



---

## STRUGGLE FOR PERSONAL AND RACIAL IDENTITY AS PORTRAYED BY TONI MORRISON IN THE NOVEL THE BLUEST EYE

**Beena Khati**

Research Scholar, Department of English  
DSB Campus, Kumaun University, Nainital, Uttarakhand

### Abstract

The present paper entitled Struggle for Personal and Racial Identity as portrayed by Toni Morrison in the novel *The Bluest Eye* is an attempt at studying the struggle for personal and racial identity, the concerns arising out of perpetual racial discrimination that led to an acute identity crisis among the Afro-Americans living in a white dominated society as portrayed by Toni Morrison in the novel *The Bluest Eye*. In her first novel *The Bluest Eye* (1970), Toni Morrison has thrown light on the black consciousness of the 1960s that was characterized by identity crisis resultant of racial and cultural discrimination. The novel revolves around the tragic tale of a young black girl who has a staunch desire for a pair of blue eyes because she considers by having blue eyes she will become beautiful and worthy. Morrison brings forth the disastrous effects of racial prejudice upon innocent black girls who are left traumatized bereft of any individuality.

**Keywords:** Racism, Identity, Acceptance, Victimization, Insanity.

### Introduction

Toni Morrison was passionately inclined towards a kind of writing that was endowed with a new insight into black history, the great oppression and trauma suffered by her race. She wanted her novels to serve a reforming purpose in the right sense of the term. She felt the oppression that the Afro-American people have had been subjected to, and found it as something highly disturbing in nature as they consider it is the lack of beauty aspects in them which is the cause of their disgrace and humiliation. The blacks desiring to have beauty aspects like blue eyes, blond hair and white skin on par with the whites is the central idea in the novel. It is a profoundly sensitive issue to the blacks and it is a tragic condition for them in a racist social order. The novel centers on racism; black stands for something dark, evil, and bad while white stands for purity, virtue, hope and innocence. Morrison brings into focus that racism tarnishes the self-image of the black girls and leaves adverse psychological effects in their psyche.

The origin of the novel sprouted from a conversation Toni Morrison had with a childhood friend. They had just started an elementary school and her friend said she wanted blue eyes. Morrison looked around to picture with them and was violently repelled by what she imagined she would look like if she had her wish. Morrison maintained that *The Bluest Eye* was her effort to say something about why she had not, or possibly ever would have, the experience of what she possessed and also why she prayed for so radical an alteration. The novelist observed an implicit racial self-loathing in her desire. And Morrison wondered who made her feel 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 and the novel pecks away at the gaze that condemned her.

The protagonist of the novel *The Bluest Eye*, Pecola Breedlove belongs to a poor black family and yearns for blue eyes like white children so that there would be mutual reciprocation of her feelings, and attitude on par with the whites. She wants to be loved and accepted by both the whites and blacks. She is convinced that absence of white complexion and blue eyes is the main reason for poor personality. She longs for blue eyes like those of white children and surrounded by cultural message that she is ugly by definition; she can achieve peace only by retreating into schizophrenia. The turmoil and pain of Pecola is made all the worse when her own father outraged her modesty. She is compelled to live a life of fetters for no fault of her own. The people of her community view her as a pitiable person reduced to nothing. She desired something which could not be fulfilled. As the narrator says:

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. Thrown, in this way, into the binding conviction that only a miracle could relieve her, she would never have known her beauty. She would see only what there was to see: the eyes of other people. (Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*, page 44-45)

Toni Morrison sincerely exposes the radical effects of racism on the black girls. The pathetic plight of Pecola is the outcome of fierce racism and interracial conflicts. Her failure is not only because of her hopeless desire for blue eyes but it is also because of her lack of self-confidence. She has a deep-rooted feeling that she is ugly and the intensity of feeling is such that she finds it difficult to uproot it even from her sub-conscious mind. She is debased by her own parents. In a young black girl like Pecola when such a feeling is accompanied by external humiliation it is her inferior complex that gets aggravated. Pecola's mother calls her ugly since her childhood days and her father hates her because she is ugly. Her downfall into insanity could have been avoided had her parents gave her the necessary love and affection. The narrator adds;



---

It had occurred to Pecola some time ago that if her eyes, those eyes that held the pictures, and knew the sights- if those eyes of hers were different, that is to say, beautiful, she herself would be different. Her teeth were good, and at least her nose was not big and flat like some of those who were thought so cute. 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 mustn't do bad things in front of those pretty eyes." (Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*, page 44)

Pecola's struggle for personal and racial identity is defined by her everlasting desire to be accepted and loved. Her family and community did not play any positive role and rather made it impossible for her to be ever sanely content. Cholly Breedlove, the father and eventually the rapist of Pecola has been a bastard. He was born to an unwed mother; his father ran away the day of his birth and his mother abandoned him three days later. This horrible beginning reflects his every day views and actions. After the death of his legal guardian (his aunt), Cholly decides that as an inner mission he needs to find his father to find himself. To delve into who he is, he has to look into his past; a long search ends in an extremely disappointing and crushing experience.

