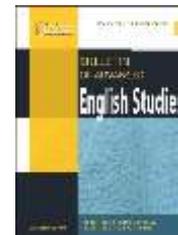




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The Blue Eyes vs Untrue Ideas: A Postcolonial Critique of Pecola's Persistence to Fit in the White American Society in *The Bluest Eye*

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Abstract: Set in Ohio, the north side of America, the tone in *The Bluest Eye* features post-colonial treatment to its central character, Pecola Breedlove. This paper discusses how she experiences a sense of being completely ruined after she is raped by her father, and her quest for the blue eyes meets merely untrue ideas. The plot, as described in the paper, provides a post-colonial background of two racial conflicts regarding the blackness, and the white beauty in America. This paper critically draws on the idea of physical whiteness as being the only American standard of beauty while Pecola's physical ugliness draws on how black people get seriously marginalized for their blackness of their own bodies. The storyline progresses to show how Pecola's tragedy becomes the central theme regarding the issue of seeing, and of being seen. The paper presents a binary opposite through the portrayal of black Pecola on one side, and Mary Janes, or Shirley Temple on the other. Consequently, the conflicts meet hardly any positive solution. Pecola receives exactly the behavior that the black slaves were used to receive from the whites in the past. From the historical perspective, The United States experienced inequality between the whites, and the blacks at that time when Morrison wrote this novel. She saw that the black race got segregated from the whites in the case of superiority. Racial tension also influenced the children in the schools, where the black ones were ridiculed there. However, the acceptance of the fair skin, actually, tormented black people both psychologically, and left a scar on them like Pecola Breedlove experiences.

Keywords: *The Bluest Eye; Toni Morrison; Post-colonialism; White Supremacy; Blackness; Trauma; Death.*

Introduction:

"This soil is bad for certain kinds of flowers. Certain seeds it will not nurture, certain fruit it will not bear, and when the land kills of its own volition, we acquiesce and say the victim had no right to live. We are wrong, of course, but it doesn't matter. It's too late.

At least on the edge of my town, among the garbage and the sunflowers of my town, it's much, much, much too late."

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- **Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye***

The Bluest Eye, published in 1970, is Toni Morrison's first novel. Morrison set the whole story in Lorain, Ohio, which is her hometown, where she used to spend her girlhood. The main character, Pecola Breedlove, is a twelve-year-old girl, who dies for blue eyes living in a poor black family with an unconcerned mother, a rude father, and a brother, who always runs away from home. Pecola suffers from family abuse, moreover, even the teacher and other kids in the school tease her all the time because of her ugly appearance. She is eager for her eyes to turn blue so that she may be as beautiful as light-skinned girls, and be loved by other people. However, her desire for blue eyes and white beauty guides her life to a painful end instead of helping her escape from the miserable life, which finally drives her insane, and sends her to irrevocable tragic fate.

The problem that deepens Pecola's tragedy, as presented in the paper, is due to two causes - the white cultural pressure; especially the internalized white aesthetic and black people's self-denial. The former cause is due to the internal key reason, while the later one directly brings Pecola to harm, and finally destroys her. *The Bluest Eye* deals with a prominent theme - the issue of beauty. In this novel, Morrison challenges the traditional western standard of beauty, which is responsible for Pecola's tragedy. Pecola's unhappy life and the tough situation that she cannot receive love from other people are mistakenly attributed to her appearance of being a young black girl manifesting a sense of being invaded that she can never change. The symbol of the bluest eye stands for not only Pecola's wish, but also all black people's desire of being whiter in the novel. Pecola's tragedy reflects on a serious issue of the African American group - especially African American women- for their passive acting in response to the oppression of white aesthetics, and, by extension of white cultural norm in other words. Morrison does not draw a positive picture about this. On the contrary, she "focuses on the damage that the black woman characters suffer through the construction of femininity in a radicalised society" (Jill L, 1998, p. 37). Being the major sufferer among the black woman characters in this novel, Pecola is sent to a tragic fate by her family, and by all the other people around her society. However, this paper will critique how Pecola's persistence for having the blue eye reflects on the black people's tragic living in the then postcolonial society of America. In this regard, a postcolonial approach is taken into consideration to show how the blue eyes reflecting the only beauty standard results in the untrue ideas that Pecola fails to understand utterly.

