

RACIAL DISCRIMINATION IN TONI MORRISON'S "THE BLUEST EYE" A POSTCOLONIAL STUDY



Literature

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Sadia Afroz

Senior Lecturer, Department of English, Stamford University, Bangladesh.

Abstract

Racism is a faithful depiction of one race's superiority to another, resulting in discrimination and prejudice towards the black nation based on race or ethnicity. For centuries, the life of the Afro-American community has been affected, tormented, maltreated due to racial conflicts. In *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison presents a community in which racial conflicts are internalized. Morrison delivers a faithful message relating to the black woman's identity crisis by presenting the emancipation of mind and soul of the black community. The Afro-American women have been exploited in American male-dominated society, where white people are the decision-maker and arbiters of all the concerns. For this purpose, the paper aims to look at the politics of the postmodern culture of capitalism in a racist society and culture. It seeks to investigate the sadomasochist attitude of the characters in the theoretical framework of internalized racism in the African-American community presented in *The Bluest Eye*. It would like to foster a little black girl Pecola's sufferings and agonies in a white-dominated society and the tribulations black families' experience.

Introduction

Toni Morrison's first novel, *The Bluest Eye*, is written in 1960 and published in 1970. Through several layers of voices and different narrative techniques, the novel presents a shocking story of a little black girl, Pecola Breedlove, who descends into madness after being emotionally and physically abused on several occasions by the entire community around her, even—and especially—by her family. (Gomes 1) Morrison touches on the racial conflicts faced by black women living in USA. She examines slavery and socio-material destruction. *The Bluest Eye* fosters a little, black-skinned girl Pecola Breedlove, who grows up in the middle of domestic violence. The white society and the perception of beauty constructed by them remind Pecola how ugly she is. Pecola believes that in order to win her mother's affection and the respect of the community, she must have blue eyes and blond hair. A little daughter of a poor black family, Pecola prays to God every night for her eyes to be blue. She thinks that if her eyes were blue, she would be a charming girl, her father would stop drinking and not beat her mother, her brother would not escape from her family, everything in Pecola's life would change. She begs God to have white skin and blue eyes. Not only Pecola but her father Cholly and mother Pauline have had a troubled and challenging life. This painful life extinguishes the love that once existed between her parents that lead to physical violence.

The culmination of the violence is when her father Cholly rapes Pecola and impregnates her. This tragic incident is a turning point for Pecola. Her self-hatred begins to deepen when her mother leaves her and the society did not accept her presence anymore. At the end of the novel, Pecola goes mad. There are two reasons: The first is the desire to identify as white with beauty.

Whiteness is a standard that blacks will never have. The situation is even more desperate for Pecola, who is blacker than others. She associates beauty with love. If her skin was white and her eyes were blue, she would be loved, and her beautiful skin and face would be appreciated in society. Blacks have such great respect for being white that Pecola calls whiteness the essence of beauty. Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* is a depiction of racial conflicts which is bought by the colonizers to establish their supremacy over the black colonized community of Africa. When black people look at a white person, they see their ugliness. (Erdemir Kara and Demirtaş 203-204)

