
**“The Fact of Blackness” in the Urge of the Bluest Eye: A Postcolonial Reading
of Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye***

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Abstract

Toni Morrison’s debut novel *The Bluest Eye*, published in the year 1970, is set in Loraine, Ohio in 1941. The novel explores the ideas of race and blackness by comparing its intensity not only in opposition to the white people but also among the colored people and mulattoes as well. Morrison explores through the novel how the black people are made to hold the view that “whiteness” is the quintessence of beauty. Throughout the novel, it can be observed how the characters face marginalization due to the colour of their skin and physical features as well. The paper utilizes Frantz Fanon’s idea of blackness to depict how the imposed identity on the blacks as “dirty” and “unclean” lead the characters to wish for the features of “whiteness” to get acceptance in the community. The paper shows how the white men’s gaze have burdened the black people with the sense of their own ugliness. The writing of the novel coincides with the “Black is Beautiful” movement which aims to dispel this notion of black people’s ugliness. Therefore, the novel explores the “fact of blackness” imposed upon the black people and their urge to get away from this ugliness. This urge is explored through Pecola Breedlove, the protagonist of the novel, who wishes to get blue eyes and also through other characters of the novel who aspire to have the physical features of the white people.

Keywords: blackness, beauty, ugly, blue eyes, whiteness.

Introduction:

Chloe Anthony Wofford Morrison (1931-2019), famously known as Toni Morrison, was an American writer who brought the black experience of the African-American people to the forefront. She was deeply influenced by various movements that gained

momentum during the time of writing this novel. The movements were the Civil Rights movement; the Black is Beautiful movement etc. which emphasized on empowering black identity and self acceptance. The “Black is Beautiful” provides the main background of the novel as each one of black characters aspires to become like white people. Morrison realized the sense of “ugliness” inherent in the minds of the black people and so she wrote this novel to address the issue of self-acceptance and racial-hatred. *The Bluest Eye* revolves around the unfortunate experiences of a young black girl who internalizes beauty standards of white people believing that possessing these features like blue eyes and blonde hair will bring her acceptance and love in a racially segregated society. Throughout the novel it is also seen how the black people try artificial makeovers to reduce their ugliness and fit in the Eurocentric beauty ideals.

The sense of commodification of the black people as “Other” is explained by Frantz Fanon in *Black Skin, White Masks* where he says that “the fact of juxtaposition of the white and black races has created a massive psych existential complex” (12). Fanon understands that the identity of the black people was not self- created. Instead, it was imposed upon them without their consent. This ill-fated identity is used to dehumanize and oppress the black people. In this white world, he felt himself as an “object in the midst of other objects” (109). Their identity is reduced to words like ““Dirty Nigger!” Or simply, “Look, a Negro!””(109). He explains how the gaze of the white people has dissected them. He felt trapped in that “crushing objecthood” (109). According to Fanon, “White civilization and European culture have forced an existential deviation on the Negro” (14).

Aims and Objectives:

The aims of the paper are to show how the white community and the beauty ideals they create serves as a reminder for the black people of their ugliness. They aspire to attain the beauty standards of the white by wishing to have blonde hair, white skin and most importantly blue eyes. They believe that having blue eyes will give them recognition and acceptance in society. They believe that no one can harm them if they have blue eyes. Therefore, the paper attempts to analyze the following objectives:

- The desire of getting recognition by attaining white beauty standards.
- The experience of self- hatred that black people feels as they believe themselves to be ugly.
- The concept of the “fact of blackness” which presents how the identity of black people is fixed through the white gaze.

- The feeling of superiority that not only the whites but also the cultural mulattoes or light dark-skinned people have towards the black Negroes.

Research Methodology:

This research paper is analytical and descriptive. The paper is based upon both primary and secondary sources. Primary source is the novel *The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison and the non-fiction, postcolonial work *Black Skin, White Masks* by Frantz Fanon. Secondary sources are comprised of edited books, E-Books and online articles.

