

The Black Community and the Female Child in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*

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Abstract

Black women writers have majorly articulated the denigrations, subjugation, and oppression that Black people, especially Black women, have had to contend with in their writings, which continues to impact their overall development as human beings. Toni Morrison's novel, *The Bluest Eye* brings to the fore the unfavourable conditions of Black people in Ohio of the early 1940s and the obliteration of a growing girl in a harsh racist environment. Morrison questions the attitude of the Black family and the Black community in protecting the female gender, particularly an innocent girl. This study interrogates the failure of the Black community in providing the much-needed survival strategy for the vulnerable Black girl, Pecola. The abdication of this responsibility opens the young girl to the vagaries of discrimination and the far-reaching consequences that negatively impact her persona. Using Black Feminist and psychoanalytic theory, this study reveals how the dysfunctional manifestation of the Black community hastens the female child's descent to destruction. Through literary analysis, this study argues that the Black communities need to address the preconception – which is even held in Black homes – that Black is inferior and that only *white* standards of beauty are the acceptable parameters for a viable existence.

Keywords: Race, Dysfunctional, Black Community, Female Child, Psyche

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Introduction

One of the respected voices to emerge in Black women's writing in the United States of America is Toni Morrison. She comes across as one of the most prolific and complex writers who remarkably appropriate language. Often in her works, there is the use of folk language, expressing culture with an emphasis on the community, and the individual. Morrison brings to the fore what she does in her fiction, imploring that:

“It should be beautiful and powerful, but it should also work. It should have something in it that enlightens; something in it that opens the door and points the way. Something in it that suggests what the conflicts are, and what the problems are. But it need not solve those problems because it is not a case study, it is not a recipe.” (Morrison 1984: 341)

Morrison adduces that one major characteristic of Black art is “the ability to be both print and oral literature: to combine those two aspects so that the stories read in silence, of course, but one should be able to hear them as well” (1984: 341). Importantly, she is determined in her works to capture the essence of being Black in a predominantly *white* environment and is not afraid to confront the complexities that shape Black life from the slavery period to contemporary times. To the extent to which slavery and its unsavoury companion, racism, continue to be interrogated in literary works, Missy Dehn Kubitschek acquiesces that Morrison remains at the forefront in acknowledging the “destructive psychological effects of racism” (1998: 30), especially on the Black children as well as adults in the community. By the 1970s, most countries on the African continent were rapidly gaining independence. As a result of this newfound freedom on the continent that supplied labourers to North America, movement across the two continents heightened. Inevitably African American literature grew, epitomised by the high number of Black women, who started writing and integrating Black African cultures into their works. Women's writings created new Black aesthetics, characterised by realism, and depiction of an accurate picture of Black lives. Thus, among those blazing the trail of propagating the cause of women and of Black communities as a whole in their writings are Maya Angelou, Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, Paule Marshall, Audre Lorde, Toni Cade Bambara, Gloria Naylor, Jamaica Kincaid, and others. Their concerns also encompass a commitment to womanhood. In this respect, Black women writers take a critical look at Black family relationships from a female perspective and vehemently address female exploitation and sexual abuse of both women and children. As Dana Williams observes, “contemporary black women writers also began to

critique black communities for their perpetuation of western beliefs and ideals which stunted the development of black people in general and black women in particular" (Williams 2009: 72). These and many other concerns become the focus of Black women writers, as exemplified in Toni Morrison's works. According to Gurleen Grewal:

"Her novels are multivoiced, multilayered, writerly, and speakerly, both famous and literary highbrow. In her writing, the confluence of two streams of the narrative tradition is made visible and audible: one is the oral tradition of storytelling passed down over generations." (Grewal 1998: 1)

There is a vast area of linkage between African culture and folk literature readily available in Morrison's works. As her central concern is with the community and the individual that dwells in it, Morrison takes, as it were, a slice of life and highlights it, bringing into sharp focus, the problems that are inherent in it. Lending credence to this, Marc C. Conner observes that each of Morrison's "novels thoroughly interrogate such issues as what constitutes a community, what function a community serves, what threatens a community, what helps it survive" (Conner 2000: 49). It is poignant to state that the relationship between the individual and the community has persistently engaged Morrison's attention in her narratives. Sula in *Sula* and Solomon Dead in *Song of Solomon* underscore the above assertion. The complex nature of this relationship continues to elicit responses in scholarship. Interestingly, many readers tend to hold Morrison's concentration on the community in an overwhelmingly positive light. As one can deduce from reading her works, the community appears as one that is nurturing, accommodating, and with a healing disposition, where the individual's place within that community is assured and guaranteed.

