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Shattered Ideals: Cultural Collisions in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*

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Abstract: Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* serves as a critical historical and social commentary on the plight of Afro-Americans in the United States between the 1950s and 1970s. During this period, Black communities faced relentless pressure to conform to white societal expectations, resulting in the suppression of their cultural heritage. Morrison utilizes the character of Pecola Breedlove, whose life is marked by extreme hardship and abuse, to expose the devastating effects of internalized racism and cultural alienation. This paper offers a detailed examination of *The Bluest Eye* as a literary representation of historical realities, analyzing the novel's portrayal of systemic oppression and its enduring impact on individual lives.

Keywords: Cultural conflict, Identity conflict, Racial segregation, Psychological trauma, Social injustice, Quest for cultural survival, Marginalization.

Introduction

Toni Morrison stands as a preeminent figure in Afro-American literature, her work garnering global recognition for its profound literary merit. Despite facing initial criticism as a female author addressing the deeply entrenched issues of racial prejudice and dehumanization during a period of intense social strife, she

courageously illuminated the multifaceted realities of Black life. While some contemporary writers depicted the harshness of their world with unyielding bleakness, Morrison infused her narratives with a nuanced portrayal, revealing glimmers of hope amidst the struggles of Black America. Her work transcended mere documentation of oppression, intertwining the Black Freedom Movement with the burgeoning discourse on women's liberation. She sought to create a body of literature that would be both culturally authentic and universally resonant, navigating the complexities of cultural conflict with unwavering integrity.

Toni Morrison, a singular voice in American literature, stands as the only Afro-American writer to meticulously dissect the complex interplay between Black cultural heritage and the dominant white mainstream. Her work illuminates the marginalized existence of Black individuals, earning her international acclaim and providing a powerful platform for their voices. Emerging during a period of intense cultural tension and the burgeoning recognition of Afro-American literature, Morrison navigated the challenges of cultural apartheid and societal survival. Unlike many of her contemporaries who adopted explicit forms of social protest, Morrison focused on the exploration of Black history, tradition, and their impact on individual lives. Her narratives, often centered on the experiences of marginalized Black women and also delve into the psychological and emotional consequences of societal exclusion.

Morrison's debut novel, *The Bluest Eye*, remains a seminal work, encapsulating her perspectives as an Afro-American author and her keen observation of the intersectional oppression faced by Black women. Through the character of Pecola Breedlove, she exposes the devastating effects of both white hegemony and internalized racism within the Black community. The novel transcends a simple depiction of tragedy,

exploring the psychological disintegration resulting from societal rejection and the profound dilemma of preserving cultural identity in the face of systemic oppression. Despite the pervasive themes of hardship, Morrison's narrative also offers a nuanced portrayal of resilience and the enduring quest for cultural survival.

Emphasizing Cultural Conflict and Psychological Impact

A human being is not only identified by their name, but also by the environment in which they live. According to the author, Black individuals were living according to the rules and norms imposed by white society, leading to a loss of their own identity—both as individuals and as a community. Though some form of identity existed, it was defined and limited by white society, often reducing Black people to roles like slaves or clowns.

The character Pecola believes that her ugliness is her only identity, and she sees herself as deserving of the rejection and abuse she experiences. This internalized belief isn't unique to Pecola; her parents, too, had come to accept their supposed ugliness during their own lives. In many ways, this acceptance reflects a painful process of self-actualization, where they internalized society's negative views about being Black.

Within the Black community itself, those with slightly lighter skin than Pecola viewed her as ugly and unworthy of inclusion. This reveals a troubling hierarchy, where individuals try to distance themselves from those at the bottom, like Pecola, in an effort to assert their own superiority. This dynamic is evident in how the boys in the neighborhood treat Pecola, mocking her because they see themselves as better due to their lighter skin tone. Even Pecola's teacher subtly dismisses her—not through overt exclusion, but through a clear lack of acknowledgment.

