

Interrogating Race, Class, and Ideology: A Cultural Materialist Analysis of Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*

Mohammed Hamad Sulaiman

Ministry of Education

Anbar Directorate of Education

Mohammed12hammed9@gmail.com

تفكيك العرق والطبقة والأيدولوجيا: تحليل مادي ثقافي لرواية توني موريسون "العين الأشد زرقة"

م.د. محمد حمد سليمان

وزارة التربية / مديرية تربية الانبار

الملخص:

امرأة شابة من أصل أفريقي في رواية "العين الأشد زرقة" لموريسون تكافح للتوفيق بين الواقع العنيف لمجتمعها والمتطلبات المتنافسة لمثالية الجمال الأسود. في الرواية، تُظهر موريسون كيف يمكن للفقر والعار الاجتماعي أن يقيدا حتى أكثر الناس نزاهة، الذين قد يؤذون بعضهم البعض رغم أفضل نواياهم. وفقاً لموريسون، فإن الاعتقاد الخاطئ هو أن الناس يلجأون إلى العنف برغبتهم. يعتقدون أن العروض المؤذية للمودة تؤدي إلى التشويه، مما ينتج عنه المعاناة. الكلمات المفتاحية: المنظور المادي السيسوتاريخية، التميز العنصري، العبودية، التدرج الطبقي، هوية النوع الاجتماعي (الهوية الجنسانية)

Abstract

A young Black woman in Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* struggles to reconcile the violent reality of her community with the competing demands of the Black beauty ideal. In the novel, Morrison demonstrates how poverty and social shame may bind even the most decent people, who may harm each other despite their best intentions. It is a misconception, according to Morrison, that people want to resort to violence. They hold the view that hurtful displays of affection induce distortion, which results in suffering.

Keywords: Sociohistorical materialist, racial discrimination, slavery, class hierarchy, gender identity

Introduction

Being sociable means you live in a community, which is characterized as a group of people who engage in social interactions. Since the abolition of slavery, discussions about African Americans in America have been fraught with controversy. Racial segregation prompted African Americans to demand civil rights. Black authors, both male and female, were outraged by the societal marginalization of African Americans and created works that depicted Black people in various contexts. Toni Morrison's work examines racial injustice through the lens of gender and motherhood in a community that is largely African American. Racism and other forms of social injustice are among the societal issues examined in the research.

1. **Socioeconomic Disparity** Toni Morrison posits in *The Bluest Eye* that numerous elements, such as socioeconomic status, level of education, familial ties, and skin color, have had a role in shaping African American identities. In the story, we see many types of African American households, each with its unique socioeconomic status. It is the white-dominated culture that is responsible for the racial prejudice that the African-American characters in *The Bluest Eye* face. Morrison used the words "mother work" and "mother love" to define a specific approach to parenting that stems from her conventional understanding of Black motherhood. Preservation, development, and social acceptance are the three pillars upon which a mother's role rests, as laid out by Ruddick. Ruddick elaborates on the idea that a mother's primary role is to provide her children's basic needs through acts of preservation, love, nurturing, and education. (O'Reilly, 2004, p. 27) Mothers' primary responsibility, according to O'Reilly, is to protect their children from harm and to keep their children's most

precious possessions secure. (2012, p. 80) An excellent illustration of this is the cat's accident. A tiny African-American boy named Junior lives adjacent to the school playground, and no one wants to play with him. Junior jumps at the chance to sexually abuse Pecola, a poor Black girl, as he sees her walking across the playground. He steps up during their playground dispute by inviting her to visit his house to meet his kitty. Junior offers Pecola a visit, and she gladly accepts so that she can see the cat. The sight of the mansion's interior filled her with an irresistible sense of gift-giving. Junior had feelings of superiority against other African American children: "Mother did not like him to play with niggers... Colored people were neat and quiet; niggers were dirty and loud" (Morrison, 2019, p. 87). Junior is quite self-aware, yet he still has the gall to do anything. Then he and Pecola, his mother's beloved cat, play a terrible game. Pecola loses her composure and throws the cat against a window, shattering its lifeless body. In the very next second, Junior's mom will learn that her cherished pet has passed away. She immediately starts acting out her long-standing animosity toward Black children: "They were everywhere ... They sat in little rows on street curbs, crowded in pews at church, taking space from the nice, neat, colored children. They broke things in dime stores, ran in front of you on the street, and made ice slides on the sloped sidewalks in winter" (Morrison, 2019, p. 92). Geraldine shows the cultural norms of African Americans through Junior's mom, Pecola. She will always insist that Pecola caused her cat's death. As Ruddick notes, the demand increases rapidly when a child's life is at stake; to shield her son from the animosity of the Black community, Junior's mother steps in. Pecola's maternal affection for her child is palpable. The MacTeers family in *The Bluest Eye* provides temporary shelter for a less fortunate African American "case" like Pecola. One could argue that the MacTeers are more severe than the Geraldines. As Claudia puts it, when we cut ourselves, adults wonder if we've gone insane and don't understand what they're doing; they don't talk to us, they just tell us what to do. When it comes to discipline, Geraldine and MacTeer are more stringent than their respective partners. This is Claudia's personal belief, as stated by her. "Adults do not talk to us—they provide us directions ... When we trip and fall down, they glance at us; if we cut or bruise ourselves, they ask us if we are crazy" (Morrison, 2019, p. 92). As Ruddick emphasizes, "To be committed to meeting children's demand for preservation, growth, and social acceptance" is the spirit of mother labor. (O'Reilly, 2004, p. 27) and needs neither passion nor affection. The ability to recognize when someone is weak and react with kindness instead of anger, indifference, or aggression is all that is required. She is a caring mother who provides for her children and helps them overcome the challenges they will face as they grow up. Finally, Claudia proves that the parents' stringent rules are really an effort to shield their daughter from the harsh reality that they themselves have encountered. However, MacTeer and the upbringing of children in the dominant African-American culture heighten Morrison's educational goals.

