

## **The Quest for Self in *The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison**

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### **Abstract**

This paper will critically read the significance of gaze in constructing identity and subjectivity of African -American women .The novel, *The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison has tried to redefine beauty and the identity crisis of the black women out of the specular American Psychological system into a racial authenticity. The identity crisis makes a sense of self-loathing, inferiority in the mind. And this situation creates the quest for self. The most insulting situation for a person is, if s/he is neglected as s/he is invisible to the viewer. And that happens to the protagonist of the novel. The book shows how the white society created their own concept of beauty and makes that universalized for the people of all colors, societies and races. But a character like Claudia, one of the narrators in the novel, shows the path of a better future of the blacks. Morrison portrays her woman from zero image (Pecola) to independent individuality (Claudia) where the expectation of triumph works.

**Key words:** Morrison, beauty, gaze, racism, panopticon, freedom, identity

### **Introduction**

The novel, *The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison explores the question of what it means to be an African in a racist capitalist white society. The very title of the book suggests the dominant ideology of racism, the class exploitation and cultural hegemony were the whites are responsible for the plight of black. The protagonist of the novel, yearns not just for blue eyes, but to be white. She is brought up in a set- presumption influenced by the white standards of beauty. This paper consists of a textual analysis taking a critical exploration mainly towards the African Americans racial identity and its effects.

Pauline Breedlove, Geraldine, Maureen Peal, and Pecola are black characters who try to conform to an imposed ideal of femininity. They are absorbed and marginalized by the

"cultural icons portraying physical beauty: movies, billboards, magazines, books, newspapers, window signs, dolls, and drinking cups. In trying to conform to the ideal of white femininity, the black women characters despise their blackness which in turn leads them to self-hatred.

The author brings out the psychological damage done to a black girl (protagonist of the novel) who self destructively accepts white culture's definition of beauty.. The novel focuses on Pecola's futile longing for blue eyes. At last author shows the psychological plight done to her. Pccola's quest is for whiteness which is synonymous with beauty and blackness which is to ugliness and what she believes is the reason behind her being rejected everywhere.

However, not all the black characters adore or are in awe of Western standards of beauty. Claudia, the young girl narrator, at the very beginning of the novel, describes herself as indifferent to both white dolls and Shirley Temple. She also realizes that she does not really hate light-skinned Maureen but hates the thing that makes Maureen beautiful. It is the ideology of whiteness that makes Maureen appear beautiful and the 'Thing' Claudia learns to fear is the white standard of beauty that members of the African American community have internalized, a standard that favors the 'high-yellow' Maureen Peal and denigrates the "black and ugly" Pecola Breedlove.

### **Relative ideas**

In *The Bluest Eye*, the dominant racial ideology is that everything related to the color of whiteness is beautiful and blackness is ugly. Thereby the identity of the African Americans is terminated through the interpellation of the western ideological thoughts. Most Americans are stimulated by the rules or ideologies set by the white Americans. One gets the feeling of constant gazing from the idea of panopticon and loses his or her total sense of identity or freedom, in this novel the black people's identity is constructed by the gaze of white people that controls their code of behaviors. White ideologies work as the mechanism of panopticon in the black community and determine their identity.

In the context of *The Bluest Eye*, panopticon is not merely a visual devise of imposing and accepting racial identity of inferiority, but also it works subtly through the life of an individual and a community. The way of admiration, acceptance and praise for any human being can simply be understood by other men's look; at the same time disgust, rejection and unworthiness for anybody can also be understood by simply look or gaze. Thus by panopticon and gaze of white standard, blacks are identified negatively regardless of their origin and without questioning they accept and internalize the hegemonic ideology through total negation and self-hatred. Blacks measure themselves through the eyes of whites. In

other words, individual blacks stand to the particular norms of beauty and values imposed by white culture. Here we see the second personhood of seeing oneself through the others eyes in a social and historical context.