Ironically, those who look down on Pecola are themselves victims of the same societal pressures and racial prejudices. However, their experience may be less harsh, leading them to displace their frustrations onto someone like Pecola. They relieve their own sense of rejection by contributing to hers. This is reflected in the scene where the girl Maureen says:

“I am cute! And you are ugly! Black and ugly black e mos. I am cute!” (Morisson 56)

Geraldine, a woman from a middle-class Black family, viewed herself and her family as “clean people,” while looking down on Pecola’s family as “dirty niggers.” She and others like her made great efforts to maintain a lighter skin tone, driven by a deep fear of being identified as stereotypically Black. This belief system was so deeply ingrained that many Black individuals were willing to go to extreme lengths—even altering their appearance with skin-lightening products—to resemble white people.

They were willing to go to great lengths to appear white, even making personal sacrifices and using various ointments and lotions to lighten their skin. This behavior reflects the deep-seated fear among Black individuals of being seen for who they truly were—Black—and, in turn, being subjected once again to society's longstanding pattern of disgust and rejection.

Even the church, which should have been a place of guidance and compassion, failed Pecola. A priest deceived her into poisoning a dog, exploiting her vulnerability. This act had nothing to do with the empowerment or upliftment of Black people. Instead, Pecola, driven by her desperate longing for blue eyes and the acceptance she believed they would bring, carried out the act in the hope of being loved and seen as beautiful.

To some extent, Pecola's parents were responsible for the condition she eventually found herself in. The family had originally lived in the South, where her mother was dehumanized and treated like an animal when she became pregnant and gave birth to Pecola. This traumatic experience led them to relocate to the North in hopes of escaping such treatment. However, even in the North, they struggled to assimilate—their way of speaking and dressing remained the same, and they quickly became subjects of the same ridicule they had faced before.

Pecola's mother often sought solace in movie theaters, losing herself in films. On screen, she could momentarily ignore the limited roles given to Black actors, but the truth remained: they were never portrayed as stars or dignified characters. Instead, they were consistently cast as clowns, slaves, or servants. These repeated portrayals, along with other daily experiences, reinforced her belief that she and her family were inherently inferior to others.

Eventually, out of deep frustration and disappointment, Pecola's mother distanced herself from her family, taking Pecola with her. She began channeling her affection toward the white children she cared for in the household where she worked as a servant. Her emotional withdrawal left Pecola's father alone, overwhelmed by stress and a deteriorating mental state. Abandoned by his family and continuously subjected to humiliation and discrimination by the white community, he became increasingly unstable. Amidst his mental breakdown, Pecola's father repeatedly abused her, believing that these acts were a twisted expression of love toward his daughter.

Pecola, along with other girls in similar circumstances, became victims of social disintegration. They

were unable to find refuge in their own homes, and outside, they faced constant humiliation and degradation from white society. Through this process, they lost their identities as human beings, relegated to the role of servants in white households, where they were assigned new names and roles. This imposed identity might remain with them for the rest of their lives, leaving them with no opportunity to reclaim their true selves or their past lives.

Toni Morrison delves into the intricate ways on how the Black individuals responded to white cultural hegemony, revealing a spectrum of reactions from assimilation to hopeful resistance. The insidious nature of white dominance fostered a self-perception among Black individuals that mirrored white perspectives, leading to internalized racism and self-alienation. Pecola Breedlove's tragic fate is rooted in this psychological distortion.

Pecola's childhood is marked by profound social isolation and internalized self-hatred, reflecting the Breedloves' acceptance of white-imposed notions of Black ugliness. This mirrors the collective trauma of the Black community, subjected to systemic oppression. Pecola's yearning for blue eyes symbolizes her desperate attempt to conform to white beauty standards, a manifestation of her internalized rejection of Black identity.

The writer's depiction of Pecola's self-examination and nightly prayers for blue eyes underscores the deep-seated psychological wounds inflicted by cultural displacement. The internalization of white perspectives led to a pervasive sense of self-loathing and a desire for assimilation. Pecola's experiences at school, characterized by invisibility and rejection, illustrate the dehumanizing effects of white prejudice.