- **White Cultural Pressure**

In this novel, Morrison focuses on issues coming from the white cultural pressure that widely impacts black people. This story was set in the 1940s, which has been nearly 100 years since Abraham Lincoln abolished slavery from the United States in 1865 ("The House Joint Resolution", 1865). Legislations provide black people with equal rights. However, the pressure that white culture imposes on black people has not completely vanished yet. Having been considered as the dominating culture for hundreds of years, the white culture dominates black people for only their being black in skin. It has been the social reality that "The black man wants to be white. The white man slaves to reach a human level" (Fanon, 2000, p. 9). In *The Bluest Eye*, the white cultural pressure - especially pressure from the white aesthetics' part - is the first cause for Pecola's tragedy.

Pecola's desire for blue eyes starts from her painful experience at both home, and school because of her ugly appearance. In this novel, black people accept the traditional white aesthetic that sets the beauty standard of women's light skin, and the blue eyes. Thus, the judgment of considering Pecola's face being ugly is, actually, guided by the white aesthetic, which has been internalized even in black group. Claudia, the main narrator of the novel, an independent, and strong-minded young black girl, summarizes the standard of beauty from children's angle, as "...all the world had agreed that a blue-eyed, yellow-haired, pink-skinned doll was what every girl child treasured" (Morrison, 1994, p. 20). The doll is more than an object for the girl children, but the standards of beauty trammel black people's aesthetic. According to this standard, Pecola can hardly be beautiful. In terms of physical appearance, these standards can hardly be fulfilled by black women. Thus, Pecola, in this novel, is considered as "ugly" by everybody, and then it makes her mistakenly think that if she turns her eyes blue, she will be beautiful, be loved, and her life will miraculously get better. She prays to God every night. As Paul C. Taylor argues, in Pecola's pursuit of beauty, "the experience of a black woman ... differs from the experiences of ... Jewish and Irish women" (Taylor, 1999, p. 20).

This is vividly seen in Pecola's relentlessly striving to conform western ideals of beauty. She decides to buy Mary Janes candy for whom the candy is named, and every wrapper of the candy. Once she owns clumps of dandelions, she feels "owning them made her part of the world, and the world a part of her" (Morrison, 1994, p. 50). However, after she is ignored by Mr. Yacobowski in the store, she loses her love to dandelions, because they are ugly in other people's eyes, and the only beautiful thing is Mary Jane candy. She imagines as long as she eats these candies, she can be a beautiful girl like Mary Jane. The dandelions, and Mary Jane candy being a symbol of Pecola's own standard of beauty, it is relevant that they stand for the dominant white aesthetic.

Pecola's own thoughts are repressed by the white culture, as well as by the white standards of America. She eats the candy on the one hand, while her self-awareness is devoured by the white culture, and the white system of value on the other. Gurleen Grewal has put his opinion that "the hegemonizing force of an ideology ([focused by] the supremacy of the bluest eye)" by which a dominant culture reproduces [its] hierarchical power structure[s]" (Grewal, 1998, p. 24). In fact, Pecola is not the only person loses the self-awareness in the black community. As a consequence, the white aesthetic is unconsciously being internalized by black people. According to Madhu Dubey's

argument in her *Black Women Novelists and the National Aesthetic*, [t]he presence that defines black feminine characters in the novel as deficient is represented not by the black man but the white woman. Each expression of black feminine desire, whether Pecola's longing for blue eyes, Frieda's love of Shirley Temple, Claudia's hatred of white dolls, Maureen's adoration of Betty Garble, or Pauline's of Jean Harlow, takes the white woman as its object (Dubey, 1994, p. 39-40).

To demonstrate such internalized white aesthetic in the black community, Morrison mentions several white actresses, and depicts how children receive influences from them. Mr. Henry, the middle-aged man, who once rented a room from Claudia's parents, calls Claudia and Frieda "Greta Garb" (Morrison, 1994, p. 16) and "Ginger Rogers" (Morrison, 1994, p. 16) as a compliment, and they like to be called this way because these two actresses are symbols of ideal beauty. Young girls like Pecola worship Shirley Temple, the blue-eyed girl, who perfectly represents western beauty of children. When Pecola drinks milk, it takes her a long time just because she "gazed fondly at the silhouette of Shirley Temple's dimpled face" on her cup (Morrison, 1994, p. 19). She uses the blue-and-white Shirley Temple cup, whenever she gets any chance, so that she can enjoy the time looking at Shirley Temple's beautiful face. Even to children, the white aesthetic is internalized, and in the roots in the minds of black people.