Literature Review:

In the article, “A Postcolonial Feminist Approach to Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*”, Erdemir and Demirtas writes:

“In this novel, black women are both ostracized by the white community and by men in their own black community. Therefore, they experience double oppression. This situation led to a mental breakdown for them. The issues of race, gender, and class created by the white world were issues that black women had to struggle with. These three major problems illustrate the traumatic conditions they experienced in white America. Women’s characters’ life was full of torture. While white women are also victims of social judgments, the situation of black women has always been worse.” (205)

In the article, “Parental Hunger and Alienation in Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*”, Ahmad, Chaudhary, and Murtaza writes:

“Alienation in the context of this novel signifies a separation of one character from one’s self and from other members of his family as well as society, and this separation minimizes their capacity to think properly and act normally. Father, who is considered to be a protector, his protection turns into an illicit thirst and he rapes his daughter twice. Cholly’s inability to connect with black and white community, results in hysteria of freedom, the freedom of an isolated man with dangerous consequences, and he uses that freedom negatively to torture brutally his own wife Pauline and then his daughter Pecola” (42)

From the above literature review, it is observed that Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* has been previously explored from a postcolonial feminist perspective and through the perspective of alienation and parent-children relationship respectively. But this paper attempts to analyze *The Bluest Eye* as a postcolonial text from the perspective of Frantz Fanon's concept of the "fact of blackness" where black people aspire to become like whites to reduce their ugliness and self-hatred. The paper will explore how racism is internalized among the black people and how they perceive themselves through the white gaze by keeping aside their blackness.

Analysis:

Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* is divided in the form of four seasons. But each chapter in the seasons depicts the form of racial oppression from an opposing perspective. For instance, the part entitled "autumn", in general terms, should explore the season of harvesting, but contrary to this harvesting image, it is seen that Pecola's immature baby dies. The season "winter" is often described as dull and cold but the entry of the new girl Maureen Peal exudes the feeling of prevalent dullness. The season spring is described traditionally as a season of happiness and newness but the novel describes the sadness of Claudia being whipped and the tragic event of the rape of Pecola by her own father. The season "summer" is associated with the description of storms in the novel which differ in meaning from destruction, for Claudia associates it with the texture of strawberry, dusk, darkness and the sticky feeling of humidity. These chapters included in "summer" explore how "public fact" (Morrison 188) of Pecola's rape is different from the "private reality" (188).

The novel opens with the introduction of Rosemary Villanucci and her wealthy white family in the neighbourhood of MacTeers. Claudia MacTeer and Frieda MacTeer, nine and ten years old respectively, are the young daughters of the black MacTeer family. The picture of "racism" is geared up from the beginning of the novel. It is described as the dominance of one race over another leading to discrimination and prejudice against individuals due to their race or ethnic background. Rosemary shows this superiority of "white" culture when she rejects Claudia and Frieda because of their skin colour. Fanon writes: "It is the racist who creates his inferior" (93). Claudia and Frieda's desire to "beat her up, make red marks on her white skin" (9) highlights the urge to destroy her physical features of whiteness and to destroy her sense of superiority but lowering her standard to "ugliness".

When Pecola Breedlove come to stay with the MacTeers, she drinks milk from a Shirley Temple cup. Her admiration for Shirley Temple drives her to intake an excessive amount of milk. This may also reflect the reality that a black girl consumes a large amount of white milk because of her internalized desire to inherit whiteness. Pecola, Frieda and Claudia's affection towards Shirley Temple shows their obsession with the white culture. Initially Claudia felt hatred towards Shirley Temple and her Christmas gifts where she always received "a big, blue-eyed Baby Doll" (20) because the elders believed that it was her "fondest wish" (20) to be like her. Claudia destroyed the dolls because of her jealousy towards the white culture and her inability to accept her racial features:

"I had only desire to dismember it. To see of what it was made, to discover the dearness, to find the beauty, the desirability that had escaped me, but apparently only me. Adults, older girls, shops, magazines, newspapers, window signs-all the world had agreed that a blue-eyed, yellow-haired, pink-skinned doll was what every girl child treasured." (20)

The urge to dismember the dolls is represents her desire to harm the little white girls. To cover her violent urges and "pristine sadism" (23) she showed "fabricated love" (23) towards these dolls and Shirley Temple. It was only later that she learned to admire the beauty of these dolls and Shirley Temple.

