



International Journal of Research Publication and Reviews

Journal homepage: www.ijrpr.com ISSN 2582-7421

A thematic study on Toni Morrison's the bluest eye

Shreyasi Kakkar

BA English,
Amity School of Languages,
Amity University,
Lucknow Campus,
Uttar Pradesh, India.

ABSTRACT :

The novel *Bluest Eye* was published in 1970 and it has a historical setting of the time of Great Depression. When it first got published it caused a great controversy but as it depicted a child's sexual abuse and sexually explicit content was shown in her novel but Morrison's Nobel prize in 1993 finally acknowledged her literary accomplishments. This novel has dealt with deeper subjects that are against the accepted ideas of beauty, identity, and oppression. The novel represents the destructive effects of the "cultural fixation" on white beauty standards on self-worth and community relations through a tragic story of the main protagonist of the novel Pecola Breedlove. This study focuses to shed light on the author Morrison's sharp critique of Socio- historical concepts of beauty and identity by examining the recurrent themes of vision, colour, and trauma. By critically examining the text it shows how Morrison exposes the pernicious effect of racism and its terrible effects on the human psyche through her narratives. This essay examines Morrison's skilful use of language, with various symbols and many narrative voices that show how the *Bluest Eye* is a potential social commentary on the ongoing fight for black liberation and the lasting effects of slavery that was faced by the black people. The characters in this particular novel can be seen very deeply affected by the black colour. Pecola Breedlove the main protagonist who is 11 years of age and wanted to be loved by her family but is neglected by everyone and at the end is unfortunately raped by her own father. This work shows the plight and sufferings the Black Americas go through, because it delves deep into the psyche. It also describes how communities, family histories influence what is deemed attractive. Morrison's novel is like a mirror that shows the cultural beliefs about "what is beauty".

Key words: Racism, Beauty Standards, Alienation, Identity, Psychological Trauma, Family Dysfunction.

INTRODUCTION

Toni Morrison original name was Cloe Anthony. The *Bluest Eye* was her very first publication and was written in 1960s and later published in 1970s. We as a reader can observe different narrative techniques used in the novel. The story revolves around our main protagonist whose name is Pecola Breedlove who is a Black American she is eleven years of age and lives in Lorain, Ohio. When her dad burns down the house, she spends some days with Macteer family. Claudia who is the youngest Macteer is one of the narrators of this novel who narrates Pecola's story as it is set during the time of Great Depression, which was between 1940 and 1941, We can see how she was bullied and troubled by her fellow mates. She used to think or categorise herself as ugly and believed that if she had blue eyes the society will better treat her.

When she returns to her home we can witness the themes of distorted family, as her mother used to work at a white man's. House, she considered herself ugly as she was black and had a disabled foot and viewed herself as Martyr. She stays with Cholly Breedlove who is physical and verbally abusive. She was the only breadwinner of the family on the contrary Cholly Breedlove was a person who was disowned by his family at a very early age and stayed with his relative. Later he married Pauline Breedlove initially there was love but the condition of their family was of continuous fighting and that effected Pecola's mental health. When she returned from the Macteer's family she witnessed a domestic fight at her place. She closed herself in a room and demanded Blue Eyes.

Later we witness in the story that Pecola was sexually abused by her dad and when her mother found out she did not believe her. The society criticised Pecola who was pregnant with her dad's child. Later she had a miscarriage. After several more attacks by her father she lost her sanity and started living in isolation.

Through this novel Toni Morrison highlights the reality during the time of great Depression and the mindset in which the Black American were living.

ABOUT TONI MORRISON

American writer Toni Morrison was born in Lorain, Ohio, on February 18, 1931, and passed away in the Bronx, New York, on August 5, 2019. She was renowned for her poetic, luminous prose and her exploration of Black experience, especially Black female experience, within the Black community. She is regarded as one of the best modern American authors and was the first Black woman to win the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1993. The owner of

