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Beauty Hegemony and Racial Discrimination in Toni Morrison's The Bluest Eye

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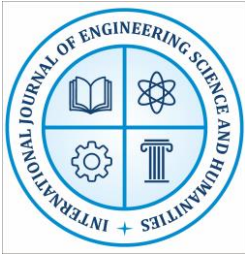
ABSTRACT:

African American literature has long explored the issues of racial inequality, discrimination and identity formation in the United States. Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1970) is a seminal work that critiques the hegemonic beauty standards of white America and their devastating impact on the lives of African Americans. Through the tragic life of Pecola Breedlove, Morrison highlights how internalized racism, oppression and the myth of white superiority lead to psychological destruction, self loathing and disintegration of identity. This paper examines the novel through the lens of racial discrimination, focusing particularly on the concept of "beauty hegemony," and analyzes how Morrison critiques American cultural narratives that equate whiteness with beauty and worthiness. By situating the novel within the historical and cultural context of the Black is Beautiful movement, the study underscores Morrison's attempt to reclaim black identity and expose the violence of racialized beauty myths.

KEYWORDS: African American Literature, Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*, Beauty Hegemony, Racism, Identity, Oppression, Pecola Breedlove.

African American literature explores the issues of freedom, equality and justice long denied of Blacks in the United States. Racial discrimination is deeply rooted in Racism. 'Racism' is a global hierarchy of superiority and inferiority among different groups that have been politically, culturally, socially and economically shaped differently for centuries by the institutes of the "capitalist/ patriarchal, western centric / Christian centric, modern / colonial world system" (Grosfoguel10). The whites never treated the blacks as human beings, just because they are of different in colour. Whites always treated blacks as inferior, exploited them and treated them brutally. Carter and Pieterse defines race as, "Race refers to social construct and practice of categorizing humans based on their skin color, physical features (e.g. eye and /or nose shape, hair texture etc.) and / or language" (41 63).

The issue of racial discrimination in postcolonial literature became the chief concern of most of the novelists of African descent. These African American writers represented themselves as well as their race and culture in their writings. They try to establish their Afro American identity through their virtuoso writing. Langston Hughes, Richard Wright, Toni Morrison, Zora Neale Hurston, Alice Walker, Ralph Ellison, James Baldwin and W. E. B. Du Bois are some of the prominent writers in this genre. Among them, Chole Anthony Wofford Morrison known as Toni



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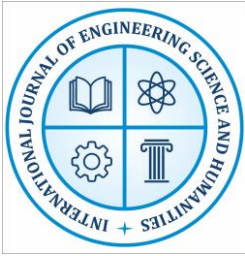
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Morrison born on February 18, 1931 in Lorain, Ohio. She was an eminent American novelist, essayist, editor and college professor. She was often regarded as one of the greatest contemporary American writers. She had been bestowed with numerous literary awards including Pulitzer Prize in 1988. She was the first African American to win the most prestigious Nobel Prize in literature in 1993. One of the most prominent themes in Morrison's novel is the notion of racial tension between whites and African Americans. Morrison raises this issue of racial discrimination in her novels on behalf of racial victims. Her writings are tales of the coloured people's oppression in a white dominant patriarchal society. Her novels are constructed within the realm of black culture. All her novels are scrutinized in the history of Afro American past, present and take a probationary leap towards the future. Being black, she has realized very early in her life that racism has become the greatest enemy of the coloured people. She is well aware with the fact that Afro Americans are targeted by white European and the Afro Americans begin to believe about themselves that white Europeans are superior in beauty, morality, intelligence and capabilities. The root cause of racial discrimination is 'beauty hegemony' that is thoughtfully depicted by Toni Morrison in *The Bluest Eye*.

The concept of racism implies a set of beliefs, attitudes, behaviors, practice and prejudices that support an imbalance in the division of power among different racial groups. Racist behavior also leads to criminal activities. The regular experience of racism can lead to people withdrawing from work or study. It also hampers the social growth of an individual and diminishes the quality of life. It can also hurt people's freedom and dignity. Those who endure racism can be made to feel as if they are second class citizens. Whatever the form of racism is, it always involves the misuse of power by the dominant individuals, groups and communities against the other. In this context Fredrickson defines the term racism as:

The term "racism" is often used in a loose and unreflective way to describe the hostile or negative feelings of one group or "people" toward another and the actions resulting from such attitudes. But sometimes the antipathy of one group toward another is expressed and acted upon with a single mindedness and brutality that go far beyond the group centered prejudice and snobbery that seem to constitute an almost universal human failing. Hitler invoked racist theories to justify his genocidal treatment of European Jewry, as did white supremacists in the American South to explain why Jim Crow laws were needed to keep whites and blacks separated and unequal. (Fredrickson1)