However, the reverse is the case as the communities depicted in Morrison's works, right from her earliest fiction, and down the line, are, in fact, "predatory, sterile, vampiric, cowardly threatening" (Conner 2000: 49). Morrison, therefore, engages in her avowed battles against those conditions that limit and inhibit the growth and the overall existence of the Black woman in society. To this end, Morrison captures the plight of Black girls, and as Susmita Roye observes, they are "perhaps the most imperceptible members of an already invisible black society in a race-segregated world [...], shrunk in stature by the crushingly diminishing combination of their skin colour, gender, and age" (2012: 212). Thus, the individual must take up the gauntlet and struggle desperately to raise the person's head above the waters amid the damaging influence the community

portends. Quite astonishingly, in this struggle, he or she is often on the losing side, which potentially encourages the fragmentation and destruction of these desperate individuals. Therefore, it would be safe to admit that Morrison's engagement with the relationship between the individual itself and the community the individual dwells in shows an exciting progression. This situation is quite manifest in the novel, *The Bluest Eye*, as well as in *Sula*, where the individuals and the community thoughtlessly victimise the female characters, and in this case, ultimately destroy both Pecola and Sula, respectively. According to Lee, "they reveal a consistency in Morrison's vision of the human condition, particularly in her preoccupation with the influence the community can wield on an individual's achievement and retention of an integrated, acceptable self" (Lee 1984: 346).

Morrison's handling of this vital relationship is highly illuminating. She employs the quest-motif style to unveil the message she hopes to pass on to her readers. In doing this, she deliberately imbues her characters with responsibilities and sets targets and goals for them. Not only that, in allowing them to discover their responsibilities they find that achieving these goals not only prove difficult, but they are also varied. Burrowing in on Morrison's distinctiveness in the presentation of the human question, Melissa Walker reveals that Morrison explores, "the impact that social conditions have on the private acts of individuals and provokes her readers to confront the historically determined social parameters within which individuals create their private lives" (Walker 1991: 51). Unquestionably, Blacks who manifest a penchant for white symbols and embrace unfathomable aspirations are left with a fractured psyche that impacts their existence.

Feminism as a concept, which has its origins in European women's struggles for their civil and labour rights, emerged in the late 18th century and spread across Europe and America in the 19th century. As a result of different reasons, ranging from political to economic considerations, scholars from the 20th century onwards have weighed in on this concept. Maggie Humm adduces that, "the word feminism can stand for a belief in sexual equality combined with a commitment to eradicate sexist domination and to transform society" (Humm 1992: 1). Nonetheless, it is important not to lose sight of the fact that "while clearly, women must be the starting point of feminist theory, this must also recognise that gender division is not the only significant source of social inequality and that for many women, race, or class may be more important" (Bryson 1992: 266). This resonates with Black scholarship, which has criticized feminism for focusing on the needs of middle-class *white* women and paying less attention to women of colour. For example, Betty Friedan's book *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), although

seen as a pioneering work in the contemporary feminist movement, has been criticized for being written as if Black and lower-class women did not exist.

As articulated by its proponents like Angela Davis, Patricia Hill Collins, bell hooks and a host of others, Black feminist theory becomes poignant for this study as it interrogates the female condition in a patriarchal and racist environment with all the trappings aimed at denigrating, dehumanizing, and subjugating the Black woman. Black feminism markedly interrogates the three prongs of oppression against Black women: gender bias, class, and colour discrimination. From the slavery era to the contemporary period, it has focused on Black women's oppression, family, work, Black womanhood, love relationships, sexual politics, and suppression of their individuality, among its core themes. As Barbara Smith asserts, "any discussion of Afro-American writers can rightfully begin with the fact that for most of the time we have been in this country, we have been categorically denied not only literacy but the most minimal possibility of a decent human life" (Smith 1985: 169). In *The Bluest Eye*, the denial of decent living for the Black girl is strikingly evident.

