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**Racial Beauty as an Impediment in The Construction of  
Black Female Identity in Toni Morrison's Selected Novels**

Thesis Submitted in Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Doctorate  
Degree in Literature and Civilization

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Date: 09/09/2024

Signed: *Lilia Zenadji*

## DEDICATION

*This humble work is dedicated to the most precious persons below*

*My beloved husband Cherif, whose pride in my achievement would have been unwavering, had fate not decreed his death.*

*My missed father, al-mujahid Ouamar Zenadji whose untimely passing during my early years deprived me of the privilege of having him by my side in such significant moments. Yet, I am confident that he would have been proud of me.*

*My wonder-woman, my light in the darkness, my breeze of hope in despair, my **Mother** who has only been supportive and unconditionally loving. I would not have been the woman that I am today if it was not for her.*

*My best friend, confidante and soulmate Khalida, who has entered my life when I was at my lowest, who has turned every bitter moment into a beautiful memory.*

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis employs an interdisciplinary approach, integrating Lacanian psychoanalysis and Judith Butler's feminist theory of performativity, to unpack the complex layers of gender and identity formation in Toni Morrison's narratives, primarily *The Bluest Eye*, *Sula*, *Beloved*, *Tar Baby*, and *Song of Solomon*. By utilizing Lacanian concepts of the Imaginary, Symbolic, and Real orders alongside The Mirror Stage, the research elucidates how Morrison's characters navigate their identities amidst the internalization of white beauty standards and the pervasive impact of racial discrimination. Furthermore, Butler's theory of gender performativity is applied to analyze how Morrison's female protagonists construct and perform their gendered identities in a society that imposes rigid racial and beauty norms. This theoretical lens allows for a nuanced understanding of how cultural rules and values hamper the ability of black women to appreciate and love themselves, often leading to self-hatred and a fractured sense of identity. The thesis also engages with other critical theories such as Frantz Fanon's racialization and Pierre Bourdieu's theory of habitus to further contextualize the socio-cultural and historical influences on the characters' development. By examining the intersectionality of race and gender, this research highlights the systemic oppression faced by African American women and their resilience in the face of such adversities. Through a close reading of *The Bluest Eye*, *Sula*, *Song of Solomon*, *Tar Baby*, and *Beloved*, this thesis provides a comprehensive analysis of how racialized beauty standards serve as an impediment to the construction of a genuine black female identity. The study aims to contribute to the fields of literary analysis, critical race theory, and feminist studies by offering an expanded perspective on the multifaceted nature of identity and belonging within a racially divided society.

**Keywords:** *Beloved*, Franz Fanon, Judith Butler, Lacanian Psychoanalysis, Intersectionality, Performativity, Pierre Bourdieu, *Song of Solomon*, *Sula*, *Tar Baby*, Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*.

# **Introduction**

One of the conventional speculations surrounding beauty is the famed quote "beauty is in the eye of the beholder," which insinuates a subjective quality within perception. Thus, often defined as a combination of qualities that provide a deep, often subjective sense of pleasure or satisfaction, beauty is more than just an aesthetic concept; it is a social and cultural construct that reflects and reinforces societal values and norms. In parallel, the discovery of racial beauty is generally a focus of attention among the marginalized or oppressed ethnicity that is judged based on the standard of the so-called 'dominant' or 'mainstream' beauty.

In the context of the American society, the influence of racialized beauty standards—where beauty is often idealized according to white-based features such as light skin, straight hair, and narrow facial features—can be palpable within the Black community. A notable example of this influence can be seen in the case of rapper Lil' Kim, who has undergone multiple cosmetic surgeries, including rhinoplasty and skin lightening, which many perceive as attempts to conform to Eurocentric beauty ideals. This issue is of great importance as it significantly impacts the development of Black females' identity in a society that struggles with ethnic and gender issues. The criteria used to express racial beauty stem from an idealized version of white beauty. "Blacks are taught that whiteness is next to God-ness" (Hilliard 62). This internalized racism has repressed the value of blackness and Black cultural norms.

In African American literature notably, beauty standards are not mere aesthetic concerns; they are deeply entwined with issues of identity, self-worth, and societal acceptance. Historically, the valorization of white beauty standards has marginalized black aesthetics, leading to a pervasive sense of inferiority among African American

women. Morrison's novels, particularly *The Bluest Eye*, vividly depict the psychological and social ramifications of these oppressive standards. Toni Morrison believes that assessing and placing racial beauty within her narratives is a huge part of explaining her characters' self-identity. She claims that "for those who are lonely - black women, blue-eyed Jews, Mohawks, big and ugly people" are thought to be "the best readers of the same sort of stories"(Morrison, *Playing in the Dark* 21). All of her novels have taken place in time periods where being a black female was a struggle in itself. Her novels are the best examples of how racial beauty really affects the lives of black females during the Great Migration and the Post-Civil Rights era. These time periods were when African Americans experienced symbolic annihilation via the media. According to Henley (1995), the portrayal was distorted, and there was a lack of representation, since the roles that were available were often based on racist stereotypes, perpetuating negative, false, or harmful ideas about Black people. This is the hazardous context in which black beauty and identity were forming during these time periods, and the ideas and concepts were passed down to future generations. This being so, Morrison's novels provide a better understanding of black self-identity and racial beauty during these time periods that are still relevant today.

Through her novels, Toni Morrison vividly illustrates how the legacy of slavery and the persistent imposition of white beauty standards profoundly impact the identity of African Americans, especially Black women. In *The Bluest Eye* (1970), Morrison portrays the internal conflict of a Black girl, Pecola Breedlove, who is driven to the brink of madness by her yearning to possess blue eyes—a symbol of societal acceptance and beauty rooted in whiteness. This tragic desire underscores the destructive effects of

internalized racism, where Black individuals, particularly women, feel compelled to reject their natural identity in favor of an unattainable, white-dominated ideal. In *Sula* (1973), Morrison continues to explore these themes by depicting how the expectations of white beauty standards clash with Black cultural heritage, leading to the alienation and frustration of her characters. This novel's nomination for the National Book Award and reception of the Ohioana Book Award highlights its significance in portraying the complexities of African-American life. Similarly, in *Song of Solomon* (1977), Morrison celebrates Black cultural heritage, which contrasts with the pervasive influence of white aesthetics, helping her to win the National Book Critics Circle Award and the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters Award. In *Tar Baby* (1981), Morrison examines the consequences of idolizing white beauty standards within the Black community, illustrating how this can distort values and lead to a crisis of identity. Lastly, in *Beloved* (1987), she exposes the lingering inhumanities of the American slavery system, showing how these horrors continue to affect African-American identity, especially in the way Black women perceive themselves within a society that venerates white beauty.

Thus, via these accounts, Morrison endeavors to locate the redefined Black identity within a complex socio-political landscape where cultural hybridization, power negotiations, and individual resistance intersect. However, just “being black” in her novels does not promote unity within the community as there also exists radicalization and class differences within the black collective. So, through her characters, Morrison portrays the dehumanization of slavery and racism. Besides, she explores how the imposed white beauty standards on Black youth, whose dark-skinned and Negroid

features blight their lives, but also how they can drastically damage one's self-love and esteem; a fact that usually occurs when beauty goes unrecognized.

The general discernment of the formerly cited novels reveals two contrasting perspectives: one suggests that the standardized beauty norms propagated by the white-dominated society serve as a model for shaping the Black female gender and identity, while the other argues that these standards act as an impediment to the construction of a coherent Black female self, ultimately leading to its distortion. While my thesis will address both viewpoints, it will primarily concentrate on the latter as the original message lying behind Morrison's targeted novels. It will also explore the complex mix of attraction and repulsion that characterizes the relationship between Black and White. Accordingly, it will discuss how the racial beauty, standardized by the white dominant society, both lures black female characters into identifying to it; thus losing their original identity, and repulses at the same time other rather rebellious characters that tend to question this standard and stick to their image of blackness.

My thesis posits that the relentless pursuit of white beauty ideals represents a significant obstacle in the formation of a healthy black female identity in Toni Morrison's works, with particular emphasis on *The Bluest Eye* as a focal point of analysis. Drawing from a diverse array of Morrison's novels, including *Sula*, *Song of Solomon*, and *Beloved*, alongside pertinent literary criticism and sociohistorical contextualization, this study seeks to unravel the intricate dynamics at play within the nexus of race, beauty, and identity. It also endeavors to elucidate the multifaceted ways in which racial beauty operates as a site of struggle, resilience, and transformation in the lives of black women. My dedication to this research stems from the persistent

impact of white-centric beauty standards on Black females in the United States of America, a pervasive influence that continues to manifest in various forms today. This ongoing relevance underscores the importance of examining how these ideals obstruct the development of a strong and autonomous Black female self.

Building on this framework, it is crucial to recognize how racial standards of beauty have long posed a significant threat to Black women's self-esteem and have been a breeding ground for identity issues. Morrison's novels offer a critical and profound examination of these destructive beauty standards. Complementing this analysis, other scholars, such as Kimberley Crenshaw and bell hooks, have provided precise evidence linking these standards to white supremacy and have investigated their pervasive impacts on Black women's lives

Kimberley Crenshaw creates a profound and detailed analysis of numerous challenges women face including racial beauty standards. She particularly focuses on addressing women's intersectionality explained as a manner in which various social categories like race, sex and class interact and amplify each other. In the context of beauty standards, intersectionality enables one to realize that black women undergo certain pressures and discrimination measures that are different from those of white women or black men. Crenshaw's intersectional theory is useful in understanding Morrison's novels since it allows for the exploration of the combined impact of both race and gendered beauty standards. Crenshaw builds on her research that the issues faced by black women are a result of the complex intersectionality of race and gender. Crenshaw's work is further developed by bell hooks who focuses on the cultural dimension of black women's oppression. hooks states that the white supremacist

aesthetic establishes blackness and femininity as worthless and interrelated, which positions black women in the periphery (Crenshaw 10-12). According to hooks, her analysis of Morrison's work explains how characters manage the intersecting oppressions. For example, in *The Bluest Eye*, the tragic protagonist Pecola Breedlove wants her eyes to be blue as a sign of acceptance into the Eurocentric beauty standards of the American society.

Also, the study titled "Beauty and Body Image Concerns Among African American College Women" by Germiné H. Awad et.al, published in the *Journal of Black Psychology*, explores the unique beauty and body image concerns of African American college women through qualitative analysis. By conducting focus groups with thirty-one African American women at a Southwestern university, the study reveals that hair texture, skin tone, and body type are central to their beauty standards. Participants frequently reported experiencing racial microaggressions and societal pressures to conform to Eurocentric beauty norms, leading to feelings of invalidation and psychological stress. The preference for "thick/toned/curvy" body types over the thin ideal often promoted in mainstream media underscores the culturally specific beauty ideals within the African American community (Awad et al. 2-4).

Reed and Miller highlight the significant psychological and social implications of the intersecting racial and gendered beauty norms. The internalization of such standards can lead to self-esteem issues, body dissatisfaction, and a continuous struggle for acceptance both within their community and broader society. Walker confirms such findings by maintaining that Black American women remain highly vulnerable to racial beauty standards passed to them through various mediums including peers, family, and

friends (3). By focusing on characteristics like hair and skin tone, the study calls for a reconceptualization of body image that acknowledges the cultural and racial experiences of African American women. Thus, Reed and Miller (2023) contribute to the literature by emphasizing the need for culturally sensitive approaches in addressing body image concerns, ultimately advocating for a broader understanding of beauty standards.

Consequently, Claudia Tate (1983) argues that Pecola's desire for blue eyes is a pathetic inclination of low self-esteem, influenced by racism. The desire comes from her self-hate where she thinks that she is ugly and should not even exist because she is black (8). According to Tate, Pecola's obsession arises from the fact that African Americans, in particular, are bombarded with images and messages that bring out their low racial status. The culturally imposed self-hatred is evident in the way Pecola treats herself and is further promoted by those around her, including her family. The psychological issue affecting Pecola is elaborate and stems from her social encounter in a prejudiced society.

Reviewing the literature on the formation of racial beauty standards and the construction of black female identity in American society through the prism of Toni Morrison's novels, it is possible to state that Eurocentric beauty standards remain deeply ingrained in American society, which produces a profound psychological and social effect on black women. Feminists like Kimberlé Crenshaw and bell hooks have shown how race and gender mingle to produce new forms of oppression that deepen internalized racism and lowered self-esteem in Black women. Morrison's characters, in *The Bluest Eye*, *Sula*, and *Beloved*, relay the impact of racism from within, and the

contempt society has for the black aesthetics of beauty, which offers a compelling counter-narrative that resists such prejudice.

Furthermore, recent work such as Awad et al.'s analysis on beauty and body image in African American college women provides additional insights into the challenges Black women face regarding beauty standards. These studies highlight the critical need to shift the prevailing paradigm of beauty norms to one that recognizes and values the inherent features and lived experiences of Black women. Thus, in alignment with various scholars' viewpoints outlined earlier and the central theme of this thesis, which explores how racialized beauty standards serve as a significant impediment to the construction of a cohesive Black female identity, the literature review supports the need of cultivating a more inclusive and positive definition of beauty. This shift is essential not only for the psychological well-being of Black women, as reflected in Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* and other works, but also for dismantling the toxic standards that currently distort Black female identity and hinder its development.

My thesis will attempt to address the following questions: How have the sociological, historical, and political contexts influenced the conceptualization of beauty among African-Americans? How does standardized beauty, as portrayed in the white dominant society, serve as an impediment in the construction of a genuine self and hence a distortion of the black female identity? In what ways do psychoanalytic theories of internalization and identity formation illuminate the experiences of Morrison's black female characters? How does the intersectionality of race and gender inform the struggles and resistance of black women in Morrison's works? What role do

community and familial relationships play in reinforcing or challenging racial beauty ideals in Morrison's narratives?

These questions will eventually be answered using the aforementioned critical tools together with Bourdieu's concept of Habitus and Fanon's Racialization. Bourdieu's concept of habitus will be employed to explore how the social environment and cultural practices shape the dispositions and behaviors of Morrison's characters. This theoretical lens allows for a nuanced understanding of how cultural rules and values hamper the ability of black women to appreciate and love themselves, often leading to self-hatred and a fractured sense of identity. Fanon's theory of racialization; on the other hand, is utilized to contextualize the socio-historical and political influences on the construction of black identity. This framework helps to elucidate how systemic oppression and colonial legacies perpetuate the marginalization of black aesthetics and reinforce the dominance of white beauty standards.

The body of my study consists of the amalgamation of Psychoanalysis and Gender Studies in the construction of the text. It will explain how the unconscious and performativity of gender play a crucial role in the orientation of characters and their respective reactions to racism and standardized beauty. It will also discuss how damaging the stereotype of the "white beauty" is to the vulnerable black girl, like Pecola and how on the other hand, more rebellious female characters like Claudia is less affected by this stereotype and rather resents it to its core. Further, the relationship between young female characters and their mothers respectively will be tackled so as to explain how the mother-daughter relationship can affect the psyche of the daughter and

hence her ideology. It will cover Eurocentric beauty as a political, social, and cultural construct and how it confines American women of African descent to harmful frameworks.

The thesis is divided into five chapters, each one carrying a relatively significant input to the overall building of the entire body. Chapter One provides an analysis of the sociological, historical, and political contexts' influence on the standardization of beauty. It describes how the indentured history of the African-Americans over the years has affected their conceptualization of beauty leading to the standardization of beauty around White concepts. It further describes how slavery and institutionalized racial discrimination have impacted the mindset of African-Americans with regard to their identity formation.

Chapter Two describes the research paradigms and theoretical tools informing the study. It tackles the key theoretical concepts behind the racialization of beauty. The main aim of the chapter is to explain the connection between beauty and identity formation and deformation. It does so by exploring the psychosocial, psychoanalytic, and gender performativity theories.

Chapter Three discusses how the standardization of beauty has been modeled after the white norms. The chapter seeks to explore whether this act of standardizing beauty based on the white template of beauty is effective in the forging of African-American women's identity. The chapter begins by describing the white beauty standards, and explaining how this form of beauty has been portrayed in Toni Morrison's novels. It goes on to explain how these white beauty standards get

conceptualized as ideal. It then describes how this conceptualization is transposed into the African-American identity.

Chapter Four focuses on the negative effect of this standardization of beauty based on white standards. It analyzes how the patterned idealization of beauty based on white precepts is generally disruptive to the norms of African-American women. The effect is that it distorts their sense of reality, construction of a genuine sense of self, and development of African-American identity. The Lacanian theory is invoked when discussing the detrimental impact of standardization of beauty, specifically the self-splitting of the image of the character. The chapter delves further to discuss the extended effect of disillusionment among the characters. Moreover, the characters do tend to internalize racist and discriminatory behaviors. The acceptance of the white standards of beauty also contributes to the perpetuation of the oppressive patterns against African-Americans.

Finally, Chapter Five explores how characters in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* and other cited novels grapple with and attempt to redefine their identities amidst the pervasive influence of racialized beauty standards. The chapter emphasizes that beauty, often seen as a source of pride, becomes a significant obstacle for Morrison's characters, particularly those who are Black. This redefinition process is complicated by societal structures and discourses that dictate what is considered normal, beautiful, and desirable—ideals often aligned with whiteness.

**Chapter One: Sociological, Historical, and  
Political Context of Racial Beauty**

Toni Morrison's narratives provide a profound exploration of the African American experience, deeply rooted in the socio-historical and political landscapes that have shaped the community's identity. Her novels—*The Bluest Eye*, *Sula*, *Beloved*, *Tar Baby*, and *Song of Solomon*—offer a nuanced critique of how race, identity, and beauty standards intersect and influence black female identity. This chapter delves into the socio-historical backdrop of Morrison's narratives, illuminating how her life and the broader historical context inform her portrayal of the black experience in America.

### **1. The African American Experience of the 1900's**

Since being published, African Americans have begun to embark on the long journey of their complete acceptance and have the same privileges and resources as white Americans. A bright title to a fresh challenging age that exposed how whites regarded blacks as inferior was the Abolition of slavery. It was plain enough for the black people here that it was never a case of a slave person or a free person. There was a contest. They have been different. They have not been blonde. For several years, bigotry in America has still been a big concern. African Americans have been discriminated against in a variety of respects. Their lifestyle aspects were too severely influenced by bigotry, such as schooling, residence, jobs, occupational distribution and economic opportunities.

The socio-historical context of the twentieth century, particularly the Great Migration and the Civil Rights Movement, significantly influenced Toni Morrison's early life and literary career. Born in 1931 in Lorain, Ohio, Morrison grew up during a time of profound racial segregation and systemic oppression in America. The Great Migration, spanning from 1916 to 1970, saw approximately six million African

Americans relocate from the rural South to the urban North. This migration was driven by the search for better economic opportunities and a desire to escape the oppressive Jim Crow laws that enforced racial segregation and disenfranchisement.

Morrison's hometown of Lorain, a diverse industrial city, provided a unique environment where she witnessed the complexities of race relations first-hand. This backdrop is vividly reflected in her debut novel, *The Bluest Eye*, where characters like Pecola Breedlove grapple with the legacies of displacement and the harsh realities of urban life. The novel captures the socio-economic challenges faced by African Americans who migrated North, highlighting the persistent racism and economic inequalities that followed them. The industrial setting of Lorain, with its melting pot of ethnicities and cultures, also exposes the internal divisions and tensions within the African American community itself.

The socio-historical landscape also includes the impact of the Harlem Renaissance, which flourished during Morrison's formative years. This cultural movement celebrated African American artistic expression and sought to redefine black identity. Influenced by figures such as Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston, Morrison's works reflect deep engagement with themes of cultural identity and self-affirmation. Her characters often struggle to reclaim their cultural heritage and assert their identities in a society that devalues them. The Harlem Renaissance, with its emphasis on black pride and cultural production, provided a foundation for Morrison's exploration of black beauty and identity, setting the stage for her critique of racial beauty standards.

Morrison's voice extends beyond the American borders. The global movements for decolonization and civil rights during the mid-twentieth century also resonate within her narratives. As African and Caribbean nations fought for independence from European colonial powers, African Americans drew inspiration from these struggles to further their own quest for civil rights. Morrison's novels reflect this interconnectedness, showing how the fight for racial equality in the United States was part of a larger, global struggle against colonialism and racism. This global perspective is particularly evident in *Tar Baby*, where the protagonist's interactions with African and Caribbean cultures highlight the complexities of black identity in a post-colonial world.

The topic of beauty standards within African-American culture is rich in historical developments, sociopolitical transformations, and cultural resistance. The standards have, therefore, been shaped by race and identity from the time of slavery till the present day. The beauty standards for African Americans are not only about the white cultural norm but also, and in equal measure, about the internalized oppression of a people in search of acceptance and identity (Smith 3). The themes can be well discussed in Toni Morrison's literary works, primarily *The Bluest Eye*, describing the destructive nature of the desire for Eurocentric beauty for African Americans. The historical continuum from oppression and dehumanization to liberty and appreciation of black skin cements the ingenuity of the African-Americans in rewriting the dictionary of beauty. It is essential to understand this evolution to fully recognize the ongoing fight for an accurate representation of beauty in today's society.

Historically, specifically during the time of slavery and the Antebellum period in America, the standards of beauty for black women were distorted under the

framework of whiteness. The black Africans who were captured and brought to the new world were subjugated to inhuman treatment, and their facial features reduced to nothing to substantiate their inferiority. Dark skin, broad noses, and kinky hair were ridiculed and depicted as ugly compared to European facial features that dominated the white and dominant society (Monroe and Grayson 7-10). The degradation was purposely done to take away everything African from the enslaved people to make them fit to be tormented and used mercilessly. The connection between beauty and light skin became fixed as a social construct and an ideology imposed onto the minds of the oppressed.

Toni Morrison's *Beloved* is one of the novels that presents the psychological trauma of this period as characters struggle with their self-perception in a society that denies their value based on their appearance. The psychological trauma is evident when Morrison writes,

In this here place, we flesh; flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in grass. Love it. Love it hard. Yonder they do not love your flesh. They despise it. They don't love your eyes; they'd just as soon pick them out. No more do they love the skin on your back. Yonder they flay it. And O my people they do not love your hands. (88)

The novel highlights the profound psychological struggles and negative emotions that arise from internalizing racist beauty standards. It raises critical questions about attractiveness and beauty for post-Emancipation Black individuals, living in a society that historically reduced slaves to standards based on color and physical appearance. Through its exploration of the fight against internalized racism and the journey toward self-acceptance, the novel delves into these enduring themes. By studying sources from

the antebellum period, we gain a deeper understanding of the historical roots linking whiteness to beauty and its impact on the identity of African Americans.

Reconstruction, which occurred after the Civil War, can be considered a period of varied progress for the black population. Though it abolished slavery and offered the black population the right to citizenship equality, they remained persecuted and oppressed. The beauty standard during this period was still Eurocentric, amplified with the onset of segregation and the emergence of Jim Crow laws (Van 20).

However, African Americans built their standards of beauty and pride amidst these oppressive circumstances as ways of countering oppressive power structures. Newspapers and black-owned or operated magazines like *The Chicago Defender* and *The Crisis* offered depictions of blacks that embraced the physical characteristics and cultural aspects of black people, which was a positive deviation from the customary portrayal of Blacks by whites (Van 22). In Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, the main character Pecola Breedlove suffers from the impulse of a racist conscience and a desire for blue eyes. The internal struggle, grounded in the period of Reconstruction, effectively illustrates the disastrous consequence of racially grooming whiteness. During the period, African Americans tried to bring out black beauty, which was not valued in society; the initiative created a foundation for the coming Cultural Revolution. There was a further change in African-American beauty standards in the early 20th century due to cultural movements such as the Harlem Renaissance and the Civil Rights movement. The movement of the Harlem Renaissance during the years 1920 and 1930 was the rebirth of the black culture that emphasized black art and literature (Van 24). From dancers like Josephine Baker to writers like Langston Hughes, a new articulation

of blackness emerged and resisted the hegemonic rules of the white civilized world. The period was a turning point, as black people began to appreciate their natural hair and other features as strengths to be proud of instead of weaknesses that should be hidden.

To some extent, Morrison's *Jazz* also depicts the dynamics of the reconstruction period and people who search for their place in society as the culture blossoms. The novel reflects the spirit of the Harlem Renaissance, a time when the celebration of Black beauty emerged as a powerful act of rebellion against the dominant norms in America and provided black people with a new way of looking at themselves. When the Civil Rights movement began in the mid-1900s, phrases like 'Black is Beautiful' came into play and heightened the significance of affirmative black iconography (Van 24). The developments laid the basis for the further emergence of beauty standards within the African-Americans and a constant struggle between the oppression by outside forces and the fight for the recognition of the worth and dignity within.

Social movement in the late twentieth century was a significant change and an advancement in the portrayal and perception of African-American beauty standards. In this era, movements such as the natural hair movement, which started in 1960 and 1970, re-emerged in the 2000s. It urged black women to wear natural hair textures instead of artificially relaxing or chemically straightening their hair, which was popular among Europeans. The natural hair movement was not merely one of beauty but of identity and rebellion through public displays against stereotypical whiteness. Civilian activists like Angela Davis and later Erykah Badu became icons of this movement as people of color wore their natural hair to signify cultural pride and personal power (Van 78). Subsequently, like in *Paradise* and *God Help the Child*, Morrison pursues beauty and

its correlation with identity, which remains an issue of modern African American women's acceptance throughout the community. The novels explore current concerns and show how the legacy of beauty standards affects black people today. Such conclusions are evident when she writes, "Soane, who had once prided herself on her looks, now found herself doubting the very same features that had brought her admiration. The mirror reflected the standards she could never meet" (Morrison, *Paradise* 189).

Another element that contributed to the reconceptualization of aesthetics during this time was the influence of black women in media and entertainment. Ladies such as Oprah Winfrey and Halle Berry, and, in the later decades, Lupita Nyong'o defied the conventional conception and gained success and admiration. Through their presence and popularity, they expanded the perception of beauty and encouraged other African Americans to appreciate their natural looks. What's more, the entry of social media in the twenty-first century has shifted the paradigm of beauty. Applications such as Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok introduced inclusiveness, making people of different origins share their beauty regimen and self-appreciation (Olayinka et al. 7). Hashtags like "#BlackGirlMagic and #MelaninPoppin" provided platforms where black women's beauty was embraced and welcomed. Such movements undo the harm done by traditional media and promote the value and belonging of black people in society.

However, there is new pressure that comes with using social media since there are filters and photo-editing applications that present unrealistic beauty standards (Olayinka et al. 8). It is similar to the struggle depicted in Morrison's novel, *The Bluest Eye*, in which the hegemonic norms influence the internal desolation of characters. The

algorithmic system of social media results in the formation of bubbles that support several standards of attractiveness and oppose the pattern of comparison and ineffectiveness. Nevertheless, social media have emerged as a tool that helps African Americans reclaim their autonomy and challenge the beauty standards that oppress them.

Generally, the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries brought significant changes and improvements to African-American beauty standards. Cultural movements embracing natural hair, role models, and the use of social media are some of the factors that have enhanced the advancement of beauty for people with all hair types. However, the peculiarities and difficulties of the constantly changing standards remain the link to historical trauma that cannot be ignored due to constant resistance and acts of self-affirmation.

## **2. Racial Beauty Standards and Internalized Racism**

In America, bigotry has become a significant issue. African Americans were dangerously and severely influenced by the way it was manifested and practiced on racialized communities at both the interpersonal and structural stages. Psychological trauma was inflicted to the black population by racial acts, oppressive attitudes, biases and assumptions, as well as procedures and actions that were correctly planned and geared against the black community and ethnicity. The African-American culture and uniqueness were slogged through names, words, and lampooning caricatures and imagery as it produced an already formed and pictured figure that the blacks could not avoid even though they tried hard.

They were born to see themselves defined in a horrific way and appearance to the universe that never incarnated the truth. When both representatives of various ages felt depressed and confused in such a discriminatory environment, being stereotyped and prejudiced produced a major divide in African-American cooperation and cohesion. They were rejected as an equal race and worthy human beings no longer in a righteous position and role. The black person was unwilling to fit into his position because of racism; to openly define who they are and adhere to their values, ideals and expectations. So, they find themselves trapped in the traditions and expectations of white people.

Norms and traditions are constructed and re-created, just when their spirits are mutilated and damaged, they are mutilated and baleful. These harmful shifts in the understanding of its participants in culture contribute to significant neurological consequences on people, often extending to hysteria and mental disturbances. Alternatively, they were ostracized and avoided, often regarded as pariahs by those who wanted to question it. It has been such a distant hope to exist without biases, assumptions and strain. Growing up in an unsafe community will create unhealthy individuals, the kind of people who could not connect with each other, respect, support, consolidate, console or even clean the tears of each other.

The family is the womb where creation contributes to culture. It may be the root of grief, of pleasure, of affection, of dislike, of belonging, of isolation, of shunning. As is widely accepted, the family is the community's focal unit and a strong culture is founded upon its strong solidarity. Furthermore, a fragmented group arose upon its fractured parts. In a detrimental manner, bigotry and segregation shaped the structure

and society of the black family. "In many ways, African-American families and communities are adversely affected by the continuation of white-on-black racism[...] The various white attacks on black families often have a significant impact on the larger communities" (Feagin & McKinney 94-95).

The African-American family had to confront diverse obstacles and challenging realities in their daily existence in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. A number of serious and continuing problems for African American families have been created by discriminatory and stressful economic conditions. Low salaries are not the only challenge, but even the stress of unemployment and underemployment actually breaks up some families, creating the much-noted single-parent families. Since most households were impoverished and faced economic obstacles, there was little opportunity for parents to invest with their children and give them attention and affection. They spent the entire day working and satisfying the needs of white people while mentally starving their children. Paul C. Rosenblatt notes that "parents can work long, extremely difficult hours in poverty to bring in a bare minimum of income, with long hours and hard work depriving children of parental time and energy." (541)

The harsh interactions to which the children of the family are exposed under the control of a racist culture have decided and developed the quality of family relationships. Since for many African Americans the reality of racism is a daily phenomenon, the family will give its members a refuge where they might forget their suffering and heal their wounds, but no one can get blood from stones. Due to the oppressive climate, the Black family was struggling and could no longer function in a healthy way, as its core relationships had been broken down. The family, rather than

being a source of sanctuary, became too wounded, depleted, or burdened by personal and interpersonal challenges to offer mutual support. As a result, the home turned into a battleground or a place of isolation, rather than a haven.

Racism has played a significant role in dispersing the black woman and shaping her home life and her main role as a wife and mother in society. The circumstances of the woman were the toughest ever since the first African-Americans walked into the American country. In addition to the massive weight of slavery on them and their descendants, another strain accrued on the back of the black women, stemming from oppression, which was economic hardship. The harsh circumstances forced her away from her son. "Historically, black women have been required to operate outside the home in vast numbers and have therefore had fewer leisure, attention, and financial capital to commit to motherhood," says Angela Davis (115). The damage arising from marital disputes such as domestic violence will naturally influence the psychological status of the individual as well as the standard of mothering. The connection between maternal psychological trauma and the quality of parenting was hypothesized to be partly mediated by the quality of the interpersonal relationships of adults. Such negativity has been found to spill over into infant experiences, undermining the consistency of parent-child relationships (Boss & Mulligan 280). It was the same with single mothers who found themselves drawn into a position in which they played both roles of mother and father. These challenging situations can often lead to single mothers distancing themselves from their children, resulting in neglect. Studies conducted on maternal depression and child development like Aurora Jackson et al's "Single Mothers in Low-Wage Jobs: Financial Strain, Parenting, and Preschoolers' Outcomes" (2000),

have shown that single mothers experiencing higher levels of depressive symptoms tend to be less engaged in their children's lives.

One has to admit that the black male was not spared either. During slavery, he had his share in torture and misery; he was like the deposed king who found himself standing waiting hopelessly as his empire was robbed, destroyed and violated in front of his eyes. Due to bigotry, the African man was profoundly affected and hurt. The economic hardships deprived him of his essential position as the heaven (Feagin & McKinney 101). The rough life the black male had was not taken into account by certain racist photos that accused the black male of being a negligent and violent man. As described above, both physically and mentally, African-American men were tortured and profoundly hurt. Throughout their lives, unbearable encounters and traumatic experiences deeply shaped their often cruel and violent actions and reactions to the world. Oppression and social forces fundamentally molded their experiences, beliefs, and relationships. While some may overcome this dark history, others internalize it, responding destructively toward themselves, their loved ones, and the world around them. Their love for those they care about may become aggressive and harmful, which clearly affects their role as parents.

The long-lasting impact of segregation, slavery, and injustice has caused many African American men to struggle with seeing themselves in leadership roles within their households. So, it was obvious that even though he was there, the father figure was missing at home, which created several difficulties. Black men were robbed of well-paid employment because of historic inequalities; decent schooling and numerous chances to better their condition and be able to support a family. The African-American

father often struggled to fulfill his role as the family's protector and provider. Additionally, he was reluctant to serve as a role model for his daughters. The father's leadership is crucial for the full parental guidance of sons and equally important for daughters. Unfortunately, racism and its harsh consequences diminished the role of the Black man, reducing him to merely a biological parent. As a result, many African American men father children but fail to provide them with the necessary economic or emotional support

The purity and weakness of the children have not interceded on their behalf with the racist and inhuman society in which they reside. The most frightening events and incidents were experienced by black children. They became members of a discriminatory system and were offspring of tortured parents. At that time school became a theater with numerous ethnic scenes played by white children that really represented the views of the adults. Racist insults, jokes, and epithets became a common part of the schooling life of black children, though no one bothered.

The discomfort that racial slurs create in children and teenagers is also not understood by many students. They scarcely interfere on behalf of the survivor when teachers witness accidents. "Black jokes and slurs[...] serve to demean or mentally harm the individual," the everyday racist acts experienced by African-American children had a significant baleful effect on their psyche (Seltzer & Johnson 137). Experiencing a traumatic encounter during the day and expecting to return home to a place where wounds are meant to heal can be even more difficult if violence is present there as well. For many Black children, the family home is a sanctuary from the constant violence and bigotry they face outside. However, any abuse within the household can severely

undermine this sense of safety, leading to heightened feelings of vulnerability and fear in these children.

Every participant had his own kind of plight in the African-American culture. "Because of inequality, unjust circumstances, and uncontrollable pressures, citizens are turning toward themselves, their loved ones, and others to express their feelings of helplessness and hopelessness," the tribulation of black children was not just for residing in a discriminatory community but also for becoming sons and daughters of victimized men and women (Harris & Miller 187). The African-American girls, sadly, were an outlet for all of their fathers' rage, complex feelings and deep wounds. In the refuge to which they migrated from the ferocious outside environment, the black children encountered very threatening and abusive circumstances. Most African American people are particularly caught up in this cycle of aggressive activity and victimization, thereby becoming an endangered species.

This was not only seen in the relationship between father and child, but also in the relationship between mother and child. The latter was slogged by bigotry and inequality; motherhood is not often harmonious, of course. The relationship between mother-daughter and mother-son is seldom flawless. This could be particularly valid where oppression is the social background (Jean & Feagin 187). Domestic abuse in the African-American home adversely affected and developed the woman as a mother.

Research on maternal-infant interaction has indicated that the effect on children living with domestic violence can be influenced by the relationship between mother and infant, especially related to the amount of stress faced by the mother (Hester et al77).

The domestic violence rise was triggered by being mentally clueless and emotionally inaccessible. It is particularly the case when the experiences of the mother indicate that she is emotionally distanced, inaccessible or sometimes often hostile to the infant, such that the effect of domestic abuse on the child can be exacerbated as a consequence of loss of care and connection.

Being an oppressive father or mother, if this family was an African-American one, definitely would have a different view. Parenting in the black communities was not the same as in the white ones. Many Black parents were once the children of slaves, and this legacy left a deep mark on their lives, shaping their outlook for generations. This history influenced how they expressed affection, often with a unique intensity shaped by their past.

### **3. Black Women and the Politics of Representation within Patriarchy**

"Patriarch" is the term that derives from the Latin word "pater," "parent" and the Greek verb "to govern", "to rule. Thus, a patriarch is a reigning ancestor who may have been the founding father of a house, a tribe, or a country. The etymology of "patriarchy" may be traced to the Greek patria, meaning "fatherland. 'Patriarchy' applies to a form of civilization or governance in an ecclesiastical context, led by fathers or elderly men in a religious group. ("patriarchy")

Patriarchy is a hierarchical structure of which the chief of the family is the male one. It is also a reflection of the circumstance in which the male asserts his dominance over his female spouse. In the English Cambridge dictionary, patriarchy is defined as "a system in which the oldest male is the leader of the family or a society dominated by

men in which they use their power to their own benefit." It is therefore plain enough that patriarchy is the cover of a persecutor-persecuted relationship where domination is the striking theme of such association. "Relationship between the dominant party, considered superior, and the subordinate group, considered inferior, under which shared responsibilities and reciprocal privileges reduce supremacy" (qtd.in Majstorivic &Lassen 01).

As a philosophy and a collection of beliefs embraced by the representatives of society, patriarchy inevitably consists and forms the African American community's social structure, which is of course, linked to the particular circumstances and events that took place in the past and present existence of women. It is never about men themselves but about what influenced the men and pushed them to be such spouses and fathers in their culture. Gwen Hunnicutt explains that the idea of hegemony is often valuable in that it holds the gaze centered on societal circumstances rather than on particular males who are driven to conquer" (554). It is obvious enough that the black male was subject to some incidents and occurrences that caused him to assert supremacy over his wife.

The African American men suffered a long pain because of the white master's superiority over black men, when they were disenfranchised from their women and were powerless to defend and take care of them. The sense of responsibility of black men towards their wives and their families disappeared since under slavery and with emasculation, African American men became emasculated; they lost their ability to defend their daughters. For instance, when an African American woman was abused by her owner, African American men had no jurisdiction to interfere (Mandalapu 1). If they

intervened to secure and support their females, they were chastened; they were prevented from the most significant aspect of the identity of the individual. Although powerless to retaliate, the foundation of manhood collapsed. "Anderson and Stewart state: "Black men in general were unable to shield girlfriends, children, husbands or mothers from physical or sexual violence without enduring or being destroyed by physical punishment.

Although slavery has ended, an oppressive culture continues to exert control over Black men and their masculinity in ways that are more subtle yet no less damaging than the overt brutality of slavery. The abolition of slavery was followed by the rise of bigotry in American society, bringing with it new forms of harm for Black men. In the oppressive American society, black men endured terrifying circumstances and encounters that culminated in their rage. The key causes for black men's deprivation were low wages, tiring careers, physical and psychological violence. The economic condition of African American people was adversely impacted by colonialism and unemployment and poverty is a direct result of white supremacist treatment of legislation such as the Black Codes and the Jim Crow. The black men then lost their position and got the habit of being reliant on their family; a failed husband and father.

Because of slavery and bigotry, the powerful spirit and body of the black man, who had the guardian and provider position for decades, faded away. He was no longer the head, the protector, and the saviour of his wife and son, "I think the unjust culture, not the black women, had emasculated those black men who were emasculated (Ladner162). This theory relates to Willie Lynch, who is a man who researched the psychology of the slaves and proposed a way of regulating and emasculating slaves,

"On December 25, 1712, the slaves were invited to the Virginia colony to give a speech among the slave owners because they thought that they were ultimately losing charge of their slaves in the plantations, the slaves rebelled against the owners through figs" (Brown 1). He saw a way for the black man to be killed and emasculated.

The notion of Lynch aimed at demolishing the black man's strong position by shaking the black family system. Thus, he no longer became the protector and seller of his household. By avoiding the black male from his rights, the slave owners followed this way. He was therefore unwilling to feed his wife and his children and to sustain them. In attempt to emasculate them, slave owners sought to make their slaves "dependent" on their masters, and later on their female partner, contributing to the collapse of the black family order (Wallace).

The black man could not be killed by heavy work on farmland or in other demanding areas. Neither fear of death nor fear of torture will pull him down. But Lynch's most influential aspect is that he seems powerless to match his position. Consequently, in front of his wife, the black man will sacrifice his sense of manhood and masculinity. In their partnership, this approach aimed to establish a void. The black lost her confidence in the manhood of her partner by being left without male security, the cause that contributed to the defection in her psyche of being totally independent and frozen, this latter dilemma will reshape the black mother's identity (Wallace).

The black male was abusive against the black female since African American men are kept to the breadwinner norm almost as frequently as white men are, he felt emasculated. African American men, as all men, sometimes feel emasculated when they

are not effective as breadwinners. Violence may be one answer to this sense of emasculation (Hattery and Smith 62). Abuse towards their wives will allow them more willing to effectively achieve something! Their usage of abuse against their female spouses was a sense of being emasculated when they were unemployed or working but making less than their wives and girlfriends felt they should be. As a result, the plight of black women depended on their obligation to cover the required feeling of male emasculation. She was categorized as a black man's topic wife by this obligation.

Black women often became the targets of the anger, frustration, and feelings of powerlessness experienced by Black men. These aggressive behaviors directed at African-American women allowed some men to assert their masculinity. Beyond physical violence, sexual abuse served as another means for Black men to compensate for their diminished sense of manhood, with women being used to soothe their resentment and heal their emotional wounds. This use of women as sexual objects and symbols of masculinity turned Black women into the "hated other," diverting blame away from the white man, who is the true architect of the patriarchal system. Given that incest often occurs in families that have adopted the values and norms of traditional patriarchal cultures, it is crucial to understand the sexual exploitation of daughters by fathers as a manifestation of Patriarchalism, even while recognizing that other factors may also play a role.

Daughters of violent fathers and mothers often found themselves in a painful dilemma, as their mothers chose to reject the incident and refused to cast out the father, even though he might also violently and sexually harass the mother. African American women, in particular, suffered under the weight of oppression, not only as mothers but

also through the shame of being portrayed in a derogatory manner. These stereotypes, deeply rooted in society, aimed to diminish the sacred role of Black mothers. In contrast, the Clan Mother or Head is an authoritative female leader within the family or clan, often the eldest woman in the extended family. Her power and the respect she commands from both men and women stem from her wisdom, particularly in education, life experience, and the vital role of food distribution. The Clan Mother or Head is a matriarchal ruler, guiding the clan with her knowledge and authority (qtd. in Webster).

The portrayal of the Black matriarch often fueled negative stereotypes, suggesting that Black mothers were pessimistic and detrimental to their families. These assumptions blamed the hardships in Black families on the absence of a stable breadwinner and criticized Black mothers as poor and unfit, often pointing to their having children with multiple partners (qtd. in Ingle & Sutera 50). As Ingle and Sutera argue, viewing the Black mother from a white patriarchal perspective is problematic because it fails to consider the unfair political, social, and economic factors that impact her life. This biased portrayal overlooks the harsh realities faced by Black mothers and distorts the public perception of Black maternity, leading to widespread misconceptions.

The inaccurate portrayal of the Black mother as a matriarch had long-lasting effects, leading to a lifetime of servitude. Her behavior was deeply influenced by the suffering she endured from slavery and bigotry. The black woman experienced challenging situations under which she was abused, humiliated and exposed to the burden of her master's family life. The position of Slavery was powerful, strong, courageous, and militant in developing her personality and identity, thus voicing her

emotions and feelings in the role of the mother. The stereotype of the Black mother as the matriarch has played a tremendous role in affecting her life because she served beyond what slavery meant and for a longer time than slavery existed. This entailing portrayal of her as an authoritative and unsexed woman has its origin in the slavery and broad prejudice she underwent. So, in slavery, Black women experienced a multitude of vulnerable situations where they suffered abuse, humiliation, and the workload of taking care of their master's family. This harsh truth not only deprived them of personal freedom but also condemned them to assume occupations that entailed prejudice and subjugation. This stereotypical view of the Black mothers as matriarchs erases the real experience of Black mothers and does not recognize the contexts that produced such behaviors as well as the forced strength of Black women in the face of extreme oppression.

However, the dreadful situations shaped the standing of slavery as nourishing strong traits such as strength, courage, and militancy into the personalities and selves of Black women. The attributes were needed to sustain them and to give expression to their feelings and emotions especially when they assumed the responsibilities of mothers. The hard and sometimes barbaric nature of servitude required both strength and perseverance, and these attributes were directed towards maintaining and safeguarding the family unit for Black women. The strength was not a 'side effect' of women's oppression but was proactively chosen and contested to allow women to survive and subvert the structures at work against them. Thus, it is crucial to note the importance of the figure of the mother under the conditions of slavery as it allowed Black women to assert themselves and regain their subjectivity and dignity in the face

of heinous oppression. The legacy was transmitted to the Black mothers of the present and thus the community can celebrate both their strength and the effect of racism.

The Black woman had to face these challenges alone, as many Black men were captured and held as captives. She endured horrific experiences, but her struggle to protect herself and her children from the racist structures of American society forged a strong and resilient character, enabling her to withstand even the harshest circumstances. The African American woman has long been subjected to the overlapping forces of Slavery, sexism, and injustice. This led to a life where suffering and hardship became a constant reality. She learned to carry this heavy burden without relying on anyone, developing the strength to endure. As she worked to unite her family and protect them from disintegration, she also fought against the forces of bigotry and segregation. "Because of this bigotry, Black women had to be tough, as they were often the primary providers for their families," claim Alvin and Poussaint (593).

#### **4. The Black Female Identity Formation and Black Feminist Writing**

To ache loudly, you need a space; you should free a groan. It never will go out and will never be healed until the agony is silenced. Black women then question their bitter truth and talk to the public about their pain. Black feminism has appeared in numerous parts to form the black woman and assert a modern identity. Black feminist authors appear to draw a fresh portrait of a patriarchal and ethnic culture, which removes all the falsified clichés toward the African-American woman. That was accomplished by exposing what was going on behind the stage and uncovering the true racist and patriarchal realities that caused the plight of black women.

Black feminist scholars have raised several concerns of which the dark woman is at the center of the research or the narrative. Black feminist literature diagnoses women's place in a racist, patriarchal culture, crafting a narrative of the unexpected crime and injustice they have encountered. The African American feminist literature Black feminist scriptures as an oppressed category criticize and dispute the assumptions and the modeling persona of the black woman. This particular literature explores various topics such as sexual abuse, ethnic stereotyping; sexism, the degrading of the attractiveness of black people; and the impact of colonialism and imperialism on the life of black women.

Black women have been disproportionately stripped of equality. In a racial and oppressive culture where they were weighted down by psychological and physical weight, they stayed quiet. As black women have been put in a complex link between patriarchy and bigotry, they have little to even no choices to maintain their lives and futures. bell hooks explores the connection between such two destructive institutions claiming "Racism and sexism are not two different structures that only overlap in the experiences of Black people". They help each other's dominant structures and their connection is central in the comprehension of the subordination of all people (814). This study considers that black women are doubly colonized and that the threat they were subjected to is doubled as well.

Some Black feminists highlight the marginalized position of Black women, arguing that their experiences are shaped by multiple, interconnected forms of oppression, such as patriarchy and colonialism. Scholars like Angela Davis, Audre Lorde, Barbara Smith, Patricia Hill Collins, and Deborah King emphasize that to

address the core issues, Black women must challenge and break the silence surrounding these oppressions. "It is now time to tell who the colored women are and expect that they can become" hook believes (123). Writing about the ideal identity offers the submissive woman who gave up these unjust structures optimism and potential. This eventually reinforced and strengthened their sovereignty and trust.

The family is the most crucial institution in which the roles and behaviors of Black women are shaped and understood. It also significantly influences how others perceive and treat Black women. When families are dismantled due to prejudice and sexism, the social standing of Black women is undermined. Additionally, families and partnerships form the foundation of communities. This is why Black feminist writers place such strong emphasis on the family. They increasingly focus on how the family is shaped by the intertwined effects of racial and patriarchal oppression.

The view of black women has an impact on how they function and participate in culture. Furthermore, the way individuals handle and view themselves determines if they are self-determined. Thus, without development of fresh perceptions and new spirits, they cannot change their condition and rid themselves of tyranny. "The Black feminist thinking cannot question the cross-breeding of inequality without educating African-American people," Collins says. Self-definition is important for individual community and authorization (36). Indeed, this new mind can only be accomplished as black women conciliate with themselves and their hurtful past, hooks notes, "Oppressed citizens avoid identification by describing their truth, their new existence, their history and their history...The new spirit can only be achieved by naming themselves as objects. (814)" She rejected the domestic black female and resisted black feminine to deny a

passive image of the black femininity, which was all daunting then to point out that color, sex and class injustice were the fundamental explanations for the low of black people. She had a clear self-defining position, and for black wives the power of self-definition was essential.

Black feminist authors emphasize the horrendous sexual encounters of the black woman. Two white and black males attacked and abused her. The implications of such occurrences may be particularly devastating for its sense of identity. Subsequently, question of sexual violence, and particularly the rape of black women by both white and black men, is intensely and profoundly interrogated in black feminist texts. These horrors are well described by Black female authors such as Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, bell hooks, and Audre Lorde who emphasize on the effect of the horrors on the Black female identity. In *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison captures the effects of incestuous rape on Pecola Breedlove who is left feeling worthless, and in *The Color Purple*, Walker shows how Celie learns to give herself the strength she needs to escape her oppression despite the abuse she endures. Critical works, such as hooks' *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism*, and Lorde's poetry and essays, put a spotlight on the sexual victimization of Black women and outline its effects on their position and mental state in the long run. Such accounts capture the impact of sexual violence on the fragmentation of the self, erasure and silence, and reproduction of distress across generations, while also describing how Black women resist erasure and reclaim their agency to reclaim their humanity.

The significance of the effects of sexual violence on the black female identity cannot be overstated, as it is vast in its ramifications. This type of trauma leads to poor

identity formation, with feelings of shame and worthlessness; hence, coming to terms with one's identity is a painful process of wandering and searching. The historical erasure of Black women's issues and exclusion of black women's voices from the public forum intensifies their fight for recognition and equality, erasing them from wider conversations on feminism and anti-blackness. In the same regard, trauma can occur across generations and is capable of distorting familial relations and contributing to the sequence of suffering. But Black feminism also focuses on survival and subversion as Black women, against all odds, rebuild their lives and assert their right to recognition and respect. Through making these nuanced experiences apparent, Morrison, Walker, hooks, and Lorde all uphold a laboratory tradition that ultimately strives for the restoration of Black female subjectivity in the face of tremendous oppression.

Throughout her life, the African American woman's self-image is often negatively affected by the societal pressures placed on her body. Sexual harassment plays a significant role in her harsh reality. Black feminist literature offers a sharp analysis of issues like sexual violence, which disproportionately impact Black communities. African American women are subjected to numerous societal norms and experiences that shape their negative self-perception. This harmful self-image is the result of continuous socialization and various damaging factors such as discrimination, objectification, and sexualization. Such occurrences are not isolated cases but are engrained in the fabric of society and have repercussions on the perception that African American women have about themselves and their worth. The exposure to these outside influences makes them lose their worth and identity because they embrace the ignorant attitude and treatment from society. One of the ways through which African American

women develop the negative self-image is through the experience of sexual harassment which is evidenced as part of their 'wretched reality'. Sexual harassment erases personal boundaries and perpetuates demeaning stereotype and social norms while distorting their self-perception. Warhol and Handle stress that black feminist literature offers a sharp and thought-provoking insight into these matters with focus on such matters as race and gender. Based on the show, it strongly depicts that sexual violence and harassment are not just single incidences but rather products of racism and sexism. In this literature, there is a call for society to appreciate and work towards solving these problems through improved policy formulation and implementation for African American women who face double marginalization.

In previous years, the black woman was refused all benefits and freedom. When it came to her anatomy, she was never questioned since the woman's body, still after emancipation, is always held by every man with the relation of its race, whether white or black. Simple access, it was labelled and stereotyped with terrible and upsetting photos like bitch, prostitute, snags, mummies, jezebels and sapphires that were emasculating. Collins observes that Black feminist ideology asserts that African American women, often viewed as the "objective other," were seen as aggressive in the USA. (272)

No one excused or even attempted to explain why the Black woman was readily available. As previously stated, the black woman lost her sense of the body, was submissive to these bad photos. From this degrading view, she viewed herself somewhat. As a result, Black feminist authors became interested to combat these myths, 'Black feminists strive to deal on the stereotypes of Black female animalism, wanton

sexuality, on topics related to identity and sexuality' (Anderson 123). African American women in previous years had no rights to any benefits and liberty; they were greatly oppressed and discriminated. Their bodies were not freed from the oppression of men after the abolition of slavery and the end of slavery. African American women's bodies were never afforded any privacy or honor; they were always seen through a racial context that sought to rob them of their humanity. It led to their bodies being described by labels and stereotyping that was degrading and detrimental to their health. The labels including the bitch, prostitute, snags, mummies, jezebels, and sapphires further reduced African American women to objects that bolstered the culture of dehumanization and emasculation. As noted by Collins and other scholars, Black feminist ideology provides a framework for analyzing oppressive power dynamics. Collins refers to African American women as the "set-other," a term that encapsulates their historical subjugation and terrorization in American society. This ideology highlights how Black women were often viewed as inherently assertive, a stereotype used to justify their oppression. Black feminist thought challenges these historical and ongoing patterns of sexualization and stereotyping, calling for the recognition of Black women's full humanity. It urges society to rethink prevailing paradigms and reject the biased portrayals that perpetuate their suffering under prejudice and discrimination.

At this juncture, Black women authors began to shed light on the threats to their dignity, with numerous works and books addressing the critical issue of sexual violence against them. This literary exploration not only exposed harsh realities but also contributed to the emergence of a distinct African American women's identity. The

unequal treatment these women have faced extends beyond their sexual identity, shaping it in profound ways and contributing to their self-defined sense of identity.

Another main aspect that adversely impacts the black woman is that she cannot love herself. The black beauty and the outward attractiveness of Black people were devalued by the structure of white domination and their power beliefs. Therefore, African American women create emotions of hideousness and insecurity. Black feminist authors glorify their blackness and distinctive elegance in a wonderful way, "The willingness of African American authors to recreate fashion laws for black females outside of prevailing governing representations of white beauty ideals is one of the profound freeing consequences of the increase in black feminist literature." They battle the manipulative picture that blackness is disgusting. The goal is to demonstrate how attractiveness would mean being different and break the white illusion of the outward presence of a black woman, "Black feminists dissipate and divide the white stare, which does not look white, and thus does not look attractive, and instead offer ideal pictures of glamorous black women."(Beaulieu 15-51).

To sum up, this chapter has provided a comprehensive analysis of the sociological, historical, and political contexts that have profoundly influenced the standardization of beauty within African American communities. By tracing the lineage of these standards, we have illuminated the ways in which historical events, such as slavery and institutionalized racial discrimination, have ingrained white-centric beauty ideals into the cultural fabric, affecting the self-perception and identity of African Americans. Indeed, the legacy of slavery, with its dehumanizing and oppressive practices, was the root cause of imposed rigid racial hierarchies that equated whiteness

with beauty and desirability. This association has been further reinforced through various societal institutions, including the media, education, and family structures, perpetuating a cycle of internalized racism and self-loathing among African Americans.

