

Black Female Disillusionism: African American Modernism and Reformation in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*

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Abstract

This research has examined black female disillusionism as a dominant idea in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*. Through the concept of modernism and reformation, this research has interrogated dimensions of oppressive representations in *The Bluest Eye*—a female perspective that articulates the disillusionment between dream and its realization. The study has explored the psychosocial effects of racial discrimination and stereotype. The research has also provided useful insight into the variegated portrait of African American females as symbols of oppression and manipulation—an attempt that has articulated Sigmund Freud's concept of neurosis through disillusionism. This study has projected 'mental aberration' as a trend deeply connected to Pecola's neurosis leading to her constant struggle to change her identity—an elusive quest borne out of racial inferiority leading to traumatic experiences. This sociological interpretation of Pecola's experiences is geared towards conscientization. Significantly, Morrison has creatively made a symbolic projection that total acceptance of identity and culture is the only way to African Americans' peace and freedom—both physical and emotional.

Keywords: African American, Disillusionism, Modernism, Reformation, Neurosis

Introduction

Gwendolyn Brooks, Toni Morrison and Rita Dove are some of the 20th century African American women writers that played very important roles in the development of African American narrative and literary scholarship of the period. For instance: Brook's *In the Mecca* (1968), Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1970) and Dove's *Mother Love* (1995) have collectively traced the emergence of Black women's intellectual consciousness rooted in disillusionment from modernist and postmodernist perspectives. Dana A. Williams further asserts that:

Contemporary African American women writers are perhaps best characterized as diverse. From Toni Morrison's first novel, *The Bluest Eye* (1970) to Rita Dove's award-winning collection of poems, *Thomas and Beulah* (1986), to Suzan-Lori Parks's experimental drama, *Topdog/Underdog* (2001), full circle, back to Morrison's eighth novel, *Love* (2003), contemporary African American literature by African American women writers offers full expressions of the complexity of contemporary African American life, particularly as this life relates to the black woman. (71)

The above mentioned literary works are replete with unique aesthetic forms that discuss the Black female as a subject of great interest within Black women's narratives. These narratives constitute radical twists on racist undertones, and have been carved out of Black experiences as a tool to combat stereotype and sexist attitudes that pose a great challenge to Black womanhood in the wake of contemporary European culture (X). The major aim of Black women narratives is to portray Black experiences from the purview of Black women. Mitchell & Taylor critically highlight the functions of Black women narratives which characteristically state that:

The genres of studies reveal not only the recurrent themes and concerns of African American women writers, but also the cultural and political currency of the genres. In the mid and late nineteenth century, a number of genres, including drama, essay, novel and short story, also present, record, and critique African American experiences, particularly post-slavery. The novel has been vital as a means of self-expression, artistic production, and cultural conservation. In the novels of African American women, the impact of race, class, and gender is portrayed and critiqued within a dynamic and fluid culture. (9)

The African American Black women writers have chronicled their experiences in American society through the fictionalization of personal and collective experiences of the society in which they find themselves. The social political challenges of rejection, racism and absentee father act as literary impulses for the creation of African American narratives. Black African American women writers have adopted literary radicalism as a tool for self-representation of African Americans' struggles in America in order to reject oppression. This rejection is genuinely connected to modernism, which Meyer Abrams' submits that it "...involves a deliberate and radical break with some of the traditional bases not only of Western art, but of Western culture in general" (175). A close survey of African American female writers presents the view that their narratives are a search within self. Eleanor W. Traylor in her text, *The Black Woman* explores first the interiority of an in the head, in the heart, in-the-gut region of a discovery called the self. It tests the desires, the longings; the aspirations of this discovered self with and against its possibilities for respect, growth, fulfillment, and accomplishment (71). Taylor's attempt explores the literature of contemporary African American women writers whose quest for self-exploration, freedom and cultural identity were spurred by the post-civil rights movement. Although the quest for self-liberation and exploration is not entirely new in the writings of African American writers, a special interest was dedicated to the exploration of black womanhood which became famous within the writing culture. The African American Women narratives have deeply explicated the aesthetics of Black writing culture and Arts movement. Responses to the ideology of womanhood are succinctly chronicled by Dana A. Williams—detailing writers such as:

Gwendolyn Brooks, Nikki Giovanni, Adrienne Kennedy, Audre Lorde, Paule Marshall, Sonia Sanchez, and Margaret Walker – and writers who made their literary and dramatic debuts in the emerging period – Maya Angelou, Toni Cade Bambara, Toni Morrison, Ntozake Shange, and Alice Walker among many others. These then-emergent writers have been at the front of depicting and historicizing contemporary African American life. More importantly, post-1970s African American women writers explore the black feminine self, a self-heretofore unexamined. (71-72)

Significantly, the century has witnessed African American writers establishing a tradition of narratives by reworking western classical myth. This has exposed readers to the explication of the theme of Ulysses visible in the classical narratives of Ralph Ellison, Countee Cullen and Toni Morrison. Tracy Walters in *American Literature and the Classicist Tradition* has focused mainly on Black women writers; womanhood and motherhood to explore how the contemporary narratives of classical works expose social issues visible in the forms of female oppression/intimidation, racial oppression and stereotype. Following Abrams' train of thought on modernism, we would discern a unifying intellectual African American precursors of modernism, who in this sense, are thinkers who had questioned the certainties that had supported traditional modes of social organization, religion and morality, and also traditional ways of conceiving the human self (175). The foregoing indicates that the ideology on literature has a stand based on a given cultural milieu. It is important to note that when the issues of cultural projection are discussed, the processes of identity creation and cultural roots are major concerns in children's and young adult literature by African American women writers. These writers are dedicated to exposing their youth to the readership portraying the images of African Americans and the history of African Americans. Angelyn Mitchell and Taylor Danille collaborating the foregoing submit that:

Since early in the twentieth century, African American women writers understood that issues of representation and identification are integral to a child's developing self-concept. Highlighting the artistry within children's and young adult literature, Dianne Johnson observes, "While self-esteem is important, and outstanding children's literature can enhance the self-esteem of young readers, building self-esteem should not be the reason that black children read black children's literature. They should read it, as well, to enjoy outstanding art and what it has to offer – illumination, interpretation, inspiration, exploration, education. (9)

The myriad of African American nomenclatures in the narratives of Black writers is characterized by persistent experiments in subject matter and form marked by an increasing assertion of independence, individuality and freedom from Victorian traditional aesthetics which is prevalent in the 19th century. Significantly, the African American break with tradition becomes a new fundamental propeller of the modernist stance for asserting racial individuality. Notably, African American Modernism foregrounds the 19th century literature and Harlem Renaissance period, which is a transitional historical phase, spurred by civil rights literature. The interest and increase in production and readership of these literary works highlight the need for black consciousness. This movement for self-discovery, cultural reconstruction and empowerment is targeted at installing the dignity of humanity in African Americans as well as achieving equality with the larger white Americans.

Modernist Tenets in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*

Deeply rooted in the African American consciousness are the colour myths associated with stereotypes of origin and disillusionment that have been challenged in writings for decades. As a black American writer, Toni Morrison in *The Bluest Eye* depicts her knowledge of certain values, treatment and behavioural patterns that have trapped black individuals making them unable to escape the myth beyond their mortal interpretation. Morrison's novel is a portrait of Modern society exploring different philosophical and psychoanalytical aspects. The title of Morrison's novel is not pretentious rather; it speaks to the philosophical undertone that laced all the experiences she depicted.