Literature Review

Erdemir Kara and Demirtaş (2020) argue that women are affected by a pre-existing male-dominated culture. This situation leads to the alienation of women, especially black women, from society. In *The Bluest Eye*, women suffer from past traumas related to their race and seek to be accepted into existing culture and society. The differences between women and men in the Afro-American community can be explained in terms of dominant power. Morrison tells about the unfortunate living conditions of black women in American society through the art of characterization and plot construction. Thus, she has presented the everyday experience of women. Women want to live freely with their own identities and to be accepted by society. Black women get being ostracized by society and begin to live in loneliness. (Mathpati 2020) agrees with Fanon, who argues that the black people or community and the nation are manipulated by the white men and nation. They have become the father, authority, where the colonized people have become the children who have to obey their father at any cost and in any circumstances. The native accepts their authority and takes up arms because they are poor and hungry. They think that they are banished and socially disintegrated and treated like an animal in the American community. Patrice Bryce (1992) explores how cultural and communal traditions influence the search for self and place within a given African-American community. Ogunyemi (1977) fosters the triadic patterns by creating the tragic condition of the black nation in a racist America. Colson (2006) wants to say how the novel presents the theme of race and identity crisis of the black nation. Rosenberg (1987) regards the black girlhood in the racist Afro-American community shows that one fashions a self in the form of racism. Fisher and Silber (2003) present a female experience and female subjectivity through the lens of gender. Vickroy (2002) also presents postcolonial theories to focus on the cultural aspects of traumatic experience by presenting relationships, identity formation, and the possibilities for symbolization. The trauma and self-hatred that show the existing framework of racism in the Afro-American society. But the relation between the impacts of the postmodern consumer culture with the psychodynamics of the black characters in the novel has not been studied to offer the framework of racism in the African-American society.

Racial Discrimination and Theoretical Projections in *The Bluest Eye*

Racism is a picture of the superiority of one race over another resulting in discrimination and prejudice towards people based on race or ethnicity. It presents the ideology that human has been subdivided into different groups because of social behavior and innate capacities as inferior or superior. Many examples of the doctrine lead to the genocide of millions of people in South Africa. Although it is practiced in the 19th-century racial discrimination and atrocities against the people of color are on the rise in their worst form in America even though the Emancipation Proclamation is signed by the American President Lincoln in 1863, which brings an end to the slave trade in America. Still, the miserable existence of the black nation remains the same still now.

Racial discrimination becomes acute with the arrival of colonialism. The European forefathers start their expedition to various countries to establish trade and commerce. They imprint their foot-marks on numerous countries as a source of autonomous power in the name of civilizing the East and purify them from barbarity. The Europeans establish political order to carry out the administration in new colonies executed either by force or by colonial power. Walia says that colonialism is accompanied by exploitation, annexation, and conquest. Its hegemonic power rests on creating the binary opposition of self/other, white/black, and superior/inferior. Thus, a part of the world can enjoy supremacy because it convinces the rest about the white man's burden and his civilizing machine. (Walia 77) This binary opposition leads to the conception of racial discrimination between the white settlers and the natives. As native elites try to identify themselves with the white settlers, which become more complicated issue, at the same time, the white settlers take advantage in exploiting the country though they join their hands in executing various programs to oppress the native subalterns. The white imperialists advocate the policy of divide and rule to carry out the smooth functioning and meet their ends. As a result, the native elites support the white settlers in suppressing the insurgency of the subalterns.

Similarly, *The Bluest Eye* is a novel of racial discrimination in America and it portrays different kinds of discriminatory structures. Morrison's characters believe that blackness means ugliness. Even Maureen, Pocola's class mate at school, thinks that since her skin is lighter brown, she is superior to other black girls and in this way, she shows her racist thoughts. Maureen shouts at the girls: "I am cute! And you ugly! Black and ugly."

In *Preface to The Wretched of the Earth*, Sartre comments that the European elite manufacture a native elite. They pick out promising adolescents; they brand them, as with a red-hot iron, with the principles of western culture; they stuff their mouth full with high-sounding phrases, grand glutinous words that lead to the teeth. After a short stay in the mother country, they are sent home, white-washed. (Sartre 3) As the colonies strengthen in many parts of the world, the white settlers have to face firm opposition from the natives. But the native elites see it as their dignity to support the uprising voice of the lower classes. It results from racial superiority or

inferiority which is based on color and wealth. The native elites join hands with the white settlers and discriminate against the subalterns to share European colonialism. Society is divided based on racial issues similarly Fanon points out that the world is divided into compartments by the two different species. The originality of the colonial context is that economic reality, inequality, and immense difference in ways of life never come to mask human realities. In the colonies, the economic substructure is a superstructure. The cause is the consequence: “You are rich because you are white; you are white because you are rich.” (Fanon 30) In this concern I can argue with Frantz Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks*, where he points:

Mayotte loves a white man to whom she submits in everything. He is her lord. She asks nothing, demands nothing, except 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 had blue eyes blond hair, and a light skin, and that I loved him.” It is not difficult to see that a rearrangement of these elements in their proper hierarchy would produce something of this order. (Fanon 42)

From the above-mentioned quotation, it can be expressed here that Like Mayotte, Morrison’s Pecola loves white man and white socio-cultural trends all of which she worships as God in her inner mind. She longs for blue eyes, blonde hair and a light skin. Fanon’s treatment of the divergence between the white and the black can purely be compared with Morrison’s treatment of the race and racism through the portray of her women characters as projected in the novel, *The Bluest Eye*.

Interiorly or exteriorly, the subalterns are made to believe that they belong to an inferior race and cannot make any real contribution to society. The white settlers are always emerged as champions of the superior race and so subjugated the will and aspirations of the clouded. In the colonial period, the settler-native relationship is compared to that of a master and a slave. Even though the natives are conscious of their rights and free will about their land, they are treated as secondary citizens. Such subjugation is made possible in racism like Indians are referred to as brown and Africans as black. The subalterns try to strike back against the white supremacy, but the authority does not have the patience to listen to their grand request.

In the colonial countries, the natives have to suffer as they are considered not equal with the so-called whites and are never an able threat to their ruthless leadership. Although colonization is abolished, its outcome is that the West occupies the position of an ideal state in the minds of the colonized people. Moreover, Ashcroft, in his book *The Empire Writes Back*, makes a distinction between colonialism and post colonialism. He writes that colonialism is used to denote a period before independence, and postcolonial covers cultures affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonization to the present time. (Ashcroft et al. 2)

In this concern I argue that Morrison makes clear that the concept of the blacks’ inferiority not only adversely affected black people, but also reciprocally affected white people and the way they imagined their roles in society. Pecola is demoralized when Maureen accuses her by saying

“her old black daddy” naked. Maureen claims her dominance by shouting “I am cute, and you ugly! Black and ugly black e mos. I am cute” (Morrison 73)

Racial subalternity continues to evolve its consequences even after the colonial rule. In postcolonial studies, race brings the way for ethnicity to account for human variation in culture, social patterns, tradition, and ancestry. Ashcroft enumerates the significance of race in this sense that race continues to be relevant in postcolonial theory for two reasons: First, it is so central to the growing power of imperial discourse during 19th-century; and second, it remains a central and unavoidable fact of modern society that race is regarded as the dominant category of daily discriminations and prejudice. (Ashcroft 207)

European and Euro-American dominion and expansion take the form of oppression, genocide, and slavery. The central reality of the new country is the economic exploitation of Native Americans, African Americans, and other Americans of color to generate prosperity, wealth, and status for generations of European Americans. The centuries-long theft of Native American lands and African American labor by European Americans constitute the economic foundation of the new nation, and the unjust enrichment stemming from that theft generated not only income, assets, and wealth for the white families directly involved, but an extensive capitalistic economy benefiting the whites. This economy is substantially centered in the slavery system and its associated farms and commercial enterprises and later evolved into related forms of racial exploitation, such as legal and de facto segregation. Over the centuries, this color-coded economic exploitation facilitates economic mobility and substantially enhances white Americans’ assets and socio-economic status. (9-10)

In this perspective, I can suggest that Morrison knows a problem specific to groups targeted by racism that Afro- Americans begin to believe about themselves and imagine that Euro-Americans are superior in beauty, morality, and intelligence. She is well known for her Afro-American identity and she is determined to investigate the complex life of the black slaves, other men and women who live in highly backward and neglected conditions in America. They are not only hated by the white men and women of America, but also, they are treated in a manner worse than animals. She is much more concerned with the life and improvement of the black community. The novel is about a young girl Pecola who desires to have white skin, blond hair and blue eyes against her dark complexion as: “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 35).