### **Quest for self**

Morrison begins the novel with reference to the "Dick and Jane" reading primer. As the story-progresses, Morrison repeats the passage from the primer, first without punctuation, then without spacing between the words. This shows that while the words remain the same in the passage, there are missing elements creating a dysfunction of sorts. This example carries over to the main text. The reader finds a family; mother, father, sister and brother, but key elements are missing. Father is a drunk, and mother is self-loathing. Pecola's only recourse to escape a tragic world without love is to go insane.

Pecola experiences damage from her abusive and negligent parents. The reader is told that even Pecola's mother thought she was ugly from the time of birth. Pecola's negation may have initially been caused by her family's failure to provide her with identity, love, security, and socialization, all which are essential for any child's development (Samuels 13). She struggles to find herself in infertile soil, leading to the analysis of a life of sterility. Like the marigolds planted that year, Pecola never grew.

Both beauty and racism, not synonymous but perhaps running parallel, create anger, shame, and self-loathing, and most importantly, they limit freedom. In the text, racist attitude toward blacks is shown as a lack of recognition, a perspective in which the idea of blackness removes human identity. A white shopkeeper literally does not see Pecola-"his eyes drawback, hesitate, and hover" (Morrison 46) and also does not see her as containing the identity of a person. In place of her personhood, there is a "vacuum" (Morrison 48), a "vacuum where curiosity ought to lodge" (Morrison 47), which she has noticed "lurking in the eyes of all white people" (Morrison 48). This is not his choice. It is his view of reality. "He does not saner, because for him there is nothing to see" (Morrison 48).

Pecola's self, her presence as a subject, remains unrecognized by those who have absorbed white standard of visual attractiveness. When Pecola goes to buy Mary Jane candy there Mr. Yakobowski cannot acknowledge her presence as a subject and refuses to look at her.

"At some fixed point in time and space he senses that he need not waste the effort of a glance. He does not see her .because for him there was nothing to see."(Morrison 36)

As Pecola does not fit the white standards of the specular system, people like Yacobowski absent her from existence. This can be described as the negation of one's self. This causes the total negation of Pecola .

"She looks up at him and sees the vacuum where curiosity ought to lodge. And something more. The total absence of human recognition-the glazed separateness. ."(Morrison 36)

Beauty is a subjective concept; every individual maintains a different perspective on what is beautiful. Using the white, middle-to-upper-class society as a backdrop for the black community of Loraine, Ohio, Morrison asserts that the concept of beauty is affected by mainstream culture.

One day, Pecola and her friends, all black, encounter a white girl, Maureen Peal, who after a tiffin with the girls, insists,

"I am cute! And you are ugly! Black and ugly black e mos. I am cute" (Morrison 73)

From this scene, two ideas are presented: the idea of blackness and the idea of beauty. The girls are struck by Maureen's insistence of superiority.

More subtly, in Pauline's story, submitting to the concept of beauty is a process described in a language that evokes images of slavery:

"She stripped her mind, bound it" (Morrison 121).

It might seem extreme to compare slavery to the idea of beauty. Morrison has presented a clear layout not only for the psychological effects of those who fall victim to romantic love, beauty, or racism, but also a way to unite all three of these ideas.

But the parallel between beauty and racism is most interesting in their shared effects. Pecola, after experiencing the perspective of the shopkeeper, a perspective in which she does not exist, goes through the same rationalization as the girls after Maureen, the same process as her mother after the movies. First there is envy. Pecola, before experiencing the perspective of the shopkeeper, a perspective in which she does not exist, prays for blue eyes. She goes to the store for Mary Janes, a symbol of whiteness. When the separateness is noticed, when no longer is "the world a part of her" (Morrison 48), a loss of love occurs. She looks to dandelions, which are now separate entities, and tries to love them.

"But they do not look at her," of course, as the shopkeeper did not-"and do not second love back" (Morrison 50).

This can be thought of as self-loathing, as she had previously identified herself with the dandelions. She becomes angry, which gives her an "awareness of worth" (Morrison 50), but this fades to disillusion, as the anger has no object.