Morrison's family's apartment complex burned down their house while they were inside when she was two years old because they couldn't pay the rent. Morrison became a voracious reader after focusing on her education. She applied her intelligence while serving on the debate team, as a member of the yearbook staff at her school, and subsequently as the chief librarian's secretary at the Lorain Public Library. She was baptized under the name Anthony in honour of Saint Anthony of Padua after converting to Catholicism at the age of twelve. Later, she adopted the moniker "Toni" in honour of this saint. Morrison made the decision in 1949 to pursue her undergraduate studies at a historically black institution. Howard University required her to relocate to Washington, D.C. Morrison was exposed to racial segregation in a novel way throughout her undergraduate years. In addition to touring the segregated South with the play, she became a member of the Howard University Players, the university's theatrical club. She also saw the way racial hierarchy separated people of colour according to skin tone. Her writing was impacted by the relationships she had with other writers, artists, and activists, thanks to the Howard University community. Following graduation with a bachelor's degree in English, Morrison pursued a Master of Arts in English at Cornell University. She started teaching English at Texas Southern University after graduating in 1955, but she eventually returned to Howard University as a professor. She met her husband Harold Morrison while teaching Stokely Carmichael, a young civil rights fighter, back at the university. Both Harold and Slade were born to the couple. Morrison spent seven years as a professor at Howard University before relocating to Syracuse, New York, to work as an editor for Random House Publishing's textbook section. After two years, she moved to the company's New York City office and started editing African American novels and books. Morrison did not publish her first book, *The Bluest Eye*, until she was 39 years old, while working for a publishing house. Morrison's second book, *Sula*, which was nominated for a National Book Award, was published three years later. Toni Morrison was well-known by the time her third book was published in 1977. *Song of Solomon* won the National Book Critics Circle Award and was praised by critics. Morrison decided to pursue writing full-time after her works became successful. After leaving the publishing industry, she kept writing plays, essays, and novels. Based on the real-life experiences of an African American enslaved woman, Morrison published her book *Beloved* in 1987. In addition to winning numerous accolades, including the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction, this book was a bestseller for 25 weeks. Morrison was the first Black woman to win the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1993. Three years later, she was also awarded the National Book Foundation's Medal of Distinguished Contribution to American Letters and selected by the National Endowment for the Humanities to deliver the Jefferson Lecture.

THEMATIC ANALYSIS

Themes play a very important and appealing role in any literary work specifically of Toni Morrison's novel *The Bluest Eye*.

Toni Morrison's work continues to influence artists and writers all across the globe. Her major focus on African American life and her commentary on race relations have continued to influence her readers.

BEAUTY VS UGLY

The black characters of the novel *The Bluest Eye* have been raised and forced to believe that whiteness is the paragon of beauty and if you are not white you will be treated as an outsider. As the novel is set during the time of Great Depression the novel clearly shows the condition of black family's during that time.

Characters are constantly subjected to images of whiteness like toys and magazines. We can see the obsession of Pecola our main character and Frieda Macteer's obsession over Shirley Temple's beauty. Later we can observe that Pauline Breedlove is a worker at a white family and how she used to spend her days admiring the white actors wishing she could access the world. Few characters in the novel like Pecola Breedlove believe that their beauty or ugliness defines their value in the society and community they live in. Characters establish their sense of self-worth based on the idea of beauty and likewise beauty and ugliness become a part of their internal conditions which have devastating impact on the novel's characters. The writer clearly depicts that how the Breedlove family's poverty is because they believe they are ugly and black. Those who are white, are admired. Our protagonist Pecola Breedlove believes that she deserves the abuse and neglect that she experiences at home, based on the self-perceived ugliness from both her family and society as a whole.

Example: "if those eyes of hers were different that is to say, beautiful, she herself would be different"

"Her eyes are too wide, too dark and too full of pain."

THE OPPRESSION OF WOMEN

Another core theme of this novel is the oppression of women. The woman in the novel endures tyranny and violation from men. In case of racial persecution and atrocity we can clearly witness the case of Pecola in this novel. She was raped by her own father but her mother was not ready to accept her words and continued to blame her for the act she was forced into. No one was ready to believe her words later she got pregnant with her father's child, but it got aborted.

She was raped several times through the hand of her own dad, but no one came to rescue her. Society never accepted her and discarded her although she was forced into a situation which was considered a sin in their society.