Todorov (1999) uses the term ‘race’ but leaves the impression that the word is only a substitute, sometimes synonymous with the nation, sometimes with the essential element or dominant faculty. On the other hand, Balibar (1991) points out that the excess that racism represents concerning nationalism, and it adds to nationalism, tends at the same time to universalize it by correcting in sum its lack of universality, and to particularize it, correcting its lack of specificity. In other words, racism adds to the ambiguity of nationalism, not only on the

theoretical plane – in many respects, racism supplies nationalism with the only theories it has – but also on the practical plane through racism, nationalism engages in a blind pursuit, a metamorphosis of its ideal contradictions into material ones. (54)

Here I agree with Todorov and Balibar in this sense that in *The Bluest Eye*, the people of the black community internalize cultural myths related to the black and the white that are based on race, and consequently start to objectify and scapegoat one of the members of their community, Pecola. So, Morrison has arguably portrayed the character of Pecola to foster the practical picture of racial discrimination.

Racial discrimination in postcolonial literature becomes the central issue of the writers. Afro- American writers not only represent themselves but also their race and culture. They try to establish Afro-American identity through fiction, stories, essays, and prose. Morrison, an Afro-American novelist, raises racial concerns in her writings on behalf of the black community. In America, racism is an accurate picture. In the postcolonial context, voices against racial discrimination get more focus and prominence. Morrison has become the mouthpiece of the black nation. Her writings present the black people's oppression and maltreatment in a white-dominant patriarchal society. She realizes very early in her life that racism becomes the greatest enemy of the black nation. She tries to justify that getting back the black identity is the only way to check the racial discrimination. She knows a problem specific to groups targeted by racism that Afro-Americans begin to imagine that Euro-Americans are superior in beauty, morality, and intelligence. Morrison is very well-known for her Afro-American identity and discovers the complex life of black slaves, other men, and women living in America's highly backward and neglected condition. They are hated by the white men and women of America, but they are treated worse than animals. She is much more concerned with the life and improvement of the black community of her age. (Dar et al. 941)

Morrison fosters that her thoughts about why a black girl prays for blue eyes are stimulated when the racial beauty of "Black is Beautiful" is reclaimed. *The Bluest Eye* fosters the voice of the demoralized black community in the insignificant society which becomes silenced. It is racial bigotry that indicates her concern to creatively describe the white folk's insensitivity towards the black nation. The novel's protagonist, an eleven-year-old black girl, thinks that she is ugly and that having blue eyes would make her beautiful. She suffers the abuse of her mother, father, and classmates. She is lonely and imaginative. Her expectation is the result of a misconception regarding race in American society. The black people have to undergo a lot of oppression and atrocities based on racial inferiority. Pecola, a female protagonist, is the most woeful creation who suffers from racial discrimination. She is abused by her mother, Pauline Breedlove. Pecola never feels her mother's love and realizes that it is because of her dark color; dark skin, dark eyes, and woolly hair. She is not seen as beautiful, and from these thoughts in her inner mind, and therefore, she begins to hate the beauty of white children. She thinks of herself as ugly and attributes their mistreatment of her to her physical appearance. She develops a thought that no one would misbehave in front of her if she were beautiful. When Pecola desires blue eyes, she wants to

escape her life. She defines herself only by her degree of blackness. At the age of eleven, she finds inferiority and worthlessness acquiring the symbol of beauty in her black community. Blue eyes are beautiful by characters, including the mother and children who admire Shirley Temple. Pecola is not appreciated and cared for by her family. She has no other person or place where she is safely valued. In her community, she is subjected to consider inter-racism by grown-ups and even her peers. Desiring blue eyes, she is becoming more and more obsessed; and imagines that her blue eye can be the solution for her distressing situation; and is shunned. (942) Here Morrison writes: “The total absence of human recognition – the glazed separateness [...] She has seen it lurking in the eyes of all white people. 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” (Morrison 48-49).

