



The Psychological Trauma in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*

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ABSTRACT

The story of Toni Morrison *The Bluest Eye* is characterized by the process of psychological tortures, the manifestation of racialized beauty hierarchies, emotional neglect, and the influence of structural oppression on the development of fragile identities. The wounds faced by characters disrupt memory, self image and relationships resulting in a landscape where suffering is normalized. The experience of Pecola Breedlove is the emotional center of the story that shows how a sense of worth in a child is destroyed through humiliation and the internalization of inferiority. She longs to have blue eyes which is an expression of a desperate wish to get out of the scorn and be in the world of hers which she imagines as safe, pure, and admired. Claudia and Frieda provide responses to similar pressures, which are opposite to each other and show how care, curiosity, and early resistance serve as their psychological support. Their views reveal the fissure in the prevailing beauty ideals and reveal the chances of restoring self-respect even in the surrounding repressive settings. Pecola does not receive such a support and is not capable of overcoming violence and rejection which surround her everyday life.

Cholly Breedlove and Pauline Breedlove add more dimensions into the portrait of trauma in the novel. Their records reveal presence of old tendencies of desertion, humiliation, and ended relationships. Every generation carries personal wounds that affect the way a person behaves and expresses their emotions before the world of Pecola starts to fall. The format of the narrative is broken into fragments, and these

fragments are reflected in Morrison, who switches in memories, voices, and silence that come to mind when a person is disoriented through repetitive harm. The discussion of such a state of psychological disturbance triggers consideration of the way the ideals of racism spread all over the community and families, changing hopes, desires and self-identification over time. The portrayal of the Morrison presents not just personal but also the communal complicity revealing societal codes of beauty and racial hierarchy according to which the lives of certain people are protected and the ones whose stories do not get told. Her novel finally reveals the devastating effects of internal rejection and stresses the importance of empathy, cultural affirmation and healing. In this light emotional ruin in *The Bluest Eye* can be seen as a form of personal tragedy and a commentary on a society that refuses to acknowledge the needy in its midst.

KEYWORDS: Psychological Trauma, Internalized Racism, Identity, Generational Suffering, Beauty Ideology, Toni Morrison

INTRODUCTION

One of the most prominent figures in American literature, Toni Morrison, the Nobel laureate and the author of *The Bluest Eye* (1970), discusses the dismal impact of the racism and internalized ideals of beauty in her first novel. The novel is set in the state of Ohio in the 40s and it shows how racism as a whole, colorism, and social pressure cause psychological traumas to the Black children, with the character of Pecola Breedlove representing the saddest outcomes. Even Morrison herself presented the story as an effort to support why her Black schoolgirl friend was so in love with having blue eyes such that she considered herself as a freak because she did not have them. Taking the two extremes of the culture of idyllic whites and the brutalities of the life of Pecola, the narrative of the novel offers a problem statement: How do the ideals of racism and toxic beauty contribute to the trauma of Black people, particularly children?

This research is aimed at discussing the structure, reasons, and outcomes of psychological trauma in *The Bluest Eye*. Key research questions are: What are the causes of the trauma in Pecola and other characters? What role does the traumatizing social structure of racialized play? And what impact does traumatizing have on identity formation in the novel? The importance of this exploration is that it sheds some light on the intersection of race, beauty ideals, and mental suffering in African American literature. Our analysis of *The Bluest Eye* through trauma theories and critical race perspectives adds to the better comprehension of the way Morrison criticizes the American racial ideology.

