

Misconceived ‘Self’ in Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*

SATARUPA DEB

M.Phil Research Scholar, Deptt. Of English, Assam University, Assam, India

Email – debsatarupa175@gmail.com

Abstract: Toni Morrison began her literary career with the novel *The Bluest Eye* published in 1970. Later she published many award-winning and best-selling novels like *Sula* (1973), *Song of Solomon* (1977), *Tar Baby* (1981) and *Beloved* (1987) which earned her repute as one of the leading African American writers. Morrison’s first published novel *The Bluest Eye* explores the issues related to the crisis of identity of a Black girl named Pecola in a White European society as a consequence of ‘internalized racism’. Through the protagonist Pecola, Morrison demonstrates the damage caused by ‘internalized racism’ to the minds of the children in the most devastating manner. The novel depicts Pecola’s struggle for identity and self where the epitome of beauty is defined by the standardized White European norms. For Pecola, having blue eyes, blonde hair and pinkish skin tone is the true epitome of beauty, which ultimately results in her suffering. Her life-long craving for the misconceived beauty provides her nothing but a false notion of self and identity.

Key Words: African American Literature, Internalized Racism, Discrimination, Toni Morrison, Civil Rights Movement, Identity, Self, Misconception.

1. INTRODUCTION:

African American Literature is the specific genre of literature which began during the 18th and 19th centuries written by and about the African Americans. African American literature tends to focus on themes particularly associated with the Black people in America. It deals with issues such as the role of African Americans within the largest American society and also with African American culture, racial discrimination faced by the African Americans in the USA, their religion, slavery, segregation, emancipation and freedom for equality. Now-a-days, African American literature has become an integral part of American literature.

Toni Morrison has a central role in the American literary canon. She emerged as one of the leading 20th century African American writers. Her novels chronicle the small-town African American life of African American people. *The Bluest Eye* (1970) is her first novel to be published. Her most renowned novel *Beloved* (1987) won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 1988. Morrison is also the first African American female writer to win the ‘Nobel Prize in Literature’. Morrison, in her writings, mostly take up the issues related to identity-crisis in the African Americans, racial discrimination, patriarchal oppression of Black women, the rich oral tradition of the African Americans and also inter-racial conflicts among the various African American groups. Through her writings, Morrison proved herself as a gifted storyteller of stories where the troubled characters seek their true identity and cultural richness in a society that denigrates such people and their culture in every sphere of life.

The Bluest Eye, Morrison’s first novel, deals with a very sensitive issue like child-abuse highlighting dysfunctional parent-child relationship and inter-racial discrimination as its focal point of study. The female protagonist in this novel, the eleven-year-old Pecola Breedlove, internalizes the White European stereotypes of happiness and beauty as the standard norms. The devastating effects of this stigma on her psyche lead her to the point where she wants to possess not just the blue eyes but rather ‘the bluest eyes’ in order to fit in her family as well as her community who taunt her as “ugly” because of her darker skin-tone. It is seen amongst the African Americans that over periods of time, as a result of the emergence of Creols amongst the African Americans, they became so obsessed with the issue of their skin tone that there emerged a division amongst them as African Americans of darker skin tone and African Americans of lighter skin tone. The latter started hating the former because they thought they were superior to the former ones. In order to know what ‘internalized racism’ and ‘intra-racial racism’ imply we need to know the racial issues in African American Criticism in brief:

2. Racial issues and African American Literary History:

The virtual exclusion of African American history and culture from American education, which began to be addressed only in the late 1960s, reflects the virtual exclusion of African American history and culture from official versions of American history before that time. Only over the past few decades have American history books begun to include information about black Americans that had been repressed in order to maintain the cultural hegemony, or dominance, of White America. For example, textbooks that were used to teach American history (which, more accurately, should have been called White American history) said little or nothing about the slave uprisings during the

horrific Middle Passage (the transportation of slaves from Africa to America), the numerous slave rebellions on the plantations, and the network of communication and resistance developed by slaves right under the noses of the slave-masters. And such accomplishments as the tremendous outpouring of creative enterprises — including, for example, black literature, music, painting, sculpture, philosophy, and political debate — associated with Harlem during the 1920s and known as the ‘Harlem Renaissance’, were not given the attention they deserved.

Much of African American literature deals with racism — as a literary record of African American experience. ‘Racialism’, a word we do not often hear in everyday speech, refers to the belief in racial superiority, inferiority, and purity based on the conviction that moral and intellectual characteristics, just like physical characteristics, are biological properties that differentiate the races. ‘Racism’ refers to the unequal power relations that grow from the socio-political domination of one race by another and that result in systematic discriminatory practices (for example, segregation, domination, and persecution). Therefore, although anyone can be a racist, in order to be a racist — in order to be in a position to segregate, dominate, or persecute — one has to be in a position of power as a member of the politically dominant group, which in America usually means that one has to be ‘White’. In other words, the systematic practice of racism (for example, denying qualified persons of color employment, housing, education, or anything else to which they are entitled) can occur on a regular basis only when those who do it can expect to get away with it. And those who do it can expect to get away with it when the group to which they belong controls most of the positions of power in the political, judicial, and law-enforcement systems.

