The Enigma of the Self: An Exposition of the Black Female Identity Crisis in Toni Morrison's "The Bluest Eye"

Amina HARRACHE[1,*], Mallek BENLAHCENE[2]

[1] Batna 2 University (Algeria) amina.harrache@univ-tebessa.dz
[2] Batna 2 University (Algeria) m.benlahcene@univ-batna2.dz

Abstract:

The significance of the Black female identity in the stratified predominantly White American society have been under scrutiny for the past half a century. Affiliated with two socially persecuted groups, African American women felt unavoidably compelled to fall under certain societal patterns and paradigms, which expectedly fail to represent their authentic sense of self. The conundrum encountered by Black females in "The Bluest Eye" is in fact aesthetically rooted; Toni Morrison vividly portrayed the destructive outcome of blindingly conforming to the standardized beauty concepts created by a dominant social group, and systematically masterminded for everyone to embrace and adapt to regardless of their cultural backgrounds and skin color. The novel exemplifies Morrison's unswerving fight against the underestimation of Black women's existence and the devaluation of their self-worth and identity.

Keywords: *Black female identity, Black females, self-worth, societal patterns, standardized beauty concepts, Stratified predominantly White American Society, The Bluest Eye, Toni Morrison.*

---

[*] Corresponding Author.

I. INTRODUCTION

"The white American trinity of ideals is extreme Protestantism, Constitutional democracy, and industrial capitalism" (Bell, 1987, p. 20). On the other hand, Black American ideals stem from the notion that African Americans are disinherited and diasporic people, characterized by their tenacity of spirit, pursuit of social justice, and their exceptional trust in the transformative strength found within enduring hardships and exercising patience. As double marginalized members of the society, Black women have a distinct experience compared to Black men or White women, as they belong to two historically oppressed groups. They have been subjected to pejorative images resulting from a long history of racism and misogyny, perpetuated by Whites and their demeaning perceptions of people of color. While there may be common aspects between Black females and Black males due to their shared experiences as two sides of the same coin, Black women face double alienation and heightened jeopardy due to the intersection of American race and gender ideals. Notably, female African American intellectuals and role models like Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, Maya Angelou, and Oprah Winfrey have played leading roles in the struggle for equality, demonstrating strength, resilience, and bravery in the face of adversity throughout the course of history.

Toni Morrison, in particular, made significant contributions to shifting attention towards African American women and Black female identity through her versatile and imaginative works, encompassing both fiction and non-fiction. Morrison addressed a wide range of issues where the Black female experience was at the core of her exploration and narrative. By challenging stereotypical beliefs and clichéd representations surrounding the Black female identity and existence, the writer acknowledged the position of African American women in a racist and patriarchal American society. The present study revolves around the following questions:

- Racialized and gendered, what does being "on the wrong side of history" mean for African American women?
- How did Womanism emerge from the realm of feminism?
- Are Black women societal conformists or unapologetic rebels?
- To what extent can "The Bluest Eye" be considered the ideal illustration of Black female vulnerability and resilience at the same time?
- To what magnitude has Toni Morrison's outcry for race and gender equity contributed to the formation of African American female identity?

1- Dethroning the Canon: Being a Black Female and the Struggle to Fit in

Race is a societal creation used to classify individuals, primarily relying on outwardly visible traits such as skin color and ancestral background. There is no scientific basis or noticeable discrepancy among different racial categories. The concept of race contributes to prejudice and power imbalances and has become deeply embedded within our personal identities, institutions, and cultural norms. Haslanger (2000) explains "races are those groups demarcated by the geographical associations accompanying perceived body type, when those associations take on evaluative significance concerning how members of the group should be viewed and treated" (Haslanger, 2000, p. 44). However, Haslanger (2000) argues that there is no way the term "race" can be defined without acknowledging "gender", another complex and highly relevant to such a societal equation. Haslanger (2000) points out that "The issue of terminological appropriation is especially important, and especially sensitive, when the terms in question designate categories of social identity such as 'race' and 'gender'" (p. 35).

The binary system is the most effective in dividing gender into two distinctively different groups (female and male). In this course, gender refers to the biological, social, psychological, cultural, and behavioral characteristics of being a man or a woman; those who do not identify as such are considered non-binary. In this regard, Haslanger asserts:

I believe that gender can be fruitfully understood as a higher-order genus that includes not only the hierarchical social positions of man and woman, but potentially other non-hierarchical social positions defined in part by reference to reproductive function. I believe gender as we know it takes hierarchical forms as men and women; but the

theoretical move of treating men and women as only two kinds of gender provide resources for thinking about other (actual) genders, and the political possibility of constructing non-hierarchical genders (Haslanger, 2000, p. 43).

It is possible to disregard the fact that most individuals have a generally established perception of their bodies as either male or female. This categorization, influenced by prevailing beliefs, limits their access to positions or opportunities due to a system of gender-based discrimination, especially when we concentrate solely on specific situations where gender is negotiated. Recognizing the significance of comprehending unequal systems, it becomes essential to situate men and women within their corresponding social classes, considering a broader framework of privilege and subordination (Haslanger, 2000).

