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# Beauty as a Cultural Aspect in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*

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fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master in English  
Literature and Cultural Studies*

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# *Dedication*

I dedicate this dissertation to: my beloved parents, to my brother Ilyes and sister Ghizlene. To my family BELAID and BENAZZI especially to my late grandfather.

# Acknowledgements

Praise to **ALLAH**, the Almighty for his uncountable blessings, and best prayers and peace be unto his best messenger **Mohamed**, his pure descendents, and his family and his noble companions.

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## Abstract

The present dissertation entitled “Beauty as a Cultural Aspect in *The Bluest Eye*” focuses on the issue of white ideology in America and its impacts on the life of African Americans during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Through the analysis of Toni Morrison’s 1970 novel *The Bluest Eye*, and using Feminist and psychological approaches, it investigates the influence of white beauty standards on the identity of African Americans, especially black females, and their experiences in a society where madness and silence are present. The study demonstrates different facets of racism and its consequences on the black character through the point of view of multiple narrators. It traces the evolution of female characters from self-hatred to self-esteem and studies the effects of child abuse. Thus, it highlights the importance of Toni Morrison’s writings and shows her feminist point of view.

**Key words:** Beauty – African American – culture – self-perception – Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*.

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## General Introduction

Literature is the artistic way of writing, revealing and describing one's thoughts; it is the body of works written by different authors. The art of writing and storytelling is supposed to have originated in the southern Mesopotamia region of Sumer in BC 3200 in the city of Uruk then it was spread in Egypt and later in Greece and Rome (Mark). Throughout time, literature witnessed changes due to social, political and economic developments, passing through various periods from the Classical one to the Modern period (c. 1914-1945) and Postmodern period (c. 1945 onward) (Wheeler).

Most of the time, a writer depicts historical events in his/her literary works seeking to get attention of the audience to the issues they want to solve, for instance the oppressed minority who is disregarded by the majority. For this reason they use literature as a weapon to demand for their rights and call for justice. Racism in America has been a central problem for black writers; this phenomenon began when white masters brought Africans to the New World. During the slave period and colonial era, racism took a deep place in African Americans' life with scientists justifying racism as a way to uplift black people. In an attempt to fight racism, the abolitionists sought to influence the political powers and public opinions. However, according to "*The Story of Race Transcript*" article, by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and with the second wave of European immigration, the spread of racial discrimination intensified with the existence of many racial and ethnic groups. By the 20<sup>th</sup> century and due to the Depression of 1920s, black citizens started immigrating north to search for work opportunities. By the 1960's the American society introduced the beauty myth to black minority who accepted it blindly resulting in the destruction of an entire race. During this period, black feminist movements emerged due the oppressive, racist and sexist acts on black women (Roth 46).

As a result, numerous authors reflected on this problem among them Toni Morrison, a feminist author, in her novel *The Bluest eye* where she attacks the founders of the beauty standards and the ones that practiced it (black and white individuals) using her own language, voice and perspective. She observes in The Foreword to *The Bluest Eye* that “The reclamation of racial beauty in the sixties...made me think about the necessity for the claim” (xi).

The present study focuses on the issue of racism and the impact of racial beauty on Morrison’s characters especially the black female experience which intrigued the author. It also investigates the identity of the black character and the reason behind his behavioral change as well as the process of such transformation.

The work seeks to answer the following questions:

- What are the American cultural aspects reflected in the novel?
- What are the effects of white ideology on African Americans?
- How has society created self-hatred in African American women and how have they coped with it?

The research supports the hypothesis that claims that African American women suffered from self-loathing and that the novel is a reflection of the historical reality of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

It relies on primary source (Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*) as well as secondary sources like journals, articles, and Websites. The researcher has adopted Feminist and psychological approaches. Literary Criticism is the analysis of a typical work by a critic using his/her judgment or reaction in reference to intellectual works. According to Tyson, feminist criticism is concerned with “...the ways in which literature (and other cultural productions) reinforce or undermine the economic, political, social, and psychological oppression of women” (Brizee et al). It is a literary analysis that identifies female characters for the purpose of challenging the male dominated society, it is used to question the society’s values that puts men in the center and reveals



that women are considered and depicted as objects in both reality and in literature.

This study focuses on investigating the psychological aspects of the characters and seeks to determine the causes and effects of their behavior. The research aims to analyze the situation of the black characters and their change of heart as a result of racism and white dominant culture, it explores the cultural aspects and events that led to writing the novel and it investigates if the theme of Morrison is a reflection of the social reality of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

In order to do so, the research work is divided into two chapters. Chapter one is the theoretical part where it proceeds with the definition of Feminism and Racism and traces them through time. It provides a glimpse on the history of Racism and its impact on African Americans in general and on Black women in particular by linking it to feminism. The reader will have a peep on the history of African American Literature in addition to the author's biography. The second Chapter is the practical part. It answers the research questions, analyzes characters, reveals the reality of their psychological development and exposes the impact of white ideology on black female characters.

# Chapter 1: Race Relations in the US

## 1.1. Introduction

African American literature reflects the most important issues faced by blacks in the United States. Black authors used literature to express their ideas, to defend their philosophy, to describe their lives, culture, religion and the way they perceive the world. Two of the most tackled subjects are Racism and its relation to Feminism. On one hand, both Black male and female writers used Literature as a weapon to fight against Racism and on the other hand, black women writers used their feminist ideas in their works and linked Feminism with Racism to show its impact on the Black society.

## 1.2. Literature, Feminism and Racism

Women had long been present in literature. From the Medieval Ages in the 5<sup>th</sup> to 15<sup>th</sup> centuries till present time, Feminism had long been a major issue and “[...] had never had a proper place in literature” (Burn 31). Feminism is the belief that men and women should have equal rights and opportunities in all domains. Moreover, restrictions placed on women existed in English literature from *Canterbury Tales* by Geoffrey Chaucer and “*Beowulf*” to William Shakespeare’s plays.

In Geoffrey Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales*, a woman’s role is made according to a mother or a nun. However, “The Wife of Bath” describes the strong feminist independent woman who is open-minded and is known for exercising power over men. In a more sarcastic manner, Chaucer criticizes the landowner who treats women as slaves and properties in “Franklin’s Tale”: “Women of kynde desiren libertee/And not to been constrey as a thrall” (“The Canterbury Tales and Other Works”) (Women by nature love their liberty/ And not be constrained like any thrall). These lines show the direct attempt of Chaucer to bring into light men’s false and ignorant view on women. As a result, he accuses men.

From the beginning of the middle ages, women's roles were restricted which means everything was revolving around their tasks as wives including cleaning, cooking and farming. On one hand, noblewomen were depicted as confined who conformed to the roles of mothers and wives typically seen as perfectly happy and honored to live such a life for example queens in "*Beowulf*" are portrayed as peace weavers, as it is stated in "*Beowulf*" "A queen should weave peace" (Nourani). This declaration indicates women's purpose as confined peace weavers who obeyed all men's commands. On the other hand, women who are independent can be extremely dangerous such as Grendel's mother in "*Beowulf*", she is described as unconfined who does not behave according to the medieval ideals but follows the male mentality of vengeance and war.

During Elizabethan times, the same medieval ideas prevailed. Girls were born to become women, to get married and have children. In fact women had no say in who they married. In other words the dominating father arranged marriage for his personal interests. In "*The Tempest*" by Shakespeare, Miranda, Prospero's daughter, is depicted as "perfect and peerless, created of every creature's best" ("*Miranda (Shakespeare)*") but used by her father as a sexual seduction to get his revenge from his brother Antonio. Thus, Shakespeare portrays the medieval society's general judgment on women as sexual tools.

Though Feminism is a 20<sup>th</sup> century concept, the Middle Ages displayed the hopes of women who did not accept the patriarchal system that suffocated them and limited their roles. As a result, even though Feminism had not been invented, the ideas of female equality were clearly not unusual. Moreover, feminism is strongly related to racism. According to Barbara Smith:

The reason racism is a feminist issue is easily explained by the inherent definition of feminism. Feminism is the political theory and practice to free all women: women of color, working-class women, poor women, physically challenged women, lesbians, old women --as well as white economically privileged heterosexual women. Anything

less than this is not feminism, but merely female self-aggrandizement (quoted by Gallardo).

Over and above, if Feminism objectified the woman, racism made it worse.

The *Oxford Dictionary*'s first recorded record of the word 'racism' was by a man named Richard Henry Pratt in 1902. Pratt was railing against the evils of racial segregation: "Segregating class or race of people apart from the rest of the people kills the progress of the segregated people or makes their growth very slow. Association of races and classes as necessary to destroy racism and classism" (Demby)

According to *the Oxford Dictionary*, Racism is the prejudice, discrimination, or antagonism directed against someone of a different race based on the belief that one's own race is superior. In other words racism is an attempt to degrade one's self esteem and confidence by using different ideologies.

The word Racism was first used in 1897 by Charles Malato, a French anarchist and writer in his book *Philosophie de l'Anarchie* (Scott), it was actually practiced in the 15<sup>th</sup> century when the first European settlement in the New World took place for the purpose of "discovery". Many of the colonists who settled in the Americas fled from religious persecution, some of them according to Kaufman "[...] were dedicated to the concept of natural rights and equality" however "there were still many who believed that people should be treated differently according to the innate biological differences" and that "there should be clear distinction between European "white men" and Native American or black persons." ("*Racism in the New World.*")The purpose of colonization was in fact purely economic to make the colonial economy thrive by using slave labor. The colonialists used "white man's burden" as a justification to racism so that black and Native Americans could be considered a property. Slaves were brought from Africa to work on large cotton and tobacco fields, most of black women took care of the white's house and children and where most of the time

sexually harassed and raped by their masters. Soon, racism was institutionalized which excluded blacks from education, marriage and work places. However, the colonialist s' efforts to dehumanize African Americans did not stop them from calling for their rights and as time went on more and more people joined abolitionist movements.

Ever since the colonial period, women suffered from marginalization, racism and coercion. Hence, they found refuge in writing their own stories criticizing the American experience. Lucy Terry composed the first famous poem 'Bars Fight' in 1746 which gave life to the African American women's Literature. Also Helen Washington who defended women and enhanced the idea that women are not sexual tools but rather creative human beings who retold their painful experience which allow them to have a "universe" of their own, she explained:

When I think of how essentially alone black women have been – alone because of our bodies, over which we have had so little control; alone because the damage done to our men has prevented their closeness and protection; and alone because we have had no one to tell us stories about ourselves; I realize that black women writers are an important and comforting presence in my life. Only they know my story. It is absolutely necessary that they be permitted to discover and interpret the entire range and spectrum of the experience of black women and not be stymied by preconceived conclusions. Because of these writers, there are more choices for black women to make, and there is a larger space in the universe for us.  
(quoted by Mitchell and Taylor 1 ).

