevant. It was their contempt for their own blackness that gave the first insult its teeth. They seemed to have taken all of their smoothly cultivated ignorance, their exquisitely learned self-hatred, their elaborately designed

hopelessness and sucked it all up into a fiery cone of scorn that had burned for ages in the hollows of their minds—cooled—and spilled over lips of outrage, consuming whatever was in its path. They danced a macabre ballet around the victim, whom, for their own sake, they were prepared to sacrifice to the flaming pit (Morrison 65)

The term "Black e mo" in the quote implies that Pecola was perceived as being more black than the other individuals mentioned. As a result, even those who do not have light complexions take advantage of this situation to mock and intimidate someone with a darker complexion. The children are holding back feelings of anger and resentment towards those with darker complexions. Maureen is very popular at the school. She has the palest complexion among the children of color because she comes from a mixed-race heritage with one white parent. Claudia, the narrator, describes herself as a "high yellow dream child"(Morrison 62), and she is liked by children of all races, both white and black. Maureen stands out as the fairest-skinned among the children of color, and her wealth and skin color are the main reasons for this attention. Along with the MacTeer sisters, Maureen is the only child who shows friendly behaviour towards Pecola. However, it does not endure long. When they get into an argument, Maureen yells from her home across the street, “I am cute! And you ugly! Black and ugly black e mos. I am cute!” (Morrison 73). It sounds as if the worst thing somebody could call anyone is ‘black e mo’.

Pecola goes to buy penny candy, but the store owner, Mr. Yacobowski, doesn't see her as a human being. She feels he judges her based on her color, associating blackness with ugliness and whiteness with



purity. She thinks he's prejudiced against her solely because of her ethnicity. This indicates the dominance and negligence of white people towards blacks. "The distaste must be for her, her blackness. All things in her are flux and anticipation. But her blackness is static and dread. And it is the blackness that accounts for, that creates, the vacuum edged with distaste in white eyes. ...How can a fifty-two-year-old white immigrant storekeeper. ... see a little black girl?" (Morrison 49) There is another precedent of the politics of color in *The Bluest Eye* which is the heinous act of Louis Junior against Pecola. Geraldine, Louis Junior's mother, who is also a black but light-skinned woman, forbids her son from playing with other black children. She tells her son Junior that white kids won't play with him if he behaves like a black child from a lower level of society. Although Geraldine and her family are black, they saw themselves as superior and almost belonging to a distinct racial group due to their superior attire and more wealth compared to other black individuals. Racism is widespread, even within the black community. In this instance, the prejudice is predicated on conduct rather than the pigmentation of one's skin.

She has taught him to only play with white children because his mother did not like him to play with niggers. She had explained the difference between colored people and niggers. They were easily identifiable. Colored people were neat and quiet; niggers were dirty and loud. He belonged to the former group: he wore white shirts and blue trousers; his hair was cut as close to his scalp as possible to avoid any suggestion of wool, the part was etched into his hair by the barber. In winter his mother put Jergens lotion on his skin to keep his face

from becoming ashen. Even though he was light-skinned it was still possible to ash. The line between colored and nigger was not always clear: subtle and tell tale signs threatened to erode it, and the watch had to be constant (Morrison 87).

As a result, Louis dislikes his own race. He had seen Pecola standing alone several times before 'at recess' and sneaking through the playground. No one wants to play with her because she is so dark and ugly. As a consequence of this, Louis approaches to her softly one day and brings her to his house to show her around. Pecola happily accepts his proposal and follows him. She is afraid of entering the house, but finally, she does because there is a large red-and-gold Bible on the dining-room table and a colored image of Jesus Christ on the wall. It ensures her not to occur any disaster. Louis Junior, on the other hand, reveals his original evil side by dragging her into another room and slamming a huge black cat in her face. He laughs viciously and rushes around the room by saying, "You can't get out. You are my prisoner," (Morrison 90). It is some sadistic pleasure for Louis which indicates such a perversion of racial society. When his mother Geraldine discovers the girl locked in her house, she taunts her emotionally. She talks with a lot of racial terms which express a lot more than words, such as: "Shut up!" Hair uncombed, dresses falling apart, shoes untied and caked with dirt. "Get out," she said, her voice quiet. "You nasty little black bitch. Get out of my house (Morrison 91).