Race and gender hold significant importance as fundamental aspects that shape cultural ideologies worldwide. Although each culture constructs its own understandings of race and gender, there is consistently a social construction surrounding these distinctions. This construction often leads to the establishment of institutionalized inequalities (Belkhir & Barnett, 2001). The eternal ordeal of African American women stems from racial segregation caused by long-term enslavement and perpetuated by gender bias and prejudice. They had to endure the torments of gender discrimination inflicted not just by White males, but also by men of the same race. For Black women, Feminism is frequently more about the group than the self, more cultural than political. Consequently, their focus primarily revolves around the distinctive cultural values associated with women from their particular ethnic group rather than considering women as a whole. Trudier Harris (2001) in her book entitled: "Saints, Sinners, Saviors: Strong Black Women and African American literature," points out:

> Designed to affirm the continued institutionalization of white power, comforting images of black women were favored over others and are therefore prominent in the American popular imagination. Those comforting images range from the large black women who keep black men in line for white Americans, to the very large black women who are eternally happy to be in the kitchen making pancakes for their white charges, to the mammy figures specifically conceived to provide broad bosoms of comfort for whites (p. 2).

Due to the degrading experience of being labeled as the "other," African American women found themselves trapped in a precarious situation of double conformity. They were expected to navigate the expectations of a predominantly White society while also conforming to the standards set by masculinity within the Black community itself.

Black women have felt a sense of responsibility and obligation to ensure that the history of the United States accurately reflects their lives and experiences. This role involves not only uncovering and sharing the stories, voices, lives, and experiences of those who have been silenced but also challenging the historical dominance of White and male historians. It goes beyond that to question the content and construction of history, as well as the credibility and accuracy of historical narratives (Pratt-Clarke, 2018).

African American women face unique challenges and forms of discrimination that result from the compounding effects of both their race and gender. This intersectionality shapes various aspects of their lives, including social, economic, and political dimensions.

2- A Nuanced Conceptualization: Feminism Vs. Womanism

Throughout history, women have faced enduring challenges in their quest for equality, a struggle that persists in various regions worldwide. In numerous parts of the world, women encounter discrimination and subjugation when compared to men, which highlights the ongoing fight for their rights. This vulnerability is particularly pronounced for women residing in conflict-affected areas. Furthermore, despite progress, job discrimination continues to exist in many Western nations, while the pervasive issue of violence against women remains a grave global concern. In response to these forms of discrimination and oppression, women have united and formed resistance movements with the aim of achieving gender equality and establishing a fair and inclusive society. Feminism and Womanism stand out as influential movements and social foundations in the ongoing battle for women's rights, recognizing the significance of

women's integral role within society.

Feminism encompasses a range of political and social groups and ideas that advocate for women to have equal rights, opportunities, and power as men, promoting the notion of gender equality. The term "Feminism" derives from the French Féminisme, which was coined during the late-nineteenth-century political upheavals in Paris. Feminism may be characterized as the struggle for equal rights and has been described as a political and social movement that occurred in terms of "waves." The first wave corresponded to the campaign for women's suffrage, which was eventually won in 1920 with the Nineteenth Amendment. During the 1960s and 1970s, the second wave fought for greater equality in education, the workplace, and other areas (Easton, 2012). Despite addressing gender and equality concerns, feminism rarely achieved equality for women of color. Historically, feminism was predominantly a middle-class White women's movement, which often faced criticism for marginalizing the more profound struggles of Black women; in this sense, the dilemma doesn't only stem from sexism but racism as well. In her article entitled "Being Lovingly, Knowingly Ignorant: White Feminism and Women of Color," Mariana Ortega (2006), a woman of color herself, writes:

> The desire, the great wanting, of this feminist is to be respected in a field that claims to care about women of color and their thought. She sees herself as someone who really understands women of color, who is putting the voices of these women on the map, who is "giving" them a voice. She constructs a reality that is in fact closer to what she wants it to be rather than what it is-a reality in which the voices of women of color are still taken seriously only if well-known white feminists quote them (p. 62).

The distinction between White women's gender politics and that of Black women's is that White women have a definite moment when they recognize oppression exists. Yet, "oppression is a lifetime issue" (Harnois, 2005, p. 813) for Black women and other women of color. There is a difference in the mindset between Black and White feminists; it is similar to the surprise element. Sexist oppression is frequently "pointed out for white women" (Harnois, p. 813) maybe at school, but many Black women and other women of color have been exposed to, and aware of, both racial and sexist oppression throughout their lives. While White women's feminism may be tied to certain life events (higher education, marital status, participation in the paid labor force), multiracial feminists argue that feminism may not evolve in response to specific life experiences, rather what Black women have been dealing with since the very beginning (Harnois, 2005).

Feminism, in a similar manner to patriarchy, started to adopt the concept of binary oppositions. This concept revolves around the notion that men are always placed in the dominant position, considered the norm, while women are perceived as weak, lacking fulfillment, or categorized as the "Other". Nevertheless, within the framework of Feminism, Black women often found themselves labeled as the "Other" due to their racial and ethnic backgrounds. In this regard, Bell Hooks (1984) puts it "They were not confronting racism. In more recent years, racism has become an accepted topic in feminist discussions not as a result of black women calling attention to it (this was done at the very onset of the movement), but as a result of White female input validating such discussions, a process which is indicative of how racism works" (p. 51).