Also, psychoanalytic theory is crucial for this study. Credited to Viennese neurologist and psychologist Sigmund Freud, particularly his publication *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900), it has evolved over the years. According to Charles Bressler, Freud believes that within the human mind

"hidden from the workings of the conscious mind, the unconscious [...] plays a large part in how we act, think and feel. The best avenue for discovering some of the content and activity of the unconscious, [...] is through our dreams. It is the interaction of the conscious and the unconscious, and not either one working in isolation, by which we shape ourselves and our world." (Bressler 1994: 88)

When applying psychoanalytic theory to literary studies, it has been argued that the individual character within a text comes to the fore, as readers develop their conceptions of each character's personality as an integral part of their interpretation of the text, rather than seeing them as solely the author's ideas. (Bressler 1994: 96)

In particular relevant for this study is the work of psychiatrist Frantz Fanon and sociologist and historian W.E.B. Du Bois, who address the impact of racism on the psyche. In *The Souls of Black Folk*, W.E.B Du Bois outlines the experience of a double consciousness, as seen in Black peoples struggle to reconcile their racial identity with their American identity: "two souls, two thoughts, two unrecon-

ciled strivings [...] in one dark body” (Du Bois 2007: 7). Furthermore, in *The Wretched of the Earth* the Martiniquean writer, Frantz Fanon weighs in on the issue of psyche in “Colonial War and Mental Disorders,” and opines that what manifests during the period of colonization is for Black people to see themselves as less human “which is the direct product of oppression” (1983: 201).

In *The Bluest Eye*, this can be seen in the form of internalized racism in the psyche of the young Black girl. While one acknowledges the setting of the novel as Lorain, Ohio, also of significance is the corresponding situation prevalent at the time of publication of the novel when pride in everything Black was gaining momentum. Evidently, by 1970, the struggle for Black power and Black pride was a major concern for racial justice, and many African Americans were not attuned to the values inherent in middle-class existence and that of white American society. Thus, *The Bluest Eye* contributed to the growing awareness at the time of the damage inflicted on Black children by a culture that exalts the white aesthetics (Walker 1991: 56).

The Female Child and Her Quest for Acceptability in a Racist Environment

The Bluest Eye is a quest for identity by an eleven-year-old Black girl, Pecola, who yearns to have blue eyes to help her reconstruct her identity that she sees as ugly, and which the society she lives in also sees as ugly. But in buying into the mainstream culture of acquiring blue eyes, she can be guaranteed comfort in life and acceptability in the environment. The desire for a new status from the image of her family (Breedlove), which is “poor and black [...] And they believed they were ugly” (34). As everything about her family continues to collapse right in her face, she feels that if she had blue eyes, “[i]f those eyes of hers were different, that is to say; beautiful she would be different” (44). Her desire to possess blue eyes cannot be divorced from the influences of her mother, Pauline Breedlove, who frequently visits the movies early in her married life, where she becomes infatuated and fascinated with white women’s beauty and proceeds to hold in contempt anything Black, including “ugly” Pecola. This distaste particularly rubs off on the daughter, who thinks that love, as expressed in mainstream white movies, is meant only for white girls with blue eyes. Accordingly, Walker acquiesces that, “Pecola’s sense of worthlessness and her desire to have blue eyes is further reinforced by her squalid living conditions in the inadequate space of a storefront” (1991: 56). She, therefore, looks forward with great hope to make a turnaround in the life of her family. This quest idea resonates with Lee, who declares that the young Pecola Breedlove searches “painfully for self-esteem as a means of imposing order on the chaos of her world” (1984: 346). To help us

understand this terrible situation better, Morrison lays at our feet a series of incidents that go to reinforce the misnomer of existence in Pecola's life as well as that of her immediate family: "All things in her life are flux and anticipation. But her blackness is static and dread. And it is the blackness that accounts for, that creates the vacuum edged with distaste in white eyes." (47)