Geraldine is an instance of the "sugar-brown" southern ladies in Morrison's novels who migrate to the North with the aspiration of assimilating into the prevailing white culture. "Geraldine, the old black bourgeoisie, with her clean house belongs to the only



black family in the novel that draws near this ideal, but she is not happy, and her brutal son perpetrates violence on her pet cat. The energy she expends in keeping up appearances takes its toll emotionally" (Ogunyemi 112). When she calls the frightened and innocent Pecola "a nasty little black bitch" (Morrison 92), she is unravelling the power of her self-erasing desire to be what she is not. Geraldine is completely affected by the nasty politics of color that is expanded in African-American community. The narrator of the novel, Claudia tries to find out why other people love such dolls so much when she receives one for Christmas. She describes the doll having "glassy blue eyeballs, twisted . . . yellow hair" (Morrison 21). She observes that this doll has the same characteristics as the actresses, who are seen as beautiful by many women. Claudia acknowledges that these traits do not inherently determine a person's beauty and that beauty seems to be more subjective. "I could not love it. But I could examine it to see what it was that all the world said was lovable" (Morrison 21). This statement of Claudia refers to decolonizing her mind from colonial oppression which is an act of resistance.

Furthermore, Cholly Breedlove, Pecola's violent and drunk father, starts to hate Darlene and all women when two white men catch them having sex and make fun of them for it. Even though white people have embarrassed him, he doesn't hate them because he knows that because of his race, he will never be able to control or shame white men like they have done to him. As a result, he directs his anger against black women. He may now hate and abuse black women and feel strong because he's doing something with his feelings. Cholly's first sexual encounter drives him to hate black women, his own race and his

realization of being dominated by whites. These factors work together to cause him to rape his own daughter. "Sullen, irritable, he cultivated his hatred of Darlene. Never did he once consider directing his hatred toward the hunters. Such an emotion would have destroyed him. They were big, white, armed men. He was small, black, helpless" (Morrison 150).

African-Americans are placed in lower social strata according to the racial ideology of the United States. Racial segregation, subjugation, and prejudice were brought about by this "myth of black inferiority," which white people institutionalized and fostered, in all spheres of daily life, including literature. Morrison feels that in the sphere of hegemonic history, the voice of blacks has been unuttered. That is why they are characterized as wicked and inferior. In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon summarizes the European associations of blackness; nevertheless, these connections also apply to black Americans and blacks in general:

The torture is the black man, Satan is black, one talks of shadows, when one dirty one is black-whether one is thinking of physical dirtiness or of moral dirtiness. It would be astonishing, if the trouble were taken to bring them all together, to see the vast number of expressions that make the black man the equivalent of sin. In Europe, whether concretely or symbolically, the black man stands for the bad side of the character...the Negro has one function: that of symbolizing the lower emotions, the baser inclinations, the dark side of the soul (61).

**CONCLUSION**

The Bluest Eye holds a community with a standard of beauty, and all of its members must achieve it, whereas being black is inappropriate while whites continue to have the supreme power and having blond hair, fair complexion, blue eyes, and a flawless family are desirable. This scale of beauty is applied to everyone as a manner of dignity. A person who fulfils this criterion is accepted. If not, they are rejected. They are cramped into a framework of internalized conventions that generate a pattern of humiliation within families throughout society. In the novel, the black community has accepted white standards of beauty; Pecola's dark skin is hideous, while Maureen's white complexion is enchanting. The maltreatment of Pecola, Cholly, Pauline and other people in the community is interrelated to their darkness and usually happens due to the politics of colour. The illusions of white beauty destroy one's rational faculty and self-esteem and create dirty politics amongst African-American communities. The Western prejudice over the white beauty standards leads the African-Americans to the ultimate misfortune. All the characters in this novel have the urge to get fair skin to escape from the agony originating from their surroundings.

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