The 1960s witnessed a growing racial pride paving the way for a Black American. The movement was a protest against racial segregation and discrimination. The movement aimed to help African Americans gain some measure of equality in the country and to refute the racial notion that blacks are naturally and inherently ugly. The "black is beautiful" was a small part of the overall trend. The movement had a strong impact on Toni Morrison and she described it in *The Bluest*



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Eye, which was published in 1970. Before the “black is beautiful” movement, the dominant cultural message in America was “white is beautiful; black is ugly”. African American children learned it was better to be light skinned and straight hair. There was a flood of skin lightening creams. African American women in particular used hair straighteners and other techniques in order to mimicked the hairstyles of white women of the time. In the United States of America, a woman’s beauty is compared with her individual value. Pale, flawless white skin, long, flowing blond hair, tall and thin feminine body and graceful and delicate facial features complete with blue eyes compose the hegemonic beauty standards by which all women are measured. In the Forward Morrison expresses her anger when she says, “...what it is like to be actually hated hating for things we have no control over and cannot change...but the far more tragic and disabling consequences of accepting rejection as legitimate, as self evident” (*The Bluest Eye*. Forward). When one is hated or disliked on the basis of their physical features and made to believe that a particular person or a group of people is inferior than the other is known as ‘beauty hegemony’. In *The Bluest Eye* Morrison focuses on this problem as it affects blacks and their psychological mechanism.

The Bluest Eye (1970) is the first and most popular novel of Toni Morrison. It is an influential novel on the perspective of racism. The book follows a young African American girl, Pecola Breedlove, who believes that sufferings of her life would have vanished if only she had blue eyes. Pecola always wished for white skin, blond hair and blue eyes against her dark complexion She uses the standard of beauty myth owned by the white child actress, Shirley Temple, who has the lovely blue eyes, of course. *The Bluest Eye* originating from the author’s conversation with a childhood friend is basically meant to make the realization of what the victimized “inferiors” would have gone through because of the harsh acts – psychologically, emotionally, physically and verbally by the people with the pseudo paragon of beauty believed whiteness.

The novel focuses on how racial discrimination affects blacks and their psychological mechanism. *The Bluest Eye* strongly speaks of the voice the demoralized blacks in the insignificant society which has become muted. Besides, *The Bluest Eye* also depicts African American society living in under the classist rationale. The writer is probing the concept of the hegemony of white beauty standard in the American society. *The Bluest Eye* originating from the author’s conversation with a childhood friend is basically meant to make the realization of what the victimized “inferiors” would have gone through because of the harsh acts – psychologically, emotionally, physically and verbally by the people with the pseudo paragon of beauty believed whiteness. In the novel, *The Bluest Eye* Breedloves believe that their biological colour is the reason of their sufferings. Describing their situation, the narrator says, “It was as though some mysterious all knowing master had given each one a cloak of ugliness to wear and they hadeach accepted it without



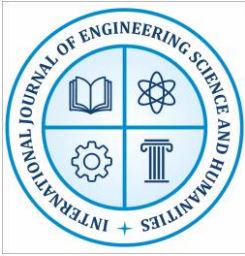
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question” (*TBE* 39). Describing their indifference towards each other Morrison says,” Each member of the family in his own cell of consciousness, each making his own patchwork quilt of reality collecting fragments of experience here, pieces of information there” (*TBE* 34).

The Bluest Eye is the story of a young girl in Lorain, Ohio named Pecola. Pecola is the central figure of the novel and she is always being told that she is very ugly and dark. As a result, a sense of inferiority haunted her continuously. In order to avoid this situation she starts to possess a desire of having the bluest eye for herself. Here the bluest eye symbolizes the white people and Pecola herself represents the real plight of black American people. The innocent girl Pecola thinks that all the white girls are beautiful because they have the blue eyes and hence they are appreciated by all including the blacks. It shows that she lives in illusion and imagination and ready to do anything to possess blue eyes. “The distaste must be for her, her blackness. All things in her are flux and anticipation. But her blackness that accounts for, that creates, the vacuum edged with distaste in white eyes” (*TBE* 49). The inhuman nature of person being judged and characterized as per the race showcased the prejudice minds of the whitefaces. Through Pecola Breedlove, Morrison vividly unfolds African Americans responses to the overpowering standards of beauty in Western culture: rejection, alienation, self loathing and gradual destruction.