The chapter has also delved into the Great Migration and the Post-Civil Rights era. It has highlighted how these periods of significant social change brought about both challenges and opportunities for African American identity formation. Despite the socio-political advancements, the media's symbolic annihilation and distorted portrayal of black beauty continued to undermine the efforts to construct a positive and authentic black female identity.

By examining the works of Toni Morrison, I have illustrated how her narratives vividly capture the psychological and social ramifications of these oppressive beauty standards. Morrison's characters, particularly in *The Bluest Eye*, *Sula*, *Song of Solomon*, *Tar Baby*, and *Beloved*, navigate a landscape fraught with racial beauty norms that impede their ability to form a genuine sense of self. Through this analysis, I have underscored the resilience and resistance of African American women who, despite the systemic oppression, strive to reclaim their identity and self-worth. This chapter has laid the groundwork for understanding the historical and sociocultural forces that shape the characters' experiences in Morrison's novels.

Chapter Two will delve into the interdisciplinary theories that provide a deeper understanding of how race, class, and beauty intersect in the construction of identity. By employing frameworks such as intersectionality, psychoanalysis, and gender studies, this chapter will critically examine how these theories manifest within

Morrison's novels, offering a more comprehensive lens through which to analyze the intricate relationships between beauty, power, and representation in the lives of Black women. In doing so, we aim to reveal the broader implications of these theoretical perspectives on the construction and performance of identity within a racially stratified society.

## **Chapter Two: A Theoretical Framework**

This chapter seeks to provide a comprehensive framework for exploring various aspects of race, class, and racial beauty, as well as the dynamics of power, representation, and agency. The theoretical foundation of this thesis is designed to offer a coherent approach to analyze how Morrison addresses these themes in her novels. By incorporating intersectionality, psychoanalysis, and gender studies, this chapter will examine the continuities and divergences in the thematic concerns that run throughout Morrison's body of work, from her earliest novels to her latest ones.

Furthermore, this chapter will critically discuss Morrison's representation of intersectionality in her subsequent novels where she broadens the cross-sectional schematic of race, gender, and sexuality. Thus, by focusing on black women's stories within the framework of intersectionality, Morrison provides a complex narrative of the subject and her place in a context of systemic oppression. Again, this chapter will use the concept of habitus to show how structures and cultures in the fictional structures of Morrison impregnate the characters. Thus, exploring the intricate dynamics of race, class, and power with a focus on the characters' agency, Morrison reveals processes of hegemonic discursive production and subversion as well as readers' implication in the processes of oppression.

While performing this cross-textual analysis of these theoretical perspectives through the narrative universe of Toni Morrison, this chapter seeks to offer a complex understanding of the thematic continuity of her novels while also respecting the differences that each can offer to the discourse on race, class, and self-image.

## 1. Capitalist Ideology and Beauty Conceptualization

It is clear from her politics and her prose that Toni Morrison is a literary spokesperson for the late twentieth-century struggle for the authentic black female voice. In her novels, particularly *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison provides deeply moving and detailed examples of the pain and violence endured by Black female victims. She explores how this external suffering often leads to internalized self-infliction, which she connects to the origins of the objectification of beauty and love in her works. The devastating feminist racial commentaries in her novels reveal the assumption of universal white superiority in the American society and serve, according to Jill Matus, "as a call to action against racism and sexism"(4). They are summonses to resist and read against the reaction of the external world and its outwardly lived manifestations. The wounds of her black female protagonists are mirrored in wider political and social terrains of the countries and the decades in which the novels are set. That these wounds can self-destruct is clear.

The repressive violence of the state apparatuses in Toni Morrison's novels is well-documented, and the majority of critics focus on the role of these state forces as the enforcers of the ideological theories and racist discourses of the dominant white society. The repressive state apparatuses conform to Althusser's (1971) definition of the ideological state apparatus, but my focus is on the role of the superstructure of these apparatuses, in particular the family and the educational institutions, and how these affect black female identity. The role of the superstructure of the state apparatus as a vehicle of black submission and the creation of a masochistic, divided consciousness is

vital to the perpetuation of the status quo in both the past and the present, and it is the implications of this that form the subject of this chapter.

In this regard, the fundamental problem of our times seems to be the problem of human collective identity. According to Althusser, collective identity under capitalism is structured and maintained by an elaborate series of social practices which complement the fundamental ideology of the ruling class. Accordingly, elements of culture and media such as advertisement, and children's toys are aspects of the capitalist system that connect with the construction of interest in the group. Thus, in such a modern context, capitalism is often built on the creation of the new resources and the possibility to work in a racist paradigm. In this case, the objectification of whiteness as a paradigm of beauty has a sexual and an economic dimension.

Taking a closer look at adoration of whiteness in *The Bluest Eye* for instance, it is crucial to notice that there is correlation of discrimination and exploitation. The novel gives the example of exactly how prejudice trends of which society take advantage of the principles of the modern capitalist world, its impact and tactics of publicity such as through children's toys, advertisements among others to cultivate subconscious feelings and suspicion; and in several events depicted in the book, this connection between beauty, prejudice and capitalist system is illustrated. An example is the act of breaking of Raggedy Ann doll by Claudia. In reality, by tearing it away, she tries to unravel the cornerstone of the system of racial prejudice, "I had only one desire: to dismember it. To see what it was made of to explore the dearness to find the charm, the desirability that only I had escaped (Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* 20). To establish demand for it, Claudia chooses to ignore disapproval of white attractiveness that has been put into

practice by advertisements, a tool of modern-day capitalist society. But she fails to understand the social construction of the romanticization process and misattributes it to the materialism of the doll that is, the product.

Prejudice and bigotry are culture-based phenomena. In this context, Claudia's disbelief in the representation of appearance can be linked to this ideology. This is usually associated with Freud's notion that terms are unconsciously visualized as actual things (*The Unconscious* 147). This phenomenon is the root cause why Claudia attempts to distort the figurine's (white doll's) beauty into something grotesque, rejecting it as a true reflection of beauty.

Television and film equally have an important role of changing the paradigm of bias in *The Bluest Eye* as they make believe in images to be real experiences. According to Jean Louis Baudry, whatever relates to cinemas, has a similar process of making of abstract symbols into real properties. In the postmodern user culture, such images are sometimes mistakenly called impressions ("The Apparatus" 315). Because Pauline learns them as impressions from film, the concept of attractiveness and physical contact affects her. Morrison reveals here how mass culture and film will use the 'definition of beauty' to generate 'racial self-hatred' whereby women will end up experiencing anxiety and/or shame about their looks and complexion. In *The Bluest Eye*, both sexes of all the protagonists are ensnared by such a romanticization of whiteness as beauty in a market economy. Pauline, for instance, "was never able to look at a face after her education in the movies, and not assign it some category on the scale of absolute beauty" (Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* 122).

Similarly, while heterosexual attraction is symbolized by the consumerist approach, the female-to-female affection is much more complex here. Females are significantly sexualized and seen as nothing more than objects of desire under this 'beauty culture' paradigm. The African characterization of beauty is thus a form of unsuitability for the market. Morrison is always providing examples and drawing the reader's attention to this premise that is at the center of *The Bluest Eye* and the logic that the Breedlove family's suffering is caused by their economic dysfunctionality, and Pecola is the bare epitome of the ugliness associated with this economic disability.

Through her narratives, Morrison explains the heuristic value of revising the traditional "master" and "slave" relationship structures that dominate discussions of race and gender relations. A purely political matrix must be enlarged to include the impact of socio-economic parameters, as they are clearly pertinent in issues of black race/gender oppression. Those women who are not legally recognized as sisters, wives, or lovers receive a different treatment under the law, and as a result, their role as benefactors within the Black community is diminished. A mere existential matrix may make forthcoming the reality of race/gender oppression, but it predetermines the discussion as a critique of the oppressed. Such characterization thwarts the instruments of liberation by limiting the discovery of indexed systems which are perhaps as frightful in their being as they are overcomable in their demonstration.

## **2. Habitus, Cultural Capital, and Socialization**

Pierre Bourdieu's concept of habitus explores how the social environment and cultural practices shape the dispositions and behaviors of individuals (*Outline 72*). In the context of Toni Morrison's novels, habitus offers a profound lens through which to examine the

intricate ways in which societal norms and cultural values influence the identities and actions of her characters. Bourdieu's theory posits that habitus is formed through a complex interplay of past experiences and present conditions, resulting in deeply ingrained habits, skills and dispositions. These dispositions are not only reflective of individual histories but also of collective societal structures and power dynamics.

Bourdieu's concept of habitus, described as "systems of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures" (*Outline 72*), offers a profound understanding of how individuals and societies are shaped. This definition emphasizes that habitus is not merely a product of historical events but also a powerful force that actively shapes and generates practices, perceptions, and cultural expressions. The notion of habitus encapsulates the idea that our past experiences, deeply rooted in the historical context in which we live, continuously influence our present actions, thoughts, and interactions. These experiences are internalized over time, becoming ingrained in the way individuals perceive the world and behave within it. As a result, habitus functions as a mechanism that perpetuates established social norms, values, and cultural practices, ensuring their continuity across generations. Moreover, habitus highlights the dynamic interplay between history and culture. It demonstrates how cultural practices are not static but are constantly being reshaped and reinterpreted through the lens of historical experiences. These practices, informed by habitus, contribute to the ongoing construction and reconstruction of cultural identity. In this way, habitus serves as both a repository of historical memory and a framework for cultural innovation, allowing societies to adapt to changing circumstances while maintaining a sense of continuity.

Cultural capital, another key aspect of Bourdieu's theory, refers to the non-economic resources that enable social mobility. These include education, intellect, style of speech, dress, and physical appearance. Bourdieu defines cultural capital as "the cultural knowledge that serves as currency that helps us navigate a culture and alters our experiences and the opportunities available to us" (*Distinction* 66). This concept highlights the social advantages conferred by cultural knowledge and competence, which are often invisible but profoundly influential.

Morrison's narratives vividly illustrate how these sociocultural constructs are not just abstract ideas but lived experiences that deeply affect her characters' self-perception, relationships, and life choices. In Morrison's works, habitus manifests through characters' internalization of dominant cultural norms, particularly those related to race and beauty. The concept of cultural capital is depicted through their adherence to or rejection of societal standards imposed by a predominantly white society. For instance, the internalization of white beauty standards, as seen in *The Bluest Eye*, highlights how cultural capital can be weaponized to uphold racial hierarchies and perpetuate self-loathing among those who do not conform to these ideals. Similarly, in *Song of Solomon*, *Beloved*, *Sula*, and *Tar Baby*, Morrison explores how characters navigate their identities amidst the conflicting demands of their cultural heritage and the societal expectations placed upon them.

By utilizing Bourdieu's framework, this section aims to delve into the ways in which Morrison's characters embody and resist the habitus shaped by their environments. This exploration will reveal how the transmission of cultural capital through socialization processes both constrains and empowers these characters, offering

a nuanced understanding of their struggles and triumphs within a racially and culturally stratified society.

In *Song of Solomon*, Pilate Dead's unique cultural identity and the influence of cultural capital are central themes. Pilate, unlike other characters, embraces her heritage and cultural roots, which sets her apart in her social environment. Her lack of a navel symbolizes her break from conventional norms and highlights her deep connection to her ancestral past. Bourdieu explains that "the habitus is not only a structuring structure, which organizes practices and the perception of practices, but also a structured structure: the principle of its generation is constituted in the course of history" (*Outline* 72). This idea resonates with Pilate's character, as her deep-rooted connection to her heritage, and the cultural capital she embodies, shapes the practices, perceptions, and identities of those around her, particularly within her family.

Pilate's character is a repository of cultural wisdom and practices that are crucial for the development of the novel's protagonist, Milkman. Her role in the family and the community illustrates how cultural capital is transmitted and how it shapes individuals' dispositions and behaviors. Pilate's stories, songs, and spiritual beliefs offer a counter-narrative to the materialistic values embraced by Milkman's father, Macon Dead. Bourdieu's concept of habitus helps to understand how Pilate's influence contributes to Milkman's eventual transformation and acceptance of his heritage. Pilate's character demonstrates the enduring power of cultural capital in shaping identities and resisting dominant societal norms. Morrison describes Pilate, "Without ever leaving the ground she could fly" (*Song of Solomon* 337). This quote symbolizes Pilate's spiritual and cultural richness, highlighting her influence on Milkman's journey to self-discovery.

In her role as the family's spiritual and cultural anchor, Pilate contrasts sharply with Macon Dead, whose pursuit of wealth and social status leads him to reject his cultural roots. Pilate's influence is described as transformative, "She was the quiet in the storm, the old lady who offered wisdom without preaching, the ancestor who refused to be forgotten" (Morrison, *Song of Solomon* 336). This highlights the significance of cultural capital in resisting dominant cultural norms and preserving African American heritage.

In *The Bluest Eye*, the Breedlove family's internalization of societal norms and values related to beauty and race exemplifies Bourdieu's habitus. The family's behaviors and self-perceptions are shaped by the dominant cultural standards, leading to internalized racism and a fractured sense of self. Bourdieu states, "The habitus is both the generative principle of objectively classifiable judgments and the system of classification" (*Distinction* 170). This concept of habitus helps to explain how societal norms and values become internalized as deeply ingrained dispositions, shaping not only how individuals perceive themselves but also how they categorize and judge their worth. These internalized judgments, passed down through generations, profoundly influence the characters' actions and erode their self-esteem, reflecting the powerful and often damaging impact of these social classifications. Pauline Breedlove's obsession with the movies and her emulation of white actresses reflect how dominant cultural norms shape her desires and behaviors. This internalization affects her relationship with her family, especially Pecola, whom she cannot love because Pecola does not fit the ideal of beauty Pauline has adopted. Morrison illustrates this internal conflict: "She was never able to look at a face after her education in the movies and not assign it some category on the scale of absolute beauty" (*The Bluest Eye* 122). Pauline's adherence to

these beauty standards demonstrates how deeply ingrained societal values can disrupt familial bonds and personal identities.

The internalization of white beauty standards devastates Pecola's self-esteem. Pecola's longing for blue eyes, a symbol of acceptance and beauty, is a poignant example of how societal norms can distort an individual's self-perception. Morrison writes, "It had occurred to Pecola some time ago that if her eyes, those eyes that held the pictures, and knew the sights—if those eyes of hers were different, that is to say, beautiful, she herself would be different" (*The Bluest Eye* 46). This reflects Bourdieu's assertion that habitus influences one's perception and classification of self and others, leading to a cyclical reinforcement of dominant ideologies.

The transmission of cultural capital through socialization processes is evident in how characters in Morrison's novels explore their identities within oppressive structures. Bourdieu emphasizes that "the habitus, a product of history, produces individual and collective practices—more history—in accordance with the schemes generated by history" (*The Logic* 54). This cyclical process is visible in the way characters like Pilate and Pecola internalize and react to societal norms. Pilate's upbringing, devoid of conventional social structures, allows her to develop a strong sense of self rooted in African American cultural traditions. Her influence on Milkman, who initially struggles with his identity due to his father's materialistic values, underscores the transformative power of cultural capital. Pilate's teachings help Milkman reconnect with his heritage, as illustrated by his epiphany: "He knew, as he stood there among the boxes and sacks, that he was alone, completely alone, but that he belonged to the world" (Morrison, *Song of Solomon* 331).

Conversely, Pecola's tragic trajectory in *The Bluest Eye* underscores the devastating effects of internalized societal norms passed down through generations. The Breedlove family's acceptance of white beauty standards, deeply ingrained over time, leads to Pecola's fractured identity as she becomes obsessed with the idea of having blue eyes. This obsession reflects the internalized judgments that have been transmitted across generations, shaping her sense of worth and belonging. Morrison poignantly captures Pecola's disintegration,

And now when she was awake, or when she was asleep, it did not matter. I even think now that the land of the entire country was hostile to her. Certain seeds it will not nurture, certain fruit it will not bear, and when the land kills of its own volition, we acquiesce and say the victim had no right to live. (*The Bluest Eye* 206).

This quote illustrates how these inherited societal norms not only destroy Pecola's self-esteem but also contribute to a collective resignation to her fate, as if her suffering were inevitable.

In *Beloved*, Sethe's experiences provide a powerful exploration of how cultural capital and socialization shape identity within the context of slavery's legacy. Sethe's past as a slave and her traumatic experiences at Sweet Home profoundly influence her identity and her interactions with her children. Bourdieu's concept of habitus can be applied to understand how Sethe's actions and decisions are shaped by her ingrained dispositions and the oppressive social environment.

Sethe's internalization of the values and norms of the enslaved society leads to her drastic decision to kill her daughter, Beloved, to save her from a life of slavery. Morrison writes, "It was absolutely the right thing to do, but she had no right to do it. It was the only thing to do, but she had no right to do it" (*Beloved* 251). This internal conflict reflects the deep psychological scars left by slavery and the ways in which

Sethe's habitus, shaped by a history of oppression, influences her perception of self and her maternal instincts.

The haunting presence of *Beloved* symbolizes the return of repressed memories and traumas, forcing Sethe to confront her past and the cultural capital inherited from her experiences. Morrison describes *Beloved*'s impact: "She is the one. She is the one I need. You can go but she is the one I have to have" (*Beloved* 89). This underscores the inescapable influence of past traumas on present identity and the enduring power of cultural capital.

In *Sula*, the titular character's resistance to societal norms and her quest for personal freedom highlight the complexities of habitus and cultural capital. Sula defies traditional gender roles and expectations within her community, embodying a form of cultural capital that challenges dominant norms. Sula's actions, such as her refusal to marry and her sense of independence, are a direct challenge to the cultural capital and habitus of her community. Morrison writes, "Sula was distinctly different. She had no thought at all of causing Nel pain when she bedded down with Jude" (*Sula* 119). This disregard for societal expectations exemplifies Sula's rejection of the cultural capital valued by her community and her pursuit of an identity based on personal freedom. Sula's relationship with her grandmother, Eva, and her best friend, Nel, further illustrate the transmission and conflict of cultural capital. Eva's pragmatic and often harsh approach to survival contrasts with Sula's defiance, while Nel represents the community's adherence to traditional norms. Sula's tragic end and her community's reaction underscore the consequences of challenging deeply ingrained social structures.

In *Tar Baby*, Jadine Childs navigates the complexities of her identity amidst conflicting cultural expectations. Raised by her Aunt Ondine and Uncle Sydney, who are servants for a wealthy white family, Jadine is caught between the cultural capital of her African American heritage and the material wealth and opportunities offered by her white employers. Jadine's education and cosmopolitan lifestyle place her at odds with the expectations of her aunt and uncle, who represent traditional black cultural values. Morrison writes, "She wanted nothing more of that life. She wanted only the safety of order—an order that she herself created". This reflects Jadine's desire to create an identity independent of the cultural capital inherited from her upbringing. Jadine's relationship with Son, a man deeply connected to his African American roots, further complicates her identity struggle. Son's presence forces Jadine to confront her cultural dislocation and the impact of her socialization. Morrison describes this conflict: "With his head in her lap, he looked up and saw her face. 'You look like a piece of candy,' he said. 'Not your face. Something inside'" (*Tar Baby* 116-191). This highlights the tension between Jadine's internalized values and the cultural capital represented by Son.

Through these narratives, Morrison demonstrates how cultural capital and socialization processes shape individual identities and behaviors within a racialized society, while also exploring the potential for resistance against these forces. By examining how ingrained societal norms and values perpetuate systems of oppression and marginalization, Morrison highlights the tension between conformity and defiance. Characters like Sula, who resist these imposed norms, challenge the status quo and assert their agency, offering an alternative to the internalization of oppressive standards. Through this exploration, Morrison not only critiques the mechanisms of social control

but also celebrates the resilience and resistance of those who refuse to be defined by these limiting constructs.

### **3. Black Feminism and Butler's Performativity**

During the darkest days of slavery, Black women were trapped in a relentless cycle of exploitation. Like men, they were treated inhumanely, dehumanized, persecuted, and subjected to cruelty. They endured harsh treatment and were often victims of rape and forced sexual acts. As Jean and Feagin state, "Slavery tortured and brutalized enslaved men and women, and this violence also had a sexual component" (534). This violence, particularly directed at Black women, shaped not only their roles within society but also their perceived identities.

While the brutal exploitation of Black women during slavery enforced rigid and dehumanizing roles, these roles were not inherent but constructed through repeated acts of violence and control. This aligns with Judith Butler's theory of performativity, where the concept of gender is understood not as a fixed identity, but as something created through repeated actions. In her 1988 essay, *Performative Acts and Gender Constitution*, and further developed in *Gender Trouble* (1990), Butler builds on Simone de Beauvoir's famous assertion from *The Second Sex* that "one is not born, but rather becomes a woman" (283). Butler argues that gender is not a fixed identity or institution that simply dictates behaviors, but rather "an identity constituted by a stylized repetition of acts". She explains that gender is constructed through bodily actions, such as movement and positioning, which shape the gendered self. These seemingly mundane gestures are performed in front of a social audience, implying that both the audience and the performers themselves "come to believe and perform in the style of belief"

through these repeated actions. Butler challenges the notion that the gendered self precedes these actions, suggesting instead that the acts themselves create not only the gendered self but also an illusion—an object of belief—where the performer assumes their actions stem from identity, rather than the reverse (*Gender Trouble* 519-520).

Butler is able to find out that not all that helps constitute gender is mundane gestures. She asks for another Simone de Beauvoir's comment, in which the latter states that gender has always been a historical rather than a realistic condition. The organism is in an ongoing phase in which the contemporary society and historical opportunities of its period are embodied (*The Second Sex* 520- 521). Butler emphasizes again that a female needs to become a woman, and so they adapt to the person's contemporary cultural environment, which is maintained by their compliance in turn. Instead of a 'project,' she terms this a 'strategy' since the term projects means that the individual who executes their gender has a clear agency over their body and personality, whereas strategy indicates a survival mechanism. Punishments will mitigate executing a gender in the incorrect manner, because even those who have not internalized the definition of gender in their own cultural or historical background will feel compelled to better execute a gender. There will be no penalties if not for the reality that the majority not only practices psychologically and socially the gender that was subscribed to them, but that this majority still trusts and internalizes their gender ideology. It is how the notion of their gender is passed down and maintained, producing a continuous loop effectively. It defines the cultural definition of gender. The majority views, internalizes and assumes the results, executes the sex they are subscribed to. The same ideas can be used,

internalized and carried out by subsequent generations (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 522-529).

In the course of slavery, white men often proclaimed that they were revolted by the physical characteristics of those they represented like body odor (usually from a rough, sweaty job). White men used to hate the Black individual, but they were powerless to keep away from a black woman's body. However, white men somehow ignored and abused this hostility' of many enslaved people. This form of violence shook not just their feeling of individuality, self-esteem and self-determination but misrepresented them as mere objects worldwide.

In the twentieth century, Black women were often portrayed as "evil," characterized as sexually promiscuous and physically dominant due to their hard labor. The denial of Black people's dignity fueled various forms of physical, emotional, and sexual abuse by white men. This mistreatment reinforced the perception of Black women as sexually wild and available. Even after emancipation, the attitudes and behaviors of white women toward Black women remained unchanged (Bobo 57). The condition of Black women after the Emancipation Act remained far from ideal. Their struggles did not end with the abolition of slavery. Even after segregation, Black women continued to face subordination and were subjected to discrimination within a racially oppressive system. Racism continued to dominate the era, leaving them as survivors in a society that still devalued their rights and humanity.

The impact of racism has taken the place of the harm caused by slavery, and the stereotypes and perceptions about Afro-American women that emerged during slavery

have not disappeared. Instead, these harmful ideas persisted, continuing to shape their lives in damaging ways. As Anna Crawford states:

The black people's bodies and psyche were no longer held over by colonialism, but their progeny and institutionalized bigotry are substituted. In complexity and effect on the lives of African American women, social stratification established during slavery in society as well as the slave culture has continued to grow and mature.  
(48)

The African American woman could not fully be herself; she struggled with deciding and shaping her identity, already confined by societal expectations that predetermined her position and personality. Her role was largely restricted to domestic work, always framed within the boundaries of managing the household. Torn between racism and sexism, the Black woman faced a dual oppression. A woman who stays at home, caring for her children and running the household, often experiences isolation and a lack of fulfillment. To find meaning in her life, she must take control of her own identity, stepping beyond the constraints of her role and engaging with the world. By doing so, she brings parts of the world back into her life, allowing her desires and perspectives to take shape independently, no longer defined solely by the needs and expectations of others. However, the Black woman's physical appearance made her even more unacceptable in an oppressive culture that valued whiteness above all else. Distinguishable from white women by her skin tone and physical features, she faced widespread discrimination. Discouraged from embracing her blackness and pressured to reject her own beauty in favor of white ideals, the Black woman's struggle was not just internal but deeply tied to the societal rejection of her natural self. This rejection of her identity, both in her domestic role and her appearance, further complicated her quest for self-fulfillment.

Given the racist history and ongoing challenges in the United States, African American women face significant struggles related to identity and appearance, particularly when their features are contrasted with white beauty standards—especially regarding skin color and hair. The experiences of institutional rejection, physical humiliation, and violence have left many Black women feeling fragmented and alienated from dominant white ideals. As a result, many Black people lost confidence in their natural beauty, internalizing the negative stereotypes they encountered in society and media. The desire to conform to Eurocentric beauty ideals may cause her to despise her own appearance and believe that being Black is not beautiful. As a result, she may feel that the only way to be considered attractive is by trying to imitate others. However, it was not simply seeing herself through the lens of white racial standards that led to this aspiration to be someone else. In fact, it could be the internalization of broader societal pressures, including media representation, cultural conditioning, and a lack of affirmation for her natural identity. These factors, coupled with historical and systemic racism, might contribute to her feeling that she needs to conform to dominant beauty standards in order to be accepted or valued, even if those standards do not reflect her true self.

The injustice towards Black women is undeniable with such suffering and silence. Amidst all these intolerable circumstances they needed the ability "to save [themselves], to find avenues to avoid, survive in, or resist social and economic injustice, Black women and other traditionally oppressed communities have long resisted, struggled, and developed unique ways of knowing, living, and being that challenge dominant power structures." (Collins 9). African American women then

discover that it is difficult to keep quiet to be sure and safe from this destructive injustice. In the early 1970s many Black feminists started voicing discontent with the established liberation movements they started to establish organizations designed to counter the double, many-fold, type of suppression which influenced their lives. Irenar Makaryk states, "In the 1980s, the dynamic and contradictory connection between Black feminists and Black women during a Black Power and Civil-Rights struggle and white women during the 1970's Women's Liberation Movement originated from Black feminist critique and theory" (9). The Black women searched for an environment where they might identify themselves and distinguish their own positions and disputes from the desires of Black men and of White women. "Most Black women understood that although Black Power was radically Afro-centered, it was also powerfully andro-centered" (Makaryk 9). In the Black world, where her male counterpart abused her, she wants to build something that is specifically about the black woman and her frail statue.

White feminists often failed to recognize the unique suffering and oppression experienced by Black women, as they did not face the same historical and systemic challenges of enslavement and racial discrimination. Black women have long confronted struggles that are distinct from those faced by white women, reflecting the compounded impact of both racism and sexism in their lives. Thus, the black woman never found a place in that movement for her distress with the advent of the white feminism which seeks to guarantee women's rights and privileges. While their interests are very identical, black and white women also are not sharing the same physical presence, background and tradition. The feminist movement seemed to be bringing a solution, but the movement's concerns and standards were increasingly seen by women

from a white, medium-sized class who seemed to disregard the different needs and desires of women from color.

Patricia Hill Collins illustrates that Black feminist theory comprises of advanced understanding produced for African-American people, which clarifies a perspective of and against black women, centered on their realities and their living circumstances which were linked to black females only a collection of ideas for themselves matches the harsh conditions they face. In other terms, the theoretical representations of the experience of Black people by those who practice it incorporates black feminist thinking. Black feminism plays an important part in helping people reclaim their senses of belonging and celebrate both their blackness and femininity. The common views and experience of black women make them believe like they need support and power. Feeling confident of who you are, can make your life simple. The easiest and the most critical path is the meaning of normality and acceptability. Barbara Smith notes, "One of the strongest contributions of Black feminism for us was to make just being Black and woman a bit simpler". (33)

In comparison to white feminists, black feminists may not accept or perceive men as rivals, "Black feminists often declined to see Black men as solely enemies, and their political commitment often lie with men rather than White women" (Bryson 202). Their understanding, opinions and actions are formed on the basis of their fact and history. During the era of segregation and intense oppression, Black men and women struggled together, forming bonds that white women could not fully understand. Even in cases where a Black man might have been abusive and violent towards his partner or children, the complexities of their shared experiences and struggles often meant that

such individuals remained integral to their partners' lives. That is why bell hooks asserts that, "recognizing black people's sexism does not mean that we became 'haters' or have to remove them from existence. What does it say is that we have to fight for another reason for their engagement" (76).

In *Sula*, Sula Peace's defiance of traditional gender roles and her non-conformity to societal expectations exemplify Butler's notion of performativity. Sula's actions challenge the dominant racial and gender norms, revealing the fluidity and constructed nature of identity. Butler states, "Gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a stylized repetition of acts" (*Gender Trouble* 179). Her relationship with Nel and the community's perception of her highlight the performative nature of gender and the societal repercussions of deviating from normative gender performances.

Sula's unconventional behavior and lifestyle stand in stark contrast to the expectations of her community in the Bottom. Her refusal to marry, her sexual freedom, and her independence are all acts of defiance against the gender norms imposed on her. Butler's theory of performativity elucidates how Sula's identity is not a fixed essence but is continually constituted through her actions. The community's reaction to Sula, viewing her as a pariah, underscores how deep-rooted these norms are and what the consequences of challenging them could be. Sula's life and her eventual downfall illustrate the difficulties of sustaining an identity that defies societal expectations. Morrison describes Sula's actions, "She didn't like her friends' way of life, but she had nothing to offer them except her own." (*Sula* 121). This quote highlights Sula's

disregard for societal expectations and her focus on personal freedom, aligning with Butler's theory of performativity.

Similarly, in *Tar Baby*, Jadine Childs navigates her identity by resisting the expectations imposed on her by both black and white communities. Jadine's struggle to define herself outside of these imposed identities underscores the performative aspects of race and gender. Butler argues, "There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results" (*Gender Trouble* 25). Butler's theory helps to understand how these performances are not merely expressions of an innate identity but are constituted through repeated acts within a regulatory framework that enforces certain gender norms and racial standards.

Jadine's experience is marked by her attempts to forge an identity independent of the conflicting demands of the black and white worlds she inhabits. Her education and cosmopolitan lifestyle place her at odds with the expectations of her Aunt Ondine and Uncle Sydney, who represent traditional black cultural values. At the same time, Jadine feels out of place in the predominantly white, affluent circles she moves in. Butler's theory highlights how Jadine's identity is continually negotiated through her interactions and the expectations of those around her. Morrison writes, "She wanted nothing more of that life. She wanted only the safety of order—an order that she herself created" (*Tar Baby* 191). This quote reflects Jadine's desire to escape imposed identities and create her own sense of self, aligning with Butler's theory of performativity.

In *Beloved*, Sethe's struggle with her past and her identity offers a poignant exploration of black feminism and performativity. Sethe's experiences as a slave and

the trauma she endures shape her actions and self-perception. Butler's theory provides a lens through which to understand how Sethe's identity is constructed and reconstructed through her responses to her past and her efforts to reclaim her sense of self. Sethe's decision to kill her daughter Beloved to save her from slavery is a drastic act that reflects the intense pressure and psychological turmoil inflicted by her experiences. Morrison writes, "It was absolutely the right thing to do, but she had no right to do it. It was the only thing to do, but she had no right to do it" (*Beloved* 251). This internal conflict and the subsequent haunting of Beloved symbolize the ongoing struggle to reconcile past traumas with the need for self-preservation and identity reclamation. Sethe's journey illustrates the performative nature of identity as she navigates the scars of her past and seeks to build a future for herself and her remaining children.

In *The Bluest Eye*, Pecola Breedlove's tragic quest for blue eyes represents a profound example of performativity and the impact of societal norms on identity. Pecola believes that possessing blue eyes will grant her acceptance and love in a society that idolizes white beauty standards. Butler's concept of performativity can be applied to understand how Pecola's desire for blue eyes is a performative act driven by her internalization of racist beauty standards. Pecola's struggle is poignantly described, "It had occurred to Pecola some time ago that if her eyes, those eyes that held the pictures, and knew the sights—if those eyes of hers were different, that is to say, beautiful, she herself would be different" (Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* 46). This reflects how Pecola's identity and sense of self-worth are inextricably linked to her perception of beauty, shaped by a racist society. Her repeated wish for blue eyes exemplifies Butler's idea that identity is constituted through repeated acts, in this case, the act of longing for a

different appearance. Pecola's tragic end underscores the destructive power of societal norms and the internalized oppression that black women face. Her story serves as a powerful critique of the ways in which racist and sexist standards are perpetuated and internalized, leading to profound psychological damage.

Through the lens of Judith Butler's performativity, Toni Morrison's characters are shown to continuously construct and reconstruct their identities in response to societal expectations and personal experiences. These narratives highlight the fluid and constructed nature of gender and racial identities, challenging the fixed notions imposed by dominant cultural norms. Hence, exploring identity of these characters through their performative acts underscores the complexities of black feminism and the continuous struggle for self-definition and empowerment. By examining these characters' journeys, we gain a deeper understanding of the ways in which black women navigate and resist the intersecting oppressions of race and gender.

#### **4. Unveiling the Intricacies of Lacanian Psychoanalysis: From the Unconscious to the Mirror Stage**

The psychological dimensions of identity formation in Toni Morrison's novels are profound and multifaceted. In this section, we delve into the intricacies of Lacanian psychoanalysis to understand how Morrison's characters cope with the complex terrain of self-perception, desire, and societal expectations. Jacques Lacan's theories, particularly his concepts of the unconscious, the mirror stage, and the orders of the Imaginary, Symbolic, and Real, provide a critical framework for analyzing the psychological underpinnings of Morrison's narratives.

Lacan's reinterpretation of Freud's psychoanalytic theories emphasizes the importance of language, desire, and the formation of the self through relational dynamics and social structures. According to Lacan, the unconscious is structured like a language, and our sense of self is constantly mediated by the symbolic systems we inhabit. The mirror stage, a pivotal concept in Lacanian theory, describes the moment when an infant first identifies with their reflection in a mirror, leading to the formation of the ego. This process of identification is fraught with misrecognition and alienation, as the reflected image represents an idealized version of the self that the individual can never fully attain.

Jacques Lacan is a Professional post-Freud psychologist whose dissertation has been analyzed by Ferdinand de Saussure's semantic views as a re-reading of Freud's strategy. According to Lacan, "the unconscious is structured like a language" (*Ecrits* 20), which means that it is text-based, or in other words, it is written. Therefore, in the constructivist context, Lacan defined the concept this way; the relationship of a symbol's two aspects; the signifier and signified blurs, and this is because it centers on tradition and not on rationale. The latter was assumed by Lacan to be an endless chain of signifiers. It needs an embarrassingly long list of signifiers and little text to utilize it. This criterion makes it a dynamic sequence of associated signifiers for the unconscious. Lacan stated that condensation and redistribution mechanisms correspond to analogy and synecdoche to enhance the hypothesis of cognitive unconsciousness. Another of Lacan's axioms is that of the subjective experience. Lacan also questioned the Freudian presuppositions where the conscience should ease the hurt and suffering that is stored in the person's unconscious. For this reason, Freud sought to enhance the part of the

ego by liberating energy when he said “Wo Es war, soll Ich werden” in *New Introductory Lectures in Psycho-Analysis* which translates in English as “where I was, ego would be” (112). However, Lacan corrected this by translating it as “where there is I have to come to be where foreign forces.” The selves are passive entities that are influenced by factors that have no control over them. The ego will never dominate the unconscious because the ego is simply a concept created by the unconscious so the self remains safe from the influence of the unconscious.

Lacan posits that the human mind is inherently chaotic, characterized by contradictions, deficits, deficiencies, and desire. He suggests that individuals handle three distinct orders—operational, virtual, and ideational—in their quest for unity and inner peace. Lacan believes, “the child, in the first stage, is indeed in the real, a world in which the ‘I’ is not yet structured, a world of needs and desires that are not yet mediated by the symbolic order” (*Écrits* 93). Accordingly, infants are born into the world in a state of premature development, endowed with reason but lacking an ego ideal. In terms of parenting and security, the infant relies heavily on caregivers, typically the parent, since the child does not yet differentiate between the parent and the self. The term “Mother” is sometimes capitalized as “(m)other” to highlight that the first primary figure the child interacts with is the mother. At this stage, the child exists in the realm of the Real.

This order persists until the infant has seen himself reflected in a mirror within six months or if he accepts the actions done to the personality of another man. This encounter is what is named “the mirror stage” by Lacan. To explain how the infant interacts with the representation it sees, Lacan employs the “mirror” as a symbol.

Contrary to the previous broken condition (the true order), the infant feels a feeling of potential wholeness; he concludes that this vision of a cohesive body is actual as he observes its image in the mirror. He then continues to grow his ego called by Lacan: the ideal ego or the ideal I (*Ecrits* 75). The mirror image creates a deceptive sense of self, as the ego is based not on the child's inner personality but on the outward image reflected in the mirror. This leads the child to mistakenly perceive itself as complete. Lacan referred to this reflection as "the other" with a lowercase "o" to indicate that it is not real. In other words, the formation of the self relies on misrecognition and is sustained by this concept of the other. The mirror stage is connected to the notion of self-image, which Lacan considered an abstract order.

It is a part of the process that removes the infant's subjectivity. In turn, lack is what Lacan also refers to as 'castration'. After the self is misidentified, gets lost, the child wishes to merge with the mother again. This need makes the father very upset. When the male child goes on seeing the involvement of his father and is learning sentence for what he lacks, he comes to a climax of this oedipal relation between the child and his (m) others. Thus, the position of the father as the signifier of the phallic force is to enact the symbolic order defined by the rules of language and cultural norms. In other words, attraction is a fundamental aspect of the symbolic order. Both the mirror stage and the Oedipal drama are influenced by factors such as castration and the resulting lack. Following the split, the subject remains without a clear desire, caught in an ongoing chain of significance that allows desire to focus on human pursuits. As Lacan emphasized, "desire, a function central to all human experience, is the desire for

nothing.” (*Ecrits* 30-293) Despite this, the essence of the variation in human motivation can be traced back to this fundamental wish.

#### **4.1. Understanding of the Female Black Subject through the Lacanian Lens**

*The Bluest Eye* of Toni Morrison orbits about the Breedlove family's troubled life, especially around the predicament of the African American child, Pecola, who is scarred and trivialized by her family and culture. *The Bluest Eye's* interpretation of psychodynamic direct causal analysis specifies how trauma influences the mind and forms the protagonists' personality. Given the fundamental distress Pecola suffered after the incest, this segment is dedicated to analyzing the abusive behavior. To give heed to the cognitive, metaphoric, as well as situational context and qualities, placing it in another fashion. Pecola Breedlove, the protagonist of the book, is an African American girl who hopes to get blue eyes, and nearly everyone in the book traumatizes and victimizes her, too. Basically, the study is performed centered on two issues: the reasons behind Pecola's suffering and her reaction to violence, moral and physical abuse.

Morrison rendered the Breedlove domestic cruelty a critical element of domestic abuse that shattered the connection among the families. The conflict between the family members caused Pecola considerable damage. Her dysfunctional interaction with her mother stems much of the domestic abuse. Morrison often lays focus on the question of ethnicity and African American supremacy. The others projected a glance of contempt and hate on Pecola, pressuring her to be impartial.

Judith Herman argues that exclusion is a common response to violations because such abuses are too difficult to articulate. She notes that "denial, repression, and dissociation" are individual mechanisms that often fail to fully express the impact of these offenses (*Trauma* 127). *The Bluest Eye* begins with a text of the first Primer set of Dick and Jane books. This depicts the traditional measures of a typical American household comprising of caring parents, children, and a pet. It also portrays how a typical American home should look like with caring parents, children and a pet Morrison disrupts this well-established marriage and domesticity of the Breedloves. Ironically, the family of Breed-love should embrace love, affection and shield its children as is implied by the name. Finally, it is contradictory with the Breedloves. Their family is reduced to rubble due to the daily fight for survival by Cholly & Pauline, symbolizing hardship, depression, bigotry, ugliness and even the anticipated hatred they get.

Pauline is one of the few things Cholly could physically engage with that elicited a sense of revulsion and thus provided a means for him to express his pain. All of his unspoken rage and thwarted impulses were directed at her. By hating her, he manages to avoid confronting his own feelings directly. Cholly and Mrs. Breedlove were combating each other with a darkly violent formalism which was only paralleled by their lovemaking. They had decided tacitly not to kill one another (Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* 42-43). When minors are repeatedly exposed to domestic abuse, their behavioral development can be severely impacted. Judith Herman highlights that the ideal expectation is for mothers to provide care and safety, but when domestic abuse occurs, this fundamental need is disrupted. Children who experience such abuse are deprived

of the security and sense of belonging essential for healthy development. As a result, they may exhibit behavioral problems, including anxiety, depression, aggression, and difficulties in forming trusting relationships. The lack of a stable and nurturing environment can hinder their emotional and social growth, affecting their overall development and well-being.

In adulthood, the cumulative impact of repeated trauma erodes the carefully constructed framework of a once stable identity. However, the effects of persistent abuse during childhood are far more profound, as they not only destabilize but also fragment the very core of the emerging self. A child subjected to chronic mistreatment is not merely shaped by these experiences but is fragmented, left with a character that struggles to coalesce into a cohesive whole. The adolescent, entrapped in an environment of unrelenting oppression, faces the monumental task of navigating coping mechanisms that are ill-suited to their developmental stage. With only a rudimentary and underdeveloped system of cognitive defenses to rely on, they are left ill-equipped to safeguard themselves emotionally or psychologically. In this vulnerable state, they are forced to confront the glaring inadequacies in the care and protection that should have been provided by the adults responsible for their well-being (Rodriguez 12).

Repetitive trauma also undercuts the foundation of the already formed identity, destabilizing the person and his/her sense of self. This can cause extensive psychological harm, as the otherwise stable self can be consistently eroded by repeated traumatic events. However, when children experience repeated abuse, it alters and splinters their character. Children are still in the process of developing their identity and due to the constant abuse, their personality is not coherent, which leads to a conclusion

that they are not whole human beings. Oppressed adolescents are faced with serious coping challenges since they still have immature psychosocial defense mechanisms. They do not have the developed adaptations to deal with and cope with the stress and traumas they are subjected to. In addition, adolescents are expected to justify the lack of responsible care and safety from adults. When adults cannot protect and care for the young people as they should, these youths have to face these adversities with their scant resources and immature psychosocial defense mechanisms. It makes their situation especially difficult and can have detrimental impacts on not only their development, but also their well-being.

Sammy, an adolescent boy, may attempt to leave home repeatedly or find himself caught up in the escalating anger between his parents, driven by the family's conflicts and the children's responses to these disputes. In contrast, Pecola, being much younger and deeply dependent on her family, finds herself trapped in this toxic environment. Her extreme subservience and reliance on her relatives leave her unable to escape the harmful dynamics around her. This scenario highlights a broader truth: children are inherently vulnerable due to their dependence on their caregivers for essential needs. When this vulnerability intersects with situations like sexual abuse, it becomes even more acute. The survivor in such cases is often left feeling imprisoned in an abusive and violent situation, their precarious position exacerbating their helplessness and isolation (Rodriguez 13).

Morrison explains the battle to deal with the violence by Pecola. As an adolescent, Sammy is in a stage where he tries to be independent though he depends on his parents. Sometimes it involves searching for independence from parents, and the

search for an individual's identity. In a domestic conflict like when the parents are fighting, this could lead to Sammy frequently leaving home. This physical removal is a direct short-term way of seeking to escape or get away from the emotional stress. Children occasionally run away from home to seek safety in someone else's home or in a public area, anywhere not in a house that is a war zone. On the other hand, perhaps Sammy finds himself drawn into the conflict. This could be the case since as children grow into teenagers, they may be forced to identify with one parent or even support one parent against the other or even attempt to reconcile the two. His involvement might be out of feeling compelled to do it, anger, frustration or because he has young ones at home. This can result in Sammy himself going through his own emotional and psychological turmoil due to struggles within his parents' conflicts and his responses to them.

On the other hand, Pecola, restricted by both her adolescence and gender, attempted to navigate various coping mechanisms. The discomfort she experienced was relentless and intense, regardless of the methods she employed. She wrestled with a powerful urge to harm others, while simultaneously harboring a profound desire to endure her suffering alone. One of Pecola's coping strategies in dealing with her suffering involves a form of psychological dissociation. Her mind, struggling to manage the overwhelming pain, seems to separate itself from the physical reality around her. As she mutters, "God, please, make me vanish, please," with her eyes tightly shut, she envisions parts of her body disappearing (Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* 45). This moment illustrates how her mind attempts to escape the harshness of her environment by

retreating into an imagined state of invisibility, reflecting her deep desire to disconnect from the unbearable trauma she faces.

However, like I mentioned earlier, Pecola is much younger than Sammy and children at this age are very dependent on parents or whoever is taking care of them to meet all their needs and seek comfort from. Her deferential behavior underscores her position as a powerless character in the novel's family drama. Unlike Sammy, Pecola cannot escape this poison; she is trapped physically and mentally with her family members. Thus, dependency makes Pecola more vulnerable than she would have been otherwise. Little children such as Pecola depend on their caretakers for food, shelter, affection, and protection. When these caregivers are the sources of conflict and toxicity, the child is stuck with no room to run away. Since Pecola fails to escape the toxic environment, she remains exposed to the unpleasant moods and conflicts that mess with the affected people's mental health.

Since Pecola is disturbed, disorientation as a behavioral defensive technique transpires; she is powerless to take a stand against violence. When Pecola wishes to vanish, she seeks to escape from actuality. In reality, in his article "On Narcissism", Freud concludes that the slipping away from the body of the victim demonstrates the onset of her delusional disassociation from the cultural and psychosocial realms and withdrawal. He further explains that this phenomenon is expressed when the cognitive realm of the individual is disrupted and replaced by an imagined illusion (Freud, "On Narcissism", 110). Admittedly, at the end of the book, the physiological and cognitive condition of Pecola is so weakened that she gets into full psychosis, hallucinating about her deranged blue-eye obsession.

A significant amount of the sexual abuse carried out by Pecola is caused by Pauline, at least implicitly. Pauline is a remarkable persona; she comes from a dysfunctional household that her parents ignore and exploit. Her broken relationship with Cholly, loss of her teeth, her failure to homogenize with the white culture and appearance, make Pauline feel more depressed and isolated. Pauline's crippled foot prompts her to appear ugly. She transfers her self-hatred onto her daughter, and from the moment Pecola was conceived, Pauline projected her own sense of ugliness onto her. Reflecting on Pecola's appearance, she describes, "Eyes all soft and wet. A cross between a dog and a guy who is dead. Yet I knew she was mean. Head full of lovely fur, Lord she was hideous" (Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* 124). Pauline's fear and rejection of her own child are striking. Many psychiatrists emphasize the crucial role a mother plays in shaping the infant's self-concept and sense of subjectivity, a process deeply hindered in this relationship.

In addition, Pauline fails to provide Pecola with the essential emotional and psychological support necessary for a child to experience and accept affection. This lack of maternal affection is evident in Pecola's inquiries to others about love. For instance, Pecola asked the Mactears, "How do you make someone love you?" and later questioned three prostitutes, "How come they all love you [boyfriends]?". Given that Pecola's understanding of love is shaped by her parents' constant conflict, she is preoccupied with the concept of love. Her ultimate realization of her situation is described as "choking sounds [Cholly] and silence [Pauline]". Pecola's decision to ask such personal questions to strangers rather than her mother underscores her profound emotional exploitation and the lack of support she receives from her own family.

Claudia said, "Adults are not listening to us they are sending us guidance. They give instructions without presenting details. "We did not start talking to adults; we answered their questions" (Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* 10-57). This shows how the bond between mother and daughter is focused on animosity and negligence.

Pauline, who works for the Fishers, displays love for the youngest daughter while depriving her children of mere care. Instead, she fills the minds of her children with a philosophy of fear:

She bent them into humility, and thus taught them terror: fear of becoming clumsy, fear of being like their lord, fear of not being accepted by Heaven, fear of insanity like the mother of Cholly. She beat her son with a loud urge to get away, and she beat her daughter with fear of growing up, fear of other things, fear of living (Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* 128).

Pauline does not evolve into a compassionate or spiritual figure; instead, she became self-righteous. She bolsters her ego by focusing on Cholly's sins, which allows her to justify her own actions and feel better about herself. As she confesses, "If Cholly had stopped drinking, she would never have forgiven Jesus". Her desire for Cholly's sins to be as extreme as possible mirrors her own sense of validation; the wilder and more reckless he became, the more she felt she was fulfilling her own sense of purpose. Pauline not only views Cholly with disdain, likening him to a "thorn crown," but she also bears the weight of her children like a "cross" (Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* 42-127). Despite being acutely aware of the fear and turmoil caused by her husband's drunkenness and violence, she fails to protect her children. Instead, she perpetuates issues by portraying herself as a victim, ultimately neglecting Pecola's well-being to maintain her own sense of self-righteousness. As a mother, Pauline's failures are

profound, and her actions deviate significantly from traditional narratives of maternal devotion.

In the context of Pauline's self-righteousness and failure as a mother, the Symbolic order—shaped by societal laws and language—plays a crucial role in reinforcing unattainable ideals. This order, which governs cultural norms and expectations, deeply affects Morrison's characters. In *Beloved*, the oppressive societal norms and the legacy of slavery function as the Symbolic order that profoundly impacts Sethe's reality. As Lacan explains, “The Symbolic order... is the order of culture as opposed to nature, the order of the law, the family, and language” (*The Seminar* 31). Sethe's traumatic experiences and her haunting by Beloved reveal a disruption in the Real order, which unearths repressed memories and desires that destabilize the established Symbolic order. Just as Pauline's self-righteousness and neglect reflect a personal failure in navigating these orders, Sethe's struggles highlight the broader impact of these cultural and societal frameworks on individuals' lives. Sethe's life is dominated by the Symbolic order of slavery, which dictates the terms of her existence. The traumatic events she endures, including the escape from Sweet Home and the loss of her daughter, are framed within this oppressive societal structure.

The haunting presence of Beloved symbolizes the return of the repressed, where the Real intrudes upon Sethe's Symbolic order, forcing her to confront her buried traumas. Lacan's theory helps to understand how Sethe's actions, such as her decision to kill her daughter, are influenced by her need to protect her children from the horrors she experienced, even if it means disrupting the Symbolic order of her new life. Morrison writes, "She ain't crazy. She love those children. She was trying to out-hurt

the hurter" (*Beloved* 256). This quote highlights Sethe's desperate attempt to protect her children from the horrors of slavery by resorting to extreme measures, emphasizing the psychological impact of the Symbolic order of slavery on her identity and actions.

On the other hand, Sethe's haunting in *Beloved* exemplifies the disruption of the Real order. The Real, which is beyond the Symbolic and Imaginary, often manifests as traumatic or repressed memories that intrude upon the present. Lacan describes the Real as "that which resists symbolization absolutely" (*Four Fundamental Concepts* 66). Sethe's encounter with Beloved, the embodiment of her dead daughter, represents a confrontation with the Real. This disruption forces Sethe to relive her past traumas and disrupts her attempt to create a stable reality within the Symbolic order. The return of the repressed through Beloved challenges Sethe's sense of self and compels her to confront the deeply buried psychological scars of slavery.

Beloved's arrival in Sethe's life brings the past into the present, blurring the lines between the Real and the Symbolic. Sethe's struggle to reconcile these parts of her psyche demonstrates the enduring impact of trauma.

Morrison uses Beloved's character to explore how repressed memories and unaddressed traumas continue to affect individuals long after the events have passed. Lacan's Real order provides a framework to analyze how these psychological disruptions influence Sethe's behavior and her relationships with those around her, especially her daughter Denver, who also becomes entangled in this complex interplay of memory and identity. Sethe's statement, "I got a tree on my back and a haint in my house, and nothing in between but the daughter I'm holding in my arms" (Morrison,

*Beloved*), captures the intrusion of the Real into her life, manifesting physical and psychological scars.

#### **4.2. The Conceptualization of the ‘Other’**

The novel's title, *The Bluest Eye*, indicates a striking topic of African American society and in particular, the protagonists of the plot. The Bluest exhibits the authority of the white culture and the impact of white beauty on the powerlessness of the black in this excessive degree of color. The eye may correspond to the white look of destruction; the peculiar singularity of the "eye" of the individual is homophony with the "I," which corresponds to the plight of the identity creation of the character (Surányi 11). The presented question thus is ontological: how the dominant whites define and limit Pecola's own perception along with a false conception of beauty which decides on her desire to be accepted.

The mechanism of the Id, which involves perception and presence, significantly influences how individuals view themselves and their behavior. Psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott highlights this by stating, “the self is not a static entity but is formed and transformed through interaction with the external world” (45). In the novel, Pecola’s self-image is profoundly affected by the gaze of others. For instance, while on her way to purchase candy from Mary Jane, Pecola finds solace in the dandelions she encounters. She feels a deep connection with these flowers, recognizing their authenticity and her own sense of belonging in their presence. She reflects, “They were true to her. They were true. She recognized them... she knew them... The crack was her own... She possessed the dandelion clump... And their possession is part of the environment and part of the world” (Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* 47-48). This passage illustrates how

Pecola's sense of self and her perception of reality are intertwined with her interactions with the environment, underscoring the impact of external judgments and internal perceptions on her self-identity, as Winnicott's insights into the dynamic nature of the self suggest.

Pecola's fascination with the dandelions filled her with excitement, appreciating their beauty and elegance. This positive interaction with the flowers symbolized a connection to the community for her. In contrast, Mr. Yacobowski, the candy shop owner, was unable to acknowledge Pecola's presence or engage with her on a personal level. His inability to connect is described in the text, "His eyes pull back, pause, and flutter somewhere between retina and object, between vision and sight. He senses that he may not have to waste a look at a certain stage in time and space. He does not see her, for nothing can be seen for him" (Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* 48). This passage highlights Mr. Yacobowski's failure to recognize Pecola, emphasizing his detachment and lack of empathy, which contrasts sharply with Pecola's meaningful engagement with the dandelions.

