

**The Search for Self - identity in *The Bluest Eye***

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**Abstract:** *Blacks in America suffered in all means since the beginning of the British colonization and that paved a way for African American Literature to explore the very issues of freedom and equality which were long denied to Negroes in America. Throughout American history, African Americans have been discriminated against and subject to racist attitudes. Particularly black women were exploited and became scapegoat and this experience inspired Morrison to portray the perception of black women who condemn themselves for their blackness and her fiction seemingly depicts the struggles and joys of the journey to self-awareness, blending the real and surreal to explore the magical elements of everyday life of the black community in America. Morrison's works have apparently illuminated the multifaceted experience, identity and psyche of communal black life.*

**Key Words:** *Self hatred, Depression, Self-awareness, Self-identity, Double Consciousness*

*Toni Morrison*, a versatile American writer won Nobel Prize for literature in 1993. Her works deal with the black experience and celebrate the black community. She tries to recapture the black American folk heritage by combining realism with myth and symbolism. Her novels explore the relationship between the individual and the community, revealing how public attitudes can shape private conceptions. Morrison's work features sharp observation and compassion for her characters. She is greatly admired for her precise language, often colloquial yet always lyrical. Morrison's works have apparently illuminated the multifaceted experience, identity and psyche of communal black life. They powerfully portray the social, economical and political conditions of the African Americans who have been degraded and distorted for centuries in America. She has been celebrated internationally as a writer who brought out renewed perspectives on the role of race in American society.

In recent times a number of writers, many of them women writers, have published books on the various facets of the blacks in America, bringing to focus the different stages of racial aggression that the blacks have been exposed to over the years. These writers include Alice Walker, Maya Angelou, Zorro Neale Hurston, Ntozak Shange, Mildred Taylor, Lorraine Hansberry, to name a few. As a novelist, Morrison has the unique distinction of portraying the black identity from the vantage point of the identitarian issues faced by the black community in general. She problematised the extent to which the myth of the racial supremacy of the whites over the blacks got imbibed into the minds especially of the younger generations of black people in contemporary America. The African-American quest for identity has been one of the major

points of departure in the works especially of the southern black writers. Morrison's new set of description is devoted to elevating the most important and cherished aspects of the African American and criticizing those who stand as obstacle in the progress of the blacks.

Approached from a broader perspective, African American literature can be defined as writings by people of African descent living in the United States of America. African American literature has generally focused on themes of particular interest to Blacks in the United States, such as the role of African Americans within the larger American society and what it means to be an American. African American literature constitutes a vital branch of the literature of the African Diaspora, with African American literature both being influenced by the great African diasporic heritage and in turn influencing African diasporic writings in many countries. In addition, African American literature exists within the larger realm of post-colonial literature, even though scholars draw a distinctive line between the two by stating that "African American literature differs from most post-colonial literature in that it is written by members of a minority community who reside within a nation of vast wealth and economic power."(Bell 29)

However, while these characteristics and themes exist on many levels of African American literature, they are not the exclusive definition of the genre and don't exist within all works within the genre. In addition, there is resistance to using Western literary theory to analyze African American literature. As Henry Louis Gates, one of the most important African American literary scholars, once said, "My desire has been to allow the black tradition to speak for itself about its nature and various functions, rather than to read it, or analyze it, in terms of literary theories borrowed whole from other traditions, appropriated from without."(Gates XIX)

The Americans of African descent could identify themselves neither with Africans nor with the Americans. Blacks had a culture and humanity of their own but historically devalued and marginalized by the Americans who were of European descent. Blacks could not find any kind of positive relationship with the white community as they were brought only as slaves to South America. Their physical and cultural differences also contributed to the demarcating line drawn between the two communities.

