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"The Fact of Blackness" in the Urge of the Bluest Eye: A Postcolonial Reading of Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Ey*

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Abstract:

Toni Morrison's debut novel, *The Bluest Eye*, published in 1970, is set in Lorain, Ohio, in 1941. The novel explores the concepts of race and blackness by examining their intensity not only in opposition to white people but also among Black individuals and mulattoes. Morrison illustrates how Black people are conditioned to view "whiteness" as the epitome of beauty. Throughout the novel, characters face marginalization due to their skin color and physical features. This paper employs Frantz Fanon's concept of blackness to depict how the imposed identity of Black people as "dirty" and "unclean" leads characters to desire features associated with "whiteness" to gain acceptance in their community. The paper demonstrates how the white gaze burdens Black individuals with a sense of their own ugliness. The novel's creation coincides with the "Black is Beautiful" movement, which sought to dispel the notion of Black people's ugliness. Thus, the novel examines the "fact of blackness" imposed upon Black individuals and their desire to escape this perceived ugliness. This urge is explored through Pecola Breedlove, the protagonist, who wishes for blue eyes, as well as through other characters who aspire to possess the physical features of white people.

Keywords: blackness, beauty, ugliness, blue eyes, whiteness

Introduction

Chloe Anthony Wofford Morrison (1931–2019), famously known as Toni Morrison, was an American writer who brought the Black experience of African Americans to the forefront. She was deeply influenced by various movements that gained momentum during the time she wrote this novel, including the Civil Rights movement and the Black is Beautiful movement, which emphasized empowering Black identity and self-acceptance. The "Black is Beautiful" movement provides the primary backdrop for the novel, as each Black character aspires to emulate white

people. Morrison recognized the sense of "ugliness" ingrained in the minds of Black people and wrote this novel to address issues of self-acceptance and racial self-hatred. *The Bluest Eye* revolves around the tragic experiences of a young Black girl who internalizes white beauty standards, believing that possessing features like blue eyes and blonde hair will bring her acceptance and love in a racially segregated society. The novel also depicts how Black individuals attempt artificial makeovers to mitigate their perceived ugliness and conform to Eurocentric beauty ideals.

The commodification of Black people as the "Other" is articulated by Frantz Fanon in *Black Skin, White Masks*, where he states, "the fact of juxtaposition of the white and black races has created a massive psychoexistential complex" (12). Fanon argues that the identity of Black people is not self-created but imposed upon them without their consent. This imposed identity is used to dehumanize and oppress Black individuals. In a white-dominated world, Fanon felt like "an object in the midst of other objects" (109), reduced to terms like "Dirty Nigger!" or simply, "Look, a Negro!" (109). He describes how the white gaze dissects Black individuals, trapping them in "crushing objecthood" (109). According to Fanon, "White civilization and European culture have forced an existential deviation on the Negro" (14).

Aims and Objectives

This paper aims to demonstrate how the white community and the beauty ideals they create serve as a constant reminder to Black people of their perceived ugliness. Black characters aspire to attain white beauty standards by desiring blonde hair, white skin, and, most notably, blue eyes, believing these features will grant them recognition and acceptance in society. They believe that possessing blue eyes will shield them from harm. The paper analyzes the following objectives:

- The desire for recognition by attaining white beauty standards.
- The experience of self-hatred that Black people feel due to their belief in their own ugliness.
- The concept of the "fact of blackness," which illustrates how the identity of Black people is fixed through the white gaze.
- The sense of superiority felt not only by whites but also by cultural mulattoes or light-skinned Black individuals toward darker-skinned Black people.

Research Methodology

This research paper is analytical and descriptive, based on both primary and secondary sources. The primary sources are the novel *The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison and the postcolonial work *Black Skin, White Masks* by Frantz Fanon. Secondary sources include edited books, e-books, and online articles.

Literature Review

In the article "A Postcolonial Feminist Approach to Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*," Erdemir and Demirtas write:

In this novel, black women are both ostracized by the white community and by men in their own black community. Therefore, they experience double oppression. This situation led to a mental breakdown for them. The issues of race, gender, and class

created by the white world were issues that black women had to struggle with. These three major problems illustrate the traumatic conditions they experienced in white America. Women's characters' lives were full of torture. While white women are also victims of social judgments, the situation of black women has always been worse. (205)

In the article "Parental Hunger and Alienation in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*," Ahmad, Chaudhary, and Murtaza write:

Alienation in the context of this novel signifies a separation of one character from one's self and from other members of his family as well as society, and this separation minimizes their capacity to think properly and act normally. Father, who is considered to be a protector, his protection turns into an illicit thirst and he rapes his daughter twice. Cholly's inability to connect with black and white community, results in hysteria of freedom, the freedom of an isolated man with dangerous consequences, and he uses that freedom negatively to torture brutally his own wife Pauline and then his daughter Pecola. (42)

From the literature review, it is evident that *The Bluest Eye* has been previously explored from postcolonial feminist perspectives and through the lens of alienation and parent-child relationships. However, this paper analyzes *The Bluest Eye* as a postcolonial text through Frantz Fanon's concept of the "fact of blackness," examining how Black people aspire to emulate whiteness to alleviate their perceived ugliness and self-hatred. The paper explores how racism is internalized among Black individuals and how they perceive themselves through the white gaze, sidelining their blackness.