Pecola is unable to respond to the rejection and disgrace she experiences. As she gazes up at Mr. Yacobowski, "She looks up to him and sees the vacuum that can accommodate interest. And there is one." On her way home, she rejects the charm of the dandelions, which once symbolized love and vitality: "Dandelions. Spring out to her a dart of love. Yet they do not smile at her and they do not return affection. 'We are ugly,' she thinks. 'It is weeds'" (Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*, 48-59). Pecola's view of the world—her perception of flowers, the environment, and herself—has been distorted by the racial judgment and rejection she endures. Mr. Yacobowski's disdain further blurs

her sensory perception and self-worth. According to Lacan, the phase of identity formation is marked by a distinct process. In Pecola's case, her sense of self is shaped largely through her relationship with her mother, the first "Other" she encounters in her life.

Early in existence the boy is inseparable from his mother when he depends on her for affection and nourishment. The true order is defined by need. Sadly, for Pecola Breedlove, this is not the case. An infant with absolute attachment and reliance upon his mother comes into life. Pauline has been casting on her daughter since Picola's birth, because she was disgusting. Pauline races self-hated in her daughter instead of breeding passion. Pecola's sense of isolation and self-neglect was aggravated by Pauline's preoccupation with the Fisher family's daughter rather than with her own child. Mrs. Breedlove, who internalizes societal and racial prejudices, projects feelings of inferiority, contempt, and misguided affection onto Pecola. This treatment reinforces Pecola's sense of inadequacy and fuels her deep-seated anger and frustration, which she experiences as a profound and painful emotion.

When Cholly raped Pecola, she was "sitting under a heavy quilt on the kitchen floor" and failed to recognize the "faces of her mother" (Morrison, *The Bluesy Eye* 163). Pauline, in turn, disbelieves Pecola and blames her for the assault. This reaction highlights a tragic disconnect, as an infant should remain unaware of such harsh realities and be guided by basic needs in the realm of the Real. According to Lacan, only after an infant separates from the mother must it cross the mirror stage and eventually enter the Symbolic order, where it begins to understand and internalize societal norms and roles.

The ego is formed by imaginary illusions and delusional delusions. By drive, unconsciousness, placements and form in/through language it is oblivious to its resolve. Before language offers us a "I" we do not have a sense of self. [...] The infant creates a falsified narcissistic sense of unity by the child's initial symbiotic partnership with the mother. The child believes that the mother is herself, and that she needs from him first. (Quoted in Rambo 16-17).

But Pauline does not support Pecola's transition into the next stage of development. Pecola's reality is defined by a complete lack of affection and care, resulting in a sense of abandonment and division. Instead of being seen as a child in need of love and attention, she becomes an object of neglect, fostering self-loathing. The hypothetical order is marked by specifications. Pecola demands affection and acknowledgement because of her past failure and gap. Pecola begged for God to make her vanish while her parents were fighting. She rendered her limbs fade but her eyes never fade, for they retain it all the violence, the hate and their hideousness. Sat before the mirror, Pecola discovered the secret of the ugliness which caused everybody to despise her. When Pecola sees herself as hideous in the mirror, the mirror stage allows Pecola the possibility to build her ego or her perfect image, but it is focused on misrepresentation. Pecola lost herself in reflecting the mirror, instead of getting a grasp of her own personality. She begs for or longs for the early stage of supposedly fullness with her mother to be broken off in this condition of lack. Pecola prays with blue eyes. Thus, it happens to Pecola that her parents handle her differently, expressing affection, if her eyes are stunning.

Good-looking eyes. Black skin, very blue. Beautiful big brown skin. Big blue. Sprint, Jip, run, run, run, run. Alice is running Jip. The blue eyes are on Alice. The brown eyes of Jerry. Jerry runs. Jerry is moving. Alice flies. Alice is running. With their blue eyes, they are racing. Four brown eyes. Four blue eyes. Four quite brown eyes. Four quite dark. Face dark and sky. Rose-like the blue eyes of Mrs. Forrest. Blue-eyes morning-glory. The storybook-eyes of Alice and Jerry (Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* 163).

Pecola's longing for blue eyes illustrates a deep desire for validation and acceptance, which Lacan describes as the ego's attempt to attain wholeness. Lacan notes, "Only a miracle can help her," and emphasizes that individuals often project an image onto themselves that leads to self-alienation. Pecola's wish to have blue eyes reflects her desire to be cherished and accepted, a desire rooted in her sense of incompleteness. As Lacan points out, "Man's desire is the desire of others" (*Ecrits* 17-31). This notion suggests that our desires are influenced by the expectations and wants of others, creating a sense of scarcity within ourselves. Pecola's admiration for the beauty icon Shirley Temple, symbolized by the blue-and-white cup, represents her attempt to fill this void. She dreams of sipping tea from this cup, hoping to embody the beauty and acceptance she sees in Shirley Temple's image. Instead, Pecola remains fixated on the outline of her own dim profile, reflecting her ongoing struggle with self-worth and external validation

According to Lacan, the object represents the cause of desire, stemming from what is lacking. In Pecola's case, her fixation on the milk cup reflects her deep need for affection. Her mother's emotional absence creates a void in Pecola's life, and this desire is not directed toward the nourishing image of a mother's breast overflowing with milk, but rather toward the idealized figure of Shirley Temple on the milk cup. Shirley Temple, in this context, symbolizes a maternal figure offering Pecola the illusion of comfort and happiness. However, this imagined ecstasy—symbolized by drinking the milk—fails to satisfy Pecola's deeper, unmet longing for love and connection.

Desire shifts from mere sensation to deeper meaning, as illustrated by Pecola's fixation on Mary Jane candy. Pecola chooses to buy Mary Jane candies because they

symbolize her longing for Mary Jane's love, as she expresses in her wish to "Be Jane's Mary" (Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* 50). This longing reflects the profound impact of white beauty standards on Black individuals. Pecola's desire to embody Mary Jane's whiteness is a manifestation of her yearning for recognition and acceptance, yet this dream remains unfulfilled. Pecola finds herself trapped in a fictional world perpetuated by white cultural ideals, which create a stark psychological, cultural, and social divide between her and the prevailing norms. The beauty standards she encounters—promoting blue-eyed, fair-skinned ideals—condemn Pecola as unattractive by comparison. Her inability to progress to a new sense of self is not only a result of her detachment from these ideals but also due to the incestuous trauma imposed by Cholly, which has never been symbolically resolved.

#### **4.3. Traumatic experience, Repression of Desires and Romantic Attraction to the Father**

Morrison explores the impact of incest and its psychological effects on the Breedlove family, particularly Pecola, by presenting scenes before and after the assault. According to Lynn Orilla Scott, the novel reflects the dynamics of father-daughter incest within the context of racial oppression, illustrating how societal discouragement prevents Black individuals from confronting such issues directly. Morrison uses the incest narrative not to critique misogyny per se, but to reveal a community where the father holds significant power, paralleling the victimization of the daughter. Scott notes, "Morrison uses the incest tale not to denounce misogyny, but to expose an ethnic community wherein the father is a priority as much as the girl" (97). Clearly, Cholly's

severe personal issues are integral to understanding his behavior and its devastating impact on his family.

Cholly has his own share of abuse and trauma, though. *The Bluest Eye* is framed as a troubling account of his youth. When his mother left him, Aunt Jimmy rescued Cholly very carefully and affectionately. Yet, his childhood had a great impact on his appearance, owing to a lack of role model and parental love. Taking into account Cholly's reflection on God's life in watching a man smash a watermelon in celebration:

He inquired if it was God's feeling like that. Yeah, no No no. God was a stunning ancient white man, long white hair, flowing white, blue eyes.... Keep the earth in his hands and plan it to fire down so that the niggers can eat the fine, warm inside. The demon must appear the way it looks. Cholly preferred him if it looked like that to the ghost. He never felt a lot of thinking about God, but just the idea of the Devil excited him (Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* 134).

Cholly's understanding of God seems to be shaped by his own experiences growing up without parental guidance. In psychoanalytic terms, the father holds a symbolic position as a figure of authority. Freud, in *Totem and Taboo*, suggests that "The father of the personal prehistoric individual was the original image of God, the model upon which later generations have shaped the figure of God" (166). Having never known his own father, Cholly's perception of God is confused and fragmented, reflecting his lack of a clear paternal figure. In psychoanalysis, the absence of a parental figure deeply affects a child's development. This absence manifests in Cholly's own dysfunctional and indiscriminate approach to fatherhood, which becomes a central theme in the novel.

Cholly redirects his escalating anger and trauma onto Darlene, expressing his disdain and hatred toward her: "He disdained her... he hated her too much". Instead of confronting his own powerlessness and resentment towards white people, Cholly took

his frustrations out on Darlene, culminating in his first sexual encounter with her. Despite being a short, dark, and seemingly powerless man, Cholly felt trapped in a cycle of self-loathing and violence. His unconscious mind was aware that his intelligence and humanity were crushed by his abusive behavior, which consumed him like a soft charcoal lump. Cholly never considered focusing his hatred on those who victimized him, such as his abusers. In his search for solace after losing his wife, Cholly became increasingly anxious, sweating and stammering during interactions. He felt defeated when his father harshly criticized him, saying, "Make your face [your] outgotten!" (Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* 148-156). This humiliation led to a physical and emotional collapse, as Cholly's intestines began to react uncontrollably, and he felt overwhelmed by hatred and shame. Rejected and humiliated, Cholly could no longer contain his suffering or repress his anger, ultimately surrendering to a life of terror and isolation.

Cholly, though not truly independent, acts with a sense of freedom akin to someone with little left to lose. Overwhelmed by grief, pity, and love, he is deeply affected by seeing his daughter Pecola washing dishes at the sink. Cholly associates this moment with his own painful memories of loss, which leads him to project his trauma onto Pecola, treating her as an extension of his own suffering. His reaction to Pauline's troubled memory, coupled with his own actions, results in a deeply disturbing and destructive act. The force he exerts on Pecola creates only a faint, hollow sound, akin to the deflated ball of a circus act, symbolizing his own sense of despair and futility. As Pecola lies on the kitchen floor under a heavy quilt, she tries to reconcile the pain between her legs with her mother's looming presence (Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* 162-

163). In this state, Pecola's mind goes blank, a psychological defense mechanism according to Herman, which helps her cope with the overwhelming trauma.

She will become submissive if an individual is totally helpless, and resistance of some kind is futile. The system of self-defense is fully shut down. The vulnerable person avoids his own situation not by handling himself in the real environment, but by altering the state of mind. (quoted in Rodriguez 21).

During this horrifying experience, Pecola becomes profoundly detached and fragmented. According to Freud's theory of the unconscious, Cholly's actions can be analyzed through his own repressed emotions, including pain, guilt, regret, and sexual desires. This repressed mindset, which Cholly struggled to manage, contributed to his harmful behavior

Her father is the only one who lets Pecola join the symbolic order. Instead of raping his baby, he ought to put an end to the oedipal period. The incestuous abuse by Cholly is likely to be caused by past sexual trauma. In addition, he connected with her when he confronted her: her shattered state represents his own helplessness; "He wanted to break her neck" (Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* 161). In reality, this desire to break her neck is his own desire to remove his own life, because Pecola reflects his failure as a parent. Cholly, though is able to transcend his previous traumas; the instant he rapes his baby, he masters his shame and offense to his own race and sexuality. In other terms, Cholly is yet another object of the lust of the other; his violation of Pecola is a means of overcoming the white men who mock his masculinity and ruin his self-love (Samuels 116-117).

Cholly struggles to fulfill his symbolic role as a father, having been stripped of his phallic authority by the psychological castration imposed by white society. Unable

to carry out his parental duties, he is unfit to guide Pecola through the Oedipal process, as he is often absent from her life. In his place, Soaphead Church steps in, embodying what Lacan refers to as "the Name-of-the-Father"—not a biological father, but a symbolic figure who assumes the paternal role when the real father is absent or incapable. However, when Pecola asks Soaphead Church for blue eyes, a symbol of her desire for beauty and acceptance, he is powerless to fulfill her wish. His inability reflects his own lack of phallic authority, as described by Lacan, leaving him frustrated and impotent in his role. To compensate for this failure, Soaphead Church elevates himself to a god-like position, assuming the power to grant divine favors. In his letter to God, he writes, "I offered her the blue eyes she desired... I did everything you didn't, couldn't, wouldn't do: I looked at that ugly little black girl, and I loved her. I played you" (Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*, 181-182). This reveals the depth of Soaphead Church's delusion and his desperate attempt to wield power. By claiming he "played" God, he acknowledges his failure to provide Pecola with what she truly desires—a transformation that would grant her acceptance in a racially prejudiced world. His love, which he views as an act of divine benevolence, is ultimately hollow, as it neither addresses Pecola's emotional pain nor alters her circumstances. In trying to "play God," Soaphead Church is asserting his superiority over the divine, suggesting that he could offer what even God could not. Yet, this act of assumed power only underscores his impotence, as he remains unable to heal Pecola's deep psychological wounds or satisfy her fundamental desire for self-worth.

Soaphead Church satisfies Pecola's desire within the Imaginary Order by granting her the illusion of blue eyes—an imaginary feature that she is the only one to

perceive. This false gift provides her with a fleeting sense of self-worth and validation, preventing her from confronting the harsh reality of her situation. However, this leads to her eventual breakdown. After this painful encounter, Pecola becomes the target of relentless abuse and mistreatment, which ultimately costs her both her sanity and physical dignity. As Judith Herman explains in relation to trauma and recovery:

When change is to little avail, severe reactions arise. The human mechanism of self-defense becomes confused and disorganized when neither resistance nor escape is necessary. Each aspect of the usual danger solution, having lost its effectiveness, continues to remain in a changed and inflated condition long after the real danger is over.” (quoted in Zaleski et al. 378)

Herman’s insight illuminates Pecola’s psychological collapse. Her mind, overwhelmed by continuous trauma, can no longer distinguish between real threats and imagined ones, leaving her trapped in a state of prolonged emotional and psychological turmoil, long after the immediate danger has passed. In other terms, signs of post-traumatic stress disorder are not developed because of the weakness to stand up against risk, but because of the futility of the person to help himself out. Such reactions help to shield the person and to reconcile the person when the threat is already done. In Pecola’s post-traumatic condition, she slipped into a dissociative state. Her mind does not absorb the magnitude of the trauma into her structure owing to her weakness and the incest that evokes intense fear and helplessness. This dissociative symptom is a function of protection produced by her psyche to deal with the fact of violence.

It is vital to notice that post-traumatic stress disorder is not associated with a person’s inability to face risks but rather with a person’s sense of inability to handle the traumatic events. These reactions serve as a coping mechanism that protects the person

and is helpful in helping him come to terms when the threat is no longer present. As for Pecola, the traumatic experiences made her dissociate, which means her mind separates severely traumatic experiences because she felt she was too weak to take that and the feeling of being helpless and terrified originated from the incest. This dissociation helps Pecola to protect herself from the violence she had to experience and it is the result of the work of her psyche.

In the "Summer" section, the reader encounters Pecola talking to an imaginary friend about possessing and enjoying her new blue eyes. The repeated trauma and dissociation she has endured result in a fragmented thought process, revealing her self-division. As Herman suggests, in extreme cases of severe abuse, children often develop distinct identities as a coping mechanism. Pecola's split into two conversational selves reflects her psychological response to overwhelming danger, manifesting in two opposing states: "intrusion and constriction" (quoted in Maxwell 23). Intrusion involves reliving traumatic events with the same emotional intensity. For example, Pecola remarks, "That was horrible, wasn't it?" referring to her father Cholly's assault. In contrast, constriction is characterized by emotional numbness, where Pecola distances herself from the trauma. She claims, "My daddy didn't do anything [to me]" (Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* 199-201), showing she remembers the event but without any emotional engagement. This disconnection underscores her attempt to protect herself from the full weight of her traumatic experiences.

According to Herman, traumatized Pecola "may experience intense emotion but without clear memory of the event, or may remember all in detail but without emotion" (127). Pecola battles with rejecting sexual harassment and asserting it. Her weak coping

mechanisms toward acute trauma was characterized by the effects of post-traumatic stress disorder that Pecola manifested. Quiet as it remained, Pecola retreated into a dissociated world in which she was forced into insanity as her own family and culture abandoned her.

#### **4.4. Schizophrenic Symptoms**

The evil self-image of Pecola creates fear and self-loathing. The preference of the other, a desire to be recognized, valued, and safe, is her longing for blue eyes. This longing is cast by the other's eyes. Morrison explains the repercussions of being left hostage of the dominant others in the final act. Pecola proceeds to question her divided selves in utter emotional collapse whether or not her eyes are the bluest eyes. Pecola, as a result, resides in a schizophrenic domain; she has forgotten her link with the outside world.

In reality, a schizophrenic individual, unable to achieve coordination, lacks a clear and stable sense of identity, time, or memory. Their experience is characterized by fragmented, disconnected signifiers that do not align with a coherent narrative. There is no continuous sense of "I" or "Me" over time; instead, their perception of the world is fractured, with each moment existing in isolation from the others, leading to a disjointed and discontinuous experience of reality. As a matter of fact, schizophrenia disintegrates the proper integration of thoughts and experiences and results in a fragmentation of identity, time, and memory. Schizophrenia patients fail to present their thoughts, feelings, and events in a logically connected manner, so their way of perceiving the world is much disorganized. They are supplied with discrete and disconnected pieces of information in which there are no references that could be used

for the interpretation of this information. Such are fragmented ideas that appear as discrete and unrelated signifying elements differentiated from one another by narrative and temporal discontinuity. As a result, people living with schizophrenia struggle to define the self because the border between oneself and the environment, between ego and personal identity, dissolves, and the notion of the self is lost in the sea of schizophrenia.

In the contemporary world, the very concept of a stable and continuous self is further complicated by the fact that people with schizophrenia view reality in a way that is different from most others. Instead of possessing a stable and persisting notion of “I” and “Me” that develops over the life span, they live in a world that is made up of an ever-changing number of perspectives, and each perspective looks at the world differently. The fragmented experience of the world reflects the profound sense of discontinuity that defines schizophrenia. Individuals with this condition live in a state of ever-shifting perceptions, without a stable core to their identity. The boundary between their inner world and external reality becomes blurred, often fading entirely. This lack of distinction leads to a disintegration of the self, where thoughts, emotions, and experiences fail to connect into a coherent whole, leaving the individual adrift in a fragmented reality.

Schizophrenia is a chronic psychiatric disorder characterized by an inability to distinguish between reality and fantasy, often presenting with symptoms such as delusions, hallucinations, and memory issues. (“What is Schizophrenia?”) In Pecola’s case, her schizophrenic behavior stems from the intense conflict between her self-perception and societal expectations. The clash between her self-image—defined by her

own sense of ugliness—and the dominant white standards of beauty creates a profound psychological strain. Pecola's inability to reconcile her identity with the external perceptions imposed on her leads to her mental deterioration. Her struggle is intensified by Cholly's failure to embody the paternal role and introduce the father's principle, leaving her unable to move beyond her fragmented self-concept. Lacan argues that true wholeness is unattainable, as he notes:

The real is that which resists symbolization absolutely. It is this impossibility of symbolizing the real that sustains the subject's desire. Wholeness, or unity, is always an illusion. The moment the subject seeks to identify with the object of desire, it is lost, for desire is always driven by lack. This absence, this gap, is the very engine of human subjectivity. What we strive for, in seeking wholeness, is a fantasy—an imaginary construction of completeness that can never be achieved. (*Four Concepts* 83)

This quote highlights Lacan's belief that the pursuit of wholeness is fundamentally misguided, as human identity is constructed around lack and absence, with desire sustained by what is perpetually missing. The illusion of completeness is, therefore, an impossible fantasy.

Pecola's desire for blue eyes represents her attempt to escape her identity and the pain associated with it, rather than embracing her Blackness. Her wish for blue eyes, symbolizing societal standards of beauty, remains unfulfilled and drives her into a delusional psychosis. Toni Morrison uses Pecola Breedlove's character to critique the legal and cultural enforcement of beauty standards. Pecola's longing for blue eyes reflects her belief that possessing them would lead to love and acceptance, akin to that afforded to white people (Asim & Bsharat 3). This destructive desire ultimately leads to Pecola's psychological collapse, highlighting how internalized racist beauty standards can severely damage the self-image and mental health of people of color.

In the same manner, in *Sula*, Morrison powerfully portrays the complex struggles faced by Black women as they navigate societal expectations versus their personal desires. The novel delves into the tensions between the roles imposed on Black women and their aspirations for self-definition. Morrison explores how these women grapple with conflicting identities, reflecting the broader societal pressures that force them to constantly shift between roles dictated by external expectations and their true selves. This constant balancing act often leads to significant identity fragmentation and an ongoing internal struggle. As Black women strive to conform to societal norms while also seeking to assert their individuality, they face the challenge of reconciling these competing demands.

In addition, the psychological consequences are not limited to self-esteem issues but core community association and social relations. But, if the images and perceptions are internalized and followed by the African-American women, they will be excluded not only from the mainstream White culture but also from their community (Asim & Bsharat 4). It can lead to emotions of loneliness, despair, and stress. The expectation of meeting the Eurocentric standard sets African-American women for constant comparison, putting the mental health and solidarity of women at risk. Furthermore, when race and gender are combined, these psychological effects are more profound. The difficulties that African-American women go through may differ from those that a white woman or an African-American man might face. They are expected to survive in a society that discriminates against them based on the color of their skin and judges their feminine aesthetic by stereotyped standards. It brings a twofold psychological pressure: the pressure of performing the gender roles while enduring racism. Such are

examples of the problems that Morrison's work analyses, showing that racism and sexism make African-American women suffer in their psychological condition and self-perception.

Hence, beauty standards have a powerful impact on mental health and self-esteem in general, but even more so for people of color, such as African-American women. Advertisements and culture as a whole establish a standard for beauty that is Eurocentric, making it difficult for women of color to feel adequate or confident in their appearance (Kaziga et al. 15). As African-American women already suffer from racial discrimination and social exclusion, they are exposed to these aesthetic demands, which can worsen their mental health conditions and lead to poor self-esteem. Numerous mental health studies reveal the adverse effects of beauty standards on confidence and mental health. Some of the adverse effects include higher levels of body dissatisfaction, anxiety, and depression among women (Kaziga et al. 17). Black women, in particular, are targeted by these demands because of the race, gender, and class dynamics at play. The assimilation of European beauty standards means that individuals can develop a rather negative image of themselves, which implies they are unlovable and undeserving of affection.

Toni Morrison's books, such as *The Bluest Eye* and *Sula*, are about the emotional cost of beauty standards for Black women. The characters' problems with self-acceptance represent real issues that can be experienced, indicating the negative impact of the beauty ideal that cannot be achieved. The benchmarks are not just about appearance but about identity, worth, and societal acceptance, as exemplified in Morrison's narratives. However, what needs to be taken into consideration is not only

individual experiences of mental health issues related to beauty standards but also social aspects and systemic injustice. The process of social conditioning that emphasizes specific body features over others maintains and strengthens oppressive systems of values. The African-American women are left to deal with a society that is designed to discourage them from appreciating their beauty, as they do not conform to white standards. It presents systemic marginalization that affects mental health, given that it leads to social isolation, low self-esteem, and psychological problems.

In this chapter, we have laid the theoretical groundwork for examining the intricate relationship between racialized beauty standards and the construction of black female identity in Toni Morrison's works. By delving into the philosophical and theoretical paradigms, we have established a robust framework that will guide our subsequent analysis. We began by elucidating the key concepts of racialization and beauty, highlighting how these constructs are deeply embedded in socio-cultural, historical, and political contexts. By integrating Lacanian psychoanalysis, we unpacked the psychological mechanisms through which Morrison's characters internalize oppressive beauty standards. Lacan's theories of the Imaginary, Symbolic, and Real orders, along with the Mirror Stage, provide a lens through which we can understand the fractured identities and pervasive self-loathing experienced by Morrison's protagonists.

Furthermore, we have explored Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity to examine how Morrison's female characters navigate their identities in a society that imposes rigid beauty norms. Butler's insights into the performative nature of gender reveal the complex interplay between societal expectations and personal identity,

illustrating how these characters resist and subvert the hegemonic ideals of beauty. Additionally, we engaged with Pierre Bourdieu's concept of Habitus and Cultural Capital to contextualize the socio-cultural influences on identity formation. By understanding how cultural practices and social environments shape the dispositions and behaviors of Morrison's characters, we gain a deeper insight into the systemic oppression they face.

This chapter has set the stage for a nuanced exploration of the psychosocial, psychoanalytic, and performative dimensions of identity in Morrison's works, paving the way for a more profound understanding of the resilience and resistance of African American women in the face of systemic oppression. After establishing this theoretical foundation, Chapter Three will explore the standardization of beauty based on white norms and its specific manifestations in Morrison's works. I will demonstrate how these beauty standards are portrayed, internalized, and challenged by Morrison's characters, providing further insight into the complex interplay between race, beauty, and identity.

**Chapter Three: The Hegemony of Eurocentric  
Aesthetics: Unveiling the White Beauty Paradigm in  
Morrison's Novels**

Beauty standards in literature extend far beyond mere aesthetic considerations; they permeate the very fabric of identity and self-perception, particularly within marginalized communities. In the oeuvre of Toni Morrison, the depiction of white beauty standards serves as a critical focal point, shedding light on the pervasive influence of Eurocentric ideals on African-American women. This chapter delves into the intricate ways in which Morrison's novels, particularly *The Bluest Eye*, *Beloved*, *Sula*, *Tar Baby*, and *Song of Solomon*, articulate and challenge the imposition of these standards.

Morrison's works vividly illustrate how the valorization of white beauty standards is not merely a cultural preference but a profound societal imposition that affects the psychological and social dimensions of African-American identity. The characters in her narratives grapple with the internalization of these ideals, often to the detriment of their self-worth and authentic self-construction. By portraying characters who both succumb to and resist these standards, Morrison provides a nuanced exploration of the damaging effects of Eurocentric beauty paradigms.

This chapter begins by explicating the characteristics of white beauty standards as depicted in Morrison's novels, examining how these ideals are established and maintained within the cultural psyche. It further explores the process through which these standards are idealized and subsequently internalized by African-American characters, leading to a distortion of their self-perception and identity. Through a close reading of Morrison's texts, this chapter seeks to uncover the complex dynamics between beauty, race, and identity, and how these interactions shape the lives of her characters.

Furthermore, this chapter will analyze specific instances from Morrison's novels where white beauty standards are portrayed as a template for African-American identity, revealing the multifaceted impact of such impositions. By tracing the reflections of beauty among the characters, it will illuminate the broader sociocultural and psychological ramifications of these standards. Through this analysis, the chapter aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the ways in which Morrison's narratives critique and deconstruct the hegemonic ideals of beauty, offering a counter-narrative that celebrates blackness and challenges the dominance of Eurocentric aesthetics.

### **1. The Diverse Manifestations of White Beauty Norms**

In *The Bluest Eye*, Toni Morrison's debut novel, the protagonist challenges the prevailing Western beauty standards and exposes how these ideals are socially constructed. Morrison critiques the notion that whiteness is equated with beauty and superiority, arguing that this perception undermines the value of Blackness. The novel seeks to dismantle these ingrained biases, illustrating that despite the abolition of slavery, the Black community continues to face systemic racial injustice. Morrison portrays white society as aggressive and demonstrates how the idealization of whiteness contributes to the oppression of Black culture. Throughout American society, there has been a persistent belief that white skin and blue eyes represent perfection, while Black skin is considered unattractive. This damaging perspective is perpetuated through the pervasive influence of mainstream media, educational institutions, and cultural norms within the community.

The protagonist, Pecola, yearns for blue eyes, convinced that possessing them would transform her life for the better. The novel identifies two primary factors contributing to Pecola's tragedy and the suffering of those like her: the violence perpetrated by white society and the internalized adoption of white beauty standards by Black individuals. This internalized racism and aesthetic alienation have thrust Black citizens into a cycle of ongoing pain and self-loathing. Morrison's narrative implores her readers to confront and rectify these internalized misconceptions. She argues that fairness and value are not exclusive to any race—both white and Black individuals possess their own strengths and make significant contributions to the world. Through her powerful storytelling, Morrison advocates the recognition of the inherent worth and beauty of all individuals, regardless of race.

Social constructs, such as ideals of beauty, are not inherent but are instead shaped by societal influences and deliberate processes. Social theorist Anthony Giddens posits that the ongoing, intentional reinforcement of certain meanings, hierarchies, and legitimizations contributes to the formation of new social orders. Similarly, Michel Foucault argues that social constructions emerge through continuous discursive practices. These constructs are not arbitrarily imposed; rather, they are the result of extensive social and cultural processes. Similarly, Pierre Bourdieu's perspective on social constructs further illuminates this process. He views these constructs as deeply ingrained in the fabric of society, reflecting the power dynamics and cultural norms of different social groups. According to him, these constructs are internalized and perpetuated through social practices and norms. As he asserts, "Social life is organized through a system of structured, structuring dispositions, called habitus, which shapes

our perceptions, thoughts, and actions.”(Bourdieu, *Outline* 72) This view highlights how beauty ideals, for instance, are not simply personal preferences but are influenced by broader social structures and cultural values.

Historically and even today, white American women have benefitted from the "white beauty ideal," which has been perpetuated by centuries of exploitation, including cheap labor and the multi-billion-dollar luxury industry. It is crucial for individuals of all races to understand how their ideals and values are influenced and shaped by popular media. Only by acknowledging these influences can people strive to combat them and reach their full potential.

Morrison unveils Western expectations of perfection in *The Bluest Eye* and reveals that the notion of attractiveness is socially built. This writer would not actually convey optimistic representations of blackness by expressing pride in becoming black. Instead, she reflects on the damage inflicted on her black female protagonists by a society that enforces white beauty standards. As Gurleen Grewal observes, “it is not enough to simply reverse assumed ‘ugliness’ into glamorous blackness, as this counter-rhetoric doesn’t address the deeper issue: the race-based class system maintained by dominant norms and prejudices.” (21) This emphasizes that merely reversing societal views of ugliness by glorifying blackness does not solve the root problem. The deeper issue is the race-based class system, which is upheld by existing social norms and prejudices.

Toni Morrison illustrates the devastating effects of imposing white standards of beauty on young African-American girls in the early 1940s, focusing on Pecola

Breedlove's emotional and psychological downfall. Pecola, desperate for love and acceptance, internalizes the belief that she is unworthy because society devalues her blackness. Morrison shows how the dominant Eurocentric ideal of beauty—defined by white skin, blonde hair, and blue eyes—creates a destructive hierarchy, where black girls like Pecola are judged and found lacking. This standard fosters self-hatred within the black community, as their natural features are seen as inferior to the unattainable white ideal.

*The Bluest Eye*, set in Toni Morrison's hometown of Lorain, Ohio, was published in 1970. The novel tells the story of Pecola Breedlove, a young black girl who, persuaded of her own ugliness, wants nothing more than blue eyes. Morrison beautifully unfolds the reactions and responses of African Americans to the overpowering ideals of appearance in Western society by Pecola Breedlove: rejection, alienation, self-hatred, and eventual death. In this book, the nine-year-old narrator, Claudia, points out at the beginning of the novel that fear of poverty and homelessness in her neighborhood is a more normal day-to-day problem than fear of prejudice, which she declares "perhaps because it was abstract (discrimination)". Years later, the adult Claudia reflects on how "the whole nation was aggressive toward marigolds that year" (Morrison 164). Despite this realization, Pecola's fate remains heavily influenced by forces beyond just hunger and homelessness. In *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison illustrates how societal expectations and distorted ideals of beauty profoundly impact individuals, revealing how bigotry affects lives in both subtle and significant ways. By exposing these societal values as instruments of racial discrimination, Morrison critiques the harmful effects of prejudice based on skin color and physical appearance.

In order to denote whiteness, the novel begins with the portrayal of a perfect white household, albeit in the almost parodic manner of a school reading tutorial, where Dick and Jane and their lovely parents reside in a pleasant house with a lovely dog and cat. "The text of Dick and Jane serves as the hegemonic force of an ideology ([focused on the superiority of the 'bluest eye') through which a dominant society reproduces[its] system of oppressive power[s] (Grewal 24). As Donald B. Gibson also suggests, "[t]he text of Dick and Jane indicates one of the key and most manipulative forms in which by the school framework, the prevailing society exercises its control." (20) It shows the role of schooling in both the victim's persecution and, more to the point, teaching the victim how to exploit her own black self by internalizing the ideals dictating beauty norms.

In a kind of preface to the novel, Morrison's allusion to the tale of Dick and Jane, was nationally known at the period as a primary-reader story for girls.

There is a house. It is white and gray. It has a red door. It is very pretty. The family is here. Mother, Father, Dick, and Jane live in a white and green house. They are very happy. They are very happy in their green-and-white house. The house has a red door. It is a nice house. Dick and Jane play in the yard. Mother and Father watch them. They all enjoy living in their happy home. (*The Dick and Jane Primer* 2-3)

Morrison used this to juxtapose the idealized image of white family life presented in children's primers with the harsh realities faced by Black children. The primer's first edition, which is clean, simple, and written in standard English, depicts an idealized, affluent white family. This portrayal starkly contrasts with the lives of Black children, whose experiences and communities are marginalized by such representations. The second version of the primer, though still clear, is less straightforward and lacks proper

capitalization and punctuation, reflecting a more complex reality. The final version, where the text appears jumbled, symbolizes Pecola's chaotic home life, where her parents fight, her brother has abandoned the family, and Pecola herself yearns for blue eyes. This primer, much like the Dick and Jane readers designed to teach children about the world, subtly shapes their understanding of beauty and self-worth. For Pecola, the ideal of beauty represented in the white, green, and red house stands in stark contrast to her own life. As she reads about Dick and Jane, she realizes that she does not fit into this ideal and feels a profound sense of inadequacy and sadness, understanding that her reality is far removed from the pristine image of white middle-class life (Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* 5).

It is important to recognize that local culture is often marginalized by public education systems, which tend to elevate a seemingly benign national ideal. Understanding *The Bluest Eye* requires knowledge of American history. Although the novel was published in the 1960s and 1970s, it is set in the 1940s. Through this temporal setting, the novel tries to reflect the social changes of the late 1960s and early 1970s, a period when African American culture was becoming more developed and accepted, despite being part of a predominantly white American identity.

Racism has been and continues to be deeply entrenched in American society. In the 1940s, it evolved into new forms. In *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison presents a fresh perspective on the traditional white-versus-black bias. She highlights that many people fail to understand both the external bigotry present in society and the internalized racism within themselves. The relationship between social status and physical appearance has been extensively studied in sociology and related fields. Research has shown that

individuals who are perceived as attractive tend to be more socially and economically successful, largely due to the "halo effect," where beauty generates positive expectations that often fulfill themselves. This framework supports the notion that attractiveness holds significant social value. However, differing beauty ideals complicate this view, as they suggest a simplistic and linear connection between beauty and social status.

The association between appearance and rank may also function the other way: status signals also come to be found beautiful. These impacts are also apparent in appearance ideals. The mechanism by which traits of rank are imbued with aesthetic meaning contributes to the diffusion of norms downwards. In historical studies of beauty standards, this "trickle down" process is fundamental. Public schooling has placed upon the children of a local community a certain sort of picture of a good existence. The novel then turns to the effect of mainstream culture on the African-American community; therefore, the icon of the nice, the real, and the lovely Shirley Temple leaps out.

In Gender Studies and Feminist Philosophy, beauty ideals are often seen as socially constructed rather than inherent. These ideals are viewed as a form of regulation that perpetuates gender inequality by promoting stereotypical body standards for women, a concept referred to as the "beauty stereotype" (Wolf 95). Media is frequently identified as a primary source of these beauty norms, which has led to extensive research on gender representations across various media outlets. This perspective encourages us to reconsider and refine our understanding of how appearance relates to social injustice, highlighting that gender plays a significant role in shaping preferences and ideals of

attractiveness carry strong moral implications. In a postmodern world, capitalism usually relies on the creation of new utilities and the ability to work inside a racist sphere. The racial idealization of whiteness in this domain has strong sexual and economic connections. That is why ethnicity is a crucial factor in this dynamic. Racial hierarchies, both globally and within individual countries, influence beauty norms, while ethnic communities often develop their own unique standards of beauty.

In *The Bluest Eye*, Toni Morrison critiques how capitalism shapes cultural and media influences—such as advertisements, literature, and children's toys—to foster interest in certain societal groups. The novel reveals how adoration of whiteness is intertwined with prejudice and patriarchy. Morrison illustrates how internalized biases are exploited by postmodern capitalism through powerful advertising techniques and products aimed at children, generating hidden impulses and fears. By exploring these themes, Morrison seeks to unravel the core of the racist system, expressing a desire to "dismember it" and uncover its components, including the allure and desirability that have been socially constructed (*The Bluest Eye* 20). Claudia's resistance to the glorification of white beauty, perpetuated by advertising, highlights the manipulative politics of idealization. However, Claudia struggles to understand the broader implications of this engineered idealization, focusing instead on the material representation—the doll.

The ideal of appearance is often focused on collectively fabricated ideals. The perplexity of Claudia about the portrayal of appearance relates to this politics. This too is connected to Freud's notion of the implicit treatment of terms as actual objects ("Unconscious" 147). This is why Claudia seeks to turn the elegance of the doll into

actual symbolic rather than embrace it as a type of outward representation of beauty. According to Jean Louis Baudry, when it comes to the movies, he sees a similar turn of abstract codes into actual properties. In the postmodern culture, certain interpretations are sometimes mistakenly known as perceptions (315). TV and film both play a key function in altering the paradigm of internalized bias in *The Bluest Eye*, using certain images of make-belief as true experiences. When she learns them as impressions from film, Pauline is governed by the notion of attractiveness and romantic love. Here, Morrison illustrates how mass culture and film can exploit the definition of beauty' to create racial self-hatred by forcing people to feel guilty and bad regarding their figure and colour. In *The Bluest Eye*, the ideology of all the protagonists is affected by such an idealization of whiteness as attractiveness in a market culture. In the case of Pauline, "she was never willing to look at a face after her education in the movies and not give it any category on the scale of total attractiveness" (Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* 122). In other works, as heterosexual attraction is mediated by it the female-to-female partnership turns out to be much more dynamic. Women are entirely commoditized and regarded as mere artifacts of lust under this 'beauty business' policy. Blackness ends up being a type of incapacity for the economy. Morrison constantly illustrates and calls one's attention to the prevalent belief in *The Bluest Eye* that the Breedlove family's suffering and blackness are attributed to their economic incapacity, and Pecola is the basic embodiment of ugliness synonymous with this economic incapacity.

During the transition from childhood to early adulthood, a female child is under the care and supervision of adults, including her parents, guardians, or older siblings. As she grows, her behavior is shaped by her interactions and observations of those

around her. This period is crucial for her physical, mental, and emotional development. To understand the relationship between society and the female child, it is important to examine her treatment and perception within her contemporary society. The female child often faces significant challenges and injustices both within the family and in the public sphere, experiencing dehumanization due to perceptions of inferiority. As Buchi Emecheta describes, in patriarchal societies, she is regarded as a “second-class citizen.” This sense of inferiority is particularly pronounced in many African communities, where oppressive cultural norms grant excessive importance to males. Men often undermine women to assert their own value and control. In African culture and the diaspora, where male dominance is prioritized and female voices are frequently neglected, male authors often reflect these patriarchal views in their literary works. Female protagonists are commonly portrayed in limiting roles such as prostitutes, girlfriends, courtesans, or servants, depicting them as passive and insignificant. This representation reinforces the notion that the fate of the female child is controlled by men.

"Whether one gains acceptability through formal education or cultural symbols, the result is self-hatred," Klotman argues (124). This quote about self-hatred being the result of both formal education and cultural symbols directly links to Pecola's internalization of white cultural ideals, which drives her desire for blue eyes. Pecola's obsession with Shirley Temple, a symbol of white beauty and innocence, demonstrates how deeply she has absorbed these cultural messages. Her relentless drinking from the Shirley Temple mug is a symbolic act of consuming and internalizing these ideals, reflecting Klotman's assertion that cultural symbols foster self-hatred. This leads Pecola

to reject her own identity, yearning for the blue eyes of a white girl, which Morrison poignantly describes as a desire rooted in terror and driven by the false promise of satisfaction. Thus, Klotman's argument about self-hatred being a consequence of cultural symbolism is embodied in Pecola's desperate longing to embody white standards of beauty, which ultimately leads to her self-destruction. Pecola associates attractiveness with being cherished and claims that if she has blue eyes, kindness and respect will eliminate the violence in her life. Surely, Pecola struggles most from the expectations of white perfection, and this hopeless ambition eventually contributes to her madness. "Since these black people have little position in the field of white aesthetics, they gain a nuanced impression of beauty from humiliating their own community's people" (Khan 2).

According to Fanon, the internalization of racial stereotypes leads to a profound sense of alienation and self-division. Pecola's longing for blue eyes can be seen as a manifestation of this alienation, a desperate attempt to reconcile her black identity with the white ideals she has internalized. In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon discusses the psychological impact of racism, noting, "not only must the black man be black; he must be black in relation to the white man" (110). This emphasizes the relational nature of identity under racial oppression, where Blackness is defined and devalued in contrast to whiteness. Pecola's desire for blue eyes can be interpreted as her attempt to escape the negative identity imposed upon her by a society that equates whiteness with beauty, worth, and humanity. By seeking blue eyes, she is not simply aspiring to beauty, but to a form of acceptance that is contingent upon the white gaze.

In this way, Pecola and her family become the targets of the entire community's self-hatred. Morrison illustrates that Pecola's perceived ugliness allows others to feel beautiful, and her vulnerability gives them a sense of strength. Through this, Morrison reveals how the humiliation of the "Other" is often rooted in such dynamics of comparison and idealization. In *The Bluest Eye*, Pecola is dehumanized not only by white characters but also by members of the Black community, as her worth is redefined through their own insecurities. When Pecola attempts to buy a treat from a white American man, she embodies disappointment—both racially, as a Black girl in a racist society, and economically, as someone trapped in poverty. The man, “looks at her: his eyes pull back, pause, and linger somewhere between the retina and the object, vision and view. He feels the need not to miss the effort of a look at any fixed point in time and space. He does not see her so there is little for him to see.” (Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* 48). This moment underscores Pecola's status as the "Other" whose existence is marked by rejection and alienation. The man's inability to fully see Pecola signifies a refusal to acknowledge her humanity, reducing her to an object that fails to capture his interest or empathy. This parallels the earlier discussion of how Pecola becomes the target of the community's self-hatred and serves as a tool for others to elevate themselves by degrading her. His indifferent gaze symbolizes the societal forces that erase Pecola's identity, reducing her to something insignificant in both racial and economic terms, reinforcing her internalization of dehumanization.

Therefore, in the eye of the Other, her ego loses some form of legitimacy. Her life is completely unrecognized; she is crushed into an instance of self-defiance, a void and an utter absence of acknowledgement as a human being. Pecola recognizes too well

how her blackness is correlated with this weakness in her ego; all aspects in her are in motion and expectation. Yet, her blackness is terrible and stagnant. And it is the blackness that accounts for that causes, the void in white eyes edged with distaste. Not only is she hated for being female, but her blackness often results in being the fixed focus of white men's endless gaze, which detrimentally puts her appearance into the place of an object of popular lust.

Pecola's tragic desire for blue eyes can be viewed through the concept of habitus. Her longing reflects not just a personal fixation but the internalization of dominant racial beauty standards by her entire community. These standards, reinforced by family, media, and social interactions, serve as mechanisms of social control, shaping perceptions and behaviors that uphold existing power structures. Bourdieu's idea of habitus is clearly seen in Pecola's social interactions. Maureen Peal, with her light skin and widespread admiration, holds significant social capital. Morrison notes, "Black boys didn't trip her in the halls; white boys didn't stone her, white girls didn't suck their teeth when she was assigned to be their work partners" (*The Bluest Eye* 74). Maureen's privilege starkly contrasts with Pecola's marginalization, highlighting how internalized beauty standards create social hierarchies and impact self-worth.

Bourdieu's concept of habitus also highlights the role of social and cultural capital in the reproduction of racial beauty standards. In *The Bluest Eye*, characters like Maureen Peal, who embody the societal ideal of beauty, possess cultural capital that affords them privilege and status. This capital is not only a source of personal advantage but also a means of perpetuating the dominance of white beauty standards, as those who lack this capital, like Pecola, are marginalized and devalued. The black girl's pride is

utterly broken under this relentless gaze, and she is made to feel ashamed of her color, her appearance, and even her entire existence. She understands that, although she is home, the entire world has its eye on her. Drawing from Lacan's theory of the "mirror stage," she develops an imagined 'self' concept through the gaze of others—what Lacan would describe as the *objet petit a*, the elusive object of desire projected by others' perceptions. She begins to internalize this external vision as her true self, as if she were gazing into a mirror that reflects not her authentic being but a distorted, socially constructed image. This self-image becomes synonymous with a feeling of twisted misogyny and shame, particularly as she becomes pregnant. The remorse Pecola feels is deeply tied to her family's blackness, as the gaze of the group frames her as a symbol of guilt and filth. In Lacanian terms, her blackness and pregnancy position her as an "Other," an object through which the community both denies and reaffirms its own identity and superiority. (Lacan, *Écrits* 152-154) In contrast to the debased status imposed upon her, the group paradoxically desires to draw strength from this image of shame. Thus, Pecola's blackness and pregnancy become central to reinforcing the ideal of white beauty through the mechanism of self-defiance and othering.

This focus on the white man's eyes illustrates how subjects like Pecola are maneuvered not only at the imaginary level but also visually, through the societal gaze. Pecola's delusional belief that blue eyes would make her beautiful reflects the collapse of her symbolic identity. Her sense of self has been reduced to an empty image in the eyes of white society, and in Lacanian terms, she can no longer sustain the function of the 'Name-of-the-Father'. This psychotic rupture leads Pecola to deny her subjectivity and physical existence altogether, as evidenced by her desperate plea: "Please Heaven,"

she muttered in the palm of her hand. "Make me vanish, please" (Morrison 45). In this suicidal withdrawal from reality, she attempts to erase herself from the realm of social representations, much like the psychotic subject who, as Freud described in *The Unconscious*, recreates the world in an imagined, impossible fantasy (147). Pecola's breakdown follows the same pattern, where she first rejects her black identity and then becomes obsessed with obtaining blue eyes—a fantasy that mirrors the impossibility of reintegrating into the symbolic order. This compulsive desire to achieve an ideal of white beauty is intertwined with her family's socioeconomic struggles, symbolizing their homelessness and dehumanization. In this way, Pecola's psychosis reflects a complete breakdown of symbolic identification, with her blackness and poverty further reinforcing her marginalization in the eyes of society.

The African-Americans of the middle class support the connections between blackness and inappropriate pornography portrayed in the sense of prejudice. According to Davis Charles, the compulsion to repress irrepressible lust through refinement and distinction (*Slave's Story* 1985) is one of the key symptoms of the production of 'obsessive neurosis.' In the character of Geraldine, Toni Morrison reveals such a type of 'obsessive neurosis'. This results from an obsessive attempt to keep in step with the prevailing societal 'Other'. Morrison therefore provides a psychoanalytic layout to Geraldine's class's internalized bigotry. Geraldine's discriminatory mentality, the agreed link between blackness and sexuality, and a deep willingness to remain apart from any sense of sullied blackness are associated with an obsessive paranoia that converts them into 'obsessive stereotypes' whose sole thought is to renounce blackness through any way. Yet it does not destroy the racial mentality as this obsessive desire falters;

however, it further tones up into a dejection that results in deeper obsessive delusions.

We see that in the obsessive effort by Geraldine to turn her son's skin white:

She put Jergens Lotion on his face in the wintertime to keep the skin from getting ashy. And if he were light-skinned, ash would show up even more easily... The distinction between colored and nigger was not always clear; subtle and telltale signs threatened to erode it, and the watch had to be constant. (Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* 87)

Geraldine is distanced from her own culture due to her obsessive distrust of any sign of blackness. This fear feeds the psychological hierarchy within the Black middle class, driven by discriminatory actions rooted in a deep-seated terror of being associated with what they perceive as a frightening and undesirable realm. This paranoia compels them to conform to the racist rhetoric of the 'Other.' As a result, Black people, particularly the middle class, find themselves oppressed by white society. Sandra Lee Bartky explores the construction of Western femininity in her essay "Foucault, Femininity, and the Modernization of Patriarchal Dominance," where she incorporates Michel Foucault's ideas on the creation of subjectivity in liberal cultures. Foucault argues that "discipline creates bodies that are subjected and exercised, docile bodies" (qt in. Bartky 62). However, Bartky critiques Foucault for not addressing gender disparities, noting that he overlooks the specific disciplinary practices that shape a distinctly feminine embodiment. She argues that these disciplinary procedures reflect patriarchal control within Western society. Yet, Bartky does not acknowledge the role of racial or ethnic distinctions in this process. She suggests that the broader systems that shape feminine bodies apply universally, without distinction of race or class. (Bartky 62-63) In fact, she implies that women of color or middle-class women are no less committed to embodying ideal femininity than their wealthier counterparts. This

highlights a broader societal obsession with beauty, which, as Naomi Wolf argues, is a powerful and pervasive myth that affects many women (49).

However, as the standard of perfection has been largely represented as a woman of fair skin and blue eyes, it is much less likely to attain this ideal for people of colour than for white women. As Paul C. Taylor claims, "a white dominant society has racialized beauty such that in terms of white beauty, it has described beauty *per se* in terms of the physical traits that white people are more likely to have." Therefore, as Taylor further suggests, in the course of attempting to attain attractiveness, "the perspective of a black woman... varies from the perceptions of... Jewish and Irish people" (17-20). This can be easily demonstrated in the forms in which the black female protagonists in Morrison's book are struggling in seeking to adhere to Western beauty ideals. *The Bluest Eye* reflects on the willingness of black African-Americans to abandon their own belief structure to begin to accept Eurocentric ideals such as materialism, capitalist prosperity and attractiveness and how all these expectations stay 'unrealistic,' harmful' and 'unnecessary' (Kohler 40). In the novel, the black identity is constantly devalued by the Eurocentric ideals portrayed by mainstream media.

The Blacks are perceived as uneducated, weak, and empty of emotions to have the wrong color for life's success; thus, as they want to follow Eurocentric ideals, it implies they do little because they are never the same. Pecola believes that gaining blue eyes, a symbol of white beauty, would make her friends, classmates, and teachers treat her better. The novel reflects this belief: "Why, look at the pretty-eyed Pecola. In front of those pretty eyes, we do not do poor stuff" (Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* 29). However, Pecola fails to understand that even with blue eyes, she would still be seen as dark, ugly,

and undesirable in the eyes of society. She fantasizes those blue eyes would change her life dynamics, believing that even if no one else noticed them, she would see them and finally find happiness. But this delusion reveals a deeper tragedy—her appearance alone cannot change her reality or the racist views that surround her. Despite her dream of transformation, Pecola continues to be a target of mockery and abuse, not just by white society but also within her own community. Her blackness, her vulnerability, and the trauma of being sexually abused by her father make her an easy victim. Morrison emphasizes Pecola's helplessness throughout the novel, showing how she is constantly at the mercy of those around her. She cannot defend herself against the bullying of her classmates or from Junior's false accusation that she harmed Geraldine's cat. Pecola remains fragile and defenceless throughout the story, while the racial and social hierarchies that oppress her are laid bare.

The dignity of Pecola and many other black protagonists is dismissed by culture. In agreement with Yancy (2005), who notes that culture is split along two race lines, one Black and one White, or two cultures, Black children do not overcome the omnipresent presence of the societal symbols of feminine attractiveness of the patriarchal culture, such as Shirley Temple. The inculcation of blackness in the minds of the black people as a "bad signifier" triggers Pecola's degradation and madness. More specifically, Pecola is situated in the gap between the humiliating black and white cultures that are unaccepted and isolated by all of them. Sincerely, the ideal of white attractiveness plays a crucial role in making Pecola and Claudia perceive that a black is hideous, and this interpretation of beauty will undoubtedly not be distinguished from the consequences of colonization. Pecola and Claudia have very different experiences

when it comes to their perception of beauty. Pecola, a young Black girl, is deeply preoccupied with her physical appearance, especially her eyes, while Claudia remains largely unconcerned with her own physical beauty. Pecola feels trapped in her appearance, believing that as long as she looks "hideous," she will always belong to those who judge her based on her ugliness. She spends hours staring into the mirror, searching for the source of her perceived ugliness—the same ugliness that leads her teachers and peers to ignore or mistreat her at school. Isolated and ostracized, she is the only student who sits alone at a double desk in her classroom.

Therefore, Pecola believes that if her eyes turned blue, her classmates and teachers would treat her better. She claims, "though, that it will take a long, long time to make anything as good as that happen... only a miracle will cure her, she will never realize her beauty." She can just know what there was to see other people's eyes (Morrison 39). The novel is divided into three sections—Autumn, Winter, and Summer—each marking the girl's journey through significant encounters during these periods. The story begins after the economic downturn in Lorain, Ohio, in the fall of 1941. During this time, the MacTeer family takes in Mr. Henry Washington, as well as Pecola Breedlove, a young girl struggling with poverty. Pecola's home life is marked by constant conflict, as her parents, Cholly and Pauline Breedlove, are locked in a cycle of bitter fights. He torches their house as a consequence of her father's intoxicated condition, this placing his family outdoors—Breedlove had burnt his house, gone upside down the head of his child, and all was outdoors as a result. Mrs. Breedlove stayed with the woman she worked for, Sammy, the boy, lived with another family, and Pecola was expected to stay with the MacTeers. Meanwhile, Cholly was in prison. The novel

presents three Black families in a clear social hierarchy, each portrayed with varying levels of status and stability. As Chikwenye Ogunyemi explains, at the top is Geraldine's family, which she describes as "a counterfeit of the idealized white family." Geraldine's family mirrors the middle-class aspirations of whiteness, reflecting values of order, discipline, and emotional restraint, but this portrayal highlights the artificiality of such an ideal in a Black family. Next are the MacTeers, who, while struggling financially, exhibit a more genuine sense of care and solidarity. They represent a working-class Black family that, despite their hardships, provides a stronger emotional foundation. At the bottom of this hierarchy are the Breedloves, described as dysfunctional and deeply affected by poverty and internalized self-hatred. Pecola's family, according to Ogunyemi, occupies the lowest social rung, reinforcing how their circumstances, compounded by societal and racial pressures, have fractured their ability to function. This hierarchy underscores the complex ways race, class, and social status intersect within the Black community (Ogunyemi 113).