This discussion is within the context of the trauma theory and critical race perspectives. Foundational trauma scholars claim that a traumatic experience disrupts normal experience and cannot be easily incorporated into narratives. Cathy Caruth, e.g. defines trauma as something whose meaning is not known at all in the first place and that comes back late in life to haunt consciousness. Judith Herman stresses the fact that trauma brings about fragmentation of the psyche and recall, which leads to dissociation in most cases. The author of *The Bluest Eye* vividly depicts such processes: the mind of Pecola is torn apart as she internalizes the ideals of white beauty, which means that her traumatic experience cannot be directly presented or acculturated. This framework is further informed by postcolonial and Critical Race theories that demonstrate how the historical oppression and racial power structures contribute to the personal suffering. Therefore, this paper views the novel by Morrison as an example where by literary form and content dramatize the effect of trauma on identity and memory.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Past theoretical research on *The Bluest Eye* has focused on identity, beauty and racialized oppression. The focus on African American girlhood and internalized racism is commonly mentioned in the critiques of Morrison. As an example, there is a recent comparative analysis that Morrison on the one hand charged Western racism and sexist ideologies by giving a voice to her Black characters. According to Chitra Pegu (2021), the novel illustrates the horrific aftereffects of the white ideals of beauty that have become deeply entrenched in the psyche of the Americans that traumatize Pecola. Emotional force of the novel has also been identified by the critics of reader-response: Hope Lopez (2023) notes that as soon as the readers observe how the trauma of Pecola, the protagonist of the novel, was systemic, they often feel motivated and moved by the novel to make personal change and to become social activists. Criticism of the narrative techniques in Morrison emphasizes how her non-linear and multi-voiced form and symbolic richness predicts the experience and resistance of Black.

Psychological trauma is generally referred to in the research of trauma as an event that overwhelms the psyche, breaking memory and selfhood. According to trauma theorists such as Caruth and Herman, traumatic events are not easily discussable and can only be described in some form of an indirect manner, either through symptoms or through gaps in the narratives. This has been used in interpreting the literature in addressing how psyches of characters to historical and personal violence will react. As an example, Bouson and Vickroy have utilized Freudian-Caruthian trauma theories to the fiction of Morrison and have shown

that the inner world of characters is a mirror of aggregate racial and sexual traumas. In *The Bluest Eye*, trauma researchers postulate that personal and cultural traumas are interrupted by prejudice, with Morrison depicting personal suffering (Pecola is abused by her father, Cholly is separated by divorce) eventually as the societal trauma of racism, sexism, and poverty.

The Bluest Eye is set chronologically in the post-Depression and Jim Crow America of history. The daily life was fraught with segregation and the separate but equal doctrine that strengthened the ideas of the white superiority. The famous quote of Charles S. Johnson (1941) was that the American folk belief equated blackness with evil or devilishness. Morrison exploits this past: she remembers the ideals of the 19th and early 20th century that glorified whiteness (light skin, blue eyes, straight hair) as the beauty and moral ideal. It is this history of racial oppression that preconditions the plot of the novel. It is against this backdrop that African American families experienced systemic poverty and internal disintegration which usually exacerbated the psychological pressure on children. The literature therefore presents *The Bluest Eye* as a personal narrative of the tragedy of Pecola and as a commentary on the racial trauma that was deeply rooted in the American society.

SOURCES OF PSYCHOLOGICAL TRAUMA IN THE NOVEL

RACIST BEAUTY STANDARDS

The novel is a prophecy of the trauma of the racist beauty ideals by Morrison. In *The Bluest Eye*, the Eurocentric traits are synonymous with value. Critics observe that Morrison portrays the ugly ramifications of the White standard of beauty that had been so ingrained by the Americans. Morrison depicts the impact of colonial and social conditioning that instills a sense of beauty of a racist nature in her characters like the *White is Beautiful*. This is evident in the fact that Pecola is obsessed with the idea of having blue eyes and light skin. The blues color to Pecola is love and acceptance: she thinks that she would be different herself in case her eyes were different: beautiful in her mind. It is a tragic desire which illustrates how ingrained the beauty standards of racism have become in her. It is evident in the story that these standards are socially constructed and inaccessible and attempting to gain them results in mental health damage. According to one of the studies, the pressure to meet these standards, which is manifested in society, may result in traumatic experiences and in the situation with Pecola, who wants to have a fairer skin and the *Bluest eye*, results in her being left psychologically unstable. Morrison demonstrates that the ideology of the beauty of whiteness is a white-supremacist privilege that causes trauma to the people who are unable to conform to it.

COLORISM IN THE BLACK COMMUNITY.