Not only is beauty an idea, but it relies on another idea, the idea of separateness. Separateness can be thought of as the primary assumption. To show her separateness, Maureen moves "safe on the other side" of the street (Morrison 73), separating herself physically from the black girls before asserting her superiority verbally.

Morrison uses popular figures from the 1940's to show the acceptance of African Americans towards "white beauty." This is first seen when Mr. Henry arrives at the MacTeer's house, greeting Claudia and Frieda with:

"Hello there. You must be Greta Garbo, and you must be Ginger Rogers  
." (Morrison 16).

Both characters are white, leading the reader to assume that white women were used to describe pretty girls of any race and girls of other color don't have any identity.

Films play an important role in the self-degradation of black people. As Frieda, Claudia, Pecola and a white girl named Maureen Peal walk past a theatre, they stand in awe at Betty Grable smiling down on them and discuss Hedy Lamarr's haircut (Morrison 69). Pauline Breedlove, Pecola's mother, recounts her visits to the "picture shows," the "education" that ended her ability to "look at a face and not assign it some category in the scale of beauty..." (Morrison 122).

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 (Morrison 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" (Morrison 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 la ta" (Morrison 65).

Early in the novel, Morrison locates Pecola and Breedlove's problems with gaze in the family setting and poses these problems as, ultimately ideological. The author goes on to theorize:

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. It was as though some mysterious all-knowing master had given each one a cloak of ugliness to wear, and they each had accepted it without question. The master had said, "You are ugly people". They had looked about themselves and saw nothing to contradict the statement; saw, in fact, support for it leaning at them from every billboard, every movie, every glance.' Yes," they had said, "you are right." And

they took the ugliness in their hands, through it as a mantle over them, and went about the world with it. (Morrison 34)

Significantly, the “mysterious master” referred to here is the dominant, hegemonic ideology which, with "the look" as its instrument, devalues the Breedloves, assigns them to their social place and correspondingly, to their place in the hierarchy of physical beauty. Equally as important though Morrison shows us the pervasiveness of the ideological state apparatuses, as "the look" is figured into billboard advertising, popular cinema, and other media and assimilated from "every glance," be it white or black.

Pecola believes that the cruelty she witnesses and experiences is connected to how she “is seen”. In other words, Pecola’s definition of her self-esteem is established by those who see her. This is how she sees herself:

"Long hour she sat looking at the mirror trying to discover the secret of" the ugliness. (Morrison 54)

Through this discovery she seeks an escape into the fantasy world. Having seen white baby dolls with blue eyes loved and desired, she believes from her childhood that blue eyes would change everything: if she had blue eyes, she would look beautiful. It is needed to be considered that the standard of beauty that her peers subscribe to is represented by the white child actress, Shirley Temple, who has the desired blue eyes. Thus, 'gaze' acts as a pervasive force in Pecola's life.

"...if she looked different, beautiful, may be Cholly would be different, and Mrs. Breedlove too. May be they'd say, why look at pretty eyed Pccola. We mustn't do bad things in front of those pretty eyes..."(Morrison 34)

Pecola thinks that how we see the world is determined by eye's colour but it is indeed related to human psychology. Hence, she appeals to God for nine years to have "pretty eyes, pretty blue eyes..."(Morrison 34). In fact they are the path towards redemption.

The most damaging interracial confrontation related to color involves Pecola and an adult. Geraldine (Samuels 12). 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" (Morrison 92).

Pecola is a delicate character because of her young age, but her delicacy lies even more in her innocence. Pecola actually believes that Soaphead Church has helped her to receive the blue eyes that she fervently prayed for. Pecola "got blue eyes, bluer than theirs" (Morrison 197).

Cholly is described as the total opposite of the father as the white society. As he is black, he is ugly and slave of the white people. This idea makes him to suffer all through his life and the violence of the rape of his daughter, is the ultimate result. So he adopted the white concept in negative way. The blacks gazed by the whites in that way, form their identity as inferior to them and the quest for self continues.