Generally black woman are the victims of perverted logic, that the black woman survives is a testimony to her unyielding 'tar' spirit that has bound the black community together, be it during slavery or after slavery. Morrison has taken the difficult task of depicting the black American female experience in a style of her own. In her essay, "Rootedness" Morrison writes:

*I don't regard black literature as simply booms written about black people of simply literature that uses a certain mode of language in which you just sort of drop g's. There is something very special and identified about it and it is my struggle to find that elusive but identifiable style in the books. (341)*

The message in Morrison's novels is a racial tolerance and her deepest concern is about an individual attempt to achieve identity. She sees male gender as a morally strong agent faces up to forces and impulses that he cannot control. Morrison's presentation of contemporary race is typical. She alleges that deep within the word "American" is its association with race. She also condemns the popular culture, shaped by films, theatre, advertising, the press, television and literature heavily engaged in race talk, having no purpose other than pressing African Americans to the lowest levels of racial hierarchy. When we go through the whole of literature, we are amazed to see the fiction has a remarkable place in literature. The fiction, which is also known as novel, is the most significant form of twentieth century. In her novels Morrison allows experiences to intersect with one another whether it is gender, race and self-identity, imagination and reality; or history and myth. She has taken seriously a role of writing a new narrative for the nation. One of the fascinated technique the novelist used in her novels is the way she carries the characters for expressing ideas of the prosperity, the adversity, love, hatred, failure, success, separation and, reunion. The novelist personal life is reflected through the characters she portrays. Morrison particularises the concept of the African American Literature that reveals two facts: first, that African American experiences have varied widely from the point that the Africans were forcibly brought to America; second, their African American experiences were bound by the external desire to continue their relic and thrift in America. Almost all her novels depict the inferiority complex of the blacks in America, and their alienation and humiliation that have occurred since the beginning of the British colonization. They are mostly associated with slavery and the blacks' social and economical background, particularly women are degraded as inferior human race. Beginnings with their enslavement in America, not only women but also their children were defined as slaves as well, regardless of their paternity.

In the present study, an attempt is made to closely read her first novel viz., *The Bluest Eye* to unravel the ways in which Morrison endeavours to redefine the black identity in America, as she seemed to have felt the need to liberate her community from the clutches of stereotypes and prejudices. This novel narrates the story of a victimized adolescent black girl, Pecola, obsessed with the white standards of beauty, who longs to have blue eyes, a symbol of white beauty. She puts herself behind the bar because of her ardent desire to get rid off black identity. Morrison, however, portrays the perception of black women who condemn themselves for their blackness by labelling it ugly. The novel presents the way such attributes of American concept of beauty as blue eyes, blonde hair, and white skin predominate among blacks. Du Bois says in his the double consciousness of the African American

*"a black person living in a white country has to learn to think with two minds, his own and the white man's, if he has any interest in survival."* (75).

The novel reveals that the concept of self-hatred comes from the dissatisfaction of appearance that can ruin one's own personality. She further addresses the conflict between the black identity and the white cultural values. *The Bluest Eye* is split into an untitled prelude and

four large units, each named after a season. The four larger units begin with "Autumn" and end in "Summer," with each unit being split into smaller sections. The first section of each season is narrated by Claudia MacTeer, a woman whose memories frame the events of the novel. At the time that the main events of the plot take place; Claudia is a nine-year-old girl. This device allows Morrison to employ a reflective adult narrator without losing the innocent perspective of a child. Claudia MacTeer lives with her parents and her sister in the humble MacTeer family house in Lorrain, Ohio in 1939.

The novel's focus, however, is on a girl named Pecola Breedlove. Pecola will be raped by her father by novel's end. The prelude frames the story so that the reader knows from the beginning that Pecola's story ends tragically. The Breedloves are poor, unhappy, and troubled. Their story seems in many ways to be deterministic, as they are often the victims of forces over which they have no control.