Also, at the shop where Pecola goes to buy candy, Mr Yacobowski looks at her with what Morrison describes as "the total absence of human recognition" (47). Mr Yacobowski's disdain becomes more apparent when she points at what she is looking for in the shop, whereupon he replies: "'What, These? These?' Phlegm and impatience mingle in his voice" (48). To limit any physical contact with Pecola, he snatches the change out of her hand with the merest of contact. Further evidence manifests concerning the unaccommodating and uncompromising society, especially the cruel way she is thrown out by Geraldine: "'Get out,' she said, her voice quiet. 'You nasty little black bitch. Get out of my house'" (90), she yells at Pecola, whom Junior, Geraldine's son had lured into the house, and in the ensuing struggle with her over the cat, hit it violently against the widow, and it collapsed. He turns around though to blame Pecola. Evident here is the class difference among Blacks, as Geraldine sees Pecola not measuring up to her middle-class status, which she proudly flaunts to her white middle-class peers.

The same experience unfolds when she disrupts the orderliness at the Fisher house by mistakenly knocking a deep-dish with berry cobbler on the kitchen floor. It was Pauline, her mother, who works in the house, who shouts at her: "Pick up that wash and get on out of here, so I can get this mess cleaned up" (107). That Pecola's mother, who ought to be the first line of protection against any untoward situation to the young girl, instead chooses to descend on her clearly underscores Ruth Rosenberg's submission that, "expressions of maternal concern are seldom verbalized in *The Bluest Eye*; rather, they are beaten into the child, inscribed on her skin" (1987: 438). Similarly, Debra T. Werrlein acquiesces that, "the sight of Pecola's abused body on the kitchen floor incites Pauline to beat instead of comfort her daughter" (Werrlein 2005: 61). Pauline Breedlove's fractured psyche is undeniably more pronounced in her pandering to the whims of the rich Fishers' which suggests, as Roye (2012: 221) mentions, that "she is indirectly indulging her dreams of a different world [...] she absorbs them without question," thus helping her assuage the pains from her denied and deprived girlhood. Therefore, it is safe to argue that for Pauline, it would amount to a travesty of existence if her daughter were to experience the joy of her dream, while the mother had a different fate in existence during her girlhood.

This development reinforces the existing gulf between the two, hence her failure to bond with her child and realise when she is drifting away. As Rosenberg observes, “the socialization pattern thoughtlessly transmitted from mother to daughter, from Pauline to Pecola, are fatal to that child’s self-esteem” (1987: 440). It exemplifies the point about the community chiefly destroying the girl and denying her any element of self-worth. Pauline Breedlove had so immersed herself in whites’ standards of beauty in the Fisher home that she kept “this beauty for herself, a private world” (100). Pauline’s situation attracts attention, perhaps because as Pecola’s mother her role becomes immediately significant. A lot is expected of her, as the first port of call in the whole chain of raising the child. In that vein, Morrison portrays a similarly affected motherhood, suggesting that histories of suffering for Black people not only debilitate parents, but turn them from nurturers into oppressors (Werrlein 2005: 62). But again, separated from the rural south with its attendant privacy and freedom of imagination, Pauline falls prey to the destructive ideas of physical beauty and romantic love as measures of self-worth (Christian 1985: 48).

It is instructive to note that Pauline’s early childhood with its few fond memories starkly differs from the hostile environment she finds herself in and her quest to accommodate herself. Thus, she relishes her work with the Fishers; “her job with the Fishers provides her with the semblance of acceptance and community she cannot find or create in her own home and neighbourhood” (Kuenz 1993: 425). This is akin to Avey Johnson abandoning her heritage just to belong to the middle class in Marshall’s *Praisesong for the Widow*. Pauline’s tragedy is encapsulated in De Weever’s (1991: 95) submission that, “when people of minority cultures strive to adopt fully values and ideals of the dominant culture, their psyche is fractured in varying degrees”. Joyce Pettis brings to our attention that, “the fractured psyche is identifiable (or suspected) through feelings and states of incompleteness, vulnerability, alienation, indirection, displacement, and identity diffusion” (1995: 12). Pauline operates on two levels of existence which further lends credence to her uncharitable situation. At the home of her employers, the Fishers’, she appears accommodating and welcoming but remains unaccommodating and almost brute-like at her own home, demonstrated in her relationship with her daughter, Pecola. In this vein, “Black women writers show how the ideals of mainstream culture cause indescribable suffering and fracture the lives in black women because these ideals cannot be reached, being existentially alien to black people” (De Weever 1991: 97). Black feminist scholars have their sights firmly set on it by taking a cursory look at the women’s condition, both in Black homes and the dominant white environment, and the psychological impact on the female gender encapsulated in the theoretical thrust of this study. *The Bluest*

Eye, therefore, captures the psychological devastation of an innocent poor Black girl who seeks acceptance by embracing the white culture of standards of beauty, the possession of blonde hair, white skin, and blue eyes.