The novel explains how these black protagonists uniquely react to the prevailing society, refuting easy simplistic social distinctions. The narrator lets us realize that Pecola's life is rough at home. The Breedloves are identified by the narrator as bad, black and ugly. Her parents were engaging in relentless combat, avoiding the involvement of their son. Pecola's child, Sammy, responds to that by running away from home. It is reported that Sammy "was known to have run away from home no fewer than twenty-seven times by the time he was fourteen." (Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* 43) Pecola remains at home, unlike Sammy. She is incapable of escaping from her loss of awareness. She later starts to believe that her parents would be good to her if she had

blue eyes, would value her appearance, and would not combat each other. Some time before, it had occurred to Pecola that if her eyes, the eyes that kept the pictures and understood the privileges, if those eyes were different... If she looked different, stunning, maybe Cholly would look different, and maybe Mrs. Breedlove would say, "Why, look at Pecola's pretty eyes." In sight of those pretty eyes, we do not do poor stuff.' She had been hoping endlessly for blue eyes. Pecola is reminded continually of her ugliness.

Also, at Mr. Yacobowski's shop, the owner behaves as though she was not there when she goes to get Mary Jane's sweets. She is taunted by boys at school. They are taunting her and shouting "Black emo. Emo dark. Sleepsnekked-yadadd. The Black Emo Black Emoyadd Sleeps Nekked. Emo dark. The dark e mo". After the experience with the people, when Pecola, Claudia and Frieda, and Maureen Peal were going home, Maureen Peal starts making fun of Pecola, and this vexes Claudia and she tries to punch Maureen but fails and hits Pecola. A light-skinned child, Maureen Peal, says, "I am cute!" And you are nasty! The Purple and the Horrific Emos. I am adorable! "That ". Even, Junior, the son of Geraldine, lures Pecola into his house with a cat and threatens her. "He blames it on Pecola when he destroys the cat and prompts his mother to shout at her, "Get out she said, her voice flat. You filthy little black slut. Get yourself out of my house' (Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* 66-92).

The narrator shows in a flashback that even Pecola's parents had a childhood full of struggles and tormenting encounters. Pauline, because of her deformed foot, felt like an outcast. This is clear as she notes that "She blamed her general feeling of separateness and indignity on her foot". She continues emulating white actors like Jean Harlow in

order not to experience the refusal. Cholly was rejected by his mother when he was a child. He was rescued and cared by his Aunty Jimmy, until she died.

During the funeral for Aunty Jimmy, he has sex with a local girl, Darlene. Two white men are kidnapped by them, pushing them to proceed as they watch. He goes to look for his father afterwards, who does not wish to have much to do with him. Pauline sees him and they get together. (Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* 111-147)

The storyteller returns to the moment Cholly comes home intoxicated and rapes her on the kitchen floor while Pecola was occupied cleaning dishes in the kitchen, not exactly whether he thought.

When Pauline returns home, she finds Pecola lying on the floor. She dismisses Pecola's claim that Cholly has abused her. Later, Cholly rapes Pecola again and flees, leaving her pregnant. In desperation, Pecola visits Soaphead Church, a fraudulent psychic and healer, hoping he can give her the blue eyes she desperately desires. He deceives her into believing her wish will be granted. Despite Claudia and Frieda's prayers, Pecola's baby dies. Pauline and Pecola eventually move to the outskirts of town, where Pecola is often seen talking to herself, lost in her own world. Morrison uses Pecola's tragic experience to illustrate the devastating psychological effects of racial prejudice. In contrast, Claudia, who is still young and not fully shaped by white societal ideals, has yet to internalize the desire for the "blue-eyed, yellow-haired, pink-skinned dolls" that represent beauty in a racist society (Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* 5).

At that point, what Claudia experiences is "unconscious hate, extending from white dolls to all white children" (Cheng 195). Black children begin with a safe, straight-forward hate of white supremacy. As a result of the hate, however, they get hurt (e.g., after breaking the doll away, Claudia gets scolded) and get the validation of the

message that whiteness is perfect and blackness is disgusting, they continue to search for shelter. "Love was the greatest hiding spot. Thus, from pristine sadism to manufactured hate to fraudulent passion, the conversion (Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* 16). The grown-up Claudia admits, "I learn to worship Shirley Temple even later, just as I continue to rejoice in cleanliness, understanding, even as I learn, without progress, that the transition is modification." The adult Claudia diagnoses the worship of white symbols (as well as cleanliness and rejection of the need of the body) by the black culture as a nuanced kind of self-hatred, but they transform hate into a fake affection to compensate. This silent transition will also be quickened by mass media, and the environment it produces and discriminatory messages are so pervasive that they are impossible to avoid. The white child star, Shirley Temple, who has the desired blue eyes, is portrayed by the ideal of appearance to which her peers adhere. Claudia revolts against Shirley Temple's tyranny and white appearance:

I despised Shirley. Not that she was adorable, but because she danced with Bojangles, who was a pal of mine, my uncle, my daddy, and who was meant to be soft-shoeing and chuckling with me. Instead, he was watching, sharing, offering one of those little white ladies, whose socks never fell under their shoes, a lovely dance thing. (Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* 19)

African Americans, however, are extremely sensitive to the messages transmitted by mainstream media that white appearance would ultimately control the lives of women. Things never work out so simple. Pecola would never transform into a disaster if these moral values, which act as weapons of ethnic injustice, were just imposed upon African Americans. External powers, such as prejudice and misogyny, are not to be said to be unimportant, but the ontological constructs and mythological modes of thinking

formed by blacks to describe and improve their conceptions of self and life have a more destructive impact on them.

Morrison points out sharply in *The Bluest Eye* that the worship of white culture by African-Americans, coupled with their hopelessness, like the ugliness of Pecola, is a condition of being both imposed upon and preferred by them. "This is why she is put in an "integrated" literary tradition by most critique of Morrison's works but does not associate her with the tradition that has marked much African-American literature, a tradition that "portrays racism as a definite evil (Eichelberger 59). To Morrison, they continue to internalize them and perceive the environment from the eyes of white society only when individuals want and embrace these white-defined ideals.

Before Pecola's shopping trip to Mr. Yacobowski's grocery store, several instances of her momentary disruption of the harmful link between how she sees herself and how others perceive her emerge. One such moment occurs when Pecola considers dandelions beautiful, despite most people viewing them as weeds. This suggests that beauty, in her view, is created by how something is seen, not merely by how it is typically judged. By this logic, even without blue eyes, Pecola could redefine herself as beautiful. However, as Madonne Miner notes, "the role of the specular beauty construction in mainstream American culture is that it grants either presence or absence" (93). In this system, one's social worth is determined by appearance, a dynamic that extends beyond simple judgments of beauty or ugliness and defines one's entire existence.

Pecola's experience at the grocery store symbolizes the internalization of white beauty ideals. When she goes to buy candy, she is confronted with "the complete loss of human recognition—the glazed separateness". Mr. Yacobowski, a fifty-two-year-old white immigrant storekeeper, is unable to see Pecola as a subject. He cannot truly look at her, and when he does, he sees only "that" . This encounter reinforces the dominance of white beauty standards. However, Pecola's reaction to Yacobowski is significant. Initially, she feels a sense of indignation as she leaves the store, a brief but powerful moment of self-recognition. Morrison writes, "Rage is stronger. There is a sensation like being in a rage. A presence and fact. A realization of value. It is a wonderful surge" . Yet, Pecola cannot sustain this feeling of righteous anger; it quickly fades, giving way to guilt. She internalizes the poor treatment she receives, believing it is somehow her fault. Pecola begins to accept that how others see her is more valid than how she perceives herself. She even starts to view the dandelions, which she once found beautiful, as ugly. In a symbolic act, Pecola seeks comfort in consuming the candy, which features the image of a blonde, blue-eyed little girl. By eating the candy, she metaphorically consumes the idealized version of white beauty. Morrison writes, "She consumes the candy, and its sweetness is good," as if consuming the candy is a way of absorbing the love and acceptance she craves from Mary Jane, the girl on the wrapper (*The Bluest Eye* 36-38).

The black characters of Pauline Breedlove, Geraldine, Maureen Peal, and Pecola strive to adhere to the enforced standard of femininity. The cultural symbols representing physical appearance are swallowed and marginalized: movies, billboards, magazines, novels, newspapers, window signage, dolls, and drinking cups (Gibson 20).

Pauline Breedlove, for example, through the films, knows about outward appearance. In Morrison's terms, "she was exposed to another physical attractiveness along with the concept of romantic love." Perhaps the most damaging thoughts in the evolution of human thinking. Both emerged from jealousy, prospered in fear, and ended in disillusionment (*The Bluest Eye* 95).

The black female protagonists thus resent their blackness in seeking to adhere to the standard of white femininity, which in turn contributes to self-hatred. They view themselves through the lens of white people and also have detrimental consequences on their own culture through their worship of white appearance. This is because, as Elanor Taylor notes, "the systemic valuation of individual forms along ethnic lines has become one of the cornerstones of the industrial West." (16) The most common category of racialized ranking portrays blackness as a condition to be hated, and this mentality is generalized by most tokens of this kind to include the physical attributes that are fundamental to black identity definition. For example, Geraldine represses her black features that are not "matched" with white femininity as she tries to get rid of the "funkiness". She even avoids Pecola when she sees her in her house as Pecola tends to reflect all the derogatory elements of her perceptions of black girls:

She stared at Pecola. She noticed the filthy ripped shirt, the plaits poking up on her head, the hair matted where the plaits had gone, the dusty shoes peeping out from among the inexpensive soles with the wad of gum, the soiled pants, one of which had walked down the shoe's foot. ...the little girl she had seen all her life. Hanging out of windows over mobile saloons, creeping over the porches of shotgun houses on the outskirts of town, sitting in bus stations carrying paper bags and apologizing to mothers who kept saying 'Shut up!' (Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* 71-72)

Geraldine draws a sharp distinction between being "colored" and being "black," shaped by her education and her embrace of Western norms. She consciously imparts these views to her son, reinforcing a hierarchy within the Black community based on behavior, appearance, and respectability. As she instructs him, "Colored people were neat and quiet; filthy and noisy niggers" (Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* 67). Geraldine's teaching reflects internalized racism, where she equates "colored" with civility and order, while associating "black" with filth and disorder. This harmful mindset underscores the divide within the Black community and reveals how systemic racism fosters self-hatred and division by promoting white standards of respectability as the ideal.

Maureen Peal, a light-skinned girl in kindergarten, frequently asserts her beauty in contrast to Pecola's supposed ugliness. Through this dynamic, Morrison constructs a hierarchy of skin tone, which highlights both similarity and difference in relation to idealized standards of beauty. Maureen's light complexion and more "acceptable" physical traits place her closer to the white ideal, positioning her above darker-skinned peers in the social order. Her treatment at school illustrates this preferential bias, as she is described as a:

High-yellow fantasy girl with long brown hair braided into two lynch ropes that hung down her back... She fascinated the whole school. When she was called by the teachers, they grinned encouragingly. In the halls, black boys did not trip her; white boys did not stone her; white girls did not suck their teeth while she was appointed to be their job partners; black girls stood aside when she needed to use the sink in the restrooms of the girls, and beneath shifting lids their eyes genuflected" (Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*, 47-48).

This passage demonstrates how Maureen's lighter skin and physical features grant her privileges that Pecola, and other darker-skinned girls, do not enjoy. She is treated with

admiration and deference by both teachers and students of all races. Black boys refrain from teasing her, and white boys don't show her the hostility they might toward other Black girls. Even white girls, typically less accepting of Black students, do not scorn her but instead tolerate her presence. Meanwhile, Black girls, who should be her peers, are awestruck, standing aside and allowing her to dominate spaces like the restroom sink. Their quiet reverence, conveyed through the metaphor of their "genuflected" eyes, illustrates their internalized belief in Maureen's superiority, shaped by society's colorism. Morrison masterfully uses this passage to critique the pervasive effects of colorism and how it skews perceptions of worth and beauty, even among Black children, reinforcing harmful divisions within the Black community.

Similarly, Pecola internalizes white ideals of supremacy, leading her to a life filled with self-hatred and eventual tragedy. Another source of this reinforcement comes from her own mother, Pauline Breedlove. Mrs. Breedlove, influenced by societal standards, passes down the idea of white dominance to her daughter. For Pauline, movies are the primary medium through which these white ideals are absorbed. She consumes these images from the silver screen and then projects those unrealistic standards onto her family, measuring them against the "meter of total perfection" (Matthews 188). Pauline eventually abandons her own family emotionally, finding solace in the perceived beauty and order of the white Fishers' household. When she speaks to Pecola and her family, her words are harsh, "like rotten apple bits," but when she addresses the Fisher's white daughter, her voice is sweet, "like honey". Her rejection of Pecola is solidified when, in front of the white girl, she intentionally ignores her own daughter, choosing instead to align with her white employers. Pauline's actions

illustrate how deeply she has internalized white standards, using them as a weapon against her own family. This form of oppression—where a Black mother rejects her child in favor of white ideals—shows the subtle but devastating impact of internalized racism. Pecola, having been mistreated by nearly everyone around her, yearns for blue eyes, believing that achieving white beauty will bring her love and acceptance. In this way, whiteness is upheld as the standard of superiority, and the ideal of white beauty becomes legitimized in Pecola's mind. Ultimately, Pecola conforms to the societal structure that values white appearance above all else.

## **2. Conceptualization of Beauty and Identity Based on White Dominance**

Toni Morrison explores the social effects of slavery's physical, mental, and moral desolation to shape the sense of self in her protagonists by personally witnessing slavery and white supremacy. In her novels, *Beloved* and *The Bluest Eye*, the failure of male and female protagonists to develop a sense of identity is related to the cultural trauma they undergo and that makes it difficult to shape a sense of self. In *Beloved*, Morrison's most influential detrimental influence on slavery reflects on how former slaves remain plagued by the dehumanization they suffer. Morrison's protagonists are only allowed to experience interactions regardless of their repressed social standing if they are given the right to do so by others who have control over them. If time moves past abolished segregation, in order to win recognition, the now 'free African-Americans must attain a social ideal of whiteness. Morrison's first book, *The Bluest Eye*, exposes the impact on African-Americans of white influence in culture and how this presence renders it impossible for the person to shape an identity. To organize these two novels and the relationships between the protagonists, their culture, and themselves, Morrison uses this

fact. Morrison reveals through *The Bluest Eye*, by the allowance or rejection of marriages, how colonialism, the deliberate dehumanization of African slaves, and the existence of whiteness in culture change the potential of her protagonists to shape their own sense of self-identity. By disabling the chance of establishing partnerships after gaining independence and generating psychological barriers African Americans must overcome in the future, the loneliness the slaves encounter echoes through future centuries.

Morrison explores the complex interplay between personality, the creation of the 'self,' and the profound impact of society and culture on identity in much of her work. Through her characters, she delves into how external forces shape individual and collective identities. As Ron Eyerman explains in *Cultural Trauma: Slavery and the Development of African American Identity*, "social trauma relates to a dramatic loss of identity and significance, a tear in the societal structure, involving a community of people that has developed a degree of continuity." Eyerman's emphasis on a "dramatic loss of identity" reflects how trauma affects not only individuals but also entire communities, disrupting the shared history and cultural values that define them. This insight is particularly relevant in the context of Morrison's novels, where characters frequently grapple with both personal and collective crises that influence their sense of self. In the specific case of African slaves, as Eyerman points out, they were bound together not only by shared experiences of oppression but also by the pervasive ethnic inequality of their climate and culture. This collective suffering fostered a communal identity rooted in both resistance and survival. In *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison vividly portrays this phenomenon through her characters, whose lives are shaped by the

lingering legacy of slavery. Eyerman notes that “the trauma in question is slavery, not only as an organization or even an event, but as a collective memory, a type of remembrance that formed a people's identity creation” (Eyerman 1-2). Here, Eyerman’s concept of slavery as a “collective memory” is crucial—it underscores how the memory of slavery, even for those not directly experiencing it, continues to shape the identities of future generations. In Morrison’s novel, this collective memory manifests in the internalized feelings of inferiority, self-hatred, and alienation that characters like Pecola Breedlove experience, revealing the deep scars left by a history of racial subjugation.

Morrison’s exploration of identity formation and cultural trauma can also be understood through the lens of Erik Erikson’s theory of psychosocial development, which further deepens our understanding of the challenges her characters face. While Eyerman emphasizes the collective memory of slavery and its impact on identity creation, Erikson’s theory highlights how the development of the self is an evolving process that begins in infancy and intensifies during adolescence. This intersection of personal and collective identity becomes particularly significant in the context of slavery, where individuals are deprived of the social and emotional resources necessary for psychosocial growth. As Erikson explains, adolescence is a crucial stage in which individuals reshape their past experiences into a coherent sense of self, a process heavily influenced by physical development and sexual maturation (392). However, for enslaved individuals, this development is stunted by the restrictive social and ethnic boundaries imposed upon them. The lack of agency in their relationships, coupled with the denial of mature adult connections, mirrors the cultural trauma Eyerman describes,

where the legacy of slavery disrupts not only collective identity but also personal psychosocial development.

In *The Bluest Eye*, Pecola's struggle for identity and her longing for blue eyes reflect this duality of trauma, where both personal and historical forces hinder her ability to develop a stable sense of self. Through this lens, Morrison's work highlights the profound impact of slavery on both collective memory and individual psychological growth, emphasizing how deeply cultural trauma permeates every level of identity formation. Part of Cholly's difficulties in establishing his own personality derives from a loss of ancestral history and an inability to advance throughout the early phases of the psychosocial philosophy of Erik Erikson. This theory comprises eight stages; each stage is characterized by a confrontation or crisis between the child and his or her setting. The person is "vulnerable and heading toward enhanced capacity during each of these conflicts; [each conflict is a moment to determine between success and decline]" (Vadeboncoeur 20). The first of the eight phases of Erikson is alluded to as Confidence Or Distrust. This stage is defined by the growth (or lack of growth) of a confidence in others and self, or a sense of childhood trust. During intimacy, Cholly does not feel much trust so he is unwilling to connect with his parents, and his grandma stays at an emotional distance even though she takes it on herself to rescue Cholly and raise him. Not only is the inability to advance past the first stage of growth to blame for the broken personality of Cholly, but Cholly is still troubled by the reality that he is not the namesake of his parent. When Cholly asks his grandmother why he is not called for his own parent, his grandmother replies:

He was not around when you were born. Your mom did not call anything for you. It was not nine days until she dumped you onto the junk bin. On the 9th day when I got you, I called you myself. You called my dead brother after him. Breedlove by Charles. A good guy. Am not no Samson never hits a decent finish (Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*133)

Accordingly, *The Bluest Eye* illustrates how the legacy of slavery continues to shape future generations through the pervasive influence of white culture. The novel's title itself highlights the power of whiteness, suggesting that both society as a whole and individuals are deeply affected by this presence. The word "eye" in the title is particularly significant, symbolizing the damage inflicted on individuals through the white gaze, especially in terms of appearance and societal acceptance. Morrison frequently underscores the importance of vision, using the term "eye" to evoke a double meaning, linking it to both sight and the self, or "I".

Cultural trauma is a recurring theme, woven into the narrative to explore how systemic trauma is transmitted across generations and impacts both individual and collective identities. Trauma manifests through various forms of expression and contributes to the reformation of social identities, as well as the reworking of collective memory. As Ron Eyerman points out, the way trauma affects individuals differs from its impact on society as a whole (1). This distinction is evident in the experiences of three central characters—Cholly Breedlove, Pauline Breedlove, and Pecola Breedlove—who not only struggle with their personal identities but also confront the overwhelming presence of whiteness in their culture and the pressure to conform to white societal ideals. Cholly Breedlove, one of the novel's male protagonists, is deeply affected by his disconnection from his ancestral history, a detachment that amplifies his inner turmoil. Abandoned by his father before birth and left by his mother just nine days

after he was born, Cholly is raised by his grandmother, who constantly reminds him that his survival is due to her. This fractured family history mirrors the broader cultural dislocation experienced by African Americans in the novel, reflecting the enduring effects of slavery and white domination on personal identity formation. Cholly's inability to reconcile with his past contributes to his internal conflict and, by extension, underscores the theme of how cultural trauma influences both the individual psyche and the societal structure.

Not only by the alienation of his birth parents, but even by the root of his name, Cholly's development of self-identity is delayed. Cholly is angry, because instead of being named after his father, he is named after a distant relative who passed away before he was born. In identity creation, the root of one's self is important. In the first chapter of his autobiography, Frederick Douglass addresses his struggle with the reality that he does not realize his true age: “And through puberty, a lack of knowledge about myself was a cause of unhappiness for me. White kids were able to say their ages. I could not say why I should be stripped of the same right” (17). As Cholly is unable to communicate with someone with whom he is associated, he loses any resemblance to a sense of self and his maturation is stunted, making it easy for him to internalize the racism of culture.

Furthermore, Cholly experiences dehumanization similar to Sethe's in *Beloved*, another of Toni Morrison's works. While Sethe is robbed of her natural life force by the brutality of slavery, Cholly's first encounter with a natural human experience—sexuality—is tainted by the intrusion of two white hunters. After Aunt Jimmy's funeral, Cholly and Darlene sneak off to a field where their innocent flirtations quickly evolve

into a romantic moment. However, this intimate experience is perverted and degraded by the presence of the hunters, who were unmistakably “white; he [Cholly] smelled it”. The hunters shone their flashlights on the pair as Cholly decided to get up and dress himself, and told her to finish. “He raised her dress up, lowered his trousers and panties with a cruelty born of utter helplessness” (Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* 147). Repeatedly, the white hunters refer to him as a 'coon' and order him to breed like crude animals with Darlene. The simplicity at which hunters need Cholly to begin intercourse with Darlene is reminiscent of the slave owners who pursued organized mating techniques with only 'breeding' in mind. This degrading and dehumanizing encounter generates in Cholly a contempt for women that is later reflected in the novel by his domestic violence towards his wife and the bullying of his baby.

One of the female characters deeply affected by the pressure of white cultural ideals in *The Bluest Eye* is Pauline Breedlove. Pauline is denied the simple connection of having a nickname among her peers, a form of social acceptance that she longs for. This lack of belonging leaves her reluctant to bond with others, hindering her ability to develop a strong sense of identity from a young age. Her intense anxiety over her appearance stems largely from her physical deformity: "Her overall sense of separateness and unworthiness she blamed on her foot" (Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* 111). This deformity becomes a symbol of the deeper insecurities she carries, further isolating her from both herself and her community.

Pauline internalizes the ideal of white beauty to such an extent that, until she achieves it, she sees herself as worthless. She frequently visits the movie theater, where

she is exposed to a new standard of attractiveness and the notion of romantic love, concepts foreign to her past experiences. Morrison suggests that these ideas, rooted in jealousy and insecurity, are some of the most harmful influences on human thought, eventually leading to disillusionment. For Pauline, this period marks her realization that beauty equates to goodness, a belief she adopts as part of the cult of white womanhood that dominated the 19th century. This ideology devalues Black women by presenting feminine virtues that are nearly impossible for them to attain due to the social and economic constraints of slavery. After her education in the cinema, Pauline could no longer look at a face without ranking it according to a "hierarchy of total attractiveness," a scale she fully absorbed from the movies (Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* 122).

Similarly, Pauline's daughter, Pecola Breedlove, is profoundly shaped by the same cultural standards. Throughout the novel, Pecola is treated as invisible or worthless by almost everyone around her, except for the MacTeers. Of all the characters, Pecola most deeply internalizes society's racism, believing that her life would improve if she had blue eyes—a result of the violence and abuse she endures from her father, mother, strangers, and other girls. Pecola's longing for blue eyes emerges from the same societal messages that influenced Pauline. Both mother and daughter are drawn to the idealized white beauty portrayed in films, which reflects a white middle-class standard of beauty and grace. Pecola's suffering intensifies when her father, Cholly, abuses her, leading to an unwanted pregnancy during her childhood. After losing the baby and enduring ongoing violence, Pecola descends into madness. In her mind, having blue eyes becomes the only way to heal her perceived ugliness and social isolation. At the novel's conclusion, Pecola starts speaking to an imaginary

friend—her twin—a tragic reflection of her fractured identity. Ironically, after being denied a sense of self and a voice to express her pain, Pecola finds not one but two voices in her madness. Her internalized racism and low self-esteem leave her unable to develop a stable sense of identity. According to Erikson's theory of psychosocial development, Pecola's inability to form meaningful relationships and connect with others prevents her from establishing a coherent self. In her isolation, she creates a second "identity," a desperate attempt to satisfy her need for human connection and recognition, which she has been denied throughout her life.

Morrison reveals, through her narrative, how the collective trauma experienced by a community can hinder the development of individual identity within that group. The cultural dominance of whiteness during this period imposed an unreachable standard of beauty and worth, which many African Americans felt compelled to pursue in order to gain societal recognition. This white ideal, rooted in external appearances and social approval, set an impossible benchmark. As African Americans compared themselves to this norm and inevitably failed to attain it, the resulting sense of inadequacy eroded their self-worth, leaving them disconnected from their own sense of identity. The pressure to conform to these ideals not only led to a profound sense of loss but also disrupted the ability to form authentic interpersonal relationships. Without these meaningful connections, the process of building a strong, stable sense of self becomes even more challenging. As Morrison shows, this cultural and emotional dislocation deepens the already existing identity crisis, compounding the feelings of alienation and self-doubt within the African American community. Ultimately, the

failure to navigate these external pressures and cultivate real human connections intensifies the struggle to achieve a coherent and fulfilling sense of identity.

### **3. Pauline's, Pecola's and Claudia's Projection of Black Beauty and Identity**

Pecola Breedlove's life is a series of rejections and humiliations, deeply affecting her self-perception and mental health. Pecola's desire for blue eyes epitomizes her yearning for acceptance and love in a society that devalues her blackness. Morrison writes, "It had occurred to Pecola some time ago that if her eyes, those eyes that held the pictures, and knew the sights—if those eyes of hers were different, that is to say, beautiful, she herself would be different" (*The Bluest Eye* 46). This belief is rooted in the dominant cultural narrative that equates blue eyes with beauty and social acceptance.

Judith Butler's theory of performativity helps to understand Pecola's plight. Butler argues that gender and identity are constituted through repeated social performances rather than inherent qualities. Pecola's repeated desire for blue eyes can be seen as a performative act driven by the internalized belief that whiteness is the standard of beauty and worth. Butler states, "Gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a stylized repetition of acts" (*Gender Trouble* 179). Pecola's longing for blue eyes represents her attempt to align herself with these repeated societal ideals, though tragically, it leads to her psychological disintegration.

Pecola's tragic story is a vivid illustration of the impact of internalized racism. She believes that obtaining blue eyes will change her reality and make her life better, reflecting how deeply she has internalized the cultural values that deem blackness inferior. Morrison poignantly captures this when Pecola thinks, "If she looked different,

beautiful, maybe Cholly would be different, and Mrs. Breedlove too. Maybe they'd say, "Why look at pretty-eyed Pecola. We mustn't do bad things in front of those pretty eyes" (*The Bluest Eye* 46). This quote underscores the extent to which Pecola's identity and sense of self-worth are shaped by the dominant white beauty standards.

Pauline Breedlove, Pecola's mother, also internalizes the white beauty standards, which profoundly affects her relationship with herself and her family. Pauline's sense of beauty and self-worth is heavily influenced by the movies she watches, which predominantly feature white actresses. Morrison writes, "She was never able...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" (*The Bluest Eye* 95). This internalization leads Pauline to view herself and her family through a lens that devalues their blackness.

Pauline's longing to emulate the white women she sees in movies reveals her desire to conform to the societal ideals of beauty and worth. She neglects her own family in favor of her white employers, finding solace in the cleanliness and order of their household, which she associates with whiteness. Morrison describes this dichotomy: "Her voice was like honey when she spoke to the little white girl, but when she turned her attention to Pecola, it was sharp and bitter, like broken glass" (*The Bluest Eye* 78). This quote illustrates how Pauline's internalization of white beauty standards leads her to reject her own daughter, whom she perceives as embodying the blackness she has come to despise.

Judith Butler's concept of performativity provides a powerful framework for analyzing Pauline Breedlove's behavior in *The Bluest Eye*. Butler's theory suggests that

identities, including gender and racial identities, are not inherent or stable; rather, they are continuously produced and reinforced through repeated performances of societal norms and expectations. Pauline's adoption of white beauty standards and rejection of her own cultural identity can be understood as a performative act in response to a society that idealizes whiteness. Butler's famous assertion that "there is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results" (*Gender Trouble*, 25) extends beyond gender to all facets of identity. In Pauline's case, her internalization of white beauty standards and her subsequent rejection of her Black identity is a repeated performance, a response to societal pressure that privileges white femininity. This performance is an effort to gain social acceptance and affirm her self-worth, despite the racial discrimination and devaluation she faces. Pauline's behavior, particularly her obsession with the cleanliness and perfection of the white family she works for, reflects her attempt to align herself with the values of a society that deems whiteness superior. This act of performing whiteness is both a survival mechanism and a tragic betrayal of her own identity. Butler's theory thus helps to explain how Pauline, much like Pecola, is trapped in a cycle of performative actions aimed at embodying an unattainable ideal, reinforcing her alienation from her own cultural heritage and contributing to the overall theme of internalized racism in the novel.

Pauline's internalization of white beauty standards also leads to a disconnection from her own cultural identity and her family. Her self-worth becomes dependent on her ability to conform to the white standards she sees in movies, leading to a neglect of her own blackness and the rejection of her family. This disconnection is poignantly

depicted when Morrison writes, "Money became the focus of all their discussions, hers for clothes and his for drink" (*The Bluest Eye* 118). Pauline's obsession with materialistic symbols of white beauty standards causes her to lose touch with her cultural roots and the meaningful connections with her family.

Nonetheless, Pecola Breedlove, passes through several tough situations throughout her life that established for her an inevitable sense of rejection. When her father decides to destroy the building, she first experiences abandonment and has been put to live with the MacTeer's family for some time. Moreover, as Pecola goes to visit her mother at Fisher's place, she mistakenly drops the blueberry on the clean floor of the kitchen:

Mad idiot . . . My floor, disaster, mess, mess, Look what you are— Yeah, jobs. Get on back. Get on out. Now that it is . . . Mad, crazy . . . My floor, my floor—my floor. My floor.' Her terms were hotter and deeper than those of the smoking berries, and in dread we backed off. "Her mother proceeds to threaten her in a rather dramatic scene, soothing the little daughter of The Fisher: "Hush, kid, hush. Here, come. Come. Oh God, look at that dress of yours. Do not weep any more. Polly's trying to change things' (Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* 109).

In comparison, Pecola is forced out of Mrs. Geraldine's house for the third time and she is oppressed by the shopkeeper, students and school teachers. She is not only ignored by her kin, but also by culture as a whole. Pecola seems to be floating because she does not find a position to welcome her. She feels that things are not going to get better as long as she remains hideous. As a black girl, she lacks sight of getting a beautiful life. She claims that the explanation for her misery is her belonging to the black group. Pecola is starting to experience some odd ideas. When she has blue eyes, she continues to picture her childhood. Her parents may be behaving differently," they

might claim, "Why, look at the pretty-eyed Pecola. In front of those pretty eyes, we do not do poor stuff (46).

In *Ain't I a Woman: Black People and Feminism*, bell hooks claims that "men are driven to channel angry violence in patriarchal culture in the direction of those without power-women and children" (145). This misplaced ire can be seen in Cholly Breedlove's reflections. Morrison states in a 1978 interview that Cholly "might love Pecola in the worst of all good respects, because he does not do this and he cannot do it. He does not do it naturally, healthily, and then it might end up in rap" . A product of long years of hardship and quest for selfhood, this intriguing character of Cholly is. Morrison discusses his divisive nature through lengthy portions of her book. In a nuanced scene where the reader feels the urge to dislike Cholly, the latter dares to sexually assault his own daughter, but he still does not experience the rage. One of the most debatable concepts in the novel is this queer affection that Cholly felt for his daughter. She gets raped by her own father when Pecola is seeking to find an answer to her doomed reality. Her mother does not trust her when she tells her, and barely beats her. She is always searching for a way out, considering the heavy weight of the issues she has. She is keen on finding a set of pretty blue eyes. She desperately prays, every night, to get them. She is mindful that in order to come true, her dream needs a miracle. She remains patient, however, and never lacks faith.

Pecola pushes into madness. Her decision to doubt existence is evidence of the massive devastation of which her character is subjected to. Pecola's narrative highlights the effect of family connections and convictions of culture on the search for human identification. Pecola, as a girl, is ultimately impacted by her family. On her mentality

and the way she is handled, she shaped her opinion regarding herself and others. She is abused by both her family and culture, mentally, socially and culturally. In order to make her wish happen, Pecola heads to Soaphead Chapel. In Lorain's African American culture, he is a student, consultant and translator of dreams. Elihue Whitcomb is his first name. In the book, he is described as a light-skinned western Indian man who had a rather strange attitude towards people and was proud of his mixed blood and felt superior to people of color. He is another illustration of how whiteness is preferred.

Appearing at the door of Soaphead, Pecola requests him to offer her blue eyes. Although by labeling her as "pitifully unattractive," he measures her physical appearance. He feels compassion for her, and he just wishes to support her, his love for whiteness and disdain for all other races make her wish very rational and understandable. A slice of beef is taken to Soaphead and poison is sprinkled on it. He advises Pecola to give it to the puppy, and her dream will come true if it responds. He sympathizes with Pecola in a rather confusing scene, but does not hesitate to brutally destroy the dog of his landlady, whom he hates. In spite of her the puppy sadly dies. She becomes angry and runs away from home.

Pecola ultimately gets her wish—she gains her blue eyes, but at the cost of her sanity. Unable to function or understand the world around her like a rational person, she retreats into delusion. Although she believed blue eyes would allow her to be accepted by society, they only deepen her isolation. Her imaginary friend becomes the only "person" she can communicate with, the only one who acknowledges her blue eyes. However, this imaginary companion provides no protection from her painful memories. Morrison reveals that Pecola's insecurities never truly disappear; they remain buried in

her subconscious. Each time she recalls the trauma inflicted by her father, she seeks reassurance from her imaginary friend about the brightness of her blue eyes, becoming enraged when this validation fails to erase her pain.

As a young Black girl who attains the coveted blue eyes, Pecola's journey in *The Bluest Eye* reflects the deeper complexities of identity and self-worth in a racially oppressive society. Pecola struggles to forge her own identity, caught between her internalized belief in the superiority of whiteness and her inability to embrace her African American heritage. Initially, she rejects her Blackness, viewing it as a barrier to the acceptance and validation she craves. She believes that possessing blue eyes—symbolic of white beauty—will transform her world, making her visible and worthy of love. However, even after she believes she has acquired these blue eyes, Pecola's expectations are shattered. Instead of receiving the affection and recognition she longs for, she remains invisible, ignored by those around her. The absence of external validation, as highlighted in her conversation with her imaginary friend, reinforces her isolation: "And no one said anything about it, just no one?... I said, is that not funny? Yeah. Yes. The only person that shows me how beautiful they are is you. Yeah. Yes. You are a true buddy of ours" (Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* 195-196). This quote illustrates the tragic irony of Pecola's situation—despite achieving what she thought would make her lovable, the external world continues to dismiss her existence. Her delusion and the fact that only her imaginary friend acknowledges her supposed beauty signify the futility of her struggle. Morrison uses Pecola's experience to critique societal standards of beauty and the destructive effects of internalizing these ideals. Pecola's inability to gain recognition from others emphasizes that her worth was never tied to her appearance

but rather to the oppressive racial and cultural forces that shaped her self-perception from the start.

While Pecola is undeniably the heroine, Morrison makes the deliberate choice to have Claudia serve as the narrator. This decision is crucial in shaping the reader's perception of Pecola. By having Claudia tell the story, Morrison creates a space for the reader to extend greater compassion toward Pecola. If Pecola herself were to narrate her own tragic experiences, her story might be too overwhelming, too immersed in trauma, for her to be seen as anything but a victim. Claudia's narration allows Pecola to remain, in some sense, a figure who endures—a survivor—rather than one who is completely consumed by her suffering. This survivorhood is central to the novel's themes, which explore the intersections of race, identity, and survival in a society that devalues Blackness. The novel's closing passages also mark Claudia's subtle rebellion against the societal structures that have contributed to Pecola's downfall. In reflecting on Pecola's fate, Claudia indicts not only their immediate community but the broader civilization that has allowed Pecola's destruction. She recognizes that Pecola's pain has been instrumentalized by society: "That was the fault of the world, the ground, our neighborhood... This soil is poor for flowers of many kinds. It will not cultivate certain plants, it will not grow certain fruit..." (Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* 206) In this metaphor of the soil and flowers, Morrison uses natural imagery to convey the deep-seated social and racial issues that Pecola faces. The "poor soil" that refuses to nurture certain plants symbolizes a society that refuses to nourish and care for individuals like Pecola—those who do not conform to its rigid ideals of beauty and worth.

Claudia's reflection is a powerful critique of how society, particularly Black communities in the novel, has absorbed and perpetuated white standards of beauty, using Pecola as a scapegoat. Pecola's self-hatred, which manifests in her longing for blue eyes, is a direct result of this societal failure. As Claudia notes, the community has "acquiesced" to these destructive ideals, allowing the land, or society, to "kill by its own free will." By turning Pecola into a symbol of their own inadequacies, they absolve themselves of responsibility for her suffering. Yet Claudia recognizes that this collective failure is tragically irreversible: "It is way, far far too late." The damage has been done, and Pecola's fate is sealed, not by her own actions but by the larger societal forces at play.

Claudia's awareness can be understood as a form of decolonizing her mind from the dominance of white cultural standards and the colonial inequalities imposed on Black people. She liberates herself from the oppressive expectations that society places on Black individuals to conform to white ideals. As Grewal notes, "Individuals collude in their own tyranny by internalizing the ideals of the prevailing society in the face of great material inconsistencies" (21). In *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison uses characters like Pecola and Claudia to represent two different responses to societal pressures. Pecola succumbs to the internalized racism, losing her sense of self, while Claudia resists and seeks to "create" or "construct" her own identity, free from white cultural norms. Morrison is addressing the broader idea that Black women, particularly those engaged in creative work (whether literal artists, writers, or individuals forging their own paths), face the danger of losing themselves if they adopt the oppressive standards of their environment. By calling attention to the "Black female artist," Morrison is emphasizing

the need for these individuals to create their own narrative and identity, rather than being shaped by external forces. In this sense, the term "artist" is a metaphor for any Black woman who is actively engaged in the process of self-creation and self-definition.

All in all, the internalization of white beauty standards by both Pecola and Pauline results in a fractured sense of self and deep psychological trauma. Pecola's quest for blue eyes symbolizes her desperate attempt to escape the reality of her perceived ugliness and gain social acceptance. However, this quest leads to her mental breakdown, as she ultimately fails to attain the unattainable ideal. Morrison writes, "The damage done was total. She spent her days, her tendrils, sap-green days, walking up and down, up and down, her head jerking to the beat of a drummer so distant only she could hear" (Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* 204). This imagery of Pecola's madness underscores the devastating impact of her internalized self-hatred.

#### **4. Idealization of Beauty in *Sula***

This section of the thesis attempts to address why Sula, as a social nonconformist and sexual dissident, ultimately becomes an immoral avatar, a helpless witch-hunt survivor, and finally, a scapegoat for her community's degradation and misfortunes. To promote this crucial mission, this section first applies the genealogy of the body as the bearer of "enjoyment and lust" as developed by Michel Foucault in *Abnormal*. Foucault's ideas help illustrate how Christian people in the culture of *Sula* view her deviance as immoral, regarding it as a threat to their social order. However, Sula's ostracism cannot merely be reduced to moral nonconformity or sexual dissidence. It is deeply intertwined with the racial and gender dynamics of her community, where white beauty standards—imposed through colonialism, slavery, and segregation—permeate black identities.

Sula's inability and refusal to conform to these ideals serve as a further indictment of her character in the eyes of her community, making her not only an outsider but also a perceived embodiment of disorder and ugliness. This section suggests that the community's scapegoating of Sula can be understood as a collective response to their internalized inferiority and the racialized beauty hierarchies that have infiltrated their consciousness. Sula's rejection of these standards becomes a radical act of defiance, yet one that the community interprets as a direct challenge to their sense of self and social cohesion. Sula's body, especially marked by her dark skin and distinctive birthmark, thus becomes a battleground for these racial, gendered, and aesthetic anxieties, symbolizing both the threat she poses to the community's moral order and its internalized desire for conformity to white standards of beauty.

Set in the Bottom, a black community in Ohio, *Sula* spans several decades, chronicling the shifting dynamics of this community and, significantly, its relationship to beauty, gender, and racial identity. Central to the novel is the friendship between Sula Peace and Nel Wright, two black women whose identities are profoundly shaped by the traumas they experience, their relationships with each other, and the larger socio-cultural forces at play in their environment. The novel opens by revealing the mythic history of the Bottom, which is marked by racism and exploitation. However, an often-overlooked element is how this history also embeds ideals of beauty and desirability into the community's collective memory—ideals which are modeled after white standards and upheld through social norms. From the beginning, Nel and Sula navigate not just the racial violence directed at black bodies but also the insidious beauty

standards that diminish black women's value if they do not conform to white physical ideals.

White beauty standards deeply influence Nel's relationship with her mother and her initial formation of identity. Early in the novel, we see Nel's mother, Helene, actively enforcing these standards on her daughter, particularly in the way she polices Nel's appearance. Helene's obsession with maintaining "respectability" through a close adherence to white beauty norms is evident in her demand that Nel pull on her nose to make it appear straighter and more refined, a feature commonly associated with whiteness. This act symbolizes not only Helene's desire for Nel to be accepted in a racist society but also a deeply ingrained belief that whiteness is inherently more beautiful, more acceptable, and more human. By encouraging Nel to alter her appearance, Helene transmits to her daughter the message that her natural black features are inherently flawed and must be subdued. This internalization of white beauty standards begins to erode Nel's sense of self-worth, creating a fracture in her identity that is rooted in her physical appearance and her desire for validation through conformity.

Nel's early attempts to meet these standards—her efforts to smooth her nose and "fit" into an idealized image of beauty—reflect the broader impact of racial beauty hierarchies on black women. White beauty standards are a form of cultural violence, imposing a Eurocentric ideal on black bodies that strips them of their individuality and intrinsic value. Nel's struggle to align her body with these standards is indicative of the pressures faced by black women in a society that not only devalues them but actively seeks to reshape their identities to fit the contours of white desirability. Morrison

emphasizes this point by juxtaposing Nel's relationship to her appearance before and after she meets Sula. Once Sula enters Nel's life, Nel begins to reject the white beauty standards imposed on her. Sula's friendship acts as a liberating force, allowing Nel to see herself through a different lens—one not defined by the oppressive ideals of whiteness but by the acceptance of her natural black features. Morrison writes that after meeting Sula, Nel "stopped trying to straighten her nose" (*Sula* 24). This simple yet profound shift marks the beginning of Nel's journey toward self-acceptance. Sula's presence in Nel's life offers a space where Nel can resist the internalized racism passed down by her mother, and, instead, embrace her blackness as a source of beauty and power. In this way, the friendship between Sula and Nel serves as a form of resistance against the hegemonic norms of white beauty that seek to suppress their identities.

While Sula helps Nel reject these oppressive standards, Sula herself also defies the beauty norms of her community in more radical ways. Sula's dark skin, her distinctive birthmark, and her refusal to conform to traditional notions of femininity place her in direct opposition to the aesthetic expectations of both black and white society. Morrison gives Sula a striking physical marker—a rose-shaped birthmark over her eye—which becomes a symbol of her difference. This birthmark, while not necessarily a sign of ugliness, is treated as such by the community, which projects onto Sula all of its anxieties about beauty, race, and morality. The community's perception of Sula's birthmark changes over time: it is alternately seen as a "snake," "tadpole," and even "Hannah's ashes" (*Sula* 114). These shifting interpretations reflect the fluidity of the community's moral judgments and its deep-seated discomfort with anything that challenges its social and aesthetic norms.

Sula's birthmark, as an unconventional feature that disrupts traditional beauty standards, symbolizes her defiance of the rigid structures that attempt to control black women's bodies. The fact that her appearance is treated as monstrous by her community underscores how deeply the Bottom has internalized the white gaze. Sula's refusal to conform to these aesthetic expectations not only alienates her from her peers but also casts her as a dangerous figure. The community views her physical difference as a marker of moral deviance, as if her failure to conform to beauty norms is reflective of a broader refusal to adhere to societal norms of behavior. This conflation of physical appearance and moral judgment reveals the extent to which white beauty standards have infiltrated the consciousness of the Bottom's black residents, influencing not only how they see themselves but also how they judge others.

Moreover, Sula's sexual independence and rejection of conventional femininity further align her with masculine traits in a society that strictly enforces gender roles, particularly through the lens of white patriarchal values. In many ways, Sula embodies what Judith Butler would describe as the "performativity" of gender, challenging and subverting the norms that prescribe how women—especially black women—should behave. By refusing to marry, bear children, or settle into the domestic roles expected of women, Sula disrupts the community's understanding of gender, destabilizing the social order in much the same way that her physical appearance destabilizes aesthetic norms. Morrison writes, "Sula was distinctly different. She did not belong to anyone. No one loved her, and she loved no one" (*Sula* 119). This passage speaks to Sula's radical autonomy, a self-fashioned identity that resists the categories imposed by both white and black patriarchal systems.

The reaction of the community to Sula's sexual autonomy and her rejection of both white beauty standards and traditional femininity is telling. Sula is cast not only as a deviant but as a kind of witch—someone who must be symbolically exorcised from the community to maintain social order. This witch-hunt mentality reflects the deep-seated need within the Bottom to police the boundaries of acceptable black womanhood, a need that is shaped by both racial and gender expectations rooted in white supremacy. By refusing to conform to these standards, Sula becomes the scapegoat for the community's misfortunes, as her difference—both physical and behavioral—is interpreted as a source of disorder. Morrison's description of the town's collective paranoia as they associate Sula with bad weather, failed crops, and even death illustrates how her refusal to embody white beauty standards becomes a convenient explanation for the community's hardships. This symbolic execution of Sula as a "witch" is profoundly gendered and racialized. The community's desire to expel her from their ranks mirrors historical patterns of scapegoating women who refuse to conform to societal expectations, particularly women of color who defy both racial and gender hierarchies. Sula's body, marked as "ugly" and "different," becomes a site onto which the community projects its fears of instability and chaos. In this sense, white beauty standards are not merely aesthetic preferences but tools of social control that regulate the behavior and identities of black women. Sula's rejection of these standards—and her embrace of her own bodily and sexual autonomy—poses a threat to the community's fragile sense of order, leading to her symbolic sacrifice.

Nel, on the other hand, initially seeks validation through adherence to the community's expectations of femininity and beauty. Her marriage to Jude and her role

as a mother are emblematic of her desire to be accepted within the confines of her society, but this pursuit comes at the cost of her own identity. Jude's betrayal and Nel's subsequent isolation reveal the hollowness of the social roles she has embraced. Nel's eventual realization that her longing was not for Jude but for Sula points to the profound connection between the two women—a connection that transcends societal norms and offers a glimpse of an alternative form of identity formation, one based on mutual recognition rather than external validation. In Sula's eyes, Nel is beautiful and sufficient as she is, without the need for the approval of the community or the adherence to white beauty ideals.

Morrison uses the relationship between Nel and Sula to explore the ways in which white beauty standards and gender norms constrain black women's identities. While Nel begins the novel by internalizing these oppressive ideals, Sula offers her a path toward self-acceptance and liberation. However, the novel ultimately shows that the cost of defying these norms is high. Sula's rejection of conventional beauty and femininity results in her complete ostracism from the community, and even Nel, who benefits from Sula's defiance, initially struggles to break free from the societal expectations that have been ingrained in her since childhood.

On the whole, the racialized beauty standards present in *Sula* play a central role in the identity formation of the female characters, particularly in how they navigate their relationships with the community and with each other. White beauty standards, imposed both subtly and overtly, act as a force of oppression that black women must confront in order to define themselves. Sula's radical rejection of these standards, along with her refusal to conform to traditional gender roles, positions her as both a liberator and a

pariah. While her defiance offers Nel a vision of self-acceptance, it also results in Sula's symbolic execution as a witch—an outsider who threatens the community's fragile social order. Through this complex exploration, Morrison critiques the ways in which racialized beauty and gender norms serve to control and constrain black women's identities, while also offering a vision of resistance, however painful and costly that resistance may be.

### **5. Pecola Breedlove and Sula Peace at the Intersection of Trauma**

In the two first novels by Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* and *Sula*, the recent academic and scholarly research has examined the impact of oppression and sexism on the black female identity. It uses the philosophy of Black feminism, which appears to analyze multiple contexts and situations implicated in the dehumanization and degradation of African-American people. Thus, researching and examining the novels of Toni Morrison from a progressive Black viewpoint offers insight into the different life experiences and the life of the black person in an oppressive and patriarchal culture. It also clarifies the most significant variables shaping the development of the identification of black women. In twentieth-century culture, *The Bluest Eye* and *Sula* reflect the plight of the African-American woman and the prejudices that bind the identity, rights and choices of black people. Morrison speaks about the suffering of black people to expose to all cultural and religious communities around the world the real aspects of African American women's lives. Morrison discusses the African-American experience in various ways through her first two novels. The latter's characters reflect entirely separate instances of the black female life journey.

*The Bluest Eye* reveals the influence of the white beauty ideals' governing portrait, which is an intensely racial look that evaluates the physical attractiveness of the black female and demeans her black beauty by contrasting it to the white one. The Black feminist writer leads the events of the novel to explain the dehumanizing aftermath of the black female identity of those judgement and assumptions. A little girl's tale is told in an oppressive culture as well as a discriminating one to represent one of the bitter facets of becoming neither white nor male in that period. A tale of a teenage African-American girl during the early 1940s is created by the Bluest Eye. It analyzes the disastrous impact on Africans of implementing white middle-class standards of American elegance. In *The Bluest Eye*, the protagonists loathe their own skin colour and feel embarrassed of their identity and history, where the protagonist story, Pecola Breedlove, is obviously stressed. She is actively seeking to put herself out of the pit of blackness in her path of looking for belonging and her assumption that blackness means ugliness was shaped by American society.

The novel reveals the trauma of the soul of Pecola. She yearns to be cherished and welcomed by the white people who reject her race and minimize it. In addition to the oppressive culture in which she resides, she is the daughter of a violent, alcoholic father and a matriarchal mother. She is beaten; physically exploited and cruelly handled by Pecola's family whilst witnessing deformed affection and hollow relationships play an important role in rendering her fight more complicated. The expected parental emotional help for her is not offered by either her mother or her father. She is a little black girl standing alone, met by the white lord and her own black culture with a great deal of hate and marginalization. Pecola is pushed deeper and deeper into her dream

universe, where another persona is personified, seeing herself with a dazzling blue eye. She loses her mind when the societal conventions made around her are no longer willing to face her. She tries to represent the identity of the whites whom she finds her only refuge from.

She is thus unwilling to achieve her individuality, which is to be cherished and embraced, driving her crazy. In the study of *The Bluest Eye*, the influential debate is the failure of personality owing to self-hatred as a consequence of the unhealthy world charged with bigotry and hegemony. The loss of Pecola represents the failure of the entire group to recognize and tolerate what is distinct from them. She has never felt valued or cherished, which inevitably causes her to disregard self-esteem. It is unbearable for a little girl to avoid rejection by her society. Pecola leaves her everyday life and tries to create her own dream universe where she is gorgeous and blue eyed because of the missing affection, atmosphere and the awful expression she sees in people's eyes every day.

In *Sula*, Toni Morrison intricately weaves the struggle for identity with the oppressive forces of hegemony, racism, and societal beauty standards. The relationship between Black and white communities in the novel imposes hardships on African Americans, reinforcing patriarchal structures that push Black women into roles that neither represent their true selves nor their desires. Beauty, as defined by white societal norms, becomes a key mechanism through which Black women are alienated from their own identities. These external standards, favoring whiteness and Eurocentric features, force Black women into a space where they cannot see themselves reflected in the culture around them, creating a dissonance between who they are and who they are

expected to be. This is particularly evident in Sula's rejection of these beauty norms. Raised in a household led by her grandmother Eva, Sula defies the community's rigid expectations of femininity and beauty, embracing her Blackness and her appearance without apology. She distances herself from the belief that "Black" is synonymous with "ugly," a sentiment internalized by many in her community. In her youth, Sula's unconventional beauty is described as "inexplicable and imprecise," a beauty that defies the very standards set by her society (Morrison, *Sula* 121). Her refusal to submit to these external pressures isolates her from the women around her, who see her as a threat to the established order.

Sula's defiance of the beauty norms that govern her community is central to her character. While many women in the Bottom are trapped by the oppressive expectation that they must strive for whiteness to be seen as beautiful or valuable, Sula openly rejects this. Her beauty is described in terms that resist categorization, as her community struggles to place her within the narrow confines of what is considered attractive: "Nobody, but nobody, could remember when exactly Sula grew to be a woman, nor even the girl she was" (Morrison, *Sula* 125). This ambiguity in Sula's physicality speaks to her larger rebellion against the constraints of race, gender, and beauty. She refuses to let her identity be defined by her community's internalized racism or the societal pressures that elevate whiteness as the standard of beauty. However, Sula's radical independence and her refusal to conform also lead to her isolation. As she distances herself from the ideals of beauty and behavior that dominate her community, she becomes a pariah. The women of the Bottom see her refusal to adhere to these norms as a direct threat to their own sense of self and security. They have been taught that their

worth lies in their ability to align themselves with the expectations placed upon them— expectations that value "white" features, submissiveness, and conformity. Sula, on the other hand, embraces her individuality and autonomy, unafraid to love herself on her own terms. As a result, she disconnects herself from all that could provide her with community or belonging: "The narrower their lives, the wider their hips, those women without men. She could not hold them in, or see them" (Morrison, *Sula* 143). In rejecting the imposed standards of beauty and behavior, Sula becomes increasingly detached from the social structures that could have offered her solace.

This rejection of traditional beauty and the consequences that follow reflect Morrison's critique of the destructive power of societal standards on Black women's identities. The beauty parameters imposed on Sula's community do not allow women to celebrate their Blackness, their individuality, or their own definitions of beauty. Instead, these women are forced to internalize ideals that do not represent them, causing them to feel inadequate and disconnected from their sense of self. Sula's defiance of these parameters and her insistence on living life according to her own terms make her both a figure of empowerment and tragedy. By the end of the novel, as she faces death, Sula confesses, "I sure did live in this world," but also acknowledges that she could not find inner peace or a stable sense of self, saying, "I never meant anything" (Morrison, *Sula* 174). Her tragic end reflects the heavy cost of resisting societal beauty norms while seeking to forge an identity outside the confines of community expectations. The novel demonstrates how the societal beauty standards rooted in whiteness hinder Black women's ability to form coherent identities. By setting Sula's defiance against the backdrop of a community struggling with internalized racism, Morrison critiques the

cultural forces that strip Black women of their autonomy and self-worth, leaving them either in submission or isolated in their resistance. Sula's character ultimately embodies both the power and the danger of rejecting these beauty norms, as she seeks freedom at the cost of belonging.

