

**RACISM AND SEXISM: A POSTCOLONIAL STUDY OF  
*THE BLUEST EYE***

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**Abstract**

Racism and Sexism, the two social paradigms of black existence are fictionalized in Toni Morrison's , the Afro-American novel, *The Bluest Eye* (1970). It represents how black women suffer from an institutionalized dehumanization in the context of race, gender and class in American society. It probes deeper into the black woman's psychic dilemmas, oppressions and tribulations symbolized by the tragic life of Pecola literally affected by the dominant culture's beauty standards (Swain and Das 89). This novel speaks about Pecola, "a little black girl who wanted to rise up out of the pit of her blackness and see the world with blue eyes" (Morrison 174). Here Morrison has described the world wide gender disparity by her characters like Pecola, Frieda, Pauline and the narrator Claudia, who once mentions in the novel that three things have greatly affected her life: being a child, being Black and being a girl. All the women characters are abused by both white women and men, as well as by black men. This paper is an attempt to show how the black woman faced the reality of double discrimination, of both race and sex.

**Keywords:** dehumanization, gender, racism, sexism, identity.

**Introduction**

The burden of history, the devastating effects of race, gender or class on an individual and especially on a woman in American white, male-dominated society constitute Toni Morrison's thematic concerns. *The Bluest Eye* (1970) represents how black women suffer from an institutionalized dehumanization in the context of race, gender and class in American society. Her well known works are: *The Bluest Eye* (1970), *Sula* (1974), *Song of Solomon* (1977), *Tar Baby* (1981), *Beloved* (1987), *Jazz* (1992), and *Playing in the Dark* (1992).

According to A. A. Mutalik-Desai, Morrison writes mainly about love. Her characters seem to be asking themselves forever as to what makes one loved. Beauty? African style or

white American? Does it comprise blonde hair, blue eyes and lips and nose of a certain contour? As Pecola Breedlove, the protagonist of *The Bluest Eye* prays every night for blue eyes, which she recognizes as the ultimate and most important, validation for beauty. It raises the question that why did Pecola so readily or inevitably accept the white American definition of beauty? But the ensuing result is heart-break and tragedy for all the Pecolas and their families in the real world (84). This novel can be studied from the postcolonial perspective, as Postcolonial theory addresses matter of identity, gender, race, racism and ethnicity with the challenges of developing a post-colonial national identity, of how a colonized people's knowledge was used against them in service of the colonizer's interests, and of how knowledge about the world is generated under specific relations between the powerful and the powerless, circulated repetitively and finally legitimated in service to certain imperial interests (Chandra and Antonysamy 127).

Racial discrimination is a theme that runs through postcolonial discourse, as white Europeans consistently emphasized their superiority over darker-skinned people. The critical nature of postcolonial theory entails destabilizing Western way of thinking, therefore creating space for the subaltern or marginalized group, to speak and produce alternatives to dominated discourse. "Postcolonial" generally refers to writing/ culture of nations/ peoples/ cultures that were once colonized by European powers. In *Orientalism* (1978), Edward Said, a pioneer of postcolonial criticism and studies, focused on the way in which the colonizing First World has invented false images and myths of the Third (postcolonial) World—stereotypical images and myths that have conveniently justified Western exploitation and domination of Eastern and middle Eastern cultures and peoples. (Chandra and Antonysamy 128).

Racism and Sexism, the two social paradigms of black existence are fictionalized in this novel. These two; themes are interdependent and hence they arise from the same set of circumstances. Gloria Steinem in her introduction to *Outrageous Acts and Everyday Rebellions* explains this connection, as she says, "Just as male was universal but female was limited, white was universal but black was limited." Gloria Wade-Gayles depicts this phenomenon through the imagery of circles:

There are three major circles of reality in American society, which reflect degree of power and powerlessness. There is a large circle in which white people, most of them men, experience influence and power. Far away from it there is a smaller circle, a narrow space, in which black people, regardless of sex, experience uncertainty, exploitation, and powerlessness. Hidden in this second circle is a third, a small dark enclosure in which black women experience pain, isolation, and vulnerability. These are the distinguishing marks of black womanhood in white America. (qtd. in Badode 85)

The Anglo-Saxon concept of beauty was forcefully thrust upon the black race as a necessary requirement for survival in America. White colour had to be, and should be, the only criterion for survival, success and happy co-existence in America. Badode asserts that being white in colour implied a whole series of connotations: of being attractive—both physically and culturally, desirable, intelligent and reasonable, and above all, worthy of love. Blackness was seen as a negative sign, a symbol of ugliness, uncontrolled, irrational behaviour, violent sexuality and so on. Thus, to quote Bell Hooks, "Black woman had to accept 'racial polarity in the form of male dominance'" (qtd. in Badode 87).

The tragedy and anger in *The Bluest Eye*, according to Badode, derive from two factors: the desire for blue eyes by a black girl, incongruous in itself but all the more so because it implies an underlying desire for assimilation, verification and acceptance by white people (88). Pecola realizes at an early age that beauty is necessary for being loved. Equating love with beauty as two necessary accompaniments that would reduce the cacophony in her life, Pecola succumbs to the Western concept of beauty. But such things are impossible for one to meet. So Pecola is disgruntled about her beauty. Disgust drags her to the corridors of madness. Pecola's direct prayer for blue eyes is synchronized with Pauline's (her mother) need for order and Cholly's (her father) need for economic strength. All three of them are victims of a vicious dream of an ideal way of life which exists in a perfect form in the outside world, the world of the Anglo-Saxon American. Pauline, Cholly's wife, experiences the racial violence while working for a white mistress as a maid. Pecola is the tragic character in the novel. She is victimized by both parents because they are made incapable of nurturing her by the limiting phenomena of race, sex, and class.

Claudia and Frieda, members of McTeer family, are also troubled by questions of beauty; but family support gives them strength to survive against all odds. Pecola's encounter with Maureen Peal and the lighter-skinned middle-class boy deepen her sense of worthlessness, as when Maureen Peal, a white girl, says, "I am cute! And you ugly! Black and ugly black e mos. I am cute!" (Morrison 73).

More than the melancholy story of a little girl driven mad by the world's hostility, *The Bluest Eye* tells the story of the community and society that persecute Pecola. She may be the central character, but she is far from the only victim. 'We' individually and collectively are both victimizer and victim; and, while the roles vary with each character, it is also the case that the role of victimizer results from that character's own victimization by a larger society.

Therefore, the novel dramatizes Pecola's hopelessness and her eventual ostracism from a society which would rather destroy than accept her. Her doom underscores the hidden tragedy, the waste in the lives of all the black women in the novel. Thus, the racial conflicts ends in tragedy for many Paulines and Pecolas in the Western society where discrimination in terms of race, class and sex is still in force.

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