

RACIAL SELF-LOATHING OF THE AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMAN THROUGH THE CHARACTER OF PECOLA IN *THE BLUEST EYE*, BY TONI MORRISON

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Abstract

*Emancipation, together with the supporting immediate amendments to the American Constitution, has not been so helpful to free the Blacks both from physical and psychological bondage. The new black American citizens have long devote their energy to exposing the Whites as the sole cause of their difficult post-emancipation condition, and the main handicap of their integration in the country they have long contributed in making economically prosperous. Although such apprehension is not to be rejected in full, it is important to unveil the Blacks share of responsibility in such a plight as theirs: black Americans have not succeeded in parting from viewing their former masters a pedestal, which has kept them into a continuous psychological domination. Such conceitedness and self-loathing of the African American has been the focus in many American literature (Black authors' in particular), and this has been portrayed in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eyes*, through the character of Pecola. The present research work, based on literary analysis and criticism, aims at recalling and denouncing the unfortunate self-rejection of Blacks in America on the basis their race, their natural and physical appearance, while trying to adopt the Whites' standards.*

Key-words: *black Americans – conceitedness - self-rejection – physical appearance*

Résumé

*Ni l'émancipation, ni les treizième, quatorzième et quinzeième amendements subséquents à la Constitution des Etats-Unis, n'ont réussi à totalement libérer les Noirs en Amérique des tourments physiques, mais surtout psychologiques. Ces nouveaux citoyens américains ont plutôt continué à présenter les Blancs comme les seuls responsables des difficultés socio-économiques auxquelles ils font face, et aussi leur incomplète intégration dans la nation américaine, celle-là même dont ils ont été grands acteur de la construction. Même si une telle appréhension peut se justifier en références aux pratiques et normes longtemps établies par pour restreindre l'épanouissement de Noirs en Amérique, il est tout aussi vrai que les Noirs américains n'ont pu se défaire du complexe d'infériorité à eux imposé avec l'esclavage, sur la base de la race. Ce déni racial a été abordé par plusieurs auteurs américains, dont Toni Morrison, à travers son roman, *The Bluest Eye*, incarné par le personnage de Pecola. Le présent article, basé sur la critique et l'analyse littéraire, vise à exposer tout en le dénonçant, le malheureux coté complexé du Noir Américain, qui en méprisant sa propre nature raciale tente vainement d'adopter la race blanche comme standard du mieux vivre.*

Mots clés : *noirs américains – complexe d'infériorité – auto mépris – apparence physique*

1. Theoretical framework of the study

1.1. Context of the writing of the novel

As Toni Morrison has become one of America's most celebrated contemporary authors, her first novel *The Bluest Eye*, published in 1970, has made her gain increasing attention from literary critics. The novel is mainly a narrated story from a young black girl, Claudia MacTeer, who is part of a poor but loving black family in Lorain, Ohio, in the 1940s. However, the primary focus of the novel is on Pecola Breedlove, another young black girl who lives in very different circumstances from Claudia and her sister Frieda. Pecola's mother, Pauline, is cruel to her family because they are a constant reminder that her life can never measure up to the ideal world of the white family for which she works as a maid. Not only is her mother distant and aloof, but Pecola's father is also unreliable for any comfort or support. Cholly Breedlove drinks excessively and later rapes Pecola. She bears his child, who dies shortly after birth. Because Pecola, like Pauline, yearns to be seen as beautiful, she longs for the blue eyes of the most admired child in the 1940s: Shirley Temple. After visiting Soaphead Church, a "spiritualist" who claims he can make Pecola's eyes blue, Pecola believes that she has the bluest eyes in the world and now everyone will love her. Clearly, Pecola is the truest kind of victim. Unlike Claudia, who possesses the love of her family, Pecola is powerless to reject the unachievable values esteemed by those around her and finally descends into insanity. *The Bluest Eye* portrays the tragedy which results when African Americans have no resources with which to fight the standards presented to them by the white culture that scorns them.