Analysis

Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* is structured around the four seasons, with each chapter presenting racial oppression from contrasting perspectives. For instance, the section titled "Autumn," typically associated with harvesting, depicts the death of Pecola's premature baby. "Winter," often seen as dull and cold, introduces Maureen Peal, whose presence disrupts the prevailing dullness. "Spring," traditionally a season of happiness and renewal, portrays Claudia being whipped and the tragic rape of Pecola by her father. "Summer" is associated with storms in the novel, which differ from destruction; Claudia links it to the texture of strawberries, dusk, darkness, and the sticky feeling of humidity. These chapters in "Summer" explore how the "public fact" (Morrison 188) of Pecola's rape differs from the "private reality" (188).

The novel opens with the introduction of Rosemary Villanucci and her wealthy white family in the MacTeers' neighborhood. Claudia and Frieda MacTeer, aged nine and ten, respectively, are the young daughters of the Black MacTeer family. Racism is evident from the outset, described as the dominance of one race over another, leading to discrimination and prejudice based on race or ethnic

background. Rosemary displays this superiority of "white" culture by rejecting Claudia and Frieda because of their skin color. Fanon writes, "It is the racist who creates his inferior" (93). Claudia and Frieda's desire to "beat her up, make red marks on her white skin" (Morrison 9) reflects their urge to dismantle her physical whiteness and reduce her perceived superiority to "ugliness."

When Pecola Breedlove comes to stay with the MacTeers, she drinks milk from a Shirley Temple cup. Her admiration for Shirley Temple drives her to consume excessive amounts of milk, possibly reflecting her internalized desire to inherit whiteness. Pecola, Frieda, and Claudia's affection for Shirley Temple reveals their obsession with white culture. Initially, Claudia harbored hatred toward Shirley Temple and her Christmas gifts, where she always received "a big, blue-eyed Baby Doll" (Morrison 20) because adults believed it was her "fondest wish" (20) to resemble her. Claudia destroyed the dolls out of jealousy toward white culture and her inability to accept her racial features:

I had only one desire: to dismember it. To see of what it was made, to discover the dearness, to find the beauty, the desirability that had escaped me, but apparently only me. Adults, older girls, shops, magazines, newspapers, window signs—all the world had agreed that a blue-eyed, yellow-haired, pink-skinned doll was what every girl child treasured. (20)

Her urge to dismember the dolls represents her desire to harm white girls. To mask her violent urges and "pristine sadism" (23), she fabricated love for these dolls and Shirley Temple. It was only later that she learned to admire their beauty.

The Breedloves choose to live in a storefront due to their belief in their own unattractiveness, illustrating the crippling impact of ingrained perceptions of ugliness among Black individuals. Fanon states, "For not only must the black man be black; he must be black in relation to the white man" (110). The Breedlove family "wore their ugliness, put it on, so to speak, although it did not belong to them" (Morrison 38). Morrison describes the physical features of Black people to highlight what made them feel inferior in the white world:

The eyes, the small eyes set closely together under narrow foreheads. The low, irregular hairlines, which seemed even more irregular in contrast to the straight, heavy eyebrows which nearly met. Keen but crooked noses, with insolent nostrils. They had high cheekbones, and their ears turned forward. Shapely lips which called attention not to themselves but to the rest of the face. You looked at them and wondered why they were so ugly; you looked closely and could not find the source. Then you realized that it came from conviction, their conviction. (38–39)

According to Morrison, the Black people's conviction of being ugly was an

imposed identity from whites, where "a mysterious, all-knowing master had given each one a cloak of ugliness to wear, and they had each accepted it without question" (39). For the Breedloves, every film, advertisement, and glance reinforced this notion. While Cholly's unattractiveness stems from his actions and behavior, the other Breedloves—Mrs. Pauline (Polly) Breedlove, Samuel (Sammy), and Pecola—handle their ugliness differently:

> 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)

Cholly's behavior toward women stems from racial oppression he experienced from two white racist men while he was with a girl named Darlene. They caught him unexpectedly during intercourse, illuminating them with a flashlight and compelling him to continue. His inability to resist their racial hatred fostered his animosity toward women, whom he considers weaker. Similarly, Pauline's self-image of unattractiveness began with her deformed foot, leading to feelings of worthlessness. Losing her tooth while biting candy symbolically represents her loss of the dream to embody whiteness. The white tooth leaves a dark space, equating to the emptiness Pauline feels as a Black woman. When Pecola is born, Pauline perceives her as ugly because, during her pregnancy, her fixation on white beauty led her to envision a perfect child. Fanon notes, "As long as the black man is among his own, he will have no occasion, except in minor internal conflicts, to experience his being through others" (109). In the North, Pauline longs for her Southern Black community, having never been surrounded by so many white people before.