Colorism, the prejudice according to the skin color, among the Black community is also a problem, which is depicted in the novel as a trauma factor. Morrison gives a light-skinned and rich classmate of Pecola, Maureen Peal, who is regarded as universally beautiful just because she is closer to whiteness. According to Yuan Yiping, Maureen Peal is considered the prettiest girl and boasts of her light skin and blue eyes, which is accommodating to the white ideal. The fact that her fellow people accept her helps to strengthen a racial hierarchy among the oppressed. On the contrary, Pecola is scorned on account of her dark and pitted looks. The implication of the description made by Morrison is that the white skin and blue eyes oriented aesthetic of the community is a deformed norm of the community with which even black characters have in common. Even black children at school yard tease Pecola with racist rhymes and taunts, when they are worshipping lightness in Maureen. As demonstrated in the novel, this intra-racial discrimination makes Pecola even more alienated: she does not only feel the mockery of the white, but her own society alienated her too. According to scholars, these attitudes among the Black population are the remnants of the white supremacy that has been instilled in the minds of people. So, the colorism is another source of the misery of Pecola, who is not only underestimated by society but also by other girls of her race.

ABUSE AND FAMILY DYSFUNCTION.

The novel is mainly traumatized by family malfunction and abuse. At home, Pecola has a very poor and disorganized life: her mother, Pauline and her father, Cholly Breedlove both abuse and torment her. Pauline who is self-hating and very unhappy does not give much warmth. She frequently fights with Cholly using Pecola as a chess piece (Pauline continued to demonstrate to Pecola that Cholly was nothing... Pecola would not experience the warmth of home anymore) Since her parents quarrel, Pecola is taught at a young age to be quiet and intimidated, as she cuddles up in bed during fights and does not want to make a noise. De facto, neglect and scorn of her mother make Pecola understand that even her family does not accept her. The cruelty of the home is further enhanced by the fact that Cholly himself has gone through a traumatic experience. Morrison shows that parents left Cholly alone and he humiliated him as a kid. He had never known the love of a father (he did not know his own father) and therefore did not have a prototype of how a father should care about children. As such, Cholly turns into an abuser of Pecola: it is in the critical moment of the novel when Cholly raped Pecola forcing her to the abyss. It is this betrayal by her father at the very end that is the climax of the trauma of Pecola. The text indicates that Cholly himself was the victim of

racism (including, by implication, the attempt to force him into a sexual encounter with white men when he was a child) is a tragedy of the tragedy reenacted against Pecola. Their personal traumas end up unresolved hence spilling over to the abuse of the generations to come.

COMMUNITY DETACHMENT

The community and society in general play a role in the trauma of Pecola by ostracizing and isolating her, in addition to her family. White townspeople habitually dismiss or disregard Pecola; in one scene, one white shopkeeper literally refuses to even look at her, as though she were part of nothing. However, Morrison is intentional to stress that the Black community fails her as well. None of the neighbours receive the news of this disgrace (Pecola is pregnant) with support, but with horror, gossip or even vicious pity. At school, the black children sing about the degrading words at her to make her humiliated as ugly black, using her as a communal disgrace. The elders and other peers, with their own racism integrated in their minds, dissociate with Pecola lest they acquire the same stigma. It is this group denial of the Breedloves that makes social isolation a further aggravation of the suffering Pecola experiences. According to Pegu, Morrison demonstrates that Pecola is isolated and victimized not only by the racist society but even by people who believed that they are superior to her. The lack of concern and judgmental attitude of the community is a kind of a vacuum that adds insult to the trauma of Pecola and her trauma is not only personal but also collective.

MANIFESTATIONS OF TRAUMA

IDENTITY FRAGMENTATION

The most effective displays of the psychological trauma in *The Bluest Eye* is the fact that Pecola even feels the disintegration of her personality. Pecola starts to disconnect herself as is usual among victims of trauma. At the end of the novel she has dropped coherent narrative identity. On the symptoms of PTSD, one scholar notes that Pecola also acquired them after the accumulation of family and racial abuse. This contemporary psychiatric conceptualizing (PTSD) highlights the fact that her experience qualifies as severe trauma: intrusive memories, emotional numbing, and psychotic aspects. Morrison uses this fragmentation to dramatize it by the final retreat that Pecola has into fantasy. She starts to notice the blue eyes she desires although she never had them physically. According to the analysis made by SwissEduc, Pecola retires into madness when she finally believes that she has blue eyes. That is, her fulfilling of the impossible desire (through imagination) is at the same time the failure of her reality. This disidentification signifies that Pecola

is no longer Pecola, she has mentally segregated the traumatic reality. Her psyche, in terms of the trauma, is only able to understand the abuse by replacing it with a delusional redemption.