It is important to note that feminism incorporates a broad spectrum of beliefs, perspectives, and goals, which primarily revolve around promoting equal rights, opportunities, as well as social, economic, and political empowerment of women. However, feminism exerts such an inclusive policy within the framework that women who do fall under certain patterns are left unrepresented and marginalized. Understandably, in response to the elitist nature of feminism, an alternative inclusive social framework emerged, known as Womanism, which focused on African American women, their experiences and perspectives.

The term "womanist" was first introduced by African American writer and advocate Alice Walker, in her 1982 book entitled: "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose." In her work, Alice Walker reimagines Black American womanhood. She fearlessly traces the ancient journeys of precursory Black women artists and confronts contemporary Black women, urging them to reclaim and recover those ancestral voices. Womanists not only celebrate all

women but also pay particular attention to the problems that are unique to Black women, men, and families (Mitchell, 1994).

According to Deborah E. McDowell (2017), in Alice Walker's account of the circumstances that led to the emergence of the womanist movement, she recalls how her colleagues Patricia Meyer Spacks and Phyllis Chesler opposed the inclusion of Black female authors in their study of women writers' history. Spacks and Chesler attempted to defend their position when Walker questioned it by claiming that they were unable to write about women whose experiences were quite unlike their own. However, they continued to write extensively about British women authors of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, whose experiences were presumably substantially different from those of Spacks and Chesler, two American historians who lived in the twentieth century. McDowell writes:

> These early theorists and practitioners of feminist literary criticism were largely white females who, wittingly or not, perpetrated against the Black woman writer the same exclusive practices they so vehemently decried in white male scholars. Seeing the experiences of white women, particularly white middle-class women, as normative, white female scholars proceeded blindly to exclude the work of Black women writers from literary anthologies and critical studies. Among the most flagrant examples of this chauvinism is Patricia Meyer Spacks's The Female Imagination. In a weak defense of her book's exclusive focus on women in the Anglo-American literary tradition, Spacks quotes Phyllis Chesler (a white female psychologist): "I have no theory to offer of Third World female psychology in America. ... As a white woman, I'm reluctant and unable to construct theories about experiences I haven't had." But, as Alice Walker observes, "Spacks never lived in 19th century Yorkshire, so why theorize about the Brontes. (2017, p. 2).

Bell Hooks (1984) in her take on the exclusive nature of Feminism suggests that the dominant women in feminist discourse have implemented exclusionary tactics, resulting in significant challenges for new and diverse theories to emerge. Feminism adheres to a specific ideology, and women who seek alternative strategies or foundations often face isolation and suppression of their voices (Hooks, 1984).

II. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

1-"The Bluest Eye": The Genesis of the Subversiveness

Toni Morrison was a pioneering crusader among modern Black writers who reinvented African American literature as well as the Black community in several ways. "Doomed" to be dark-skinned, female, African American women have faced racism and gender issues, not only from the White society but also from within their own communities. These women have encountered issues of race and gender that have pushed them to the margins. Toni Morrison's works lend themselves particularly well to feminist interpretations due to the way they disrupt conventional "norms" of race and gender.

Morrison's work offers debates that are crucial to American literature and history. Indeed, according to her, one cannot fully comprehend American history and literature without acknowledging the significance of African American presence. Morrison's works address problems regarding important societal challenges and concerns, such as the interconnectedness of racism, class exploitation, and sexism; dominance and imperialism; the spirituality and power of oral folk traditions and values; the mythic scope of the imagination; and the negotiation of slippery boundaries between personal desire and political urgencies, particularly for members of oppressed groups. Her work also addresses timeless human dilemmas and paradoxes, such as how humans relate to the good, the beautiful, and the powerful; what virtue and evil are; and how people obtain their sense of identity from community while maintaining individual distinctiveness (Gates & McKay, 1996). When Nellie McKay asked about the relationship between Morrison's literary works featuring female characters and the historical suppression of early Black women in a predominantly White American society, Morrison acknowledged, stating, "Indeed, I do sense a profound connection to 'ancestors,' in a manner of speaking. What primarily occupies my thoughts regarding this matter is the overwhelming presence of

information about Black women in my life. They were the carriers of culture, instructing us [children] on what actions to take" (Morrison & McKay, 1983, p. 4).

According to Duvall (2000), "The Bluest Eye" includes certain autobiographical elements that connect the work to the author's very personal life. Duvall (2000) notes that "To write is to write the self. When one writes, one always tells, consciously or unconsciously, one's intellectual autobiography, and in novels, autobiography emerges most clearly through character, though certainly writers play themselves out through several characters" (p. 11). Morrison (1993) revealed in the novel's foreword section that the narrative was driven by a little chat she had in elementary school with a girl who wished for blue eyes. In the 1960s, when she started working on her novel, she was still reflecting on the conversation she once had, which coincided with the Black is Beautiful movement that was fighting to restore Black American beauty (Morrison, 1993).