Pecola's urge for "blue eyes" takes root when she witnesses her parents' violent fights. Fanon describes the Black individual's sense of inferiority as an "inborn complex" (115). Unable to escape like her brother Sammy, Pecola prays for blue eyes, which hold two significant meanings: first, that people will see her as beautiful, and second, that it will alter her perspective of the world. She believes blue eyes will change her condition, failing to recognize her inner beauty as she is fixated on "the eyes of other people" (Morrison 47). Her perceived unattractiveness leads her to associate with broken pavement and dandelions, which are also deemed unattractive by the community. She feels a connection to these rejected things, as they link her to the world. The community views dandelions as "weeds" (47), wanting only their "jagged leaves" (47), not their "yellow heads." Pecola's emotional attachment to the dandelions shows she relates to their alienation. Her perception of them as beautiful, unlike others, suggests that beauty is a matter of individual

perception, not an inherent trait. However, Pecola cannot grasp inner beauty due to her fixation on white beauty and social status. The "yellow heads" of dandelions, discarded by Black women, symbolize their envy of blonde-haired white women. When Pecola enters "Yacobowski's Fresh Veg. Meat and Sundries Store" (48), she spends all her money on Mary Jane candies. By consuming candies featuring a white girl's face, she believes she can inherit white beauty standards. The label is described as:

> Smiling white face. Blonde hair in gentle disarray, blue eyes looking at her out of a world of clean comfort. The eyes are petulant, mischievous. To Pecola they are simply pretty. She eats the candy, and its sweetness is good. To eat the candy is somehow to eat the eyes, eat Mary Jane. Love Mary Jane. Be Mary Jane. (50)

This reflects her desperation to belong to the socially accepted white society. When paying three pennies to the shopkeeper, Mr. Yacobowski, she observes in his blue eyes "the total absence of human recognition—the glazed separateness" (48). Mr. Yacobowski represents the white gaze, viewing Black people solely through their skin color. Fanon argues that Black self-loathing stems not only from internalized negative stereotypes but also from a broader failure to recognize Black individuals as human: "A feeling of inferiority? No, a feeling of nonexistence" (139). Pecola's difficulty interacting with him highlights the divide between Black and white communities. His hesitation to touch her palm for the pennies, brushing her hand with his nails, underscores the harmful nature of racism. Leaving the store, "Pecola feels the inexplicable shame ebb" (50), and her perspective on the dandelions shifts: "They are ugly. They are weeds" (50). This change illustrates the significant influence of racism.

The desire for white beauty standards intensifies with the arrival of Maureen Peal, a "disrupter of seasons" (62), a fair-skinned Black girl with features associated with whiteness—green eyes, affluence, and attractiveness. The way "black boys didn't trip her in the halls; white boys didn't stone her; white girls didn't suck their teeth when she was assigned to be their work partners; black girls stepped aside when she wanted to use the sink in the girls' toilet" (62) shows disparities within the Black community, with those closer to whiteness receiving respect. Her entrance highlights how Black female characters develop self-hatred influenced by societal beauty ideals. Frieda and Claudia seek her flaws to balance her beauty against their perceived ugliness, nicknaming her "Six-finger-dog-tooth-meringue-pie" (63). Targeting Maureen's shortcomings perpetuates the cycle of oppression and racial animosity. Although Maureen and Claudia agree to a friendship, Claudia knows it will be a "dangerous friendship" due to class and race barriers, fueling her violent urges toward Maureen.

Pecola and Maureen's admiration for Betty Grable, a blonde-haired, blue-

eyed actress, reflects their loyalty to white beauty ideals. Maureen's story about a Black girl named Audrey, who went to a beauty parlor to style her hair like Hedy Lamarr's, underscores Black individuals' passion for altering their appearance to gain acceptance in white society. Fanon explains this artificial makeover:

For several years certain laboratories have been trying to produce a serum for "denegrification"; with all the earnestness in the world, laboratories have sterilized their test tubes, checked their scales, and embarked on researches that might make it possible for the miserable Negro to whiten himself and thus to throw off the burden of that corporeal malediction. Below the corporeal schema I had sketched a historico-racial schema. (111)

