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TONY MORRISON'S 'THE BLUEST EYE': A CONTEMPORARY CRITICAL APPRAISAL

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ABSTRACT

We tend to discuss whatever we see around us and also share our views on the issues. A writer has the advantage to express his views and ideas with people around him. Our society and culture has always been directed by religion, caste, tradition and norms. In fact the most conflicting situation can be seen when people of various cultures try to live together, without making any adjustment. Sometimes, people of a specific culture or religion feel that they can make others follow their culture by force in order to show their supremacy. This is the reason for violence on women, fight for property, prejudices in the workplace and education. This leads to fighting for survival under the most difficult situations. Sometimes, we can learn ways to fight for our rights and keep moving ahead, but at times circumstances become so violent and ugly that people just cannot move ahead in life. Life becomes more difficult for a woman as she has to keep on proving herself to the men around her, who leave no space for her to live her life peacefully and happily.

The word "multiculturalism" has become synonymous with people of many cultures staying together in one country. A word which is not used for official purposes only, but also among academics and social activists. The matter under discussion and debate is the way to govern these multicultural communities. The matter under discussion is that who has the authority to create norms and social hierarchies within society or on the basis of which norms to exclude anyone from the society. The tensions raised by the issue of "multiculturalism" are in constant argument with power itself and the relationships within the various communities in which multi-cultural societies throw up. It is usually used in the singular sense, signifying the distinct philosophy or doctrine of multi-cultural strategies. 'Multi-cultural,' however, is a plural word so we want to give definition of this particular word simply put it means many cultures in a homogeneous zone.

Writers like Chinua Achebe wrote *Things all Apart* (1958), Nadime Gordimer wrote *Burgers Daughter*, Ngugi Wa Thiongo wrote *Petals of Blood*, Malsenior Walker wrote *The Colour Purple*. Langston Hughes wrote *The Negro Speaks of Rivers*, Ralph Ellison wrote *The Invisible Man* they have all written about displacement and the feeling of disorientation in a new country to which one does not belong. It makes one feel isolated and without roots as one can never have the feeling of belonging to a country which makes one feel inferior. There is always a mark on their identity as they are being under examination at all times. Their intelligence, skills, behavior is always under suspicion as they are made to feel good for nothing. This is the

reason they are treated as slaves so that whites can maintain their superiority and keep ruling over the black skin.

Toni Morrison, born,with her childhood name as Chloe Ardelia Woord on February 18,1931, is an American novelist, editor, and Professor Emeritus at Princeton University. She was born in Lorain, Ohio, to Ramah (née Willis) and George Wofford. She is the second of four children in a working-class family. Her parents moved to Ohio to escape from southern racism and put in a sense of heritage through telling the traditional African American folktales. She read frequently as a child; among her favorite authors were Jane Austen and Leo Tolstoy. She became a Catholic at the age of twelve and also received the baptismal name "Anthony", which later on became the basis for her nickname "Toni".

In 1949 she enrolled at Howard University, graduating in 1953 with a B.A. in English, and went on to earn a Master of Arts from Cornell University in 1955. Her Master's thesis was *Virginia Woolf's and William Faulkner's Treatment of the Alienated*. She taught English, first at Texas Southern University in Houston for two years, then at Howard for seven years. While teaching at Howard, she met Harold Morrison, a Jamaican architect, whom she got married to in 1958. The couple had two children but got divorced in 1964.

After the breakup of her marriage, she began working as an editor in 1965 for a textbook publisher in Syracuse, two years later on she went to Random House in New York City, where she became a senior trade-book editor. In that capacity, Morrison played a vital role in bringing black literature into the mainstream, editing books by authors such as Henry Dumas, Toni Cade Bambara, Angela Davis, and Gayl Jones. In 1983, she left publishing to devote more time to writing, and lived in a converted boathouse on the Hudson River.. Her novels are known for their epic themes, vivid dialogue, and richly detailed characters. Among her best known novels are *The Bluest Eye* 1970, *Sula* 1973, *Song of Solomon* 1977, and *Beloved* 1987.