Morrison's portrayal of Pecola's suffering serves as a powerful indictment of the destructive impact of white social norms on Black individuals and the Black community.

Emphasizing the Dynamics of Cultural Hierarchy and Self-perception

Morrison's narrative explores the devastating impact of white cultural dominance on Black identity, reducing individuals to marginalized roles and fostering a sense of inherent inferiority. Pecola Breedlove's acceptance of her 'ugliness' reflects this internalized oppression, as does her family's acceptance of their own perceived inadequacies. The narrative reveals a complex hierarchy within the Black community, where lighter-skinned individuals seek to distance themselves from darker-skinned individuals like Pecola. Maureen Peal's assertion of her 'cuteness' and Pecola's 'ugliness' (Morrison, 56) highlights this internalized discrimination, a manifestation of their own fear of societal rejection.

The characters' obsession with conforming to white beauty standards, exemplified by the use of skin-lightening products, underscores the pervasive influence of white cultural norms. Even figures of authority, like the manipulative priest, contribute to the exploitation of Black individuals. Pecola's family history reveals the cyclical nature of oppression. Their attempts to escape discrimination by moving north prove futile. Pecola's mother's internalization of stereotypical portrayals in films reinforces her sense of inferiority, leading to her emotional detachment. Pecola's father's violent response to his own marginalization further perpetuates the cycle of trauma.

Pecola and the other marginalized girls are victims of a system that denies them both physical and psychological sanctuary. They are stripped of their identities and relegated to subservient roles, symbolizing

the profound and lasting impact of cultural oppression.

Pecola's Marginalization and Search for Belonging

Pecola's life is portrayed as deeply miserable, marked by societal rejection due to her race and perceived ugliness. Her interactions with the three Black prostitutes offer a temporary refuge, a space where she experiences acceptance, love, and a sense of belonging. This relationship symbolizes a form of maternal care and genuine human connection, providing Pecola with a sense of self-worth that is denied to her elsewhere.

The author not only depicts Pecola's tragic life but also illustrates the survival strategies of Black people. For instance, in the novel, Pecola encounters three Black prostitutes who have chosen this path willingly. Perhaps their choice symbolizes a form of protest against the norms imposed by white society. Pecola forms a close bond with these women, frequently visiting them and spending time together. The love they offer her is genuine, and their home is the only place where she is not labeled as "ugly." There, she feels a sense of belonging and authority, learning to live her life without concern for others' judgments. The four of them share moments of laughter, enjoy food and drink, and simply revel in each other's company.

The author portrays this relationship as a form of maternal love and care from Pecola, and a true human connection from the prostitutes. On the other hand, these women also represent the preservation of their own culture and heritage in a society where many Black individuals, eager to conform to white standards, abandon their own identities.

Another significant character in the novel is Claudia M'Dears, who serves as a narrator and considers

herself a friend to Pecola. Through Claudia's perspective, readers gain insight into Pecola's life. Claudia often reflects on the love and affection of her mother, but she also imagines that Pecola, too, could experience the same kind of care. However, she understands that these thoughts are more like dreams—hopes that may never come true. Claudia's mother, referred to as "M'Dear," is depicted as a healer, almost a magician, who uses her "magic" to bring comfort to Black people. Both of Claudia's parents are shown as responsible figures who, unlike others, never abandoned their family and continue to hold hope that things will someday return to normal.

Throughout the novel, Claudia sees Pecola as a friend and wishes to help improve her life. She plants marigold seeds, believing that one day, they will grow into beautiful plants, symbolizing her hope that something positive will eventually come into Pecola's life. The incidents mentioned above can be seen as reflections of the survival instincts of Black people, acting as a bridge to maintain their identities. Survival is intrinsically linked to a person's sense of identity, and when that core identity is lost, survival itself is jeopardized. In the novel, Black people are depicted as losing their identities while attempting to conform to the social norms set by white society, and even facing internal conflicts within their own community. This highlights the challenges they face in maintaining their survival in a society where their very sense of self is constantly undermined. While many have resigned themselves to their fate, some still hold on to the hope that change will come, and better times will return.

