

IMPACT OF CULTURE THROUGH RACE & COLOUR CONSCIOUSNESS IN TOM MORRISON'S THE BLUEST EYE [1970]

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With contemporary interest concentrating increasingly on the diasporic situation, the trauma inherent in the African-American situation has received special attention. As the study is based on racial consciousness or racism, it becomes necessary to define or to give a look to the meanings of the terms 'culture' and 'Black culture'. Cultures are virtually all varieties of 'long-term' coverage, against both external and internal; or repression, assimilation, attachment, or attack from neighbouring or foreign cultures - with all the positive and negative connotations of the 'cover ups' thus produced. In this black, culture is no exception. Cultures differ from one another. Black culture is a concept first created by Europeans and defined in opposition to 'European culture'. According to Hegel, Black culture is the lowest stage of that laudable self-reflection and development shown by European culture, whose national outcome must be the state or nationhood. [Dubey, Madhu. 1994 : 62] To talk about African-American, it is not only a name but indeed a badge of the black American's identity- racial, cultural and national. The Blacks constitute an oppressed minority in the United States of America. They are the most oppressed and exploited people in the world. They have been oppressed and exploited racially, culturally, socially, sexually, economically and politically.

The discourse of the African-American literary study arise out of a specific kind of exclusion from both mainstream culture, criticism and literary history. The African-Americans have assumed that one may theorize about the experience of Blacks in racist culture on the basis of the black men alone. On the other hand, the black women's literary tradition thus suffer from double disinheritance : from the mainstream as well as from the Black literary tradition. The two issues which haunt the writers taken for the study are : introduction of race into feminist theory and the subject of gender in the African-American discourse. Toni Morrison was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature in the year 1993. In her work, she has explored

the experience and roles of black women in a racist and male-dominated society. In the center of her complex and multi-layered narratives is the unique cultural inheritance of the African-Americans. Morrison has been the member of both the national Council on the Arts and the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters. Morrison grew up in the black community of Lorain. She spent her childhood in the midwest and read voraciously from Jane Austen and Leo Tolstoy.

In 1949, she entered Howard University in Washington, D., America's most-distinguished black college. While teaching at Howard University, Morrison wrote her first novel *The Bluest Eye* [1970]. With its publication, Morrison also established her new identity which she later in 1992 rejected : I am really Chloe Anthony Wofford. That's who I am. I have been writing under this other person's name. I have been writing under this other person's name. I write some things now as Chloe Wofford, private things. I regret having called myself Toni Morrison when I published my first novel *The Bluest Eye*. [1992.] *The Bluest Eye* is a 1970 novel by American author and Nobel Prize recipient Toni Morrison. It is Morrison's first novel, written while Morrison was teaching at Howard University and was raising her two sons on her own. The story is about a year in the life of a young black girl in Lorain, Ohio named Pecola. It takes place against the backdrop of America's Midwest as well as in the years following The Great Depression. *The Bluest Eye* is told from five perspectives : Pecola's, her mother's, her father's, her friend Claudia's, and Soaphead Church's. Because of the controversial nature of the book, which deals with racism, incest, and child molestation, there have been numerous attempts to ban it from schools and libraries. In 2000, the novel became a selection for Oprah's Book Club. In writing about the impeachment in 1998, Morrison wrote that, since Whitewater, Bill Clinton had been mistreated because of his *blackness*: Years ago, in the middle of the Whitewater investigation,

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one heard the first murmurs: white skin notwithstanding, this is our first black President. Blacker than any actual black person who could ever be elected in our children's lifetime. After all, Clinton displays almost every trope of blackness: single-parent household, born poor, working-class, saxophone-playing, McDonald's-and-junk-food-loving boy from Arkansas. [The New Yorker. 1998.] *The Bluest Eye* is a poetic tragedy about color that concentrates so much on the horror of racism that it is difficult to read. The highly acclaimed *Song of Solomon* reveals a voice of restoration from within that community of pain. Milkman, propelled in search of his family history, finds it embedded in the history of slavery, recorded in the rhythmic chants of children's games, like a miniature ring shout. This novel examines the tragic effects of imposing white, middle-class American ideals of beauty on the developing female identity of a young African American girl during the early 1940s. Inspired by a conversation, Morrison once had with an elementary school classmate who wished for blue eyes, the novel poignantly shows the psychological devastation of a young black girl, Pecola Breedlove. Pecola searches for love and acceptance in a world that denies and devalues people of her own race.