Morrison's novel is conceived from realism, a deep survey of Black experiences within a Black community in America with a special reference to the Black female. This survey depicts her value for Black integrity, culture and values that shaped her mentality as a child and writer. Frances Smith Foster and Larose Davis observe that:

It is very likely that during the long and terrible voyages from Africa to the North American colonies, African women soothed fears and silenced moans of despair with songs and stories. It is not hard to imagine mothers creating lullabies and lovers composing poems. Surely, they recited their personal histories and created prayers to strengthen their faith, hope, and courage. In the New World, women of African descent passed on the stories of their cultures, their ancestors and their gods, of their tribes, families, and themselves. In the process, they also augmented and embellished them, employing new forms and adding additional incidents and details. (15)

In the reconstruction of African American narratives, the contemporary black female writers have imbued their works with their social, historical realities and the worldview of earlier black women writers, thus projecting a common stance that the Black Woman suffers from the twin burden of being Black and female (227). Black women writers' consciousness could be summarized from the realities of female experiences as captured in Frances Beale submission:

Her physical image has been maliciously maligned; she has been sexually molested and abused by the white colonizer; she has suffered the worst kind of economic exploitation, has been forced to serve as the white woman's maid and wet nurse for white offspring while her own children were more often than not starving and neglected. (92)

In the novel, Pecola represents the image of African American females who have been exploited by those who ought to have protected them. The implication is that the trauma in the reality of sexual abuse weighs more than the reality of poverty. In the novel, the rape scene in which Pecola's world is destroyed is wrapped in familial ties—her father. To explore this bizarre predicament, we see a reflection of male dominance over the vulnerable female who is no better than a common slave. The slave image has a dual interpretation; most African American females are slaves to the whites and slaves to African American men. This slave image is a mental anachronism that militates against the self-esteem of African Americans and their quest for development. Pecola's rape reveals the level of decay in the African American cultural milieu. In fact, it depicts a clear picture of moral fragmentation necessitated by a decline in morality. A close interpretation of Pecola's rape exposes the fragile ego of her father whose sexual ambition helps in promoting gender-based-violence. According to the narrator in *The Bluest Eye*:

Removing himself from her was so painful to him he cut it short and snatched his genitals out of the dry harbor of her vagina. She appeared to have fainted. Cholly stood up and could see only her grayish panties, so sad and limp around her ankles. Again the hatred mixed with tenderness. The hatred would not let him pick her up, the tenderness forced him to cover her. So when the child regained consciousness, she was lying on the kitchen floor under a heavy quilt, trying to connect the pain between her legs with the face of her mother looming over her (Morrison 163).

Basically, the respect for human rights is grossly denigrated. Pecola's loss of consciousness denotes a life threatening violent experience in which she has suffered both behavioural and memory disorders. The excerpt emphasizes the psychological role that physical violent experiences play in a victim's life. Pecola's rape is a traumatic event which is extraordinary since it occurred within the familial space by someone who is meant to offer protection. Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* highlights how Pecola's subconscious is connected to her past experiences. Pecola's inability to integrate her traumatic experience has enriched her sub-consciousness with fixed idea and emotion. Pecola's experiences have trapped her in a traumatized memory.

Realism in African American perception is conceived in two ways: as a literary movement of the 19th century in the prose fiction of Black writers. And a recurrent pattern of representing real experiences in literature which are depicted by writers prominent in the historical literary movement. *The Bluest Eye* is a realistic fiction because it presents an accurate imitation of African American experiences. Morrison is a realist who deliberately selects her scope of experiences dealing with the commonplace and the everyday aspects of human issues. Morrison's major character (Pecola) is a middle class young girl without highly exceptional endowments or privileges. Basically, Morrison's story is woven around average working class characters that have uneventful, sorrowful and ordinary experiences in childhood, adolescence, love, marriage, parenting, relationship, family, trust and hope. Significantly, the plot of her story revolves around the unhappiness of her protagonist centering on her dull life in a house imbued with domestic violence. The atmosphere of despair and family violence depicted by Morrison is well captured in the quotation below:

Naked and ashen, he leaped from the bed, and with a flying tackle, grabbed his wife around the waist, and they hit the floor. Cholly picked her up and knocked her down with the back of his hand. She fell in a sitting position, her back supported by Sammy's bed frame. She had not let go of the dishpan, and began to hit at Cholly's thighs and groin with it. He put his foot in her chest, and she dropped the pan. Dropping to his knee, he struck her several times in the face, and she might have succumbed early had he not hit his hand against the metal bed frame when his wife ducked. Mrs. Breedlove took advantage of this momentary suspension of blows and slipped out of his reach. Sammy, who had watched in silence their struggling at his bedside, suddenly began to hit his father about the head with both fists, shouting "You naked fuck!" over and over and over. (Morrison 44)