2. Racialized Gender Inferiority

Morrison presents African American women in a demeaning light, regardless of their gender. Black women experience this oppression firsthand since they are expected to serve their husbands regardless of their well-being. Due to her racial discrimination in the US, Pauline Breedlove is among the most oppressed characters in the book. As Hooks has already said: "White people established a social hierarchy based on race and sex that ranked white men first, white women second, sometimes equal to Black men, who are ranked third, and Black women last." (Hooks, 2014, p. 52) Also, men in the economically deprived African American society experience an inflated feeling of authority when they have money. Cholly Breedlove, who is married to Pauline Breedlove, has retreated to the margins of society as a result of the fast-worsening financial position in their family. He makes his family feel like they're his entire priority when he's around them. Pauline Breedlove's life story was primarily shaped by a few joyful recollections from her infancy and an early marriage in Lorain, which she describes as the "loneliest time of my life." "I don't know what all happened," she confesses. "Everything changed." She shows that she was unprepared for her relocation north. It was difficult to obtain. As she got to know the locals here, she found herself yearning for her people back home. In the north, they fight all the time. "Deconstruct all over the streets, next door" (Morrison, 2019, p. 93). As a result of witnessing this racially divided and antagonistic atmosphere, Pauline's inferiority to whites leads her to work odd tasks for white masters. She tried imitating white people in movies, but it didn't help. Many of Pauline's self-deprecating beliefs and attitudes originate from the films she sees. She learns about the qualities and physical attractiveness that she admires. She tries to zero in on the white master's house and shows her organizational skills while she's at it. By limiting her self-perception to that of "the ideal servant," she blocks out all other forms of pleasure (Morrison, 2019, p. 93). A ray of light or Pauline's thoughts of inadequacy cast these monochrome images onto her psyche, reducing her to a life of stark contrasts. Being a slave in the fisherman's house meant that Pauline could not have the