To put the matter another way, the systematic practice of racial discrimination can occur only when racism has become institutionalized. ‘Institutionalized racism’ refers to the incorporation of racist policies and practices in the institutions by which a society operates: for example, education; federal, state, and local governments; the law, both in terms of what is written on the books and how it is implemented by the courts and by police officials; health care, which can be racially biased in everything from the allocation of research finance to the location of hospitals to the treatment of individual patients; and the corporate world, which often practices racial discrimination in its hiring and promotion despite whatever equal-opportunity policies it officially claims to have.

One area in which ‘institutionalized racism’ has been very effective in discriminating against African Americans is the American literary canon. The Western (British, European, and American) literary canon has been dominated by a Eurocentric definition of universalism: literary works have been defined as great art, as “universal”— relevant to the experience of all people — and included in the canon only when they reflect European experience and conform to the style and subject matter of the European literary tradition, that is, only when they resemble those European works already deemed “great.” For ‘Eurocentrism’ is the belief that European culture is vastly superior to all others. Although African Americans can boast a long and impressive literary history dating back to the eighteenth century, white American literary historians considered black writers as a tributary or an offshoot rather than part and parcel of American literary history.

Therefore, until recently, anthologies of American literature, including those used to teach high school and college courses, were confined largely to the work of White male writers. The literary canon has, thus, been used to maintain white cultural hegemony. This situation has begun to change, of course, but that change is coming rather slowly. Although contemporary black American authors certainly hold top honors today — with Toni Morrison (who won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1993), Alice Walker, John Edgar Wideman, Maya Angelou, Gloria Naylor, Ishmael Reed, Nikki Giovanni, Charles Johnson, Rita Dove, Sherley Anne Williams, August Wilson, and Ernest J. Gaines, among many others, producing some of the most widely acclaimed literature in America — works by black writers, past and present, are still too often underrepresented on course syllabi in American literature courses.

The promotion of racial discrimination by ‘institutionalized racism’ is often mirrored in a society’s racist stereotypes and in its adherence to a narrow standard of Anglo-Saxon beauty. Before “Black is beautiful!” and “Say it loud: I’m black and I’m proud!” sounded the call for a radical change in African American self-definition and self-perception in the late 1960s, many African Americans suffered from ‘internalized racism’. And despite the success of black-pride advocates, many people of color continue to suffer from it today. ‘Internalized racism’ results from the ‘psychological programming’ by which a racist society indoctrinates people of color to believe in white superiority. Victims of ‘internalized racism’ generally feel inferior to whites, less attractive, less worthwhile, less capable, and often wish they were white or looked more white. ‘Internalized racism’ is loosely defined as the internalization by people of racist attitude a loathing towards members of their own ethnic group. Robin Nicole Johnson defines it in her book *The Psychology of Racism* (2008) as “an individual’s conscious and unconscious acceptance of a racial hierarchy in which whites are consistently ranked above the people of color” (Johnson, 167). It helps articulating an uneven power dynamic between white and non-white people. It serves as a barrier towards achievement of racial equality. Needless to say, Toni Morrison provides one of the most chilling portraits of ‘internalized racism’ in *The Bluest Eye*, in which Pecola Breedlove, a young black girl who cannot see her own beauty, believes she would be pretty, happy, and loved if only she had blue eyes like a White girl.

‘Internalized racism’ often results in ‘intra-racial racism’, which refers to discrimination

within the black community against those with darker skin and more African features. This phenomenon is illustrated in *The Bluest Eye* when Pecola is knocked off by other black children for having dark skin, while another black child, the light-skinned Maureen Peal, is treated by the same black youngsters as if she were superior to them. While the economic hardship and social marginalization caused by 'institutionalized racism' are common knowledge, 'internalized racism' and 'intra-racial racism' illustrate the devastating psychological experiences that also results from these.

3. DISCUSSION

In the novel *The Bluest Eye* Pecola is involved in a quest – for love and identity and Morrison depicts the world in the novel from a child's point of view. The story of the eleven-year-old Pecola, the tragic female protagonist of *The Bluest Eye*, stemmed out of Morrison's memory of a girlhood friend who as well craved for 'blue eyes'. Morrison had written of the little Black girl whom she knew :

"Beauty was not simply something to behold, it was something one could do. *The Bluest Eye* was my effort to say something about that; to say something about why she had not, or possibly ever would have, the experience of what she possessed and also why she prayed for so radical an alteration. Implicit in her desire was racial self-loathing. And twenty years later I was still wondering about how one learns that. Who told her? Who made her feel that it was better to be a freak than what she was? Who had looked at her and found her so wanting, so small a weight on the beauty scale? The novel pecks away at the gaze that condemned her" (Morrison, 208).