This clearly establishes a connection between fiction and reality. Morrison's major preoccupation is to expose the level of decay and fragmentation within the familial circles in uncompromising themes that align with modernity. She is conscious of certain tenets that hinge on gender stereotype and inequality. The protagonist's mother, Mrs Breedlove inherently falls short of a mother a very bad example for a noble woman emerging from the modern world. The expressions below depict a physical clash borne of inhuman acts; "Mrs. Breedlove, having snatched up the round, flat stove lid, ran tippy-toe to Cholly as he was pulling himself up from his knees, and struck him two blows, knocking him right back into the senselessness out of which she had provoked him. Panting, she threw a quilt over him and let him lie. Sammy screamed, "Kill him! Kill him!" (Morrison 44). One of the most interesting phenomena of the novelistic interest and focus of Toni Morrison is captured in her chat with Charles Ruas where

she confessed “ to writing about a girl... and the pain of yearning and wanting to be somebody else... part of all females who were peripheral in other people’s lives” (218). Pecola’s experiences give readers the glimpse of an actual experience. Phyllis Hastings has remarkably drawn on “Pecola’s tragedy as a family tragedy, with roots in her parents’ past” (60). The narrator’s description of Breedloves’ family confirms the root of tragedy that affected Pecola’s mentality:

The Breedloves did not live in a storefront because they were having temporary difficulty adjusting to the cutbacks at the plant. They lived there because they were poor and black, and they stayed there because they believed they were ugly. Although their poverty was traditional and stultifying, it was not unique. But their ugliness was unique. No one could have convinced them that they were not relentlessly and aggressively ugly. Except for the father, Cholly, whose ugliness (the result of despair, dissipation, and violence directed toward petty things and weak people) was behavior, the rest of the family—Mrs. Breedlove, Sammy Breedlove, and Pecola Breedlove—wore their ugliness, put it on, so to speak, although it did not belong to them. The eyes, the small eyes set closely together under narrow foreheads. 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. They had high cheekbones, and their ears turned forward. Shapely lips which called attention not to themselves but to the rest of the face (Morrison 38-9).

In the novel, Pecola’s mother has rejected her at birth, due to her less attractive nature—ugliness. Pecola becomes a victim of her cultural group. She constantly becomes an object of ridicule in her school and consistently, she is exposed to her violent and loveless family—the Breedloves family which has failed to love and appreciate her. This exposes the issue of identity silenced by the psychic inferiority of black girlhood and womanhood in general. Morrison’s novel is a work that exposes African American identity and there is an attempt to expose the height of frustration and emotional conflict which is an emphasis on modern materialistic world. There is also an attempt to show that the protagonist of the novel is wrapped in a flame of insecurity which has affected her public personality and ego.

Morrison’s *The Bluest Eyes* x-rays the influence of Modernism and some autobiographical issues centering on racial discrimination and the identity of Africans within the geographical enclaves of America. Materialism as a modernist tenet is captured in Pecola’s idealization of physical appearance based on white beauty as a standard for identity acceptance. Pecola’s materialist ideals molded her mentality into accepting that material things are more valued than spiritual things. In *The Bluest Eye*, some Black fictional personalities are attracted to the superiority of White race thus creating a mental barrier laced with black inferiority. The black people’s materialist quest and desire to resemble the white people denote their yardsticks for beauty which is mostly built on some biological features inherent in white people’s ancestral lineage. This strong desire to be like the white is a modernist materialist nature which Morrison has imbued in her character, Pecola longs for blue eyes, the epitome of “whiteness,” because she is convinced that they would make her eternally happy, beautiful and acceptable just like the white girls (Morrison 40). Pecola’s desire for the blue eye is obsessive in nature, according to the narrator:

Each night, without fail, she prayed for blue eyes. Fervently, for a year she had prayed. Although somewhat discouraged, she was not without hope. To have something as wonderful as that happen would take a long, long time. Thrown, in this way, into the binding conviction that only a miracle could relieve her, she would never know her The Bluest Eye beauty. She would see only what there was to see: the eyes of other people (Morrison 46-47).