We might quickly infer by reading *The Bluest Eye* and *Sula* that societal and cultural prejudices undermine and intersect with the path of black people to their selfhood. The positions and relationships of women in their racist patriarchal culture are still dictated by bigotry and sexism. This double pressure renders shaping their identity challenging for them. Morrison reveals by the conclusion of both novels that black women's bitter truth will never make them be themselves, whether they want to fight and contest it like Sula or mingle in it and passively pursue it like Pecola. *The Bluest Eye* and *Sula*, like anti-racist novels, is a black feminist author's call to protest against the mainstream society that caused all black female characters fail to establish their personal identities. Like several other feminist black authors, Morrison used her gift as a writer to advocate for her race and gender. She wants to communicate with the entire world the long past of African Americans' struggle. She was involved in discussing the issues of her society and her own people.

## **6. Conceptualization of Black Beauty in *Beloved***

In *Beloved*, Toni Morrison offers a searing exploration of how the traumatic legacy of slavery, intertwined with white beauty standards, profoundly disrupts the identity formation of Black women. The novel delves into the psychological and physical scars left by slavery and the ways in which white standards of beauty and worth reinforce the oppression of Black people, particularly women. Through characters like Sethe,

Denver, Baby Suggs, and even Beloved herself, Morrison reveals how these standards obstruct Black women's ability to develop a stable sense of self, contributing to their fractured identities and the ongoing pain they endure.

Sethe, the protagonist, is a woman whose identity has been irrevocably shaped by slavery. Her body and mind are marked by the violence she has endured, and the trauma she carries manifests not only in her memories but also in the way she views herself and her children. In a society dominated by white beauty ideals—where pale skin, straight hair, and delicate features are synonymous with worth and virtue—Sethe struggles to see herself as beautiful or worthy. Her primary concern is to protect her children from the horrors of slavery, but in doing so, she also internalizes the broader societal belief that Black bodies are dehumanized, commodified, and unworthy of protection. The clearest example of this is Sethe's act of infanticide—killing her daughter, Beloved, to spare her from a life of slavery. This act, driven by both love and desperation, also reflects the internalized devaluation of Black lives in a society that prizes whiteness. Sethe's decision to kill her daughter rather than see her subjected to the horrors of enslavement reveals the extent to which her identity as a mother has been shaped by trauma. In this context, Sethe's motherhood is a performative act of protection, and in her mind, the only way to save Beloved is to take her life. Morrison writes, "She just flew. Collected every bit of life she had made, all the parts of her that were precious and fine and beautiful, and carried, pushed, dragged them through the veil" (Morrison, *Beloved* 179). In this moment, Sethe attempts to reclaim her daughter's beauty and innocence, aspects of herself and her children that slavery sought to strip

away. Yet, this tragic act speaks to the broader tension in Sethe's life—her inability to protect herself and her children from a world that devalues their very existence.

The presence of Beloved as a ghostly figure who returns to Sethe's life highlights the ongoing grip of slavery on Sethe's identity. Beloved's haunting is not just a supernatural event; it is the physical manifestation of Sethe's unresolved trauma and the weight of her past. Beloved's return forces Sethe to confront the emotional and psychological scars she has tried to bury, many of which are tied to the violence and dehumanization she has experienced. Beloved represents not only Sethe's daughter but also the embodiment of the horrors of slavery that continue to haunt Black women long after they have escaped physical bondage. In this way, Beloved herself becomes a symbol of the unattainable beauty and innocence that Sethe believes she has destroyed in her efforts to protect her child.

Morrison's treatment of beauty in the novel is not limited to physical appearance but is deeply intertwined with identity and self-worth. For Sethe, the physical scars on her back—referred to as a "chokecherry tree"—serve as a constant reminder of her dehumanization. These scars, both literal and symbolic, reflect the ways in which Black women's bodies have been marked and controlled by white society. The chokecherry tree is a grotesque inversion of beauty, a disfiguring mark that symbolizes the violence inflicted upon her by white oppressors. In contrast to the ideals of beauty that elevate white bodies, Sethe's scars are a testament to her survival but also to the deep physical and psychological wounds she carries. Morrison writes, "Boys hanging from the most beautiful sycamores in the world. It shamed her – remembering the wonderful soughing trees rather than the boys. Try as she might to make it otherwise, the sycamores beat

out the children every time and she could not forgive her memory for that” (*Beloved* 6). This reflection underscores how beauty, both in nature and in the idealized standards of society, becomes distorted by the violence of slavery.

Denver, Sethe’s daughter, similarly grapples with identity formation in the shadow of her mother’s trauma and the societal pressures that surround her. Growing up in isolation, Denver’s sense of self is deeply influenced by the ghost of *Beloved* and the broader cultural standards that marginalize Black women. Denver’s perception of her own beauty and worth is complicated by her isolation from the community and the ever-present influence of her mother’s past. Denver’s coming-of-age journey is marked by her gradual recognition that she must step outside of the confines of her home, both physically and metaphorically, to find her own sense of self. In doing so, she begins to reject the internalized belief that Blackness is inferior, a belief that has been reinforced by the white beauty standards that permeate the society around her.

One of the most powerful figures in the novel, Baby Suggs, offers an alternative to the dehumanizing standards of white beauty. As a spiritual leader, Baby Suggs actively resists the societal expectations that devalue Black bodies. In her gatherings at the Clearing, she encourages the Black community to embrace their bodies and reclaim their self-worth: “Here... in this here place, we flesh; flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in grass. Love it. Love it hard” (Morrison, *Beloved* 103). In urging the community to love their flesh, Baby Suggs directly counters the white beauty standards that seek to devalue and dehumanize Black people. Her emphasis on the body as something to be celebrated rather than despised is a radical act of resistance in a society that has long viewed Black bodies as commodities. However, despite her efforts

to create a space for healing, Baby Suggs is ultimately overwhelmed by the weight of her own trauma and the rejection of the larger community. Her death signifies the difficulty of sustaining a sense of self-worth and identity in the face of pervasive societal oppression.

Beloved herself, as a character, further complicates the narrative of beauty and identity. Her physical presence is described in ways that blur the line between beauty and horror. As a ghost, she occupies a liminal space, both beautiful and terrifying, embodying the unresolved trauma of Sethe and the broader community. Morrison writes of Beloved: “Her skin was flawless except for three vertical scratches on her forehead, so fine and thin they seemed at first like hair, baby hair curled tightly on her scalp” (*Beloved* 61). Beloved’s beauty is ethereal, almost otherworldly, but it is marked by the scars of her past, much like Sethe’s own chokecherry tree. Her presence forces Sethe to confront her guilt and trauma, but it also demands that Sethe reexamine her own worth and identity outside of the oppressive framework of slavery and white beauty standards.

Freud’s concept of the return of the repressed is evident in Beloved’s character, as her presence forces Sethe to confront the memories and trauma she has tried to bury. These repressed memories are tied not only to the physical violence of slavery but also to the psychological damage wrought by a society that devalues Black lives and bodies. The psychoanalytic dimensions of this dynamic underscore the connection between trauma, memory, and identity formation in the novel. Moreover, Lacan’s notion of the Real is manifest in the haunting, disruptive force of Beloved. Her return shatters the Symbolic Order of Sethe’s life, bringing to the surface the unspeakable traumas of slavery that Sethe has tried to suppress. In doing so, Beloved forces Sethe—and, by

extension, the reader—to confront the painful realities of a world where Black women’s identities are shaped by both the horrors of their past and the unattainable standards of beauty imposed by white society. *Beloved*’s demand for recognition mirrors the performative demands placed on Sethe as a mother and a survivor, and in this way, she represents the fluid and unstable nature of identity in a world governed by racial oppression.

Ultimately, *Beloved* vividly portrays how white beauty standards and the legacy of slavery obstruct the identity formation of Black women. Morrison's use of characters like Sethe, Denver, Baby Suggs, and Beloved illustrates the deep psychological wounds inflicted by a world that both devalues Blackness and imposes unattainable ideals of beauty and worth. The scars on Sethe’s back, Denver’s isolation, and Baby Suggs' attempts to reclaim Black bodies all serve as powerful metaphors for the complex and painful process of identity construction in the face of oppression. As Morrison critiques these destructive norms, she also offers a path toward healing through community, memory, and the reclamation of self-love—though it is a path fraught with difficulty and pain.

A distinctive female character in the text, whose name and experience reflect the colonial world's influence on stereotypical discourse, is Sethe's mother. Her body is marked with a circle and a cross burned under her breast, leaving both a physical and psychological imprint. This symbol represents the branding and naming of slaves, identifying them as the property of their masters. These markings, visible on Sethe and other enslaved individuals, function as both a sense of identity and a signifier of ownership. They are crucial in signaling to other slave owners that these enslaved

people are commodities. However, the significance of these scars goes beyond mere ownership; the marks on Sethe, her mother, and other slaves highlight that the act of inscribing on Black bodies serves as a tool for constructing identity. In this context, the "recognition of the other" often reflects a simultaneous construction of the self. Thus, branding and scarring on Black bodies not only shape Black identity but also contribute to the development of a White identity, as exemplified by characters like Mr. Garner.

The latter refers to the Sweet Home males as men in the text:

The discipline they had exhibited was only necessary because they were Sweet Home men—those of whom Mr. Garner bragged when other farmers shook their heads at the word. He told them, "You all got guys." "Young guys, elderly boys, picky boys, boys from Stroppin. Now at Sweet House, my niggers are all Em's guys. Bought em this way, raised em that way. Both persons." "Start, Garner, to differ. "Not if you are afraid, they are not." Garner's grin was a big one." "But if you are a kid, you may want your niggers to be men as well." (Morrison, *Beloved* 12-13).

This statement reveals the irony of wanting enslaved individuals to be "men" (in the sense of dignity and respect) while simultaneously denying them true personhood. In terms of beauty standards, it reflects the contradictory desire for black individuals to meet white standards of beauty (and thus be accepted) while never being allowed to fully embrace their own identities. This creates a liminal space where black individuals are constantly negotiating their identity in a society that values whiteness. It also highlights the complex interplay of control, fear, and identity formation under oppressive systems. When viewed through the lens of white beauty standards, it underscores the profound impact these standards have on black identity, perpetuating internalized racism and a constant struggle for self-acceptance in a society that values whiteness.

## 7. Construction of Black Beauty Standards in *Song of Solomon*

"Why doesn't he like your hair?... It's still his hair. He has to love it. He doesn't love it at all. He hates it." This desperate statement, made by a feverish and emotionally unstable Hagar Dead to her mother, Reba, and grandmother, Pilate, occurs during one of the most heart-wrenching scenes in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*. In this passage, the three women—grandmother, mother, and daughter—debate whether Milkman, the novel's central character, likes Hagar's hair. By the end of the scene, it no longer matters that Pilate has offered a reasonable explanation as to why Milkman cannot dislike Hagar's hair. "How can he love you and hate your hair?" Pilate asks (Morrison, *Song of Solomon* 315-316). Yet Hagar remains convinced, with tragic certainty, that Milkman is only attracted to women with European features. This belief seals her emotional devastation, culminating in her tragic insistence on this idea with deadly finality.

African-Americans have long had an uncomfortable coexistence with the European white ideal of elegance, with their historically African characteristics. According to Angela M. Neal and Midge L. Wilson, "Black people have become more intensely impacted by the prejudicial fallout around skin tone, body appearance, and hair disorders relative to black males. Such influence can be primarily due to the value of outward beauty for all women." (328). The most readily managed role for black women is hair. Although modern black women often opt for plastic surgery or mirrored contact lenses, the most common approach to approximate a white feminine ideal of appearance remains hair modification (i.e., hair-straightening "permanent hair weaves, braid extensions, Jheri curls, etc.). Neal and Wilson suggest that much with the

"obsession of skin tone and features" of the black female has to do with the effort of the black woman to obtain a "strong desirability stem[ming] from her physical resemblance to the white ideal of beauty." (328). So, who do African-American women expect to draw by achieving this "strong attractiveness"? Although there is some controversy as to why one's hair style preference automatically implies one's partnership with or resistance to white supremacy, anecdotal data strongly refers to the straightening of black hair as a way to blend within an overall white ideal of appearance, yet unintentionally (Awkward 134). However, what is sometimes ignored is the unique black male standards as it comes to black-female hairstyles.

In almost the same way as males gravitate to such types, activities, and actions that are more likely to draw women's interest, on certain degree, male "likes" must be rated as at least a factor when selecting a female hair style. The logic a woman engages when selecting a hair design, of course, differs far more than just attempting to impress a male. Ultimately, women style their hair in ways that please them most, as Erica Hector Vital explained in a recent post about her decision to cut off her dreads and embrace a short, natural look.

The characters in Toni Morrison's novels—such as Hannah in *Song of Solomon*, Sula in the eponymous novel, and Pecola in *The Bluest Eye*—all succumb to dishonor and sorrow due to the absence of nurturing maternal guidance. Without the protective voices of mothers to provide essential lessons—such as reminders to carry oneself with dignity, avoid harmful relationships, or take pride in one's appearance—these women are left vulnerable. Simple warnings like "don't let your slip show," "don't sneak off with the neighborhood boys," or "don't neglect your appearance" go unspoken, and their

absence leaves these characters unprepared for the challenges of their oppressive and patriarchal society. Such female characters are portrayed as being susceptible to shame and despair because they lack a mother's influence. Living in a complex society burdened with rigid gender roles, these women become easy prey for abuse and manipulation. Without maternal figures to offer moral guidance or life lessons, they must navigate the harshness of the world alone. Morrison poignantly illustrates the devastating effects of this absence, showing how the early loss of maternal support scars the soul and perpetuates cycles of suffering and hopelessness across generations. This is particularly evident in the prohibitions emphasized throughout Morrison's novels, where the absence of a maternal figure leaves characters exposed to societal censure and discrimination. Without the protective guidance of motherly figures, these characters are left to cope with the harsh consequences of crossing these boundaries on their own. The transgressions of these societal norms result in profound consequences, underscoring the essential role maternal influence plays in shaping the characters' fates, preserving their dignity, and shielding them from the oppressive forces that threaten their integrity and sense of self.

After Violet decided to cut her dreadlocks, a choice she made for herself, one of the questions she asked while sitting in the barber's chair was, "What do the brothers think?" (Morrison, *Jazz* 12). This concern with how Black men perceive Black women's hair may not always be explicit, but it is present, reflecting the subtle yet powerful dynamic between Black men's preferences and Black women's appearance. In her works, Toni Morrison explores the tension between Black women's personal hairstyle choices and the expectations of Black men regarding female beauty. In *Song of*

*Solomon*, for instance, Morrison critiques the white beauty ideal by presenting two characters who represent opposing sides of this construct. Pilate Dead, who keeps her hair neatly cut, embodies a natural, unadorned beauty that resists societal pressures to conform to external ideals. In contrast, her granddaughter Hagar becomes obsessed with altering her appearance to fit a standard she believes will make her more appealing to Milkman, her projected love interest. Hagar fantasizes about having "silky copper-colored hair", highlighting her internalized desire to conform to Eurocentric beauty standards. Morrison uses hair as a symbol to distinguish Pilate and Hagar, portraying them as opposites when it comes to the influence of white beauty ideals.

The emphasis on youthful attractiveness is a key aspect of the white cultural standard of femininity, which suggests that for a woman to maintain her femininity, she must embody a "non-adult or childlike appearance." This ideal ties a woman's value to her ability to appear youthful, diminishing the recognition of her maturity and agency. In *Song of Solomon*, Hagar, in a desperate attempt to win back Milkman's love, tries to conform to this ideal of "youthful elegance." She believes that by making herself appear more youthful and desirable, she can recapture the affection they once shared. This reflects the damaging societal pressures placed on women to conform to external standards of beauty, even at the expense of their sense of self and dignity. Hagar's pursuit of this unattainable ideal highlights the destructive power of such standards, particularly on women who internalize these expectations in their quest for love and validation.

Shortly after Milkman sends Hagar a "thank you" letter that effectively ends their relationship, Hagar becomes consumed with the desire to destroy him. The letter deeply

wounds her, but it is only when she sees Milkman sitting in Mary's, laughing with a woman whose "silky copper-colored hair cascaded down her coat's sleeve" (Morrison, *Song of Solomon* 127), that her anger turns murderous. Later, instead of pursuing her violent impulse, Hagar decides to transform herself into a woman with copper-colored hair, believing that this is what Milkman truly desires in a partner. Her decision reflects her internalization of the belief that beauty, particularly as defined by Eurocentric standards, is the key to regaining Milkman's love. Hagar's rationale reveals the damaging impact of societal pressures, as she becomes convinced that altering her appearance is the only way to win him back. This demonstrates how deeply ingrained beauty standards can shape a woman's self-perception, leading her to believe that physical appearance is the sole means of securing affection and validation.

Hagar, in her internal monologue, repeatedly justifies her belief that Milkman will never love her, saying, "No wonder. No wonder. I look like a hog on the ground. Where is the comb?" (Morrison, *Song of Solomon* 308-09). In a desperate attempt to win him back, she decides to transform her appearance, hoping to make herself more desirable. After days of neglecting her own self-care, she takes a long-overdue bath, embarks on a frantic search for a comb, and hurries to the beauty store to purchase fashionable clothing. Her actions clearly reveal her hope that by perfecting her hair—an emblem of beauty and femininity—she can rekindle Milkman's affections. However, this effort also underscores the deeper issue of Hagar's submission to societal and patriarchal norms that dictate how women, particularly Black women, should present themselves, especially their hair, to gain male approval. In his essay "Unruly and Let Loose: Myth, Ideology, and Gender in *Song of Solomon*," Michael Awkward examines

Hagar's struggle for transformation. Although the essay's title references Morrison's appeal to the unruly nature of creativity, the phrase "unruly and let loose" could equally be interpreted as a comment on the unbound, natural state of a Black woman's hair—free from societal constraints yet entangled in the expectations imposed by gender and racial ideology. Though Milkman arrives at a meaningful understanding of tradition, myth, and existence, Awkward argues that Hagar's role remains constrained by hierarchical domestic plots, both in the literal and narrative sense. This limitation leads to a disconnect in how women's perspectives are valued in bourgeois culture. Hagar's complete embrace of traditional notions of feminine appearance partly reflects this recognition of women's marginalization.

Hagar's desire to conform to bourgeois ideals of female beauty is evident in her longing for "silky hair," "penny-colored hair," "lemon-colored skin," and "gray-blue eyes"—traits reminiscent of the Black girls Milkman encountered during his childhood trips to Honore Island. These bourgeois standards, however, reflect a male-centered notion of beauty. In other words, the girls of Honore present their hair and appearance in ways designed to appeal to men and align with the expectations of their social class. One of the most compelling arguments for Milkman's implicit control over Hagar's perception of her own hair comes from Awkward's suggestion that Morrison deliberately shifts the narrative to implicate Milkman in Hagar's eventual demise. Awkward argues that Milkman is made to bear responsibility for Hagar's downfall. This idea is reinforced by Hagar's outburst: "You annoy me!" she shouts at Ruth, while clawing at her fur in frustration" (Morrison, *Song of Solomon* 139). Although her

annoyance seems mundane, the awkwardness of her reaction reveals to Ruth that there is something deeply unsettling within Hagar

Morrison contrasts Pilate and Hagar, using hair as the basic denominator, and Hagar is evidently absent. The most significant aspect of the analogy is how Pilate declines to allow others to exploit her hair: by shaving it herself, she manages her own hair. Not only does this signify her liberation as a liberating gesture, but it effectively signifies her resolve not to be exploited by her hair, or in any other way. In Milkman's reaction to them, Morrison's positioning of Hagar and Pilate as opposites is most obviously seen. At the same time that Hagar is disintegrating, Milkman is accumulating a family background and a knowledge of life outside of his own down in Virginia in a vain attempt at material development. The bond between Milkman and Solomon, his great-grandfather who flew back to Africa, is the spark that sets him free to see his past self-centered ways.

His bond with Nice, the woman he stays with in Shalimar, is the core partnership Morrison uses to demonstrate Milkman's transformation from greedy to selfless. Milkman proposes to bathe her after being bathed by Nice. The tank is too thin, she demurs, and there is not enough hot water left. But he starts, stating, "Let me give you a cool one then". The following passage illustrates the increasing capacity of Milkman to give and take instead of just take:

He soaped and hugged her until she squeaked and shone like onyx on her skin. She had applied salve on his forehead. He washed his hair for her. On his bottom, she sprinkled talcum. Behind her, he straddled her and massaged her back. She gave his swollen neck a witch hazel. He is made the bed up. She offered him to eat gumbo. He cleaned the pots (Morrison, *Song of Solomon* 285)

Milkman is in a role to see exactly how poorly he handled Hagar, as a consequence of his moral awakening. Again, as a means of demonstrating this awakening, Morrison uses fur. She drops a bottle over his head as Milkman returns to Pilate's house to inform her about his discoveries in Virginia, leaving him unconscious. Milkman appears in a dim cellar where, unbeknownst to him, Hagar's hair lies near a green and white shoe case. Milkman advises Pilate about his revelations, and the important scene concludes with Pilate asking what to do with Hagar's hair box:

If I burv Papa, I think somewhere I can bury this too. She stared back at Milkman. Don't, he added. No. Send it here. He stepped into the house on Not Doctor Street as he went home that evening with almost none of the items he had taken with him. He returned, however with a package of Hagar's fur. (Morrison, *Song of Solomon* 334)

The box of hair symbolizes Milkman's inner connection with Hagar and serves as what has been termed "Pilate's tribal punishment," a reminder of his guilt, as he continues to keep a box of Hagar's hair. However, there is another, equally significant reason why Milkman holds onto Hagar's hair. Morrison presents two opposing perspectives on Black women's hair: on one side is Hagar, who is "weighed down with hair," with hair described as "a thundercloud" that even obscures her profile. Hagar embodies the bourgeois ideal of female beauty, conforming to societal standards of how a woman should look to attract a man. In stark contrast, Pilate represents a symbol of true liberation. She shaves her head and consistently keeps her hair cut short, much like a man's. Thus, Milkman is not only tasked with keeping Hagar's ill-fated hair as an act of atonement for his wrongdoing, but he is also forced to navigate Morrison's symbolic contrast between the two representations of hair and the broader lifestyles they signify.

Through this, Milkman must confront the cultural and personal implications of these divergent ideals.

In the final scene of *Song of Solomon*, Pilate and Milkman travel to Shalimar to bury Pilate's father. Pilate dies in Milkman's arms after being fatally wounded. Earlier in the novel, Milkman had come to the painful realization that "the repercussions of his own stupidity would linger, and remorse would still overshadow the accomplishments he was proud of. Hagar was dead, and he hadn't loved her for a moment". Now, faced with Pilate's death, Milkman experiences his final moment of revelation. Holding her in his arms, he understands the depth of his love for her, recognizing how much she truly meant to him: "He understood now that he had cherished her so much. She could ride without ever touching the ground." In his grief, he softly whispers to her, "Another one like you must be there. At least one more woman like you needs to be there" (Morrison, *Song of Solomon* 335- 340). Through Pilate's death, Milkman comes to terms with the women in his life and the emotional connections he had failed to fully appreciate.

Milkman's judgment operates on both a superficial and symbolic level. He is faced with a choice between Hagar, who embodies the white standard of beauty, and Pilate, who rejects those ideals entirely. Ultimately, Milkman gravitates toward a woman who transcends these societal norms, preferring someone who exists beyond the constraints of white-defined attractiveness. Through her use of hair symbolism, Morrison does not suggest that the only "correct" way for African American women to wear their hair is in its natural, kinky state. Instead, she highlights the cultural significance and pride traditionally associated with natural Black hair. Pilate's tightly

cropped hair serves as a powerful representation of this joy and self-acceptance shared by both African women and men.

The second key aspect of the African American cultural image of attractiveness in Morrison's work centers on ethnic identity. Pilate and Reba make repeated but futile attempts to convince Hagar that Milkman truly appreciates her hair in its natural state, despite her efforts to conform to white beauty standards. Malin LaVon Walther highlights this connection between hair and ethnic identity, noting that Pilate "links hair as an aspect of appearance to ethnic identification" (782). Pilate reassures Hagar of her intrinsic beauty by questioning Milkman's supposed dislike of her hair: "How does he not love your hair? It is the same hair that grows from his own armpits... It's all over his head, Hagar. It's still his hair. He has to love it. He may not realize what he likes, but one of these days, darling, he'll come around. How can he love himself and despise your hair?" (Morrison, *Song of Solomon* 315). Through this dialogue, Pilate emphasizes the shared cultural and physical traits that connect Hagar and Milkman, reinforcing the idea that her natural beauty is an extension of her identity. Walther rightly contends that by insisting that it be based in racial identity, Morrison redefines feminine appearance. Instead of imitating other races' types of beauty, blacks would love and want racially genuine beauty. It is a rejection of oneself to do something less. To love Hagar's hair, for Milkman, is to love himself and his ethnic heritage.

He arrives to make an educated decision between Hagar and Pilate only by the self-discovery of his path. In several respects, his symbolic embrace of an alternate African American ideal of beauty is instructive to black-male readers who see the white standard of beauty as the only "ideal" and want to persuade their wives or partners that

there is no alternative to European hairstyles. Morrison's novel-length transformation of Milkman is a sly indication that they too, might take a serious, educated look at the white-beauty image if other African-American males were to pursue a similar method.

Pilate challenges traditional gender roles through her fierce independence and refusal to adhere to societal norms. Her physical appearance, notably her lack of a navel and her preference for wearing men's clothing, becomes a powerful symbol of her rejection of conventional femininity. Morrison emphasizes this defiance when she describes how "Pilate curved her spine and shot out her hip, flaunting her lack of a navel" (*Song of Solomon* 139). This deliberate act of flaunting her physical difference reflects Pilate's deep acceptance of her own identity, as well as her resistance to the societal pressures that dictate how women should look and behave. By embracing her uniqueness and rejecting external expectations, Pilate embodies a form of radical autonomy, positioning herself outside the boundaries of traditional gender norms. Her character not only challenges the roles imposed on women but also suggests a broader critique of societal standards that limit individual freedom and self-expression. Through Pilate, Morrison illustrates the power of self-determination and the rejection of conformity in defining one's identity.

Overall, Pilate's defiance extends to her role as a mother and matriarch. Her unconventional approach to parenting, characterized by love and freedom rather than strict discipline, challenges traditional notions of motherhood. Morrison's depiction of Pilate's nurturing yet nonconformist parenting style underscores the diversity of black female experiences and the possibilities for redefining gender roles. Pilate's life story

and her interactions with her family illustrate how performative acts can subvert and transform established gender norms.

Pilate's character embodies the resilience that Frantz Fanon describes in his analysis of racialization, where colonized and marginalized people are forced to endure and resist oppressive societal structures designed to dehumanize them (*Black Skin* 109). Despite the systemic oppression and marginalization she faces as a black woman, Pilate maintains her dignity and autonomy, refusing to conform to societal norms or internalize the inferiority projected onto her by a racist, patriarchal society. Fanon's concept of racialization, particularly in *Black Skin, White Masks*, explains how the colonized subject is reduced to a mere object by the dominant culture, seen primarily through the lens of race and treated as "other." However, Pilate's character resists this dehumanization by rejecting the value systems imposed upon her, choosing instead to define herself on her own terms. Her marginalized position as a black woman who lives outside mainstream society allows Morrison to explore themes of resistance, autonomy, and survival in the face of racial and gendered oppression. Pilate is not bound by the expectations of bourgeois respectability or white beauty standards, as seen in her refusal to engage with traditional markers of femininity, such as her shaved head and her rejection of the materialism that defines much of Milkman's world. Fanon argues that racialization attempts to rob individuals of their subjectivity by imposing rigid, demeaning identities on them, yet Pilate's existence challenges these fixed identities by living freely outside the structures that seek to control her. Pilate's survival, despite systemic oppression, exemplifies the broader struggles of black women who are doubly marginalized by both race and gender. Her ability to maintain her dignity, resist

racialized and gendered stereotypes, and live in defiance of societal expectations embodies Fanon's idea of reclaiming agency. In refusing to be defined by the white gaze or the patriarchal structures that attempt to limit her, Pilate symbolizes the possibility of freedom and self-determination, even within a world that seeks to constrain and racialize black identity. Through Pilate, Morrison highlights the ongoing battle black women face to assert their humanity and complexity in a society determined to reduce them to simplistic, racialized categories.

Morrison's portrayal of Pilate's resistance is evident in her refusal to conform to societal expectations and her commitment to living life on her own terms. Pilate's declaration, "I wish I'd a knowed more people. I would have loved 'em all. If I'd knowed more, I would have loved more" (Morrison, *Song of Solomon* 338), exemplifies her philosophy of love and connection as acts of resistance. However, this resistance also manifests in Pilate's rejection of the white beauty standards that pervade her society, a contrast to other female characters like Hagar, whose identity is deeply tied to these harmful ideals.

While Pilate's life is a testament to the power of self-definition and resilience, Hagar's experience illustrates how white beauty parameters hinder the identity formation of black women. Hagar's obsession with physical appearance and her attempts to conform to white ideals of beauty—believing that lighter skin, straight hair, and a certain femininity will earn her love and validation—ultimately leads to her emotional destruction. This fixation underscores how deeply internalized racism shapes her self-worth and distorts her ability to form an autonomous identity. Pilate's resistance to such standards, symbolized by her decision to keep her hair short and live outside the

norms of femininity, allows her to cultivate a stronger sense of self, free from societal expectations. Through this contrast, Morrison illustrates the damaging effects of white beauty standards on black women's identity formation, while also highlighting the possibility of liberation through self-acceptance and resistance to imposed ideals.

### **8. The Issue of Standardization of Beauty in *Tar Baby***

To a lot of readers, Toni Morrison's *Tar Baby* appears to be an aberration in her growth as a novelist. Morrison's fourth book is quite minor in her canon, set primarily on a sort of rich man's fantasy island in the Caribbean and dealing for the first time with portraying rounded white characters; it is less regularly taught and attracts comparatively less critical consideration than her other novels.

Nevertheless, the way *Tar Baby* carries forth the ideas of the earlier work of Morrison shows that it engages centrally in her ongoing fictional ventures. In particular, there is the question of how Western appearance is created by the media as a common ideal. Pecola Breedlove in *The Bluest Eye*, leads the path to Jadine Childs in *Tar Baby* in this respect. Pecola, a dark-skinned black girl who cannot approach the cultural imperative, and Jadine, a light-skinned black, who can embody her appearance on Parisian fashion runways, both embrace a Western valuation of attractiveness, but for opposing reasons: However, *Tar Baby* is much more directly linked to the *Song of Solomon* project. Both novels concentrate on the struggles of young African Americans, Milkman Dead and Jadine Childs, whose subjectivities are torn between the need to assimilate the white middle class ideals and the voices that encourage them to accept a black cultural identity. Morrison appears to be engaging in a form of self-fashioning in both books, utilizing these two protagonists to sort out her own battle to create an

authentic identity as an African American woman. Morrison grew up in the working-class community of Lorain, Ohio, where no black communities occurred, and encountered a childhood and adolescence that was mostly free of racial knowledge. In a 1992 speech, Morrison said, "I never absorbed racism; I never soaked it in. That is why I published *The Bluest Eye* to figure out how it feels". In a project of ethnic self-discovery, Morrison's account of her relation to *The Bluest Eye* encourages us to reflect upon her subsequent fiction figures.

The gesture is evident in *Song of Solomon*. The day following Morrison's birthday, February 18, 1931, Milkman was born. The novel's action lasts thirty-two years, concluding in 1963 when Milkman gradually achieves a racialized persona, a period that correlates to a marriage that was about to end in Morrison's life and the beginning of her writer's career. *Tar Baby*, I would contend, is as intensely personal as *Song of Solomon*, which relies more specifically on Morrison's family background, with all her distances and displacements from her maturation in Lorain, Ohio. To claim that these novels report the personal is not to ignore the forms in which they focus on broader social and political issues; moreover, Morrison's fourth novel allows her to fictitiously explore her achievement as a writer in a white-dominated publishing and literary community especially when her identification as an African American woman is impacted by that performance.

In *Tar Baby*, Toni Morrison poignantly explores how white beauty standards hinder the identity formation of female characters, particularly Jadine Childs. These Eurocentric ideals of beauty, propagated by media and dominant societal norms, exert a subtle but profound influence on the female characters in the novel, dictating not only

how they are perceived by others but also how they perceive themselves. By incorporating the philosophical insights of Frantz Fanon, and Pierre Bourdieu, the text becomes a rich exploration of how beauty functions as a mechanism of power, reinforcing racial and gender hierarchies, and ultimately stunting the formation of a self-defined identity for black women like Jadine. Morrison's examination of these beauty norms reveals how deeply ingrained systems of domination shape the subjectivities of black women, keeping them alienated from their heritage, communities, and authentic selves.

Michel Foucault's concept of the disciplinary gaze can be linked to Lacan's notion of the self, where the gaze functions as a tool of power. For Lacan, the gaze represents the process through which a subject becomes aware of being watched, leading to a self-consciousness that shapes identity and desire. In the case of white beauty standards in *Tar Baby*, Lacan's gaze highlights how Black women, such as Jadine, are forced to see themselves through the eyes of a white-dominated society. This external gaze imposes an ideal that is foreign to their natural identity, fostering a sense of alienation and self-regulation. Similarly, Foucault believes that modern power does not function solely through violence or coercion but through the internalization of norms that compel individuals to regulate themselves according to societal expectations. In *Tar Baby*, white beauty standards serve as one such disciplinary mechanism, pressuring characters like Jadine to conform to an aesthetic ideal that privileges Eurocentric features and devalues African heritage. This conformity, however, comes at the cost of Jadine's ability to form an authentic sense of identity. Jadine's modeling career, which is steeped in the Western fashion industry, requires her

to embody an image of beauty that aligns with the white gaze. Her light skin, straight hair, and slender figure allow her to be accepted by the fashion industry, but this acceptance is conditional on her continued performance of a whitened, de-racialized form of beauty. The white gaze functions as a form of surveillance, disciplining her body and identity to fit a mold that distances her from her African roots. Jadine's internalization of these beauty standards results in a self-regulation that mirrors Foucault's concept of the panopticon—wherein individuals become complicit in their own oppression by constantly adjusting themselves to meet the expectations of an external gaze.

The internalized gaze of white beauty standards hinders Jadine's identity formation by making her reliant on external validation rather than fostering a self-determined identity rooted in her heritage. Her success as a model is predicated on her ability to erase markers of blackness, thus alienating her from the black women in the novel who represent more authentic, culturally rooted forms of black beauty. The rejection of these women—such as Therese and the black woman in the yellow dress—represents the cost of Jadine's internalized submission to the white gaze. The disapproval of these women signifies a rupture between Jadine and the "ancient properties" of black womanhood, creating a void in her identity that Morrison critiques as a consequence of her subjugation to white beauty norms.

Frantz Fanon's analysis of racial beauty in *Black Skin, White Masks* provides a critical framework for understanding how the imposition of white beauty standards hinders the identity formation of black female characters in *Tar Baby*. Fanon argues that colonized subjects internalize the values of the colonizer, particularly in terms of

aesthetics and beauty, leading to a psychological alienation from their own bodies and cultures. This internalization of white standards results in a desire to assimilate and a rejection of one's own racial identity. Jadine's internal conflict is a direct manifestation of the psychological trauma Fanon describes. As a light-skinned black woman, Jadine is able to access the privileges of beauty within the white-dominated world, but this access requires her to devalue her own racial identity. In her pursuit of success, she adopts a Westernized form of beauty that renders her foreign to her black heritage. Her disdain for figures like Therese, who represents a non-Western, black beauty steeped in cultural tradition, reflects the internalization of Fanon's "colonial aesthetics." Jadine's desire to distance herself from her blackness is a symptom of the alienation that Fanon critiques: a black individual's self-worth is determined by their proximity to whiteness, which leads to a rejection of their racial identity.

Jadine's disconnection from her black roots, symbolized by her modeling career in Paris and her disregard for the cultural values of the black women around her, parallels Fanon's notion of "epidermalization," where black individuals come to see themselves through the lens of white society. This internalized racism prevents Jadine from forming a stable and self-affirming identity. Her sense of self is inextricably linked to how she is perceived by the white gaze, and this reliance on external validation inhibits her from engaging with her own heritage in a meaningful way. The result is a fractured identity, torn between the desire to succeed in a world that devalues her blackness and the pull of a heritage that she has been taught to disavow.

Pierre Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital and taste, as articulated in *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, sheds light on how beauty

operates as a form of social currency in *Tar Baby*. Bourdieu argues that aesthetic preferences are not merely personal choices but are shaped by one's social class and the cultural norms of the dominant group. Beauty, in this context, becomes a form of cultural capital—a way for individuals to accumulate social prestige and access to power. In *Tar Baby*, white beauty standards function as a form of cultural capital that enables characters like Jadine to succeed in the white-dominated fashion world, but this success requires the erasure of her black identity.

Jadine's beauty, which aligns with Eurocentric ideals, grants her access to the cultural and social capital of the white world. Her modeling career in Paris and her education at the Sorbonne are markers of this capital, as they position her within a cosmopolitan elite that values whiteness as the standard of beauty. However, Bourdieu's concept of "symbolic violence" helps explain the deeper implications of Jadine's success. Symbolic violence refers to the ways in which dominant cultural norms, such as white beauty standards, are imposed on marginalized groups in ways that perpetuate their subordination. Jadine's internalization of these beauty standards is a form of symbolic violence because it forces her to conform to an aesthetic ideal that devalues her racial identity, thus reinforcing her alienation from her black heritage.

The fetishization of white beauty as cultural capital in *Tar Baby* prevents Jadine from forming a self-defined identity. Instead of drawing on the cultural and historical resources of her black identity, she adopts the tastes and values of the white world, which alienates her from the black women who represent a more authentic form of black femininity. Her rejection of figures like Ondine and Therese is a reflection of the way cultural capital operates to create distinctions between those who conform to dominant

norms and those who do not. By choosing the path of white beauty, Jadine is positioning herself within a social hierarchy that privileges whiteness, but this choice comes at the expense of her ability to form an identity that is true to her cultural roots.

The impact of white beauty standards on the identity formation of female characters in *Tar Baby* is not only racial but also deeply gendered. Morrison explores how these beauty norms intersect with patriarchal expectations, placing black women in a double bind. On the one hand, they are pressured to conform to white beauty standards, which devalue their blackness; on the other hand, they are expected to fulfill traditional gender roles within the black community, which often restrict their autonomy and agency. Jadine's relationship with Son, a black man deeply connected to the rural black community of Eloë, Florida, exemplifies this double bind. Son represents a form of black cultural authenticity that Jadine is expected to embrace, but his vision of black womanhood is rooted in patriarchal values that confine women to subservient roles. Son's desire for Jadine to reject her Westernized identity and return to her black roots is not simply a call for cultural reconnection; it is also an attempt to impose a patriarchal vision of black womanhood that denies Jadine the freedom to define herself on her own terms.

Thus, Morrison critiques both the white world's definition of beauty, which objectifies and erases blackness, and the black patriarchal world, which confines women to traditional gender roles. Jadine's inability to fully belong to either world highlights the ways in which white beauty standards, in conjunction with patriarchal expectations, limit black women's ability to form self-determined identities. Morrison

suggests that true liberation for black women requires rejecting both the white world's oppressive beauty norms and the patriarchal control exerted by black men.

In *Tar Baby*, Toni Morrison offers a profound critique of how white beauty standards hinder the identity formation of black women, using the lens of Foucault's disciplinary gaze, Fanon's racial beauty, and Bourdieu's cultural capital to illustrate the complex ways in which beauty functions as a site of power. White beauty standards not only alienate black women from their cultural roots but also force them to navigate a double bind of racial and gendered oppression, preventing them from forming self-defined identities. Jadine's journey in the novel is a powerful reflection of this struggle. Her success in the white world comes at the cost of her connection to her blackness, and her relationships with characters like Son and Therese reveal the limits of both white beauty standards and black patriarchal expectations. Morrison suggests that the path to authentic identity formation for black women lies in rejecting the oppressive norms of both worlds and embracing a new vision of beauty and identity that is self-determined and free from external constraints. By incorporating the philosophical insights of Foucault, Fanon, and Bourdieu, Morrison's *Tar Baby* becomes a rich exploration of how beauty standards operate as mechanisms of racial and gendered oppression, and how black women can resist these norms in their pursuit of self-actualization and liberation.

This chapter has explored the pervasive influence of Eurocentric beauty standards within Toni Morrison's novels, highlighting the complex interplay between aesthetic ideals and identity formation among African-American women. By analyzing how these standards are depicted and idealized in Morrison's works, this chapter has

underscored the profound psychological and sociocultural ramifications these norms impose on marginalized communities.

The investigation revealed that Morrison's narratives do more than merely portray the external imposition of white beauty ideals; they intricately depict the internal struggles and distortions these ideals cause within African-American characters. Characters like Pecola Breedlove in *The Bluest Eye* serve as poignant examples of how the relentless pursuit of these unattainable ideals can lead to a devastating sense of inadequacy and self-rejection. Conversely, Morrison also portrays characters who resist these standards, thereby offering a counter-narrative that celebrates blackness and critiques the hegemony of Eurocentric aesthetics. By dissecting the conceptualization and transposition of white beauty ideals within the African-American psyche, this chapter has illuminated the broader implications of such standards. The analysis of character reflections and the psychological impacts therein provides a comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted ways in which beauty, race, and identity intersect in Morrison's literary universe.

On the whole, Morrison's novels not only expose the detrimental effects of Eurocentric beauty standards but also invites readers to question and deconstruct these oppressive norms. Through her masterful storytelling, Morrison advocates for a redefinition of beauty that encompasses and celebrates the diversity of African-American identities. This chapter contributes to the broader discourse on race, aesthetics, and identity, underscoring the need for a more inclusive and affirming understanding of beauty in literature and beyond.

As we move into Chapter Four, we will delve further into the psychological ramifications of these beauty norms, focusing on how they disrupt the internal worlds of Morrison's characters. Drawing on Lacanian psychoanalysis, Chapter Four will explore how these externally imposed ideals create a fractured sense of self, leading to identity disillusionment. We will examine how characters, like Pecola Breedlove from *The Bluest Eye* and Pauline Breedlove, struggle with self-image in a society that equates whiteness with beauty and blackness with undesirability. This chapter will focus on the psychosocial dimensions of internalized racism and its impact on self-perception, furthering our understanding of how these standards not only harm but also compel black women to renegotiate their identities in the face of pervasive white beauty ideals

**Chapter Four: Psychosocial Disruptions of Eurocentric  
Beauty Norms: A Lacanian Deconstruction in Morrison's  
*The Bluest Eye***

The imposition of Eurocentric beauty standards does not merely affect external perceptions but penetrates deeply into the psychosocial fabric of identity and self-worth. This chapter delves into the negative consequences of these pervasive ideals, focusing on their disruptive impact on African-American women's identity formation as depicted in Toni Morrison's works. Utilizing Lacanian psychoanalytic theory, this chapter examines how the internalization of white beauty norms leads to a fragmentation of self, fostering internal conflicts and disillusionment. Morrison's characters often grapple with an idealized form of beauty that is fundamentally unattainable and alien to their own cultural identity.

This chapter seeks to explore the psychological turmoil and identity crises that arise from the relentless pursuit of these standards. By invoking Lacan's theories of self-splitting and the mirror stage, the analysis will illuminate how characters like Pecola Breedlove experience profound disruptions in their sense of self, leading to a devastating internal schism. The discussion begins with an in-depth analysis of how the idealization of white beauty standards distorts the reality of Morrison's African-American characters. It will explore the concept of the mirror stage and how characters perceive themselves through the distorted lens of societal expectations. The chapter will also address the broader implications of this self-splitting, examining how internalized racism perpetuates oppressive behaviors and inhibits the development of a cohesive and authentic identity. Moreover, the chapter will extend the analysis to consider the wider societal and cultural contexts that reinforce these destructive beauty ideals. By situating Morrison's narratives within the frameworks of psychoanalytic and cultural theories, this chapter aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the pervasive influence of Eurocentric beauty standards and their detrimental impact on African-American women's

psychosocial well-being. Through this Lacanian deconstruction, the chapter will demonstrate how Morrison's fiction not only critiques the hegemony of white beauty norms but also offers a profound exploration of the resilience and resistance of African-American women.

### **1. Pauline Breedlove's Tragic Self-Splitting**

In *The Bluest Eye*, through the portrayal of the Breedlove family's struggles, Toni Morrison reveals the damaging effects that mainstream society inflicts on black citizens. The Breedloves, in their search for self-identity, attempt to create an ideal ego, but the oppressive conditions of a white-dominated culture leave them without an "other" to positively project onto in their process of self-construction. As a result, their efforts to form a cohesive sense of self are in vain. They are emotionally trapped in an extended mirror stage, caught in a hostile environment that leads to their psychological fragmentation. This self-splitting occurs because they remain stuck in the paradox of the Mirror Stage, where the gap between their desired self-image and their actual reality creates an unbearable tension. By analyzing the Breedloves' life journey through the lens of Jacques Lacan's theory of Psychoanalysis, this chapter aims to explore the emotional suffering imposed on black individuals by a society dominated by white ideals.

In *The Bluest Eye*, Toni Morrison emphasizes that the ultimate consequence of black people adopting white middle-class values, particularly regarding appearance, leads to destruction and silence. As black individuals aspire to conform to the idealized image of the white woman, their sense of self is eroded. This theme has been analyzed extensively by critics from various perspectives. Sociologically, Linden Peach argues

in *Toni Morrison* that the novel's power lies in its examination of how dominant white ideals negatively impact the black community. Similarly, Jan Furman, in *Toni Morrison's Fiction*, contends that the novel explores black girlhood and the vital role of family, noting that the Breedloves' internalized racism and dysfunction culminate in Pecola's tragic fate. Pecola's self-loathing, inherited from her family, makes her a victim of both her community's racial dynamics and her own internalized hatred. From the perspective of black feminist criticism, some scholars view Morrison's portrayal of Pauline and Pecola as a compassionate exploration of how racism and misogyny distort the soul and stifle human potential, turning victims into victims of themselves.

In the analysis of fictional works, psychoanalysis, as a field of human knowledge, can often be understood as "the composition of literature [that] necessarily discussed the material circumstances, the institutional meaning, and the psychological terms of its own creation" (Wallace 18). The psychological depth embedded in literary texts frequently serves as a key point of interest for readers, drawing them into the intricate layers of human emotion and behavior portrayed by characters. Foundational psychoanalytic theories, such as Sigmund Freud's "Oedipus Complex" and Jacques Lacan's "Mirror Stage," have become staples in literary criticism, offering valuable frameworks for examining psychological dynamics within narratives. These theories provide insightful tools for interpreting the subconscious motivations and inner conflicts of characters, enriching the understanding of a text's psychological underpinnings. In *Psychoanalysis and Fiction*, Daniel Gunn makes significant contributions to this ongoing dialogue by exploring the application of psychoanalytic ideas to the study of fiction, further enhancing the ways in which psychological theory

can inform literary interpretation. Through works like Gunn's, the intersection of psychoanalysis and literature continues to deepen, allowing for more nuanced readings of fictional texts.

In recent analyses of *The Bluest Eye*, several critics have sought to apply psychoanalytic concepts to deepen their interpretations of the novel. For example, Brooks Bouson, in his work *Quiet As It's Kept: Shame, Trauma, and Race in the Novels of Toni Morrison*, highlights the psychological impact of guilt and suffering within both the individual psyche and the family structure. He argues that *The Bluest Eye* "dramatizes an intense aspect of the shame-vulnerability and shame-anxiety experienced by African Americans in white America." Similarly, Pin-chia Feng interprets the novel as a story of young girls living "constantly under the glare of the blue eye of prevailing ideologies," focusing on how societal pressures shape their identities. Additionally, Barbara Hill Rigney dedicates an entire chapter of her book *The Voices of Toni Morrison* to an analysis titled "Hegar's Mirror: Self and Personality," offering insight into the psychological struggles of the characters. While these works provide valuable perspectives, particularly in exploring themes such as shame and the societal gaze, they often limit their analyses to a single theme or concept. This narrow focus can sometimes lead to subjective interpretations that overlook the broader, lived experiences of the novel's protagonists. As a result, these analyses may fall short of offering a comprehensive or fully persuasive understanding of the complex dynamics at play within the Breedlove family and the novel as a whole.

In her essay "*Memory, Creation, and Writing*," Toni Morrison reflects on *The Bluest Eye*, stating, "the conceptual picture of a splintered mirror, or the corridor of

broken mirrors in *The Bluest Eye*, is the form and substance of the novel" (71). This imagery immediately evokes Jacques Lacan's "Mirror Stage" theory, which is fitting for a psychoanalytic reading of the text. Lacan's theory describes the perpetual tension between an individual's idealized self (the "perfect ego") and their actual reality. As Lacan writes in *Écrits*, "the mirror stage is a drama whose internal thrust precipitates itself from insufficiency to anticipation" (78), highlighting the process through which individuals struggle to reconcile their perceived ideal self with the fragmented self they see in the mirror. This internal conflict is especially relevant to black individuals living under the oppressive forces of a white-dominated society, as they confront a distorted reflection shaped by racialized beauty standards. Lacan's framework is therefore essential for understanding the emotional and psychological challenges faced by characters like the Breedloves, who suffer from the dissonance between who they are and who they aspire to be under the pressures of societal injustice. The idealized self they wish to embody, often defined by white beauty norms, creates an unreachable standard. In this section, Lacan's "Mirror Stage" is applied to analyze the emotional turmoil experienced by black individuals in *The Bluest Eye*, as seen through the personal histories of characters such as Pecola and her family.

The searching for self among Black people is a recurring theme in the novels of Toni Morrison, as she once proclaimed that, "the quest for love and belonging runs through almost everything [she] post[s]." *The Bluest Eye*, seen in the light of Jacques Lacan's theory of the mirror stage, seems to examine the tragedy of the fracturing self. In deep and lasting ways, the child's identity is influenced by the adoption of the visual identity provided by other people (particularly mother, father, and siblings), thereby

connecting his identity to socially established circumstances. There can undoubtedly be certain rather significant repercussions on one's sense of self in adverse social circumstances, it may also permanently have some detrimental impacts on one's emotional health and contribute to a divided self. It is just an issue that troubles black people. So, Lacan's ideas provide a perfect insight to the understanding of human beings, and in Toni Morrison's book, they are extremely beneficial in portraying certain black people who are psychologically struggling.

Toni Morrison discusses the trauma created by the self-splitting of the black population, the sense of self as stained and defective, by her depiction of the tragedy of the Breedlove household, typical of the psychological injustice endured by black people in a white-dominated culture. The negative climate would not include the potential for black individuals to create up an emotionally stable self. Instead, through their own perspectives, black people learn to embrace and internalize the philosophy of the dominant white people as their ideal concept in life. They see a perfect vision in it as the 'Other' to project in their self-building, when gazing at the mirror that the white culture holds up to them. They strive to live up to this outward vision placed on them by the mainstream culture, but their inability to attain this "ideal picture" contributes to a tension between their truth and their dreamed ideal that can never be bridged, thereby trapping them in a perpetual psychological paradox that is just the inconsistency that Jacques Lacan explained in his popular "Mirror Point" theory. Ultimately, much as the Breedloves in *The Bluest Eye*, this extended mirror stage results in their self-splitting.

The psychological catastrophe of self-splitting among black individuals and within black culture has serious consequences not only for the black community but

also for the entire nation. While society is responsible for contributing to this self-splitting, the experiences of black individuals, as intrinsic members of that society, also shape and influence the larger social fabric. For Toni Morrison, the struggles of black people in their pursuit of identity are emblematic of the broader human experience. Through the unique lens of African American life, Morrison offers profound insights into the human condition, using these experiences to explore the physiological and psychological struggles faced by all people in adverse circumstances.

The narrative reveals through the picture of Pauline Breedlove what can happen to an individual disconnected from meaningful black values. The tale is a story about girls growing up without optimistic representations of themselves mirrored in the mirror kept up by mainstream culture, and continuously under the lens of the blue eye of prevailing ideologies." Pauline Breedlove, mother of the household, who is clearly quite a survivor of the suppressive conditions, acts as a counter to the usual mother figure who nurtures the family. Not only is she a survivor of an impoverished world suffering from a fractured self, but she is also the one who inflicts further suffering on the members of her family, especially on her daughter, Pecola Breedlove.

According to Jacques Lacan's theories, Pauline's tragic life story can be understood through four distinct stages, the most crucial being the "Mirror Stage." For Lacan, this developmental phase is not inherently optimistic, as it introduces a permanent tension in the child's process of self-formation. Lacan argues that "the mirror stage is a drama whose internal thrust precipitates itself from insufficiency to anticipation", highlighting that the infant's sense of self is always caught between what they perceive and what they aspire to be. The mirrored image, according to Lacan,

captures the subject's identity, locking them in a perpetual state of contradiction: "this form situates the agency known as the ego... in a fictional direction" (*Écrits* 76-78).

In Pauline's case, this unresolved tension between her fragmented sense of self and her idealized self-image becomes permanent. The "Mirror Stage" for her is not a passing developmental phase but a lasting state of internal division. Without a stable external image to compare herself to, she is unable to form a coherent notion of "Self." This process is further disrupted by the oppressive social conditions in which she lives. As a victim of racism, misogyny, and societal neglect, Pauline's attempts at self-construction fail, resulting in a fractured and unstable identity that mirrors the hostile world around her. Her life, like the broken mirror Lacan describes, reflects an ongoing disintegration of self, shaped by external forces that prevent her from achieving wholeness.

Psychoanalysis researchers place significant emphasis on a person's early memories, as they can have a lasting impact on one's psychological state. In this context, understanding Pauline's childhood psychology is particularly important. One key aspect of her development is the loss of a nickname, which plays a critical role in shaping her sense of identity. As Trudier Harris explains, "Nicknaming and name calling are traditions relevant to the formation of black character, representing habits of care and integration into the culture." Toni Morrison similarly states that the absence of a name leaves "a massive psychological scar" on a black person. In black culture, nicknaming is an ancient and vital practice, one that reinforces a sense of belonging and connection.

Pauline, however, is isolated as the only child in her family without a nickname, leaving her without the shared experiences, jokes, and memories that help others feel included. She feels neglected, as no one in her household takes an interest in her, including her eating habits. Her relatives, particularly her grandparents, attempt to protect her by raising her apart from the other children, hoping to shield her from perceived harm. However, this special treatment only deepens her sense of alienation. It deprives her of the ability to connect with her family, leaving her feeling out of place. As Morrison writes, "She never felt at home anywhere, or like she belonged to any house." Instead of fostering a sense of belonging, this isolation turns Pauline into an outsider within her own family, further distancing her from her roots.