Another well known female author is Harriet Ann Jacobs, whose powerful biography *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* influenced slave narratives. She described her experience and gave a version of how the life of black women can be in slavery. She depicted "the incessant violence that North Carolina slaveholders used to extort labor from the enslaved" (Feagin 71). Additionally, Jacobs wrote a letter to her friend Amy Post explaining her sedulity in fighting to get her freedom, she stated: "God [...] gave me a soul that burned for freedom

and heart nerved with determination to suffer even unto death in pursuit of liberty". (*Harriet Ann Jacobs Biography.*)

Also, Harriet Beecher Stowe, the peculiar author, who sparked the civil war with her anti-slavery novel, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, which was published in 1852. The novel depicted the evil of the white society and the sad reality of slavery. Accordingly Stowe, was recognized as both an author and an abolitionist when Abraham Lincoln declared: "So You're the little woman who wrote the book that made this great war!" (Charles Edward Stowe et al. 203).

Native American women on one hand wrote about violence and child abuse within both the Native American community and the racist white society. Mary Crow Dog is a 20<sup>th</sup> century native woman writer who mentioned that she was raped at a young age but did not reveal whether the rapist was white or Native American. Mary was concerned about young native women being raped by white policemen, she said: "Rapes on the reservations are a big scandal. The victims are mostly full-blood girls, too shy and afraid to complain" (quoted by Hendrickson 16). In fact, the young women were arrested on "false drunk-disorderly" (quoted by Hendrickson 68) charges, raped in jail and left or thrown on the street.

Mary talked also about racism in school, she tackled this situation with her mother and grandmother who claimed that "school was a form of child abuse" (quoted by Hendrickson 16) and the purpose of the Indian schools was to make the Indian pupils forget about their culture and embrace the white one. The system forbade even the Indian language to be used in school and "the children were beaten for speaking their own language" (quoted by Hendrickson 16). Some of them according to Mary, who went to school in 1960s, "got depressed when they first arrived" (quoted by Hendrickson 16).

Racism went more deeply than just depriving the natives from their language.

Many Indian children, Mary explained, are placed in foster homes [...] even in some cases where parents or grandparents

are willing and able to take care of them, but where the workers say their homes are substandard, or where there are outhouses instead of flush toilets, or where the family is simply "too poor." [...] We are losing the coming generation that way and do not like it." (quoted by Hendrickson 16-17).

The above lines highlight Mary Crow Dog's worry about Native American children and women who suffered from violence and racism. Many other female authors focused on this issue such as Louise Erdrich in her novel *Love Medicine* (1984) where she highlighted racism and brutality against the indigenous people.

As a result of these female writings, many intellectuals confirmed the role of literature as an effective factor of social change. Most of the African female writers wrote about the awful portrait that a woman has to endure everyday.

There emerged hope with the rise of feminism. The history of the feminist movement is divided into "three waves" by feminist intellectuals. The first feminist wave had its roots in the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century, which focused on women's suffrage. The second wave was in the 1960s and 1970s, an attempt to call for their cultural and political rights. The third wave started in the 1990s when the concept of "universal womanhood" took place. It rose as a reaction to the failures of second wave movement (Rampton).

The word Feminism or "Women's Lib" as a movement aiming to make women equal to man emerged from the social circumstances and inequalities, as Bell Hooks pointed out in her book *"Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center"*:

My awareness of feminist struggle was stimulated by social circumstance. Growing up in a Southern, black, father-dominated, working-class household, I experienced as did my mother, my sisters, and my brother) varying degrees of patriarchal tyranny and it made me angry..." (10).

Hooks explained that American feminist consciousness arose from the racist ideology imposed on black people. Consequently, Feminism and Racism in

America has a deep meaning contrary to other European countries. In fact, Black women's writings aim was to build the identity of women and to construct black women's literary tradition. Though African American women have been writing since the 18th century, their works were unappreciated as literature until the evolution of African American authors in the 1970s along with Black Feminism.

### **1.3. African American Literature: An Overview**

“We have always been imagining ourselves . . .we are the subjects of our own narratives, witnesses to and participants in our own experience. . . . We are not, in fact, “other.” We are Choices.”(Morrison, *Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature* 133).

Morrison is proudly talking about her race and her experience as African American. From the above quotation, one understands that African American Literature is the works written by American authors from African decent expressing their experience as oppressed people in an artistic way.

During the 17th, 18th, and 19th centuries, James Weldon Johnson and other black American unknown poets recount the slavery days using poetry and “sorrow songs” whose lyrics described the dehumanization of black slaves. The lyrics of such songs as “Steal Away”, “Swing Low Sweet Chariot” and “Motherless Child” offered lessons of morality and showed that the black tongue is not broken (Samuels 4). Moreover, when exposed to the Western Culture, these writers decided to create their own works and the first writings by blacks in America were autobiographical and became known as the Slave Narratives.

#### **1.3.1. Slave Narratives:**

When the United States of America got its independence the Afro-American Literature began to flourish. Slave narratives are the first written works of African American Literature. Olaudah Equiano (Gustavus Vassa), was the pioneer of the slave narrative, he is the first black in America to write an



autobiography. In , *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano; or, Gustavus Vassa, the African, Written by Himself* (1789), he describes his native land (Nigerian from Ibo) and the horrors of his enslavement in the West Indies (Andrews).

In addition to Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs, with their respective works, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself* (1845) and *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself* (1861). These writings were their way to freedom (Samuels 5). The above examples serve as clear evidence of the influence of the African American works on the history of the United States and the issue of slavery.

### **1.3.2. The Post Slavery Era:**

When American Civil War ended slavery in the US, some strong minded black writers produced nonfiction works for a radical change. *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) by William Edward Burghardt (or W. E. B. Du Bois), created a black intellectual and artistic consciousness:

If, however, the vistas disclosed as yet no goal, no resting place, little but flattery and criticism, the journey at least gave leisure for reflection and self-examination; it changed the child of Emancipation to the youth with dawning self-consciousness, self-realization, and self-respect. In those sombre forests of his striving his own soul rose before him, and he saw himself, darkly as through a veil [...]He began to have a dim feeling that, to attain his place in the world, he must be himself and not another (quoted by Samuels 5).

As a result Du Bois's purpose was to celebrate the African American heritage, music, art and literature in order to make it part of the Western Culture and shows the black's disappointment in achieving freedom.

Booker T. Washington was the founder of the Tuskegee Institute in Alabama. He was American educator and author. Between 1890 and 1915, Washington was the dominant leader in the African American community. He

published different well known books; *The future of the American Negro* (1899), *Up from slavery* (1901), *Tuskegee and Its People* (1905) and *My Larger Education* (1911) (African American Literature).

The above mentioned authors forged the path to a new generation of African American writers, especially Black women writers, who suffered the most. In fact, most of the notable figures of Black movement in post-slavery era have been Black men. However, the Afro-American women played a powerful role and continued to write more seriously which resulted in the emergence of numerous famous black writers including Toni Morrison, Paul Marshall, Alice Walker, and many others.

### **1.3.3. The Harlem Renaissance**

According to *USHistory.org* the Great Migration that occurred between 1910 and 1970, and Jim Crow laws led many African Americans to hope for a new life up north. Instead of sinking in self-pity, the African Americans started a new era of revolution as a result their culture was reborn in the Harlem Renaissance. The Harlem Renaissance also known as «The New Negro Movement» began in the early 1920s (Hutchinson). The movement's impact was felt across the United States in the areas of music, literature and art which revolved around the African American's past, present and future in the United States. Concerning literature, "New Negro writers questioned traditional "white" aesthetic standards to cultivate personal self-expression, racial pride, and literary experimentation" (Andrews).

The New Negro writers claimed that the Old Negro was a myth and that the New Negro movement is a newness that never existed before (Gates). Accordingly this period saw the emergence of numerous writers such as Claude Mckay and Langston Hughs.

Claude Mckay is one of the famous poets in the Harlem Renaissance, from the poem "If We Must Die" (1919) where he encouraged the black

community to strike back, to the *Outcast* which was considered by the critics as the first brilliant literary work in the Harlem Renaissance. McKay influenced Langston Hughes who used street vernacular in his poetry. Hughes was much recognized in his works *The Weary Blues* (1926) and *Fine Clothes to the Jew* (1927) where he experimented with Jazz and Blues. (Andrews)

The Harlem Renaissance was generally a period of change. The African Americans were proud of their heritage, developing and changing in many domains. Nevertheless, while this period reached its climax, many white Americans did not appreciate the African Americans' talents and they insisted on treating them according to their skin color. With the Wall Street crash that resulted in the 1920's Great Depression, the Harlem Renaissance came to an end in the 1930s.

#### **1.3.4. Realism, Naturalism and Modernism: An Overview**

The 1940s – 1960s was an era influenced by the Second World War, the Great Migration, Communism, and Marxism, as well as early civil rights legislation which provided many opportunities to black people to study and work. It was in fact an era of social change.

“Realism” is defined as the “faithful reproduction” of reality while naturalism refers to the “franker, harsher treatment of that reality”, Modernism, at its most basic level, denotes “a break with purely representational aesthetics, with the familiar functions of language and conventions of form” (Taylor) In other words, Realism is the everyday life of people while Naturalism is the harsh and bad side of reality. Modernism, on the other hand, was the way writers used the language to break from the boring narrating style used in literature. Black writers used this northern and urban approach to criticize the Jim Crow law and racist ideology, among them: William Attaway's *Blood on the Forge* (1941) depicted the sad reality lived by black people in an industrial age.

Ralph Ellison, a novelist, essayist and scholar in his novel *Invisible Man* (1952) described the story of a nameless black man who learns how to adapt himself in a society that does not 'see' him. In addition to many other African American writers such as Margaret Walker, Gwendolyn Brooks and Lorain Hansberry.

### **1.3.5. The Black Arts Era**

Following the issues of race, class and politics, the assassination of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King J.r, the creation of "Black Power" slogan by Carmicheal and which became a revolutionary movement that triggered the political and cultural consciousness in the African Americans, the Civil Rights Movement which called for equal access to public spheres till the Vietnam War and the sensitive relationship with Cuba, the 1960s witnessed the emergence of the Black Arts Movement (Taylor).