Such kind of internalization not only destroys Pecola, but also changes all the black people's minds in the novel in a tragic way. According to the words from Saphead Church, who tricks Pecola into believing that she receives blue eyes, De Gatinneau's hypothesis is mentioned in *The Bluest Eye*, "all civilizations derive from the white race, that none can exist without its help, and that a society is great and brilliant only so far as it preserves the blood of the noble group that created it"

(Morrison, 1994, p. 168). This hypothesis suggests an unfair racial hierarchy, which labels the white group as a noble group, while the black group is marked as ignoble. As the dominant culture, and the basis of social norms for over hundreds of years, white culture is so powerful that black people can hardly reject it.

From Morrison's characterization, the main black skinned characters in *The Bluest Eye* are presented being very different to the white culture, and, thereby, identified, hierarchically, in three particular families, as Chikwenye Ogunyemi argues that they are "first Geraldine's (a counterfeit of the idealized white family), ... [then] the MacTeers and at the bottom [of the social order], the Breedloves" (Ogunyemi, 1977, p. 113). As the storyline goes deep, on the surface, black people are understood to share equal physical rights as white people do, which embodies as they are no longer slaves, but, literally, they have to serve white people by performing arduous physical labors. However, they still have to obey all the white social norms, but suffer from unequal treatment of being spiritual slaves of white culture. Having created with dark skin, Pecola, Pauline, Geraldine, and the likes are all found thirsty for getting alike Shirley Temple, or Merry Janes, as Donald B. Gibson believes that they sense of being marginalized by the "cultural icons portraying physical beauty: movies, billboards, magazines, books, newspapers, window signs, dolls, and drinking cups" (Gibson, 1989, p. 20).

Pecola's mother, Mrs. Breedlove, who plays an important role in Pecola's tragedy, is a typical example of victims of the white cultural pressure among black people. Mrs. Breedlove moves north with her husband, and all her dreams about future when she is still "young, loving, and full of energy" (Morrison, 1994, p. 116). She thought that after they move north, her husband would find a better job, and then she could be a happy wife, and their house would be delightful. However, she was wrong. All she has is just a drunk husband, and her loneliness. She cannot fit in the white group in north, and feels "I didn't even has a cat to talk to" (Morrison, 1994, p. 117). In that way, she is trapped by the reality that she marries a man without fortune, who cannot offer her a rich and pleasing life.

Later, she realizes the only way for her to enjoy life is going to the movies. She finds her dreams again from movies, and receives the idea of physical beauty from those movies too. After she experiences the delight of the movie, she feels as "It was really a simple pleasure, but she learned all there was to love and all there was to hate" (Morrison, 1994, p. 122). More unrealistic dreams are motivated, and these dreams blur her scale of judging the world. She begins to seek things such as romance, physical beauty, wealth, which a poor black family can never fulfill. In a word, what she wants is everything that only a rich white family can obtain. Since then, Mrs. Breedlove worships white people, and, consequently, her system of value is twisted as a result.

Just as Pecola does, Mrs. Breedlove wears ugliness as a mask as well, to do it "for support of a role she frequently imagined was hers- martyrdom" (Morrison, 1994, p. 39). She denies things that belong to her in real even including Pecola, her own daughter. She treats her family indifferently, while she loves the white family she works for. She sees her experience of working for the Fisher family as beauty, which is "for herself, a private world, and never introduced it into her storefront, or to her children" (Morrison, 1994, p. 128), and she feels "all the meaningfulness of her life was in her work" (Morrison, 1994, p. 128). The Fisher family offers all what she learns from the movies, and properly fulfills her dream of a happy rich family. So that she chooses to give her love to the Fisher family rather than to her own family, and children. Her act provides Pecola a sense of neglect, and not being loved, which is responsible for Pecola's tragedy as well. Once when Pecola knocks down the pan of cobbler by accident, she abuses Pecola by calling her "crazy fool" (Morrison, 2007, p. 109). At the same moment, she tries her best to comfort the crying girl of the Fisher family by calling her "baby".