There are two major metaphors in *The Bluest Eye*, one of marigolds and one of dandelions. The narrative structure of this novel is important in revealing just how pervasive and destructive social racism is. Narration in novel comes from several sources. Much of the narration comes from Claudia MacTeer as a nine-year-old child. But Morrison also gives the reader the insight of Claudia reflecting on the story as an adult, some first person narration from Pecola's mother, and narration by Morrison herself as an omniscient narrator. In this novel, the eyes of the characters are everything. The word 'eye' appears over and over with rich adjectives that describe color, movement and nuance of expression to signify a character's mood and psychological state. Morrison emphasizes the paradox of eyes: Eyes are at times a window to enlightenment, however, what eyes see is not always objective truth, but instead a distortion of reality into what a person is able to perceive. *The Bluest Eye* is about the life of the Breedlove family who resides in Lorain, Ohio, in the late 1930s. This family consists of the mother Pauline, the father Cholly, the son Sammy, and the daughter Pecola. The novel's focal point is the daughter, an eleven-year-old Black girl who is

trying to conquer a bout with self-hatred. Everyday she encounters racism, not just from white people, but mostly from her own race. In their eyes, she is much too dark, and the darkness of her skin somehow implies that she is inferior. Through the voices of her black characters, Toni Morrison reveals a broad spectrum of black culture during the 1930's and 1940's. We get a glimpse of the middle class through Claudia and her family, who maintain a sense of dignity and pride. In the first chapter, she tells us,

Being a minority in both caste and class, we moved about anyway on the hem of life, struggling to consolidate our weaknesses and hang on, or to creep singly up into the major folds of the garment. [Morrison. 1999 : 17] We encounter the desperately poor through the Breedlove family, Cholly, Pauline, and Pecola, each choosing a different means to escape the harsh reality of their lives. For example, Pecola dreams of having blue eyes, then she would be accepted, loved, respected, and beautiful. We are also introduced to the upwardly mobile black family of the 1940's through the women from the towns with names like Aiken, and Meridian, who "dust themselves with Cashmere Bouquet talc...and still call sex 'nookey', and have learned "how to get rid of the funkiness." [82- 83] In the novel, Morrison challenges Western standards of beauty and demonstrates that the concept of beauty is socially constructed. Morrison also recognises that if whiteness is used as a standard of beauty or anything else, then the value of blackness is diminished and this novel works to subvert that tendency. [Matus. 1998 : 37] As Gurleen Grewal also argues, merely reversing perceived 'ugliness' to beautiful blackness "is not enough, for such counter-rhetoric does not touch the heart of the matter: the race-based class structure upheld by dominant norms and stereotypes." [Grewal. 1998 : 21]

The Bluest Eye opens with three excerpts from the common 1940s American elementary school primer that features the All-American, white family of Mother, Father, Dick, and Jane. The first excerpt is a faithful reproduction, the second lacks all capitalization and punctuation marks, and the third dissolves into linguistic chaos by abandoning its spacing and alignment. This section is interrupted by an italicized fragment representing the memories of Claudia MacTeer, the principal narrator of this novel. In 'Autumn', Claudia begins her narrative as the MacTeers take in a boarder, Mr. Henry Washington.

At the same time, Pecola comes to live with the MacTeer family after Cholly burns down his family's house. Recounting their typical girlhood adventures, Claudia particularly remembers the onset of Pecola's first menses. The omniscient narrator interrupts with descriptions of the Breedlove's household. It is noticed how the parents are unable to hide the violence of their relationship in the presence of Pecola and her brother Sammy. In the midst of the hostilities, Pecola constantly prays for blue eyes. She believes that if she only had blue eyes, life would be better. In 'Winter', Claudia recalls the arrival at school of Maureen Peale. Maureen is a lighter-skinned, wealthy black girl with green eyes. The girls both hate and admire her eyes. When a group of boys harasses Pecola, Maureen temporarily befriends Pecola. But they eventually turns on her, calling the darker-skinned and deeply hurt Pecola 'ugly'. The omniscient narrator again interrupts and describes an incident involving Pecola and Geraldine. Geraldine is a socially mobile middle-class African American woman. She loves her blue-eyed cat more than she loves her own son, Louis Junior. When Pecola is wrongly blamed for the cat's death, Geraldine quietly calls her a "nasty little black bitch".

Claudia opens the 'Spring' sequence of *The Bluest Eye* with disparate memories about Henry Washington fondling Frieda's breasts, his subsequent beating and eviction by Mr. MacTeer, and a visit to Pecola's apartment. The omniscient narrator's descriptions of Pauline and Cholly's history predominate the rest of this section. The narrator relates events from Pauline's early life, her marriage and how she became a maid for an affluent, white family. The narrator next recounts Cholly's traumatic childhood and adolescence. Abandoned almost at birth, he is rescued by his beloved Aunt Jimmy. Later she dies when he is sixteen. After her burial, Cholly is humiliated by two white hunters who interrupt his first sexual encounter with a girl named Darlene. He flees to Macon, Georgia, in search of his father who is miserably mean and wants nothing to do with his son. Crushed by this encounter, Cholly eventually meets and marries Pauline and fathers her children. Years later, in Lorain, a drunken Cholly staggers into his kitchen. In 'Summer', Claudia resumes her narration. She recalls how the gossip spreads regarding Pecola being pregnant with Cholly's baby. Near the end of the novel, Pecola finally narrates a story about her conversation with an imaginary

companion concerning her new blue eyes and whether they are 'the bluest eyes' in the world. In the last section of *The Bluest Eye*, Claudia remembers meeting Pecola after Cholly's baby is delivered still born and accounts for the whereabouts of Sammy, Cholly and Pauline. In trying to conform to the ideal of white femininity, the black women characters despise their blackness which in turn leads to self hatred. The most prominent type of racialised ranking represents blackness as a condition to be despised, and most tokens of this type extend this attitude to cover the physical features that are central to the description of black identity. [16]