The Breedloves choose to live in the storefront because of their believe of their own unattractiveness which illustrates the crippling impact of the ingrained perception of ugliness among the black individuals. Fanon says, "For not only the black man be black: he must be black in relation to the white man" (110). The Breedlove family "wore their ugliness, put it on, so to speak, although it did not belong to them" (38). Morrison explains the physical features of the black people to explore exactly the appearance that made them feel inferior in the white world:

"The eyes, the small eyes set closely together under narrow forehead. The low, irregular hairlines, which seemed even more irregular in contrast to the straight, heavy eyebrows which nearly met. Keen but crooked noses, with insolent nostrils. The had high cheekbones, and their ears turned forward. Shapely lips which called attention not to themselves but to the rest of the face. You look at them and wondered why they were so ugly; you looked closely and could not find the

source. Then you realized that it came from conviction, their conviction.” (38-39)

According to Morrison, the black people’s conviction of being ugly came to them as an imposed identity by the whites where “a mysterious, all-knowing master had given each one a cloak of ugliness to wear, and they had each accepted it without question” (39). For the Breedloves, every film, advertisement, and look reinforced this notion. While Cholly is the only member of the family whose unattractiveness stems from his actions and behavior., all the other Breedloves, Mrs. Pauline (Polly) Breedlove, Samuel (Sammy) and Pecola have their own way of handling their ugliness:

“Mrs. Breedlove handled hers as an actor does a prop: for the articulation of character, for support of a role she frequently imagined was hers- martyrdom. Sammy used this as a weapon to cause others pain. He adjusted his behaviour to it, chose his companions on the basis of it: people who could be fascinated, even intimidated by it. And Pecola. She hid behind hers. Concealed, veiled, eclipsed-peeping out from behind the shroud very seldom, and then only to yearn for the return of her mask.” (39)

Cholly’s behaviour towards women was a consequence of his own racial oppression which he faced from the end of two white racist men while intimidating with a girl named Darlene. They unexpectedly found him and the girl engaged in intercourse and illuminated them with a flashlight from behind. As Cholly stopped the sexual act, they compelled him to proceed. His inability to fight against the racial- hatred of the white men has developed his hatred towards the women whom he considers weaker. Similarly, Pauline’s self-image of unattractiveness began with her deformed foot, which led her to the feeling of worthlessness. Losing her tooth while biting a candy symbolically signifies Pauline’s loss of dream to inherit whiteness. The white tooth leaves a dark space which is equated with the sense of emptiness that Pauline feels as a black woman. When Pecola is born she feels that her baby is ugly because during her pregnancy, her fixation on white beauty drives her to envision the perfect child. Fanon is of the view that : “As long as the black man is among his own, he will have no occasion, except in minor internal conflicts to explain his being through others” (109). Similarly it is seen that in the North, Pauline starts to long for her community. She had never been surrounded by so many white people when she lived in the South.

Pecola's urge to get "blue eyes" gets rooted when she sees her parents fight violently. The black people's sense of inferiority is described by Fanon as an "inborn complex" (115). Unable to escape the situation, like her brother Sammy, she prays for having blue eyes which bears two significant meanings. First, that people will see her as beautiful and second, it will alter her perspective of seeing the world. Pecola thinks that if she acquired blue eyes her condition will change. She fails to realize her inner beauty as she always sees "the eyes of other people" (47). Her perceived unattractiveness causes her to associate herself with the broken pavement and the dandelions, which others also deem unattractive. She feels a sense of belonging to these things which are rejected by the community as they connect her to the world. The community considers the dandelions as "weeds" (47) and "they do not want the yellow heads-only the jagged leaves" (47) of the dandelions. The emotional attachment that Pecola feels towards the dandelions shows that she can relate to the sense of alienation that the dandelions feel. The fact that Pecola does not perceive the dandelions as unattractive, unlike others, proves that that considering something beautiful is a question of individual perception and is not an inherent characteristic. Pecola could not understand the essence of inner beauty because she is fixated with the beauty of the white individuals and their social status. The "yellow heads" of the dandelions that the black women throw away symbolically refers to their envy against blonde-haired white females.

When Pecola enters "Yacobowski's Fresh Veg. Meat and Sundries Store" (48), she chooses to use all her money to buy Mary Janes candies. By consuming these candies on which the face of a white girl is labelled, she feels that she will inherit the standard of white beauty. The picture on the label is defined as:

"Smiling white face. Blonde hair in gentle disarray, blue eyes looking at her out of a world of clean comfort. The eyes are petulant, mischievous. To Pecola they are simply pretty. She eats candy, and its sweetness is good. To eat the candy is somehow to eat the eyes, eat Mary Jane. Love Mary Jane. Be Mary Jane." (50)