The disallowance of African Americans' distinct cultures and histories, notably that of Black women, is shown predominantly in "The Bluest Eye" as a result or outcome of the increasingly widespread and poisonous mass culture industry, which erases popular forms and imagery. In this sector, the presentation of any image that does not revolve around consumption or the promotion of normative values that underpin it is becoming increasingly outlawed. These ideas are frequently linked to gender and are ethnically exclusionary, to the point that racial and ethnic variety cannot be reflected (Kuenz, 2007).

"The Bluest Eye" presents the ill-fated story of Pecola Breedlove, a young Black girl who lives in a world that fails to reflect on her beauty and perspicacity. Governed by what Morrison refers to as an "outside gaze" (1993, p. xi) this world bestows approval only on those who conform to its narrow definition of beauty, as exemplified by Shirley Temple and Mary Jane. Even candies have pictures of their perfect slick hair and bright smile, Pecola feels perplexed and overwhelmed because "Each pale-yellow wrapper has a picture on it. A picture of little Mary Jane… 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" (Morrison, 1993, p. 50).

Claudia, the novel's first-person narrator, returns to 1940, when Pecola moved in with the MacTeers after her father, Cholly, blew down the Breedloves home. Perceived as disgusting and repugnant by neighborhood, the Breedloves are convinced that they have a "unique" ugliness: "Although their poverty was traditional and stultifying, it was not unique. However, their ugliness was unique. No one could have convinced them that they were not relentlessly and aggressively ugly" (Morrison, 1993, p. 38). Pecola, as a young Black girl, is tormented by the concept of whiteness. Every night before she goes to sleep, she prays for the blue eyes of Shirley Temple. Claudia, on the other hand, despises the child star, indicating that some blonde girl with blue eyes does not represent who she really is. She even tells the story of receiving a blonde doll as a Christmas present. Claudia is enraged by the tradition that each year "The special, the loving gift was always a big, blue eyed Baby Doll. From the clucking sounds of adults, I knew that the doll represented what they thought was my fondest wish. I was bemused with the thing itself, and the way it looked. What was I supposed to do with it? Pretend I was its mother?" (p.20).

Claudia stands critical against her society's celebration of Temple and her blue eyes. She condemns the prevailing belief that White standards should be imposed on Black community. Additionally, she distances herself from the illusion of whiteness glorification, affirming her own unique beauty and attractiveness in a genuine way.

Morrison most eloquently dramatizes the trauma inflicted by the "glazed separateness" (Morrison, 1993, p. 48) of the White gaze through Pecola's narrative, as told by Claudia and an anonymous third-person narrator. Claudia speaks of the girl's predicament "She (Pecola) has seen it lurking in the eyes of all White people. So. The distaste must be for her, her blackness. All things in her are flux and anticipation. But her blackness is static and dread" (Morrison, 1993, p. 49).

Morrison creates an apparently simple account about a Black girl yearning for blue eyes.

The title's play on words, on the other hand, alludes to Pecola's feelings of shame, worthlessness, and failure. She was born in a difficult atmosphere, at the wrong time, and in the wrong place. The story contends that the girl's social milieu, including her parents and friends, is arid, hostile, and damaging. The novel presents a world in which disruption is perpetual and, at the conclusion of the story, the seeds die rather than develop.

Through a similar lens, The Breedloves are portrayed in the story as a disadvantaged, impoverished, and helpless family with warped vision (Morrison, 117). They lack the ability to lash out and, as a result, inflict agony on one another rather than alleviating it. The family is depicted as being locked in a vicious spiral of cause and effect under capitalism, with little spirit evident to fight their way out of it. Pecola's parents are one of the most visible depictions of men and women's contrasting experiences. While none of them has a desirable existence because race and class are both against them, the influence of gender on Pauline's life is clear. The impact of society on Pauline began to shape how she thinks of herself and how she conducts her life during the beginning of their marriage when they were still "fairly" pleased with one another. Morrison (1993) says of Pauline's experience "The women in the town wore high-heeled shoes, and when Pauline tried to wear them, they aggravated her shuffle into a pronounced limp" (p. 117). Morrison compares this with Cholly's experience "he had no trouble finding other people and other things to occupy him-men were continually mounting the stairs asking for him, and he was pleased to join them, leaving her alone" (Morrison, 1993, p. 118).

2- The Dichotomy between Blackness and Beauty

"The Bluest Eye" depicts the unspeakable situation African American women endure in racist patriarchal America. It investigates how dominant groups' ideas, as well as those embraced by marginal organizations, shape the identity of Black women. Morrison's characters are flooded with images of White beauty, and their main goal in life is to be White. They strive to erase their origins, and finally, like the heroine, Pecola Breedlove, they have no choice but to go insane. John Duvall (2000) argues, "Notably there is the issue of how the media constructs Western beauty as a universal standard. In this regard, Pecola Breedlove in Morrison's first novel, The Bluest Eye, accepts a Western valuation of beauty… because she cannot approach the cultural imperative" (Duvall, 2000, p. 100). The concept of beauty is extremely problematic in the novel; the anonymous third-person narrator proclaims that "physical beauty" and "romantic love" are probably the most destructive ideas in the history of human thought (Morrison, 1993).