Being well educated and having adopted Western ways of life, Geraldine draws the line between coloured and black. She deliberately teaches her son the differences between coloured and black: "Coloured people were neat and quiet; niggers were dirty and loud." [67] Maureen Peal is a light-skinned girl at school. She 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 idealised physical attributes. As "[a] high-yellow dream child with long brown hair braided into two lynch ropes that hung down her back." [47] Maureen is treated well at school: 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." [47-48]

Geraldine represses her black characteristics which are not 'fitted' to white femininity as she strives "to get rid of the funkiness." [64] She also rejects Pecola when she sees her in her house as Pecola seems to embody all the negative aspects of her views of black girls: She looked at Pecola. Saw the dirty torn dress, the plaits sticking out on her head, hair matted where the plaits had come undone, the muddy shoes with the wad of gum peeping out from between the cheap soles, the soiled socks, one of which had been walked down into the heel on the shoe. . . She had seen this little girl all of her life. Finally, Pecola has been treated very badly by most people surrounding her. She yearns to have blue eyes in the hope that people will love her. Despite those radical distinctions, the construction of femininity for black women is

somewhat similar to that of white women in terms of gendered body and subjected body. Pecola sees herself as ugly, as an object possessing an abject body. This is paralleled with what Bartky says about the process of disciplining practices to gain the ideal body of femininity. This produces “a practiced and subjected body, that is a body on which an inferior status has been inscribed. A woman’s face must be made up, that is to say, made over, and so must her body.” [Bartky. 1988 : 71] This suggests that “[women’s] bodies are deficient.” [Bartky. 1988 : 71] Pecola does not have blue eyes, these social symbols of white beauty, she cannot come anywhere near to the ideal of white beauty. White women may lack something in terms of the gendered body. But due to their white privilege, they are not racialised in the same way. *The Bluest Eye* can also be read as text which is critical of liberal white feminism which excludes the experience of black women. The concept of physical appearance as a virtue is the center of the social problems portrayed in the novel. Thus the novel unfolds with the most logical responses to this overpowering impression of beauty: acceptance, adjustment, and rejection. Through Pecola Breedlove, Morrison presents reactions to the worth of physical criteria. The beauty standard that Pecola feels she must live up to causes her to have an identity crisis. Society’s standard has no place for Pecola, unlike her “high yellow dream child” classmate, Maureen Peals, who fits the mold. [62] Maureen’s influence in the novel is important. “She enchanted the entire school ... black girls stepped aside when she wanted to use the sink in the girl’s toilet ... She never had to search for anybody to eat with in the cafeteria—they flocked to the table of her choice.” [62-63] In contrast, Pecola’s classmates insult her black skin by chanting “Black e mo Black e mo Ya daddy sleeps nekked/ stch ta ta stch ta ta.” [65] When Pecola enters Geraldine’s home at the invitation of her son, Geraldine forces her to leave with words that hurt deeply, saying “Get out ... You nasty little black bitch. Get out of my house.” [92] Pecola is a delicate character because of her young age. But her delicacy lies even more in her innocence.

Pecola believes that Soaphead Church has helped her to receive the blue eyes that she fervently prayed for. Pecola “got blue eyes, bluer than theirs.” [197] Dee describes the impact of the novel, saying “[Morrison] has split open the person and made us watch the heart beat. We feel faint, helpless and afraid - not knowing what to do.” [20] Morrison herself claims that “One problem was centering: the weight of the novel’s inquiry on so delicate and vulnerable a character could smash her and lead readers into the comfort of pitying her rather than into an interrogation of themselves.” [211] Morrison didn’t want readers to “remain touched but not moved.” [211] The issues raised truly do touch the reader in an indescribably deep and special way. In *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison has created a powerful novel with a strong social impact.

The Bluest Eye is written as a fragmented narrative from multiple perspectives and with significant typographical deviations. This novel juxtaposes passages from the Dick-and-Jane grammar school primer with memories and stories of Pecola’s life alternately told in retrospect by one of Pecola’s now-grown childhood friends and by an omniscient narrator. It is published in the midst of the Black Arts movement that flourished during the late 1960s and early 1970s. It has attracted considerable attention from literary critics - though not to the same degree as Morrison’s later works. There is a sensitive portrait of African American female identity and its astute critique of the internalized racism bred by American cultural definitions of beauty in this novel. It has been widely seen as a literary watershed, inspiring a proliferation of literature written by African American women about their identity and experience as women of color. Morrison depicts a large part of African American culture when she places the characters in an urban area. The change of environment from the north to the south plays a key role in the loss of communal ties. African Americans are extremely affected given that they are displaced and are attempting to conform to northern cultural standards. The emphasis in the north is on material wealth and beauty, whereas the south is more family oriented.

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