After the death of Malcolm X in February 1965, Amiri Baraka or le Roi Jones, the founder of the Black Arts Movement (BAM), moved to Harlem with a proud sense of Black Nationalism. He established the Black Arts Repertory Theatre/school (BARTS) along with Umbra <sup>1</sup>poets where plays, reading poetry and concerts were performed to awaken Black people's sense of life. Amiri Baraka, Lary Neal and Maulana Karenga declared that 'the artist and the political activist are one' (quoted by Jarrett 612). Accordingly, during this period, African Americans founded magazines such as *The Black Scholar and Third World Press*. Dudley Randall's Broadside Press in Detroit published four hundred poems in over one hundred books and recordings" (612). Moreover, due to internal conflicts and the federal assault on Black Power Movement, the movement declined in the mid of 1970s marking its legacy in the academic field of Black studies and African American culture.

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<sup>1</sup> Umbra (1962) was a collective of young Black writers based in Manhattan's Lower East Side; major members were writers Steve Cannon and Tom Dent and Brenda Walcott.

### **1.3.6. The Contemporary Scene: 1970s – Present**

The United States and the world as a whole witnessed economic and political changes which transformed African American Literature from the ‘Culture War’ of 1990s and the ‘War of Terror’ in 2001 to Globalization (Jarrett 711).

During this period, the African American works began to be published and read and criticized by whites and blacks. Black women writers also achieved success as poets, artists and authors. In the 1960s, working as a senior editor at Random House, Toni Morrison helped publishing works of African American authors such as Cade Bambara (Jarrett 714). In the 1970s, African American women writers such as Pauline Hopkins, Anna Julian, Lorain Hansberry established political and literary movements such as Black Power Movement where they called for the pride of being Black and investigated the issue of identity. By the 1990s, women writers had published different works that explored Feminism, violence, family issues and human rights issues. However they faced some allegations by male authors who considered these works a threat to the canon. But the African American women continued to produce great works such as Alice Walker, a novelist and poet who is best known with her work *The Color Purple* (1982) and Toni Morrison, among her famous works *The Bluest Eye* (1970), *Sula* (1977). All these women worked to erase the mythical view of African American women.

### **1.4. Toni Morrison’s Biography and Publications**

Toni Morrison, whose original name is Chloe Anthony Wofford, is an African American writer. She was born on February 18, 1931, in Lorain, Ohio in the United States, the second oldest daughter, to George Wofford and Ramah (Biography.com). Her father worked as a welder and held three other jobs to support his family. Her mother was a domestic worker.

Morrison's childhood witnessed the period of the Great Depression of the 1930s. She grew up in an atmosphere filled with African American folklore and music. Her family was, as Morrison states, "intimate with supernatural" ("Toni Morrison Biography.") and influenced by myths, signs, visions and foreseeing the future.

Morrison loved reading books because of her parents who instilled in her the love of writing and reading. She preferred reading French, Russian, and English classical books including Jane Austen (1775-1817), Virginia Woolf (1882-1941) and Leo Tolstoy (1828-1910). Morrison was fascinated by their style and the way they depicted their experiences in their works. Thus, she was motivated to write in such way in her works, using her African American culture.

In 1949, Morrison graduated from Lorain high school with honors and went to Howard University in Washington, DC, where she studied English and Classical Literature (Biography.com). She graduated from Howard University with a degree of Arts in English in 1953 and continued her education in Cornell University where she got her Master's degree in 1955. Then she moved to Houston where she worked as a teacher in Texas Southern university ("Toni Morrison Biography.").

In 1957, while teaching English at Howard University, Morrison met Harold Morrison, an architect from Jamaica. They married in 1958 and had two sons (Harold and Slade), in 1964, Morrison got divorce and went to Syracuse, New York where she worked as an editor for a Random House company which allows her to free her time for writing novels ("Toni Morrison Biography."). In 1968, Morrison's career as editor flourished; she became the senior editor for Random House and was the only African American to hold that position.

*The Bluest Eye*, Morrison's first novel, was published in 1970. The book did not sell well until recent years. Her second novel *Sula* (1973) follows the friendship of two women, and it was nominated for the National Book Award

(Biography.com). In 1977, Morrison published *Song of Solomon* and won a National Book Critics Circle Award and the American Academy of Arts and Letters Awards ("Toni Morrison Biography.").

*Tar Baby* which was published in 1981 received mixed criticism. The following, *Beloved* (1987) proved that Morrison is one of the greatest African American authors. The novel is inspired from real events. It is about a black woman; Seth, who chooses to kill her children so that they won't become slaves. She therefore kills her daughter who comes back as a ghost and hunts her down. The novel won the Pulitzer Prize in 1988 with several literary awards (Biography.com).

Morrison moved to Princeton University and became a professor in 1989. There, she produced works such as *Playing in The Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (1992). In 1993, she received the Nobel Prize in Literature. In 1996, she received a Medal for Distinguished Contribution to American Letters from the National Book Foundation ("Toni Morrison Biography."). In 1999, Morrison shifted to children's literature where she collaborated with her son Slade on *The Big Box* (1999), *Little Cloud and Lady Wind* (2002) (Biography.com).

In 2001, she was honored by President Bill Clinton and was given the National Arts and Humanities award. Morrison continued producing great works including nonfiction, *What Moves at the Marge*, in 2008 ("Toni Morrison Biography.").

In 2010, Morrison lost her son Slade which was a great loss for her. In her 80s, Morrison is still crafting remarkable works. In 2012 she published *Home*, and in the same year, she received from President Barak Obama the Presidential Medal of Freedom (Biography.com).

In 2015, Morrison published a novella; "God Help the Child". Her marvelous contribution to American literature allowed her receiving the

Pen/Saul Bellow Award for Achievement in American fiction in autumn 2016 (Biography.com).

### **1.5. Conclusion**

Race and gender issues cannot be separated from each other. They have never been a smooth phenomenon as depicted by African American authors, from the first clash between earlier settlers in America till the recent cultural conflicts.

Toni Morrison in particular deals with racism and feminism and tries to portray the realistic image of what it is like to be an African American woman artistically especially through *The Bluest Eye*.



## **Chapter 2: Black Women's Experience in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye***

### **2. 1. Introduction**

*The Bluest Eye* is divided into seasons, and the narrative paves its way through other sections and flash backs. The novel is about the Breedlove Family who lives in misery, and more specifically about a black little girl's obsessive desire to be pretty and longing for blue eyes. Morrison's characters want to adopt the white standards of beauty and are so desperate to be acknowledged by the whites that they end up hurting themselves and each other. The author displays the story of each character, his/her motives and desires. She reveals the reason behind their choices in life and their change in identity, exploring their confusion and lack of self-esteem and focusing on the black female who resists the racist oppression and recreates herself after being buried in the pit of self loathing.

### **2. 2 Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye***

In the beginning of the book, there is a Forward part where Morrison explains the story behind her novel, the reason of choosing the language. She points out: "My choices of language (speakerly, aural, colloquial), my reliance for full comprehension on codes embedded in black culture ... are attempts to transfigure the complexity and wealth of Black American culture into a language worthy of the culture" (xiii). She tackles the consequences of the issue of beauty and parenthood and the way she feels about it.

The novel was written in the 1960s when the "Black is Beautiful" movement emerged which celebrated the African American culture and recognized black as beautiful (Bloom 16). However what made Morrison write this novel is a conversation that happened in elementary school between her and a black little girl who wished for blue eyes (Bloom 17).

*The Bluest Eye* starts with the prologue which is written in Sabon Italics and split into two parts. The first section is written in a type of story taught in school; Dick and Jane (Bloom 15) which represents the typical family and the beautiful house. In the second section, the Dick and Jane tale is repeated two times. The reader notices that in the first repetition there is no punctuation and, as he continues reading, the words start clashing and the paragraph loses its structure.

“Hereisthehouseitisgreenandwhiteithasareddooritisverypreeety” (Morrison 4)

The second part is a short text narrated by Claudia MacTeer beginning with: “*Quiet as it’s kept, there were no marigolds in the fall of 1941. We thought, at the time, that it was because Pecola was having her father’s baby that the marigolds did not grow.*” (Morrison 5) where she reveals the truth allowing the reader to have an idea about Picola’s pregnancy.

The novel is divided into four seasons; each season is composed of chapters: Autumn is broken up into three chapters, winter is split into two chapters, spring which is the longest part is made up of four chapters and summer is divided into two chapters.

The seasons are narrated from both first and third person point of view. The first person is Claudia who provides most of the narration of the book; she actually witnesses what happens to Pecola and how she is perceived by the society. The third person is found in specific chapters (2, 3, 5, 7, 8 and 9). For instance, in chapter seven, the unnamed narrator recounts the childhood of Mrs. Breedlove, Pauline, who “... was the ninth of eleven children and lived on a ridge of red Alabama clay seven miles from the nearest road” (Morrison 110). Morrison used this unknown narrator to provide the reader with the essential information of each character and to discover the different sides of his personality by diving into his thoughts and emotions.

### 2.3. Summary of *the Bluest Eye*

The novel starts with Claudia MacTeer and her sister Frieda standing in front of the Greek Hotel and watching their neighbor, Rosemary Villanucci, eat bread and butter. She tells them that “they can’t come in” (Morrison 9). Because of being denied by the girl, Claudia imagines herself beating Rosemary leaving “red marks on her white skin” (9).

When school starts, Claudia and Frieda are ordered by their parents to go collect coal in the evenings. Unlike the Dick and Jane’s colorful house, the house of the MacTeers is “old, cold and green” (10). One day when Claudia gets sick at a young age, she does not understand that her mother’s angry statements are out of concern but feels them like insults: “Great Jesus. Get on that bed. How many times do I have to tell you to wear something on your head? You must be the biggest fool in this town” (10). Though Mrs. MacTeer is scolding the sick daughter, Claudia still feels “Love... everywhere in (the) house” (12).

The MacTeers take in two people, Mr. Henry who used to stay in Miss Dalla’s house and Picola Breedlove; “a case” (13) as Mrs. Breedlove refers to her, who stays for few days because her father, Cholly “burned up his house” (17). The novel continues with Claudia explaining the difference between being homeless and being put “outdoors” which is something one “could not control” (17). During her stay with the MacTeers, Pecola and Freida are fascinated by Shirley Temple and how cute her smile was, whereas Claudia hates her as much as she hates all the white dolls in the world.

At a young age she does not understand the love expressed towards the dolls so she tries to “dismember it” (20). Over time, this act transforms into violent illusions; an urge to hurt white girls as Claudia describes it: “The truly horrifying thing was the transference of the same impulses to little white girls” (22). In order to hide this desire, she “fabricated her love” (23) for white dolls which resulted in worshipping Shirley Temple.