Although Toni Morrison sets her novel *The Bluest Eye* in the 1940s in the North, the thoughts that gave rise to the novel are centered in the Civil Rights Movement, which was waning in the late 1960s when she was writing the novel. Many historians mark the peak year of the Civil Rights Movement at 1963 because of the pivotal events which took place during this year: the assassination of NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) leader Medgar Evers, mass demonstrations led by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., in Birmingham, Alabama, the attempt by Alabama Governor George Wallace to stop integration of Alabama's schools, and the March on

Washington marked by Dr. King's "I Have a Dream" speech. When Morrison published *The Bluest Eye* in 1970, the Civil Rights Movement was far from over; however, following its peak in 1963, white backlash increased. In addition, national attention turned to other events, such as the continuing Paris peace talks to end the Vietnam War, war protests by college students at Kent State University and other colleges, and the exposure of the massacre of unarmed civilians in My Lai, South Vietnam, by American troops. With such events taking place, the March on Washington must have seemed like decades ago to black activists who found it increasingly difficult for their voices to be heard. Progress seemed to halt as Congress approved bills designed to stop bussing of students to create racial balance in integrated schools and Governor Wallace encouraged governors across the South to ignore integration orders from Washington. As historian, Harvard Sitkoff explains in his book *The Struggle for Black Equality: 1954-1992*, "the movement had secured basic civil rights for African-Americans, yet much remained to be done" (Sitkoff, 2008, P. 65).

The main point raised through the present investigation is the auto-victimization of the ex-slave, now African American. The new American citizen shaped by the thirteenth, fourteenth and fifteenth amendments to the constitution was lost in a decision making about his/her double identity: the African ancestry in the one hand, and America in the other hand. This middle position or no identity condition has made of the Black American to doubly victim, first from the ex-master's rejection as a neighbor, then the denial and despising of their own natural physical embodiment. Praising the Whites for their skin color and physical appearance could not help, but enforce the latter's domination, while preventing Black Americans from integrating that American nation they have contributing in making strong socially and economically. Such has been the warning and denouncement message of Morrison through the plot of her *The Bluest Eye*.

1-2 Literature review

When Toni Morrison published *The Bluest Eye* in 1970, she was explicitly trying to write about the analogous effects that self-loathing creates for families, communities, and in history. In the foreword for the 2007 edition, Morrison said that she is sure everyone knows what it feels like to be disliked or rejected or hated, "for things we have no

control over and cannot change” (Morrison, P. 19). But she also explains that this hatred comes with its own kind of grace: believing you deserve better. “*The Bluest Eye*, she writes, was about the people who learn to hate themselves, the far more tragic and disabling consequences of accepting rejection as legitimate, as self-evident,” and became either much worse for it or collapse, silently, anonymously, with no voice to express or acknowledge it (Morrison, 1970, P. 33).

In her memoir on reminiscences, Mago Jefferson writes of learning, over the course of her childhood, to recognize how and why she should hate herself. “I hated being caught unawares. It was so dangerous, so shameful not to know what I needed to know” (Jefferson, P. 48).. As a black woman, she was “denied the privilege of freely yielding to depression, of flaunting neurosis as a mark of social and psychic complexity, a privilege that was glorified in the literature of white female suffering and resistance. Jefferson then grew to consider her self-loathing reason enough to die, and her anger at this learned response is carefully measured. “My people’s enemies have done this to me. But so have my own loved ones...Let me say with care that the blame is not symmetrical: my enemies forced my loved ones to ask too much of me” (Jefferson, 2011, P. 103).

Published in 1969, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* is the first of Maya Angelou's many autobiographies, and it chronicles her experiences living with her grandmother in rural Stamps, Arkansas, being shuffled between her parents, being raped by her mother's boyfriend, and eventually giving birth as a teenager to her own son. In an early critique of *The Bluest Eye*, Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi concentrates on the structure of the novel, noting the "triadic patterns," patterns that appear in the present work. Further, Chikwenye has examined the scapegoating in the novel, ranging from Geraldine's cat, to Bob the dog, and finally to Pecola herself.

1.3. Objective, methods and the theory

The present study aims at drawing out the impacts of not knowing or ignoring the importance of racial pride. It intends to awaken consciousness on race as dependent on God, then unchangeable. Hating one’s race, skin color or physical construction is a sin, in the same way as trying amend God’s creature in the way Pecola intends to change her eyes into blue is a sin as well. So, the present

study is expected to bring the African Americans in particular and every human in general to be proud of their natural and racial construction.