According to Jacques Lacan, the formation of the "I" and the concept of a complete "self" in the infant relies on encountering the "Other" as a reflection of their identity. Lacan explains that while the infant may still be physically uncoordinated during the "mirror stage," they are capable of recognizing their reflection, which serves as an external image of a unified self. This process, however, is fraught with tension, as the child perceives an idealized image that they are not yet capable of embodying. As Lacan states, "the mirror stage is an identification...in which the individual assumes an image" (*Écrits* 2). This identification leads to the creation of the ego, but it also establishes a division between the idealized self and the fragmented reality of the child's experience. Without a supportive environment, this self-construction becomes delayed and unstable.

Pauline, in *The Bluest Eye*, finds herself in a similar state of psychological fragmentation. Although surrounded by her family, she is deprived of the parental love

and nurturing that are crucial for her emotional development. This emotional neglect creates what Morrison portrays as a form of "spiritual orphanhood," leading to Pauline's psychological fragmentation. Lacan's theory helps us understand this dynamic: in the early stages of development, a child sees themselves as inseparable from their mother, an entity they refer to as the "Other." As self-awareness develops, this unity with the mother is disrupted, causing the child to experience what Lacan describes as a "primordial absence" (*Écrits* 79).

In Pauline's case, her unresolved sense of absence leads to a distorted perception of herself and others. As Morrison describes, "Pauline kept this order, this beauty, for herself, a private world where she could slip into a place nobody could reach" (*The Bluest Eye* 98). Pauline's inner world becomes a place of isolation, where her fractured self-image is reinforced by the lack of emotional connection to her family. Like the infant in the mirror stage, who cannot fully integrate their idealized reflection, Pauline remains stuck in a fractured sense of identity, unable to escape the psychological consequences of her neglected upbringing.

Pauline Breedlove's attempt to build a sense of self through her family fails during this critical stage of development. Her family members do not provide her with the emotional support or reflection she needs to affirm her identity, leaving her without a "mirror" to validate her sense of self. While Pauline longs to be accepted and loved by her family, in reality, she is left feeling isolated and emotionally neglected. This creates an irreconcilable gap between the harmonious family environment she dreams of and the loneliness she actually experiences, both physically and psychologically. This contradiction mirrors the psychological tension described in Lacan's "mirror

stage," where the individual perceives an idealized version of themselves that is at odds with their fragmented reality. For Pauline, this unresolved conflict keeps her trapped in a state of psychological immaturity, unable to fully develop a stable sense of self. This "primordial lack," as Lacan describes, becomes the foundation of her lifelong emotional turmoil and ultimately explains the tragedy of her existence.

A stable individual who resides in a harmonious family is Pauline's perfect self in her opinion; that is the dream picture for which she still yearns. To escape the messy condition in her home, she wants to put down some laws for her family to abide by. She loves organizing things. Hence, for Pauline, the ideal self-prototype encompasses the idea of balance, especially in the sphere of family interactions. In her own perception of the world, she has an ideal self-image as a stable person who has the right traits and lives in a happy family. This is a typical, almost innate self-image that has embedded itself in her personality and does not fade even with the complexity of society. Thus, for Pauline, the dream of having such state becomes a motivation and desire that pushes her to look for a means to implement it into the reality of her life. Pauline is motivated by the need to stay away from the complicated and unstable nature of her home life hence has the tendency to impose order within the family setting. Pauline's desire to impose rules and regulations reflects her need to regain a sense of control and order amidst the chaos around her. By enforcing these laws, she attempts to shape her environment according to her idealized vision, striving to bring structure and order to a world that feels overwhelming and disordered. Furthermore, her fondness for ordering things is not merely a utilitarian trait, which ensures cleanliness and orderliness but also

subconsciously addresses her psychological need to have power over the surroundings and make them conform to her ideal of a perfect family with strong bonds:

Most of all, she loved to plan things. To line items up in groups, jars on canning shelves, peach pits on the step, bricks, stones, leaves, and let these arrangements be the members of her kin. If someone misplaced her rows by a mistake, they still paused to clean them up for her, and she was never upset, because it offered her an opportunity to rearrange them again. Whatever portable plurality she encountered, according to their scale, form, or color gradations, she arranged into tidy lines. She would never place tomato jars next to the green beans, much like she would never match a pine needle with the leaf of a cottonwood tree. (Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* 88)

Pauline's need for simple rules and order can be understood through the lens of Lacan's theory of the subject's relationship to rules and laws. According to Lacan, individuals often impose rules and seek order as a way to manage the deep, internal sense of lack or incompleteness that emerges during the "mirror stage." This lack, or gap between the ideal self and the fragmented reality, creates anxiety that individuals try to mitigate by exerting control over their external world. In Pauline's case, her compulsive need to clean and impose structure is an attempt to compensate for the chaos and instability in her life. After her family moves to Kentucky, she takes on the task of house-cleaning for her single mother, a task that provides her with a temporary sense of mastery. As Morrison describes, Pauline is "simultaneously calmed and energized by the stillness and loneliness," finding satisfaction in organizing her environment. However, from a Lacanian perspective, this behavior reflects her deeper psychological struggle. Pauline's imposition of order is an attempt to resolve the internal contradiction between the fragmented self she experiences and the idealized image of herself she seeks to achieve.

Yet, like Lacan's concept of the law as an unattainable structure, Pauline's efforts are continually frustrated by her physical frailty and the limitations imposed by her low social status as a black woman. The gap between her reality and her desire for perfection becomes an unresolvable dilemma, driving her to seek fulfillment outside her home. In Lacanian terms, Pauline's constant need to impose order is an attempt to cover over the "lack" at the core of her identity—a lack that she cannot escape. This cycle of unattainable perfectionism sets the devastating pattern for her entire life, as she continually strives to restore an idealized version of herself that remains forever out of reach.

Pauline's second phase of life begins when she falls in love with her future husband, Cholly. The moment she sees him, she offers him her heart because, as Morrison writes, he "bent over, tickling her fractured foot and kissing her leg" (Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* 91). This gesture holds deep significance for Pauline, as she had long blamed her foot for her feelings of isolation and unworthiness. Cholly's act of affection toward her injury is transformative, as it acknowledges the very source of her shame. Unlike her family members, who avoided confronting her disability, Cholly's embrace of her physical imperfection offers Pauline a sense of validation and connection that she had never experienced before. To her, this acceptance of her "fractured" self is far more meaningful than the avoidance she faced from her family, as Cholly sees her for who she truly is, despite her disability.

He spoke to her about her foot, and she wondered whether she was sore as they moved through the town or in the fields. He made it sound like something rare and endearing, instead of denying her infirmity, pretending it was not there. Pauline thought for the first time like her poor foot was an advantage.

This frank acknowledgment from Cholly allows Pauline to believe that with him, she can finally build a true family and, in turn, develop a genuine sense of self. According to Jacques Lacan, the formation of self-identity is a process that relies on the reflections and recognition of others. Lacan asserts that “the so-called identity and character are only formed through the mirror of others” (*Écrits*, 6), meaning that individuals can only construct their sense of self through assimilation and validation from those around them. Without this external validation, a true sense of identity remains incomplete. For Pauline, meeting Cholly offers her what seems like the first real opportunity to face this "mirror" of recognition. During her adolescence, she channels her hopes for self-formation into romantic illusions and desire. Pauline becomes increasingly sensitive, attaching her dreams of self-fulfillment to the idea of love and to Cholly as the man who could help her realize it. As Morrison notes, “Her mind and hands were pulled away from her job by dreams about men and love and contact” (p. 92). These romanticized notions lead her to become more emotionally invested in the idea of finding completeness through love, but ultimately, they only bring her deeper melancholy. This misplaced reliance on Cholly for her self-building reflects Lacan’s theory that identity can remain fragile and illusory when it is built on the unstable foundation of another’s validation.

Pauline's youthful dream lets her place her passion for self-building at the end of her love. The infatuation of Pauline with Cholly cannot easily be viewed as a matter of passion. Cholly, to Pauline, is far more of a "Presence" or "Code":

Someone (Cholly) had no face, had no shape, had no sound, had no scent. He was a simple presence, of power and a vow of rest, an all-embracing tenderness. It did not matter that she (Pauline) had no idea what to do and tell to the presence, her visions

disintegrated after the wordless awareness and the soundless contact. The appearance, however will know what to do. The only thing she had to do was put her head on her lap, and he would take her to the shore, to the city, to the forest... forever (92)

The perfect vision in the imagination of Pauline is a vibrant description of her possible aspirations. Cholly, the man in front of her, is merely a strong symbol for her to help her in the self-pursuing phase. "He came tall, he came heavy, he came with yellow eyes, his nostrils flaring, and he came with music of his own. And he came with the promise that with him he will create a normal existence for her." (Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* 29-92) But Cholly himself, alas, is just a part of the suppressed black party. The difficult burden of helping Pauline's dream cannot be borne by him. He and Pauline went to the North after their marriage in order to make their living. No space for housing is left for them by the mainstream white community. A heavy blow to Cholly's desire for a better existence is the strain of job and life, crushing his delicate sense of self. His unstable emotional condition makes him fail to sustain a stable family existence which makes things much tougher for him to help Pauline's dream. The snooty black people, who snicker at her lameness, her unstraightened dress, and her provincial expression, hate Pauline. So, the second stage of Pauline's self-building is bound to struggle only because on the basis of the reflection of Cholly, who turns out to be an impotent individual, she creates her dream of the ideal family life and living condition.

The third phase of Pauline's difficult life begins with the birth of her first child. This event not only presents her with another opportunity to develop her sense of identity, but also offers a chance to restore harmony in her family life, as Morrison writes:

Pauline learned she was pregnant one winter. He [Cholly] shocked her by being delighted when she told him. He continued to drink less and to come home more often. When he asked if she was lonely or needed him to get her something from the supermarket, they settled back into a friendship much like the early days of their marriage. ( 96).

From a Lacanian perspective, childbirth can be viewed as a pivotal moment in identity formation. Lacan states, "the name is the first mark of social identity, linking the subject to the symbolic order" (*Écrits*, 87). For Pauline, pregnancy and the birth of her child offer her the possibility of a new identity, tied to her role as a mother. The act of naming and bringing life into the world connects her to a new social role, which could serve as an anchor for the fragmented sense of self she has struggled with throughout her life. The return of Cholly's affection and the rekindling of their bond during her pregnancy momentarily restores the illusion of wholeness and stability in Pauline's life. However, as Lacan would suggest, the naming and creation of identity through childbirth also ties Pauline to societal expectations and structures, further complicating her quest for a stable, independent sense of self.

Aside from her, the pervasive influence of popular society permeates every aspect of life. Pauline's visits to the cinema become pivotal, as they offer her a means to escape her profound sense of isolation while Cholly is away at college. The films invigorate her imagination, drawing her deeper into her previous fantasies. They present her with new ideals of physical beauty and romantic love, painting a world so alluring that Pauline envisions it as the epitome of her ideal existence. Her aspirations center on a vision of a perfect home life and the unblemished affection depicted by white characters in these films. The movies renew her infatuation with these idealized fantasies, immersing her in the physical and cultural stereotypes portrayed by white

cinematic idols. Through this engagement, Pauline is seduced by Hollywood's elaborate illusions, aligning herself with the white paradigm and its seductive, yet distorted, ideals of love and hate.

Pauline's alignment with the white standards of attractiveness presents a fundamental issue, as this identification perpetuates all preference roles—both the desire for the other and the desire to be desired by the other. In an attempt to fill the void in her life, Pauline immerses herself in the fantasies offered by "white picture shows," hoping that these idealized images will bring her fulfillment. However, her engagement with these films brings her joy, yet simultaneously makes her own reality—particularly her relationship with Cholly—seem intolerable. She becomes dissatisfied with her family life, contrasting sharply with the idealized version depicted in the films.

To bridge this gap between fantasy and reality, Pauline resorts to cosmetic changes, striving to emulate the white film actresses she admires, believing that adopting their appearance will lead to a perfect life. This pursuit often leads to conflict with Cholly, who resents her efforts. For Pauline, this discord is a troubling sign, as she struggles to distinguish between her idealized existence and her true reality, conflating them into a single, imperfectly happy vision.

Pauline's emotional turmoil symbolizes her fractured sense of self. According to Lacan, a person's desire is more about fulfilling the 'Other's' expectations than achieving the 'Other's' dream. She constructs an idealized self-image to replace her sense of inadequacy, aspiring to embody the orderly, perfect family life represented by white women in the films. This discord between her idealized self and her actual

circumstances creates a rift within her, making it challenging for her to form genuine connections with others, as she fails to accept them as they are. Pauline's identity becomes a façade, consisting of high heels, lipstick, and a Harlow hairstyle. She depletes her soul, accumulating self-contempt by equating physical attractiveness with moral goodness, which she then projects onto her husband and children. Her pursuit of an unattainable beauty standard, absorbed from the silver screen, exacerbates her internal conflict and dissatisfaction.

She also retains the power of self-examination at this point, but there are signs of Pauline's self-splitting. She feels uneasy about what she has done to her family, she feels terrible for her husband and son and seeks to change the circumstances. So, the impending birth of her second child, as she is pregnant for the second time, offers her another opportunity to affirm her status as a mother. Pauline tells herself to love the girl when she gets her second daughter, Pecola, no matter whether or not she is pretty. With the advent of this girl, she wishes to restore a harmonious family:

When I had the second one a child, I said I would love it no matter what it looked like. She had the appearance of a black ball of fur. I do not recall wanting to get pregnant the first time around. So, I wanted to get pregnant the second time. Maybe because I already had one and was not afraid to use so. I felt fine anyway, and I was not worried about holding it just the baby itself. I used to speak to him while he was still in the womb. Like we were real friends. (Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* 98)

Yet, her hospital experience is destroying her dream. During the birth of Pecola, Pauline's impression that she is "ugly", that is, inferior and deficient, is reinforced. "Pauline overhears the white doctors at the hospital as she is about to deliver Pecola, as they respond to black people like her as animal-like: "They deliver immediately and without discomfort. Much like horses." The doctors in their sweet polite discussions

should not talk to her like they do with the white women. While she does her hardest to act like a white woman, to give birth to a child in a huge hospital, and also to moan terribly to display her discomfort like a white woman, she is still unable to obtain the appreciation or compassion of a pregnant woman from white people. Pauline was greatly hurt at the point. She begins to understand that she is completely different from those white people, even though she has a girl, and does not enjoy a life of order like them.

The distance between her idealized self and her actual condition is widening. She is compelled to give up her dream of establishing herself through the infant from that moment forward. Shamed by the physicians, who treat her as an object of ridicule, Pauline unwittingly equates her child with excrement: something gross and filthy, that is. And the fact that Pauline identifies her infant child as hideous, "Head full of lovely hair, but Lord she was ugly," indicates that Pauline projects her own feeling of ugliness on her daughter from the onset.

The fourth step represents a crucial phase in Pauline's life. She becomes a victim of mainstream white society due to her adoption of ideals from the films. At this stage, the perfect existence depicted in the movies—filled with affection and joy—becomes a reflection of what she aspires to project in her own self-development. Pauline develops a disdain for anything that obstructs or mystifies her vision, embraces easily maintainable values, and positions herself within this idealized framework. She finds it simpler to adhere to the values represented by white people in the films than to create a new system of values for herself. Pauline returns to the church and adopts a role of piety, seeing herself as an exemplary Christian woman. Her family members,

particularly her husband, become sources of suffering and obstacles to her holy duties. During prayer meetings, she laments Cholly's behavior, praying for divine assistance to shield her children from what she perceives as his sins. She, perceives Cholly as a "model of sin and failure, she bore him like a crown of thorns, and her children like a cross" (Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* 126-27). By comparing her children to a cross, Pauline suggests that her role as a mother is also a source of burden and pain. Instead of joy, her children represent another heavy responsibility that she feels forced to bear. She believes that suffering and punishing these perceived failings is a sacred duty ordained by God.

Up to this point, Pauline has been fully absorbed by white society. She strives to emulate the behavior and lifestyle of white people in an effort to distance herself from her own black identity. The perfect life of white people becomes the "Other" for her to project. The infant considers the picture in the mirror as himself, as Lacan put it. By identifying with the image in the mirror, he completes the period of self-building. So "the Other is an important entity that the child depends on for self-building". To Pauline, in her self-building, the mirrored vision she craves is white-standardized. She is a black woman physically, however psychologically, she feels more relaxed trying to be like the white woman. Pauline is greatly suppressed by the insurmountable conflict between reality and idealized existence, speeding the mechanism of her self-splitting. After her approval to serve as a servant in a well-to-do white household, the tension is further deepened. "In her fantasy life, she considers something there and pours all her enthusiasm into her current career and her "new family." Now for her perfect ego to project, the well-ordered white family becomes the Other. She likes the relatives of her

white master much more than her own. She finds her new identity there, “She (Pauline) looked at their houses, smelled their linen, touched their silk draperies, and loved all of it...” She became what is known as an ideal servant, for such a role filled practically all of her needs.

That is, only when Pauline accepts her guilt for being black is she willing to fulfill the goals of her ideal self and achieve the acceptance she seeks by assuming the subordinate position of the ideal servant at the home of the white Fishers. The creditors and service people, who would usually humiliate her, admire her and even find her threatening as she serves as the Fishers' delegate. Although keeping her own "black home" in a messy and disorderly condition, she manages to maintain the "white family" clean and orderly. As a servant to the blonde-blond, blue-eyed, tidy, wealthy family to whom she dedicates her affection and her respect for an ordered life that poverty cannot offer, Pauline finds haven, hope, life and importance. Conversely, with disdain and almost contempt, she comes to view the truth of her own family:

She progressively ignored her home, her daughters, her husband—they were like the afterthoughts one had just before sleep, her day's early-morning and late-evening edges, the dark edges that rendered the Fishers' everyday life lighter, more fragile, more beautiful. She should organize items here, line stuff up in tidy groups. Her foot flopped across the thick pile of carpets here, and there was no uneven noise. Here, she found elegance, order, cleanliness, and praise... In this home, strength, praise, and luxury were hers (Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* 101)

Here in her master's home, she discovers what she longs for. She is stuck in the dream of becoming a family member. Her childhood wishes, which in her black family cannot be fulfilled, find their way here in the white house. In order to achieve a tidy order, she also fulfills her fantasy of lining up items. Another identification brings her this feeling

of being embraced by her dream family life. Here she even gets the nickname "Polly" and that is one thing she has never had in her black house before. Pauline feels unclaimed in some other way by her relatives without a nickname, "they offered her something she never had as her white masters gave her a nickname, and thereby claimed her affection and her allegiance more than anybody else in her family had done." This shows the possible function of identity-shaping offered by such naming. Being "Mrs. Mrs.." "Breedlove" is "Polly" to the white family she works with, also to her husband and children. This also suggests that by her obsequious devotion to whiteness, Pauline has reduced herself. She is more and more isolated from her kin, from the black culture, and Pauline tightly clings to her friendship with the Fishers. Pauline breaks the last ties to her ethnic identification by giving her family up and disappearing into the private realm of snow-white elegance and order in the Fisher household.

The Fishers' harmonious family life is the aim for Pauline to follow in her self-building, but it is difficult for her to fit in with the white family as an outsider in popular society and establish an identity there. She resigns herself to suffering and ugliness as Pauline drops a tooth and gives up attempting to emulate white movie heroines. She gives up convictions that have connected her to black cultures until she lacks confidence in the potential for progress. As evidenced in her adoration of the little pink-and-yellow" Fisher child, giving up her attempts to get her perfect ego in her own black family represents, in part, her overall transition of identity from black to white. In exchange, her severing of connections to folk culture short circuits any bonds she could move on to Pecola that might help her reconnect to that culture. She struggles all the way from the tension between her status quo and her fantasized future selves. Her unsatisfied

longing divides her from her black relatives, lets her neglect her husband and children's natural affection, and produces a miserable life for herself and the survivors of her family. In her life course, Pauline attempts to locate "the other in her mirror stage to affirm her own identity and tries four times to fulfill her self-building, but all of her actions lead to nothing. It is her divisive self that is accountable for her miserable life in the first place and for Pecola's in the second.

## **2. Pecola Breedlove's Tragic Self-Splitting**

*The Bluest Eye* directs a skeptical glance at the mechanism and images of childhood imprinting of the self and what happens to the self when the process is askew and the symbols are faulty. It certainly applies to Pecola Breedlove's identity problem, a little black girl who longs for a pair of blue eyes, "symbols of self-printing," as she falls prey to the ideal established by an American culture that ascribes a certain picture of white people as what is attractive. The life of Pecola Breedlove, relative to her kin, is a total and utter disaster. She is a survivor of the mainstream white system of domination. She never has a chance to taste the affection and appreciation she so earnestly wants in her fleeting life. Instead, her unloving upbringing is something she has to confront every day, her rejection from about anyone she meets. She is steadily stepping through the path to insanity through her self-imposed exile and self-abnegation. Only in their sheer fantasies will she achieve her desired satisfaction.

The destiny of Pecola from the moment of her birth is destined to be a disaster. The fact that her mother Pauline identifies her as hideous, "Head full of lovely hair, but Lord she was ugly," indicates that the mother projects on Pecola her own perception of ugliness from the beginning. The ideal family life of Pecola is the kind of harmonious

life mentioned in the white primer, and her ideal self is like Jane in the primer, who enjoys parental affection in a happy family, yet her family does not conform with the criteria by which the beauty and satisfaction of the first family are measured: the bond between her family members is indifferent, and her parents frequently battle each other. She yearns for affection and consideration, and asks her friends Claudia and Frieda, "How can you make anyone love you?" This is an excellent case, but she does not get true love from her parents, and this emotional orphanage adds to her tragedy. Little Pecola does not get it, she cannot do much but blame her ugliness for the wretched life of the family: she feels down on herself, she hates herself, and she still tries to improve herself for a better life. Pecola falsely, like her parents, takes the life of white people as her ideal, as the other to project in her self-pursuit. But unlike her friends, no matter how useless they are, she has no ability to pursue any self-building attempt. She is used to submission and recognition because of her lack of self-consciousness. She still measures and tests herself according to the white people's norm, thereby slipping into a deep psychiatric crisis induced by the tension between her dream and her reality.

Her personal history is characterized by brutality and lovelessness, as represented by the harsh yet darkly formal "war" between her parents in their storefront house. Pecola is a survivor of her "crippled and debilitating kin." The emptiness of the lives of her parents and their own pessimistic self-images is particularly hurtful. Ironically titled, Cholly and Pauline Breedlove ultimately 'kill' their baby, whose victimization is a bold sign of their own desperation and grievances, as they breed not love but aggression and suffering.

The conclusion made by Pecola that people with white skin and blue eyes are superior is confirmed by her mother. The latter becomes infatuated with the attractiveness of white women and so disdainful of her own race that all she can see is the "ugly" blackness of her daughter. "As Pauline shifts her focus and affection from Pecola to the little pink-and-yellow child" she cares about, she continually fixes in the mind of her daughter the idea that love is reserved for little white girls with blue eyes, as Phyllis R. Klotman appropriately points out that through her mother's distorted view of the Fishermen's pink, white, and golden setting, Pecola discovers that she is hideous, unaccepted. Pecola is learning from her mother to love and internalize white ideologies.

Cholly, like Pauline, passes on to his daughter his own stigmatized cultural status, his own sense of shame and loss. He is unwilling to provide a child with the nutritious, maternal soil he requires to develop and build a healthy sense of self. His raping of Pecola is tragic, which accelerates the self-splitting phase on the part of Pecola. Morrison implicitly alludes to the disparity after the rape, "So when the child recovered awareness, she laid under a thick quilt on the kitchen floor, struggling to connect the agony between her legs with her mother's face towering over her." (Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* 129)

Although Cholly is the one who inflicts physical violence upon Pecola, it is Pauline's profound emotional neglect that inflicts a deeper, more insidious harm on her daughter's sense of self-worth. Pauline's indifference and contempt create a void in Pecola's emotional life, eroding her self-esteem and leaving her defenseless against the world's cruelties. Pauline's neglect is not merely a passive absence of affection but an

active force that distorts Pecola's self-perception, making her feel unworthy of love and care.

Pecola meets individuals repeatedly that affirm her conviction that blackness is a curse. She concludes that the "distaste must be for her, her blackness," noticing that the white shopkeeper who offers her sweets is hesitant even to approach her by taking money from her side. The racism that separates not only blacks and whites, but members of the black group from each other is further adding to the demise of Pecola. Pecola is momentarily befriended by the light-skinned Maureen Peel, and then turns on her, screaming "I am cute!" And you are nasty! E mos, black and hideous black. I am adorable! "That" (Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* 41-61)

Pecola remains unseen as a little black child because people fail to see her. The invisibility of Pecola is an indicator of her sense of self-image when addressing the patriarchal white culture. Pecola frequently looks into her mirror, "trying to find the secret of ugliness, the ugliness that caused teachers and peers neglect or hate her in school." (Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* 39) The tragedy here is that the secret cannot be contained inside herself, but within the society that describes her as hideous. This image of herself as self, which the mirror represents, kills Pecola. The mirror lies in showing her that she is not attractive, since mirrors just reflect a white image of appearance that she blindly embraces. Pecola is taught through unconditional appreciation of white attractiveness through the context of ethnic 'lack' in a mirror level of racial inferiority. She refers to her blackness the explanation that no one cares or likes her and tries to get rid of her black identity, "Please God, she muttered in the palm of her side. 'Please let

me vanish.” Pecola's effort to disappear literally here often signals the beginning of her depersonalization experiences: that is, her "alienation from the environment and self”.

Her eyes, though, did not go anywhere. She longs for blue eyes like those of white girls, "symbols of self-printing." Burdened with her own ‘ugliness’ and an intense need to be white, blue-eyed, and attractive, Pecola concludes that her love will carry such perfection. Pecola's deep longing for blue eyes, symbolized by her insatiable drinking from the Shirley Temple cup, is first revealed in the book, exposing her underlying rationale for this desire. She believes that having blue eyes would make her perfect and transform her family into a loving, supportive unit. In her imagination, blue eyes would garner admiration and erase all negativity from her life: "She wanted to see that image, wanted to see what beauty was—what was beauty to her—she wanted to see it in her own eyes" (Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* 39). Pecola is convinced that if she were different—if she possessed the beauty and admiration associated with blue eyes—then her father, Cholly, would change, and her mother, Mrs. Breedlove, would become nurturing. In her vision, her blue eyes would prompt others to say, "Look at the beautiful-eyed Pecola," distancing her from the poverty and despair that she associates with her current self.

But culture is delivering a hard blow to her lovely hopes. "In *The Bluest Eye*, I want to portray a little girl as a true and utter target of everything surrounding her," Toni Morrison says. (71) It is not impossible to see Pecola as a victim of external culture. For example, Patrice Cormier-Hamilton argues that *The Bluest Eye* acts as an example of "black naturalism" and Morrison most emphatically introduces the naturalistic concept of the "waste of human ability" owing to environmental conditions in the character of

Pecola. Little Pecola progressively learns that she is hated by all the adults around her and nearly everyone is abusive to her with "Black e mo.", little black boys jeer and mock her. Yeah, black e mo. Yadaddsleepsnekked," defensively dismissing the hue of their own bodies. In the school, teachers neglect Pecola, paying heed to a "high-yellow fantasy boy with long brown hair" and "sore green eyes." And even this same high-yellow Maureen Peal announces to Pecola and the MacTeer sisters that "[she is] cute! And you are nasty! Black and hideous." (*Morrison, The Bluest Eye* 52-66) The blossoms of her hopes, placed in such a wretched circumstance, are destined to wither away.

Critic Michael Awkward explores Pecola's "purgative violence" in relation to the black community's shame over its inability to conform to external standards of appearance and behavior. This shame is externalized through Pecola, who becomes a vessel for the community's perceived failures. Pecola is cast as a symbol of the community's failings, embodying the shadow of its collective shortcomings. The community seeks to ceremonially expel this shadow, both from individuals and from society as a whole, by targeting Pecola as a scapegoat. In this context, the term "shadow" refers to the parts of the self or collective identity that are repressed or denied, representing the darker, less acceptable aspects that are not integrated into the conscious self. This concept (Carl Jung's) involves these hidden aspects, which are projected onto others to maintain a facade of purity or normalcy.

In Pecola's case, the community projects its own insecurities and failures onto her, treating her as a symbolic embodiment of its shortcomings. This dynamic aligns with Lacanian theory, where the 'Other' represents societal expectations and ideals that individuals internalize. Pecola's role as a scapegoat is integral to what Lacan describes

as the "mirror stage," where the self is formed through its reflection in the eyes of others. The community's expulsion of Pecola serves to cleanse or purge the collective psyche of its unacceptable aspects, aiming to restore a sense of order and integrity. A scapegoat, in this framework, is a person or entity onto whom a group projects its own undesirable traits or failures, thereby absolving itself of responsibility. For *Awkward*, Pecola functions as this scapegoat, her visibly flawed and suffering condition allowing the community to symbolically rid itself of its own shadowy imperfections. This process is an attempt to maintain social cohesion and conformity by sacrificing one individual who embodies the collective's internalized guilt and inadequacy (*Awkward* 75). In Lacanian terms, this scapegoating reflects the tension between the ego's self-image and the disruptive reality of the shadow aspects that challenge the idealized self.

When looking at *The Bluest Eye*, one cannot argue that Toni Morrison tries to conceal some of the negative effects that elements of Black culture might have on a member of the community. By the mouth of Claudia, Morrison gives the overarching commentary on the societal factors that led to Pecola's misery. When Claudia says her final words, Morrison is able to drive home the point that the whole community is to blame for toxic masculinity and the negative stereotyping that led to Pecola's tragic end. While analyzing Pecola's experiences in Morrison's novel one does not see just an individual misfortune but systematic racism and prejudice targeting African-Americans. In this way, Morrison is able to locate Pecola's story within the larger social and cultural realm, thus exposing the effects of racist self-loathing and societal oppression on individuals such as Pecola.

Although Claudia never speaks directly, Morrison uses her as a narrator to shift the responsibility for the negative images of African American women onto the entire community. Through Pecola's story, Morrison vividly demonstrates the destructive consequences of the stereotypes imposed on African Americans, offering a poignant example of how these harmful perceptions can deeply affect individuals. Morrison underscores that the entire community shares in the responsibility for perpetuating these damaging dynamics, urging readers to reconsider issues of race, identity, and self-worth in American society. In Claudia's final reflections, Morrison emphasizes the systemic forces that shape individual lives and perpetuate suffering and despair. By recounting Pecola's tragic fate, Morrison not only highlights the harmful effects of cultural oppression but also challenges readers to confront the far-reaching consequences of systemic prejudice. Morrison delivers her remarks at the conclusion of the novel by Claudia:

I have spoken about how I have not rooted the seeds so deeply, how it is the responsibility of the soil, the soil, of our region. Now I also consider that the whole country's land was aggressive to marigolds that year. This soil is poor for flowers of many kinds. It will not cultivate certain plants, it will not bear certain fruit, and when the land murders of its own volition, we agree and conclude that the survivor has no right to live. (*The Bluest Eye* 160)

Morrison uses this metaphor to highlight how the entire community, like the soil, bears responsibility for Pecola's downfall. The community's failure to confront and challenge damaging stereotypes and systemic forces leads to Pecola's destruction, much like the way the soil refuses to nurture the marigolds. The idea that "the land murders of its own volition" suggests that the failure of the community, and even the country as a whole, is not accidental; it is a result of deeply ingrained, systemic racism and prejudice that

prevent certain individuals, particularly African American women like Pecola, from thriving. This passage reinforces the notion that when society fails to protect and cultivate its most vulnerable members, it implicitly condones their suffering. The statement "the survivor has no right to live" further underscores the tragic conclusion that those who are not supported by the system are deemed unworthy of survival, mirroring Pecola's isolation and the community's complicity in her downfall.

Feeling unloved by her parents and hideous in the gaze of others, Pecola protects herself by fleeing. She retreats into the sanctuary of chaos. Crazy, she literally replaces a better one with her cruel reality: she has blue eyes that everybody admires and envies. Pecola repeatedly elicits affirmation in pathetic interactions with an imagined acquaintance that hers are the bluest eyes in the entire universe. The tragic fantasy of Pecola reflects Morrison's greatest critique of a white ideal of appearance that eliminates most black people and that kills any who aspire to match up but does not. Since Pecola is stuck in the 'bifurcate condition of' I 'versus' them,' Pecola has come to compare' I 'with' eye 'in her attempt to overcome the I/them bifurcation. She pays in her own psychosis for this misguided identity. Pecola thinks in disappointment that nothing bad might be seen by those eyes. Cholly and Pauline would not fight; she would not be hated by her teachers and classmates; she would be safe. After being bullied by Junior, she may also take relief in the cat's "grey eyes."

*The Bluest Eye* symbolizes the biased definition of American society that perceives black people as the Other" and favors only a white outward ideal of appearance. Pecola is the prime perpetrator of the "bluest eye." The bluest eye depicts what bell hooks calls the 'colonial stare', the look created by a white supremacy

ideology that aims to control, subjugate, and colonize. Significantly, the final appearance of Pecola in the novel is metaphorically "a winged yet grounded creature, focused on the blue vacuum that it could not enter, could not even see, but that filled the valleys of the mind." (Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* 158) This "blue void" reflects a "lack" inside Pecola that has grounded her fledging development, a longing for the "bluest eye" that is difficult to satisfy because it originates in an external.

The "hole" in Pecola's existence can be likened to what bell hooks describes as the "gaps" in black people's psychology—areas where mindless complicity, self-destructive rage, hatred, and paralyzing desperation emerge as a result of societal conditioning (4). In Lacanian terms, this "hole" is the result of a "mirror stage" encounter. Pecola is unable to see herself reflected as the idealized image of beauty, represented by blue eyes, when confronted with the standards imposed by white culture. She has internalized these standards so deeply through her upbringing and her mother's influence that the insurmountable gap between her actual self and the ideal image of beauty erases her fragile self-image, creating an emotional "grey vacuum" around her that signifies her profound emotional distress. Wilfred Samuel and Clenora Hudson-Weems, in their critical analysis of *The Bluest Eye*, argue that the Breedloves are characters who struggle to live up to an exterior image imposed by conventional culture. Pecola's self-abnegation is a form of extreme "Bad Faith," as she transforms herself from a subjective "being-for-self" into a "being-for-the-other," prioritizing the external expectations over her own sense of identity.

According to Lacan, "by internalizing the way the Other views us by assimilating the accepting and disapproving looks and remarks of the Other, one begins to see

oneself as the Other sees one to recognize oneself as the Other recognizes one" (Ecrits 75). This quote encapsulates Lacan's theory of the formation of self-identity through the gaze of the Other—the external entities or societal standards that influence how we perceive ourselves. In Lacanian terms, the 'Other' represents the societal norms, expectations, and judgments that shape our self-image. In relation to Pecola's experience, Lacan's concept further illuminates how Pecola's self-worth is fundamentally shaped by the societal ideals imposed upon her. Pecola's intense desire for blue eyes and her resulting self-loathing are a direct consequence of her internalization of the dominant white cultural standards. By assimilating the approving and disapproving looks of others, particularly those influenced by white beauty norms, Pecola starts to view herself through the distorted lens of the dominant culture. This external perspective becomes internalized, causing Pecola to recognize herself as the 'Other' does—through the gaze of those who deem her inferior.

This internalization mirrors Sartre's concept of "Bad Faith," where Pecola's self-perception is not authentically her own but is dictated by the external validation she seeks. Her adoption of the idealized white beauty standard signifies a surrender of her authentic self to the expectations and judgments of the 'Other.' Pecola's struggle reflects a denial of her personal freedom and authenticity, as she conforms to an identity imposed by societal ideals rather than embracing her true self. This alignment with external standards, rather than internal self-definition, epitomizes Sartre's notion of "Bad Faith" and underscores Lacan's view of identity formation through the gaze of the Other.

Considering the tragic life history of Pecola, it becomes evident that her profound inability to reconcile with the 'I'—the authentic self or subjectivity—is a crucial factor in her psychological fragmentation. Pecola's relentless pursuit of the unattainable ideal of beauty, embodied by the 'perfect image' of blue eyes and white skin, underscores her struggle with self-identity. Her sense of self is shattered because she cannot align her own reality with the idealized image imposed by societal standards and internalized through the gaze of the Other. This conflict between her real self and the idealized image creates a severe internal rift. Pecola's desire to embody this perfect image is so overpowering that it drives her into a state of insanity. She finds herself in a world where the only avenue for self-actualization becomes the realm of delusions. In her distorted reality, where the ideal image of beauty is attainable only through mental escape, Pecola's self-realization is not grounded in any genuine sense of self but is instead anchored in an illusory world. Her delusions become a coping mechanism, a way to fulfill the impossible standards set by the external gaze, even as they further distance her from a coherent and healthy sense of self.

Thus, Pecola's story is a poignant illustration of how the dissonance between one's authentic self and the internalized ideal can lead to profound psychological distress. Her journey reflects the devastating impact of societal and cultural pressures on individual identity, where the pursuit of an unattainable ideal not only distorts one's self-perception but also ultimately drives one towards mental fragmentation and madness. Her inability to bridge the gap between herself and the imposed ideal reveals a tragic commentary on the consequences of living under the weight of external expectations and the destructive power of societal standards on personal identity.

### 3. The Disillusionment of the Self-image

A recurring motif in Toni Morrison's writing is the fragmentation of the self, a theme that appears prominently in both of her novels. This motif reflects how individuals may undergo profound psychic disintegration when faced with extreme stress and trauma. As Clifton Spargo notes, Morrison's exploration of trauma-induced dissociation serves as a crucial lens for understanding the complex backgrounds of her characters, providing insights into the experiences of those subjected to severe social abuse—experiences often neglected in more equitable historical narratives (133).

In Toni Morrison's narratives, dissociated subjectivity—such as Pecola's experience in *The Bluest Eye*—is often deeply connected to historical traumas like slavery and its lasting effects on African American identity. Lynda Koolish notes that this dissociation stems from the internal conflict between African Americans' self-perception and the dehumanizing misrepresentations imposed by the legacy of slavery (174). Morrison extends this exploration of psychological fragmentation to other forms of trauma as well, such as the impact of war. In characters like Sula, she delves into the effects of mental scarring that arise from personal and collective trauma, illustrating her broader concern with the various ways in which historical and individual oppression can lead to emotional and psychological disintegration. Through these characters, Morrison underscores how deeply trauma shapes identity, challenging the boundaries between personal suffering and societal harm.

From a Lacanian perspective, this fragmentation of the self can be understood as a profound disillusionment with one's own identity. Lacan's theory posits that the self

is constructed through a process of identification with societal ideals and external mirrors, leading to a sense of disillusionment when one's actual self fails to align with these idealized images. Morrison's vivid portrayal of the dissolution of the self, particularly in young female characters, reflects this Lacanian disillusionment. The delicate psyche of adolescence, subjected to violence and marginalization, embodies the struggle to achieve psychic wholeness in the face of oppressive societal discourses.

The disintegration of adolescent subjectivity is particularly significant for two reasons. First, the inherent insecurity of youth renders individuals especially vulnerable, making their experiences of fragmentation particularly acute and tragic. Second, developmental issues during youth have profound implications for the future, making the disillusionment of young people particularly poignant and distressing. Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* highlights how these psychological struggles are intricately linked to broader socio-cultural pressures, revealing the profound impact of external expectations on the formation and disintegration of the self. In the novel, she has delved into the effect of social distress on the selfhood of the female adolescent. The traumatized children, like Pecola, poignantly exemplify this effect. The dissociation of the female teen personality in *The Bluest Eye* derives from the colonization of Blacks by mainstream society and the internalization of their appearance ideals, creating self-hatred. In Freudian terminology, trauma, as the root cause of psychological problems, may be described as a wound caused on the psyche (*The Unconscious* 3). Psychic trauma may be the effect of a traumatic incident, or as in tyrannized marginalized communities, may be the result of lengthy exposure to shame and violence. Traumatic events may fracture the abstract world of the topic irreparably. A permanent psychic

rupture is produced by the death of a significant one and can trigger a dramatic shift of personality as well as psychiatric illnesses. Bereavement includes the disintegration of the subject becoming in his turn desolate and powerless. The person who has experienced a tragic loss in the family may seem to be 'damaged' in the center of the group, holding a devalued and marginal role.

Two critical factors influencing the impact of psychological distress on selfhood are societal oppression and power dynamics. In her work, Morrison highlights the often invisible traumatic wounds experienced by social minorities. She draws on Maria Root's concept of 'insidious trauma,' which refers to the "traumatogenic consequences of injustice that are not immediately visible or physically harmful but deeply violate the soul and spirit" (107). This form of trauma results from the cruelty inflicted by dominant groups, often white majorities, on socioeconomic and ethnic minorities. These minorities internalize feelings of inferiority and self-contempt, projected onto them by the Western patriarchal discourse. Lacan's concept of the "Real" provides a valuable framework for understanding this internalization. The Real, in Lacanian terms, is defined as "the unassimilable, the dimension of experience that resists being captured by language and the symbolic order" (Lacan, *Fundamental Concepts* 66). This means that the Real represents aspects of existence that cannot be fully articulated or integrated into our symbolic frameworks, such as language and social norms.

In the context of Morrison's portrayal of trauma, the 'insidious trauma' experienced by marginalized groups often falls into the Lacanian Real. This trauma involves profound experiences of injustice and alienation that elude conventional

representation and resist full integration into the individual's self-concept. Lacan elaborates on this by stating, "The Real is what interrupts the Symbolic, what resists being symbolized" (*Écrit* 321). This concept highlights how systemic oppression creates a disconnection between the traumatic experiences of individuals and the symbolic frameworks available to them.

For members of oppressed communities, systemic racism perpetuates this disconnection by continuously reinforcing distorted views of their worth and identity. The persistent invalidation of their experiences deepens their sense of disillusionment and contributes to a fragmented self-concept. This alignment with Lacan's idea of the Real underscores how trauma, which resists symbolic representation, exacerbates feelings of alienation and self-doubt, further alienating individuals from a cohesive and positive self-image.

Trauma often leads to ostracism, which in turn results in a profound loss of self-identity. Judith Butler articulates this connection by stating that "disempowerment and disconnection from others are the central experiences of psychological trauma"; she explains that "traumatic incidents have primary effects not just on the psychological mechanisms of the person, but also on the frameworks of attachment and sense that bind person and community" (*Gender Trouble* 51). In *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison vividly depicts how trauma exacerbates alienation and self-loss. For example, Pecola Breedlove's traumatic experiences, including her father's sexual abuse and her mother's emotional neglect, are compounded by societal and familial rejection. Pecola's internalization of her family's and community's disdain—especially her mother's

preferential treatment of white standards of beauty over her—illustrates how this trauma is deeply intertwined with her sense of identity.

The trauma Pecola endures is compounded by the discrimination and abuse she faces from within her own community. Her peers and even family members reinforce her feelings of worthlessness. For instance, the cruelty of her classmates, who mock her and her family, and the emotional abandonment by her mother, Pauline, contribute to her profound sense of exclusion. This aligns with Root's observation that "a function inherent to their personality varies from what is valued by those in control," presenting "a different challenge to psychological wellbeing, stability, or survival" (10). Pecola's longing for blue eyes as a means to fit into the ideal of beauty and acceptance perpetuated by the dominant culture further exemplifies this challenge. The gap between her self-image and the societal standards she is subjected to underscores the destabilizing effects of trauma and ostracism on her sense of self.

Minority groups often face reification as discarded and debased artifacts due to marginalization, which has profound psychological effects. Julia Kristeva's concept of abjection provides insight into this process. According to Kristeva, abjection occurs when individuals project onto the Other everything they find intolerable, thus disrupting "identity, system, order" (4). This act of abjection is particularly severe when the victims are adolescents whose identities are still developing and who are therefore especially vulnerable.

In *The Bluest Eye*, Pecola Breedlove embodies the intersection of these challenges. Her struggle with identity is compounded by the societal and cultural forces

that mark her as both female and black. As Angela Davis points out, "In this culture, femininity, like blackness, is distinct, and in a patriarchal society the problem of women is parallel to that of blacks in a colonial society" (12). Pecola's abjection, driven by societal rejection and internalized racism, undermines her self-esteem and fosters self-loathing, destabilizing her social existence. At a critical stage of identity formation, such trauma, self-contempt, and ostracism can push individuals from sanity into a state of disarray, illustrating how deeply marginalization and psychological trauma can affect mental health and self-perception.

In *The Bluest Eye*, the dissociation of personality experienced by characters like Pecola Breedlove is intricately linked to the ethnic discrimination perpetuated by the dominant white society and its impact on self-definition among African Americans. The pervasive cultural structure imposed by the hegemonic white group infiltrates the lives of Black individuals, leading them to internalize these dominant values. This internalization, as Rafael Pérez-Torres notes, "fragments both human psyches and the society as a whole" (21-22). Lacan's theory of dissociation is particularly relevant here. Lacan posits that the fragmentation of the self occurs when individuals are forced to reconcile their internal identity with the external expectations and judgments imposed by society.

Lacan's concept of the "Imaginary" further explains Pecola's plight. The Imaginary is the realm of images and illusions, where individuals seek to construct their identity based on external representations and idealized images (Lacan, *Ecrits* 76). Pecola's fixation on blue eyes and the ideal of whiteness represents her attempt to align her self-image with the dominant cultural narrative, which ultimately leads to a

disconnection from her true self. This fragmentation manifests as Pecola and other characters struggle to align their self-perception with the unattainable standards of beauty and worth set by white society. This internal conflict is life-denying, as African Americans find themselves unable to meet these imposed expectations, resulting in a profound sense of inadequacy. Consequently, their recognition by others and their own self-worth become contingent upon the disavowal of their own ethnicity. The dissociation from their cultural identity is a coping mechanism to fit into the dominant narrative, which ultimately reinforces their marginalization and exacerbates their psychological distress.

Morrison calls focus to the detrimental effects of the prevailing Western cultural structure on Black communities through the Breedlove network. Their misfortune is the product of the tension between the dominant culture's ideal quality of existence and their true one. "The Breedloves are the absolute antithesis of the uniform, perfect (white American family" according to Michael Awkward; thus, they can only be considered by some, both white and black, and themselves as fully failing to adhere to the criteria by which the appearance and happiness of the first family (and by implication, American families in general) is calculated (58). The Breedlove family not only struggles because they are reluctant to adhere to the Western cultural structure and thus, to the white concept of the perfect family, but also because they continue to forget their own black culture ideals, such as solidarity, when they actually commit to it. Trudier Harris points out how "[t]he collapse in the novel of the ties of human treatment represents the general lack of morals and ethics" (38). Therefore, the abuse endured by

the black community as colonized by the controlling Western civilization adds to the feeling of unworthiness of its people and the destruction of their belief structure.

According to Gurleen Grewal, "*The Bluest Eye* is an antibildungsroman" (125). This classification highlights how the novel subverts traditional coming-of-age narratives by focusing on Pecola Breedlove's tragic descent into madness, rather than her growth or self-fulfillment. Pecola's story vividly illustrates the destructive impact of internalized racial bias on Black individuals, especially as she is still a child. Her struggle with self-worth is deeply intertwined with her perceptions of race and color. For Pecola, whiteness and its associated qualities symbolize ideal beauty and self-worth, creating an insurmountable barrier to developing a positive self-image. As Pecola internalizes these ideals, she feels a profound sense of inferiority and self-disgust. Morrison captures this struggle poignantly: "Like the majority of her kin, Pecola feels she is disgusting, an ugliness that does not belong to her; it comes out of belief, their conviction... they took the ugliness in their embrace, put it over them like a cloak, and traveled around the world wearing it" (*The Bluest Eye* 28). This statement reflects how systemic racism imposes a distorted self-image on Pecola and others in her community, forcing them to adopt a self-deprecating view that aligns with societal prejudices.

In his exploration of adolescent identity, R.D. Laing posits that the sense of self during puberty is shaped by the interplay between internal self-awareness and the external perceptions of others (106). Teenagers, particularly sensitive to societal and familial judgments, often struggle to define themselves in a world where their self-worth is continuously reflected back through the eyes of others. Pecola's profound inability to

view herself as anything beyond how she is seen by society starkly embodies this struggle. Her self-perception is reduced to the gaze of those around her, rendering her ontologically nonexistent, a condition Morrison poignantly refers to as "unbeing." Pecola cannot acknowledge her own existence unless she conjures an alternate reality, one in which she embodies an idealized version of beauty that has been imposed upon her by a racially biased society. Morrison's assertion that "she is not seen by herself unless she hallucinates a human" (*The Bluest Eye* 220) captures this tragic dissociation. Pecola remains invisible to herself—her true identity buried beneath layers of societal rejection and self-loathing—until she constructs an imagined alter ego, a fantasy version of herself that conforms to the unattainable standard of whiteness and beauty. This need to hallucinate a version of herself that is worthy of recognition speaks to the destructive power of societal ideals and the devastating impact they have on those who are excluded from them. Through Pecola's story, Morrison illuminates the psychological consequences of internalized racism and the impossibility of self-acceptance in a world that devalues one's very existence.

Ultimately, Pecola's quest for self-worth is undermined by the need to conform to an unattainable ideal. As Laing suggests, this results in the creation of a false self to fit into a set of false realities (12). Pecola's tragic failure to achieve a coherent sense of self, amidst the pervasive racism and self-loathing, embodies the antibildungsroman's focus on the disintegration rather than the development of the self.

Pecola symbolizes the legacy of racism and the systemic rejection of Black identity, bearing the psychological scars of repeated sexual abuse and societal rejection, which Kai Erikson calls "psychic degradation." Erikson notes that such dysfunction

"stems from a constellation of life events" (185), and Pecola's brief life is marked by constant alienation and suffering. Her family and cultural environment, which should nurture her sense of self, instead exacerbate her trauma. The internalized self-hatred that Pecola experiences reflects a broader societal problem—one where systemic injustice and inequality corrode the foundations of personal and communal identity. Morrison, through *The Bluest Eye*, portrays trauma not merely as an individual issue but as a communal crisis, rooted in broken familial relationships where parents are estranged from each other and often harm their children. The Breedlove family is ironically named, as no love or nurturing flourishes within it. Morrison's portrayal deconstructs "the patriarchal illusions of perfect family existence," revealing her resistance to accepting the standards of white society as the measure of Black experiences (Baker 59). Through Pecola's tragic life, Morrison critiques the damaging effects of both familial breakdown and societal oppression, emphasizing that personal trauma is often inseparable from the systemic forces that perpetuate inequality and dehumanization.

The victim of an intergenerational transition of ethnic self-loathing is Pecola. As a result of her own self-contempt, which she counteracts in her position as an 'ideal servant', her mother, Pauline Breedlove, refuses her. Her children deserve no affection or compassion from her. In fact, she only teaches them to fear, "fear of life". Lacan emphasizes the central role of the mother's gaze in the formation of the child's subjectivity. The child depends on being seen and recognized by the mother in order to construct an ideal "I" in the mirror stage. However, Pecola is subjected to a gaze of shame and rejection, which disrupts her ability to form a coherent sense of self. Pauline, trapped in her own misrecognition and self-loathing, projects her fractured identity onto

her daughter, punishing her for the reflection of ugliness that Pauline perceives. This is evident when Pauline physically assaults Pecola after she accidentally spills a blueberry pie—an action that symbolizes Pauline’s displacement of her own internalized shame onto her daughter.

Many other psychologists, like Laing, state how critical the look of the mother is for the growth of subjectivity of the infant, "The failure to react to one or another feature of the child's being on the part of the mother would have major implications" (Laing 116). The look of the mother is at the heart of the developing self-concept of the infant. From her birth, Pecola is subjected to an ashamed and condemning stare.

Furthermore, when Pecola is abused by her father, Pauline's disbelief and inability to defend her reflect a deeper Lacanian failure of the maternal function. Pauline cannot serve as the protective "Other" for Pecola because she is herself caught within a symbolic order that devalues blackness and femininity. This lack of recognition leaves Pecola vulnerable to repeated abuse, illustrating how, without the stabilizing gaze of the mother, the child is abandoned to the chaotic and destructive forces of the unconscious.

Likewise, the father of Pecola, Cholly, who experienced traumatic events in his childhood, is incapable of fatherly behavior. He is neglectful and cruel toward his children. Cholly’s actions can be understood not merely as personal cruelty but as the tragic result of his constrained performance of identity, shaped by racial, gendered, and patriarchal scripts. According to Judith Butler, identity is not something one *is*, but something one *does* through repeated acts, “There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; ...identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions'

that are said to be its results" (*Gender Trouble* 90). Cholly's failure to embody "fatherly" behavior is thus the consequence of his own subjugation to these harmful norms, where he performs masculinity through acts of violence and neglect. His victimization of Pecola is not solely an individual act but a re-enactment of patriarchal and racialized scripts, where he transfers his anger and self-disgust onto her—acting within a framework that defines black masculinity as violent and abusive.

In this context, Pecola's victimization further exemplifies Butler's argument that individuals are not autonomous in their identity formation but are constrained by cultural discourses. Pecola is "outside," as Cynthia Davis writes, excluded by her race, gender, and personal experience from the dominant norms of society (14). Butler suggests that exclusionary practices are central to the formation of identities, stating: "The performative that constitutes the subject works not only through reiteration but also through exclusion, erasure, violent foreclosure, abjection" (*Bodies* 93). Pecola's identity, shaped through these repeated acts of exclusion, ultimately leads to her dissociation from herself, where she is constructed as the object—a figure who cannot be fully recognized within dominant cultural frameworks.

Pauline and Cholly, as colonized and oppressed subjects, are likewise performing identities shaped by the internalization of harmful racial and gendered discourses. They have absorbed the damaging stereotypes imposed upon them, and through their actions, they perpetuate these norms. Butler argues that subjects are often implicated in the very systems of power they resist, "The subject is produced in and as a gendered matrix of relations that condition and limit its agency" (*Gender Trouble* 87). Pauline, through her obsessive desire to meet white, patriarchal standards, and Cholly,

through his violent outbursts, both perform these identities, unconsciously reinforcing the systems of oppression that have subjugated them. Their performances transmit these damaging norms to Pecola, contributing to the ongoing cycle of dehumanization and violence.

Pecola's ordeal is not solely the responsibility of the Breedlove family but also a reflection of broader societal structures, implicating the nation as a whole. Like Pauline and Cholly, many Black individuals in the novel participate in their own victimization by internalizing the values of a Western, capitalist culture that prizes certain forms of social capital. Pierre Bourdieu's concept of *cultural capital* helps explain how these values, particularly those centered on race and gender, shape social hierarchies. Cultural capital refers to non-economic assets such as education, style, and behavior that confer social power and status. In this context, Black individuals—both consciously and unconsciously—adopt prevailing cultural norms that privilege whiteness and bourgeois respectability, reinforcing their own subjugation.