The mentality depicted in the quotation above however foregrounds the unconscious and irrational impulses built on false ambition that were very harmful to repress by Pecola thus leading to her split psyche, a decline in her moral values. Morrison's adoption of Freudian ideas is a reflection of how modernism has permeated her literary narrative. The modernist tenet of "Absurdism" is visible in Morrison's novel. Pecola's internal conflict between her human quests to have the blue eyes that would transform her as a black girl, the tendency of having the beauty of white girls, the meaning of life for black identity and her inability of finding what she yearns for are replete with the basic tenets of absurdism. This is indeed caused by human limitation or constraints built around biological traits. The theatre of the absurd is well captured when Pecola encounters a faith healer, Soaphead Church, who assures her of transforming her eyes to blue since he is "deeply convinced that if Black people were more like White people, they would be better off" (Morrison 223). Soaphead Church confesses his deceptive psychic manipulation on Pecola; "I, I have caused a miracle. I gave her the eyes. I gave her the blue, blue, two blue eyes. Cobalt blue. A streak of it right out of your own blue heaven. No one else will see her blue eyes. But *she* will. And she will live happily ever after. I, I have found it meet and right to do so" (Morrison 143).

The Bluest Eye is subtly wrapped in surrealism. Morrison's ability to present unusual, exaggerated and scandalized nature of human existence makes her novel a modernist narrative; an awareness of unreality laced with reality. The surrealist nature of Morrison's novel is represented in her attempt to express what is in Pecola's subconscious mind, an attempt to connect to her preconscious state from which concerted dream state or images that becloud her unconsciousness are captured. Reference is here made to Pecola's hopeless ambition leading to psychic split; a condition which exposes her to rape with her biological father as the oppressor. Pecola's neurotic display is strongly influenced by psychoanalytical concepts in which ideas beyond reality are submerged in the imaginary. Pecola becomes disconnected from the society and loiters through refuse dumps in the town, uttering objective reality assembled by haphazard images. Pecola is enveloped in Stream of Consciousness effect as she continuously expresses her thoughts in free flowing manner using symbolic constructions. She speaks:

What? What we will talk about?

Why, your eyes.

Oh, yes, My eyes. My blue eyes. Let me look again.

See how pretty they are.

Yes, They get prettier each time I look at them. ...

Prettier than the sky?

Oh, yes. Much prettier than the sky.

Prettier than Alice-and-Jerry Storybook eyes?

Oh, yes. Much prettier than Alice-and-Jerry Storybook eyes. (Morrison 156)

The picture represented in the above expressions by Morrison reflects the image of a girl with multiple personality disorder. In fact, Pecola's frantic quest for emotional and physical escapes

from her violent reality; violent home and oppressive individuals that expose her to insanity. Her story tells of her limitation as a poor African American without an existing family-love tradition. The excerpt is a monologue of Pecola. However, her free flowing speeches create the impression of a young lady talking to someone, but the reality is that she has become a broken personality with a divided self. Pecola's thoughts are vague because we do not know whom she speaks to or addresses. The setting of her discussion is psychological, that is in Pecola's mind. Her monologue is an attempt to pretend to class. She is in a helpless situation where she picks up ideas and builds on it to satisfy her pretentious attitude. The implication is that her socio-political environment has turned her into a hypocrite with no genuineness, but artificiality. Pecola's free flowing thoughts indicate her hallucination as a mentally ill person. Pecola wishes for an adventurous world where there are no moral decisions or turbulence. She considers her society to be corrupt and her dream futile. Pecola is a persona undergoing the mid-life crisis, a psychological stage of life imbued with trauma between adolescent and adult phases.