At the end viewers see how her mental health deteriorated as she was isolated by her family and society she lived in. This scene clearly depicts the mentality of a man of those times. Pecola's family had distorted family dynamics. Her father couldn't provide her protection instead he decides to rape her and on the contrary her mother who found her lying on the floor didn't even accept the truth and accused her only. Through this theme we can witness how women did not have a right to speak the truth and even if they did people did not believe them. Society reacted when they got to know that our main protagonist Pecola Breedlove is pregnant with her own father's child. No one accused the dad everyone blamed Pecola throughout and later she was separated from everyone.

Example "The onlookers laughed and only one or two women registered annoyance. Cholly's hostility, completely helpless, had moved outward towards the one thing that he, as a man, could control: the women. She in turn acquiesced to his powerlessness"

RACE AND RACISM

The Bluest Eye deals with complex problems of race and racism. It projects conventional depictions of racism, which involve white hostility towards Black people. The Bluest Eye focuses on the problem of racism between the colour of people. Despite the lack of significant white characters and the scarcity of white characters, racism is nonetheless at the core of Morrison's book. There is a spectrum of "whiteness" because the majority of the characters in the book are black. Race is characterized by a person's place of origin, social status, and educational background in addition to their skin colour, facial features, and hair texture. "Whiteness" is linked to virtue, cleanliness, and worth, whereas "blackness" is linked to immorality, filth, and unworthiness. These racial notions of cleanliness, virtue, and worth are internalized to varied degrees by various characters. As a result of internalizing these racial notions, the protagonists in The Bluest Eye eventually develop racial self-hatred, which causes a variety of dysfunctions in their lives. For instance, Mrs. Macteer treats Claudia with extreme harshness when she becomes ill since being ill is a symbol of uncleanness, which is associated with being Black. Children are also the target of Soaphead Church's sexual cravings because he finds black women to be unclean. The characters in the book evaluate their own "whiteness" and sense of value by comparing themselves to other Black people. Characters choose to define their "whiteness" by social, educational, religious, regional, and familial distinctions, when the colour of their skin, the colour of their eyes, and the texture of their hair are insufficient to distinguish their race. Geraldine keeps her home spotless, straightens her hair, and applies lotion to Junior's skin to prevent it from turning ashen in an effort to distance herself and her family from looking black. Similarly, Soaphead Church defines "whiteness" by his origins, education, and white heritage. Those characters who lack any "Whiteness" markers are the ones who suffer the most. When Pecola is raped, the terrible power of racial self-hatred and the issue of race come to her head. The height of racial self-hatred, both literally and figuratively, is presented here. Following the rape, Pecola is forced to internalize Cholly's racial self-hatred both physically as she carries her father's child and metaphorically through the anguish she endures.

Example: "it had occurred Pecola some time ago that if her eyes were different that is to say, beautiful she herself would be different"

SEX AND SEXUALITY

Sex is linked to immorality, violence, and humiliation in The Bluest Eye. Similar to race and beauty standards, sex functions as a kind of oppression rather than being pleasurable between two individuals. Sexual initiation has a terrible impact on a person's life and sense of self, for both men and women. Particularly brutal and degrading, the sexual initiation scenes have a profound impact on the characters in the book. When the white males coerce Cholly into raping Darlene, it is accompanied by shame and loathing. Following her first sexual encounter, which Mr. Henry forces upon her, Frieda feels destroyed. And rape is how Pecola is sexually initiated. In the narrative, men oppress the women in their life through sex. Their beliefs about the worth of women and their prior sexual failures have twisted their sexual urges. Cholly's first sexual encounter causes him to feel unlovable and to despise women and his own species. His daughter gets raped as a result of these factors coming together. Soaphead Church's repressed sexual urge for children is influenced by his broken marriage and his disdain for women. Sex turns becomes the defining factor of the younger characters' transition into womanhood in The Bluest Eye. However, the story's teenage ladies don't really comprehend how dangerous sex is. They have romantic ideas about sex, linking it to love and a woman's sense of value. When Mrs. Breedlove was a teenager, she had dreams of a guy entering her life and saving her from her family's rejection. Geraldine is an example of a different type of experience. She continues to get her feeling of value as a woman from her marriage. Because they take care of the house, cook, and clean, husbands of ladies like Geraldine marry them. She cannot enjoy sex because she sees it as a weight she must carry for her spouse, even though it is not explicitly violent.