Biased beauty constructions have been employed as a support foundation for assigning and perpetuating contrived systematic racial disparities and deficiencies, as well as serving as a means to denigrate and subordinate certain groups of people, such as Pecola and her family. The racialized beauty ideals portrayed in the novel extend beyond the personal impact on Pecola and have far-reaching consequences for how the entire Black community is perceived, judged, and treated. Gravett (2007) suggests that "In The Bluest Eye, this struggle takes shape as the black community endeavors to accept the standards imposed by white society" (p. 99). The pursuit of the White beauty paradigm and its impact on individuals who do not conform to these established ideals, like Pecola and her mother Pauline, has resulted in a myriad of issues, including body dysmorphia and low self-esteem. The third-person narrator describes:

> As long as Pecola looked the way she did, 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. She was the only member of her class who sat alone at a double desk (Morrison, 1993, p. 38).

Morrison demonstrates the destructive repercussions of White beauty concepts through the character of Pauline. Pauline abandons her authentic self and succumbs to the idea of a flawless world. "She was never able, after her education in the movies, to look at a face and not assign it some category in the scale of absolute beauty, and the scale was one she absorbed in full from the silver screen" (Morrison, 1993, p. 122). Mrs. Breedlove ultimately escapes her domestic captivity, but with nowhere else to go but the movies, she chooses the movie industry; the heart of Hollywood, where fame, fashion, feminine beauty, and whiteness are the norm.

Pauline's ideals of perfect love and beauty, which she discovers in films, control her. Here, Morrison exhibits how the idea of "beauty" can be employed by the media and the film industry to instigate racist self-hatred by making women feel intimidated and embarrassed at their own appearance and race. Most of the female Black characters in the novel are in an endless quest for an enforced standard of femininity; in the process, they despise themselves and devalue their blackness, which inevitably leads them to a hollow phase of self-loathing. According to Taylor (1999), most of the Black women in "The Bluest Eye" have with the destructive idea that "blackness" in synonymous with "ugly" and that:

> The most prominent type of racialized ranking represents blackness as a condition to be despised, and most tokens of this type extend this attitude to cover the physical features that are central to the ascription of black identity. So, a central assumption has been that black folks-with our kinky hair, flat noses, thick lips, dark skin, prognathism, and steatopygia - are ugly (p. 16).

Claudia MacTeer, on the other hand, defies the exaltation of White beauty standards, which are vilely imposed by the media (in Claudia's case TV commercials) on her small Black entourage. Claudia fails to comprehend her community's adoration of the White aesthetic mainstream; she is oblivious to the fact that beauty ideals are always based on artificially created societal norms. Claudia's bewilderment leads to her struggle to accept the doll's beauty as a sort of external representation; instead, she strives to change the symbolic representation into the actual one. While she was staying with the MacTeers, Pecola, along with Frieda (Claudia's sister), were enthralled with Shirley Temple and how adorable her grin was. Claudia hates Temple and blondes as well as all the White dolls on the face of the earth. When she first saw the blonde doll she got as a Christmas present, her first thought was to "dismember it" (Morrison, 1993, p. 20). As time passes, this feeling develops into a compulsion to hurt White girls, as Claudia puts it "The truly horrifying thing was the transference of the same impulses to little white girls" (p. 22).

On a different scale, Claudia cannot fathom the idea of the commoditization of women in general. In Claudia's contemporary world, the beauty department objectifies and sexualizes women; it also reduces the value of the female existence to mere means for male seduction and satisfaction. In this social equation, blackness winds up being as a sort of "economic inadequacy" (Morrison, 1993, p. 38). Morrison in "The Bluest Eye" continually highlights the widely held belief that the Breedlove family's poverty and blackness are tied to their economic inadequacy, and that Pecola is the primary manifestation of the ugliness associated with this inadequacy. The omniscient narrator exclaims, "The Breedloves did not live in a storefront because they were having temporary difficulty adjusting to the cutbacks at the plant. They lived there because they were poor and black, and they stayed there because they believed they were ugly" (p. 38).

In order to establish the interaction between the White society and Black women in the novel, it is crucial to understand how these women are regarded as and linked to within their micro societal milieu. It is of an utmost importance to investigate the daily struggle and hardship experienced by Black women starting with their families and inner circles; since an early age Black women have been severely oppressed and dehumanized at the hands of their fathers and brothers. In "The Bluest Eye", Pecola, the teenage protagonist, is raped by her own drunk father, which results in her despair and madness at the end. Claudia expresses the community's bewilderment "lots of girls had babies who were not married. And we did not dwell on the fact that the baby's father was Pecola's father too; the process of having a baby by any male was incomprehensible to us" (Morrison, 1993, p. 190). The Black female opens her eyes in a world where male chauvinism rules, she is treated as a second-class citizen, and subjugated to an inferior status for which she perpetually feels intimidated and ashamed. For Black women this inferiority complex grows from within the Black community to the outer sphere.