The title of the novel provides some interesting insights about standards of beauty. Morrison is interested in showing the illusory nature of the social construction of beauty, which is created in part by the imaginary world of advertising billboards and movie stars. The title uses the superlative of blue because at the end of the novel, when Pecola has gone mad, she is obsessed with having the bluest eyes of anyone living. But the title also has "eye" in the singular. By disembodiment of the eye Morrison subverts the idea of beauty or standards of beauty, tearing the idealized part away from the whole, creating a beauty icon that is not even human. Reinforcing this non-human aspect of the ideal eye, Pecola's new blue eyes at the novel's end are not described with colors in the human range, her eyes are blue like streaks of cobalt, or more blue than the sky itself.

At key points in the novel, important plot information is revealed through gossip. Morrison writes long stretches of beautiful and uninterrupted dialogue, with great sensitivity to oral language. Pauline Breedlove gets a chance to speak in the first person near the middle of the novel; in a section divided between third-person narrator and Pauline, she gets to address the reader directly and in dialect. Morrison's interest in carving a place for oral language in literary art is readily apparent in this novel.

Morrison, by employing multiple narrators, is trying to make sure that no single voice becomes authoritative. The gossiping women become narrators in their own right, relaying critical information and advancing the story at key points. Claudia's perspective is balanced by the third person narrator, and Pauline Breedlove narrates for parts of one of the middle sections of the novel. This method of multiplying narrative perspectives also demands more active participation on the part of the reader, who must reassemble the parts in order to see the whole.

Pecola's negativity rests initially with her family's failure to provide the socialization, identity, love, and security that are essential to healthy growth and development. The emptiness of her parents' lives and their own negative self-images are particularly hurtful. Not only does their socioeconomic status as poor blacks set them on the periphery of society, but their

perception of themselves as ugly isolates them further, offering evidence of self-hatred. Pauline describes Pecola after her birth as “Eyes all soft and wet, a cross, a puppy and a dying man, I know, she is ugly, head full of pretty hairs but lord she was ugly” (BE 100). Pauline understands it as the usual way of the black community that despises her own child calling ‘Ugly’. This self-hatred is the most destructive element in their lives; the central element they lack is self-love. Pecola experiences the most damaging form of intraracial prejudice, however even at the hands of her abusive negligent parentes. On the contrary, Claudia reacts more fiercely towards oppressive society. She refuses to accept the norms of white society and does not succumb to it. “I was physically revolted by and secretly frightened of those round moronic eyes, the pan cake face and orange worm hair” (BE 20).

I can't go to school no more.

And I thought may be you could help me

Help you how? Tell me. Don't be frightened

My eyes

What about your eyes?

I want them blue ( BE 137)

Being degraded by her own folk and the white people, Pecola is fascinated by Sherly Temple, a handsome young white who has blue eyes which attract attention. Pecola is driven to the perception that if she has the same blue eyes, the world would view her from a positive dimension. So she went to seek help from Soaphead Church, a guest preacher, is proud of his academic accomplishment. “A little black girl who wanted to rise up out of the pit of her blackness and see the world with blue eyes” ( BE 137)

Equally significant is the physical violence done to the black child by parents who are themselves confused about their identity, as is the case with the Breedloves. In the end, when cholly rapes his daughter, it is a physical manifestation of the social, psychological, and personal violence that, together with his wife, he has put upon Pecola. Significantly, Cholly rapes Pecola in the section of the novel titled “Spring”; he above all remains incapable of providing the fertile, parental soil a child needs to grow and develop a positive sence of self. “having no idea of how to raise children, having never watched any parent raise himself, he could not even comprehend what such a relationship should be” ( BE 126) . Pecola is considered as the central scapegoat. She is not only made a scapegoat by her parents but also by the narrator, Claudia, a once caring friend who shuns her in the end. Pecola's failure to define and accept her own perceptions denies her inherent freedom and responsibility but does not negate their existence. She fails to realize the responsibility ,and She remains dishonest with herself. This is the crucial point that Morrison's text reveals about Pecola.

In spite of fragility in the characters Morrison's quest to inscribe the black figure on the white page. The novel is associated with the struggles of the blacks that are incessantly trying to achieve their self-identity and individuality, without being socially marginalized as the minor community demands humanity on its own accord.

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