SELF-LOATHING AND INNER CITY RACISM.

Morrison portrays clearly self-hatred as a trauma symptom. Pecola and other characters crave to be other, under the influence of the white-centric ideology. The dreaming to white standards is demonstrated in the novel more than once, e.g. when Pecola desires to become different (i.e. she wishes to have blue eyes) this means that the notion of what it means to be beautiful is altered inside her mind so that to be beautiful is to be white. The summary of this motif is provided by SwissEduc commentary: Pecola with her blue eyes represents “the internalization of white beauty standards). To her, being black is synonymous to being ugly and worthless. This self-hating is supported by the details of the story (e.g., Dolls, Candy): Morrison actually depicts Pecola as drinking out of a Shirley Temple glass and eating Mary Jane candy to eat Mary Jane... Love her. Be like her- a symbol of consuming whiteness. The psychological burden is enormous: Pecola hates herself because of her color, because she feels that this is what makes her miserable. Thereby, the violence of racism is internalized, her trauma manifests itself in her identity hatred.

EMOTIONAL SYMPTOMS AND BEHAVIORAL SYMPTOMS.

Traumatic effects are emotional and behavioral in nature. Pecola turns passive, lonely and powerless. At the very beginning of the story, she is portrayed to retreat whenever there was a row within the family, curled in bed, looking too scared to say anything- an acquired mechanism to constant fear. She does not talk much or insist herself but in her fantasies. This catatonic attitude is one of learned helplessness due to the constant abuse she has been subjected to. On the contrary, Cholly is the symbol of uncontrolled and unpredictable aggression - he is also a victim of his own trauma. The sexual experience with an abusive gaze when he is a boy and the subsequent anger (raping Pecola, burning the house) are just external manifestations of the inner conflict. Morrison implies that Cholly is not a violent person, but a person who is breaking the bonds of the suppressed pain.

METAPHORIC INDICATIONS OF TRAUMA.

Morrison uses the extensive symbolism to describe the impact of trauma. The marigold flowers that Claudia and Frieda plant in the hope that Pecola will give birth to the baby is one of the symbols. The marigolds do not bloom, as it is mentioned several times in the text. This deserted gardening is a symbol of the community not providing care to Pecola or safeguarding her - the soil of her world is unfriendly.

SwissEduc remarks that the death of the marigolds relates to the fact that the society does not want to raise up Pecola and other helpless Black girls. A second symbol that is heart-rending is the primer of children of Dick-and-Jane family. The lines of this idyllic storybook also open each part of the novel, but they, too, degrade, as the gibberish (no punctuations, no spaces). This visual breakdown is a reflection of the psychic breakdown of Pecola: as the story breaks apart, so does her mind. According to SwissEduc, this is because the breakdown of the primer reflects the psychological breakdown of Pecola. Morrison compares the story of the loving white family of the primer with the reality of the Breedloves and highlights the fact that the life of Pecola will never be the same as that myth. The themes are reinforced by other symbols: the storefront house belonging to the Breedloves, which is explained as ugly and unlovely, is the result of their self-directed hate that was internalized (they lived there because they were poor and black, they stayed there because they thought they were ugly). The consumer objects are symbolic too: the attention Pecola pays to the memorabilia of Shirley Temple, candy is a propaganda of whiteness, as it trains her (literally and figuratively) to equate happiness with white features. Together, these images represent the trauma-ridden values that construct the identities of the characters and support the aspect of the novel, which is the critical depiction of the racialized oppression.