Pecola Breedlove was shunned by her town's prosperous Black families as well as White families as a consequence of her darker skin color. They tormented her for being Black and ugly. She also has a difficult childhood. She lives with her abusive, irresponsible, insensitive and alcoholic father and an embittered and overworked mother in a shabby two-room storefront, that emblemizes their wretched condition of living. Pecola tries to make herself disappear because she perceives her and is perceived by others as 'too black to be beautiful'. Comparing her own image with her clean, well-groomed schoolmates she is convinced of her own 'ugliness' and desperately craves for the blue eyes of a White girl which, she thinks, will surely turn her beautiful. Morrison expresses this self-loathing in the 'Foreward' to *The Bluest Eye* :

"There can't be anyone, I am sure, who doesn't know what it feels like to be disliked, even rejected, momentarily or for sustained periods of time. Perhaps the feeling is merely indifference, mild annoyance, but it may also be hurt. It may even be that some of us know what it is like to be actually hated — hated for things we have no control over and cannot change" (Morrison, ix).

It is evident in the novel that Pecola is treated by others as an 'inconvenience'. She possesses no voice or physical integrity. Other than accepting her ethnic identity as a black girl, she assumes a false identity. She is not happy with her appearance and yearns for blue eyes only – a symbolic of American White beauty. Morrison, here, uses a contrast between Sharley Temple and Pecola. Pecola goes literally crazy by the disparity between her existence and the epitome of beauty set by the dominant White culture. Pecola's psyche has been deformed by the oppressing White culture. Hence, she rejects her original identity and craves for a false notion of beauty.

This novel was also a product of its own time. In the later 1960s, the Civil Rights Movement in America had produced historical advances in protecting the freedom and dignity of the African Americans. But the African Americans still found themselves discriminated in all spheres of life – economic, religious, educational, political and legal. They were segregated – which implied 'separate but equal'. Though 'equality' was provided to them, they were always treated as the 'Other' by the White American society. The African Americans also started to experience that the culture industry had produced a single standard European norm of beauty – the White as beautiful and the Black as ugly. This normative standard definitely excluded the African Americans as they are black in skin tone. It was the standard European image of White womanhood and White girlhood – blonde hair, fair, pinkish skin tone, blue eyes and economically privileged status of living, which, Pecola longs for. The Black Pride Movement was stemmed out of this recognition. Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* is said to be part of this movement. Here, she depicts the severe damage caused by 'internalized racism' and 'intra-racial racism' on the psyche of the characters of the novel — particularly its devastating effects on Pecola. She also demonstrates what happens when the African American people start to believe the stereotype of being beautiful, when they comply with the notion of White being most lofty and beautiful and Black being most degraded and ugly.

Morrison has pioneered in her writings the injury inflicted by blacks on other blacks. In this novel, Morrison attacks the issue that the Black children were commonly given White dolls which looked like privileged White babies. The Black parents encouraged their children to see these dolls as the epitome of beauty and prosperity, and, in this way they were indirectly encouraging their children to see themselves as less than beautiful. Even a particular branch of cosmetics industries promote products that actually served the purpose of spreading and promoting 'internalized

racism' amongst the African Americans. Some cosmetic products as skin-tone lightening cream claimed to lighten dark skin, hair straighteners promised to make African hair look more like that of the White European movie stars. Even today, these products are used by the African Americans at a large scale.

Morrison also observes the losses that the African Americans experienced during their migration from the rural South to the urban North in 1930-1950s. While their migration had taken place, they lost their sense of community, their connection to their past and ancestry, their rich tradition and culture. They had adopted the European way of living and accepted it as their own, while forgetting their oral tradition of storytelling and folktales, and music which actually were representatives of the great African culture. This oral tradition no longer remained a source of strength for them which used to heal them earlier. It was engulfed by the culture and tradition of the White community. They adopted and adapted themselves with the White European culture in America and shunned away their own.

The novel explores the lingering effects of 'internalized racism' by commenting on Black self-loathing obvious in most of the characters in the novel. Most of the characters in the novel are consumed with 'culturally imposed' notions of White beauty and they subconsciously act out feelings of self-loathing on other members of their family or community. Pecola's possession for blue eyes like a White European girl damages her healthy self-image and creates a 'misconception' regarding her true self. The title of the novel is suggestive of its subject matter. It signals that value is placed on blue-eyed little girls – that acts as the stereotype of standard beauty not only by the White Americans but also by the African Americans as a consequence of internalized racism.