Accordingly, Grewal opines that “*The Bluest Eye*, is considered by most readers to be a rather bleak novel for the events, its plot evinces little hope” (1998: 34). This apparent bleakness pervades the life of young Pecola, and her desire to acquire ‘blue eyes’ holds only the bright spot in her life. Morrison equally unearths Pecola's position when a group of boys taunt her after school. This scene is strikingly remarkable as it offers the reader an opportunity to examine Pecola's status as an outsider through her own eyes (65). It is worth mentioning and indeed painful because her peers in school are excluding her from their circle. The jeers themselves focus on Pecola's Blackness and her father's nakedness, foreshadowing an event that further complicates an already battered and unhappy life, when the father, Cholly Breedlove, rapes his daughter. Having just been rescued from the boys by her two school friends, Claudia and Frieda, and the new girl in town, Maureen Peal, Pecola's world crumbles as soon as Maureen taunts her about her father's nakedness. All these painful experiences manifest themselves in Pecola's unquenching desire to transform her Blackness into that “essence of whiteness”; the blond hair and bluest eyes of Shirley Temple, the epitome of beauty.

Furthermore, it is pertinent to recall that young Pecola had only just witnessed a brutal fight between her mother and father, a situation she believes could be improved by having blue eyes, as her suffering in the cantankerous atmosphere of her parents' house would be thus reduced. As a result of this continuous harassment of her person and its impact on her psyche, she dissolves into what can be regarded as wishful thinking and a desire of self-effacing, when she pleads, “‘Please, God,’ she whispered into the palm of her hand. ‘Please make me disappear’” (43). Grewal posits that “the defeat of the self in Morrison's fiction is demonstrable through body imagery that has to do with shame, suppression, and shrinkage; the dissenting self inhabits a robust body that refuses to atomise itself or rid itself of ‘funk’” (1998: 37). The descent to self-effacing by the young Pecola only shows the impact of the unrelenting assault on her person and psyche.

The Community and its Dysfunctional Manifestation on the Black Girl

The relationship between Blacks in their community resonates with the frosty and unhealthy relationships associated with the oppressive culture caused by racism. As we have observed, one way to stand back from the despicable

treatment the community is unleashing on the young Pecola is for her to cease to exist and hope to find solace in this way. However, she comes to a harsh realisation that for her to "disappear", perhaps into thin air, may not easily happen and may only remain in the realm of her dreams. Kuenz (1993: 424) suggests that "when others – Mr. Yacobowski, her teachers, etc. – cannot or will not see her, then she ceases to be seen at all or sees herself in the iconographic images she can attain only in madness." Her quest for identity and the desire to change and improve her image to appear as a beautiful girl, drives her to seek out Elihue, leader of the soap head church, who claims to have the powers to give blue eyes (139). However, the situation worsens when her father, Cholly, returns from one of his drunken sprees and rapes her (128). This despicable act would all but put an end to the chequered existence of a young girl who only seeks for a better fate. This situation is different from Marguerite in Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, whose community rallies around her after her rape by her mother's live-in lover, Mr Freeman. As Manuela Lopez Ramirez writes, "Pecola's rape by her father at the age of eleven is the culmination of a series of shaming and denigrating events in her life, which will lead to the complete dissociation of herself" (2013: 80). There is no doubt the Breedloves' unpalatable experience of racism continues to plague them in their relationship with their daughter and by extension other Blacks.