The plot and structure of the novel help us to understand that how racial discrimination is deeply embedded in American society. In the preface of the book, Morrison has written three versions of “Dick and Jane”, which was at that time nationally recognized as a children's primary reader story. The primer is used to read in American public schools presents the perfect image of white children while there is no place for blacks in the primer. The education system was not the same for African Americans as for that of white Americans. Says Morrison, “juxtaposes the white educational process the realities of life for many black children” (Klotman 123). At the very opening of the novel, we encounter with Dick and Jane’s ideal image of American kids in the following lines, “Here is the house. It is green and white. It has a red door. It is very pretty. Here is the family. Mother, Father, Dick and Jane live in the green and white house. They are very happy” (*The Bluest Eyes*. Prologue). The above lines portraying white middle class families intended to show children the everyday lives of “true and brave American boys and girls” and teach them how they could also “become a helpful American citizen” (Werrlein 196). Dick and Jane were presented as the role models to be looked up to and imitated. They represented a self fabricated American image. Anything out of this image was not accepted in the society. As noted by Morrison herself in *Playing in the Dark*, the country's literature was interested in forming a national cultural identity and “American means white” (Morrison 39;47). African American children were not regarded in the mainstream of the American society. They were forced to consider themselves undesirable, much like Pecola who desire to have white skin, blond hair and blue eyes against her dark complexion as: “Each night, without fail, she prayed for blue eyes.



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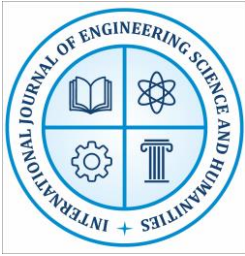
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Fervently, for a year she had prayed. Although somewhat discouraged, she was not without hope. To have something as wonderful as that happened would take a long, long time” (*TBE46*). The societal norms and customs not only makes a person hate his/her looks but also kills the self respect, self confidence and the self esteem that might have taken the complete life to build in. The ridiculous perceptions of the people about race, class and characterizing people on the basis of the outer looks makes it difficult as hell for the people to live and face reality so that they can accept themselves as they are.

Considering black people as ‘other’ or ‘inferior’, white people try to disrespect and humiliate their black fellows. This is evident in various parts of the novel when we see that Breedlove family is totally devoid of love and attention not only from the side of whites but from each other also. “The Breedlove 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” (*TBE38*). The Breed loves can’t change the truth of being poor and black but the whites too does’t support them enough so that they can lead a life with a better status. As Gravett affirms, “those unable to afford thematerial lifestyle society values are ruthlessly pushed aside” (92). Despite accepting the blacks, they are neglected and criticized for their true fact. Continuing with the views blacks infers about their own selves, the statement shows how they have accepted that they are inferior to whites andcannot upgrade themselves only due to their skin complexion. Despite the periodic sufferings, miseries and ill treatments, they feel that their ‘ugliness’ cannot make them reach heights in the society.

Pecola has struggled hard to figure out the reason of mistreatment she has always received from the people around her. Her own perception manages to understand that it isbecause of her ugliness. The ugly conviction directly affected Pecola. Because Pecola is black, she becomes invisible for the outside world. The notion of Pecola's invisibility is closely associated with Ralph Ellison’s novel *Invisible Man*. In the prologue to Ellison’s *Invisible Man*, the narrator emphasizes that he is not a ghost. He is a man of flesh and blood. Yet, he is invisible because people are rejecting his presence for the reason he is black. The same thing goes with Pecola. Her blackness and ugliness make her invisible in the eye of the beholder. Her classmates and teachers ignore her inside the classroom simply because she is not beautiful and does not meet the white standards of beauty. Pecola’s pathetic condition is depicted in following lines, “Long hours she sat looking in the mirror, trying to discover the secret of the ugliness that made her ignored or despised at school, by teachers and classmates alike. She was the only member of her class who sat alone at a double desk” (*TBE45*).

In *The Bluest Eyes*, we find that many black people admire and try to assimilate white values and their system. They always try to look like them and pretend to live like them. But they forget that it is only an imitation and not reality. Some characters in the novel like Pauline,



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Maureen Peal and Geraldine assimilate and try to imitate white concepts of a good lifestyle. The way in which they segregate themselves from their own culture lower the worth of their culture and other African Americans as well. At the very opening of the novel, we get acquainted with the image of a perfect American family. Dick is a brown haired boy and Jane is a blond girl. Their father, mother and little sister also have fair complexion. They represent a self fabricated American image that embraced the white society's values and fit exactly the portrait they wished to promote to its citizens. "... all the world had agreed that a blue eyed, yellow haired, pink skinned doll was what every girl child treasured" (*TBE20*). These few words scripted the barbarous ideology of the majority of the population prejudicing a human child on the basis of the superficial appearance. The inner self and its beauty can never be inferred by the attire or the skin tone.