One Saturday, Pecola drinks three quarts of milk out of love for the white beauty: “she was fond of the Shirley Temple cup and took every opportunity to drink milk out of it just to handle and see sweet Shirley’s face” (23). This highly upsets Mrs. MacTeers who keeps nagging. Meanwhile, the three girls went outside when suddenly Pecola starts to menstruate for the first time, Claudia and Pecola freak out while Frieda keeps calm, ordering Claudia to bring water, as they are trying to “pin the napkin to her dress” (30). Rosemary starts calling for Mrs. MacTeer who comes running, she spansks Frieda and Pecola. When the pad falls out, the mother felt sympathy and “pulled both of them toward her” (30) then she took Pecola to wash her from the bleeding.

An unnamed narrator describes the storefront that the Breedloves live in then moves on and explains that “they lived there because they were poor and stayed there because they believed they were ugly” (38). Each member of the family has accepted his ugliness. On a Saturday morning in October, Mrs Breedlove gets up and walks to the kitchen where she begins making noise to wake up her husband Cholly who came home drunk. She approached him asking him to get up and get them some coal complaining that if she is not working then they would “all be dead” (40), her husband refuses to wake and Pauline returns to the kitchen.

During the parents’ verbal and physical fights, the two children react differently. Samy either curses, runs away from home or throws himself between his parents. Pecola on the other hand, being young; wishes either to die or “one (of her parents) would kill the other” (43) From this point, Pecola starts wondering about the hatred of society expressed towards her, from her parents, brother, neighbors, teachers to classmates. The little girl realizes that this hatred is due to her ugliness so she starts praying everyday for blue eyes.

In October, the girl visits three prostitutes; her neighbors, who “were friendly” (52), they accept Pecola the way she is, sing for her and tell her stories. They were seen as ugly by the community but according to them their job makes

them the dominant. By using their sexuality the females can exercise authority over men.

When winter comes, a new girl named Maureen Peel arrives in school. She is a rich light skin girl who is loved by the entire society. As a result, the two sisters are “bemused, irritated and fascinated by her” (63). One day Maureen decides to walk home with Pecola, Claudia and Frieda. On the way home she asks Pecola if she ever saw a man naked so Pecola replies that “Nobody’s father would be naked in front of his own daughter” (71). The two sisters tell Maureen to end the conversation which resulted in her running away and calling them “ugly, black emos” (73). The quarrel stops and all the girls go on their ways thinking about the insults.

The fifth chapter describes a type of black women in general, slowly the author introduces Geraldine, one of these females who keeps her relationship with her son Junior cold as ice, she “did not talk to him, soo him or indulge him in kissing bouts” (86). However, she teaches him to hate everything black which resulted in turning his hatred towards children and animals.

Claudia’s voice narrates the painful memories that happened in spring. One Saturday, she finds Frieda crying due to the fight that happened between her father and Mr. Henry who sexually assaulted her. The two sisters tried to find a solution. As a result, they go to Pecola to ask her for Whiskey because it will prevent her from getting fat or “ruined” (101). They find Pecola in her mother’s work where they witness the beating Pecola receives from her mother because she intentionally ruins the blueberry pie that was prepared for the white family.

When she was young, Pauline used to live in Alabama where she was wounded, deformed her foot and her front tooth which resulted in losing her self esteem. The girl is obsessed with order and cleanliness which reflects her love for and desire to be white. When her family moves to Kentucky due to economic problems, she starts taking care of her two siblings and fantasizes about love and

men. Her long waited man comes; Cholly. They get married and move north to Loraine, Ohio. Staying all day in her house, the wife feels lonely and becomes dependant on her husband, they start fighting over Pauline asking for money to buy new clothes which is the reason behind her taking day worker jobs. When Mrs Breedlove gets pregnant with her son, Samy, Cholly changes to the better. However, she still feels loneliness so she begins going to the theatre where she is introduced to the concept of beauty. The fights start again between the couple. As a result, Pauline decides to get pregnant with Pecola but when the little girl is born, Pauline felt ashamed and shocked because the child is not how she had imagined her to be. The mother finds a new purpose in life, considering herself and her daughter ugly; she decides to return to church and becomes the “breadwinner” (126) of the family.

When Cholly was a baby, his mother “wrapped him in two blankets... and placed him on a Junk heap of the rail road” (132). He is saved and raised by his Aunt Jimmy who takes care of him. After four years, he finally asks his aunt about his father’s identity. His aunt recalled that his name is “Samson” and that he was never present. After two years, Cholly quits school and starts working in Tyson’s Feed. During a very chilly day, Aunt Jimmy gets sick and dies on Saturday night. After the funeral, Cholly meets his cousin, Jay, and a group of girls and boys. He gets to know a black girl named Darlene; who goes out alone with Cholly. When they start having sex, two white men show up forcing him to keep doing the act which resulted in his hate toward Darlene and all the women. Over the next few days, Cholly leaves his town in search for his father, Samson Fuller. When he finds him the latter does not recognize his son and answers him rudely. After these experiences, Cholly finds himself “dangerously free” (159) to the point that when he becomes a father, he rapes his daughter Pecola.

Summer finally arrives and brings with it sun rays and storms and Pecola’s pregnancy which the members of the community are aware of now and hoping for the death of the baby. After hearing the awful news, Claudia and

Frieda decide to buy marigold seeds with the money they had been saving up for the bicycle. The two girls plant the seeds in the back of their house with the belief that if the marigolds bloom, the baby will live.

Finally the baby dies. Pecola becomes insane but happy because she gets her blue eyes and an imaginary friend who considers her pretty.

Claudia wraps up the novel with feelings of guilt and a scene she remembers where Pecola was “walking up and down, up and down, her head jerking to the beat of a drummer only she could hear” (214).

The novel is dominated by female characters that are presented with different conflicts and actions.

## **2. 4. Character Analysis**

Richard Gill points out in his book *Mastering English Literature* that, “A *character* is a person in a literary work and *Characterisation* is the way in which a character is created” (127). A character is in fact a figure that is created by the author for a certain purpose. She/he is inspired according to the creator’s imagination, personality and experiences. Characterization on the other hand is the mechanism in which the author builds up his character.

Toni Morrison constructed *the Bluest Eye* with characters that differ from one another; this creation helps in developing the events of the novel. She focuses on female characters including Pauline, Pecola, Claudia and Frieda, and Aunt Jimmy. In the following part, the above characters along with Cholly Breedlove will be analyzed.

### **2. 4.1. Pauline**

Pauline is a black woman with “small eyes set closely together under narrow forehead. The low, irregular hairlines, which seemed even more irregular in contrast to the straight, heavy eyebrows which nearly met. Keen but crooked nose, with insolent nostrils... high cheekbones, and ears turned forward.

Shapely lips” (38). Pauline William, born in Alabama, is the ninth of eleven children. As a young girl, she deformed her leg which was the starting point of her self-hatred.

The reader first meets Pauline as Mrs. Breedlove; the dominant mother, in chapter three, where the narrator depicts her endless fights with her husband, Cholly: “The tiny, undistinguished days that Mrs. Breedlove lived identified, grouped, and classed by these quarrels” (41).

In chapter seven, the narrator flashes back to Pauline, the child, who deformed her leg and is isolated and ignored by her family and friends due to the western ideology that restricted the beauty standards to white skin and blue eyes. After the reader gets to know the powerful side of the mother, he meets the weak Pauline who is also a victim of society. Then he shifts to the consequences of her embracing the white ideology. When she married Cholly, the feeling of loneliness invaded her so she turned to movies where she found out about the physical beauty: “It was really a simple pleasure, but she learned all there was to love and all there was to hate” (122). One day while eating a candy and watching movies, Pauline broke her front tooth which intensified the emotions of ugliness in her to the point that she hated her family and considered her daughter ugly: “Anyways, the baby come. Big old healthy thing. She looked different from what I thought” (125).

In Christian theology the name Pauline has relation with “characteristic of St Paul, his writings, or his doctrines; ‘the Pauline Epistles’ (“Definition of Pauline in English.”). Accordingly, Morrison uses this name as a symbol for Pecola’s mother who sees herself as an apostle, finally found her path and “joined a church where shouting was frowned upon, served on Stewardess Board No. 3, and became a member of Ladies Circle” (126) after being obsessed with beauty, movies and lost in self loathing.



Pauline is a dynamic character who changes over the course of the story. Furthermore, due to the society's treatment to her in the end she finds her voice but at the expense of her hate toward her family.

#### **2.4.2. Pecola**

Pecola Breedlove is the ugly little black girl who always wanted to reach the white beauty. Born in Lorain, Ohio, Pecola is a kind and respectful girl who avoids dominating others. This characteristic occurred when Pecola was staying in the MacTeers house. Though she was a new friend to Claudia and Frieda, she accepted their food kindly as explained in the present quote: "When we discovered that she clearly did not want to dominate us, we liked her. She laughed when I clowned for her, and smiled accepted gracefully the food gifts my sister gave her" (19).

In chapters three and four, Pecola is depicted as a friendly person who is easy to talk to. She loved visiting China, Poland and Miss Marie and "in turn, they did not despise her" (51). She could interact with others on the first meeting for instance when the black girl had a loving conversation with Maureen Peal; the new light skin girl in school, about an actress named Pecola: "Maureen, suddenly animated, put her velvet-sleeved arm through Pecola's and began to behave as though they were the closest friend" (67).

Pecola was born in a hostile society that saw her ugly as a result she became 'obsessed' with the concept of beauty and blue eyes. According to her, the world had agreed that physical beauty is the worshiped concept, as portrayed in Pecola's words:

*Pretty eyes. Pretty blue eyes. Big blue pretty eyes.  
Run, Jip, run. Jip runs, Alice runs. Alice has blue eyes.  
Jerry has blue eyes. Jerry runs. Alice runs. They run  
with their blue eyes. Four blue eyes. Four pretty  
blue eyes. Blue-sky eyes. Blue-like Mrs. Forrest's  
blue blouse eyes. Morning-glory-blue-eyes.  
Alice-and-Jerry-blue-storybook-eyes (46).*

Pecola is also depicted as possessing a sense of worthlessness, being perceived as ugly by her family, classmates and neighbors, Pecola accepted that:

As long as she was ugly, she would have to stay with these people. Somehow she belonged to them. Long hours she sat looking in the mirror, trying to discover the secret of the ugliness, the ugliness that made her ignored or despised at school, by teachers and classmates alike (45).