The writing of the present paper has required the reading the novel, *The Bluest Eyes*, and other works and critics in connection with the search, loss or denial of identity in the African American community and elsewhere; the collected data have been critically analyzed and interpreted, with regard to the context: and the circumstances or events that form the environment within which Morrison's novel has appeared.

The theory that has been applied to this study is the Critical Race Theory. This is a theory that examines how people exposed to prejudices due to cultural perceptions of race are portrayed and how they wish to portray themselves. It studies the individual's character, social class in order to explain that race has nothing to do with intellectual capacity, moral behavior or other distinctly human traits (Delgado and Stefanick, 2000, P. 9). To the scholars concerned with the Critical Race Theory, the term "white privilege" is an institutional set of benefits granted to those who, by race, resemble the people who dominate the powerful positions in society. Francis E. Kendall explains that: "One of the primary privileges is that of having greater access to power and resources than people of color do; in other words, purely on the basis of our skin color doors, are open to us that are not open to other people" (Kendall, 2003, P.33). He also emphasizes that white privilege has nothing to do with being a good or bad person but solely the fact that a person belongs to a certain race (Kendall, 2003? P.36).

2. The origin of Pecola's racial self-loathing

2-1 The family as the roots of Pecola's racial self-loathing

Pecola Breedlove is an eleven year-old little black girl, blossoming with life, has become homeless. By orders of the county, the MacTeers take Pecola into their home to temporarily take care of her until the county finds another home for her. There on the MacTeers compound, she meets and becomes best friends with Claudia the main characters and the narrator of the story, and with Frieda. Pecola is not happy with herself, her being black with so black eyes; she sees blacks, and black women in particular as not so beautiful as white women, with reference to their eyes, and she longs for blue eyes, as for

her, blue eyes are symbolic of American white beauty. Pecola has a very difficult life growing up, and her torment come from the fact that people in her environment focus on her blackness as symbol of ugliness. Such a situation has quickly developed in the little girl conceitedness and lack of confidence. The white man's strategy during slavery and even after emancipation that has consisted in pouring in the Blacks' mind that they were worthless as inferior human being has then functioned in Pecola. James Baldwin, in *The Fire Next Time*, has warned the countrymen on such strategy aiming at keeping the Blacks under domination:

The details and symbols
of your life have been
deliberately constructed
to make you believe
what white people say
about you. Please, try to
remember that what they
believe as well as what
they do and cause you to
endure, does not testify
to your inferiority but to
their inhumanity and fear
(Baldwin, 1963, P.8)

Morrison provides details in the origins of Pecola's racial self-loathing, stretching back to her parents. Pecola's mother, Pauline lost self-esteem after getting her foot injured and then developing a limo as a result. Nonetheless, she long for love, but at the same time viewing beauty only through the white woman, which led her to desire to be white. When her long waited man, Cholly Breedlove finally comes, they get married and moved north to Lorain Ohio for better opportunities. Unfortunately, life has not been as expected, both with her partner and in society. The bith of their first son Sammy has not made things any better and the soon birth of Pecola has rather let Pauline feel ashamed and shocked; Pauline sees in her little baby, the true symbol of Blacks' ugliness.

I talked to it so much before I conjured up a mind's
eye view of it.

So when I seed it was like looking at a picture of your
mama when
she was a girl. You know who she is, but she don't
look the same.
They give her to me for a nursing, and she liked to pull
my nipple off right
away. She caught on fast. Not like Sammy, he was the
hardest child to feed.
But Pecola look like know right off what to do. A right
smart baby she was.
I used to like to watch her you know how they make
them greedy sounds.
Eyes all soft and wet. Across between a puppy and a
dying man.
But I know she was ugly. Head full of
pretty hair but Lord she was ugly"
(Morrison, 1970, Pp. 99-100).

It could not then be expected that Pecola be loved by her mother, and the little girl then grows up with a mentality of being ugly. More than just the skin color, the black woman's ugliness is viewed through the darkish color of her eyes; that is why, at eleven years old, Pecola after reviewing her mother's attitude and education on her, has decided to long for the white woman's eye, the bluest eyes that will change the view of her own black community on her. Pauline has also taught her daughter the fearful of being clumsy or being just like her father whom she describes as an inadequate man. These lessons are consolidated through beating: into her daughter she beats a fear of growing up, fear of other people, in a word, the fear of life and living. Pecola, as an answer to this situation has decided to make herself invisible until the external world will be ready to see her positively, that is with a new look, some blue eyes.