Some instances of modernist tenet in *The Bluest Eye* are the visibility of multiple narrators and points of view. From Claudia Mac Teer's point of view, we explored the child's sensibility (from a nine-year-old) and adult perspectives of the story. Claudia's narration is important since it provides the details in the plot of the story as a witness to Pecola's bizarre experiences. Claudia's narration is seen in the prologue and the ending chapter of the novel. In fact, an x-ray into her narration gives her the credibility of an empathetic narrator:

Oh, some of us loved her. The Maginot Line. And Cholly loved her. I'm sure he did. He, at any rate, was the one who loved her enough to touch her, envelop her, give something of himself to her. But his touch was fatal, and the something he gave filled the matrix of her agony with death. Love is never any better than the lover. Wicked people love wickedly, violent people love violently, weak people love weakly, stupid people love stupidly, but the love of a free man is never safe. There is no gift for the beloved. The lover alone possesses his gift of love. The loved one is shorn, neutralized, frozen in the glare of the lover's inward eye (Morrison 159-60).

Pecola has a unique point of view streamed with the stream of consciousness technique; ways of letting the readers capture her inner thoughts and disillusionment. The omniscient narrator (third person) further explores the inner thoughts and actions of the characters in detail for the readers' comprehension of the vast nature of black lives and child abuse inherent in family and social structures. The omniscient narrator's impact is felt in the details surrounding the Breedloves' family and the spiritualist, Soaphead. We are able to understand the family history of Breedloves, Cholly's sexual oppression and Soaphead's journey in space and time, his migration from West Indies to America. This narrative point of view is very expository in nature.

Notably, there is an intersection of gender, class, and race in the history of African American people, especially black women. These issues result from the people's circumstances and impelled by economic, social, and psychological factors. The major source of repression of African American people is class exploitation which is fed by racial discrimination and gender exclusion. Class is a very important issue in the history of African American people because it is inextricably linked with the Capitalist system which necessarily fuels the partitioning of the society into two unequal classes: master and slave. This master and slave relationship between

the Whites and African American people, respectively has led to the legitimization of White ideals and denigration of black values. Robert J Patterson asserts that:

Slavery's devaluation of black women's bodies and sexuality, as Spillers clarifies, is the process by which black subjects became "reduced." Overturning the notion that black bodies were inherently "inferior" or debased, Spillers demonstrated how cultural inscriptions, and, in the instance of slavery, literal bodily inscriptions, by making humans transferable capital, attempted to strip blacks of their value. This process, Spillers argued, set in motion a catalogue of events that resulted in Africans being physically displaced, and their gender and familial structures being pushed into a crisis. (99)

The Whites usually set the acceptable social standards and this explains Morrison's ideology on the standard of beauty promulgated by the Whites as a vital issue of concern in *The Bluest Eye*. As a cultural reformist novel that seeks to emancipate the African American people, Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* challenges the Whites' benchmark for beauty and demonstrates that the notion of excellence is socio-culturally constructed. In a similar vein, the novelist expresses the opinion that if whiteness is considered as a mark of excellence, beauty and brilliance, then the assessment of darkness disappears; hence, the novel strives to disabuse the tendency to assess beauty using the standards set by the white people. Substantiating this point of view, Matus stresses that, "in demonstrating pride in being black, the author does not simply portray positive images of blackness; she also focuses on the damage the black women characters suffer through the construction of femininity in a radicalized society" (37). Grewal describes it by switching the idea of "ugliness" with "beautiful blackness", yet the concept of beautiful blackness "is not enough, for such counter-rhetoric does not touch the heart of the matter: the race-based class structure upheld by dominant norms and stereotypes" (21). In trying to attain beauty, in the words of Taylor, "the experience of a black woman ...differs from the experiences of... Jewish and Irish women" (20). The explication of the experiences of black female characters in Morrison's novels captures immense hardship as they strive to conform to the Western standards of beauty. Breedlove's family has perceived the hard reality of their world by repressing thoughts and reacting differently about their facial appearances. According to the narrator:

It was as though some mysterious all-knowing master had given each one a cloak of ugliness to wear, and they had each accepted it without question. The master had said, "You are ugly people." They had looked about themselves and saw nothing to contradict the statement; saw, in fact, support for it leaning at them from every billboard, every movie, every glance. "Yes," they had said. "You are right." And they took the ugliness in their hands, threw it as a mantle over them, and went about the world with it. Dealing with it each according to his way. 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 his as a weapon to cause others pain. He adjusted his behavior 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. (Morrison 39)

The African American characters in *The Bluest Eye* are portrayed as dissimilar and, in all, these different characters. According to Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi, they are three ranked families: “first Geraldine’s (a counterfeit of the idealized white family), ... the Mac Teers and at the bottom of the social order, the Breedloves” (113). The story shows how the black characters respond to this dominant culture differently and defeated it by debating the binary social differentiation. In addition, Morrison reforms and empowers the African Americans by creating a grim portrait of the anguish they undergo while conforming to the Whites’ criteria of beauty and human acceptance. The text is a thought provoking piece that tacitly jolts African Americans to reality, impelling them to re-think their relationship and take actions against their current status as helpless and hapless slaves to the Whites. This thought is made manifest through the character, Claudia who notices that if African American people strive to fit into the ideology of the whites in terms of beauty, they may attain the supposed Western splendor but, certainly, at the expense of black values and culture. Therefore, Claudia charges the African American people who consent to “a white standard of beauty ... that makes Pecola its scapegoat” to desist from such illusive quest for beauty and accept black identity wholeheartedly (Morrison 21). The moralistic tone adopted by Claudia in commenting on Pecola’s plight captures the underlying truth that humanity must defend and respond to urgently. Claudia confesses:

All of us—all who knew her—felt so wholesome after we cleaned ourselves on her. We were so beautiful when we stood astride her ugliness. Her simplicity decorated us, her guilt sanctified us, her pain made us glow with health, her awkwardness made us think we had a sense of humor. Her inarticulateness made us believe we were eloquent. Her poverty kept us generous. Even her waking dreams we used—to silence our own nightmares. And she let us, and thereby deserved our contempt. We honed our egos on her, padded our characters with her frailty, and yawned in the fantasy of our strength. And fantasy it was, for we were not strong, only aggressive; we were not free, merely licensed; we were not compassionate, we were polite; not good, but well behaved. We courted death in order to call ourselves brave, and hid like thieves from life. We substituted good grammar for intellect; we switched habits to simulate maturity; we rearranged 205 lies and called it truth, seeing in the new pattern of an old idea the Revelation and the Word. She, however, stepped over into madness, a madness which protected her from us simply because it bored us in the end (Morrison 206).

From Claudia’s purview, Pecola’s family and the society at large are to be blamed by the evil experienced by the protagonist. In addition, Claudia narrates that, “Frieda and Pecola had a loving conversation about how cu-ute Shirly Temple was. I couldn’t join them in their adoration because I hated Shirly” (Morrison 13). Obviously, the voice of Claudia is a reformist one; emboldened by the strength she draws from her family, she subtly interrogates and even rebels against the ideals of the Whites, alerting the people that there is often no beauty or strength in the so-called Western beauty. Substantiating her standpoint, Hooks observes that “as long as black folks are taught that the only way we can gain any degree of economic self-sufficiency or be materially privileged is by first rejecting blackness, our history and culture, then there will always be a crisis in black identity” (18). One thing is clear, Claudia’s narration blends smoothly with Morrison’s philosophical approach in this novel. Her power of narration employs subtle satirical targets rendered in a clear language that is more committed and direct.

It is clear that Hooks' position coheres with as well as summarizes the reformist stance of Morrison in *The Bluest Eye*. Both scholars find a connection between consumerism and degeneration, and the ways they both assist the reformation of the identity of African American characters and culture by extension, the entire black community.