As a mother, Mrs. Breedlove never offers Pecola any concern or love, but gives her blame, and hurts instead. When she is discriminated by the white group, she projects her humiliation on discriminating her daughter. Indeed, her mistreatment to her daughter images her reflection of frustration that she receives from the white group. In that way, Mrs. Breedlove is destroyed by the white culture, and, ultimately, destroys her own daughter's life too. If it is

scrutinized, a sense of racial superiority is so strong an aspect delineated in the novel that even the black women start showing hierarchy among their own races. In particular, Pecola's mother's maltreatment to her own daughter is a vivid example of her relentless trying to confront to the whites' ideals, and their beauties. To cover her own dark skin, and save herself from humiliation, she abuses Pecola, and projects frustration on her, what Taylor argues it happens owing to:

[o]ne of the cornerstones of the modern West has been the hierarchical valuation of human types along racial lines. ... 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. (Taylor, 1999, p. 16)

Black Community's Self-denial According to Frantz Fanon, "The black man wants to be white" (Fanon, 2000, p. 56), and "every colonized people...finds itself face to face with the language of the civilizing nation; that is, with the culture of the mother country...He becomes whiter as he renounces his blackness" (Fanon, 2000, p. 18). In the black community that Pecola lives in, they worship white culture. They believe that the less black they are, the whiter they will be. In that case, they choose to deny, and abandon their own black culture, in order to receive civilization from the white society. This is the second cause for Pecola's tragedy after the whole black society's self-denial, and their acts of renouncing their blackness.

The whole black group plays a role, which is weaker to the white group, and which is undeniable. Meanwhile, when black people make an effort to fit in the American society, they need to abandon some of their traditions in order to be accepted by white culture, while they also need to find a scapegoat to carry the mask of ugliness, which they have been given by the white group. Claudia, on the other hand, rebukes the black community for they suffer from the inferiority complex, and take pride to walk with the whites ignoring their own community. Pecola also becomes a scapegoat to this sentiment of her own community's sense of inferiority. Jan Furman also believes that once they are able to put their masks of blackness, and ugliness off, they can truly be as equal as the white people.

Within the black community, skin color becomes a standard for people to judge each other, the same as Ania Loomba states, "today, skin colour has become the privileged marker of races" (Loomba, 2002, p. 105). The lighter skin color is, the powerful that person is. Thus, a boundary line is drawn between colored, and black. Colored people look down upon black people, conversely black people respect, and envy colored people. The black community is repressed by white people, and they "live their own unnatural lives under the gaze of the dominant culture" (Bryce Bjork, 1994, p. 53) on the one hand, while they repress weaker ones within their own community to make themselves "whiter". In *the Bluest Eye*, Maureen, and Geraldine represent the colored group, while Pecola stands for the scapegoat for the whole black group.

Pecola is always the weaker one within the black community, which makes herself the perfect one to be the scapegoat for the whole black group. She is the only one sitting alone in the class; nobody shares the double desk with her. Both teachers and classmates do not like her that shows that they try to ignore her by even avoiding mentioning her name. They do so when they have to, or want to make fun of any her in the class. These people look down upon Pecola, and treat her in a terrible way because they want to find the sense of superiority. Just as Bryce Bjork claims in his book, *The Novels of Toni Morrison: the search for self and place within the community*, that "Contrasting themselves with Pecola, they embolden their own worth, deny the incongruity and inauthenticity of their own lives" (Bryce Bjork, 1994, p. 53). They impose their pain of being neglected on Pecola, make her isolated, and then they feel relieved. Once there is someone even feels more pain than they do, they feel better because they are not the worst one. In a sense, Pecola carries the deepest hurt from the black community of hers.

A sharp contrast is set in this novel when Maureen, a light-skinned girl from a rich family, who is completely different from Pecola, shows up in the school. After Maureen first arrives at the school, "She enchanted the entire school" (Morrison, 1994, p. 62). In the novel, black people adore light-skinned people like Maureen, because they want to be the same - "whiter". Maureen represents things these black people chase, including not only the light-skin, but also wealth. The former part is unchangeable, but they can still shape the latter because "While colour is taken to be the prime signifier of racial identity, the latter is actually shaped by perceptions religious, ethnic, linguistic, national, sexual and class differences" (Loomba, 2002 p. 105). They want to become "whiter" when they cannot change the physical factors, the only thing they can do is to deny what they used to have, and shape their own identities by their own actions. They do not really care about their black descendants, and culture, and they feel ashamed of them instead. They cannot change the physical appearance, but they still have the choice to make themselves closer to the dominating white culture, in the way of self-denial.