SEEING VERSES BEING SEEN

Even though Pecola's wish for blue eyes is completely unrealistic, it is founded on one accurate perception of her world: she feels that the cruelty she sees and encounters is related to how she is perceived. People wouldn't want to do unpleasant things to her or in front of her, Pecola thinks, if she had gorgeous blue eyes. This observation is confirmed by her experience of being taunted by the lads; when Maureen saves her, it appears that they no longer wish to misbehave in front of Maureen's alluring eyes. More simply put, Pecola and her family are subjected to discrimination in part because they are Black. Desiring blue eyes instead of lighter skin, Pecola says she wants to be viewed differently as much as she wants to perceive things differently. The only way she can fulfil this goal is by going blind. Pecola is thus able to recognize her own beauty, but only at the expense of her capacity to perceive the world and herself clearly. For her, there is a particularly terrible result from the relationship between how one is perceived and what one observes

THE POWER OF STORIES

There are several interconnected, perhaps contradicting stories in The Bluest Eye rather than just one. To make sense of their existence, characters tell stories, and these tales have great potential for both good and evil. Specifically, Claudia's stories are notable for their affirmative power. In the first place, she narrates Pecola's story, and although she challenges the veracity and significance of her account, her care and attention to detail somewhat make up for the unpleasantness of Pecola's existence. Furthermore, Claudia and Frieda try to reinterpret this story as one that is uplifting, portraying themselves as saviours, when the adults express Pecola's pregnancy and desire that the baby dies. Finally, by crafting her own narrative about the beauty of Blackness, Claudia challenges the idea that white people are superior. Other characters' stories frequently cause harm to both, them and other people. Pauline Breedlove's self-loathing is reinforced by the tale she tells herself about her own ugly appearance, and her cruelty toward her family is reinforced by the fiction she tells herself about her martyrdom. It is blatantly hypocritical for Soaphead Church to claim to have noble motives and a unique relationship with God. The truth is as likely to be distorted by stories as it is to be revealed. Although Morrison seems to think that stories can be a source of redemption, she is not a naive optimist and will not allow us to easily settle into any one scenario.

HOME AND STORY

The term "home" in *The Bluest Eye* refers to more than just a family's actual dwelling. Home serves as a concept that both defines the protagonists' sense of self and value in Morrison's book and influences how others view them. Written in the guise of a Dick and Jane primer, the novel's first part presents an idealized picture of home and family against which the homes in *The Bluest Eye* are set. The unconventional household structures and family structures that the Black families in the book inhabit are contrasted with this ideal. The majority of black families make owning and maintaining a home their top priority since the concept of home is central to how black families are viewed. Black families are already at a disadvantage due to the colour of their skin, and home becomes a way for them to create and maintain a sense of worth. The story features a number of homes that illustrate the extent to which a person's or family's feeling of value is shaped by their conception of home. The Breedloves have the lowest sense of self-worth and reside in an abandoned storefront. On the contrary, Geraldine lives in a lovely home that makes her feel superior to other black families, and the Mactees own an old house that they take great pride in. Being "outdoors" and being homeless are two very different things, according to Claudia. The majority of black families in the book feel like they belong even though they don't own a house. On the other hand, being "outdoors" means leaving home and family behind, a place people can never return to. Cholly's assault of Pecola symbolizes the total lack of a family and a home. Cholly violates home and family for the worst as he rapes his own daughter. On the contrary, having a sense of family and home can be a life-saving influence. Frieda and Claudia's home and family allow them to see the world from a different angle than characters who don't. Ultimately, the reader is able to follow Morrison's story because of Claudia's unbiased viewpoint.

RESEARCH PAPER ANALYSIS

Theme of self-analysis

The Bluest Eye explores the struggles of the main protagonist Pecola Breedlove with identity and self-worth in a society that devalues her race and appearance. Her internalized racism and self-hatred stem from societal pressure, cultural expectations, and marginalization. The dysfunctional family and white beauty standards of society complicate her identity. Morrison's use of language and narrative techniques highlights the complexities of identity formation and the influence of societal norms.

Pecola's struggle with her identity due to racial and societal oppression as she longed for blue eyes, which symbolizes her desire for acceptance and love. Internalized beauty standards distort her sense of self; she faces discrimination based on both race and gender. Blue eyes serve as a symbol of white beauty standards and their destructive power. Pecola's characterization shows her agency and desire beyond being a victim. Her father, Cholly Breedlove, is represented as a character who is a victim and is represented as violent, as well. Morrison's nuanced portrayal of blue eyes adds depth to the exploration of self-identity.