In the first chapter, the narrator depicts Pecola's life in a black and ugly family where peace never takes place in her house due to her parents' verbal and physical fights. Then, he moves to Pecola's school life where she is constantly bullied by her classmates who call her "black e mo" (65) and insult her family. In chapter three, the audience confirms Pecola's acceptance of ugliness and her wish for blue eyes: "Try as she might, she could never get her eyes to disappear. So what was the point? They were everything. Everything was there, in them" (45) and in the last chapter, Claudia, the narrator, exposes the effect of Pecola's obsession with Physical beauty: "She, however, stepped over into madness, a madness which protected her from us simply because it bored us in the end" (206).

While diving into the story the reader knows the economic situation of Pecola: "Pecola was to stay with us. Cholly was in jail. She came with nothing. No little paper bag with the other dress, or a nightgown, or two pair of whitish cotton bloomers. She just appeared with a white woman and sat down" (18). Her mother was always working as a servant for the white family, her father was all the time drunk and most of the fights between her parents were in fact because of money. Till the end of the tale, this family is still being depicted as poor: "her

poverty made us generous” (205). This quote is expressed in the last chapter by the adult Claudia, which affirms Pecola’s persistent poverty.

Round characters are complex figures that change in a given work. According to E.M Forster “When there is more than one factor in (characters), we get the beginning of the curve towards the round” (48). Pecola is an “open” (Gill 130) and complex character who is exposed to various incidents in her life. In the beginning of the story, Pecola is presented as a sane normal little girl who likes to play with her friends Claudia and Frieda: “We had fun in those few days Pecola was with us.”(18) But in the end of the novel, Pecola becomes the crazy girl character: “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.” (204).

Additionally, the name Pecola means a “brazen woman” (“Meaning of Pecola”), a bold and confident woman which is the total opposite of the female black protagonist who is calm, weak and passive girl. Morrison uses this name as an irony to clearly depict to the reader the real Pecola.

In the novel, Maureen Peel confuses between the name Pecola and Paola who is a light skin female character in the novel *Imitation of Life*:

“Pecola? Wasn’t that the name of the girl in *Imitation of Life*?”  
“I don’t know. What is that?”  
“The picture show, you know. Where this mulatto girl hates her mother cause she is black and ugly but then cries at the funeral” (67)

In the present scene the reaction of Pecola was no more than a ‘sigh’ (67) which reflects her emotional and cognitive state; the black girl could not let go of the words that Maureen said but was unable to reflect on it except by staying silent. The author depicted Pauline, the mother who despises her daughter, Pecola and loves the white family’s daughter contrary to Fannie Hurst’s *Imitation of Life* where the light skin daughter, Paola, denies her black mother. Morrison used

this inversion in order to depict the distorted African American family especially between a mother/daughter relationship due to the Ideals of beauty.

### **2. 4.3. Claudia and Frieda MacTeer**

Claudia MacTeer is the black girl who narrates parts of the novel, sometimes from a child's perspective and sometimes from the point of view of an adult. Claudia was born and raised in Lorain, Ohio, she is nine years old when the novel begins, younger than her sister Frieda and her friend Pecola.

Claudia grows up in a loving family where she is better taken care of than Pecola; her sister sings for her when she is sick and her mother is concerned for her which made Claudia feels "Love ... stuck, along with (her) tongue, to the frosted windowpanes...so when (she) thinks of autumn, (she) thinks of somebody [her mother] with hands who does not want (her) to die" (12).

Claudia is an innocent kind girl but strong-willed and passionate who wants to know every detail of the events that happened to her sister or her friend Pecola. For instance when Frieda is sexually assaulted, Claudia felt jealous: "I don't have nothing to pinch. I'm never going to have nothing" (100) and kept digging for the truth until she found out the reason that made her sister cry.

Unlike Pecola, Claudia is a brave girl who stands up for the right and refuses to be degraded and bullied by others. In chapter four, when Pecola is bullied by her classmates, Claudia stands up for her along with her sister Frieda and says: "You shut up, Bullet Head" I had found my tongue" (67).

According to the *Oxford Dictionary* the Spanish translation of Claudia is greengage which is in fact a soft and sweet fruit. From the description of the narrator and the events that happened, the reader gets to know Claudia's soft heart and sensitiveness. She was sympathizing with Pecola during the whole story: when Pecola was outdoor, when she was horrified by her classmates, when Picola was pregnant, the community misjudged her while Claudia: "thought about the baby that everybody wanted dead... More strongly than my

fondness for Pecola, I felt a need for someone to want the black baby to live” (190).

Claudia MacTeer is a foil character; she is the contrast of Pecola and Frieda. Her negative rejection to follow the adults and her peers in the worship of white beauty standards is expressed in various events. In chapter one, Claudia hated the fact that Pecola loved drinking milk from Shirley Temple cup. While her older sister and Pecola were fascinated by the beauty of the whiteness of the milk and the white doll, Claudia made it clear that she “couldn’t join them in their adoration because (she) hated Shirley” (19) and preferred Jane Withers. She states: “younger than both Frieda and Pecola, I had not yet arrived at the turning point in the development of my psyche which would allow me to love (Shirley Temple)” (19). Stating the fact that she is younger than her sister and Pecola, Claudia cannot accept the idea of the superior white beauty.

On Christmas, when her parents gave her “The big, the special, the loving gift... (The) big blue eyed Baby Doll” (19-20) she “could not love it.” But rather dismember it so (she) “could examine it to see what it was that all the world said was lovable”(21). Claudia refuses the gifts and prefers her parents’ precious time where she “wanted rather to feel something on Christmas day ... (where) she could sit on the low stool in Big Mama’s kitchen with (her) lap full of lilacs and listen to Big Papa play his violin for (her) alone.” (21-22).

Frieda is a major figure in the novel mainly in the presence of Claudia. Frieda is ten years old, older and different than Claudia. Unlike Claudia, Frieda is a passive girl for example when Mr. Henry tried to assault her, the frightened girl’s reaction was to escape to her parents then to her room where she isolated herself to cry.

The older sister is independent and stubborn. Due to her close shift to adolescence, Frieda is more adjusted with community’s beliefs about white superiority and aware about the adults’ world. For instance, when Pecola began to menstruate, Frieda was the only one to figure it out:

“ Frieda said, “Oh. Lordy! I know. I know what that is!”  
“What?” Pecola’s fingers went to her mouth.  
“That’s ministratin’.”  
“What’s that?”  
“You know.”  
“Am I going to die?” she asked.  
“Noooo. You won’t die. It just means you can have a baby!”  
(27-28).

## **2. 4.4. Aunt Jimmy**

The Great Aunt Jimmy is a kind, generous woman who rescues and raises up Cholly Breedlove in Georgia specifically in the South. She is a courageous and caring woman who “beat(s) (Cholly’s mother) with a razor strap and wouldn’t let her hear the baby after that” (132).

Aunt Jimmy was a friendly person, when she fell sick “Friends came to see about her. Some made chamomile tea; others rubbed her with liniment” (136). She was also a good Christian woman who loved listening to her friend, Miss Alice, reading for her the Bible: “Miss Alice, her closest friend, read the Bible to her ... she nodded in drowsy appreciation as the words from First Corinthians droned over her. Sweet amens fell from her lips” (136).

Aunt Jimmy grew up during slavery where “All of the bruises (she) had collected from moving about the earth — harvesting, cleaning, hoisting, pitching, stooping, kneeling, picking — always with young ones underfoot.” (138). Though in her younger years she worked in plantation, raised white’s children, was sexually abused by black and white masters, Aunt Jimmy is in fact the opposite of Pauline, Pecola’s mother and Geraldine, Junior’s mother who threw their children into the deep dark whole of the racist society. Unlike them she took Cholly, cared about him and sheltered him, she found hope and happiness after long years of suffering. In spring Aunt Jimmy supposedly “died of peach cobbler” (135) that Essie Foster brought to her.

## 2. 4.5. Cholly Breedlove

Known also as Charles, Cholly is the father of Pecola and the antagonist in the novel. He is a black man who suffers during the story and ends up destructing himself and his daughter.

At the age of four, he was wrapped in newspapers and blankets and thrown on a junk heap; his father abandoned him and does not even know his existence. In the first parts of the tale, the reader meets the drunk, violent and ignorant father who burns up his house and abuses his family. Claudia restates her mother's words: "That old Dog Breedlove had burned up his house, gone upside his wife's head, and everybody, as a result, was outdoors" (17). However, in the middle part of the story, Morrison makes Cholly a weak figure who is like every other black man; emotional and experiences suffering. Having been abandoned by his parents, Cholly decides that "there (is) nothing more to lose" (160), he was humiliated by white men and violently forced to perform sexually in front of them. He was cruelly ignored by his father and as a result, he felt "weak, trembling, and dizzy" (158).

The name Charles is in fact of old German origin meaning "free man" (*Nameberry*) which reflects the portrayal of Cholly who represents the negative side of freedom: "he knew that Cholly was free. Dangerously free" (159). He was not the man he used to be, he was not free to care about others, to love and to enjoy life rather he became free to get drunk, to abuse women and to go to jail.

Even the name Breedlove is a symbol of sarcasm and irony; the whole family does not produce love but Cholly specifically is not able to love his children like normal fathers do because he had never experienced the parental love. Thus, the only way to care for them is by using violence so he "breed" love in his daughter Pecola by raping her which was the only way he knew when it comes to showing affection for his child.

As a result, Morrison made sure not to dehumanize her characters as she explained in the Forward to make the audience feel sympathy towards them. Concerning female characters, the author depicted them in different shapes, facing distinct struggles which resulted either in regaining their self-esteem or staying stuck in self-loathing

## **2. 5. Black Women's Transformative Experience:**

Toni Morrison once declared in her conversation with Christina Davis (in *Conversation with Toni Morrison*) that her purpose in writing her projects is to give the black girl a voice, to revive her after being killed by the American society and neglected by her family, "rescuing her from the grave of time and inattention... bringing her back into living life" (quoted by Dissenha Costa 81). Morrison's purpose is to rescue her from the claws of the American white ideology. She exposes these issues in her writings and discusses the problems related to black family and the conflicts between the society and the black individual specially the mother-daughter relationship.

Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* is a novel that explores characters who embrace the white ideology due to different reasons. The author criticizes the American system that prevents black individual from creating himself, transforming him/her into a passive isolated person.

In the novel, the characters are often depicted as victims, with immoral behavior and harsh treatment, which is mainly due to the society's pressure but through the events the reader will notice that the characters remain responsible for most of their actions and choices in life.



### 2. 5. 1. From Self-hatred to Self-Esteem

Pauline Breedlove is one of the characters who finds herself lost and struggles to create her identity in a society that rejects her due to her gender, class and skin color. As a child, Pauline injures her foot, isolating herself from her family and friends “The easiest thing to do would be to build a case out of her foot” (110). She considers this accident the reason behind her ugliness.