In this particular context, Pecola becomes the central image of the community's self-loathing. Morrison seeks to demonstrate that this idealization is primarily built upon the devaluation of those who are considered different. The author highlights that Pecola's perceived ugliness leads others to feel beautiful, while her vulnerability empowers both the Black community and the White society. Ultimately, Pecola represents the culmination of racial and social failures. There is a specific incident where Pecola, consumed by guilt, tries to purchase candy from a White man. Morrison describes how the man completely disregards Pecola, as if she were invisible. Morrison writes, "Between his eyes and Pecola's face, something obstructs his vision. He hesitates, withdraws, and lingers. In that specific moment, he recognizes that it's not worth the effort to spare a glance. He fails to see her because, in his eyes, she is inconsequential (Morrison, 1993, p. 48) Pecola's ego is entirely destroyed by this continual scrutiny; she is pushed to feel horrendous about her blackness, her figure, and even her whole existence. Even when she is by herself, she is deluded that the entire community is keeping an eye on her. She constructs a brand-new fictitious idea of who she is in the eyes of the "other," and she ultimately starts to think of that image as her true self.

3- The Molding of The Black Female Identity in "The Bluest Eye"

Toni Morrison's development as a writer took place during her work on "The Bluest Eye" from 1965 to 1969. This period aligns her with the Black is Beautiful movement, which urged African Americans to reassess their relationship with White culture. Morrison demonstrates an awareness of the feminist challenge to a male-dominated society in terms of gendered identity, even if she sometimes distances herself from it. Additionally, she comes of age as an artist during a time when high modernist literature holds full sway in the literary canon, while the Black artistic movement of the 1960s advocates for a distinct Black voice and a Black Nationalist identity. These historical circumstances surely left a significant impact on an ambitious Black female author, whether consciously acknowledged or not. In her works, Morrison indeed acknowledges some of these constraints by foregrounding the processes of identity formation (Duvall, 2000).

During her coming of an age as a novelist, Morrison started to critique the Black communities' embrace and adherence to White ideals and values. It is evident that the author was troubled by the acceptance of beauty as a desirable attribute without a thorough examination of its implications. In the foreword of "The Bluest Eye," Morrison declares,

> When I began writing The Bluest Eye, I was interested in something else. Not resistance to the contempt of others, ways to deflect it, but the far more tragic and disable consequences of accepting rejection as legitimate, as self-evident. I knew that some victims of powerful self-loathing turn out to be dangerous, violent, reproducing the enemy who has humiliated them over and over. Others surrender their identity; melt into a structure that delivers the strong persona they lack. Most others, however, grow beyond it. But there are some who collapse, silently, anonymously, with no voice to express or acknowledge it. They are invisible (1993, p. x)

Morrison also highlights that the writing of "The Bluest Eye" was influenced by the social, artistic, and aesthetic upheaval brought about by the Black is Beautiful movement in the 1960s (Morrison, 1993). According to her, the novel served as a reflection of the decade's quest for a reaffirmed African American identity, which encompassed the restoration of Black racial pride and the celebration of Black beauty and aesthetics (Morrison, 1993). However, later in her life, Morrison began to question the very claim itself, the assertion of Black beauty ideals, as if it implied that Black beauty had never existed in the first place. To Morrison, the novel was provoked by "The reclamation of racial beauty in the sixties stirred these thoughts, made me think about the necessity for the claim. Why, although reviled by others, could this beauty not be taken for granted within the community? Why did it need wide public articulation to exist? These are not clever questions" (Morrison, 2007, p. xi). It appears that the author was unsettled by the fact that these assertions seemed to be directed not towards a Black audience, despite their principles suggesting otherwise. Morrison seemed to believe that much of the self-validation message during that period was intended for White people, as a means of explaining who dark-skinned people were and how they took glory in their identity.

In analyzing the formation of the Black female identity in the novel, it is essential to take into account the interconnectedness of the factors that contribute to the composition of the sense of self in the Black community. Morrison (1993) notes that in order to depict a raw transparent human experience about racial discrimination, she "… focused, therefore, on how something as grotesque as the demonization of an entire race could take root inside the most delicate member of society: a child; the most vulnerable member: a female" (p. xi). Added to that "The extremity of Pecola's case stemmed largely from a crippled and crippling family—unlike the average black family and unlike the narrator's" (p. xii). The protagonist's dysfunctional family is the source of her crushed self-esteem from the outset; plight emanates not just from her racial complexities but also from the fact that she is female, incredibly impoverished, and the product of an abusive family.

Ubiquitously, Morrison's commitment to challenging beauty standards and excavating the truth behind the quest for the true self in the novel is presented in the characters who are oppressed by such ideals, in addition to the characters who utilize them to oppress others. Pauline Breedlove is, according to the author, the cause of everything that is wrong with Pecola. According to Morrison (1993), the character grew up with a "general feeling of separateness and unworthiness" (p. 111). Her identity crisis started at an early age when a neglected foot injury led to a slight limp. As a result, she matured feeling ugly, rejected, and unfitting.

Pauline's entire existence is hampered by her incapacity to identify with her race. She is plagued by the idea that her identity as a Black female is valueless until it is linked to White people or White culture in general, such as frequenting the movies and working for the Fishers. Claudia narrates: "More and more she neglected her house, her children, her man—they were like the afterthoughts one has just before sleep, the early-morning and late-evening edges of her day, the dark edges that made the daily life with the Fishers lighter, more delicate, more lovely" (Morrison, 1993, p. 127). Pauline thinks she is happy and diligent in the Fishers' house; she believes their place is beautiful, orderly, and clean, and that it is an example of a decent correct life. Pauline also finds delight in serving the White family; this feels rewarding to her because, in her thinking, this is the least she can do to be a part of the family's "whiteness."