On the other hand, there are instances where Black people exploit and humiliate their own in an attempt to gain approval from white society, seeking validation as "well-wishers." Though this behavior was

not a legitimate way to treat their own people, it was justified according to the societal norms set by whites. Some Black individuals managed to survive by adopting these strategies, but their survival was short-lived, as they too eventually became trapped in the system of exploitation by whites. In the end, they were subjected to the same humiliation, harassment, and exploitation as everyone else.

The author attempts to portray cultural clashes through two distinct forces: one imposed by whites and the other originating from within Black society. In the first case, the primary antagonist is the set of norms established by white society, which creates a dilemma similar to the "snake and goose" situation—something that cannot be fully embraced or rejected. Accepting these norms wholeheartedly means abandoning their own culture and heritage, relegating Black people to a subservient role for whites. On the other hand, striving for white approval simply to survive causes internal conflict among Black people, which proves even more destructive. This conflict not only creates divisions within the Black community but also increases the potential for criminal activity in the neighborhood.

In this regard Morrison herself stated that:

I'm interested in survival—who survives and who does not, and why—and I would like to chart a course that suggests where the dangers and where the safety might be. (Tate 145)

The Prostitutes as Cultural Carriers

The prostitutes represent a form of resistance against the dominant white culture. They maintain their own

cultural identity and heritage in a society that pressures Black individuals to assimilate.

Claudia M'Dear's Perspective and Hope

Claudia, as a narrator and Pecola's friend, provides insight into Pecola's experiences. Claudia's mother, M'Dear, is depicted as a figure of healing and resilience within the Black community. Claudia's act of planting marigold seeds symbolizes a hope for positive change in Pecola's life.

Loss of Cultural Identity and Threat for Survival

The loss of cultural identity threatens the survival of Black individuals within a society that seeks to erase their heritage.

Internal Conflicts and Exploitation

The novel also explores the destructive consequences of internalized racism, where Black individuals exploit and humiliate their own community in an attempt to gain acceptance from whites. This self-destructive behavior, while offering temporary survival, ultimately leads to further oppression.

Cultural Clashes from External and Internal Sources

Morrison portrays cultural clashes arising both from the oppressive norms imposed by whites and from the internal conflicts within the Black community itself. The pressure to conform to white standards creates a dilemma where Black individuals risk losing their cultural identity or facing internal strife.

Morrison's Focus on Survival

As Morrison states, her work explores "who survives and who does not, and why," highlighting the dangers and possibilities for safety within a racially divided society.

Struggles and Resilience of the Characters

The characters in the novel, including Pecola's parents and the prostitutes, face significant challenges in maintaining their integrity and finding ways to survive. Some, like the prostitutes, choose unconventional paths as a form of resistance.

While the desire for blue eyes symbolized the yearning for white acceptance, many Black individuals also attempted to assimilate by adopting white mannerisms, clothing, and speech. However, the author argues that these efforts ultimately resulted in a loss of cultural identity without achieving genuine acceptance. The novel also explores the ongoing cycle of cultural clashes and survival instincts, demonstrating that subsequent generations, like Pecola continuing to face the same struggles as their predecessors. These struggles resulted in greater devastation, culminating in Pecola's rape by her father and her mother's refusal to believe what happened and her abandonment of the family to work as a servant for a white household.

Conclusion

Morrison's work, written during the rise of Afro-American literature, aimed to portray the realities of Black

life, including the struggles for identity, basic rights, and the experience of discrimination. She emphasizes the importance of self-confidence and cultural preservation as essential for the survival of Black people. "*The Bluest Eye*" itself symbolizes Pecola's desire for the physical attributes associated with white acceptance, highlighting the damaging impact of societal beauty standards.

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