Even if the white women, and the black women are similar in terms of a physical body, and sentiment, Morrison shows how, despite of those similarities, the whites are identified as the gendered body, while the blacks are identified as the subjected body. Verily, realizing Pecola's worst experience from the white community, and her own community, her ugly face, and physical status make herself a body, devoid of white feminine ideals, generating a body, which to Sandra Lee Bartky is "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, 1989, p. 71).

Geraldine is the typical person, illustrating black people's self-denial. As a light-skinned lady, she lives her life like the white people's way, and wishes to clean her black descend out. She does not allow her son to meet, or play with any black child, as she thinks that they are dirty, and rude. She tries her best to keep her son with a perfect

outward appearance, "He was always brushed, bathed, oiled, and shod" (Morrison, 1994, p. 86). On the surface, she does all these things for her son's sake. Nevertheless, her real purpose is to get rid of anything that can be related to black culture, which is to say, she does all these things for herself. She does not really "talk to him, soothe him, or indulge him in kissing bouts" (Morrison 86), and her son Junior, is just a tool for her to show how different she is from other black women.

To some extent, Geraldine focuses too much on cleaning her black descend out, which makes her live in her own world, and cut real connection with other people. She loses her maternal instinct, and her ability of communicating with her son. She transfers her love to the cat, and shows more concern about the cat than about her own son. In contrast, her son, Junior transfers his anger to the cat. He abuses the cat, and spends "some happy moments watching it suffer" (Morrison, 1994, p. 86). Besides, he also enjoys teasing black girls such as Pecola, who he considers ugly. Later on, when Geraldine comes back home, she sees Pecola in her house. The moment she looks at Pecola with her eyes, she sees her own reflection on this little black girl as well as the reflection of her own black descend. She sees Pecola's dirty, and torn dress, plaits, muddy shoes, soiled socks and so on, which make her feel as "she had seen this little girl all of her life" (Morrison, 2007, p. 91). It's a mirror image that she does not accept. She kicks Pecola out of her house, not just because she thinks Pecola kills her favorite cat by mistake, but also because she is not able to face up to her.

Pecola reminds her of the truth that she always tries to cover - the truth that she is also originally from the black group. This makes her feel terrified. She abuses Pecola as "nasty little black bitch" (Morrison, 1994, p. 92). Afterwards, when she kicks Pecola out in a rude way, she strengthens her feeling of superiority again. The black community's self-denial plays the role of helping the white culture create Pecola's tragedy. When Pecola needs help, nobody lends her a helping hand. All they do to her is only using her as the scapegoat for all what they suffer from being black. White people need black people's privation, and ugliness to foil their poverty, and happiness, and then stronger black people need weaker black people to provide them with a feeling of superiority within their own community. This unfair treatment brings Pecola dual pressure, and results in her ultimate tragedy.

Conclusion:

With Pecola's tragedy being a prime theme in this novel, Morrison depicts the cruel image of black people's life, to show the serious issue of black people's loss in the white dominated world of postcolonial society in America. In this novel, black people wear masks of ugliness for different reasons. To some extent, their masks of ugliness not only come from the white group, but also been worn by the black people themselves. In the white dominated world, they are not confident, both in their black identities, and culture; so, they become confused, and get lost in the mirage of blue eyes.

Pecola's tragedy is not the only production of white cultural pressure, or black community's self-denial. As a matter of fact, all people in the black group, no matter how light-skinned, or black they are, suffer from that. All black people want to be treated equally as same as white people, while they can hardly reach the same living conditions, and social status that the white people have. They can never really get the same treatment, and receive real respect from the white people.

The only way for them to change their recent tough living condition to a better one is to fit in the white society, to become "whiter" so that they can take off the mask of ugliness and blackness in that case, and then live happy lives as white people do.

The black culture appears as weak culture, and so, they choose to give it up, and accept the strong culture, the white culture. They want to rebuild their identities, so that the first thing they can do is to remove their black identities all up. In order to get access to the white world, they passively accept all what the white society offers them, and abandon their own black culture, and system of value for change. However, the diversity of cultures gives them barriers because of the stress on cross-cultural interactions. They can hardly give up their own culture completely, and then accept a new one in a short time. As a negative consequence, once the black people abandon their own culture, they can give up many other important things such as descend, identity, subjectivity, self-esteem and so on. Whenever they watch the world, or judge anything, they do not do it from the black people's angle any more, but in the white people's way. In that case, they get themselves lost in the white dominated world. Being lost in the white culture, they can hardly find the right way to construct their subjectivity, and their identities that are finally twisted as a consequence.

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