Cholly Breedlove is introduced as the tyrannical male of the novel whose childhood trauma affected his later life as a husband and a father. Cholly's upbringing was so deprived that, despite the love of his Aunt Jimmy, who nurtured him until he was fourteen, and the companionship of an elderly man named Blue Jack, he is a jumble of unsorted, intense emotions that sometimes confound him. His mother deserted him as a newborn, his father never met him, and at the age fourteen, he was mocked by White men with flashlights watching him while he was attempting his first time at lovemaking. As a result, Cholly is unleashed as "Dangerously free. Free to feel whatever he felt—fear, guilt, shame, love, grief, pity" (Morrison, 1993, p. 159). Harold Bloom (2010) points out:

> He (Cholly) endures two massive emotional assaults: being forced to perform sexually before an armed group of leering and jeering white men and being crudely rebuffed by his biological father, who does not want to know who he is. These wounds stay with Cholly and eventually compromise his will to live. He burns down his house and rapes his daughter and becomes the worst of the community's pariahs. (p. 24).

As an abused-turned-abusive Black man, Cholly's turbulent life inevitably has a tremendous impact on the well-being of the women in his household. Initially, his marriage to Pauline had its fair share of bright moments. In fact, they were in love and shared dreams of having a decent life together. However, as time goes by, their relationship takes a downward spiral due to Cholly's drinking problem and his increasing sense of irresponsibility. He becomes violent, unfaithful, and imprudent. Cholly directs towards his wife the accumulated weight of his inarticulate anger, stemming from a lifetime of deprivation, humiliation, and insults. Regrettably, this woman becomes an unfortunate target of his abhorrence (Baum, 2007).

Cholly's erratic behavior around the house has also immensely influenced Pecola's own perception of herself and her identity as a Black female. After being raped by her own father at the age of eleven, Pecola started questioning the reason behind her existence and fantasizing about living an alternative life that only exists in her dreams. Pecola believes that her own

blackness is the genesis of her pain and suffering. According to Morrison, Pecola is "a little black girl who wanted to rise up out of the pit of her blackness and see the world with blue eyes" (1993, p. 174). In Pecola's thinking, the solution to her predicament is morphing into a White girl with delicate features and blue eyes in an effort to live up to the White society's mainstream template and to comply with the Black community's pattern of beauty. Sunanda Pal (1994) states, "Morrison does not limit herself to an indictment of the dominant White class only. She turns her gaze to the problems within the Black community, as she relentlessly exposes intra-racism, male brutalities, female sexual abuse and incest" (p. 2441).

The Black community's reaction to Pecola's rape and pregnancy does nothing but deepen the little girl's agony. The neighborhood, instead of offering sympathy towards Pecola, raises doubts about whether she bears some responsibility for the unfortunate events that unfolded in her life, which is disconcerting given Pecola's age. It is crucial, though, because it demonstrates how a certain social prejudice may blind individuals to the anguish and trauma of people with whom they share the same race and experience. Pecola's child is the result of hatred, violence, and an incestuous relationship. The majority of those who are close to Pecola want the baby dead because its existence would serve as a continual and distressing reminder of the horrors that exist in their society. They are even repulsed by the prospect of the baby's physical appearance. "She be lucky if it don't live. Bound to be the ugliest thing walking" (Morrison, 1993, p. 189).

In "The Bluest Eye," Toni Morrison explores how institutions of the dominant group perpetuate notions that impact the formation of Black women's self-image. The resulting identity conflict, arising from racial stigma, can lead to mental disintegration. For generations, Black Americans have been stripped of their ancestral heritage and, severed from their roots leading them to perceive the prevailing ideology as the only viable perspective. The mass media portrays a White lifestyle to the country's diverse population, in which the ruling class promotes an unattainable ideal of beauty for other ethnic groups through blonde-haired dolls, Mary Jane candy wrappers, and a plethora of cosmetics guaranteeing White skin and straight hair. The media, educational system, and other cultural institutions serve as important avenues for conveying ideological viewpoints by preserving White majority ideals while reinforcing stereotypes about minority groups. These socially constructed stereotypes are simplistic and distorted representations (Pal, 1994).

From a different angle, Morrison sheds light on the role of familial ties in the quest for Black female identity. In "The Bluest Eye," family relationships influence the Black female characters' personalities, which in turn shape who they really are. The narrative depicts struggling Black families that pass on social stereotypes and racial complexities, which inevitably damage their family bonds. These tendencies persist unabated and are eventually inherited by their offspring, who will embrace these convictions as the vicious spiral continues.