opportunity to be a mother to her children. Slave mothers in African American culture were forcibly taken from their children and forced to perform menial tasks in the fields because of the social value they placed on motherhood. The annihilation of families and the denial of a mother's love for her child were slavery's highest achievements, according to Barbara Hill Rigney (Gillespie, 2007, p. 73) As a result, her family looks up to Pauline Breedlove for her ability to breed well. However, when she begins to feel inadequate, she expresses her maternal love to the fisherman's child. In her role as a mother, she is able to wear the halo of the Madonna and effect social change through her moral compass and social housekeeping. Even though White America is shown as privileged and exclusive in *The Bluest Eye*, Black America is portrayed as downtrodden and excluded. Without a doubt, race relations are the novel's most talked-about and conspicuous theme. That is Morrison's assertion. Can we learn who chooses the white ideal as the best? This notion has been a nagging thought for anyone who has done serious research on the concept of a white beauty standard. And specifically for Pecola, who led her to believe that being a freak was preferable to embracing her true self? Who had looked upon her and deemed her so deficient, so unworthy of beauty? To accomplish this, Black people strive to imitate the white ideal, which is examined in detail in this article about dolls, celebrities, films, and the media. The Black community is directed "outdoors" while experiencing an indescribable level of suffering (Morrison, 2019, p. 15). The primary narrator of the book, Claudia, lays the groundwork for comprehending the dynamics at play in the Black community's interactions with society. Claudia says to me that there is a distinction between being put out and being put outdoors. "If you're put out, you go elsewhere, but if you're outside, there's nowhere to go. Being a minority in both caste and class, we moved about anyway on the hem of life" (Morrison, 2019, p. 17). Pecola finds safety with the MacTeers family after being more exposed to the weather; it is there that she gains an understanding of racism. The idolization of the dolls is something Claudia finds incomprehensible, and as a result, she frequently feels driven to destroy her own dolls (Morrison, 2019, p. 21). A recurring theme in Claudia's feelings toward her doll is her continued identification with her childhood self-perception. Despite her childhood, Claudia makes a poignant point regarding the Black community's feelings of anger, frustration, and pain caused by their marginalization from popular culture. Adapting to the survival techniques passed down from her mother is something Claudia must face. She expresses her anger at white supremacist ideology and society by dismantling the doll, and she thinks she isn't emotionally mature enough to love someone yet (Morrison, 2019, p. 21). Media really shows how the "white ideal" is everywhere in society, even though dolls are just one specific example of this. You can really see the white ideal in Pauline's experience with film. Denis Heinze believes that to achieve success, two sets of values really need to work together. If someone is completely cut off from society and their community, they're likely to struggle in the world around them (Bouson, 1999, p. 32) As a result, the Black community is distinctly apparent to the broader society. Another example is the Christmas Eve dolls given to children. The dolls convey that white middle-class values influence children prior to adulthood, instructing them on which traits are deemed beautiful or positive and which are considered ugly or negative (Bouson, 1999, p. 32). Pauline maintains that her character has improved as a result of her experiences throughout the narrative. "The loneliest time I seem to be happy was when I was in the picture show. Every time I got, I went. I'd go early, before the show started. They cut off the lights, and everything was black. The screen would light up, and I'd be more right on them pictures" (Morrison, 2019, p. 93) From the perspective of the film, Pauline's onscreen experience closely mirrors her real life. This shows how Pauline is trapped in a horrible and inevitable life because she follows white society's standards. Pauline, as Kern Carmean notes, holds on to a role that other people have given her, and by doing so, she stops herself from growing. Countless others have followed her embrace of white culture and values. In other words, these behavioral standards deviate from their fundamental principles and instead enforce harmful or incorrect norms (O'Reill, 2012, p. 27) As a result of her shortcomings, she finds herself trapped in a world where she must constantly put other people's needs before her own, all the while harboring a deep sense of shame, isolation, and envy for her downfall. White people's and society's beauty standards promised Black women and the African-American community reintegration into mainstream culture if they could only achieve these ideals. The Black community works diligently to conform to societal expectations and blend in.

3. Structural inequality and the construction of self-esteem.

Morrison's works vividly depict the effects of prejudice and brutality on the most defenseless members of society. Although Morrison wrote her novel 40 years ago, the issues of racism and sexual violence it discusses are still very relevant today. Within the context of children's fiction, Morrison deftly depicts the systematic oppression and hardship that her characters endure, as well as the realities of her society. The narrative opens

with an introduction to Pecola's madness and her fixation on winning the approval of everybody around her. Pecola has developed the belief that her life would be simpler if she were physically more beautiful due to her lack of exposure to a loving and supportive family. Morrison argues that children benefit much from their parents' loving presence and that parents should set a good example by fostering a strong sense of self in their children. Morrison claims that loving oneself should be the primary goal of self-love. According to O'Reilly, "Morrison's writings reflect her belief that mothering is essential for the emotional well-being of children because it is the mother who first loves the child and gives to that child a loved sense of self" (O'Reilly, p. 33). "The nurture of the daughters in a patriarchy calls for the strong sense of self-nurture in the mother" (O'Reilly, 2004, p. 33), as Rice puts it. Therefore, as said before in the cultural foundations, the self-love that is essential for true maternal love is based on the memories and old attributes of one's ancestors. There will be no "outdoors" abandonment or insanity for Pecola if her parents love themselves this much. Pecola's society plays a significant role in shaping the events in *The Bluest Eye*. Around her, she finds people who despise themselves and who see African Americans as a whole as having an unattractive physical quality. Claudia writes, "As long as she looked the way she did, as long as she was ugly, she would have to stay with these people" (Fultz, 2004, p. 50), expressing Pecola's beliefs. The narrator stresses again how Pecola believed that physical beauty might change people's lives. "It had occurred to Pecola some time ago that if her eyes, those eyes that held the pictures and knew the heights—if those eyes of hers were different, that is to say, beautiful, she herself would be different." (Fultz, 2004, pp. 39–40) Morrison stresses that Pecola's family leaves her feeling abandoned and unloved, which in turn drives her to isolate herself and destroy her self-esteem, which in turn brings about a worsening of her life situation. Breedlove is distinct from other Black people, especially the MacTeers, because of their treatment and lack of affection. Pecola survives by loving and protecting others, even though she can't do so for herself. As a result, they start by encouraging self-assurance in themselves, and many of the other people who impact Pecola have learned it from a young age. Morrison explores an innocent person's experience with internalized racism in *The Bluest Eye*. While contemplating Pecola's end product, Claudia makes a note, though. In particular, she stresses: "The birdlike gestures are worn away to a mere picking and plucking her way . . . among all the waste and beauty of the world, which is what she herself was. All of our waste, which we dumped on her and which she absorbed. And all of our beauty, which was hers first and which she gave to us" (Morrison, 2019, p. 79). As a result, Pecola was exposed to the community's rubbish, clouding the world's first view of her innate worth as a girl and a person. *The Bluest Eye* thus exposes how prejudice and societal forces impacted a vulnerable young woman. Its repercussions, however, apply to everybody who has ever felt powerless, unjustly treated, or oppressed. The upper-class family shown in *The Bluest Eye* lives near the playground, but they refuse to interact with their lower- and middle-class neighbors. The same is true for Junior, whose mother bans him from hanging out with other Black kids and is unable to live a full life herself. She is always furious and aware of the condition of the African American poor to raise awareness about class injustices. Morrison realistically illustrates the lives of Black people in an oppressive society while also accentuating the Black community's exterior appearance. Claudia, the novel's autonomous protagonist, portrays the most unconstrained groups in African American culture. Her writing reveals the inner turmoils of her characters, who are marginalized by society. Claudia, who has a solid support system, sheds light on the characters' internal and external conflicts. Morrison shows the strength of a scared slave girl named Pecola. The all-encompassing portrayals of motherhood in Morrison's novel necessitate empathy from readers everywhere, not only Pecola. The impact of mental illness on Black women and girls is a reflection of the sensitivity and vulnerability of their mourning in today's society, and this research reveals that they confront numerous sorts of prejudice.