The Black community is not absolved from the negative role since they have internalized Western values and turn to victimise themselves. For one who was branded ugly at birth, the community insists that "Pecola will never be an insider in the black community and cannot possibly hope for acceptance beyond that community" (Harris 1991: 21). It was relatively easy for them to achieve that because the individual is a child, as evinced in the rape incidents where another woman in the community accuses Pecola of not doing enough to dissuade Cholly and his advances. It is worth noting how easy it is for the Black child to be adultified, a phenomenon in which Black children are seen as less innocent and more adult than their white peers (Epstein 2017). Significantly, this happens to Pecola as evidenced in the woman's assertion above. Nicole King emphasizes that slave status was used to overwrite all distinctions of humanity, including childhood. And that the enslaved child subject is excluded from childhood and thus adultified (2022: 59). This is the crux of the matter, the obvious culpability of the community. According to Samantha Alongi, "Black society's lack of empathy for their members is also a cause [...] The very same society that is supposed to sustain and support Pecola upon learning of her rape and pregnancy, ultimately turns its back on her" (2009: 102).

Conner asserts that in *The Bluest Eye*, “Pecola Breedlove forms a peculiarly unstable core of the book” (2000: 52). This statement is quite understandable as she seems to be floating around in the community that she yearns to be part of and is not entirely accepted. This “unstable” nature stems from the fact that her father, out of drunkenness, had burned down their house, and automatically the whole family became “outsiders”. It manifests when Claudia MacTeer's mother informs her that, “a girl who had no place to go” (15) is coming to stay with them. The palpable fear in the statement attests to how the Black community relate to Pecola as an ‘outdoor,’ who had no home, and whom they find difficult to integrate as one of them. But through the MacTeers’, who took Pecola in after her rape, “Morrison illustrates that the values that can sustain and provide the guidelines for growth are not alien to the community” (Harris 1991: 42). Herein lies the disparity between Claudia and Pecola. Although both families are Black, it's clear that the MacTeers, despite the challenges of poverty they face, pay much attention to their girls and care for their welfare, as evidenced by their response to Frieda's sexual harassment by her schoolteacher. In this vein, Darwin Turner acquiesces, “[b]ecause Claudia's perspective is not as distorting as a result of sheltering under love and youth, Morrison tells the novel's grimmer story through an omniscient narrator” (1984: 362). Through the third-person narrator, Morrison chronicles the brutality that Pecola encounters in society. Thus, Pecola's undue exposure to the “outdoors” invariably leads to her ruination. Conner reminds us that, “this fear of being ‘outdoors’ is ‘the real terror of life,’ a consuming anxiety about being without a fixed abode, without a house” (2000: 53). The narrator captures the dire straits situation: “if you are outdoors, there is no place to go... outdoors was the end of something, an irrevocable, physical fact” (15). It demonstrates the shape of the situation the young Pecola finds herself in and must grapple with if she is to attain self-worth.

The point of interest here is that the idea of one not having a home is a dominant feature in Morrison's fiction. This trend persists in *The Bluest Eye*. As Conner observes, “it defines the community's greatest fear and also its relation to Pecola” (2000: 53). Therefore, Pecola is always outdoors, never able to integrate herself into the community. She is consistently on the peripheries, literally moving from house to house, searching for a fixed place of comfort and security (Conner 2000: 53). It is the urge and eagerness to belong and to have an identity that she relentlessly pursues. Eventually, her father violates her, which drives her to madness. Pecola's condition elicits added concern here because of her age and the far-reaching consequences of her violation. Ramirez outlines the factors that account for the disintegration of the female adolescent which includes, first, “owing to their gender and age, the adolescent is extremely vulnerable and,

consequently, more prone to become a victim in adverse circumstances. Secondly, psychic disorders in one's teens are particularly tragic and appalling, since they map out the future" (Ramirez 2013: 76). The outcome of Pecola's desires is a testament to the above assertion.

But in the character Claudia, we see quite the opposite of Pecola, especially in her inner state, even though she is not living "outside" like Pecola. Barbara Christian (1980) reveals that "Claudia resents the dolls, tries to make sense out of the contradictions she finds around her about love and beauty. She becomes the girl-woman in the book with whom we can identify" (Christian 1980: 141). It is quite pertinent here to state that although she is a narrator providing that vital young person's thoughts, the story primarily concentrates on girls' survival in a community that is not ready to bend over backwards to protect and accommodate them. Grewal offers insight into Claudia's narrator role, demonstrating that through her [Claudia's] growing understanding of the meaning of Pecola's story, Morrison is staging an emergent consciousness" (1998: 34). It is revealing to create such a character, for instance, in contrast to the novel, *Sula*, which features an adult consciousness. It quite significantly heightens the place of the female child in a charged, racist environment.