CONSEQUENCES OF TRAUMA

PSYCHOLOGICAL BREAKDOWN

The final result of the traumas in the novel is the loss of mental health of Pecola. She is unable to operate in reality any longer since she has experienced parental violence, sexual abuse, community scorn, and internalized racism. Morrison shows the tragic conclusion: Pecola delivers a dead child, and, feeling guilty and desiring something, psychotically devoted to the dream of blue eyes. In real life, the naive girl that we encountered has lost her mind permanently, according to Ariharan. Though Morrison does not apply clinical terminology, the behavior of Pecola is the example of complete dissociative breakdown. In the last scenes, all she talks about is her bluest eyes as this is a give away that her trauma has disintegrated her former self. According to Lopez, the case of Pecola shows that the internalized racism permanently harmed her psyche. The only thing that she can imagine is the obsession with the fictional bluish eyes a tragic cure to a society that abused her. Finding redemption is not granted to Pecola in the novel: her destiny is a curse of what an unresolved trauma can completely ruin in the persona of a child.

GENERATIONAL TRAUMA

The Bluest Eye also depicts the trauma as a family curse. The cruelty demonstrated by Cholly Breedlove can be seen as the result of his violence and loss in the past that has been demonstrated to be cyclical. Morrison also narrates how his father deserted Cholly and how the white men once raped him, which helps him develop the abject male chauvinism he displays. In his turn, Cholly abuses Pecola. In the same way, Pauline has her own identity that is influenced by growing up as a housemaid in a white house as she was only appreciated to serve. It is this history that contributes to her poor self-esteem and cruelty against her family. Morrison suggests that the traumas caused by the race of one generation are inherited by the other, as though every character is bearing the legacy of historical racism on their bodies and souls. Theoretical approaches to the issue of the trauma substantiate it: Caruth and other people claim that personal trauma is closely related to cultural and historical trauma. Lopez makes it clear that The Bluest Eye connects the personal trauma of each character to the social traumas of racism, sexism, and poverty in the community. The Breedloves family in itself is a micro-world of the racist society, and Pecola is the child who has to inherit those damages that have been piled up. In this way, Morrison implies that the process of healing cannot be carried out at an individual level, but the whole societal traumas will have to be recognized to achieve the break.

SOCIAL IMPLICATIONS

The social implications brought out in the novel by Morrison are far reaching. The Bluest Eye charges the racialized values that enabled the destruction of Pecola by dramatizing her destruction. It implies that racism is not a victimless crime: a whole community has to be morally accountable of the evil which was done to one of its children. The novel can be viewed as a general critique of racial hierarchy: revealing that such simple things as shopping glance, social gossip, the cruelty of a child, and so forth all lead to dehumanizing a Black girl, Morrison shows that the culture that glorifies whiteness is by definition destructive. According to Lopez, this message is usually faced by the reader: she observes that the novel is acutely aware of the real message by revealing the horrifying character of the trauma and how it is supposed to drive the social activism against racism. That is, The Bluest Eye is not merely tragic; it makes the reader challenge the status quo within which it was created. In modern-day language, the social implication of the novel is an appeal to destroy the base beauty ideals and racial prejudices. It cautions that telling its children to loathe who they are as a people, a society end up blaming itself and causing traumas. To Morrison, the

validation of Black identity and opposition to Eurocentric norms is not merely a social need of an individual, but a social need.

NARRATIVE TECHNIQUES AND REPRESENTATION OF TRAUMA.

NONLINEAR NARRATIVE

The very structure of the narration is the fragmentation of trauma presented by Morrison. The *Bluest Eye* follows the narrative nonlinearly: it starts in the middle, with individuals thinking about the events of the past, and alternates between the current tragedy and the flashback of history. This discontinuous chronology reflects the concept of trauma theory of traumatic memory as non-sequentially stored. This fragmentation has been noted by literary critics to echo Freud and Caruth as to the idea of the deferred action in trauma: the events are told in reverse as the past comes back to haunt the present of the characters in question. As an example, the flashbacks of her childhood of Pecola are mixed with the current community responses, highlighting the fact that the past humiliations continuously creep into the minds of the characters. The nonlinear also conceals important revelations (e.g. of what Cholly went through as a child himself) until the author reveals this, which forces the reader to withhold causality. This is a reflection of how the psyche of Pecola has to put it together out of the unspeakable experiences. The fragmented time of Morrison, therefore, is the figure of psychological fragmentation: similarly to the role of the self of Pecola, which is not a whole, the narrative cannot be easily broken down into a single, chronological time.