Cholly's private life is still painful. Being a black victim, he is forced to have sex with two white police officers. Forcing him to have sex they just chuckled from behind. These episodes left a huge impact on him that eventually caused him to do something that would not have happened had he had proper guidance in those areas. Cholly's family and his community contributed in making the man he became and thus his eventual downfall. Shedding light on the past journey of Cholly, the narrator says:

He was free to live his fantasies, and free even to die, the how and when of which held no interest for him. In those days, Cholly was truly free. Abandoned in a junk heap by his mother, rejected for a crap game by his father, there was nothing more to lose. He was alone with his perceptions and appetites, and they alone interested him. It was in this godlike state that he met Pauline Williams. And it was Pauline, or rather marrying her, that did for him what the flashlight did not do. The constantness, varietylessness, the sheer weight of sameness drove him to despair and froze his imagination. To be required to sleep with the same woman forever was a curious and unnatural idea to him; to be expected to dredge up enthusiasm for old acts, and routine ploys; he wondered at the arrogance of the female. (Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*, page 157-58)

Almost all characters in *The Bluest Eye* are hankering after something. Having lost themselves they look in for their identity. Pecola yearns for blue eyes. At the end of the novel she believes that she has those eyes. She thinks that people treat her funny because of her blue eyes and she has learned to accept that happily. She yearned for the acceptance and love of society seen through her eyes. No matter if that acceptance and love were there or not, she thought it was and therefore was able to survive. Pecola's search for her identity ends in her insanity. Although she is not accepted by society for reasons she does not understand, she puts exclusion from society into terms she can comprehend. Society influences her identity and moulds her into what she becomes by not giving her the guidance and approval she needs. In the same way Cholly found himself separated from the community. He does an act of inhumanity and he could not live with the realization of the monster he had become and he disappeared. As a man he does not know who he is.

W. E. Du Bois in his book, *The Souls of Black Folk* talks about the hazardous impact of racism on cultural self consciousness and identity. The term, 'double consciousness', refers to two distinct realities – a psychological conflict between opposing cultural world views and debilitating resolution in which extremely derived and distorted perceptions of the self constitute a single, but alienated self- consciousness. Du Bois further notes that it is a peculiar sensation, this double consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others. In America, African American from the very beginning was made to undergo a state of double consciousness. This view of Bois is reflected in the following excerpt where he says:

After the Egyptian and Indian, The Greek and Roman, the Teutonic and Mongolian, the Negro is a sort of seventh son born with a veil and with second sight on this American world – a world which yields him no true self-consciousness but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation – this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, measuring one soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity, one ever feels his two-ness - An American, a Negro, two thoughts, two un-reconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. (W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*).

*The Bluest Eye* had been instrumental in creating a climate of revolution and evolving black consciousness of the sixties, a period characterized by an almost evangelical struggle for personal and racial identity. Morrison chooses the obsession of the blacks with an American standard of beauty that seems both inescapable and destructive. The novelist states that that concept of physical beauty as a virtue is one of the dumbest, most pernicious and destructive ideas of the western world. The focal idea that the novel brings home is that the Blacks are driven by this belief that blue eyes, blond hair and white skin are the touchstones of the existing American standards of beauty. The novel studies honestly and sensitively the damaging influence of white standards and values on the lives of black people. It poignantly portrays the pathetic and tragic conditions of blacks in a racist society. It also examines how the ideologies, fostered by the institutions controlled by the dominant group, influence the making of self-image particularly the black

---



women. The novel brings forth the victimization of black people within the context of racist social order. Such a social order is a threatening force that refuses to treat blacks on par with the whites.

The racist culture fostered by the whites for centuries in American society has touched the consciousness of blacks to such an extent that Pecola's mother Pauline who works as a domestic servant in a white family's house hates the ugliness of her house, her daughter, her family and herself. She goes one step ahead by blaming her sense of unworthiness. Therefore, the novel becomes a myth that defines human worth and explores the potential greatness of the people who have gone astray due to the beliefs they have adopted from outsiders. The white women are taught that their blue eyes, blond hair and creamy skin is not wonderful but somewhere it is also the surface manifestation of the very best character of God and nature ever created. Hence, the novelist works upon the myth of beauty standards by which white women are judged and are considered superior. The black women are prejudiced because they cannot meet or be part of these so-called white standards of beauty. Pecola's longing for blue eyes is not merely for the purpose of beauty but on a deeper level it is for the acceptance by both whites and blacks. The reason for her vulnerability is the all-pervasive deep-rooted racism that denies the blacks basic right to live a normal life. As the narrator says towards the end of the novel:

So it was.