Elaborating further on Pecola Breedlove's subjugation in the community, Grewal opines that "*The Bluest Eye* also portrays the artist as a black girl who considered all speech a code, an obstacle to overcome [...] all gestures subject to careful analysis" (1998: 34). Remarkably, Claudia's narrative of childhood experiences depicts a desire to relive and reflect upon the personal and the past to comprehend its lived exclusions. The rewarding scenario this has created is that through Claudia's first-person account, the consciousness of childhood is given as an adult understanding, exhibiting an uninhibited desire channelled toward a political critique. Instructively, this is a profound perception that Morrison has done here by recreating the mind of a young girl to comment and talk like an adult in a milieu that does not reflect her age. Burrowing in on this, Marilyn Mobley McKenzie acknowledges that:

"It is through this narrator and her retrospective reading of Pecola's demise, and the community's complicity in that demise, that the reader learns the layers of meaning inscribed in this novel. The narrator's ability to assess the fate of Pecola and the community, to tell the story in all its complex beauty and tragic ugliness [...] [Pecola] whose descent into madness represents freedom in her mind, but a tragic enclosure inside the narrow spaces of disconnection from the community and the larger society forever. (2004: 222-223)

Morrison has structured the plot into a four-season cycle spanning a year. It has a prologue that heralds these periods, Autumn, Winter, Spring, and Summer. It is important to note this, given the age of the girls as they prepare to transition into womanhood. It becomes increasingly clear that Morrison is suggesting “a tale of growth and the eventual fruition of ‘summer’” (Lee 1984: 346). The prologue would not be without its significance. A critical scenario that should also be considered is the imagery at the beginning of the novel, where the expectation that the autumn season would offer a rewarding experience, but the content of the prologue had put a wedge in the actualities that the season could offer, especially the sunny summer. But this was not to be, as Claudia reveals when she laments: “Quiet as it is, 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” (9). Therefore, a new awareness has come as Claudia looks back on the environment that was “unyielding to both marigold seeds and Pecola Breedlove” (Lee 1984: 347). Her view tallies with that of Grewal, who observes that “the introductory inscription of competing texts followed by the voice of the narrator juxtaposing one unnatural event in 1941 – ‘there were no marigolds’ – with another unusual event – ‘Pecola was having her father's baby.’ Thus, establishing Pecola as the marigold nipped in the bud of the Dick-and-Jane text, we are led to consider the actual image of seed, flower, and earth. Both are nursery metaphors that embody inculcation and cultivation (Grewal 1998: 22).

On the strength of narration, if the third-person narratives depict the theme of “subjection charting dilapidation processes” (Grewal 1998: 32), Claudia's first-person narrative enables us to see the possibilities of an individual and perhaps collective resistance. Thus, the complicated relationship between the individual and community in *The Bluest Eye* comes alive through the ambiguous symbol of the house. Conner rightly points out that “the novel opens with the Dick and Jane primer that promises the idyllic home and family for which Pecola searches for, throughout the book” (2000: 53). As can be seen in the following passage, the reality is the opposite: “Here is the house. It is green and white. It has a red door. It is very pretty. Here is the family. Mother, Father, Dick, and Jane live in the green-and-white house. They are very happy” (2).

One significant development Conner observes, is that as this “chant manifests in subsequent paragraphs, it becomes a frantic, unpunctuated stream of language without order, suggesting that behind this myth of a comforting and nurturing home lies a reality that is recognisable and disrupting” (2000: 53). The underlying-

ing point is that right at the beginning of the novel, there were high hopes about existence in the community. But in no time these hopes have been dashed, and the very community that should have opened its arms, and embraced people like Pecola has been at the forefront of destroying them. Conner agrees that “not only does the community fail to aid her in her distress; they are ultimately shown to be complicitous in Pecola's destruction” (2000: 57). This reinforces the thrust of the present study in asserting the culpability of the Black community in instilling in the young Black girl that she was not only ugly, but unwanted, and despised. Despite the glaring wrong choices Pecola made as a result of the internalization of the mainstream culture of standards of beauty, the community owe it upon itself to envelope her with love as a survival strategy in confronting racism, and its obfuscating impact.