In *The Bluest Eye*, self-worth and integrity are defined by dominant cultural paradigms, particularly around skin color. Light-skinned individuals like Maureen Peal are perceived as superior to those with darker skin, while women who conform to traditional gender roles, such as married women, are seen as more respectable than those labeled as "whores." These distinctions are forms of cultural capital that elevate certain individuals above others within the social order. As Bourdieu argues, cultural capital operates as a form of social differentiation, where individuals or groups are valued based on how closely they adhere to dominant norms. Pecola, who does not possess the

cultural capital of beauty or respectability, is ostracized and rendered invisible, allowing others to affirm their own superiority through her dehumanization.

Claudia reflects this dynamic when she observes, “All of us who met her looked so healthy after we washed ourselves on her” (Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* 163). The community collectively asserts its superiority by standing in contrast to Pecola’s perceived “ugliness.” This act of comparison is a way for them to accumulate symbolic capital, boosting their self-esteem and status by reinforcing the idea that they are more “beautiful” or “worthy” than Pecola. As Bourdieu notes, symbolic power is exercised through these subtle distinctions, where marginalized subjects are relegated to positions of inferiority within the social hierarchy. Pecola, as the scapegoat for the community’s insecurities, becomes the vessel through which others reinforce their social positions. In a colonized culture that upholds the standards of the dominant class, marginalized individuals like Pecola are condemned to ostracism and invisibility. The pressure to conform to these hegemonic standards—particularly those regarding race and femininity—leads to a collective form of self-policing within the Black community. For those who are acutely sensitive, like Pecola, this can push them to the brink of madness, as the constant devaluation of their being becomes intolerable.

Pecola faces relentless psychic abuse from other Black individuals, who neglect and dislike her primarily due to her perceived “feebleness”. She becomes the cultural scapegoat: in the black community, Pecola can never be an insider and does not hope for recognition outside the community (Harris 21). Pecola is a defenseless child, an easy target for victimization. In a patriarchal society, the abuse of women and children is often distorted, with blame placed on the victims themselves. This is evident when one

woman accuses Pecola of being partially responsible for her father's statutory rape, claiming that "she takes some of the responsibility" (Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* 149) simply because she did not fight him off, despite being only eleven years old.

The community's disdain for Pecola extends to her unborn child, which they assume will be "the ugliest thing", wishing for its death. This illustrates the internalized self-hatred within the Black community, a form of generational trauma passed down. However, some characters—particularly Claudia and Frieda—resist this toxic cycle. In a society that idolizes white beauty, symbolized by Shirley Temple dolls and figures like Maureen Peal, Claudia and Frieda reject these standards and feel a deep responsibility toward Pecola. They long for someone to "want the black baby to live" (Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* 149), a desire to break free from the destructive forces of internalized racism and self-loathing. In a desperate attempt to alter Pecola's fate, Claudia and Frieda turn to magical thinking, praying for a miracle to save her unborn child. They bury their money and plant marigold seeds, believing that if the flowers bloom, it will be a sign that the baby will survive. This act reflects their deep hope to disrupt the cycle of oppression and tragedy that the community and society have imposed on Pecola and her child.

Unlike others in the Black community, such as Pecola, Claudia resists conforming to the dominant society's standards of beauty. Claudia's actions can be seen as a form of resistance against the societal expectations imposed on Black women and girls. Unlike Pecola, who internalizes the dominant beauty standards, Claudia consciously rejects these norms. In an act of rebellion, she destroys the white doll she receives for Christmas, symbolically rejecting the ideal of white beauty that the

patriarchal and racist society holds up as the standard for all women. This destruction is a performative act, in Butler's terms, that challenges the enforced identity constructed by societal norms.

Butler argues that identity is not a stable or inherent essence but something performed through repeated acts that align with or resist cultural expectations. By rejecting the white doll, Claudia disrupts the performative cycle of femininity dictated by whiteness and patriarchy, refusing to conform to the prescribed roles for Black girls. Unlike the Breedloves, Claudia's family, the McTeers, uphold communal traditions that resist these oppressive norms. Even in the face of economic hardship, they take Pecola in after she is raped, offering her care and protection. As Harris notes, "Morrison shows in the McTeer family that the ideals that support and guide development are not new to the group" (42).

Claudia further embodies this rebellion when she protects Pecola from the boys who torment her and expresses contempt for Maureen's sense of superiority due to her light skin. In these moments, Claudia enacts a rejection of the patriarchal and racial hierarchies that privilege whiteness and light-skinned Black women. This mirrors Butler's view of resistance, where individuals can subvert societal norms through actions that refuse to replicate them. Claudia's refusal to accept these hierarchies exemplifies the potential for Black women to challenge and resist the rigid norms of an unjust society. Through her defiance, she and her family embody a form of female rebellion that rejects the patriarchal standards imposed on their lives.

Like the "ugly duckling" of fairy tales, Pecola craves the recognition and validation that she believes will come if she embodies the dominant standard of beauty. According to Lacan, the desire for approval stems from the "mirror stage," where the subject first identifies with an external image, seeking to be seen and affirmed by the 'Other'. In Pecola's case, her fantasy of having blue eyes represents her internalization of a racist, external gaze. She believes that if she acquires blue eyes, she will be loved, validated, and "whole." Pecola's wish for blue eyes epitomizes what Lacan refers to as *méconnaissance*—a misrecognition of the self in the Other's gaze. Rather than accepting her own identity, Pecola adopts the white, blue-eyed ideal imposed by society, falsely believing it will bring her fulfillment. As she withdraws further into illusion, she rejects the real world, reflecting Lacan's notion that when the subject cannot reconcile their identity with the 'Other's' demands, they retreat into fantasy.

Her descent into madness culminates when she seeks out Soaphead Church, a self-proclaimed psychic, hoping he can make her dream of blue eyes come true. In Lacanian terms, Soaphead Church functions as a false "Other," promising to fulfill Pecola's desire. Morrison highlights this when she describes how Soaphead is "completely persuaded that they would be better off if black people were just like white people" (qtd. in. Stepto 22). Through his pseudo-godlike role, Soaphead "grants" Pecola the illusion of having blue eyes, though they exist only in her mind. This tragic outcome reflects Lacan's belief that the pursuit of wholeness through external validation is doomed to failure, as the subject's desire is never fully satisfied by the 'Other's' gaze. Pecola's fixation on blue eyes becomes her ultimate undoing, as she loses herself in the fantasy of being someone else entirely.

Sexual violence completely shatters Pecola's sense of self, leading to her psychological disintegration. Instead of being her protector, her father becomes her abuser, violating the essential trust required for her identity formation. As Doris Brothers notes, "psychological distress can only be thoroughly understood as the betrayal of trust in the relationships of self-objects in which selfhood rests" (66). Cholly's repeated abuse drives Pecola into a mental collapse, retreating into a fantasy world where she believes she has finally gained the blue eyes she longs for. This dissociative state symbolizes the complete fracture of her identity, as she becomes so splintered that she communicates only with herself, severed from reality. Her dissociation is both profound and tragically irreversible, highlighting the devastating effects of trauma.

Yet, despite her belief that the blue eyes have been "bestowed" upon her, Pecola does not achieve the liberation she expected. Instead of the flight and freedom she imagined, she remains trapped in a state of "devastating inertia," unable to escape her delusions (Dixon 121). This tragic outcome underscores the futility of her quest for approval and identity through the symbolic markers of beauty and acceptance imposed by society. This links directly to Lacan's *Symbolic Order* and Pecola's quest for blue eyes. Her father's betrayal intensifies her already alienated state within the *Symbolic*, where she cannot fulfill society's oppressive standards of beauty and worth. Pecola's retreat into fantasy, believing she now has blue eyes, is her final attempt to resolve the unbearable demands of the *Symbolic*. However, even in her dream world, the promise of recognition and transformation remains unfulfilled, further demonstrating Lacan's idea that external validation—especially through such unattainable ideals—can never

truly heal the fractured self. Pecola's fragmented identity and permanent dissociation show how deeply damaging these societal standards can be, as they push her into a schizophrenic state from which there is no return.

Pecola does not travel and can never fly, because her spirit could only soar by self-acceptance. As Claudia says, Pecola steps "over into crazy, a madness that shielded her from us" (Bluest: 163). Unable to struggle through her traumatic and frustrating life anymore, she retreats into schizophrenia. In a dream universe, Pecola seeks to find refuge, a way to move on. Her fictional companion is a tactic for safety. That is why when she questions her alter ego why she has not come before, she says, "You did not need me before". Pecola will reject her awful encounters in her dream world, including those of sexual and physical violence. When she wonders about her incestuous abuse when she separates herself, she disputes that anything happened: "He just attempted, see? He had accomplished nothing. Are you listening to me?" (Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* 154-163). However, Pecola remains intensely worried about achieving the beauty she wants to be cherished, particularly in her schizophrenic condition. She keeps asking her picture of her eyes: are they blue enough? Are they the world's bluestones? As Harris points out, "The culture of Pecola has trained her not just to desire to be attractive but to be the most beautiful of all, for she can only remove the loss of love, the persistent lack of acceptance, in such dominance" (42). The catastrophe of Pecola is the drastic result of the internalization of the set of beliefs of the ruling party, the whites, contributing to the black individual's marginalization and self-contempt.

The scapegoating of the poorest and most disadvantaged members of the community reinforces the harmful social dynamics at play. By the end of the novel,

Claudia comes to realize how both the community and Pecola herself contributed to her victimization: "All of our garbage that we threw on her and that she consumed" (Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* 162). Claudia's growing awareness marks an evolution in her understanding of the community's complicity in Pecola's suffering. In contrast to Pecola's descent into trauma, Morrison uses Claudia's journey to illustrate her passage into adulthood. Claudia, as one of the true survivors of the story, offers a glimmer of hope for the future through her developing self-awareness and moral integrity. This newfound insight suggests the possibility of change and growth in the face of overwhelming hardship.

#### **4. Internalization of Racism and Beauty Perception through Oppression**

This section aims to explore how Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* addresses the intersecting inequalities of race and gender, highlighting how oppression is experienced and managed by African-American individuals, particularly women. One of the most insidious forms of injustice is the internalization of white beauty standards, which leads African-Americans to feel inferior and to reject their own physical traits that differ from these norms. African-American women with darker skin tones face even greater challenges, as they often become victims of racism within their own communities, where lighter skin is sometimes valued more highly. This internalized racism adds another layer of complexity to the oppression these women endure. A crucial factor in overcoming this injustice is self-awareness. Without a strong sense of self-consciousness, African-American women may continue to be trapped by ideals that erode their self-worth and sense of belonging. Developing this self-awareness is

essential for resisting the pressures of these harmful standards and reclaiming their identity.

The White Anglo-Saxon Protestants' nationalism has played a significant role in embedding and spreading white ideals throughout various communities in the United States. Central to this ideology is the elevation of physical features associated with whiteness as the ultimate standard of beauty. This philosophy of white appearance—emphasizing traits such as pale eyes, pointed noses, and thin lips—has created a rigid and exclusionary benchmark for beauty. As a consequence, Black people, whose features often do not conform to these idealized traits, find themselves systematically marginalized. This distortion of beauty standards not only devalues Black identity but also perpetuates the notion that they are outsiders in their own country, relegating them to a position of inferiority within the broader societal hierarchy. The pervasive nature of these ideals contributes to the ongoing racial divide and reinforces a system of oppression that denies Black individuals the right to be seen as equal and worthy in both appearance and identity.

A significant form of discrimination against women is the societal imposition of rigid beauty standards, which dictate that women must conform to a specific and often unattainable ideal of appearance. This expectation places an undue burden on women, as they are compelled to understand and internalize what constitutes "desirability" according to these narrow criteria. Women's bodies become the battleground for these ideals, with their anatomy serving as a canvas upon which the concept of beauty is both imagined and enforced. When a woman's body deviates from these prescribed norms—

such as in the case of Black women in the United States, who face an additional layer of racialized beauty standards—the patriarchal pressure intensifies. The further a woman's appearance is from the socially accepted ideals, the more she is marginalized, not only as a woman but also within a racial context. Black women, whose bodies often fall outside the Eurocentric norms of beauty, are subjected to a compounded form of discrimination, where the intersection of race and gender creates a more profound sense of exclusion. This patriarchal burden is felt even more acutely in societies where women's value is disproportionately tied to their physical appearance. Black women, who have long been dehumanized and othered by mainstream beauty standards, experience this oppression in a way that strips them not only of their right to self-definition but also of their cultural identity. The pressure to conform to white, patriarchal ideals of beauty becomes a tool of control, reinforcing both gender and racial hierarchies and limiting the autonomy and self-worth of women whose bodies challenge these constructed ideals.

For Black individuals, considered inferior in a white-dominated society, white supremacy has long fueled segregation and systemic injustice. The racial conflicts in the United States are deeply rooted in history, and while slavery was abolished, it did not bring true equality between Black and white populations. As W.E.B. Du Bois observed, the "color line" was the defining issue of the twentieth century, underscoring the complexity of resolving racial problems. The enduring tension between Blacks and whites shaped much of the racial dynamics during this time. Acts of violence and discriminatory laws, such as lynching and segregation, exposed the harsh realities of this racial divide. As Ciment notes, lynching was a common practice in the South, often

involving torture, harassment, murder, and mutilation, predominantly targeting Black individuals accused of crimes (120). Between the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, approximately one hundred Black people were killed annually in these brutal acts of racial violence. Even in the North, racism persisted, bolstered by the widespread belief in the inherent inferiority of Black people, reflecting the deeply ingrained notion of white supremacy. In the South, racial discrimination was legally sanctioned, granting whites exclusive rights to public spaces and services. The "separate but equal" doctrine, which legitimized segregation, institutionalized this discrimination and further entrenched the racial hierarchy. By reinforcing divisions between races, this legal framework made true social equality impossible, preventing meaningful integration and perpetuating inequality across American society.

A response to the widespread inequality and racial divide faced by Black citizens has been the rise of numerous social movements advocating for human rights and equal representation. These movements are characterized by mass marches, protests, and riots, reflecting the growing collective strength of Black communities. Such campaigns have played a pivotal role in fostering a sense of pride and self-esteem among Black individuals, as seen in cultural trends like "Black is beautiful" and "Black is sexy." For Black women, however, the struggle against social inequality offers perspectives that differ significantly from those of both white women and Black men. While white supremacy assigns Black women a lower status in comparison to both white men and women, racial disparities also create unique challenges for Black women that set them apart from Black men. The oppressive culture of the United States historically views women as inferior to men, placing African American women at the intersection of

multiple layers of discrimination—racial, gender-based, and more. As such, African American women are doubly marginalized: first for their race, and second for their gender. These injustices have attracted the attention of scholars like Patricia Hill Collins, who, in *Black Feminist Thought*, emphasizes that Black women in the United States face marginalization not only because of their race but also due to their gender, class, and other social distinctions (22). The intersecting nature of these inequalities gives Black women a distinct set of experiences and perspectives compared to non-Black women. Collins argues that this overlap in oppressions, including race and gender, creates multiple forms of authoritarian control that shape the lived realities of Black women. Moreover, she highlights that these intersections are not fixed but dynamic, reflecting the complex interactions between race, gender, class, and other aspects of identity. This intersectionality underscores the need to understand the full picture of the injustices faced by Black women, as their experiences cannot be viewed through a single lens of race or gender alone.

*The Bluest Eye* stands as one of the first major works of fiction to place the issue of internalized prejudice at the forefront. While internalized prejudice had previously been discussed, it often remained a peripheral subject. Morrison's novel, however, centers this racial dilemma, offering a profound exploration of how systemic oppression deeply impacts the psychological well-being of African Americans. Through her narrative, Morrison sheds light on the complex struggles Black individuals face in a racially divided society, particularly in relation to identity and self-perception. Kevin O. Cokley, in *The Myth of Black Anti-Intellectualism*, defines internalized bigotry as "the degree to which members of ethnic and religious minority groups adopt and act

upon stereotypical, discriminatory beliefs directed at their own racial or ethnic communities" (187). According to this concept, internalized racism involves accepting and internalizing the prejudices imposed by the dominant culture. This concept closely aligns with Franz Fanon's analysis of colonialism in *Black Skin, White Masks*, where "the colonized internalizes the rejection of his community and begins to see his own culture as deficient, filled with guilt and self-contempt" (47). Althusser's theory of interpellation, which describes how individuals internalize the values of the dominant society, further clarifies the process of internalized bigotry. John McLeod exemplifies this through Fanon's experience of being called a "dirty nigger" in France, demonstrating how external labeling can deeply affect an individual's sense of self and identity (37). In *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison vividly portrays these dynamics, revealing how racial interpellation and internalized prejudice erode self-worth and fracture personal identity in a society governed by white standards of beauty and value.

The most significant character through whom Morrison explores the effects of internalized prejudice is Pecola. Consumed by intense self-hatred, Pecola views her Blackness as inherently repulsive and believes that if she were white, she would finally be visible, valuable, and loved. She yearns to be blonde and blue-eyed, convinced that whiteness is the key to acceptance and beauty. Whether in the classroom, on the streets, or at home, Pecola feels invisible and ugly because of her race, her sense of worth shattered by the belief that white society's negative portrayals of Black people are true.

Lacan's views on mockery provide insight into Pecola's experience, particularly in the scene where a group of Black boys at school cruelly taunts her. According to Lacan, mockery is a mechanism through which individuals project their own

insecurities onto others, using ridicule to highlight perceived deficiencies. The boys, grappling with their own internalized racism, mock Pecola as a means of displacing their own feelings of ethnic guilt and self-contempt. By ridiculing her, they attempt to distance themselves from their own Blackness, using Pecola as a scapegoat for their internal struggles and insecurities. In this way, Pecola becomes the target of the boys' efforts to escape their own racial realities, underscoring the damaging effects of internalized prejudice on both the victim and the perpetrators.

This dynamic is evident when the boys cruelly taunt Pecola with racist insults: "Black e mo Nekked Black e mo Ya daddy sleeps. Stch ta tastch ta tastach ta tatatatata" (Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* 65-66). Their mockery is not just an attack on Pecola but a reflection of their own internalized self-hatred, as Bousoon notes, "the boys express their deep-rooted hatred for their own Black identities" (305). Through Lacan's lens, this mockery functions as a defense mechanism, where the boys, feeling vulnerable under the oppressive gaze of the "Other" (white society), use Pecola as a target to temporarily relieve their own sense of inadequacy. Pecola, however, fully internalizes these insults, amplifying her ethnic guilt. Her tears, as she runs away from their taunts, represent her acceptance of the racist mockery directed at her. Lacan's theory explains how this mockery is absorbed and reinforces Pecola's already fragile sense of self, deepening her belief in her own inferiority. The fact that all the boys who torment Pecola are Black highlights how deeply internalized racism permeates their identities. Morrison illustrates how, in a society steeped in racial prejudice, mockery becomes a tool through which internalized self-contempt is projected onto others, intensifying the ethnic guilt that plagues Pecola and those who torment her.

Black boys are not the only ones who project their self-hate onto fellow Black individuals. Cholly also channels his self-contempt towards Darlene. During their encounter, after being humiliated by white hunters, Cholly directs his shame at her: "Cholly glanced at Darlene, going harder. He really despised her... he despised her too much" (Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* 149). Unable to confront the white hunters who emasculated him, Cholly transfers his hatred onto Darlene, someone more vulnerable. As Jan Furman notes, "Cholly recognizes that hating [the hunters] is useless, so he continues to hate Darlene for witnessing his weakness" (17). His inability to act against the source of his humiliation leads him to displace his self-loathing onto her. This aligns with Lacan's view on bullying, where aggression is a projection of one's own perceived inadequacies onto others. Cholly's self-hatred, rooted in his powerlessness against white supremacy, is redirected toward Darlene, who becomes a scapegoat for his feelings of inferiority.

Similarly, Claudia also grapples with internalized societal norms around beauty. She initially resists the prevailing admiration for Shirley Temple, a symbol of white beauty: "It was a small step to Shirley Temple. I continued to revere her years later, just as I learned to rejoice in cleanliness" (Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* 19). Despite her outward adaptation, Claudia's deep opposition to white patriarchal ideals remains. She fabricates her affection for Shirley Temple to conform to society's expectations, yet her underlying resistance to these narratives speaks to her rejection of imposed standards of beauty. Both Cholly and Claudia reflect the complex dynamics of internalized prejudice, with Cholly projecting his shame and Claudia struggling between resistance and conformity to societal ideals.

Oppression operates through four interconnected forms of control: physical, economic, psychological, and internalized, as outlined by Sheila Ruth (434-436). Physical control includes coercion, intimidation, and violence, often justified as discipline or threats. Economic repression functions by restricting access to fair wages, confining individuals to low-paying jobs, or enforcing unemployment, thus rendering the oppressed powerless. Psychological control is maintained when those in authority establish norms for marginalized groups, often based on biased assumptions or discriminatory ideologies. Internalized control is perhaps the most insidious, as it occurs when the oppressed come to "accept" their perceived inferiority, thus reinforcing their own subjugation. Collins, stresses the importance of fostering black women's personal motivation to resist patriarchal injustices. She emphasizes self-awareness as a critical tool for challenging inequality, which is further strengthened through self-definition, self-assessment, self-reliance, and self-empowerment(119).

Frantz Fanon's concept of racialization adds another layer to understanding these forms of oppression, particularly through the internalization of racial hierarchies. Fanon argues that colonialism and systemic racism create a sense of alienation among the colonized or oppressed, who come to see themselves through the lens of the dominant group. This racialization process imposes a false identity on the marginalized, shaping their self-perception according to the values and standards of the oppressors. These dynamics of racialization and internalized oppression are central to Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*. The novel explores how African American women are subjected to the oppressive force of white beauty standards. Pecola, the protagonist, is rejected and dehumanized because of her dark skin and eyes, a condition exacerbated by her

internalized belief in the superiority of whiteness. Fanon's idea of racialization is evident in Pecola's desire for blue eyes, a symbol of her yearning to escape the marginalization imposed upon her by a society that values white skin. The novel critiques how racial and gender-based oppression intertwine, exposing the devastating impact of internalized racial hierarchies on African American identity.

In most cultures women are more obsessed with the expectation of making an appealing presence than men are. This often relates to black people who are supposed to have more desirable body looks. This expectation, meanwhile, is not so much meant for black men. This imposes a heavier strain on black women who do not have an appealing image than for black men who do not look attractive. This condition illustrates that discrimination toward black women persists. Jane H. Hill argues that the superiority of white ideology positions the status of the descendants of Africa below that of the whites. (77) The whites equate themselves as something civilized, possessing strong standards, and pretty. In the other side, blacks are associated with something low, have bad ideals, and are disgusting. In multiple strata, the prevailing philosophy enforces a hierarchy that positions black and white identities in stark opposition to one another.

The social structure of color creates an ideology where whiteness is associated with goodness, purity, and respectability, while Blackness, in contrast, is linked to poverty, filth, and indecency. Under this construct, white is seen as more desirable because it embodies positive values, whereas Black is devalued for its perceived negative traits. It is no wonder that, while Blackness is despised, white skin is later idolized. Tracey Patton highlights that white women's attractiveness is often compared

to that of Black women, with contrasting representations of skin color reinforcing these racialized ideals (26). This dynamic is particularly disadvantageous for Black citizens, as the system places them in an inferior position. Many share the same feelings of frustration toward a system that marginalizes them. As African Americans are continually exposed to the white beauty standard, they become hegemonized by these ideals. Advertisements, movies, and commercials constantly feature artists and models who reflect this idealized white beauty, ultimately shaping perceptions of beauty and self-worth in the Black community.

Hegemony refers to a form of dominance that is accepted, to some extent, by those who are oppressed (Aschroft et al. 116). Without the use of force, the oppressed internalize and embrace the values imposed upon them. In *The Bluest Eye*, this dynamic is evident in how black culture absorbs the ideals associated with the beauty of white women, contrasting them with their own sense of self-worth. The novel vividly portrays the overwhelming power of white beauty standards, which leads black characters to willingly adopt these beliefs. Morrison writes, “The black-and-white pictures fall together there, forming a beautiful whole, both reflected from above and behind through the ray of light. It was an easy joy yes, but she knew everything there was to love and everything there was to dislike” (*The Bluest Eye* 111). This passage illustrates how Pauline Breedlove, internalizes beauty as defined by whiteness. Influenced by the movies she watches, Pauline comes to believe that what is beautiful, lovable, and worthy is white, while blackness is associated with ugliness and rejection. Ultimately, she accepts the notion that white embodies positive qualities, while black represents the opposite. The quote similarly depicts beauty in terms of art and at the same time

philosophic concern over feelings and existence. The use of words like ‘black and white pictures,’ and ‘fits perfectly’ gives the impression of order and balance. This description evokes an era of harmony and beauty where everything appears to be in its rightful place and forms a beautiful whole. Light as a metaphorical theme complements the imagery, thereby using the rays of light to extend the beauty of the scene. However, within this moment of the portrayed beauty, there is a bittersweet acknowledgment of human joy and sorrow. The protagonist seems to have the feeling that is referred to as an “easy joy” – a happiness that feels all too temporal. However, this moment of happiness is followed by a realization of the realities of love and hatred: In this seemingly innocent scene, the protagonist is able to give a positive and negative connotation to love. This duality reflects the complexity of human relations and emotions together with pleasure and pain, love and hatred. All in all, this quote sums up Morrison’s concern with the richness of people’s existence, happiness and pain, love and its darker sides. In fact, Morrison is very careful in the choice of imagery and words, which allows the readers consider the paradoxes of life.

Movies are one of the powerful ways of disseminating white values that culture embraces without any opposition. It is no surprise that the black community readily embraces those media when they are bundled and portrayed quite attractively. In reality, physical appearance is defined by several variables such as body height and weight, stance, skin tone, eye color, hair color, forms of the nose and lips, and others. Of these features, as appearance is linked to ethnicity, skin color is dominant and quickly becomes troublesome. Pecola and Bride, both of whom have the same oppressive

experiences, have this problem. They not only have to face disapproval by those around them, but even abuse.

Intimidation is a clear indicator of abuse, and one common form of this is bullying. According to David Farrington, bullying can be defined as the repeated psychological and physical mistreatment of a weaker individual by a more powerful one (381). In *The Bluest Eye*, Pecola experiences this type of emotional abuse at the hands of her peers, who target and humiliate her due to her perceived physical unattractiveness. Her tormentors fixate on her appearance, reinforcing societal beauty standards that marginalize those who do not conform to them. Pecola also realizes that she might claim:

Bobby loves Pecola Breedlove! anytime one of the girls at school tried to be especially insulting to a guy, or wanted to get an immediate answer from him. Pecola Breedlove is cherished by Bobby! and never fail to get peals of laughter from those in earshot, and ridicule the accused's indignation (Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* 45).

Pecola is synonymous with that which is poor. Owing to her black skin, she is known as a human whose attractiveness is missing. As the survivor, the harassers chose her because they believe she is prone to being ridiculed. They claim that there is no self-esteem for Pecola. Friends of Pecola do not allow her to become one of them. Since she is deemed a pest, she is intended to be alienated from them. Isolation is often a means to defend white dominance from being contaminated with something black that would weaken them. For them, something bad is synonymous with Pecola's black and hideous heads. Pecola is getting inferior and more alienated. Junior, Pecola's mate, observes this as the narrator explains it, "as she marched, she kept her head down. Many years since,

he had noticed her, standing alone still alone at recess. Nobody interacted around her at all. He figured, perhaps, that she was ugly” (Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* 82).

It is not just her colleagues that alienate her, but it is also what teachers do. Teachers often appear to exclude her from their encounters, which are expected to regard both students equally. By coordinating her seating in such a manner that she sits by herself, teachers reduce their experiences with Pecola. She is compelled to see in this sense that her instructors just wish her to remain alone. Much of this is because Pecola is deemed to be separate from the rest of the class. In order to be part of the class, she is not granted space. Intentionally, she is alienated so that she may not become an annoyance. Discriminative care is a sad occurrence for Pecola. Black people believe like without feeling bad, what they do is something normal. This illustrates how the superiority of white attractiveness as the setting of the novel was quite high in the African-American culture in the 1940s. It is bigotry to offer a right to those persons dependent on skin colour. These black people mimic how the whites handle the blacks in this scenario because the whites have a larger privilege.

Pecola sinks to be the object of the hegemony of elegance. In this case, she goes crazy, fascinated with blue eyes and light skin, an addiction that can never be realized. Morrison criticizes African-American women here who are swept away by patriarchy and oppress themselves in fact. Morrison reveals by the two protagonists of the novels that self-consciousness is the main path to liberating them from oppression; knowledge that their cultures must be viewed positively; and awareness that it is self-identity that can make them equivalent to citizens of other cultures.

For the sake of becoming more beautiful and embraced by society, pressure to have bright skin is a type of discrimination towards women as it can become an unnecessary strain, particularly when the objective behind is not achievable. White beauty superiority, for black people in the United States, is a type of racism. Unconsciously, this superiority has put them beyond the circle of appearance categories because their outward features are far from conforming to this hegemonizing ideal. In comparison, for African-American people whose facial appearances are perceived to be less favorable than those of other African-American women, oppression can have more drastic consequences since their skin is darker. Self-awareness of the superiority of white beauty and reverence for self-identity are important to resist injustice.

### **5. The Symbolism of Mary Jane and Consumerism in Identity Affirmation**

In capitalist culture, where economies dominate and dollar bills are viewed as votes, consumers take political stances through their purchasing decisions. As Siegfried Zepf explains, buyers see themselves in a transitive context, shaped by the environments of marketed products. This creates a desire to consume certain items, which are linked to self-representation. According to Zepf, advertising brings an implicit aspect of the consumer's identity to consciousness, allowing them to recognize it as part of their personal self-image (146). In this way, consumers may eat or buy their way toward an idealized version of themselves—who they aspire to be. While this often occurs instinctively, driven by the appeal of items that reflect their desired self-image, it can also align with philosophies of responsible consumption, such as fair trade or veganism. Consumption, then, becomes an act of affirmation, reinforcing personal values and

identity. In some cases, it also serves as a subtle protest against the culture behind the product. Pecola, in *The Bluest Eye*, exemplifies this dynamic. Overwhelmed by self-hatred and a sense of her own ugliness, she participates in this implicit form of affirmative consumption when she spends her only money on Mary Jane candies:

There is an image on each pale yellow wrapping. An image of little Mary Jane, whose name the candy is named after. A white, happy face. Blond hair in soft disarray, blue eyes from a world of clean warmth staring out at her. The eyes are mischievous and petulant. They are pretty for Pecola. She consumes the sugar, and the sweetness is good. Somehow, consuming sweets involves eating eyes, eating Mary Jane. Mary Jane's affection. Mary Jane to be. Three pennies with Mary Jane had given her nine lovely orgasms. Lovely Mary Jane, a treat named after her. (Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* 48).

The reader may initially struggle to understand why Pecola chooses her favorite candy, but the symbolism behind this purchase is crucial. For Pecola, unwrapping and consuming the candy allows her to momentarily escape into the world of Mary Jane, a figure she idolizes. By eating the candy, Pecola imagines herself embodying the qualities she believes Mary Jane represents—beauty, desirability, and acceptance. The act of purchasing and consuming the candy brings Pecola a fleeting sense of joy, described as "nine lovely orgasms with Mary Jane." However, more importantly, it brings her closer, albeit temporarily, to her greatest wish: having blue eyes. The consumption of Mary Janes represents a form of "capitalist magic," wherein Pecola believes that by ingesting the candy, she can absorb the idealized qualities promoted through advertisements. This fantasy, however, requires Pecola to lose her sense of self entirely, as she dreams of inhabiting the cartoon-like figure of Mary Jane, a figure created by a system that idealizes whiteness and beauty. The entire act underscores Pecola's deep internalized racism and her desperate attempt to conform to the societal standards imposed on her.

For readers unfamiliar with the Mary Janes candy logo, it is important to note its significance, much like the characters Dick and Jane extend beyond Morrison's novel. The candy's logo, a simple cartoon of a blonde girl with blue eyes, plays a crucial role in Pecola's fantasy. While Morrison's depiction may not exactly replicate a real candy, the one-color illustration of Mary Jane adds another layer to Pecola's deep sense of self-hatred. In some versions of the logo, the girl's features are minimal, with only outlines, yet the blonde hair and blue eyes persist as dominant traits. This imagery reinforces Pecola's belief that she must be blonde and blue-eyed to be worthy of having something as desirable as a candy named after her. To Pecola, blue eyes represent the key to being seen, to being noticed and desired, and ultimately, to being worthy of existence in public life.

Pecola's consumption of Mary Jane candies can be viewed as her attempt to survive the 'Symbolic Order' of capitalist society, which defines beauty and worth through whiteness. The candy's image of a blonde, blue-eyed girl represents the ideals that dominate the Symbolic realm, ideals that Pecola internalizes through her consumption. By buying and eating the candy, Pecola tries to integrate herself into this symbolic system, hoping to align with the societal values it embodies—beauty, whiteness, and desirability. Lacan's notion of the 'Big Other', which represents the social structures, language, and cultural codes that dictate identity, is also relevant here. Pecola's identity is shaped by the gaze of the Other, which, in this case, is the white-dominated culture that defines what is beautiful and valuable. Her desire to consume the Mary Jane candies is driven by her need to gain validation from the Other, to be seen as worthy and to gain a sense of belonging in a society that marginalizes her. By

consuming products that represent the white ideal, Pecola attempts to adopt the identity imposed by the Other, reflecting Lacan's idea that our sense of self is always mediated by the gaze and expectations of external forces.

Moreover, Lacan's idea of 'lack'—the inherent sense of incompleteness that drives human desire—helps to explain Pecola's behavior. Pecola's intense desire for blue eyes and her consumption of the candy reveal a deeper sense of lack that she feels in terms of her identity. In a capitalist society, consumer goods are often presented as solutions to this lack, promising fulfillment and identity affirmation. However, Pecola's consumption of the Mary Jane candy, like the pursuit of any consumer good, cannot resolve her internal feelings of inadequacy. Instead, it reinforces her alienation, as the ideals she seeks through consumption remain perpetually out of reach.

Visual identity and consumerism are closely intertwined in Pecola's desperate quest to obtain blue eyes, as highlighted throughout *The Bluest Eye*. After experiencing the symbolic "nine orgasms with Mary Jane," Pecola realizes that simply wishing for blue eyes is insufficient—she must take more drastic measures to obtain them. Her next step is turning to Soaphead Church, whom she believes can grant her prayer for "fresh blue eyes" (Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*, 178). This longing reflects Pecola's shift from a metaphysical yearning for self-worth to an economic one, as she increasingly believes that her identity and value can only be attained through material possessions. Initially, Pecola purchases sneakers as a superficial attempt to signal her desire for beauty and acceptance, hoping that consumer goods will bridge the gap between who she is and who she wants to become. Her desire for blue eyes represents a deeper internalization of societal values, where beauty and worth are associated with whiteness. Edward Said's

discussion of the "Other" in postcolonial contexts further illuminates Pecola's plight, as she exists in a world that equates humanity with whiteness. Said's analysis suggests that Pecola's aspirations are rooted in a society that renders her invisible and less than fully human (108). Her journey, then, is not just about personal transformation, but also a reflection of the broader societal forces that devalue her very existence.

Pecola's reliance on consumerism to affirm her sense of self is evident in her purchase of Mary Jane candies, which allows her to briefly imagine herself in the fantasy life of the idealized white girl on the wrapper. But this is not her only attempt to humanize herself through consumption. When her friends ask why she spends time with the loud and intoxicated prostitutes upstairs, Pecola lies, saying, "They are not evil. They always give me things... beautiful dresses and shoes. I have more shoes than I could ever wear. And jewelry and candy and money" (Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* 105). Instead of defending these women through their personal qualities—such as kindness, wisdom, or humor—Pecola resorts to emphasizing their material wealth to make them seem more human in the eyes of her friends. This consumer-driven aspiration to humanize oneself through wealth is shared by Starr and her brother Seven in Angie Thomas's *The Hate U Give*. Living in a housing project, they do not yearn for specific items but for the status and possibilities that come with wealth. As Thomas writes, "If you're a kid in the projects in a one-bedroom, rich is the best thing to be" (131). In a world increasingly dominated by commercialization, wealth is not merely a means of affording things—it represents power, status, and, crucially, the ability to affirm one's humanity.

In a capitalist society, participation hinges on personal wealth. Without financial capital, affirmative consumption becomes impossible, and without this form of consumption, individuals are unable to confirm or solidify their identities within the visual culture that dominates popular media. Lacan's concept of 'desire' can help explain this dynamic, "Desire is the relation to the object that is lacking" (*Écrits* 223). Desire is not simply a need for objects, but a drive for recognition and validation through the symbolic value attached to those objects. In capitalism, consumer goods become stand-ins for identity, and people consume in an attempt to satisfy the desire for self-affirmation. However, as Lacan notes, "Desire is always the desire of the Other" (*Fundamental Concepts* 178), and it is never fully satisfied—it continually shifts from one object to another, leaving the subject always chasing an elusive sense of fulfillment. The unattainable nature of this desire ties into Lacan's notion of 'lack', the fundamental void or absence that drives human motivation, "The lack is the root of desire" (*Écrits* 245). In capitalist culture, the individual's sense of lack is perpetually reinforced by the promise that purchasing certain products will fill this void. Without the ability to participate in this consumer cycle, the subject cannot attempt to fill this lack, leading to a deeper sense of alienation and incompleteness.

Additionally, the concept of 'jouissance'—the paradoxical experience of both pleasure and pain—becomes relevant in the context of consumption. Affirmative consumption offers a fleeting sense of pleasure (or jouissance), but this pleasure is often accompanied by the pain of realizing that the fulfillment promised by consumerism is always out of reach. As Lacan states, "Jouissance is the impossible encounter with the Real" (*The Seminar* 216). The more one consumes, the more the sense of lack is

reinforced. Those who are excluded from this system, dehumanized and unable to participate, may experience an even greater longing for the fleeting jouissance that comes from affirming their identity through material goods.

Capitalism's popular media, while ostensibly multicultural, often perpetuates a vision of identity that contrasts sharply with the experiences depicted in *The Bluest Eye*. Within this media landscape, marginalized individuals frequently encounter a dissonance between their lived realities and the idealized images promoted by mainstream culture. This disconnection can lead to a profound sense of alienation, as the glare of advertisements and film screens imposes a narrow, white-centric standard of beauty and success. To assimilate into this paradigm, individuals may feel pressured to renounce aspects of their own identity. Historically, Black individuals have been further marginalized in a nation whose economic prosperity was built on the exploitation of enslaved people and justified through rhetoric that devalued Black lives. Vásquez observes that "the Black female commoditized body has traditionally acted as a reluctant path to American economic success" (71). This observation reveals how the Black female body has often been reduced to a mere commodity within the capitalist system. Such commodification stands in stark contrast to the body's intrinsic humanity and vitality, reducing it to an object of consumption rather than recognizing its full, vibrant existence.

Jean Baudrillard argues that the restriction of "women and blacks" to mere bodily existence is not solely a result of their discursive positioning as being "closer to nature," but also a consequence of their entrenched roles in patriarchal culture, where they have been subjected to servitude. Although the feminist movement of the twentieth century

brought women into the workforce and expanded their purchasing power, Baudrillard notes that they continued to be perceived as embodiments of femininity rather than as fully autonomous individuals. He asserts that marginalized communities, historically confined to roles of servitude, now possess "the greatest disruptive capacity and thus the most fundamental danger to every societal order whatsoever" (Baudrillard 137).

In *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison captures a period when market options that affirm Black identity were virtually nonexistent, and the 'Black is Sexy' movement was just beginning to take shape. The 'Black is Beautiful' initiative, while a significant anti-capitalist effort, faced challenges in countering the commodification of Black imagery. Popular media, which sets the standards for attractiveness, often exploits Blackness rather than celebrating it in its own right. This aligns with Lacan's idea that desire in consumer culture is not about fulfilling real needs but about the symbolic validation of identity through commodified images. Black individuals are often reduced to symbols or objects in advertisements, Hollywood productions, t-shirt designs, and the music industry, perpetuating their role as commodities rather than as individuals with intrinsic value.

Mass culture continues to uphold white beauty standards, leaving women, especially those depicted in *The Bluest Eye*, striving to conform to these ideals. Butler's theory of gender performativity helps explain how these standards are internalized and reproduced; women are judged based on their adherence to these norms, often depicted as products within media representations. The notion that "sex sells" reflects how the female body, particularly when it aligns with prevailing values, is commodified, with the nude female body becoming a potent symbol in this economy. Morrison critiques

this commodification by showing Claudia's rejection of conventional notions of beauty and Pecola's psychological distress resulting from her obsession with these ideals. Lacan's notion of the "mirror stage" further illuminates this critique, as Pecola's desire for blue eyes symbolizes a deeper quest for an idealized self-image that remains perpetually out of reach.

On the whole, the critique of Pecola's consumption of Mary Jane candies in *The Bluest Eye* illustrates the profound interplay between consumerism, identity, and desire within a capitalist culture. Through her desperate pursuit of blue eyes, Pecola embodies the internalization of white beauty ideals, driven by the Symbolic Order that equates worth and visibility with whiteness. Her actions, shaped by Lacanian concepts of desire, lack, and jouissance, reveal the painful reality of attempting to attain fulfillment through consumer goods that promise but never deliver self-affirmation. Pecola's longing for validation underscores the alienation experienced by marginalized individuals in a society where material goods and popular media reinforce exclusionary standards of beauty and success. This dynamic, far from offering a solution to her identity crisis, instead deepens her sense of alienation, as she is unable to achieve the idealized self-image projected by capitalist culture. Ultimately, Pecola's narrative serves as a critique of the commodification of identity and the hollow promises of consumerism, revealing the tragic consequences of seeking affirmation through a system that perpetuates both racial and economic disenfranchisement.

This chapter has explored the psychosocial disruptions caused by the internalization of Eurocentric beauty norms in Toni Morrison's novels that reveal the profound psychological fragmentation experienced by her African-American

characters. Through the lens of Lacanian psychoanalysis, this chapter has demonstrated how the ideals of white beauty, deeply embedded in the Symbolic Order, lead to identity crises, self-splitting, and alienation. Characters like Pecola Breedlove embody the devastating effects of striving for an unattainable standard of beauty, which warps their self-perception and leaves them perpetually disconnected from their authentic selves. Morrison's narratives, especially through Pecola, expose how the relentless pursuit of these ideals not only disrupts individual psyches but also reinforces systemic oppression. The chapter's analysis of Lacan's mirror stage has been instrumental in revealing how characters misrecognize themselves in the distorted reflection imposed by society. This misrecognition underscores the broader theme of how racialized beauty norms fracture African-American identity, pushing characters into a state of perpetual self-rejection.

As we transition to Chapter Five, the focus will shift towards Morrison's alternative vision of self-definition and identity reclamation. Here, we will explore how characters navigate and ultimately resist the oppressive beauty norms imposed upon them, seeking to redefine their identities on their own terms.

## **Chapter Five: Toni Morrison's Alternative**

### **Re/Definition of the Self**

This chapter will delve into Toni Morrison's alternative vision of self-definition and identity reclamation, offering a counter-narrative to the oppressive beauty norms explored in previous chapters. Where Eurocentric ideals of beauty have historically marginalized and dehumanized Black women, Morrison's works present a pathway to reclaiming identity that is rooted in cultural resilience and self-affirmation. Through the lives of her characters, Morrison critiques the internalization of white beauty standards and proposes a redefinition of beauty and identity that transcends societal impositions.

It will also explore how Morrison reimagines the concept of beauty and identity by centering the experiences of Black women who resist or navigate the damaging effects of racialized beauty norms. By examining the nuanced portrayals of characters who challenge or subvert these ideals, the discussion will focus on the reclamation of self-worth and agency. Drawing on psychoanalytic theory and feminist critiques, we will analyze how Morrison's characters undergo processes of healing, resistance, and transformation, positioning their narratives as vital to understanding the broader struggle for autonomy in a society dominated by exclusionary standards.

More importantly, the chapter aims to highlight the powerful reclamation of identity as a key theme in Morrison's works, showing how her characters forge new paths toward self-affirmation. This journey of resistance against externally imposed ideals paves the way for a more inclusive and authentic vision of identity, one that reflects the complexities and strengths of Black womanhood. By redefining beauty on their own terms, Morrison's characters embody the potential for liberation and self-empowerment, offering a vital counterpoint to the damaging effects of societal oppression.

## 1. Reconceptualization of Black Beauty through Pecola and Claudia in *The Bluest Eye*

The concept of beauty is fluid, changing across time and place. It is widely understood that elegance is one attribute that people often take pride in. However, this is not always the case. In Toni Morrison's novel *The Bluest Eye*, for instance, factors like race prevent certain characters from seeing themselves as beautiful. As Carmen Gillespie notes, "the novel discusses the structural factors that drive perception and definition of societal ideals such as appearance, normalcy, family, and sexuality" (46). For African American communities, which are often excluded from mainstream recognition, these structures present particular challenges. This aligns with postmodern debates about discourse. Michel Foucault, in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, describes discourse as the broad field of all statements, sometimes understood as a distinct group of claims or as a regulated activity that governs a set of statements (53). Binary oppositions, such as black/white, East/West, left/right, and male/female, often shape rhetorical antagonism. Moreover, discourse is a socially constructed framework rooted in language. Issues like femininity and racism are integral to the formation of such discourse.

In *The Bluest Eye*, the reader is introduced to Pecola Breedlove, a young girl who must confront the patriarchal ideals of beauty imposed by the dominant culture. These ideals are shaped by a society that prioritizes white, patriarchal, and unequal standards of attractiveness. In other words, the prevailing white culture defines beauty in terms of specific traits that must be adhered to in order for one to be considered attractive. Within the world of the novel, perfection is equated with blue eyes, fair skin, and blonde hair. As a result, Pecola prays every night for a year to have blue eyes, believing that

possessing them will bring her love, admiration, and strength: "Every night, without exception, she prayed for blue eyes" (Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* 46). In Pecola's mind, blue eyes would transform how she sees the world and, more importantly, how the world sees her. They would protect her from the hatred and abuse she experiences both within her home and in society at large. Tragically, Pecola becomes invisible to those around her as she loses herself in this unattainable pursuit of an ideal she can never embody.

Pecola Breedlove is not the only character shaped by society's unjust expectations of beauty. Her mother, Pauline Breedlove, also suffers under the racialization of appearance. After moving from Kentucky to Ohio with her husband, Cholly, Pauline is forced to reevaluate her own beauty standards. She longs for the familiarity of her community in Kentucky and feels alienated by the unfamiliar environment in Ohio. Additionally, she must adapt to the northern way of life, which comes with new social norms and expectations. Pauline's first encounters with people in Ohio reveal how difficult it is to conform to the patriarchal beauty ideals of this new setting. She feels out of place among the few Black women she meets because she doesn't straighten her hair, which leads them to ridicule her. Her attempt to apply makeup in the way they do only highlights her discomfort. Under these overwhelming conditions, which erode her sense of self-worth, Pauline finds solace in her work as a servant at the Fisher household. As Furman notes, "eventually, Pauline gives up on her own family and takes shelter in the gentle beauty that surrounds her in the Fisher household" (16). For Pauline, the Fisher home becomes a sanctuary, offering her an escape from the harsh realities of her life, including her troubled relationship with

Cholly. In this alienating world, Pauline lacks a community of peers who share her experiences. As a result, she gradually conforms to society's expectations of appearance. Her conversations with Cholly increasingly revolve around money—her focus being on clothes, and his on alcohol. Ironically, Pauline's interest in clothing and cosmetics is not born out of personal desire but rather a longing to attract the approving glances of other women. Her preoccupation with wealth and appearance reflects her submission to society's beauty standards, driven by a deep-seated need for social acceptance.

Unlike Pecola and Pauline, Claudia actively rejects the dominant white ideals of beauty. She serves as a symbol of resistance, speaking out on behalf of African American women against these racialized standards. As a central character in *The Bluest Eye*, Claudia stands in stark contrast to Pecola and Pauline. Rather than desiring the blue-eyed, blonde-haired white baby dolls she receives each Christmas—gifts she neither asks for nor wants—Claudia feels an impulse to dismantle them. Her reaction highlights her struggle to resist the ideals of beauty that other characters, like Pecola, long for. Claudia resents the white baby doll she receives at Christmas, unable to understand why it is seen as beautiful. To her, the doll is ugly. Frustrated by the lack of consideration for her own desires, she destroys it: "I did not know why I destroyed those dolls. But I knew nobody ever asked me what I wanted for Christmas" (Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* 21). By tearing apart the doll, Claudia symbolically rejects the distorted beauty standards imposed by white patriarchal society.

As the novel progresses, Claudia begins to embrace her own sense of beauty. As Maureen T. Reddy observes, "Claudia, whose voice concludes the book, does not see

Pecola's blue eyes, but eventually acknowledges that Pecola embodies all the beauty of the universe" (98). In this way, Claudia refuses to accept the white beauty myth and instead celebrates her own identity as a young Black woman. By the end of the novel, Claudia has found contentment in her own beauty, contrasting her experiences with the tragic fate of Pecola. Though she recognizes Pecola's suffering, Claudia considers herself fortunate: despite the pressures of patriarchal beauty standards, she does not succumb to the emotional turmoil that overwhelms Pecola. Reflecting on Pecola's plight, Claudia concludes, "And all our beauty, which was hers first and which she gave to us... When we stood astride her ugliness, we looked so beautiful" (Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* 205). Through Pecola's perceived ugliness, Claudia finds her own sense of perfection, liberating herself from the oppressive ideals of racialized beauty. Her ability to celebrate the Black body represents her ultimate rejection of the beauty standards forced upon Black women by white society.

The focus on whiteness in *The Bluest Eye* thus not only depicts this attitude in the characters, but also echoes the prejudices of society as a whole. Identifying whiteness as the sign of purity, cleanliness, and sophistication, characters like Pecola Breedlove, Geraldine, and Pauline Breedlove are inclined towards it as opposed to blackness, which they consider to be inferior. This desire for white skin is rooted in their psyche and is manifested at every turn in the novel: Pecola dreaming about blue eyes, Geraldine rejecting anything associated with black or dirty. Morrison shows how this desire is inscribed in African-Americans' consciousness and how it reinforces self-hatred and internalized racism within the black community.

From the outset of *The Bluest Eye*, Toni Morrison establishes the theme of whiteness as a societal construct. Her characters, along with their thoughts and behaviors, reveal how deeply ingrained the concepts of white supremacy are within American culture. However, Morrison does not present this obsession with whiteness as an inherent quality of her characters. Instead, through the postmodern technique of intertextuality, she problematizes and subverts these discourses. By skillfully weaving together various voices, perspectives, and literary allusions, Morrison destabilizes dominant racist narratives and questions the epistemological foundations of whiteness. Morrison's use of intertextuality undermines the authority of white master narratives and offers readers alternative perspectives. To deepen the reader's understanding of race and identity, she incorporates references to a range of cultural texts, including folklore, music, and literature. This method allows Morrison to critique the internalized effects of racism while simultaneously celebrating aspects of African American culture. By doing so, she not only confronts the issues of race and racism but also suggests pathways toward healing and reparations.

Subsequently, to grasp the topic of whiteness in *The Bluest Eye*, the Dick and Jane curriculum interface is highly relevant. The reader is guided through the novel with an implicit focus on whiteness, as suggested by the epigraph. This opening frames whiteness as something beautiful, safe, and happy. The epigraph presents an idealized white family: a father, mother, and their children, Dick and Jane, living in a perfect home. Morrison uses excerpts from the epigraph at the start of each section of the novel to introduce different characters. By doing so, she creates a deliberate contrast between the idealized whiteness of the Dick and Jane world and the experiences of the Black

characters in the story. This juxtaposition underscores how white ideologies affect the Black community while also critiquing the inadequacy of whiteness as a standard for understanding the realities of African American life. Linden Peach discusses Morrison's use of the Dick and Jane primer to show how the philosophies of the white community fail to capture the complexities of Black existence. The epigraph, therefore, symbolizes an idealized version of whiteness. From the very beginning of the novel, blackness is marginalized, as Rachel Lister notes, "the fear of marginalization haunts *The Bluest Eye*." Morrison introduces her story with a familiar narrative from a child's primer, emphasizing the idealized white family, while the repetition of the Dick and Jane passage throughout the novel highlights the persistent marginalization of Blackness.

Morrison replicates the Dick and Jane primer in various forms: first without punctuation, and later without any spacing. By doing this, she symbolizes the lack of order in the Black community's lives as compared to the structured, idealized world of whiteness. As Linden Peach notes, "the order of the white world, its coherence and spiritual certainty, is completely juxtaposed with the absence of harmony and the quest for coherence in the lives of African Americans" (35). This disparity leads many characters to idealize whiteness. Pecola, in particular, becomes a victim of these white narratives, embodying the destructive consequences of this loss of coherence.

While staying with the Mactees, Pecola consumes a large quantity of milk, an act that draws Ms. Macteer's frustration, "Three quarts of milk. That is what was there yesterday in that icebox. Three full quarts. And now they're gone, not a drop left. I don't mind if people come in and take what they need, but three quarts of milk? What the hell does anyone need with that much milk?" (Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* 23). Pecola's

excessive consumption of milk symbolizes her deep fascination with whiteness. She believes, on some level, that drinking milk will bring her closer to the white ideal. Additionally, she drinks the milk from a cup featuring Shirley Temple, a white movie star idolized by American children. David E. Magill, in his essay on whiteness, explains that "Morrison continually depicts whiteness as a possession, an asset of meaning that indirectly marks Blackness as having no worth" (Magill, 2003, p. 377). According to Magill, Morrison portrays Blackness as devalued, while whiteness is treated as a commodity. In this sense, Pecola's desire to consume milk can be seen as her metaphorical attempt to "purchase" whiteness, reflecting her longing to possess the qualities and status that society values.

Another character who longs for whiteness is Geraldine, a multiracial figure. As Magill explains, "multiracial protagonists destabilize whiteness for Morrison" because the concept of whiteness relies on a binary understanding of race rooted in an unjust hierarchy (378). The presence of multiracial characters like Geraldine, Maureen Peal, and Soaphead Church complicates the notion of whiteness. Their conflicted racial identities challenge the rigid logic of binary racial separation, which upholds white supremacy. These characters, in various ways, attempt to distance themselves from their African American heritage, associating blackness with dirt and inferiority. In doing so, they seek refuge in whiteness, trying to escape the stigmas attached to their Black origins.

Jan Furman reveals how Geraldine separates niggers from colored individuals, "While Pecola is in the house of Geraldine-tricked there by the hateful son of Geraldine- she transgresses a boundary demarking "colored individual" from "niggers". (15).