Social constructs of beauty and whiteness shape individuals' identity and marginalize black women. Women's desire for blue eyes reflects societies' rationalized beauty standards that basically shape the society. All around themes align movements like Black Lives Matter and the Me Too movement with the novel, serving as a reminder of ongoing struggle for recognition and equality that is prevailing in the society. *The Bluest Eye* explores the search for identity in the face of societal oppression. Pecola's struggle with beauty standards and racial discrimination highlights the damage and effects of internalized societal norms and intersectionality of the identity. Morrison's use of literary devices like symbolism and characterization adds depth to the theme of self-identity, which is very majorly reflected in the text and her personal experiences as a black woman inform her writing, creating her writing providing with authentic perspective to the text.

Critical analysis of the bluest eye

Toni Morrison, born 1931 and died 2019, was a renowned American writer who explored black experiences, particularly talked about black female identity. She won the Nobel Prize in literature in 1993. She was born in Lorain, Ohio, where racism was less explicit; she was shocked by the segregation in the society. Emancipation Proclamation 1863 and 13th amendment (1865) ended slavery but did not end racial discrimination. 14th amendment (1868) granted black citizenship but systematic exclusion continued. "Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee" is to keep the alive the experience of slavery which the ancestors have gone through to make the descendants a part and parcel of American dream of success. The blue is tie is Morrison's first novel addressing issues like racism, child molestation. The story is about an 11-year-old girl named Pecola Breedlove who hates her black skin colour and prays for blue eyes and white skin to feel beautiful. In the society set in Lorain, Ohio, post Great Depression, highlighting racial self-hatred and beauty standards, the novel showcases Morrison's strength and controversies as a writer of black culture. Pecola's longing for blue eyes symbolizes racial hatred and emotional fragmentation. Big beauty standards imposed by media, education, and culture cause black women to reject their identity. She faces threefold separation (sex, race, class) which threatens the psyche of Pecola Breedlove. Black women are scapegoats for displaced emotions, whereas Cholly Breedlove, when he humiliates on polling, Pecola's family is broken by alcoholism, abuse, and societal rejection, reinforced their perceived ugliness. Her sexual assault by her father Cholly Breedlove and neglect destroy her mental stability and made her a victim of suppression at all levels. She is represented as a woman who chases unrealistic beauty ideas and suffers for it. Morrison's writing style is a major strength, using various points of view to engage readers. Full readers find use of black slang difficult to understand and a risk of interpretation as readers might view it as promoting white beauty standards. Full stop: the novel's message is self-acceptance is crucial. Love yourself first before expecting others to love you, as seen in Pecola Breedlove's character.

The white beauty standards and its traumatic impact: A study of Toni Morrisons the Bluest eye.

Beauty is subjective and shared by individual perception societal influences dictate rigid standards in the bluest eye Toni Morrison explores the traumatic effects of the white standards of beauty on African Americans particularly through the character of Pecola Breedlove who internalises the belief that beauty means having fair skin straight hair and blue eyes rooted in colonialism and reinforced by media this notion causes self-loading and social rejection amongst white individual's sociologists like Charles s Johnson and web du boys highlight how "blackness is historically associated with inferiority leading to a double consciousness" that African American struggle with Pecola's mother Pauline adopts these ideas from Hollywood films neglecting her own daughter while idealising white beauty Pecola faces constant humiliation tormented by black boys rejected by her mother and insulted by Maureen Pearl her father rapes and impregnant her pushing her into insanity believing so that Soaphead church has granted her blue eyes Morrison highlights how beauty standards are socially constructed and racist causing deep psychological trauma movement's like black is beauty and black lives matter fight against these oppressive ideas what Pecola story exemplifies how societal rejection compound by family neglect leads to devastating consequences Morrison's narrative ultimately exposes the dangers of internalised racism and the urgent need to redefine beauty inclusively. Her desire for blue eyes symbolises her yearning for freedom from oppression mockery and rejection believing that beauty would earn her love and acceptance however Morrison reveals that Pecola's downfall was not solely due to societal pressure but also because she belonged to a crippled and crippling family that failed to support her mother Pauline instead of shielding her found solans in serving a white family valuing their more than her own daughter her father cholly consumed by his own draw mas and self-hatred commits the ultimate betrayal by raping picola and act driven by his own helplessness and rage das psychological scars inflicted on Pecola are compounded by the communities indifference she is not only abused at home but also ridiculed by those around her including other black children who project their self-loading on to her even the momentary kindness shown by Maureen Pearl is ultimately a reinforcement for Pecola inferiority as Morin uses her light skin privileges to assert the domination over picol over her piccolo is insanity in her final escape retreating into an imaginary world where she finally processes the bluest eye Morrison storytelling exposures how deeply ingrained beauty standards scanned distort self-perception and driven individuals to psychological run through Pecola is tragic fate Morrison critiques the dangerous consequences of internalized racism and the societal structure that sustain it, emphasizing the urgent need for redefining beauty beyond racial constraints