MULTIPLE PERSPECTIVES

Another style that Morrison uses to depict trauma is the use of multiple voices of narration. More importantly, the part of the novel is told by Claudia MacTeer, a young Black girl that does not only see some of the experiences but also actively opposes the culture of racism. The first person narration of Claudia is in contrast to the third person emphasis on Pecola. Morrison gave a counter-narrative through Claudia. It is important to note that Claudia directly rebuffs white beauty standards: she only desires to dismantle her Shirley Temple doll, she wants to experience the beauty, the desirability that had eluded her. This is a moment when she is giving a will to demolish the fixed principles and to see her personal worth. The narration by Claudia is thus some form of voice of resistance and truth which shows what Pecola is not able to say. It also shows that not everything turns out to be as traumatizing to Black children; in the case of Claudia and her sister Frieda, they manage to live through, partly due to such resistance. Morrison compares two possible reactions to racism by expressing the rebellious point of view of Claudia and the subdued pain

of Pecola. This plurality of perspectives is in consistency with postcolonial narrative practices that do not want the single monolithic view of reality, and it highlights the central theme that survival can depend on the narrative voice.

SYMBOLISM AND IMAGERY

Morrison incorporates imagery and symbolism, which support the theme of trauma and twisted beauty. The dominant and the idols have been mentioned above. Other instances are application of consumer imagery: the Shirley Temple cup and Mary Jane candy ties which Claudia described of Pecola identify them to indoctrination. Morrison, as the SwissEduc guide notes, equates the consumption of these objects of sweetness to that of whiteness. Even the mere fact of Pecola taking candy is symbolically loaded: she actually attempts to consume the eyes of the white ideal in order to transform herself. Another important image is the Breedlove apartment per se, physical representation of trauma: it is empty, unloved, and the narrator calls it ugly. Morrison is writing that they were poor and black and they stayed there because they believed they were ugly. The decay of the house therefore reflects the sense of self-depreciation in the family. Fire (e.g. the arson by Cholly) is also another symbol of self-destruction, but space does not allow one to talk more about it. Notably, these icons are not ornamental, but they are integrated into the story; they serve as tangible depictions of mental conditions. By ironing the contrasting bright and hopeful images (marigolds, children picture books) and their perversion or failure, the imagery of Morrison dramatises the way racist ideologies corrupt reality.

CONCLUSION

This discussion has revealed that *The Bluest Eye* talks about trauma which is deeply rooted in systemic racism, unhealthy beauty standards, and family dysfunction. Morrison narration relates the psychological tortures of Pecola and her family to the social traumas of racism, sexism, and poverty that are in the air around them. The novel uses a complex combination of narrative structure and symbolism to express to the audience the impact of an internalized white supremacy as something that can break the identity of a child permanently. Thus, as the literary critics note, Morrison thus offers a criticism of the American racial ideology per se. The tragedy of Pecola is made imageable of what can occur when a society socializes its children to hate their own bodies and value.

The message is far-reaching: *The Bluest Eye* invites the reader to see and question the ideologies that cause such injuries. According to Hope Lopez, when the readers face the description of trauma given by Morrison, they do not leave without feeling moved and nudged towards personal transformation and social activism. The novel reminds the readers that the effort to confirm Black identity and oppose imposed beauty standards is a pressing one. Morrison is calling upon a consciousness awakening (as Yuan calls it), which can disrupt the discourse power of the mainstream aesthetic, by revealing the inhumane price of racial oppression.

In future research, a comparison of *The Bluest Eye* and subsequent novels by Morrison, like *Beloved*, or other novels of that era such as *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker, where the racialized violence has also taken its psychological toll, would be fruitful. The other direction to take is to explore how the themes of the novel can find their reflection in the modern culture: how the concepts of colorism and Eurocentric beauty influence Black girls through media and the sphere of beauty products. These comparative and contemporary studies would cut the warning of Morrison with the present.

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