But Pecola's mother is not the sole origin of her conceitedness; Cholly Pecola's father has been abandoned by his own mother as a baby; he has been taken care of by his Aunt, Jimmy. When after Jimmy's death, Cholly get acquainted with his father, Samson, he is deceived since the latter has just ignored him, and Cholly finds himself "dangerously free", with no compasses, no social and moral education,

to the point that his own daughter Pecola becomes his victim through raping, This inhumane act of Pecola's father, has definitely wiped out the confidence the little girl is expecting from herself and from her community.

In *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Zora Neale Hurston has depicted this self-destruction, of destruction of their fellow Blacks. Slavery had let the black women to sexual exploitation by the Whites. I was then expected that with emancipation African American women should be protected by their men, but the plot in the novel that occurs in the days following abolition of slavery explores the sordid side of the newly emancipated black man, that is different from the former white master just in the color of the skin. This is to be seen through the attitude of Logan Killicks who considers wife Janie as a mule to do the household chores and to help in the farm; at home, she is just for cooking the food and sex with any true consent. This has led Janie to abandoning her husband after the death of her grandmother who forced her into that marriage. Janie's second husband, Jody Starks has been specially different but harder with his 'jailing' and silencing the woman, to increase his power and influence as a mayor. Janie latter is victim of an attempt of murder from her third husband Vergible Woods, who on the break of death, will not conceive leaving his wife to any other man. Through her novel, Hurston going along with Morrison, aims at telling the black community that the white man is not their only problem for peaceful living and integrating in the American Society; they, the Blacks, represent such handicap as well.

Moreover in *The Bluest Eyes*, Claudia's parents as well as every black parents offer white dolls for birthday present, and this appears meaningful enough: the white doll is beautiful and attractive; it has blue eyes, and this expresses its beauty and the white woman's beauty as a consequence. "Adult, older girls, shops, magazines, newspaper window signs - all the world had agreed that a blue eye, yellow - haired, pink-skinned doll was what every child treasures. Here, they said, this is beautiful, and you are on this day, worthy, you may have it (Morrison, 1970, P. 20). Yet, awareness on the bad impacts of such self-loathing is sometime difficult to raise in the victims; while Claudia becomes angry and tries to rebel against the standards that are imposed on her by likewise victim parents, Pecola in the opposite becomes introvert and resigned to the white man's superiority in every regard, quietly

increasing hatred in herself, since the dream of blue eyes is an unattainable one.

2.2. Expression of denial and shame for roots and background culture

In *The Bluest Eyes* the conceited Blacks have associated the white skin with power of beauty and purity. This is depicted through adoration of the Shirley Temple doll which was given to Claudia and Maureen, and which is seen as cuter than all black girls. Bell Hooks in his article "Baby love" (Hooks, P.61) says that many American girls are given dolls during Christmas time so that they can be molded into future wives. But for the Black girl, this seems too much demanding: first, she will have to change herself into that complexion and model, before expecting the physical changing that will turn her into a wife. This first condition being almost impossible, the black girl ugly compared to the doll, she will view herself as a second class girl and human being compared to the white girls. This frustration has led Claudia, in *The Bluest Eyes*, to tear the Shirley Temple's doll. For Claudia, the white dolls are perceived to be the remembrance of how ugly they are just as Pecola is trying to change herself due to her social class of drunkards and rapists, which always makes her wish that she had better disappear and become somebody else.

In *The Bluest Eyes*, Morrison uses Pauline and Pecola to bring out how ignorance or abandoning the root culture caused by the contact with the white has led to self-loathing in the black community. The Blacks have come to identify themselves with the Whites because of their closeness with the Whites and mainly because of their being dominated by the latter. Due to their position and condition through slavery, the Blacks have idolized the white master's family and their lifestyles: the little whites' blonde haired, and blue eyed daughter. Such a conception is more critical contemporarily in America, and even in most Sub-Saharan African countries with men and women striving for using lotion and other dangerous products for white complexion, artificial long hair, nails and many other practices that get them close to the Whites in style and standards. In *The Bluest Eyes*, Pecola's self-hatred is also associated with her skin color, which she blames her parents and God for. When playing with little boys, the latter tease her with

reference to her complexion, on the opposite of Maureen who is praised for her light skin with blue eyes.