This also indicates her desperation to belong to the socially accepted white society. When she pays three pennies to the shopkeeper, Mr. Yacobowski, she observes in his blue eyes "the total absence of human recognition-the glazed separateness" (48). Mr. Yacobowski is representative of the white gaze who looks at the black people only through the colour of their skin as a trait. Fanon argues that the self-loathing experienced by Black individuals is not solely based on the internalization of negative

stereotypes associated with their race, but also arises from a broader failure to acknowledge Black people as human beings. He writes: “A feeling of inferiority? No, a feeling of nonexistence” (139). Pecola’s difficulty in interacting with him demonstrates the divide between Black and white communities. His racism becomes apparent when he hesitates to touch Pecola’s palm for the pennies. The manner in which he brushes her hand with his nails implies the harmful essence of racism. Coming out from the store “Pecola feels the inexplicable shame ebb” (50). Her perspective towards the dandelions changes and she feels “They are ugly. They are weeds” (50). The shift in Pecola’s perspective following her encounter in the store illustrates how racism exerts a significant influence.

The anxiety to acquire white beauty standard was intensified with the arrival of the “disrupter of seasons” (62), a mulatto girl- Maureen Peal. She is a fair-skinned black girl who has features associated with whiteness—green eyes, affluence, and attractiveness.. The way “black boys didn’t trip her in the halls; white boys didn’t stone her; white girls didn’t suck their teeth when she was assigned to be their work partners; black girls stepped aside when she wanted to use the sink in the girls’ toilet” (62) demonstrates that there are differences inside the community of the black people as well, and that those who are nearer to white individuals receive respect. Her entrance into the novel illustrates how the black female characters intensifies a feeling of self-hatred influenced by societal ideals of beauty. Frieda and Claudia began to find out her flaws so that they can attain equilibrium of her beauty to their ugliness. They nicknamed her as “Six-finger-dog-tooth-meringue-pie” (63). Finding Maureen’s shortcomings and wielding them against her illustrates the repetitive cycle of oppression and racial animosity. Although Maureen and Claudia consents their friendship, Claudia knows that it will be a “dangerous friendship” because the obstacles of class and race will still lead Claudia to feel violent urges against Maureen.

Pecola and Maureen’s admiration for Betty Grable, a blonde-haired and blue-eyed actress, reflects their loyalty and acceptance to white beauty ideals. Maureen’s story about the black girl named Audrey reflects upon how passionate black people are to change their looks to get acceptance in a white society. She mentions that Audrey went to the beauty parlour to fix her hair like Hedy Lammar’s. Fanon also explains this concept of artificial makeover that black people undergo to attain the standards of white beauty:

“For several years certain laboratories have been trying to produce a serum for “denegrification”; with all the earnestness

in the world, laboratories have sterilized their test tubes, checked their scales, and embarked on re-researches that might make it possible for the miserable Negro to whiten himself and thus to throw off the burden of that corporeal malediction. Below the corporeal schema I had sketched a historico-racial schema.” (111)

The unnamed narrator of the novel mentions a specific group of women of the Black community hailing from small Southern towns nestled in natural beauty. They are attractive, well-groomed, and have a pleasant fragrance. They use Jergens lotion to enhance their skin and straighten their hair with Dixie Peach, styling it to one side. These women received their education at land-grant colleges and were prepared to work for white individuals." They are so much obsessed with cleanliness that they only befriend cats who are understood as clean. One of these women was Geraldine. Her relationship with her husband and son demonstrates the harmful consequences of racial self-repression. Geraldine instructs her son, Louis Junior, that he is distinct from the other black children. Geraldine calls the other black children as “niggers” and only allows her son to play with “coloured” children. She dresses Junior like the children of the white people, keeps his hair short to avoid the hairy texture of the blacks and puts lotion on his skin to protect it from becoming ashen. He also perceives Pecola as ugly. Pecola figuratively becomes linked to Geraldine's cat, which has black fur and blue eyes. Geraldine looks into Pecola as: “Hair uncombed, dress falling apart, shoes untied and caked with dirt” (91) and her description of black people as “they slept six in a bed, all their pee mixing together in the night... grass wouldn’t grow where they lived. Flowers died. Shades fell down...Like flies they hovered; like flies they settled” (92) shows her racial hatred towards black people as she perceives them to be ugly and unclean. She addresses Pecola as “nasty little black bitch” (92). “Introduced in "Winter," the characters of Maureen Peal and Geraldine represent Morrison's critique of internalized racism. Both the characters recognize the privileges that comes along with looking and acting "white" and, as a result, learned to hate all that was "black," all of the "Funk" that associated them with their culture” (Wallowitz 156). Another mulatto character in the novel who believes himself to be higher in status than the blacks is Soaphead Church, “a cinnamon-eyed West Indian man with lightly browned skin” (167). A Britisher brought ‘white strain’ into his lineage in the early 1800s, leaving the mother and child with a modest amount of money. The child grows into a man fixated on his white ancestry, passing this fixation down to his descendants. He, similar to his forebears, misuses the power acquired from his white heritage to take advantage of Pecola who wants blue eyes for his own