BOOK REVIEW

Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* is a powerful novel that explores themes of beauty, racism, and self-worth. Set in 1940s America, it tells the story of Pecola Breedlove, a young Black girl who believes she is ugly because of society's obsession with white beauty standards. She dreams of having blue eyes, thinking that this will make her loved and accepted.

The novel is deeply emotional and tragic, showing how racism and societal pressures damage self-esteem. Through Pecola's story, Morrison highlights how children absorb ideas of beauty and worth from their surroundings. The novel also explores family struggles, poverty, and trauma, making it a heartbreaking but necessary read.

Morrison's writing is poetic and rich, making the reader feel the pain and emotions of the characters. She shifts perspectives between different characters, giving a broader view of the struggles faced by the Black community. The book does not offer easy answers but forces the reader to think about racism and its long-lasting effects.

Overall, *The Bluest Eye* is a deeply moving and thought-provoking novel. It is not an easy book to read because of its painful themes, but it is an important one. Morrison masterfully shows how society's beauty ideals can destroy a person's self-worth, making this novel a must-read for understanding racism, identity, and self-acceptance.

The bluest eye is not just a novel for me but it's something that I personally feel is very relevant in our present society its very relatable specially the character of Pecola Breedlove as she is shown as a very realistic character and themes like beauty vs ugliness, oppression of women etc can be seen vividly. The character of Pecola Breedlove is represented as a someone who just wanted to earn some respect in the society just like the whites during the time of great depression had but as she was a black, she had faced the ordeals of the society just like other character in the novel were also facing. The blue eyes in this particular novel is the symbol of beauty and a way through which u can be accepted and respected in our society. That is the reason we can see that Pecola wanted blue eyes as she believed that if she will be beautiful, she will not face the distorted condition that she was facing in her house, and her conditions will be better than the way they were.

Things became worse for her after the "rape" done by her own father and they way at the end she was disowned by the society and was forcefully isolated from the society. For my personal view this novel represents the harsh realities of not only during the time it was written but even today. The novel does not showcase any fictional story but something our author herself saw around her and wrote.

CONCLUSION

The main takeaway from this analysis of Toni Morrison's **The Bluest Eye** is that the book delves deeply into the ways that white supremacist beauty standards cause psychological damage, especially to young Black girls like Pecola Breedlove. Morrison's story painstakingly demonstrates how adopted racism and the ensuing self-loathing, which are fed by these imposed ideas, have disastrous personal repercussions. Additionally, the investigation reveals how trauma in families affected by systemic oppression is cyclical, showing how these influences cause suffering to last for generations. Through the tragic tale of Pecola, Morrison forces readers to face the pernicious effects of racial prejudice and the pressing need for social change.

REFERENCES

1. Kakkar, Shreyasi. *A Thematic Study of Toni Morrison's The Bluest Eye*. Summer Project, Amity University Uttar Pradesh, May 2024.

-
2. Morrison, Toni. *The Bluest Eye*. Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1970.
 3. Washington Township Public Schools. *The Bluest Eye* (PDF). Washington Township Public Schools, 2019.
 4. "The Bluest Eye Study Guide." *LitCharts*, 2025.
 5. "The White Standard of Beauty and Its Traumatic Impact: A Study of Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*." *Drishhti: The Sight*, vol. IX, 2022.