Whenever her parents are on a contest, Pecola immediately refers to her blackness as the cause; if only her eyes are blue at least, father and mother will behave lovely with each other. Now she has refuge in buying and eating candy, the wrapper of which is stamped with a colorful picture of Mary Jane's white face, blond hair, blue eyes, that same combination hated by Claudia. Also, Geraldine, a socially conscious middle-class black has decided to be concerned only with white things, and does everything possible to disconnect herself from her African roots. She mistreats her son, Louis Junior, and prefers caring for her though black cat, but with blue eyes. The blue eye she is conceived as that thing to veil blackness, then to mask inferiority. Such denial of blacks' ancestry, coped with praising and adoration of the Whites has increased the Black man's conceitedness and self-loathing. The advocating of Black's beautifulness to resist such Whites' isolating strategies as miscegenation and discrimination then still have a long way through, if not already dead.

This symbolic cannibalism is a sign of Pecola's latent instability. The desire for blue eyes is evidence of Pecola's dissatisfaction with her identity, with her world, and of her longing for something better, which, at twelve years old, she has no way of providing for herself. The desire for blue eyes is part of the inverted quality of her world. In wanting blue eyes, Pecola wants, in fact, to be white. The focus of the novel shifts to a description of some black American people, especially women, who attempt to control and modify their blackness.

Ugliness of the black Americans is also evident in Gerald Early's book *Life with daughters: Watching the Miss America Pageant*, where he asserts that most of the American beauty contests are mainly made for and won by the white Americans. This is because most black Americans considered themselves less beautiful than white Americans. According to Early, the pageant is exactly an entity, "the worst sort of Americanism, the soft smile of sex and the hard sell of toothpaste and hair dye adds wrapped in the dreamy ideological gauze of making it through one own effort" (Early, 1990, Pp. 225-226).

3. The impacts of racial self-loathing in Pecola's life

3.1. *Loneliness*

Praising and worshiping Whites' beauty has led Black American, through the character of Pecola, into deriving a complicated impression of beauty from humiliating people of their own community. In this way Pecola and her family have turned out to be the focal point of the whole black community's self-hatred. Moreover, by indicating that Pecola's ugliness has helped everyone else to feel beautiful, while her weakness is making others to feel potent, Morrison tries to reveal how such idealization predominantly depends on one's idealistic conception and self-rejection.

According to Morrison, the black community grants Pecola no sympathy, no assistance. On the opposite, they strengthen her conviction of belonging to the wrong race, by making of her a victim of rape, which the white community does not tolerate (or is no more tolerating).

At school, Pecola is never designated by the teacher, unless as an obligation. Although, basing on the spelling of her name, she has to be sitting in the front She always stay alone in the classroom and the beginning letter of her name obliged her to sit on front place, she has no table neighbor. "she was the only member of the class who sat alone at a double desk" (Morrison, 1970, P. 43).

In the store as well, the tender refrains from touching on her hand when getting money or giving her the bought article. Because of her supposed ugliness, the man always " hesitates, not wanting to touch her hand. She doesn't know how to move the finger of her right hand from the display counter or how to get the coins out of her left hand" (Morrison, 1970, P.43). Pecola then appears as the prototype of the black community's of failure racially, but also socially and psychologically. And since nobody will love if you don't love yourself, Pecola can't expect any more favorable attitude on her from the white community.

Thus her ego lacks any
sort of validation in the
eye of others as her
existence is totally

unrecognized; she is crushed into an instance of self-defiance, a vacuum signifying nothing, a total absence of acknowledgment as a human being. Pecola knows very well how this failure of her ego is related to her blackness: All things in her are in flux and anticipation. But her blackness is static and dread. And it is the blackness that accounts for, that creates, the vacuum edged with distaste in white eyes (Hooks, 2002, P.72).