Claudia and Frieda Macteer were raised in a healthy loving home, which cherishes African American heritage and stands for Black family traditions; consequently, the Macteer sisters grow up to be defiant and rebellious against the social patterns associated with White culture. On the other hand, Pecola Breedlove's estrangement from her family results in her mental and psychological fragmentation. Edward Guerrero, in an article entitled: "Tracking 'The Look' in the Novels of Toni Morrison," points out, "Pecola's sad situation is compounded, moreover, by a crushing sense of inferiority and ugliness inherited from her family and their own struggles with 'the look,' and by her attempts to ease her misery by retreating ever more deeply into a confused—and finally shattered, psychotic—self-image" (Guerrero, 1990, p. 764). Home in "The Bluest Eye" is more than just a constructional entity in which a family lives, home is an idea that shapes the characters' sense of self and self-worth, as well as the way they are viewed by those around them.

III.   Conclusion

Through the narrative of "The Bluest Eye," Morrison reveals the destructive consequences of seeking validation and identity solely through the lens of White beauty standards. Pecola's desire for blue eyes represents a larger desire for acceptance and love in a world that constantly reinforces her sense of worthlessness. In order to offer insight into the extent of disgrace and self-loathing felt by the Black women in the novel, Toni Morrison employs a relentless feeling of dread that pervades the entire story. It is purposely sickening to capture the demeaning journey of these women who happen to stumble upon the bitter reality that they ought to make sense out of and justify their existence hence, the self-discovery of their identities as being "the other" in a hegemonic American society that denigrates their gender and skin color.

Morrison not only reflects on the discrimination exerted on Black women by the canonizing American society, but also examines the damaging effects of the intra-race within the Black community itself. "The Bluest Eye" presents a fragmented image of struggle, endurance and resilience from the perspective of Black female girls whose lives are deeply touched by what their society installs as the "norm". Through Pecola's story, Morrison sends a message to the world that it is crucial for all races and individuals to thoroughly comprehend how mass culture impacts and shapes people's credence and values; only after fully understanding that they can thrive and rise to their highest potential and best self.

References:

Baum, R. M. (2007). Alcoholism and Family Abuse in Maggie and The Bluest Eye. In H. Bloom (Ed.), *Toni Morrison's THE BLUEST EYE* (pp. 132–147). Infobase Publishing.

Belkhir, J. A., & Barnett, B. M. (2001). Race, Gender and Class Intersectionality. *Race, Gender & Class*, *8*(3), 157–174. http://www.jstor.org/stable/41674988

Bell, B. W. (1987). *The Afro-American novel and its tradition*. University of Massachusetts Press.

Bloom, H. (2010). *Blooms Guides: The Bluest Eye*. Infobase Publishing.

Duvall, J. N. (2000). *The identifying fictions of Toni Morrison: Modernist authenticity and postmodern blackness*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Easton, M. (2012). FEMINISM. *Studies in Iconography*, *33*, 99–112. http://www.jstor.org/stable/23924276

Gates, H. L., & McKay, N. Y. (1996). *The Norton anthology of African American literature*. W.W. Norton & Co.

Gravett, S. L. (2007). Toni Morrison's The Bluest Eye: An Inverted Walden? In H. Bloom (Ed.), *Toni Morrison's THE BLUEST EYE* (pp. 114–124). Infobase Publishing.

Guerrero, E. (1990). Tracking "the look" in the novels of Toni Morrison. *Black American Literature Forum*, *24*(4), 761–773. https://doi.org/10.2307/3041801

Harnois, C. E. (2005). Different paths to different feminisms? Bridging multiracial feminist theory and quantitative sociological gender research. *Gender & Society: Official Publication of Sociologists for Women in Society*, *19*(6), 809–828. https://doi.org/10.1177/0891243205280026

Harris, T. (2001). *Saints, sinners, saviors: Strong black women in African American literature*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Haslanger, S. (2000). Gender and race: (What) are they? (What) do we want them to be? *Noûs*, *34*(1), 31–55.

Hooks, B. (1984). *Feminist theory: From margin to center*. South End Press.

Kuenz, J. (2007). The Bluest Eye: Notes on History, Community, and Black Female Subjectivity. In H. Bloom (Ed.), *Toni Morrison's THE BLUEST EYE* (pp. 13–24). Infobase Publishing.

McDowell, D. E. (2017). New directions for black feminist criticism. *African American Review*, *50*(4), 606–612. https://doi.org/10.1353/afa.2017.0107

Mitchell, A. (Ed.). (1994). *Within the circle: An anthology of African American literary criticism from the Harlem renaissance to the present*. Duke University Press.

Morrison, T. (1993). *The Bluest Eye*. Vintage Books.

Morrison, T., & McKay, N. (1983). An interview with Toni Morrison. *Contemporary Literature*, *24*(4), 413. https://doi.org/10.2307/1208128

Ortega, M. (2006). Being lovingly, knowingly ignorant: White feminism and women of color. *Hypatia*, *21*(3), 56–74. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1527-2001.2006.tb01113.x

Pal, S. (1994). From Periphery to Centre: Toni Morrison's Self Affirming Fiction. *Economic and Political Weekly*, *29*(37), 2439–2443.

Pratt-Clarke, M. (2018). *A black woman's journey from cotton picking to college professor: Lessons about race, class, and gender in America*. Peter Lang Publishing.

Taylor, P. C. (1999). Malcolm's conk and danto's colors; Or, four logical petitions concerning race, beauty, and aesthetics. *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, *57*(1), 16–20. https://doi.org/10.2307/432060