Racism which penetrates every aspect of society is a crucial factor in understanding the actions of Pauline and Cholly, and their actions are the reactions to oppression and racism. Pecola does not witness love and affection at home. She reacts about love as “what did love feel like? She wondered how grown-ups act when they are in love. Eat fish together?” (Morrison 44) Even one of the most traumatizing events in her life is the moment when she is raped by her father, gets pregnant, and loses her sanity.

On the other hand, Claudia, an 11-year-old girl, apprehends white beauty as the terrible narrator of the story. She does not like Frieda and Pecola towards Shirley Temple, who is an icon of white peach. There is another evidence of racism in *The Bluest eye*: Young Junior’s wicked deed towards Pecola. Geraldine, the mother of Young Junior, is also a black who does not allow her son to play with other black children, making him dislike his race. Once Young Junior sees Pecola many times standing alone at recess and taking a shortcut through the playground. Nobody wants to play with her because of her black and ugly body and face. By observing this situation, Young Junior talks to her gently and invites her to his home to show her something at home. Pecola goes to his house. She is scared to get in-home but finds a big red-and-gold colored Bible on the dining-room table and a color picture of Jesus Christ on a wall. Young Junior discloses his original wicked character by pulling her into another room and throws a big black cat right on her face. She speaks pinching and full of racial words:

“Shut up!” Hair uncombed dresses falling apart, shoes untied and caked with dirt. The end of the world lay in their eyes, and the beginning, and all the waste in between. They were everywhere. They slept six in a bed, all their pee mixing in the night as they wet their beds, each in his candy-and-potato-chip dream. “Get out,” she said, her voice quiet. “You nasty little black bitch. Get out of my house (Morrison 90).

It is not only Pecola who feels racial discrimination, but even her father, Cholly, is also a victim of racism and emotional abuse since his childhood. He feels racial conflicts when he is caught having sex with his friend Darlene. Pecola realizes the supremacy of white society and longs to have the features of white females. Her strong desire to have the bluest eye in the world itself reveals her eagerness to have even more delicate features than white women. (Dar et al.944).

Except for Claudia and Frieda, Pecola has no friends. She is ridiculed by most of the other children and is insulted and tormented by black schoolboys because of her dark skin and coarse features. She realizes that no one — except Claudia and Frieda — plays with her, socializes with her, or is seen with her. She is raped by her drunken father and self-deceived into believing that

God has miraculously given her the blue eyes that she prayed for. She loses her baby, and shortly afterward, she loses her sanity. Her fate is worse than death because she is not allowed any release from her world—she moves to the edge of town, where we see her even now.

The Bluest Eyes a Postcolonial Discourse

The postcolonial theory demonstrates that decolonized people develop a postcolonial identity that deals with the cultural interactions between different identities assigned varying degrees of social power by the colonial society. In postcolonial literature, the anti-conquest narrative analyzes the identity politics that are the social and cultural perspectives of the subaltern colonial subjects—their creative resistance to the culture of the colonizer; how such cultural resistance complicates the establishment of colonial society; how the colonizers develop their postcolonial identity; and how neocolonialism actively employs the “us-and-them” binary social power structure to show the non-western world as inhabited by the other. Moreover, in the book *Postcolonial Drama: Theory, Practice, Politics* (1996), Gilbert and Tompkins point out that the term *post colonialism* is an engagement with and contestation of colonialism’s discourses, power structures, and social hierarchies. (Gilbert and Tompkins 1996)

From the postcolonial point of view, it can be expressed here that Pecola Breedlove is a colonized girl who has lost her identity and is domestically and sexually harassed by her father, Cholly, and mistreated by the white community. She falls victim to social power by the colonial society in America that Morrison has faithfully presented in her novel. Pecola has no ability to resist and protest against her drunken father or the white community. Though she tries to establish her identity, she fails due to her dark skin, blue eyes, and blonde hair. Therefore, I agree with Gilbert and Tompkins because Morrison has logically and realistically presented power structures and social hierarchy in the novel *The Bluest Eye* to foster the accurate picture of 21st-century postcolonial America.