Pecola is not appreciated and cared by her family. She is raped by her own father and beaten by her mother because they had been badly influenced by the vicious standards of white world. Furthermore, she has no friends or any other person with whom she feel safe and valued. In the surrounding community she was made to think as an outsider by grownups and even her peers. She had a strong obsession for blue eyes. The desire is made because of she wants to escape her life by becoming something she is not. Pecola thinks that only blue eyes can diminish all the sufferings from her life. She wants to be treated differently in her family as she thinks, "...if those eyes of hers were different, that is to say, beautiful, she herself would be different. If she looked different, beautiful, may be Cholly would be different and Mrs. Breedlove too" (*TBE46*). Pecola here believed as if the blue eyes will make sure that the treatment around her would go through a drastic makeover and would come up with the beautiful reality. Her ugliness will disappear and she will gain the love and security which is desperately missing from her life. Pecola is made to realize her ugliness by the society around her. Her classmate named Maureen, a light skinned girl teases Pecola and her friends by calling them black and ugly. Pecola's friends Claudia and Frieda were nicer, brighter too but still lesser than Maureen. The black sensibility makes them feel low and inferior. They were made to realize again and again that they lacked blue eyes, white skin, blonde hair, the so called American standards of beauty. The black boys too harsh Pecola over the colour of her skin. The hatred of the black boys for the black girl is the self hatred cultivated by racism. The belief that black was not valuable is deeply rooted even in the minds of the blacks.

Pecola shows excessive enthusiasm for Shirley Temple, which can be seen from her fascination for Frieda's blue and white Shirley Temple mug. This can be seen as a part of her longing to assimilate the values of white culture. Pecola's desire to be Shirley Temple denies her own identity. Not only Pecola, the narrator says, "... the rest of the family Mrs. Breedlove, Sammy Breedlove – wore their ugliness, put it on so to speak, although it did not belong to them." (*TBE38*). They never try to raise questions about their predicament. They meekly accept their



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destiny as the ultimate reality. Pauline Breedlove (Pecola's mother) has a great fascination for white beauty. She identifies with the virtues of the white family for whom she works as she get everything here what she aspires for. Pauline wants to identify herself with the white standards of beauty. She is a black woman who pines for beauty, romantic love, recognition and desire to live an ideal life. Pauline hates the ugliness of her house, her daughter and herself. She compares her house with (Fishers) her employer's house. For her life at Fishers is light, more delicate and more lovely. We can understand this in the following lines, "Here she found beauty, order, cleanliness and praise" (*TBE127*). Incredibly lonely and lost, she first turns to the movies in order to escape her real situation and at the same time imagines herself in a world of romantic love and physical beauty, white physical beauty. She gazes for hours and imagines an ideal life for herself. She tries to do her hair like Jean Harlow but cannot see her husband as Clark Gable. Economic condition is also the cause of the sufferings of Breed loves.

Cholly, Pecola's father had always felt insecure and alienated as a child. As an orphan, he is rootless and in search of his self, his identity. At the age of fourteen, Cholly seemed to lose a great part of his connection to his community – much like what would happen to Pauline later on. The rape of Pecola by her father Cholly could be an attempt to escape to the days of his first love. His love towards Pecola turns to lust and raise as he remembers the incident of his first act of intercourse when he was forced to continue by two whitemen. This incident filled Cholly with contempt and scorn. It is absolutely clear that Cholly is an oppressor in the situation mentioned above. However, he is also a victim of oppression. As hooks reminds us, "men too are victimized" and "to be an oppressor is dehumanizing and anti human in nature" (158).

Pecola's craving for blue eyes and blond here is associated with white beauty standards. It is not only Pecola who wants to be loved by people around her. In Maureen we see an attempt of a black girl to alienate herself from her community. She was the new girl at school and was rich by standards of their community. She is considered beautiful by her classmates and teachers. However, Maureen and Pecola belong to same community, but the first can come much closer to the dominant society's beauty standards and socioeconomic conditions while the latter is far away from both the conditions.

CONCLUSION:

Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* is more than a novel about an individual girl's tragedy; it is a profound commentary on the destructive consequences of internalized racism and hegemonic beauty standards. Pecola Breedlove's desire for blue eyes symbolizes the deep psychological scars inflicted upon African Americans by a society that valorizes whiteness while demeaning blackness. The novel demonstrates how systemic oppression corrodes family bonds, distorts self image and marginalizes entire communities. Through Morrison's narrative, readers witness the devastating effects of racial prejudice: invisibility, alienation and fractured identities. The



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Breedloves' acceptance of their supposed "ugliness" reflects how hegemonic ideals perpetuate inferiority within the oppressed. By weaving in cultural references, the Dick and Jane primer and the critique of white cultural dominance, Morrison exposes the falsity of American ideals of beauty and democracy. Ultimately, Morrison calls for a re-visioning of identity that embraces blackness as beautiful and resists conformity to oppressive norms. *The Bluest Eye* remains relevant today as it continues to interrogate racial hierarchies, challenge Eurocentric beauty ideals and advocate for cultural self-acceptance.

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