3.2. The harming effect of racial self-loathing on Pecola's community

Pecola's rejection of her race first comes from her parents' attitude, quarrelling days because of their daughter's physical appearance. This has led to the scattering of the family, since Sammy, Pecola's brother early leaves home to escape witnessing their parents' daily strife. All the people Pecola has to deal with are contaminated by such rejection of one another: Apart from the shop tender, there Elihue Micah Whitcomb, known as Soaphead Church, who hates to be around his people. When Pecola refers to him, she thinks that his supposed supernatural powers will help her acquire those blue eyes to change her life. Unfortunately, Soaphead just helps Pecola to worsen her ppsychological condition, as she finally depressed into madness.

“Morrison has chosen to emphasize the family's objection by letting the Breedlove family be talked about in third person narrative while the MacTeer family in first person” (Chikwenye, 2014, P.34). The crisis in the family and in the community as a whole is expressed in *The*

Bluest Eyes Pecola's calling her own mother 'Mrs'. It is then inappropriate talking about family. By raping Pecola, Pecola's father has already broken his fatherhood with the girl; community doesn't admit having sex with one's own daughter, let alone raping her. The here family has then been cut up into individual stranger members. But for Pecola, such situation as her being raped by her father has been possible as an expressing of disgust and rejection from her genitor; has she been a beautiful girl with those blue eyes, this will never have happened. "*For long hours she sat looking in the mirror, trying to discover the secret of the ugliness, the ugliness that made her ignored or despised at school, by teachers and classmate alike*" (Morrison, 1970, P. 39). The failure of fatherhood has not been mended by motherhood; Mrs Breedlove shows no compassion to her daughter with the raping. This increases Pecola's strong desire for the bluest eyes.

Discussion and conclusion

The loss of identity with the African American is not something the latter should be blamed of in first view, since the white masters, during slavery, have managed the Blacks in a way that they would no more identify themselves to Africa, while not being Americans. The black slave was totally, morally and psychologically shaped to become 'Nobody'. This has greatly contributed to the difficult orientation and integration of the Blacks, once they became emancipated. The main problem of those new Americans was the following: who are they? Where they Americans or Africans? If Africans, they would have no reason for remaining in that country where they were taken to, in chains. But if they should be considered Americans, their former masters should have to admit them as their countrymen with equal rights, and there lies the real problem. The descents of the White slavers would never welcome the descents of their fathers' slaves as equal citizens in this America whose greatness has been effective with the contribution of those slave descents. Such rejection, coped with loss of identity compasses due to slavery, has made the Blacks to lose self-confidence, then continuing to live under the psych-domination of the Whites. Many African American writers have found it appropriate to expose and denounce this conceitedness and self-loathing, but the end is probably not so close. Though fictional, Morrison's novel *The*

Bluest Eyes has exposed the true condition of the post emancipated African American in the time of her writing of the novel, and even in the contemporary time. In *The Bluest Eye* Pecola feels neither loved nor accepted and it has a heart-breaking effect on her. Her story is unfortunately not unique, as numerous children continue to suffer from rejection today in America at large, and in the African American community, because of their skin color, gender or any other factors brought about by social inequalities. As in many other cases the community where Pecola lives never intervenes although they most likely are fully aware of the unsatisfactory state of things in the Breedlove family. To some extent this could explain why Pecola accepts to become a scapegoat for all shortcomings everyone around her has experienced, from racism to neglect and abuse. When internalizing feelings of shame, neglect and powerlessness, she can act as the embodiment of other people's feelings of inferiority. Not feeling beautiful enough is unfortunately still an issue in our society but when combining that with the feeling of inferiority because of one's skin color, this definitely will have devastating effects on the youth.

The outreach of the present study is to transpose the fictional plot of Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* on the African American life, then conclude that the black Americans' moral and psychological condition, and as a matter of fact, their social and economic condition, have always depended on themselves. As long as Blacks in America will have no self-confidence due to their past slave status and their natural black condition, and until they confide and love one another, they will remain in that kind of psychological and effective domination from the Whites. Blaming the Whites for being ex-slaves could be acceptable as a pretext, but fully blaming those Whites for the present incapability to emerge and integrate the American community is vain and unacceptable.

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