In *Culture and Imperialism*, Edward Said (1994) defines imperialism as the practice, the theory, and the attitudes of a dominating metropolitan center ruling a distant territory. While the target adopted in colonialism is settled, imperialism becomes a capital-oriented formation due to its context and helps systems based on capitalism. Although colonialism seems to come to an end by the end of the 20th-century, it changes in meaning, and finds a place to gather under the roof of capitalism. While colonialism means preponderance in a particular region, it ceases to be applied under the hierarchy of imperialism replaced by a global understanding. (9)

If we apply the theory of Said’s colonialism and culture, we will realize that Morrison characterizes a quest for love malformed and wrenched by the viciousness of a white-dominated

culture that perverts its every expression. She on black cultural heritage and solicits the Afro-Americans to be proud of their black identity. She wants to prove that black identity is not inferior to white in any way; physical appearance and culture may be different but that doesn't mean servitude of the entire race. Her persistent interest is in what she calls "unspeakable thoughts unspoken," a phrase that resonates for her with the silence surrounding many things repressed in the American Africanist discourse.

In "Post-Colonial Body of *Post-Colonial Studies: The Key Concepts*" Ashcroft et al (2000) argue:

While there is no such thing as 'the post-colonial body', the body has been central to colonialist and post-colonial discourses of various kinds. Much post-colonial writing in recent times has contended that the body is a crucial site for inscription. How people are perceived controls how they are treated, and physical differences are crucial in such constructions. This view of the body as a site for representation and control is central to many early analysts of post-colonial experience, notably Frantz Fanon (1961), but also to the arguments of Edouard Glissant (1989). These early concerns with the body centered on ideas of colour and race (see chromatism). They emphasized the visibility of signs of difference when manifested in skin colour, hair type, facial features such as eye shape or nose shape, etc. Although such 'differences' do not constitute any decisive genetic dissimilarity, and certainly do not indicate the existence of sub-groups within a single human species (as theories of race have often erroneously asserted), they nevertheless became prime means of developing and reinforcing prejudices against specific groups.

(Ashcroft et al 166)

In this regard I argue that Morrison becomes the mouth-piece of the colored people. Her novel *The Bluest Eye* represents the colored people's oppression in a white dominant patriarchal society. She wants to justify that "getting back the black identity" is the only way to check the racial discrimination. In an interview with Salman Rushdie, she comments: "I am not sure what the word "Negro" means, which is why I write books. What is black child/woman/friend/ mother? What is a black person? It seems to me that there are so many that inform blackness" (Russel 36).

Research Findings

Morrison shows that racial pride and connection to Afro-American roots can be achieved through traditions from the community and storytelling techniques. It is not an accident that Claudia, who learns about the black community through listening to her mother's blues and receives support in her self-confidence from her sister Frieda, manages to survive and grow up healthily in the story. Pecola, who is exposed to aspirations of white values and does not learn to connect to the Afro-American community, cannot find peace or love anywhere. She believes that she has got her blue eyes by the end of the novel, but she wants bluest eyes and blonde hair.

In *The Bluest Eye*, the community has been shown as the Afro-American one by portraying male and female characters and plot construction. After all, the bluest eye does not refer

exclusively to Pecola's wish. The "eye" can be read as "I": self, subject (Moses 126). The blue eye is regarded as a reference to blues: a strong Afro-American community. If Pecola imagined, her healing would come from possessing the most downcast eyes. Morrison fosters that a truly healed identity will come from connection to community and others, which is her novel's message to her readers. Pecola, who is only exposed to aspirations of white values and does not learn to connect to African American traditions, cannot find peace or love.

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