A little black girl yearns for the blue eyes of a little white girl, and the horror at the heart of her yearning is exceeded only by the evil of fulfillment.

We saw her sometimes. Frieda and I--after the baby came too soon and died. After the gossip and the slow wagging of heads. She was so sad to see. Grown people looked away, children, those who were not frightened by her, laughed outright.

The damage done was total. She spent her days, her tendril, sap-green days, walking up and down, up and down, her head jerking to the beat of a drummer so distant only she could hear. (Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*, page 202)

One of the most prominent literary figures of the Harlem Renaissance, Langston Hughes was a strong advocate of "Black is Beautiful" motto and he believed that it is important for the African American people to embrace their 'race' and be proud about their racial heritage. As he says in one of his short yet finest poems titled "*My People*" about racial consciousness:

The night is beautiful,  
So, the faces of my people.  
The stars are beautiful,  
So, the eyes of my people.  
Beautiful, also, is the sun.

Beautiful, also, are the souls of my people. (Hughes, *My People*)

The white dominant society succeeded in yarning myth that black was not valuable or beautiful and it was so powerfully thrust upon the blacks that it has had a terrible impact in their psyche that it hindered them to have any chance in a society that strives on racism. The members of Breedlove family despise themselves because they believe that they are unworthy. The innocent girl Pecola fails to understand that she is under the spell of white cultural domination. She has been subjected to repeated brutalization and rejection. She undergoes a traumatic psychological experience. Pecola becomes a scapegoat in a society where people are reduced to objects and are made to feel inferior as objects. Her case stemmed largely from a crippled and crippling family- unlike the average black family and unlike the narrator's (Claudia's). But Pecola's life is singular and some aspects of her vulnerability were lodged in all young girls.

*The Bluest Eye* is an account of victimization of the African American by the whites in the context of racial and social order. Morrison portrays how racism distresses and can prove to be acutely dangerous to black girls. The narrative so far successfully built up by the whites was that black represents something dark, evil, savage, and coarse whereas the white represents purity, hope, innocence and virtue. Prevalent racism does not leave any scope for self-embracing acceptance of racial heritage in terms of beauty and individuality and that is where the blacks fall prey to vulnerability caused by the white standards of beauty. Being an African American girl, Pecola is compelled to do away with her cultural and racial heritage and succumb to the white dictates. The blacks have been, whether in the first place they wanted or not, fatally attracted towards the pro- white culture phenomenon in order to be considered a part of the American society and hence the feeling of acceptance is always associated with it as far as the vulnerability of the blacks is concerned. As a female and black, she is a victim of both racism and sexism because she suffers from the double jeopardy on account of being a female coming from an African American racial heritage in a racist white dominated society.



---

## Conclusion

In exploring the social and domestic aggression that could cause a child to literally fall apart, the novelist mounted a series of rejections, some routine, some exceptional, some monstrous, all the while trying hard to avoid complicity in the demonization process Pecola was subjected to. Morrison did not want to dehumanize the characters that wronged Pecola and contributed to her eventual fall. Morrison opines that the assertion of racial beauty was not a reaction to the self-mocking, humorous critique of cultural/racial/personal foibles common in all groups, but against the damaging internalization of assumptions of immutable inferiority originating in an outside gaze. Therefore, she focused, on how something as grotesque as the demonization of an entire race could take root inside the most delicate member of society: a child; the most vulnerable member: a female.

## Works Cited

1. Bjork, Patrick Bryce. *The Novels of Toni Morrison: The Search for Self and Place within the Community*. Peter Lang, 1992.
2. Burghadt Du Bois, William Edward. *The Souls of Black Folk*. Dover Publications Inc., 1994.
3. Christian, Barbara. *Black Feminist Criticism: Perspectives on Black Women Writers*. Pergamon, 1985.
4. Hughes, Langston. *Selected Poems of Langston Hughes*. Vintage, 1990.
5. Koolish, Lynda. *African American Writers: Portraits and Visions*. University Press of Mississippi, 2001.
6. Morrison, Toni. *Playing in the Dark*. Vintage Books, 1992.
7. *The Bluest Eye*. Vintage Books, 2016.
8. Rigney, Barbara Hill. *The Voices of Toni Morrison*. Ohio State University Press, 1994.
9. Roynon, Tessa. *The Cambridge Introduction to Toni Morrison*. Cambridge University Press, 2013.