The characters like Paulin, Geraldine and Maureen are the proper example of self-loathing. Here we find Morrison presents them who look at the black girls. It means that not only the white people making the blacks as their subject of gaze, but also the black women are making other blacks as their subject of gaze. Paulin by accepting her as the slave of the Fisher's shows her self-hatred. Geraldine shows the acceptance of the white standard of beauty and cleanliness, by concerning excessively with house cleaning. Maureen is the symbol of pride, because is lighter skinned girl than the other black girls. All these characters through their acceptance of the white standard of beauty search their self and show their self-loathing.

When Paulin Breedlove realizes that she cannot achieve full citizenship in her own domestic space, she contents herself with occupying the space of her employers. Morrison's hemming metaphor takes an added significance here because, as the Fishers' servant responsible for domestic tasks as such as hemming and cooking, Polly is able to "hang on to the hem of their lives. In her role as the Fishers' cherished servant Polly, Paulin feels what it's like "to wear their white skin" and to assume the "privileges" of citizenship that such whiteness affords her. At their house

"She could arrange things, clean things up in neat rows-Here she found beauty, order, cleanliness and praise"(Morrison 101)

The fishers turn Polly into a fetish; she is the signifier of happy servitude, of benevolent rescue from her own culture's inherent debasement. For, Claudia, Polly is the signifier of the intimate forms of exploitation inherent in the relationship between black and white families; in other words, she realizes that it is the black white inter-familiar relationship that is inherently flawed and not the black family itself. When Claudia witnesses Paulin's mothering of the Fisher girl, she recalls,

"The familiar violence rose in me her calling Mrs. Breedlove Polly, when even Pecola called her mother Mrs. Breedlove" (Morrison 86)

Thus by assuming the slave position in the white family, Paulin actually shows her self-hatred.

Again, Geraldine's emphasis on decorum and cleanliness also represents Morrison's critic of a particular kind of internalized racism and a middle class contempt for the poor. Throughout the book, the worship of cleanliness. Geraldine's hatred of dirt and disorder is fundamentally linked to her hatred of "blacks" and is off course, a kind of self-hatred. This emphasis on propriety and cleanliness actually functions as a deep form of self-betrayal. She scapegoats poor, dark skinned black children like Pecola, because she hates her own blackness. This scapegoating is intensified by fear: the fear that is not so easy to distinguish between respectable "colored" people and "blacks" after all, and the fear of the suffering she sees in the eyes of black girls like Pecola.

Maureen, lighter than other black girls, shows her pride not being a black, and she even does not hesitate to call others as black and ugly. She also reinforces the connection between race and class -lighter skinned than the other black children, she is also wealthier. Maureen Peal is a green eyed, middle class mulatto girl. She successfully achieves the superior status in the society. But she is the symbol of the slavery and oppression of the whites'. As being the representative of the hybrid birth, she loves to be as one of the part of the white dominant society, but the truth is she is in quest of her self-hood.

The only character in *The Bluest Eye* that seems to be unaffected by mainstream culture is Claudia MacTeer. As Frieda and Pecola converse about how cute Shirley Temple is, Claudia becomes disgusted. She hates Shirley because she feels that instead of,

"one of those little white girls whose socks never slid down under their heels," she should be the little girl dancing with Mr. Bonjangles (Morrison 19).

Claudia reminisces about the Christmas she was given a white baby doll. With no interest in a white baby doll, and feeling let down that her parents didn't even ask her what she wanted, she destroyed it. Her feelings towards the doll transferred over to actual white girls.

"What made people look at them and say, 'Awwwww,' but not for me?"  
(Morrison 22).

Yet, Claudia understands what the future holds.

"Younger than both Frieda and Pecola, I had not yet arrived at the turning point in the development of my psyche which would allow me to love her." (Morrison 19).

Claudia naively assumes that the beauty others see in the doll must inhere physically inside it. Her dissection of white doll parallels the investigative work done by the novel. In its own words, the novel attempts to discover 'how' social forces have combined to produce Pecola's tragedy. As a resistance to the white ominous 'gaze' or racist ideology of 'beauty', her subsequent loving of black baby (of Pecola) indicates her hating of white babies.