The unnamed narrator describes a group of Black women from small Southern towns, attractive and well-groomed, using Jergens lotion to enhance their skin and Dixie Peach to straighten their hair. Educated at land-grant colleges, they were prepared to work for white individuals and were obsessed with cleanliness, befriending only "clean" cats. Geraldine, one such woman, instructs her son, Louis Junior, that he is distinct from other Black children, whom she calls "niggers," allowing him to play only with "coloured" children. She dresses him like white children, keeps his hair short to avoid a Black texture, and applies lotion to prevent ashen skin. Junior also perceives Pecola as ugly. Pecola becomes figuratively linked to Geraldine's cat, which has black fur and blue eyes. Geraldine describes Pecola as: "Hair uncombed, dress falling apart, shoes untied and caked with dirt" (91), and views Black people as "they slept six in a bed, all their pee mixing together in the night... grass wouldn't grow where they lived. Flowers died. Shades fell down... Like flies they hovered; like flies they settled" (92), revealing her racial hatred. She calls Pecola a "nasty little black bitch" (92). Wallowitz notes, "Introduced in 'Winter,' the characters of Maureen Peal and Geraldine represent Morrison's critique of internalized racism. Both characters recognize the privileges that come with looking and acting 'white' and, as a result, learned to hate all that was 'black,' all of the 'Funk' that associated them with their culture" (156). Another mulatto character, Soaphead Church, "a cinnamon-eyed West Indian man with lightly browned skin" (167), believes himself superior to Black individuals. A British ancestor introduced a 'white strain' into his lineage in the early 1800s, and he misuses this heritage to exploit Pecola, who seeks blue eyes. Fanon terms this "Colour Prejudice" (118), explaining:

It [colour prejudice] is nothing more than the unreasoning hatred of one race for another, the contempt of the stronger and richer peoples for those whom they consider inferior to themselves, and the bitter resentment of those who are kept in subjection and are so frequently insulted. As colour is the most obvious outward manifestation of race it has been made the criterion by which men are judged, irrespective of their social or educational attainments. The light-skinned races have

come to despise all those of a darker colour, and the dark-skinned peoples will no longer accept without protest the inferior position to which they have been relegated. (118)

Fanon notes the Black community's self-denial: "The black man wants to be white" (56), and "every colonized people…finds itself face to face with the language of the civilizing nation; that is, with the culture of the mother country… He becomes whiter as he renounces his blackness" (18). They believe that appearing less Black makes them seem whiter, leading them to reject their own culture for acceptance in white society.

The construction of houses reflects differences between white and Black communities. Frieda and Claudia enter a wealthy white neighborhood to find Pecola: The streets changed; houses looked more sturdy, their paint was newer, porch posts straighter, yards deeper... The lakefront houses were the loveliest. Garden, furniture, ornaments, windows like shiny eyeglasses, and no sign of life... Lake Shore Park, a city park laid out with rosebuds, fountains, bowling greens, picnic tables... Black people were not allowed in the park, and so it filled our dreams. (105)

The white family's house where Pauline worked contrasts sharply with the Breedloves' home. Pauline's presence in the white kitchen décor symbolizes her desire to embody whiteness. The fear in the eyes of the white family's little girl reflects her learned fear of Black people. Fanon recounts a similar incident where a child on a train shouts, "Mama, see the Negro! I'm frightened" (112), showing how white children are taught prejudiced beliefs. The little girl addresses Pauline as "Polly," indicating her inferior status. Despite witnessing the white family's unhappiness, Pauline's view of whiteness as the standard remains unchanged. She is shocked to find their house dirty and unclean.

After Pecola's rape by her father, her psychosis, illustrated by dialogues with an imaginary companion, symbolizes the ultimate damage of Black individuals' fixation on white beauty ideals. Believing she has acquired blue eyes, she feels isolated from the community, who she thinks envy her. Her blue eyes reflect her unstable mental state, leading the community to view her more harmfully. Claudia understands that the Black community used Pecola as a scapegoat to purge their self-loathing by directing animosity toward her: "We were so beautiful when we stood astride her ugliness" (205).

Conclusion

Throughout the novel, Black characters are repeatedly exposed to representations of whiteness through films, literature, and sweets. Initially, Frieda and Pecola admire Shirley Temple's beauty, and Pauline spends her days in cinemas adoring white actresses. The association of beauty with blue eyes and whiteness drives Black individuals to aspire to white beauty standards. The Breedloves suffer

in poverty because they believe they are unattractive, and Pecola feels she deserves mistreatment at home due to her perceived unattractiveness. Beauty grants power to certain characters; for instance, Maureen Peal's beauty halts the violence Pecola faces from Black boys at school. The influence of beauty leads Pecola to believe that blue eyes will elevate her above her sufferings. However, her rape by her father drives her into isolation and insanity, highlighting the destructive power of racial self-hatred.

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