Conclusion

In *The Bluest Eye* (1970), the author explores the effects of economic collapse on migration. The novel recognizes the psychological and emotional subjugation that Black women endure. Frieda and Claudia are now living with their parents in Lorain. They take in a renter named Mr. Henry and a foster girl named Pecola Breedlove after her unpredictable father, Cholly, burned down the family home. The story of Pecola is the foundational text for the idea of African American culture. Her parents, who are often arguing, verbally and physically mistreat the shy little girl. Therefore, she can't help but contemplate how much she would change if she could just be a white girl with blue eyes and blend in with her bigoted neighborhood. Dick and Jane rely heavily on the prologue for the majority of the story's headings. As stated by Rice (2003, p. 62), The parents of Pecola, Cholly, and Pauline, are shown as their younger selves, allowing us to understand the struggles they endured as Black Americans in a mostly White Anglo-Saxon Protestant neighborhood. A wealthy white family

employs Mother Pauline as a housekeeper. The juxtaposition with the present highlights the traumatic impact of Cholly's drunken rape of Pecola, who was Pauline's and Pecola's father. Neither of these women can do much to improve their terrible situations. Due to Cholly's abandonment of Pecola while she is pregnant, only Claudia and Frieda in the neighborhood have the belief that the unborn child is likely to survive. The parents, superstitious as they are, believe that the child's very survival depends on the marigolds' blossoming, so they opt to plant marigold seeds instead of purchasing a bike. Similar to Pecola's unborn child, the marigold blossom remains closed the entire time. At last, the narrator, Claudia, regrets Pecola's racial discrimination and the fact that she was unable to overcome her obstacles. Cholly Breedlove, the novel's protagonist and a Black woman, endures emotional and financial hardship as a result of racism. He has lived through the devastation of poverty and need. Schreiber (2010, p. 53) claims The fundamental theme of the book, which depicts an infant girl named Pecola going through a period of confusion and loneliness, is the conflict that exists between an individual's sense of self and their connections to those closest to them in society. The character's demise begins with this. By bringing up the topic of slavery, she further degrades African Americans and their fight for independence and self-determination. Slave children can't love or care for their kids because they are dehumanized. As enslaved people, they are unable to change who they are or even own themselves completely. As a result of the traumatic stress disorder brought on by his experiences with racist and sexist abuse, Cholly Breedlove is unable to function at all. To escape his own depravity, Cholly turns violent against his family because he feels utterly powerless and exposed by his oppressors. He rapes his daughter, destroys his home, and assaults his wife. The hardships endured by Cholly are representative of the larger Black African American community as a whole, which is reeling from the effects of racial injustice and responding violently and angrily to white people. Mr. MacTeer is an example of the kind of Black man who refuses to back down from a struggle for his community's honor and dignity, in contrast to Cholly, whose community gives in to white intimidation and fails miserably. The book portrays Mr. MacTeer as an obstacle that Cholly struggles to overcome. Morrison utilizes him and his family to show that Black people can succeed in spite of racism if they stay resilient, work diligently, and have a positive outlook. (Reyes-Conner & Conner, 2000, p. 68)

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