Additionally, the image of white doll dismemberment by a white girl oddly inverts and fore shadows Pecola's later psychological destruction.

Meanwhile, Claudia is not only indifferent to white dolls along with Shirley Temple cup, but also realizes that she hates the thing that makes Maureen beautiful:

"The *Thing* to fear was the *Thing* that made her beautiful and not us"(Morrison 58)

It can be said that 'the thing' Claudia learns to fear is the white standard of beauty, standard that favours the 'high yellow' Maureen Peal and denigrates the 'black and ugly' Pecola Breedlove. Claudia also asserts that:

"Dolls we could destroy, but we could not destroy... the obedience in the eyes of our peers. The slippery light in the eyes of our teachers when they encountered the Maureen Peals of the world. What was the secret? What did we lack? Why was it important?"(Morrison 57)

Claudia takes her anxieties and discomfort and cherishes Pecola Breedlove, as well as Pecola's unborn child,

"Just to counteract the universal love of white baby dolls. Shirley Temples and Maureen Peals" (Morrison 148).

Nothing about Pecola or Claudia is stable and coherent. It is through the instability and incoherence of place and sense of self that the characters in Morrison's novel continually 'become': they are embodied processes rather than passive recipients of cultural subjugation.

Geraldine is a metaphor for that society of people who in their own quest for acceptance use their own race against others who are darker or poorer than they are. This became the case of Pauline Breedlove as well. This is a human flaw. A straight haired person yearns for curly; a short person yearns for height, a brown-eyed person, yearns for blue. We are never totally satisfied with what we have. This flaw, when dealt with realistically, can be beneficial, it can help in the realization of self.

Claudia accepts who she is, she knew. She was not Shirley Temple, and resented the fact that the world needed her to be. Pecola, on the other hand, fell into the trap. Pecola remained in denial of who she really was, she set race, economics, and sex dictate how she felt she needed to be perceived.

At the end of the novel, Pecola gets a friend and gets the blue eyes but not only through her imagination and insanity. Alone, with no one to turn to, she creates an imaginary friend, someone who will listen while she talks about her blue eyes. Pecola has been destroyed by racism that wholly negates the dreams and aspirations of black skinned, brown eyed people.

The devastating power of racial contempt and self-hatred has caused Pecola to literally self-destruct in her quest for love, self-worth, and identity.

### **Conclusion**

Beauty is a phenomenon calls into being in the viewer an instant, complex process of recognition, misidentification projection and elimination. The experience of beauty has always called the self into profound relation with beauty .The journey in the novel. *The Bluest eye*, makes the experience of beauty an easy analogue for racial classification, a process of self-definition. *The Bluest Eye*, makes it obvious that the cultural standards of beauty and their association with racism, really affect one's perspective of life. In the story ,the notion of what is beautiful is constructed and maintained by the white ideology, and Pecola longing to belong to that dominant group causes her eventual destruction .Pecola's desire for 'blue eyes' is synonymous with her search for the American myth of beauty and self-virtue.

Morrison adjures the female members of the community and exhorts black women to return to reality and reject the illusionary tendencies of media presentation. Pecola's desire for 'blue eyes' is synonymous with her search for the American myth of beauty as self-virtue. But her illusions suffer distortions as she is subjected to varied degrees of oppressions, within the community and without. The main theme of the novel is, quest for individual identity and the influence of the family and community in that quest.

The white 'gaze' and black 'blindness' are the policy or mechanics leading to "hegemonic ideology' to fulfill the power system of making the unprivileged blacks inferior to whites. Regarding the racial prejudices originating from outside 'gaze'.Pecola tries to conform to the hegemonic ideology of beauty and utterly fails. She suffers from identity crisis which leads her to quest for self. The novel tries to deconstruct the hegemonic ideology and racially hierarchical identity constructed by gaze and blindness to reconstruct a dignified identity for the twentieth -century African-Americans.

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