There is also the lack of healthy interpersonal relationship between the parents and child. Cholly Breedlove twice rapes his biological daughter in a fit of drunkenness and impregnates her. Pecola does not receive the parental love and care which she was supposed to get from her parents. Cholly is an absent and uncaring father. Whereas, Paulin does not believe her daughter when she gets to know that Cholly, her husband, has raped their daughter Pecola. She beats Pecola instead and makes her unconscious. Cholly's blackness infuriates him and compels him to believe that he is ugly and so he does not deserve a better life. He is a sadist character who only loves to inflict pain on others.

This novel also demonstrates how centuries of cultural mutilation of Black people in America leads to a psychological oppression and subjugation. Self-proclaimed inferiority operated in the Blacks of America and they could not break their minds free from the shackles of racial inferiority. It became a culturally imposed racism for them. Their blackness implied their inferiority to the Whites in America. Similarly, the Breedlove family also accepts the hollow notion of whiteness and consequently experiences its damaging outcomes. In Pecola, there operates a growing self-loathing. Through her character, Morrison attempts to paint a more complicated and deeper portrayal of the effects of racism via how self-loathing eclipses the minds of Black people. Breedlove family was said to be ugly – ugliness that was constantly felt by them, but was not clearly visible. They hated their skin color because they were told by other members of the community that they were too ugly, too black. This ugliness and self-loathing was a consequence of both 'internalized racism' and 'intra-racial racism'. This novel reinforces racism and social hierarchy – their devastating effects on the lives of people who are though physically liberated, are still in the shackles of self-loathing. The White standards of living constantly juxtaposed against the standards of living of the Blacks in America. Hence, there has been a cultural clash even after the Civil Rights Movement in America.

Also the influence of the White media produced a growing self-hatred amongst the African Americans in America – through movie, myths, books and advertisements. These racist tools created in the minds of the African Americans a stereotype of beauty and prosperity – being White suggests well-to-do, happy, beautiful, playing characters while Black implied just the opposite of it. In this process, the true self and identity of the Blacks were submerged and a false concept of self emerged in them, as obvious in the character of Pecola. As she blindly accepts the White norms of being happy and beautiful, she wants to wash away her blackness – her ethnic identity. She prays and longs for the bluest eye which is the epitome of ideal beauty for her. The African American parents bought their daughters white expensive dolls which act as an instrument of superiority and domination. Another instrument of racial oppression in this novel is the 'Dick and Jane' primer. It serves as the archetype of the white upper-middle class life-style. It signifies how prevalent and important the images of White perfection are in Pecola's life. She is the victim of both 'internalized racism' and 'intra-racial racism'.

It is to be noted that, Pecola's blackness also forces the other African American boys to face their own blackness which they cannot tolerate. Hence, they constantly taunt her for being too black and too ugly. In this novel, children also act out the oppression done to them by the adults on other children. Morrison observes this cycle of oppression in the treatment of Pecola by other children in her community. The adults also grow up to inflict their own injuries on their children. This is especially evident in the abandoned child Cholly, who turns up to be a dysfunctional and awful father.

Unfortunately, Pecola becomes the 'dumping ground' for the African American community's fears and feelings of unworthiness in America. It is noteworthy that, Pecola's request is for blue eyes – but not for more sensible parents who would love and care for her. It indicates her psychological submission to the White standards of beauty. The society in general and the African American community in particular judge her by the White standards.

They do not pay attention to her true identity as a Black girl with African features like curly hair and black skin, her ethnicity, her culture, her abused childhood, her careless parents. She is constantly rejected and humiliated by others who only value her appearance more than anything else. They have a high regard for Maureen Paul, who has lighter skin color and detest Pecola for her darker skin. Unfortunately, she does not possess these valued and admired White features and qualities. Ultimately, these affect her psyche so devastatingly that she becomes obsessed with having blue eyes like a White girl. She internalizes this stigma so badly that she thinks, if she could look White and have blue eyes, she would be loved and valued by all. In the process of attaining blue eyes, her true self is lost.

REFERENCES:

1. Bouson, J. Brooks. *Quiet As It's Kept: Shame, Trauma, and Race in the Novels of Toni Morrison*. Albany(2000) State University of New York Press,
2. Morrison, Toni. Foreword.(2007.) *The Bluest Eye*. New York: Vintage International, ix –xiii.
3. Johnson, Robin Nicole (2008), *The Psychology of Racism*. USA: Vintage,
4. Morrison, Toni. Foreword.(2007.) *The Bluest Eye*. New York: Vintage International, ix –xiii.
5. Tyson, Lois.(2006) *Critical Theory Today*. 2nd ed. New York: Routledge,

Web references:

- <https://quizlet.com/205742186/literary-theory-flash-cards/>
- https://www.bookbrowse.com/reading_guides/detail/index.cfm/book_number/462/The-Bluest-Eye