As a black woman, she is seen as marginalized and fated to be unworthy. Paul C. Taylor explains how the ideal standards of beauty and racism affect blacks: “A white dominated culture has *racialised* beauty, [in] that it has defined beauty per se in terms of white beauty, in terms of the physical features that the people we consider white [people] are more likely to have (in the novel: blue eyes, white/light skin, blond hair)” (17). He continues: “They are motivated also by the worry that racialized standards of beauty reproduce the working of racism by weaving racist assumptions into the daily practices and inner lives of the victims of racism” (17).

Taylor’s commentary on racism helps understanding Pauline’s situation and behavior. In a discriminatory society, Mrs. Breedlove loves to work for the Fishers, a white family. As a result, she hates her family to the point that she is disgusted from her daughter’s hair and fascinated by that of the white Fisher girl: “Then she brushed the yellow hair, enjoying the roll and slip of it between her fingers... no tangled black puffs of rough wool to comb” (127). By comparing her daughter’s hair to the fur of animals, Pauline affirms her acceptance of the racist ideology that white society has woven in her.

Racism is deeply rooted in American society and it has various forms in Morrison’s novel by black against black, beautiful black against black and white against black. One day, Pauline physically and verbally abuses Pecola because the latter unconsciously spills the blueberry pie that is prepared for the Fishers’ little daughter. Claudia describes the scene:

In one gallop she was on Pecola, and with the back of her hand knocked her on the floor. Pecola slid in the pie juice, one leg

folding under her. Mrs. Breedlove yanked her up by the arm, slapped her again, and in a voice thin with anger, abused Pecola directly (109).

As the present passage indicates, the mother is worried about the blueberry pie and the white child instead of taking care of her daughter. Hence the Western standards devalue the beauty of African Americans, resulting in harsh treatments with each other and encouraging the worship of whiteness.

During Pauline's young adulthood, she enjoys the time she spends alone: "The stillness and isolation both calmed and energized her" (112). However, this pleasure does not last, she starts to think about her future and the prince who will come and save her from her misery according to white fairy tales. As a result, Cholly appears and resets the order in her life. When Pauline moves North with Cholly, the feelings of isolation and loneliness increase. Consequently, these feelings are "representative of the loss of a center" (Christian 77); from trying to have a happy married life Pauline finds herself conforming to other women's estimations which was a failure as Morrison notes: "when she tried to make up her face as they did, it came off rather badly" (118). Being a Southern black woman, Pauline conforms to the northern values without making effort to reject them. This feminine act shows her need for love and acceptance, her self hatred and isolation become stronger when her husband starts ignoring her. Pauline equally finds refuge in the movies where a woman is treated properly, where beauty shines and family lives happily. Unfortunately, because these images present the total opposite of Pauline's world, they deform the wife's sense of beauty and life as she concludes: "*I'd move right on in them pictures. White men taking such good care of they women... Them pictures gave me a lot of pleasure, but it made coming home hard, and looking at Cholly hard*" (123). In his book *Writing Prejudices "The psychoanalysis and pedagogy of Discrimination: From Shakespeare to Toni Morrison"*, Robert Samuels

argues: “not only do films and the popular media render females insecure about their bodies, they also create racial self-hatred” (107).

Due to her “education in the movies” (122), Pauline swallowed the poisonous racist ideas without question and fell into self-loathing. So she started to “fix her hair up like (Jean Harlow)” (123), went to cinema where suddenly her tooth broke. This was actually the last attempt of Pauline to make efforts to look beautiful. After her tooth broke, all what she believes in faded away, she stops fixing her hair and realizes her failure to achieve ideal beauty: “*Everything went then. Look like I just didn’t care no more after that. I let my hair go back, plaited it up, and settled down to just being ugly. I still went to the pictures, though, but the meanness got worse.*” (123). Yet, she does not totally yield to self-hatred.

One of Pauline’s rebellious reactions to the racist insults happens when a group of doctors insult her comparing her to “a horse” (125) as she was giving birth. As a result, she “*let them people know having a baby was more than a bowel movement. I hurt just like them white women*” (125). For the first time in Pauline’s adult life, she commented on the insults. Unlike Pecola, she rebelled, questioned the treatment and reflected on it. In other words, she knew her worth and this act is the starting point of Pauline’s shift toward self esteem.

After Pecola’s birth, isolation and loneliness revived in Pauline’s life. In order to eliminated them and deactivate the desire of being pretty, she started working for the Fishers and becomes the “perfect servant” (128) where she finally had the nickname “Polly” that she always wanted. Eventually, Pauline forsakes her family, she damages the meaning of family; the home life of warm interactions and exchanges her love and care for her family with the praises of the society and the Fishers who declare: “We could never find anybody like Polly” (128).

Therefore, the reader begins to notice Pauline’s change when she starts to become responsible by working hard in order to provide food for her family,

teaching her children respect to the point that they learned to call her Mrs. Breedlove instead of mom. She “felt she was fulfilling a mother’s role conscientiously when she pointed out their father’s faults to keep them from having them” (128). According to her, she sees it as something good that one should be proud of because in “her own house she only sees chaos, ugliness and dirty things besides lack of peace” (quoted by Babamiri 6).

Morrison can be considered as a black feminist author by depicting Pauline as the “breadwinner” (126) of the family. Morrison challenges the patriarchal society by making Pauline “defend herself mightily against Cholly, rose above him in every way... she worked twelve to sixteen hours a day to support them” (128-129). She became “outraged by painted ladies who thought only of clothes and men... joined the church and became member of the Ladies Circle No.3” (126). Pauline transformed to a good Christian woman with the belief that she could rebuild order in her family by “holding Cholly as a model of sin and failure, she bore him like a crown of thorns, and her children like a cross” (126-127).

Pauline’s attempt to be respected and loved stems from the racist beliefs that she learned. Ultimately, she moved from ugliness and self-hatred to self-esteem where she regained control over her life but only as a female. The white ideals did not destroy her but they stripped her from the feelings of motherhood making her a crucial contributor in her daughter’s madness. A similar transformation from self-hatred to self-esteem is experienced by Pecola.

According to Powell: “*The Bluest Eye* is meant to be a novel of failure; it is a portrait which depicts how a young black woman’s idea of what constitutes a true self is de-centered by the implicitly ethnocentric tenets of the society” (752). Pecola has been suffering from the racist standards since her birth. Not only Shirley Temple, Dick and Jane text influenced her concept of beauty but there is also the society and her family especially her mother who writes her fate from the day Pecola is born: “*knowed she was ugly. Head full of pretty hair, but*

*Lord she was ugly*” (126). The treatment the mother receives from the white society has impacted greatly the development of her racial identity and everything it denotes; she took her own self hatred and instilled it in Pecola:

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 (39).

Each member of the Breedlove family is showed as dealing with ugliness and racism in his own way. In the words of Lind: “Blacks lived in an environment that confirmed their inferiority, which evoked defensiveness and pre-conscious wishes to be White” (quoted by Adams 67). Accordingly, Pecola spent most of her time hiding at home where she inherited her mother’s low self-esteem which resulted from the absorbed racist traditions and beliefs of the Western culture.

According to Dr. Bowen, a family is a group of people in which “each member had a role to play and rules to respect. Members are expected to respond each other in a certain way” (quoted in Genopro.com). The Breedlove’s house is the calmest in the neighborhood not because it is a happy place but because its members do not interact with each other; the father is alcoholic and almost never at home, the son is careless, the mother has a lack of communication skills which impacts Pecola’s self existence. As a matter of fact the mother-daughter relationship never develops, since the day of Pecola’s birth Pauline does not share, explain or express her feelings with the little girl. Instead, she teaches her “a fear of growing up, fear of other people, fear of life” (128). Even when Pecola is raped by her father, all the efforts she made to

explain to her mother are useless as Pecola explains when she talked with her 'other self':

You don't understand anything, do you? She didn't even believe me when I told her.  
*So that's why you didn't tell her about the second time?*  
She wouldn't have believed me then either.  
*You're right. No use telling her when she wouldn't believe you.* (200)

Pauline disbelieves her daughter, blaming her for a crime she did not commit. The white society's plan was to deconstruct the black family bonding, to indoctrinate each member about absolute beauty by enforcing in them the belief of ugliness which they accepted with "conviction" (39) as in Pecola's case.

Due to Pecola's weakness and low self-esteem, she is easily influenced by the Dick and Jane model which "comes to symbolize the institutionalized ethnocentrism of the white logos, of how white values and standards are woven into the very texture of the fabric of American life" (Powell 749). A child's mind is shaped and built in elementary school, it is a place where he/she learns the basics of a society. As a result, these kinds of "children's books...clearly embody...the ideal of Western culture, which is to say white culture" (Powell 750). This is why Morrison introduces her novel with reference to such children's family model as Dick and Jane before thwarting it in an incomprehensible manner, suggesting Pecola's madness.

At a young age, Pecola still does not understand the reason behind her ugliness, she stays for "long hours...looking in the mirror, trying to discover the secret of the ugliness that made her ignored or despised at school, by teachers and classmates" (45). She links the concept of blackness with ugliness and lives her everyday life believing she is ugly. Due to her mother who accepted her fate as being ugly, Pecola absorbs this feeling and thinks that Mr Yacobowski, Geraldine and Maureen Peel hate her because she is the image of all what is shameful, detestable and ugly. As a result, she tells herself a lie and believes it;

she starts drinking white milk from Shirley's Temple cup as Claudia describes: "We knew she was fond of the Shirley Temple cup and took every opportunity to drink milk out of it" (23). She rejects herself and 'wears' the image of Mary Jane just because the cover has on it a white beautiful girl. She imagines that "to eat the candy is somehow to eat the eyes, eat Mary Jane. Love Mary Jane. Be Mary Jane" (50).

The most destructive thing to a child is to lose his/her mother's love, Mrs Breedlove reinforces in her daughter the feeling of ugliness that drives Pecola to ask Frieda "how do you get somebody to love you" (32) which asserts Pecola's love starvation. She always thought that if God grants her blue eyes, then she will receive love from her society and her parents and all her problems would disappear.