Geraldine informs her son that while colored individuals are neat and silent, niggers are messy and noisy. She creates a distinction of black and white when doing so. The more someone touches the white hue, the cleaner he or she gets, as the following quotation shows, "His mother did not want him playing with niggers. She had clarified the distinction between colored persons and niggers to him. Easily recognizable, they were. Colored people were safe and quiet; filthy and noisy niggers." (Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* 87)

In his essay "Toni Morrison's 'Cave Allegory': Movies, Consumption, and Platonic Realism in *The Bluest Eye*," Thomas H. Fick asserts that movies play a central disruptive role in the novel, not only because they promote ideals of beauty—flawless white bodies and romanticized love—but also due to the way they present these ideals (20). Hollywood, as a cultural apparatus, functions as a powerful force in disseminating and reinforcing the ideals of whiteness. Throughout *The Bluest Eye*, cinema plays a key role in shaping the psyches and identities of multiple characters, especially the African American characters who are exposed to and internalize these images. In this sense, cinema operates as a part of the "ideological state apparatus" described by Louis Althusser, serving to perpetuate the values and philosophies of the capitalist, white-dominated class (5). Through repeated references to white movie stars, Morrison highlights how deeply these ideals of beauty have permeated the consciousness of Black individuals. As Fick points out, several instances in *The Bluest Eye* reveal the powerful influence of white cinematic icons. For example, Mr. Henry, the Macteers' boarder, playfully refers to the young girls as "Greta Garbo" and "Ginger Rogers." Pecola obsessively drinks milk simply to admire the image of Shirley Temple on her cup. Black

characters even style their hair to resemble Hedy Lamarr, and Betty Grable's name dominates the theater marquees (24). These examples underscore how the pervasive presence of white beauty standards shapes the self-perception and aspirations of Black characters in the novel.

These references demonstrate the pervasive influence of white film stars on Black characters, revealing how even those who are marginalized by society's beauty standards remain captivated by Hollywood's portrayal of white women as the ultimate symbol of desirability and success. Morrison critiques this obsession by showing how Black men, like Mr. Henry, participate in the idolization of white film stars, comparing young Black girls like Frieda and Claudia to Ginger Rogers and Greta Garbo. This comparison underscores the impossibility of attaining these white standards of beauty and highlights how such ideals contribute to the disillusionment and alienation of Black characters who feel they cannot measure up to these unattainable ideals.

The study of whiteness has emerged as a significant area of mainstream research and media attention. Recent scholarship primarily aims to identify and analyze the markers of white identity. Many contemporary scholars have engaged in this field of study. For example, Rachel Lister discusses Henry Louis Gates Jr.'s 2003 documentary *America Beyond the Color Line*, in which the renowned postcolonial critic explores race in Hollywood. During his visit to Los Angeles, Gates observes the industry's preference for lighter-skinned Black actresses over darker-skinned ones. He describes this as "one of the deepest mysteries of Hollywood: the color line within the community." Gates concludes that "minor differences in skin tone can make or break the career of a Black woman" (82). This observation highlights the persistent issue of colorism in the film

industry and its broader implications for racial identity and representation in American media.

In his article, "The Fourth Face: The Image of God in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*," Allen Alexander observes that biblical parallels—both from Western and African traditions—are prevalent throughout the novel. However, he argues that these parallels are most intriguing and complex in *The Bluest Eye*. Among the many religious references in the text, Morrison's depictions and allusions to God stand out as particularly subtle and, therefore, the most profound (111). One of the most divisive and sensitive themes Morrison addresses is the portrayal of God as white, a concept that deeply impacts the characters' perception of divinity, race, and self-worth. Through this exploration, Morrison challenges the racialization of spiritual ideals, prompting readers to reflect on how whiteness has been embedded in religious imagery and its consequences for marginalized communities.

Through the character of Cholly, Morrison explores the complex and troubling depiction of God: "He wondered why God looked like that. No. God was a beautiful old white guy, with long white hair, a flowing white mustache, and tiny blue eyes that seemed depressed when people died. So, when people died, it must be the devil that looks like that" (*The Bluest Eye* 134). This passage reveals Cholly's internalized confusion about divinity and race. On the Fourth of July, while walking with his friend Blue Jack, Cholly sees a man lifting a watermelon overhead, ready to smash it. Cholly looks at the man's long arm and wonders if God looks like him. This thought disturbs him, and he begins to associate the man's appearance with the devil, suggesting the moral and racial ambiguity that Cholly wrestles with in his understanding of God.

Similarly, Pecola has a moment of religious disillusionment when she is confronted by Geraldine, who orders her out of the house. As Pecola turns toward the front door, she encounters an image of Jesus staring down at her. However, instead of offering comfort, this Jesus appears powerless and indifferent: "Pecola turned to find the front door and found Jesus with depressed and unsurprised eyes staring down at her, his long brown hair parted in the center, and gay paper flowers twisted around his forehead" (Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* 76). This depiction emphasizes Pecola's sense of abandonment and the hollow promises of salvation. Both Cholly's and Pecola's experiences illustrate Morrison's critique of religious imagery, particularly the ways in which whiteness has been projected onto spiritual figures, leaving Black characters alienated from both God and themselves.

Luce Irigaray's work, particularly *This Sex Which Is Not One*, has garnered significant attention from feminist critics in recent years. Her concepts of the "sexual gaze" and "specular economy" provide a crucial framework for analyzing the visual objectification of women in Western society. However, much of the feminist application of Irigaray's theory has focused predominantly on white female protagonists, assuming a "universal" standard of female beauty. In contrast, Toni Morrison challenges these frameworks in both her fiction and nonfiction, prompting a reevaluation of how women approach the specular system and beauty standards. Morrison critiques the conceptual foundations upon which ideals of beauty are built, emphasizing the ethnic dimensions that are often overlooked in dominant cultural discourses. From her debut novel, *The Bluest Eye*, to later works such as *Song of Solomon* and *Tar Baby*, as well as in her essays and interviews, Morrison shifts the

focus from a gendered, white-centric notion of the gaze to a broader exploration of beauty rooted in racial and cultural identity. Over the span of two decades, Morrison has worked to redefine beauty outside of the narrow confines of the specular economy, advocating for a vision of beauty that is grounded in racial authenticity and reflective of diverse experiences.

Early in her career, Morrison rejected the concept of attractiveness as both racist and superficial, shaped largely by the standards of white consumer culture. In her 1971 essay "What the Black Woman Feels About Women's Lib", she addresses representations of Black female beauty, such as Nefertiti, which Black women began to reclaim in response to the dominance of white beauty ideals. However, Morrison remains skeptical of this reclamation, questioning whether it might be "almost as good" for Black women to remain focused on being "useful" rather than striving for romanticized notions of beauty. She critiques this "romanticism" as a hollow ideal, urging a reevaluation of beauty that transcends mere aesthetic standards and engages with the deeper, more substantial qualities of strength and purpose.

This statement challenges traditional notions of beauty, yet within its rejection lies the foundation for Morrison's potential redefinition of beauty. Morrison distinguishes between the superficial traits of white, commercialized beauty and the "O.K." qualities of Black women, presenting two significant points of contrast. First, her remark that Black people can "remain useful" subtly critiques the uselessness often associated with white cultural depictions of female beauty. In white beauty standards, women are expected to have soft hands and delicate feet, symbolizing idleness, whereas Morrison highlights the value of Black women who work, with their "calloused hands"

and "tired feet." This contrast subtly informs the reader that idleness is an underlying criterion for traditional beauty, implying that to be attractive, one must appear untouched by labor. In her later works—such as *Song of Solomon* (1977), *Tar Baby* (1981), *Beloved* (1987), and *Paradise* (1997)—Morrison shifts the focus to a more functional, valuable form of beauty. She critiques the idealized beauty of white popular culture for its detachment from reality, noting how it objectifies women by separating the image of beauty from the real person. In this sense, white beauty ideals are "unreal," existing only as abstract, unattainable representations. Morrison connects true beauty to the lived experiences of the body, grounded in racial and cultural identity. Over time, she moves from accepting that Black people with small necks, calloused hands, and sore feet are "O.K." to asserting that these characteristics are not only authentic but also more beautiful than the idealized, fragile stereotypes of white femininity. In her redefinition, beauty becomes a reflection of usefulness and truth, qualities that reject the passive, objectified ideals of white culture in favor of a more grounded, authentic expression of womanhood.

In *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison critiques the visual structure of mainstream American culture and rejects white-defined standards of feminine beauty. The novel reveals the destructive impact of these white ideals on a young Black girl, Pecola Breedlove. Films play a central role in spreading these beauty ideals to the masses. For instance, Pauline Breedlove, is well-versed in movie stars, having spent much of her first pregnancy in the movie theater. Morrison highlights the specular nature of beauty judgments here: Pauline relies on visual standards, formed by what she sees in films, to assess someone's attractiveness. However, Morrison emphasizes that this supposedly

"absolute" scale of beauty is arbitrary and heavily influenced by race. Although it claims to be universal, this scale is rooted in white norms, which Pauline has internalized. The silver screen promotes and markets this white standard of beauty, shaping how Black characters like Pauline and Pecola view themselves and others. Through these examples, Morrison critiques the pervasive and harmful influence of white beauty ideals on Black identity and self-worth.

Because Pecola does not meet the white standards of the specular system, she is rendered invisible by individuals like Mr. Yacobowski. This silence and invisibility are internalized by Pecola and her family, the Breedloves. They "wear their ugliness" because society, through its visual representations, labels them as ugly. Morrison skillfully illustrates the paradox of the specular system by describing Pecola's "ugliness" in terms often associated with beauty: "And Pecola. She hid behind hers. Rarely glimpsed, masked, eclipsed—peeking out from behind the shroud, only to long for her mask to return" (Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* 34-35). In this metaphor, Morrison uses the language of concealment usually reserved for extraordinary beauty, where a veil or mask might enhance allure. However, Pecola, lacking conventional attractiveness, hides behind the reification of her absence in society. Because she does not possess beauty, she has no presence in the eyes of the visually dominant white community. Morrison's ironic observation is that Pecola's supposed ugliness, defined by white standards, forces her into a state of invisibility—yet this very absence becomes her only means of presence. She is seen, paradoxically, through her invisibility. Pecola retreats into this void, masking herself under the weight of a cultural ugliness that the

world refuses to even acknowledge. Thus, her invisibility becomes her tragic form of existence, shaped by a society that overlooks her entirely.

Pecola's desire to disappear is frequently expressed through her internalization of visual erasure. In this scene, several key ideas converge. To begin with, Pecola's longing to vanish is so profound that she has internalized the act of making herself invisible. Her submission to societal standards of beauty requires her to reject and erase her physical body in an attempt to become unseen. This desire for disappearance is often linked to her relationship with her mother, Pauline. Yet, even when her body fades from perception, Pecola's eyes remain. This is not only because a woman's eyes are sometimes considered a marker of feminine beauty, but also because Morrison emphasizes the specular construction of beauty in culture. The blue eyes Pecola prays for would transform both how she sees herself and how she is seen by others. The novel's focus on the specular nature of female appearance is highlighted in the scenes where Pecola gazes at her reflection in the mirror.

Interestingly, the rejection of the real feminine body is embedded in the process of internalizing societal standards of beauty, which rely on a specular, surface-level artifice due to their visual nature. In this system, appearance is achieved through how one is seen, rather than through the presence of the actual body. Pauline Breedlove, like her daughter Pecola, attempts to erase her physical self in order to conform to white ideals of beauty. After moving with Cholly and becoming immersed in cinema, Pauline begins to shape her identity based on the artificial images she sees on screen. Her growing interest in clothing, makeup, and hairstyles reflects this shift, leading to conflicts with Cholly and further distancing her from the reality of her own body.

Pauline's attempt to emulate the appearance of a white movie star reveals her denial of her own physical reality. As a Black woman, breastfeeding and possessing features that do not resemble Jean Harlow's, Pauline disregards the basic truths of her body in favor of an unattainable image. Morrison critiques the racist foundations of popular culture's standards of female beauty. By internalizing white beauty ideals, Pauline distances herself from her own identity and reality. Morrison underscores this disconnection, noting that for Black women, the pursuit of romanticized beauty ideals is a futile detour, disconnected from their lived experience. Pauline's adherence to these ideals marks a redefinition of herself, one that is rooted in an illusion rather than in her authentic, physical self. Morrison critiques this pursuit, highlighting that it is neither born from nor aligned with Pauline's true physical existence.

In her internalization of the white-defined norm of female appearance, Pauline is not alone. Morrison portrays a black culture through *The Bluest Eye* that has adopted on its own the white criteria of appearance. The explanation of Claudia's hate of white girls illustrates this: "What made people smile at them and think, 'Awwwww,' just not for me When they approached them on the pavement, the eye slip of black women and the possessive gentleness of their contact as they treated them" (Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* 22). Black people are viewed here as conveying the gaze to white children, and thus their appearance. They uphold the white visual beauty scale. Morrison introduces black people who gaze at black girls in *The Bluest Eye*-Maureen, Geraldine, and Pauline-only to condemn them in favour of white girls. Especially revealing is the scene in which Pauline selects a little white girl over Pecola, her own daughter. The argument of

Morrison is that the gaze is not male exclusively; Black women may even keep other Black women up to a visual attraction scale.

In *The Bluest Eye*, the primary distinction between the male and female gaze lies in its connection to sexual attraction and social power. Women often look at other women to evaluate their own social standing, comparing themselves to others based on external beauty standards. This is an act of self-objectification, where women internalize societal ideals and measure their worth through appearance. By gazing at other women, they assess their position in a hierarchy that is largely defined by a Eurocentric standard of beauty. For men, however, the gaze tends to be more overtly linked to sexual objectification. Women are seen as objects of desire, their bodies commodified for male pleasure, rather than individuals with agency.

This distinction between the male and female gaze is central to the dynamics in the novel, particularly in the character of Pauline Breedlove. Pauline, much like her daughter Pecola, has absorbed the white standard of beauty, learning to evaluate herself through a lens shaped by popular culture. Her obsession with the glamour and perfection of white actresses in the movies leads her to devalue her own Blackness and physical appearance. This internalized gaze causes her to reject her own reality and, tragically, to project this same harsh judgment onto Pecola. In Pauline's world, the ideal woman is one who embodies whiteness, an impossible standard for her and Pecola. This gaze is not neutral or benign; it actively strips Pauline of her ability to appreciate her own beauty or that of her daughter. For Pecola, the impact of these gazes is particularly profound. She is not only subjected to the critical gaze of her mother but also becomes the victim of the male gaze in its most destructive form. The character of Cholly

Breedlove exemplifies the violent consequences of the male gaze when it is linked to power and domination. In the scene where Cholly rapes Pecola, the male gaze transforms from simple observation into an assertion of control. Cholly, consumed by his own emotional scars and rage, sees Pecola not as his daughter or a child, but as a vessel for his own distorted desires. His gaze dehumanizes her, reducing her to an object upon which he can act out his own frustrations and need for dominance. Morrison describes Cholly's disconnection from Pecola's humanity: "He saw her dimly and could not tell what she was thinking or feeling. Why did she always look so beaten?" This moment captures the essence of the male gaze in its most destructive form, where the person being observed is stripped of individuality and reduced to a mere object. Cholly's inability to perceive Pecola's inner life reflects the dehumanizing power of this gaze. Pecola becomes an extension of his internal turmoil rather than a subject with her own needs and identity.

The novel also explores Pecola's yearning to escape the crushing weight of these gazes through her obsession with blue eyes. Her desire for blue eyes symbolizes her wish to be seen in a different light, to be loved and valued in a world that rejects her. Blue eyes, in Pecola's mind, represent an escape from the ugliness that others project onto her. She believes that if she could have blue eyes, the world would gaze upon her with admiration, rather than disdain. This fantasy is, of course, unattainable and tragic. It illustrates the devastating effect of both the male and female gazes, as Pecola internalizes the belief that her worth and visibility are tied to meeting an impossible beauty standard.

## 2. Redefinition of Black Beauty through Hagar in *Song of Solomon*

*Song of Solomon*; on the other hand, does not concentrate on a study of the specular structure and female appearance to the degree that *The Bluest Eye* does. However, Morrison develops some of the same problems surrounding visual representations of white female attractiveness in the subplot involving Hagar. *Song of Solomon* serves as a transitional text between *The Bluest Eye* and *Tar Baby* in Morrison's redefinition of female appearance, because in it, she provides a picture of black female beauty, although a distressed one in Hagar. After he broke off their friendship, and her ensuing hysteria and death, the Hagar subplot follows her attempts at killing Milkman. What starts her downward spiral is not only the Milkman's friendship ending, but also that Hagar sees him with a girl who fits the white expectations of female attractiveness, "It was the hair, her lover's hair that Hagar wanted... she would not feel so low if she had it" (Morrison, *Song of Solomon* 315). This fixation on the girl's physical appearance, particularly her hair, reveals the deep-seated insecurities Hagar harbors, driven by the belief that her own beauty falls short in comparison. This passage encapsulates Hagar's tragic internalization of white beauty standards, showing how such ideals can distort self-perception and contribute to personal devastation.

The mad shopping spree of Hagar illustrates her internalization of the advertising (white) representations of female appearance exemplified by Milkman's new girlfriend. Morrison exposes the convergence of color, class, attractiveness, and female beauty in the definition of the makeup counter: "Lipsticks in soft white hands spread out of their sheaths like the glossy red penises of puppies" (*Song of Solomon* 310- 311). It is not so much that Hagar is insane; however, Morrison utilizes Hagar to enact the absurdity of

the American cultural expectations of feminine attractiveness. Hagar believes that in order to win Milkman's attention and affection, she must buy into and embody the ideals of beauty imposed by a culture that overemphasizes physical appearance—ideals that are implicitly shaped by white, market-driven standards. Morrison critiques this internalization of white female beauty. Here, the authentic physicality of Black women is overshadowed by a fixation on white standards of attractiveness. To achieve the white-defined ideal of perfect hair—silky and light—Hagar feels compelled to straighten her "wild, wet shoals of hair" rather than embracing her natural beauty. Instead of striving for self-acceptance, Hagar is consumed by a futile quest for perfection, one defined by an unattainable and externally imposed standard (314).

In *Song of Solomon*, as in *The Bluest Eye*, the specular structure serves as the defining paradigm for judging female beauty. Hagar's journey begins with a moment of self-reflection, much like Pecola's descent into madness. This scene, where Hagar gazes at herself in a mirror, echoes Pecola's obsessive longing for beauty. Morrison describes the scene with Pilate standing by Hagar's bed, holding a compact:

One day, before the face of her granddaughter, Pilate stood on Hagar's bed and kept a compact. It was trimmed with a goldlike metal and had a pink plastic lid. Look kid. See here? Pilate flipped it all around to show it off and pushed in the grab. The lid sprung open and Hagar noticed a tiny portion of her face mirrored in the mirror. Then she took the compact and looked for a long time in the mirror. (*Song of Solomon* 313)

Hagar is transformed into a focus of the gaze by the act of gazing in the mirror which positions her inside the complexities of the specular structure where she needs to construct herself in the form of a white visual ideal of feminine appearance. This moment is crucial: "She could not resist from the moment she stared into the mirror in the little pink compact. It was as though she kept her breath and did not let it go until the enthusiasm and the busyness resulted in an appearance that would dazzle him".

(Morrison, *Song of Solomon* 313) Here, Morrison critiques not only the white standards of female beauty but also the very nature of the visual structure that leads to self-objectification. The mirror scene places Hagar within a system of representation where her appearance and how she perceives herself become more significant than her true identity.

In *Song of Solomon*, as in *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison connects the gaze with male sexual attraction. However, she often removes gender from the concept of the gaze, revealing it as a broader societal mechanism. Hagar desperately seeks validation of her beauty from Milkman, hoping her attractiveness will be acknowledged. Yet, it is Pilate and Reba's feminine gaze that exposes the reality behind her carefully constructed façade:

She finally opened the door and introduced herself to Pilate and Reba. And it was in their eyes that she noticed in the reflection something she had never seen before: the wet, torn hose, the soiled white shirt, the dirty, lumpy makeup on her lip, the streaked crimson, and the wild, wet hair on her shoals. She found all this in their minds.... (Morrison, *Song of Solomon* 314)

Pilate and Reba serve as a reflection of truth in contrast to the imaginary image Hagar tries to project. In *Song of Solomon*, the women embody honesty and authenticity, standing in opposition to the women in *The Bluest Eye*, who have internalized the societal gaze and the ideals of beauty imposed by a white, specular community. This difference speaks to one of Morrison's key critiques, as outlined in her essay "What the Black Woman Thinks Regarding Women's Lib", where she argues that (white) female beauty "separates us from reality" (15). Pilate and Reba function as a reality check, highlighting the racial inauthenticity of Hagar's attempts to mold herself into the image

of white female beauty. They represent a standard of Black female beauty that rejects the false ideals Hagar has internalized. Interestingly, this positions women as the true judges in Morrison's redefined beauty landscape. Unlike the male gaze, which reduces individuals to objects of desire, the female gaze in *Song of Solomon* recognizes genuine beauty and authenticity. Morrison suggests that women, particularly Black women, possess the ability to distinguish real beauty from superficiality, making them the rightful arbiters in this contest between reality and illusion.

In this novel, Morrison redefines elegance in racially authentic terms by one essential characteristic of female beauty: hair. It is Milkman's new girlfriend's silky, light hair that makes Hagar try to destroy him; Morrison directly compares it to Hagar's wild hair. Hair acts, then, as a touchstone for racial authenticity and therefore for the redefinition of female beauty by Morrison. She says, "Why does not he like my hair until Hagar dies?" Pilate and Reba fill out a dialogue page attempting to persuade Hagar that Milkman enjoys her hair, but Hagar knows better, saying, "He prefers silky hair." Pilate then ties hair to ethnic identification as a characteristic of beauty:

How does he not love your hair? It is the same hair that develops from his own armpits.... It is all over his head, Hagar. It is still his hair. He has to love it He may not realize what he likes, but one of these days, darling, he can come around. How will he love himself and despise your hair?" (Morrison, *Song of Solomon* 315)

Here Morrison redefines feminine beauty by grounding it in racial identity. Rather than striving to emulate the beauty ideals of other races, she envisions a world where Black individuals embrace and value their authentic, racially rooted beauty. To do otherwise, she suggests, is an act of self-rejection. For Milkman, to love Hagar's hair—her natural beauty—is to love himself and his cultural heritage. A key moment in Milkman's

journey of self-discovery is when he returns to the house on Not Doctor Street with the package of Hagar's hair, which Pilate had given him. This symbolic act highlights the significance of ethnic identity in the redefinition of beauty. Through Hagar's hair, Morrison presents a new vision of feminine attractiveness, one that centers on embracing ethnic authenticity as the true marker of beauty.

### **3. Challenging White Beauty through Jadine and Margaret in *Tar Baby***

In *Tar Baby*, the concepts of attractiveness and the specular framework are central to the novel's focus. Unlike *The Bluest Eye* or *Song of Solomon*, where beauty is critiqued or redefined in more limited ways, *Tar Baby* offers a complete overhaul of both the notion of beauty and the visual structures that support it. In *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison critiques the harmful impact of white standards of beauty on Black individuals, while *Song of Solomon* introduces a redefinition of female beauty as part of the male protagonist's self-discovery. However, in *Tar Baby*, the core issue is explicitly beauty itself.

Morrison intricately weaves together themes of feminine appearance, artificiality, design versus nature, the gaze, fertility, ethnic identity, and the influence of media images, creating a narrative that deconstructs traditional notions of beauty. She presents a vision of Black female beauty that challenges and dismantles the conventional frameworks through which it is often discussed. The novel juxtaposes two primary representations of beauty: Margaret, a white woman, and Jadine, a Black woman. Through these characters, Morrison critiques the white-established norms of female beauty and explores the internalization of these stereotypes by both Black

individuals and Black culture as a whole. At the same time, Morrison constructs an alternative, Black-centered ideal of beauty through a series of marginalized characters—such as the woman in purple, Therese, and even the island landscape itself, which Morrison personifies with vivid richness. These elements work together to create a new, Black-defined standard of attractiveness that rejects the artificiality and limitations of the white gaze, celebrating authenticity and a deeper connection to ethnic and cultural identity.

In *Tar Baby*, Morrison introduces Margaret, a representation of white-defined elegance, who is unfavorably referred to as "Principal Beauty". As a former beauty pageant winner, Margaret embodies society's reification of white female beauty standards. Through her character, Morrison critiques these ideals. Her remark that it may be better for Black women to remain "useful women" implies that white female beauty, as portrayed by Margaret, is ultimately frivolous and devoid of substance. Throughout the novel, Margaret leads a pampered, meaningless existence, her only purpose being to maintain her outward appearance, symbolized by her "beautifully manicured hands". Morrison extends this critique by comparing Margaret's concept of beauty to waste. The "red and white gumdrops in a red and white jar," likened to the Valerians, are made from "the syrup sludge left over from the main dress—Teddy Boys". This metaphor draws a parallel between Margaret's superficial beauty and discarded, unnecessary remnants. Morrison emphasizes this connection when Valerian recalls seeing Margaret "on a float with a polar bear... all red and white, like the Valerians" (*Tar Baby* 11-51). In this passage, Morrison vividly illustrates how white beauty in popular culture is both artificial and wasteful, devoid of real value or purpose.

In her critique of white feminine beauty, Morrison asserts that “eventually, the achievement of beauty must distinguish us from reality” (“Women’s Lib” 15). In *The Bluest Eye* and *Song of Solomon*, this detachment from reality manifests in a rejection of the body, where female characters, in their attempts to conform to conventional American beauty standards, deny or avoid the truth of their own physical existence. In *Tar Baby*, we first encounter Margaret wearing “Frownies” between her eyebrows. When Valerian asks about them, Margaret explains, “I don’t want to frown. Frownies don’t let you frown. They remove the results of frowning.” Valerian’s response is ironically revealing: “But why don’t you just stop frowning? Then you wouldn’t need to tape your face with little pieces of paper”. This exchange highlights Margaret’s effort to suppress the visible signs of aging and unhappiness, striving to maintain an unrealistic image of beauty. Her refusal to accept her body’s natural aging process reflects her deeper dissatisfaction with her life. As their conversation escalates into an argument, Valerian’s final remark becomes even more revealing: “Don’t snarl... your frown is slipping” (Morrison, *Tar Baby* 22-31). The lines on Margaret’s face are symbolic of her reality—her unhappiness. Rather than confronting this unhappiness or adjusting her life to improve her well-being, she clings to a beauty standard that denies her lived experience. Morrison suggests that instead of adhering to such unrealistic ideals of beauty, Margaret could either accept the reality of her situation or redefine beauty to embrace truth rather than illusion.

Furthermore, Morrison uses Jadine's appearance not to emphasize black-defined beauty, but to illustrate the internalization of white beauty standards by black people and black culture. Jadine's nickname, "copper Venus", reflects this—typical of

Morrison's characters. Her beauty is likened to that of a Roman goddess, with dark eyes added almost as an afterthought, as if it made little difference. This portrayal suggests a universal ideal of female attractiveness centered around white standards. Had Jadine embodied Morrison's vision of authentic black beauty, she might have been nicknamed after a black goddess, such as Kali. Like Margaret, Jadine symbolizes the emptiness and artificiality of white-defined female beauty. Her role as a foreign model, whose beauty must photograph well, highlights Morrison's third major critique of white beauty standards: beauty, in this context, is entangled in the superficial structures of popular culture. It reduces the self to an object, distorting both beauty and reality. Morrison suggests that beauty created solely for visual consumption may not be true beauty at all, hinting at her later exploration of beauty defined by blackness.

Morrison frequently uses imagery of eyes and mirrors to symbolize the specular system, as seen in *The Bluest Eye* and *Song of Solomon*. In *Tar Baby*, a pivotal scene occurs where Jadine becomes transfixed by Son's intense gaze through a mirror. She perceives herself as detached and unaware of her own actions, presenting herself in a stylized, almost superficial manner. Son, questioning her choice to become a model, flips through her magazine spread, lingering on the images: "He came to a four-page spread of her in other poses after turning the pages for a few seconds; other clothing, other hair, but still the same wet and wide lips. 'Goddamn,' he muttered. Go-oddamn." Jadine does not respond to his remark but simply grins at the expression on his face (Morrison, *Tar Baby* 114-116). This scene clearly shows the operation of the mechanism of speculation. In the images, Jadine, the elegant, is portrayed and objectified. Son provides the masculine gaze of lust in which he stares at the frozen

pictures of Jadine. The gratification the woman gets from catching the male eyes is also portrayed by Morrison: Jadine watches Son look with a grin at her objectified self. In a great twist of irony, Morrison then reveals how Son and Jadine attempt to make life resemble art by forcing these artificial images on reality; they reconstruct their relationship in the form of their representational relationship of appearance object and male gazer. The physical truth that they exist, breathe, move is denied by this concept of attractiveness. Morrison criticizes within the specular framework the representational nature of appearance because it objectivizes the self and is disconnected from reality.

The horrors of representation are conveyed through various symbolic elements in *Tar Baby*. Reflections, often contrasted with literal scenes of mirroring, play a significant role. Valerian's eyes, for example, are described as mirror-like, reflecting his cold detachment and artificial nature. Son even suggests that Valerian use mirrors to repel soldier insects from his greenhouse, thus preserving this artificial environment. Photography, within this specular framework, serves as a recurring symbol of objectification. Jadine is not only frequently photographed but also enjoys taking pictures of those she encounters, creating images as a way of managing reality by turning it into something she can control. Her need to "sketch [Son] and make it over" (Morrison, *Tar Baby*158) reflects this desire to reshape and objectify him. Distracted by his physical appearance, she seeks to reduce him to an image she can manipulate.

She also wishes to draw Alma instead of interacting with her at every actual or linked stage. In Eloë, where Jadine is unwilling to cope with the truth of Son's community, the most telling scene takes place, so she gets out of her camera and starts shooting. Jadine recalled her camera right before she felt she might go crazy, attempting

to hold a conversation moving. Instead of engaging with reality, Jadine struggles to objectivize the encounter. These people's conceptual images are simpler to cope with, even to dismiss, than their three-dimensional existence. In the remark "She saw planes and angles and lost character," Morrison sums up Jadine's character flaw (*Tar baby*, 158). Her visual objectification blinds her to the truth that is important.

Morrison's criticism of female beauty's interrelationship with the specular framework brings her to a description of black female beauty beyond that system. Black elegance, since it is strongly related to truth, exceeds representation. The lady in yellow is the first personification of the black female attractiveness Morrison offers:

The view itself was far too tall for a woman. Jadine realized there was so much hip, too much chest beneath her long Canary yellow coat. The corporation will chuckle at her from the lobby, so why was she transfixed in the shop like everybody else? The height there? Skin as tar against a yellow canary dress? ... Then she looked up and they noticed something so intense in her eyes that her eyelashes were melted down. (*Tar Baby* 45)

This lady establishes the black definition of elegance for Morrison. First instead of refusing to adhere to a popular version of appearance to the truth of her body, this woman exceeds the concept with too much "body". Her beauty comes from her body's truth. Second, ethnicity plays a key and distinguishing role in this version of beauty. Her skin serves as an essential part of her appearance, "like tar"; it might also be the cause behind her beauty. Importantly, Morrison concentrates on the eyes of the woman as a representation of elegance, as in *The Bluest Eye*. The eyes of this lady, unlike Pecola, who wishes for blue eyes, are not only sufficient, but incredibly strong. Unlike Pecola and Hagar, she "does not have to become somebody. . . . she already is" anyone (McKay 422). The most revealing portrayal of the woman in yellow includes her

"unphotographable elegance". For Morrison, black beauty is inherently unrepresentable; it cannot be objectified into an image, a painting, or an item. It is genuine and true. Therefore, Morrison excludes black beauty from the specular framework.

In contrast, the lady in yellow assumes the role of a judge of Jadine's beauty: "...the woman dramatically tilted her head to the left and fixed her gaze upon Jadine. Her eyes, too striking for mere eyelashes to obscure, fired an arrow of saliva through her teeth onto the pavement below, accompanied by the slight parting of her lips" (Morrison, *Tar Baby* 46). This figure critiques both physical allure and ethnic authenticity, reminiscent of Pilate and Reba in *Song of Solomon*. Through her gaze, she renders Jadine unsettled and disconnected from her own identity. In *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison portrays Black characters grappling with internalized white beauty ideals. However, in *Song of Solomon* and, to a greater extent, *Tar Baby*, she shifts to depicting women who serve as arbiters of a newly defined Black standard of beauty, a vision Morrison constructs through these narratives.

In the tale of the blind race and the woman Therese, the second way Morrison embodies the exclusion of attractiveness from the specular system happens. Therese has "missing vision", and she is born from a race of blind citizens descended from those slaves who went blind the moment they saw Dominique. Blindness, therefore is the ethnic legacy of Therese. Yet as the tale continues, "What they have heard, they have seen with the mind's eye" (Morrison, *Tar Baby* 151-152). This ignorance and intuition theme shows that maybe the main beauty is not evident, or that seeing simply blinds

one to other truths. The physical blindness and vital insight of Therese contrast directly with the essential blindness and physical sight of Jadine.

In a scene that directly engages with the central themes of Morrison's body of work, the island landscape becomes a symbolic extension of her exploration of Black female beauty. During a picnic with Son, Jadine attempts to capture the scenery's elegance, though she remains blind to its true beauty. When Son leaves to get petrol, Jadine is left alone, confronting the landscape in a moment of isolation. Echoing Pecola's perceived ugliness in *The Bluest Eye*, which causes the shopkeeper to avert his gaze, we learn that Jadine similarly finds the Isle des Chevaliers repulsive, noting "this is the hideous aspect of the Isle des Chevaliers—the part from which she averted her eyes as she rode by". The once passive landscape becomes animate and oppressive, trapping her in the marsh, underscoring her disconnection from both her surroundings and her sense of self.

Sighed and swayed the young oak. The woman stared down and ceased murmuring from the rafters of the forest. When they finally met her, they were pleased, believing that a runaway girl had been returned to them. Yet they saw things differently as they looked closer. This girl was trying to stay away from them. The women hanging from the trees were now silent, but arrogant-mindful of their worth, their extraordinary femininity; understanding as they did that their holy assets had created the first world of the world; that they alone could keep together the stones of the pyramids and the rushes of the crib of Moses; knowing their steady consistency, their speed of glaciers, their permanent embrace. (Morrison, *Tar Baby* 181-183)

This scene specifically refers to Morrison's earlier critique of conventional beauty standards. Unlike the white-defined ideals of beauty that Morrison challenges, the Black women on the island are grounded in practicality and "fact," embodying a beauty that is both functional and authentic. However, these women are far from merely

"acceptable" — much like the lady in yellow, they exemplify an "exceptional femaleness" that transcends the limitations of white-defined notions of appearance and femininity. They redefine beauty on their own terms, moving beyond externally imposed expectations.

In *Tar Baby*, Morrison's redefinition of beauty is not confined to the cultivated, artificial aesthetics represented by the greenhouse's hothouse blooms, but rather expands to encompass the raw, untamed splendor of the natural world. This shift reflects a deeper critique of the rigid, imposed ideals of beauty, suggesting instead that true beauty lies in the acceptance of the world in its entirety—flawed, unpredictable, and wild. At the novel's conclusion, this more expansive and organic understanding of beauty is made explicit:

At every moment in time, the wonder of the universe is sufficient. There is no need to photograph, paint, or even remember it. Its mere existence is enough. Thus, one can open the windows of the greenhouse, allowing the elements to enter. The door bolt should be left unlatched, the muslin torn, for even the soldier ants possess their own beauty...  
(Morrison, *Tar Baby* 242)

Here, Morrison invites us to relinquish the human impulse to contain, control, or immortalize beauty through artificial means like photography or painting. Instead, she advocates for a more profound engagement with the world, where beauty is experienced in its immediate, unmediated presence. The act of opening the windows and leaving the door unlatched signifies a release of control, an acceptance of nature's unpredictability. Even the soldier ants—creatures often seen as pests—are now viewed as part of the intricate, interwoven tapestry of life, worthy of admiration in their own right. This scene serves as a powerful metaphor for the need to dismantle not only the physical barriers

that separate the greenhouse from the wilderness, but also the conceptual boundaries that limit our understanding of beauty. The greenhouse, with its controlled environment, symbolizes the restrictive ideals imposed by society, whereas the open landscape represents a liberated, more holistic view of existence. In this reimagined world, beauty is not exclusive to what has been deemed conventionally attractive; it is found in the very essence of life, in all its complexity, resilience, and imperfection.

Morrison asserts a redefinition of attractiveness across the vehicle of the island landscape that portrays black female beauty as extraordinary, useful, actual, and racially authentic. It cannot be interpreted in the scheme of speculation; it cannot be objectified by the stare. The redefined ideal of beauty by Morrison often refers to black males and white women, implying that her bigger project is a general redefinition of beauty rather than only a description of black female beauty. The wildly stunning presence of Son is often listed. His hair appears "alive", and Jadine considers herself unwilling to "draw his heaven-raised smiling smile". The elegance of Son exceeds conventional American definitions, like the presence of the woman in yellow, and is inherently unrepresentable because it is so real. Jadine's effort to turn him into an African prince in the city challenges the dignity of this beauty, but eventually Son prefers the blind race of men who love the swamp women, who have not forgotten their "'ancient estate'" (Morrison, *Tar Baby* 132-305).

By the end of the novel, Margaret's white elegance assumes a new form of dignity and purpose. After Valerian's downfall, precipitated by the revelation of her neglect toward their child, Margaret steps into a position of authority, evolving from a superficial emblem of beauty into a capable household leader and a more fully realized

individual. This transformation aligns with Morrison's broader redefinition of beauty, moving beyond mere aesthetics toward a deeper, more authentic selfhood:

She was even lovelier now that her hair had no spray in it, that it was not tortured into Art Deco, now that it hung according to its own will and the shape of her head. And she did not wear any makeup. Instead of styled eyebrows, tiny charming eyebrows, and the small top lip was even cooler than the complete one she ritually painted. (*Tar Baby* 237)

Margaret's beauty, once rigidly controlled and artificially constructed, is now liberated and natural. No longer constrained by societal expectations, she embodies a more profound and genuine elegance—one that reflects inner strength and autonomy, rather than outward conformity. This shift symbolizes her personal growth and the broader reimagining of beauty that Morrison presents throughout the novel.

The redefined beauty of Margaret represents the two qualities described by Morrison as fundamental to black female beauty: utility and a relation to fact. Margaret now oversees the home. Her current look does not dispute her body's reality; however, it encourages her attributes to come out in their natural elegance. As realized by Valerian, "Now he could see the lines, the ones brilliantly hidden by the make-up.... She seemed sincere. Not like a slice of Valerian candy, more like a person on a bus with an existence that is not yours and not available to you already shaped, fleshed, dense." (Morrison, *Tar Baby* 239) This is the redefined beauty of Morrison that is open to everyone: helpful, actual, and embodying a self that should not be objectivized, portrayed, or appropriated.

All in all, this chapter has examined how Toni Morrison's narratives offer a critical counterpoint to the hegemonic beauty standards that have historically marginalized Black women. Through her exploration of self-definition and identity reclamation, Morrison presents a transformative vision of beauty that transcends Eurocentric ideals. Her characters, particularly those from *The Bluest Eye*, *Sula*, and *Tar Baby*, serve as vehicles through which she critiques the internalization of white standards of beauty. By asserting their self-worth, these characters resist the oppressive norms that devalue their Blackness, thereby redefining beauty on their own terms.

The chapter's analysis of Morrison's novels, underscores the resilience of Black women in the face of systemic oppression. Morrison's characters engage in a nuanced negotiation of their identities, which allows them to confront and challenge the cultural constructs that seek to oppress them. The narratives of resistance, healing, and transformation not only reflect individual struggles but also illuminate the broader, collective journey towards self-empowerment. Thus, Toni Morrison's literary vision advocates for a reimagined concept of beauty—one that is inclusive, grounded in cultural resilience, and reflective of the diverse experiences of Black women. Her fiction offers a vital contribution to the ongoing discourse on race, gender, and identity, serving as a powerful testament to the importance of self-definition in the face of societal constraints.

## **Conclusion**

For all races and individuals, it is essential to recognize how our ideals and principles are influenced, conditioned, and shaped by popular media. Only by understanding this impact can individuals work to resist it and reach their fullest potential. Morrison's novels, particularly *The Bluest Eye*, gained considerable acclaim for their vivid portrayal of the subtle yet profound cultural effects of internalized racism. Although the novels' storylines are not entirely new or distinct from other African-American literature, Morrison departs from the tradition of simply depicting racism as a clear-cut evil. Instead, she highlights the devastating effects of internalized racism on the most vulnerable members of a community—particularly young people. This thesis has explored how modern social constructs, such as the white beauty standard, redefine what is considered "normal." It has examined the cultural impact of these ideals and their harmful psychological effects on African Americans and their communities.

This thesis has embarked on a comprehensive exploration of the detrimental effects of Eurocentric beauty standards on the formation of a genuine Black female identity, particularly through the lens of Toni Morrison's novels. By employing interdisciplinary approaches grounded in psychoanalysis, intersectionality theory, and gender studies, the study has illuminated the multifaceted ways in which these oppressive ideals influence and shape the self-perception and societal interactions of African-American women.

Chapter One has contextualized these struggles within the broader sociological, historical, and political landscapes that have shaped African-American experiences. By examining the impact of slavery, institutionalized racism, and the Great Migration, the chapter underscored the pervasive influence of these forces on the conceptualization of

beauty and identity within the African-American community. This historical perspective provided a backdrop against which the imposition of Eurocentric beauty standards can be understood as part of a long-standing pattern of cultural hegemony and oppression. This contextualization was crucial for understanding the depth and persistence of the issues Morrison addresses in her work.

The theoretical framework established in Chapter Two has connected beauty with identity formation and deformation, exploring key philosophical concepts such as racialization, habitus, and the politics of representation. This framework proved instrumental in understanding how Morrison's characters navigate the complexities of race and gender, and how these intersections contribute to their struggles with identity and self-worth. By leveraging psychoanalytic theories, particularly those of Jacques Lacan, the thesis was able to dissect the psychological fragmentation caused by internalized beauty standards. Additionally, intersectionality theory, as developed by Kimberlé Crenshaw, provided a lens to examine how overlapping systems of oppression impact African-American women uniquely. Gender studies further enriched the analysis by highlighting the gender-specific implications of these beauty norms.

The concept of habitus, as articulated by Pierre Bourdieu, was particularly useful in analyzing how deeply ingrained social structures and cultural norms shape the perceptions and behaviors of Morrison's characters. The habitus encompasses the dispositions and practices that individuals acquire through their cultural and social experiences, which in turn shape their perceptions and actions. This concept helped illuminate how characters internalize Eurocentric beauty standards as natural and self-evident, even when these standards are fundamentally alien to their cultural identity.

Understanding the habitus allowed the research to trace how these internalized dispositions affect characters' self-perceptions and their interactions with others.

Frantz Fanon's theory of racialization provided a critical lens through which to examine the processes by which characters in Morrison's novels come to see themselves and others in racial terms. Fanon's insights into how colonialism and racism impose an identity onto the colonized were particularly relevant in understanding the psychological impact of Eurocentric beauty ideals. The research revealed how racialization operates in Morrison's narratives, highlighting the internal conflicts and identity crises that arise from the imposition of a white-dominated aesthetic on black bodies.

Judith Butler's notion of performativity was also integral to this research. Performativity refers to the ways in which identity is constructed through repeated social performances. In Morrison's works, characters often perform whiteness or strive to embody white beauty standards, revealing how these identities are not inherent but are instead produced and reinforced through societal expectations and pressures. This performative aspect underscores the fragility and constructed nature of identity, providing a deeper understanding of the internal and external conflicts faced by Morrison's characters.

Jacques Lacan's theory of the mirror stage was central to the psychoanalytic dimension of this study. According to Lacan, the mirror stage is a critical period in an individual's development when they first recognize their own reflection as an image of themselves, which leads to the formation of the "I". This moment of recognition is simultaneously a moment of misrecognition because the image in the mirror presents

an idealized, unified version of the self that is at odds with the fragmented experience of the self. In Morrison's novels, this theory helped elucidate how characters like Pecola Breedlove experience a disconnection between their internal sense of self and the external ideals imposed upon them. The pursuit of an unattainable beauty ideal results in a psychological fragmentation where characters see themselves through the distorted lens of societal expectations, leading to a devastating internal schism.

Chapters Three and Four have delved into the specific mechanisms through which Eurocentric beauty standards are portrayed, internalized, and resisted in Morrison's narratives. Chapter Three has analyzed the depiction of these standards and their idealization, revealing how they distort the self-perception of African-American characters and impose a hegemonic aesthetic that is fundamentally alien to their cultural identity. Through a detailed examination of characters like Pecola Breedlove, the chapter has demonstrated how the relentless pursuit of these unattainable ideals leads to a pervasive sense of inadequacy and self-rejection. Morrison's nuanced portrayal of characters who either succumb to or resist these standards provides a critical commentary on the broader implications of such beauty norms.

Chapter Four, through a Lacanian lens, has explored the psychosocial disruptions caused by these beauty norms, highlighting the internal conflicts and identity fragmentation that arise from their relentless pursuit. The chapter has utilized Lacan's theories of self-splitting and the mirror stage to illustrate how characters like Pecola experience profound disruptions in their sense of self, leading to a devastating internal schism. This analysis revealed that the pursuit of unattainable beauty ideals results in a psychological fragmentation where characters experience a disconnection between their

internal identities and external perceptions. By applying Lacanian psychoanalysis, the research showed that characters experience a disconnection between their internal identities and external perceptions, causing a splitting of the self.

At last, Chapter Five has examined how Morrison's characters attempt to redefine their identities amidst the oppressive force of racialized beauty standards. Through an analysis of *The Bluest Eye*, *Tar Baby*, and *Song of Solomon*, the chapter has explored how beauty, rather than being a source of empowerment, becomes a significant obstacle for Black women. However, Morrison also presents characters who challenge and resist these norms, creating spaces for self-empowerment and cultural pride. This chapter has emphasized the resilience of Black women and their ability to reclaim their identities despite societal constraints.

One of the key findings of this research is the internalized oppression that Morrison's characters experience. They often internalize Eurocentric beauty standards, leading to a profound sense of inadequacy and self-rejection. This internalization disrupts their ability to develop a cohesive and authentic sense of self, causing a split between their inner identity and the external ideals imposed upon them. The compounded factors of race and gender further complicate the characters' struggles with identity and self-worth. This intersectionality is critical in understanding the multifaceted nature of the characters' experiences, as they navigate the simultaneous pressures of conforming to white beauty standards while grappling with racial and gendered oppression.

Despite the pervasive influence of these oppressive beauty standards, Morrison's works also portray characters who resist and challenge these norms, thereby offering a

counter-narrative that celebrates blackness and authentic self-expression. The research has highlighted Morrison's critique of the broader sociocultural systems that perpetuate and reinforce Eurocentric beauty ideals. Her narratives invite readers to question and deconstruct these hegemonic standards, advocating for a more inclusive and affirming understanding of beauty. This critique is not only directed at the external imposition of these ideals but also at the internalized racism and self-hatred that they engender within African-American communities. By depicting characters who resist these standards and reclaim their sense of self, Morrison's works underscore the importance of fostering resilience and resistance against oppressive beauty norms.

Throughout the thesis, Morrison's works have been shown to not only critique the imposition of white beauty ideals but also to celebrate the resilience and resistance of African-American women. Her narratives provide a counter-narrative that challenges the dominance of Eurocentric aesthetics and advocates for a more inclusive and affirming understanding of beauty. Morrison's characters embody a spirit of defiance and self-acceptance, illustrating the potential for individuals to reclaim their identities and resist the pressures of conforming to oppressive standards.

In sum, this thesis contributes to the fields of literary analysis, critical race theory, and social justice activism by returning the focus to the marginalized individual and highlighting the endurance of oppression. It offers a meaningful analysis of Morrison's storytelling, presenting it as a timeless reflection on the ongoing struggles with the representation of race and beauty in art. By advocating for the recognition and celebration of diverse representations of beauty, this study underscores the importance

of fostering a more inclusive and affirming conceptualization of identity in both literature and society at large.

The findings of this research are significant in that they provide a deeper understanding of the complex ways in which Eurocentric beauty standards affect the psychological and social dimensions of identity formation among African-American women. By situating Morrison's narratives within broader discourses of psychoanalytic theory, intersectionality, and gender studies, this thesis has elucidated the multifaceted impact of these standards and the resilience required to resist and redefine them. Morrison's works ultimately advocate for a more inclusive and diverse understanding of beauty, one that celebrates the authenticity and integrity of African-American identities and challenges the hegemony of Eurocentric aesthetics.

This thesis makes several important contributions to the field of literature and criticism. Firstly, it expands the existing scholarship on Toni Morrison by offering a comprehensive analysis of her critique of Eurocentric beauty standards. By integrating psychoanalytic theory, intersectionality, and gender studies, this research provides a multidimensional approach to understanding Morrison's fiction, thereby enriching the academic discourse surrounding her narratives. Secondly, the thesis highlights the importance of examining literary texts through an interdisciplinary lens. The integration of psychoanalysis, particularly Lacanian theory, offers an enlightening perspective on the psychological fragmentation experienced by Morrison's characters. This approach not only deepens our understanding of the characters' internal struggles but also demonstrates the value of applying psychoanalytic concepts to literary analysis. Thirdly, the study underscores the significance of intersectionality in literary criticism.

By focusing on the compounded oppressions of race and gender, this research illuminates the intricate ways in which these factors intersect to shape the experiences of African-American women in Morrison's novels. This intersectional approach enhances our comprehension of the multifaceted nature of identity formation and the pervasive impact of systemic oppression.

The findings of this research have also broader implications for the study of literature and cultural criticism. Firstly, they call for a re-evaluation of beauty standards in contemporary societies. By highlighting the destructive effects of Eurocentric beauty norms, this thesis advocates for a more inclusive and diverse understanding of beauty that celebrates the richness of different cultures and identities. Such a shift in perspective is essential for fostering a more equitable and affirming societal framework. Secondly, the research underscores the need for continued interdisciplinary approaches in literary criticism. The integration of psychoanalysis, intersectionality, and gender studies has proven to be a fruitful methodology for analyzing complex literary texts. Future research should continue to explore the intersections of these fields to uncover deeper insights into the dynamics of identity, oppression, and resistance. Lastly, this thesis emphasizes the enduring relevance of Toni Morrison's work in contemporary discussions on race, gender, and beauty. Her narratives offer valuable lessons on resilience, resistance, and the importance of self-acceptance. By engaging with Morrison's works, readers and scholars alike can gain a deeper appreciation for the complexities of African-American experiences and the ongoing struggle against systemic oppression.

In conclusion, this thesis has shed light on the intricate and often devastating effects of Eurocentric beauty standards on African-American women as portrayed in the works of Toni Morrison. It has highlighted the psychological fragmentation and internalized oppression resulting from these standards, while also celebrating the resilience and resistance of Morrison's characters. By deconstructing these hegemonic ideals, the study calls for a more inclusive and affirming conceptualization of beauty that recognizes and values the diversity of African-American identities. The issues regarding the influence of beauty standards on mental health and self-esteem should be solved at societal and legislative levels, emphasizing cultural change and gender equality. By admitting the adverse effects of Eurocentric beauty standards and demanding the proper representation of diverse types of beauty, society can enhance people's well-being and self-acceptance across race and color. As such, Morrison's fiction is an effective advocacy instrument that increases the community's awareness of the problems and encourages discussion about the need to accept and value different representations of beauty and develop a healthy self-attitude. Finally, by abandoning stereotyped beauty standards and enhancing the culture of self-acceptance, society can work towards accepting multicultural beauty and treating every person with respect irrespective of their physical appearance.

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## المخلص

بتلر جوديث ونظرية اللاكاني النفسي التحليل يدمج، التخصصات متعدد منهجًا الأطروحة هذه توظف سيما ولا، موريسون توني روايات في والهوية الجنس لتكوين المعقدة الطبقات لتفكيك، الأداء في النسوية خلال ومن. "سليمان أغنية" و، "القطران طفل" و، "المحبوبة" و، "سولا" و، "زرقة الأكثر العين" البحث يوضح، "المرأة مرحلة" جانب إلى والواقعي والرمزي التخيلي لمفاهيم اللاكائية المفاهيم استخدام المتقشي والتأثير الأبيض الجمال معايير استيعاب وسط هوياتهم في موريسون شخصيات تنتقل كيف بناء كيفية لتحليل الجندرية الأدائية عن بتلر نظرية تطبيق يتم، ذلك على وعلاوة. العنصري للتمييز تتيح. صارمة وجمالية عرقية معايير يفرض مجتمع في لها وأدائهن الجندرية لهوياتهن موريسون بطلات تقدير على السوداوات النساء لقدرة الثقافية والقيم القواعد إعاقة لكيفية دقيقًا فهما النظرية العدسة هذه. الممزقة بالهوية والإحساس الذات كراهية إلى الأحيان من كثير في يؤدي مما، أنفسهن وحب بورديو بيير ونظرية فانون لفرانتز العرقنة نظرية مثل أخرى نقدية نظريات مع أيضًا الأطروحة تتفاعل تطور على والتاريخية والثقافية الاجتماعية للتأثيرات إضافية سياق وضع أجل من (habitus) العادة عن الاضطهاد على الضوء البحث هذا يسلط، والجنس العرق بين التقاطع دراسة خلال من. الشخصيات المحن هذه مواجهة في وصمودهن أفريقي أصل من الأميريكيات النساء تواجهه الذي المنهجي "القطران طفل" و، "سليمان أغنية" و، "سولا" و، "زرقة الأكثر العين" لروايات المتأنية القراءة خلال من هوية بناء أمام كعائق العنصري الجمال معايير عمل لكيفية شاملاً تحليلاً الأطروحة هذه تقدم، "الحبيبية" و، النقدية العرقية والنظرية، الأدبي التحليل مجالات في المساهمة إلى الدراسة تهدف. حقيقية سوداء أنثى داخل والانتماء للهوية الأوجه المتعددة الطبيعة حول موسع منظور تقديم خلال من النسوية والدراسات. عنصرًا منقسم مجتمع.

أغنية، القطران طفل، الحبيب، سولا، سولا، زرقة الأكثر العين، موريسون توني: **مفتاحية كلمات** المرأة، الهابيتوس، بورديو بيير، الهوية، الأدائية، بتلر جوديث، اللاكاني النفسي التحليل، سليمان، العرقية، فانون فرانتز، العنصري الجمال، المرأة مرحلة، الخيالي، الحقيقي، السيمبولية، السوداء الأبيض الجمال معايير، التقاطعية