Morrison embraces the folk tradition in language use. Turner contends that there is a lyrical expository style in *The Bluest Eye* (1984: 363). To this end, the levels, and class distinctions manifest in the language used by the people. It is demonstrated by the way Pauline Breedlove speaks and those of the middle class like Maureen Peal. Pecola's rape is the unspeakable horror at the centre of Morrison's narrative, as indicated by the very inability of the community to tell the story coherently. Conner argues that the “tale is communicated only in fragments of talk, that must be properly placed in order to piece a story together, a secret, terrible, awful story” (2000: 55). The terrible situation accounts for the different voices in the whole narration; spanning from the narrator, Claudia Macteer, Pauline Breedlove, and of course the fantasies that emanate from young Pecola's mind that is psychologically bereft of discernment of the imperious condition of Black people. As Walker points out, “the four parts of the novel – Autumn, Winter, Spring, Summer – are constructed from fragments of these various voices” (1991: 51).

Similarly, Morrison submits that at the centre of *The Bluest Eye* “is a terrible story about things one would rather not know anything about” (Morrison 1984: 341). There is no way, therefore, that the community can absolve itself from it. The discovery comes in the form of their reaction to Pecola's trauma. Disappointingly, they turn away from her denying her the security and protection she desires, but which she labours fervently to establish so that she could be recognized and eventually consolidate her identity. For instance, the Black community in Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* symbolized by the aristocrat of the community, Mrs Bertha Flowers, helps in bringing Marguerite out of her cocoon after having been raped. Also evident is the support and camaraderie Selina receives from Suggie Sweet, a sexually liberated Black

woman in her journey to formulate her identity in Paule Marshall's *Brown Girl, Brownstones*.

Claudia and Frieda admit that the community is part of the very cause of Pecola's pathetic desire for blue eyes. Thus, by holding up those standards of beauty they inadvertently contribute to influencing the mind of the young girl in yearning, albeit erroneously, for a terrible impactful exercise on her psyche. Morrison, according to Alongi, uses the story as "a means of educating audiences on the unfortunate side effects of internalized racism, lack of empathy for one another, and the power of looking at a situation from multiple viewpoints" (2009: 101). To appreciate the impact of the community's action, Alongi states that, "internalized racism is manifest when a person actively and knowingly discriminates against a member of their own race and experiences a tacit or perhaps explicit revulsion for one's own race, fostered by the society" (2009: 101). It is clear that the community in *The Bluest Eye* manifests this phenomenon by embracing white-held notions of beauty with open arms, forcing Pecola and her peers to measure themselves through the lens of ugliness. Mention must be made that Claudia particularly reminisces on her relationship with Pecola and is gripped with an obvious sense of guilt for not having helped her, but also being culpable in welcoming the same values that led to Pecola's destruction. Thus, sundered and alienated from her people, Pecola is denied acceptance into the only world she can know. According to Phyllis Hastings, "*The Bluest Eye* is a social tragedy, the failure of society and not just an individual" (1990: 66).

Conclusion

Toni Morrison demonstrates through this timeless work why she is revered and respected in literary circles around the world. She unwaveringly confronts and brings to focus events that happen in our everyday lives, but which we may not know nor fully appreciate. In turning the spotlight on the Black community, Morrison questions the role of the population in the survival of the individual, especially when such an individual is a deprived and vulnerable female child. Morrison emphasizes it by calling out the Black middle class to reserve some concern for the denied and disadvantaged amongst them, and not be in cahoots with the culture that perpetuate denigration, and its much-vaunted standards of beauty in measuring themselves. Pecola's destruction concerns her community, and its liability is glaring, evident in her isolation, and eventual descent into madness.

This study, therefore, indicts the Black family, community, and elite for buying into Western values that continue to alienate them from their heritage, and place

them at the mercy of destructive values. Herein lies the need for literature and academic research to make a conscious and concerted effort to engage, interrogate and bring about radical change through writings that celebrate African consciousness and heritage, so that future Pecolas would be well placed to contain and nullify the ignoble and negative influences of racism on the coming generations. This call has become imperative in a world where Blacks are increasingly losing their values on the excuse of globalization, wherein the imported values continue to hold themselves aloof as some kind of totem needed for existence.

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