Pecola's obsession with blue eyes is much stronger than her self confidence, in a world that considers her ugly and treats her cruelly. "The price she pays for them is her sanity: she wanders through the town dump, babbling about how blue the eyes are that no one else can see" (Rosenberg 441). Pecola wishes every single night to possess blue eyes; Morrison depicts this in Pecola's eternal worship: "Each night, without fail, she prayed for blue eyes. Fervently, for a year she had prayed" (46). Just like any other black girl in American society, Pecola is fascinated by the white beauty. Morrison uses these images to display how devastating these standards are to the self-esteem of a child. In Mead's view: "The individual experiences himself as [an object]... not directly, but only indirectly from the particular standpoints of other individual members of the same social group, or from the generalized standpoint of the social group as a whole to which he belongs" (quoted by Adams 67). In this sense, Pecola uses the indoctrinated norms as a reference; she regards herself ugly and identifies herself by taking the image of a white girl such as Mary Jane. To state it differently, the white ideology creates a "practiced subjected body" as Bartky states, "a women's face must be made up, that is to say, made over, and so must

her body” (33). Pecola has to find a different body (or part of it like eyes) to exist in her own esteem.

In search for hope and happiness, Pecola takes a step towards madness. In a desperate situation she visits Soaphead Church, a “Reader, Advisor, and Interpreter of Dreams” (165) and one of the white ideology conformists. He feels sorry for Pecola and sees himself superior to her. After pretending to speak to God, the little girl’s innocent mind believes it and goes back home with the belief that her wish will be granted.

On top of being poor, isolated, hated, deprived from parental love, Pecola is raped by her father. When her mother enters the kitchen and sees Pecola’s body on the cold floor, no signs of tenderness or worry are seen on the mother. As a result, “the damage done was total” (204). Unable to cope with traumatic experiences, “she spent her days, her tendril, sap-green days walking up and down, up and down, her head jerking to the beat of a drummer so distant only she could hear” (204). Pecola’s mind was damaged resulting in schizophrenia which is according to psychiatrist Ranna Parekh “a chronic brain disorder, its symptoms can include delusions, hallucinations, troubles with thinking and concentration”. (“What is Schizophrenia?”).

Finally, Pecola’s world turns upside down, a simple wish to become beautiful destroys her. In a search for total beauty, the little girl got stagnant in self-loathing. Accordingly, the only way out is to split her self. Bakerman points out “Through her false belief that she, indeed, acquired blue eyes, beauty, Pecola escapes to the deepest isolation of all” (547) and indeed Pecola regains her self esteem but only at the expense of her sanity.



## **2. 5. 2. Black Men's Reverse Process**

Unlike Black women who painfully move from self-loathing to self-esteem, Black men are seen to experience an opposite pattern. Cholly, the father is considered a victim and a victimizer. When he was “four days old” (132) his mother left him which was the first disappointment in his life then his father rejects him. When he was raised by his aunt Jimmy, he lived happily and felt grateful. On the day of his aunt's funeral, during his first sexual encounter with the girl Darlene, Cholly got humiliated by two white men who forced him to continue the act. Cholly's reaction is nothing but hatred and violence expressed towards Darlene; “He hated her. He almost wished he could do it—hard, long, and painfully, he hated her so much” (148). Instead of expressing his anger towards the men, Cholly directs his outrage toward Darlene and later on against all women. After this incident, he isolated himself by running away from his hometown to forget his humiliation; he decided to look for his father who instead of welcoming Cholly, threw on him harsh words and chased him away.

Unable to love again and trust people, the only thing that seemed reasonable to Cholly was to get drunk; to be free from the human relationships. Even though Cholly loved Pauline, his feelings did not last. When he became a father of two children, his anger and violent treatment to his family intensified. The effect of racism was much stronger than loving himself and his family, especially when he learnt that his parents rejected him, Aunt Jimmy died when he was a teenager which is a sensitive period for a child to endure, and white men degraded him. The leading scholars in the field of race relation Park and Stone explain:

“Liberated from his own culture,” he endeavors to find his place in the new, mainstream culture. The marginal man is caught between two societies; unfortunately the one he seeks to join (the White mainstream) rejects him. A person in this marginal position experiences low self-esteem, identity problems, spiritual instability, and malaise” (quoted by Adams 67).

As a result all what Cholly learned from his society is to release anger, be violent and express love only through sex; “He was alone with his own perceptions and appetites, and they alone interested him” (160). Cholly hated relationships, became disgusted by women, abhorred his blackness, experienced low self-esteem and the only way to prove his maleness was to abuse his wife and children. Nevertheless, having no idea what parenting is, “his reactions were based on what he felt at the moment” (161). Sadly, he ended up raping his own daughter and letting out his outrage when feeling confusion.

Consequently, through different painful events in his life and conflicts with himself and his lack of control over his life, Cholly shifted from self-esteem to self-hatred without making effort to change it. As Faedra Carpenter asserts in her book *Coloring Whiteness: Acts of Critique in Black Performance*:

*In the case of Pauline and Cholly, expressions and practices of white superiority and systematic racism have so deeply affected their psyches that they accept these biases as truths, in turn, impart their own sense of self-hatred to their daughter--a-self-hatred that is consistently reinforced by the mediated images and experiences of racial prejudice that Pecola faces every day (82).*

In this essence, both parents have actually destroyed the girl’s self-esteem and are one of the reasons that led to her madness. In an attempt to run away from their problems and confusion, they dumped all their “ugliness” in their daughter. However, Morrison does not stop at this negative situation.

### **2. 5. 2. Black Women’s Empowerment**

Unlike Pecola and Pauline, Claudia and Frieda maintain their self-esteem, they have in fact parents whom they rely on. In a society that demolishes the ties between members of family by enforcing racist ideas, Claudia and Frieda’s parents, though harsh sometimes, know how to nurture their children. Carmen Gillespie comments: “Claudia has her family, which while challenged by the

post depression realities of African American life, manages to convey to their daughter the knowledge that her intact survival to adulthood is one of their central concerns” (47). Effectively, *The Bluest Eye* is a novel that reveals the impact of White beauty standards on the identity formation of a child especially on a female’s psyche.

Frieda loves Shirley Temple but is not obsessed with her as Pecola. Claudia on the other hand hates Pecola’s obsession with milk and Shirley Temple. By pulling apart the doll she wants to investigate what made the society so fascinated by its beauty. Her parents love the doll and scold her for dismembering it, they appreciate the white dolls. As a result, they confirm the oppressed standards. Claudia in turn does not accept the society’s beliefs because if she does so then she admits her ugliness. Later on she accepts the dolls but confidently rejects the idealized standards of her society. Inger-Anne Softing claims that: “Claudia is the only character in this novel who consciously makes an attempt at deconstructing the ideology of the dominant society” (quoted by Madsen 144).

Due to the racist hierarchical system, Frieda and Claudia become aware of their position in society, when Maureen Peel arrives at school both sisters compare themselves to her. In the end they create flaws and nickname her “the six-finger-dog-tooth-meringe-pie” (63). Claudia imagined slamming the locker door on (Maureen)’s hand and kicking her” (63). However, they were aware that their friendship with her would be a dangerous one because everyone admired her for her physical beauty which was something unacceptable according to the sisters. Fortunately, they stayed happy with what they had and “felt comfortable on (their) skins, enjoyed the news that (their) senses released to (them), admired (their) dirt, cultivated (their) scars, and could not comprehend this unworthiness” (47).

The Macteer sisters’ self-confidence and self-worth is seen in their physical and verbal reactions towards Pecola’s bullies: Frieda hit Woodrew

Cain's head with her books and threatened to reveal his secret, Claudia intimidated Bay Boy calling him "Bullet Head" (66). The two sisters also stood against Maureen's insults unlike Pecola who "tucked her head in" (72) and stayed silent. These incidents strengthened the two girls' self-esteem and made them aware and afraid of "the thing that made (Maureen) beautiful" (74). To put it differently, they recognized the devastating effects of the enforced ideals of white culture on the African American society.

All in all, Claudia and Frieda's self-confidence resulted first from their mother's love and their father's protective side and second from the harsh treatment they witnessed which transformed their psyche into a 'bulletproof shield' against the brainwashing of main stream America resulting in a pride and love of self which most of the blacks have lost as Claudia describes: "we had defended ourselves since memory against everything and everybody; considered...all gesture subject to careful analysis; we had become headstrong, devious and arrogant" (191).

Besides Morrison's depiction of the female resistance in Claudia; the rebellious child, she proudly highlights the empowerment of black women in other characters such as the Great Aunt Jimmy, Mrs. MacTeer and M'Dear; a midwife and healer. These three women are the symbol of the black females who "kept their naturals" as Brooks referred to them in her poem "To those of My Sisters who Kept their Naturals" (*The Essential Gwendolyn Brooks* 120).

Aunt Jimmy learned how to cope with the society's treatment since the days of slavery. Although she was mistreated by white masters, it did not affect her self-esteem, she rescued and raised up Cholly with love and "Cholly was grateful for having been saved" (132). She was a "center and a stalwart in her community" (Gillespie 58). Unlike Pauline and Pecola, Aunt Jimmy was happy in her life even though she was not rich, white and beautiful, "her laughter had been more touch than sound" (138). She was aware of the racist behavior of the patriarchal society where "White women, said Do this." White children said,

“Give me that.” White men said, “Come here.” Black men said, “Lay down.” (138) but she “took all of that (and) re-created it in (her) own image” (138). Despite the fact that she had been oppressed and maltreated, Aunt Jimmy created herself, she did not lose herself nor did she neglected her duty as a black female, a wife and a mother; “when white men beat their men, they cleaned up the blood and went home to receive the abuse from the victim, they beat their children with one hand and stole for them with the other” (138).

Contrary to Pauline, Mrs. MacTeer is a responsible mother with a strong will; she works hard to keep her family healthy. Through her songs, Claudia learns about the African American culture, the situation of blacks and the problems of adults as Gillespie states: “Claudia learns from her mother...valuable information about becoming an adult woman” (47). Claudia’s strong identity stems from her relationship with her mother. In addition, by hearing her stories, the little girl analyses the situation and rejects the white female beauty and embraces herself as a black female. She learns how to take responsibility and endure tough times, she explained: “Misery colored by the greens and blues in my mother’s voice took all of the grief out of the words and left me with a conviction that pain was not only endurable, it was sweet” (26).

Morrison’s use of the female character M’Dear is both to illustrate the richness of African American Culture and to show that black females are smart and are able to attain high positions. When Aunt Jimmy fell sick, her friends called for M’Dear who is “a competent midwife and decisive diagnostician... In any illness that could not be handled by ordinary means—known cures, intuition, or endurance—the word was always, “Fetch M’Dear.” (136) Gillespie explains: “M’Dear resembles other powerful female figures in African American Literature as she possesses knowledge and ability that seem nearly supernatural” (66). She embodies Morrison’s feminist ideal.