Morrison is an exceptional strategist in the production of an academic language for African Americans. Her deployment of an emerging perspective, a fragmented narrative and a voice were similar to the characteristics of the characters that discover the impact of the scholarly writers like Virginia Woolf and William Faulkner, the two major writers that Morrison studied very well as a college student. Her works, according to Karim and Idrus, demonstrate:

The impact of Afro-American old stories, melodies, and ladies' tattle. In her endeavors to apply these types of oral art to literary methods of portrayal, Morrison made a lot of works influenced by an unmistakably dark reasonableness while attracting various types of readers, beyond the black community. Characters in *The Bluest Eye* and the time frame mark a period in American history that assumed a significant role in the thoughts of freedom and equity. Each of the components on which America was established has been mutilated and never again applied to blacks and different minorities in this nation. Life led by Pecola and others like her, positive or negative, is a piece of the story that numerous Americans lived across the country. Though numerous policies have been changed to improve the situation of freedom and equality, it is still a matter of question whether equality is prevailing in American society. Morrison composed this story on a general level. An individual from any culture can peruse this and get a link with the pulse of the story, and simultaneously appreciate the masterly strokes with which the novel was composed. It is not difficult to accept this story and create an enthusiastic bond with it. (119)

The Bluest Eyes speaks to the mainstream population, both whites and African Americans, showing how a racial social framework exhausts the spirits and brains of people. It shows how overwhelming images of white actors with blue eyes and their celebrity lifestyle influence young African American children to believe that being white is synonymous with being happy and successful. The implication is that when they look around their own environment and existence characterized by filth, penury, and abuse, they resort to hating themselves and the entire African American values. Morrison, thus, seeks to reform the Black culture and empower the African Americans through a grim exposure of the atrocious effects of racist practices by the Whites on the young—innocent black people who, right from birth, are gradually made to accept the illusive quest of resembling the Whites. Specifically, the failure of this quest leads them to inherent hatred for their origin and identity thus leading to psychological issues in the forms of depression, anxiety, neurosis or even psychosis as seen in the case of Pecola. The narrator captures Pecola's pathetic situation in the quotation below; "So it was. A little black girl yearns for the blue eyes of a little white girl, and the horror at the heart of her yearning is exceeded only by the evil of fulfillment. We saw her sometimes. Frieda and I—after the baby came too soon and died. After the gossip and the slow wagging of heads. She was so sad to see. Grown people looked away; children, those who were not frightened by her, laughed outright" (Morrison 230). The pretentious attitude of the society towards oppression is indeed disheartening. The implication here is that the people in society contributed to Pecola's psychic

breakdown. Nevertheless, operating through a manipulation of thoughts, one would emphasize that the society has failed to support a child that needs succor and human sympathy. Toni Morrison's novel does not hesitate to offer a social commentary on situations that distort complete wholeness but attempts to revitalize a good sense of pride for cultural identity and unity in diversity despite lack of cultural or racial affinity culture.

Conclusion

This study has examined Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* as a modernist novel exhibiting tenets such as modernism, realism, materialism, surrealism, Freudianism (psychoanalysis), stream of consciousness technique, fragmentation and multiple narrative points of view. The novel is a clarion call on Afro-American people, especially women who are wrecked by the psychological impacts of racism and black complicity. As a marginal population in both race and class, African Americans are vulnerable to the treachery of psychological racism, which tacitly encourages them to undervalue their self-worth. This study has explored Pecola Breedlove's psychological torment caused by her prevailing quest for the white culture, a benchmark for beauty. Her conviction that she is irremediably ugly and that general beauty means conforming to the White's blond and blue eyes, is strengthened by commercialism. As a result, she does her best, striving to become like the White longing for the blue eyes in eternity. For her, the blue eyes are the fundamental symbol of inclusion and an end to the rejection she suffers from both her fellow African Americans, especially her family and the Whites in general. Having been convinced to jettison her own culture and being disallowed by the White community to which she desperately desires to belong, she becomes marooned in a place where she neither belongs to the Black community nor the White group. In the absence of a community to anchor her identity on, she becomes a complete abject person apparently unfit for any class in particular. Through a grim portrait of these harsh experiences of African Americans in the racist American society, Morrison through Claudia has interrogated the White culture by reconstructing the black mentality on the importance of accepting cultural values.

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