needs. Fanon in *Black Skin, White Masks* regards this as “Colour Prejudice” (118). He explains:

“It [colour prejudice] is nothing more than the unreasoning hatred of one race for another, the contempt of the stronger and richer peoples for those whom they consider inferior to themselves, and the bitter resentment of those who are kept in subjection and are so frequently insulted. As colour is the most obvious outward manifestation of race it has been made the criterion by which men are judged, irrespective of their social or educational attainments. The light-skinned races have come to despise all those of a darker colour, and the dark-skinned peoples will no longer accept without protest the inferior position to which they have been relegated.” (118)

“Black community’s self-denial”, according to Fanon, “The black man wants to be white” (56), and “every colonized people... find 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” (18). They think that the less black they appear, the whiter they will seem. Consequently, in order to get accepted by the white society, they opt to reject and forsake their own black culture.

Even the construction of houses shows the difference between the white and black communities. Frieda and Claudia enter a wealthy, white neighbourhood to find Pecola:

“The streets changed; houses looked more sturdy, their paint was newer, porch posts straighter, yards deeper... The lakefront houses were the loveliest. Garden, furniture, ornaments, windows like shiny eyeglasses, and no sign of life... Lake Shore Park, a city park laid out with rosebuds, fountains, bowling greens, picnic tables... Black people were not allowed in the park, and so it filled our dreams.” (105).

The white family’s house where Pauline worked sharply differs from the house that the Breedloves lived in. Pauline’s image in the white décor of the kitchen symbolically signifies her manifestation to embody whiteness and be a white person. The scare in the eyes of the little white girl of the family reflects that she is taught to fear black people. In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon also shares a familiar incident where a child shouts at him in the train as “Mama, see the Negro! I’m frightened” (112). This shows how the white children are made to internalize prejudiced beliefs

that have caused him to fear black individuals.". The little girl of the white family addresses Pauline by her nickname, Polly, which shows the inferior status of Mrs. Breedlove to this little girl. Although the white family was unhappy, Mrs. Breedlove's perspective of whiteness as the standard is not altered by what she witnesses. She is even shocked by the fact that a white family's house is also dirty and unclean.

After Pecola gets raped by her father, her conclusion symbolizes the ultimate damaging effect of black individuals' fixation on white beauty ideals. Due to her trauma and the obsession she endured, Pecola descends into psychosis, illustrated by her dialogues with her imaginary companion. Pecola thinks that she has acquired blue eyes because of which she is isolated from the community as they envy her. Her blue eyes represents her unstable mental condition and this leads the community to perceive her in a more harmful manner. Claudia understands that the black community used Pecola as a scapegoat whom the community could purge its own self-loathing by directing that animosity toward her. She conveys that Pecola's perceived ugliness provided the community with a misleading sense of beauty. "We were so beautiful when we stood astride her ugliness" (205).

Conclusion:

Throughout the novel it is seen that the black characters are repeatedly exposed to representations of whiteness presented through films, literature, sweets, etc. In the beginning of the novel, Frieda and Pecola rave about Shirley Temple's beauty, and later, Pauline spends her days in the cinema admiring the white actresses. The association of beauty with blue eyes and whiteness causes the black people to aspire for the white beauty standard. The Breedloves suffer in poor condition because they think they are unattractive, and Pecola feels she deserves the mistreatment and disregard she faces at home due to her self-perceived unattractiveness. Beauty grants power to certain characters. For instance, Maureen Peal's beauty has the ability to halt the violence Pecola experienced as a bully from the black boys in school. The influence that accompanies beauty causes Pecola to believe that having blue eyes will enable her to rise above her sufferings. But her rape by her father led her to isolation and the desire to have blue eyes have driven her insane which shows the power of racial self-destruction.

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