Morrison’s concern and criticism against the patriarchal system and the white ideology that subjected black women is seen in her boundless request to

black women to stay proud of their blackness and femininity and to perform their duty as mothers. As a result, she rails against the white superiority through the sisterly love of Mrs. MacTeer, Aunt Jimmy and M'Dear as Christian and Bowles argue in the book *New Black Feminist Criticism*:

In reaction to the Western patriarchal emphasis on the individual, on the splitting of human beings into mind and body...these writers saw the necessity of honoring female values. If women were to become empowered, it was necessary for them to perceive their own primary, their centrality to their society as well as to analyze how dangerous patriarchal values were to the harmonious social order (122).

The novel's feminist tag is also revealed in Claudia's thoughts about Pecola's baby. After listening to the members of society about Pecola's pregnancy, Claudia and Frieda were astonished, sad and worried about her baby. Claudia's concern about the life of the baby reflects Morrison's defense and criticism about the treatment that a black child receives in the American society due to his/her subject to sexual abuse and racism which may result in psychological disorders.

Morrison's theme of 'black life matters' is echoed in multiple incidents where children are either sexually or violently abused or raped. At the beginning of *Autumn*, Morrison describes sexual abuse from Rosemary's point of view who witnesses the abuse and tends to imitate it. When she degrades the MacTeer sisters, Claudia states angrily that "after beating Rosemary, (she) will cry and ask us do we want to pull her pants down" (9) which is something confusing to the sisters who reply: "We will say no. we don't know what we should feel or do when she does, but whenever she asks us, we know she is offering something precious" (9). It is important to note that the sentence "whenever she asks us" is a clear evidence that Rosemary has been uttering this statement more than once, her reaction to beating suggests that she was either sexually abused or was a witness of it.

In the same season, Claudia and Frieda tried to help Pecola who had her first menstruation. Suddenly, in the middle of the situation, Rosemary appears and starts calling for Mrs. MacTeer claiming that Frieda and Claudia “are playing nasty” (30). The fact that Rosemary is familiar with the “nastiness” of the situation affirms her frequent exposure to sexual assaults. According to [victimsofcrime.org](http://victimsofcrime.org): victims of sexual child abuse “may feel significant distress and display a wide range of psychological symptoms...They may feel powerless, ashamed and distrustful of others” which is the case of Rosemary though not of the two sisters.

Another example of sexual behavior towards children is depicted in Mr. Henry who is considered a threat toward young girls. When he came to the MacTeers’ house, he praised the little girls comparing them to white American female movie stars: Greta Garbo and Ginger Rogers, he then hid a coin and asked the sisters to find it, the innocent girls “searched all over him, poking (their) fingers into his socks, looking up the inside of his coat” (16) while the parents were “amused” by watching them having fun. This scene is in fact not as innocent as it looks because Mr. Henry’s motive was to be touched by the little girls. His dangerous side starts being uncovered as the novel advances, his abusive act is revealed when he molests Frieda who has a conversation with her sister Claudia and describes the scene as follows:

“He . . . *picked* at me.”  
“Picked at you? You mean like Soaphead Church?”  
“Sort of.”  
“He showed his privates at you?”  
“Noooo. He touched me.”  
“Where?”  
“Here and here.” She pointed to the tiny breasts” (99)

Though feeling shame and confusion, Frieda survives the assault because unlike Pecola who has been raped by her father, Frieda was assaulted by a stranger, was not raped and most importantly had her parents’ back who supported and protected her; her mother listened to her and believed her while her father

attacked and beat Mr. Henry as Frieda testified the scene: “I told Mama, and she told Daddy, and we all come home, and he was gone, so we waited for him, and when Daddy saw him come up on the porch, he threw our old tricycle at his head and knocked him off the porch.”(100).

To say the least the two sisters did not bear hatred toward Mr. Henry and had “no bitterness in (their) memory” (16) due to the unconditioned support of their parents and their fast reaction to their children’s call. In a search for a better place where she can obtain the love she always wanted, Pecola’s peaceful world is destroyed by her father’s rape to her. Mrs. Pauline does not share with her daughter the pain nor does she sympathize with her. Just as Pauline had not been protected from the doctors’ insults and Northern women’s humiliation to her, she does not share her daughter’s suffering. Instead, she swallows these treatments and spits them out on Pecola, transforming her into a ‘small version of Pauline’.

When Cholly abuses Pecola, he actually releases her from misery, a misery that had been eating her since her birth; pulling her out from the real world and putting her into a never ending dream. After being harshly treated by her mother, the community, Cholly’s “touch was fatal” (206). He destroyed the last pieces of the meaning of love that Pecola held. As a result the little girl kept denying what Cholly did to her, instead of admitting the awful truth, she links the rape and the hatred of the community with her granted wish and considers every one jealous of her blue eyes. She was psychologically and physically damaged as Doane and Devon L. Hodges assert in their book *Telling Incest: Narratives of Dangerous Remembering from Stein to Sapphire*: “Through incest, what left behind is her father’s seed that fails to thrive. Through white patriarchal ideology, what is left in her is a desire for bluest eyes that devalues as it eradicates her racial identity” (42).

Moreover, in an attempt to save Pecola’s baby who is the product of incest, Frieda and Claudia decide to plant marigold seeds with the belief that if



the seeds grow then the baby would live. Unfortunately, the marigolds never flourish and Pecola's baby dies. Morrison uses the marigold seeds as a symbols of life and earth as the mother that embraces the seeds but Claudia reveals in the end of the novel that "the land of the entire country was hostile to marigolds that year" (206). She compares the seeds to black children and earth to the mother and the members of community who turned their back to a damaged child and avoided the ugly truth as Claudia clarifies: "This soil is bad for certain kinds of flowers. Certain seeds it will not nurture, certain fruit it will not bear, and when the land kills of its own volition, we acquiesce and say the victim had no right to live." (206).

Morrison criticizes the damage that happens to children who are not listened to and are abandoned by their family due to the community's lack of consciousness, Stephanie Demetrakopoulos comments: "Morrison's sense of the earth as untrustworthy, contingent, penurious, grudging. In this novel there is no cosmic ground of being that mothers us all; time is fluent and so much human and natural potential is irrevocably lost." (64). Morrison insists on the importance of a mother in a society, she compares a black woman to the earth where no seeds grow. She has been through different hardships leading her to become ignorant, miserable, having lost her trust in family and society and angry from herself which resulted in her disconnect from the role of the mother destroying the only resort for a child to grow up in; a family.

## **2. 6. Conclusion**

In *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison gives the audience a sip of the life of black females in a racist patriarchal society. She creates, explains and explores the different situations and reasons that may lead a black African woman to lose her identity or maintain it. The author also provides sensitive examples about child molestation and sexual abuse in order to raise the awareness of the community. She exposes the worst thing that may happen to a child especially a black one

and more than that a female, Pecola Breedlove; a girl who lives miserably and 'dies mentally' due to the negligence of society.

## General Conclusion

The present work has focused on the issue of beauty myth, racism and the forced white ideology on the life of African Americans. It explores each character's situation and investigates their identities. Through the analysis of *The Bluest Eye*, the researcher reveals the reasons behind Black women's change of heart and their shift from self-hatred to self-esteem especially Pecola Breedlove, the protagonist who lives within a racist community that considers her "ugly". As a result, she escapes from the harsh reality and embraces herself in an imaginary world where she finally gets her blue eyes. It also sheds light on men's transformative experience, from self-esteem to self-hatred which is depicted in Cholly Breedlove.

*The Bluest Eye* is a reflection of the Blacks' reality in the 20<sup>th</sup> century; it is in fact a representation of African Americans' life and struggle to be accepted. The key to understand Black female's shift is through Claudia's narrative perspective as a young girl and an adult where the reader gets a glimpse on the Black women's lives. The novel not only portrays the psychological developments but also depicts the economic, cultural and political dimensions during the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The analysis of *the Bluest Eye* from a feminist and psychological criticism approach helps the researcher in answering the research questions and proving the hypothesis. The events of the 20<sup>th</sup> century are mainly about the impact of the Great Depression of the 1920s when the majority of the Black citizens immigrated north as in the case Pauline and Cholly, the enforcement of white beauty standards by using propaganda in candies including Mary Jane candy and in movies such as the American beauty; the actress Jean Harlow. This proves that the events depicted in the novel juxtapose with the reality of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. By using the literary artistic way of depicting the cultural aspects of this time, Morrison made sure to transmit the hell that black community suffered from.

African American women characters experienced different kinds of discrimination from both white and black societies: racism, sexism and oppression. The reader gets to know their lives through the narrator who bears witness to Pecola's story, Claudia is made to narrate the story of a girl who lost her voice. Morrison gives this responsibility to "the most delicate member of society: a child; the most vulnerable member: a female" (xi). The author wants from her readers to experience a person's story, to react on the injustice, to take action as Claudia points out: "We have to do it *right*, now. We'll bury the money over by her house... and we'll plant the seeds out back of our house... And when they come up, we'll know everything is all right" (192). Morrison's novel is not only a mirror that reflects her time but it is also influenced by her milieu, perspectives and prejudices.

The novel is a feminist work written by a strong minded author who suffered, witnessed and lived in a racist society. Morrison spices her tale by revealing the dark side of conforming to the beauty standards, she depicts a miserable black child, and creates for her a family, classmates, neighbors and friends to expose the reason behind the abuse of children, self-loathing, the shattered family, harmful behavior and madness. She mainly returns the cause behind the 'black chaos' to racism and how beauty as a cultural aspect can be destructive to a child. She observes: "In trying to dramatize the devastation that even casual racial contempt can cause, I chose a unique situation, not a representative one... Pecola"(xi-xii). Morrison's attempt is to picture the life of black little girls in a prejudiced society and their total exposure to it.

Furthermore, *The Bluest Eye* is a piece of work that deals with different issues of African American community. It is a call to both whites and blacks to rise against the injustice. Thus Morrison's purpose is in fact beyond documenting racism and child abuse, it is a cry for love in a community full of hatred from a black feminist author who indirectly uses Claudia and Fried as a solution behind loving oneself. Both sisters have survived the discrimination and

the enforced ideas of beauty due to their parents' love and support, their female powers have developed thanks to both self realization and self worth; they recognized their worth not only as black but also as females. Morrison leaves the reader to foresee the future because she is confident that these kinds of females are able to survive and keep their identities in a racist and patriarchal society unlike Pecola whose future has no hope. The author has seen both the bad and the good; tasted oppression and lived in discrimination, she uses Pecola's story as a call that is artistically and specifically written to blacks in order to love themselves, accept their blackness and love the youth despite their race, gender or class.

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