Morrison won the Pulitzer Prize and the American Book Award in 1988 for *Beloved*. *Beloved* was adapted into a film starring Oprah Winfrey and Danny Glover in 1998. Morrison was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1993. In 1996, the National Endowment for the Humanities selected her for the Jefferson Lecture, the U.S. federal government's highest honor for achievement in the humanities. She was honored with the 1996 National Book Foundation's Medal of Distinguished Contribution to American Letters. On May 29, 2012, Morrison received the Presidential Medal of Freedom. In 2016 Morrison received the PEN / Saul Bellow Award for Achievement in American Fiction.

Morrison began writing fiction as part of an informal group of poets and writers at Howard University who met to discuss their work. She attended one meeting with a short story about a destitute black girl, pregnant by her father, who longed to have blue eyes. Morrison later developed the story as her first novel, *The Bluest Eye*, writing it while also raising her two children, teaching at Howard, and later while she was living in Syracuse. It got published in 1970 when Morrison was thirty-nine.

Toni Morrison also analysed the concept of silence as it is considered as speech of the silent black race that means how a dominant culture silences the weak culture. Dr. Bois has named the term double consciousness to explain the jeopardy of a Negro who is at once black and American. Morrison says black woman have triple consciousness it is the black American female. Resilience is breaking away from this darkness to come out in the open sky. As Morrison spoke on her race through her writings, in the ancient Greek myth Poseidian rapes daughter, Persephones and mother, Demeter. Their identities are connected with Pauline and Pecola as the daughter gets assaulted in *The Bluest Eye*. This can also be termed as archetype because the same events are happening in present times as they happened in the ancient times. This causes the revival of ancient myth that things are happening in the same way as they occurred years ago. It means culture and society has remained as it was, no changes have occurred to bring about upliftment of marginalized people.

In 1975 her novel *Sula* 1973 was nominated for the National Book Award. Her third novel, *Song of Solomon* 1977, brought her some more national attention. The book was a main selection of the Book of the

Month Club, the first novel by a black writer which got chosen since Richard Wright's *Native Son* in 1940. *Song of Solomon* also won the National Book Critics Circle Award.

In 1987 Morrison's novel *Beloved* got published, which was inspired by the true story of an enslaved African American woman, Margaret Garner, who did manage to escape but was recaptured again. Rather than return back to slavery, she eventually killed her two-year-old daughter, Mary, but was captured again before she could kill herself. The novel became a big critical success. When the novel failed to win the National Book Award as well as the National Book Critics Circle Award, 48 black critics and writers did protest against the omission in a statement that *The New York Times* published on January 24, 1988. "Despite the international stature that Toni Morrison had, she has yet to be given the national recognition that her five major works of fiction entirely deserve," they wrote not long afterwards, *Beloved* won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction and also the American Book Award. It also won an Anisfield-Wolf Book Award.

Morrison could be seen on the cover of *Time* magazine, but only the second female and second black writer of fiction to appear on what was perhaps the most significant and important U.S. magazine cover of that era. In 1993 Morrison was awarded with the Nobel Prize in Literature. Her citation reads: Toni Morrison, "who in novel was characterized by visionary force and poetic import, gives life to an essential aspect of American reality". In May 2006, *The New York Times Book Review* named *Beloved* the best American novel published in the last 25 years.

Toni Morrison has been one of the most important African American novelists of the 20th century. While Morrison's work has been controversial, it has received a variety of prestigious awards, including the Nobel Prize and Pulitzer Prize. What makes Morrison's writing "authentic" is that it draws upon her experience growing up in a black, working class family in the Midwest during the 1930s. *The Continuum Encyclopedia of American Literature* points to the fact that Morrison's work "blends the realistic detail of black families and neighborhoods in an Ohio town that resembles her birthplace" as a way to convey her encounters with racism, white oppression, "violence within the black community" and "exploitation of blacks by other blacks".

When asked about her motivations for writing *The Bluest Eye* in an interview, Morrison claimed that she wanted to remind readers "how hurtful racism is" and that people are "apologetic about the fact that their skin is so dark". Reminiscing on her own experience, she recalled, "When I was a kid, we called each other names but we didn't think it was serious, that you could take it in." Expanding on this point of self-esteem, Morrison elaborated that she "wanted to speak on behalf of those who didn't catch that they were beautiful right away. She was deeply concerned about the feelings of ugliness. As seen throughout *The Bluest Eye*, this idea of "ugliness" is conveyed through a variety of characters. For example, Pecola, the main character of the book, wishes for blue eyes as a way to escape the oppression that results from her having dark skin. Through Pecola's characterization, Morrison seeks to demonstrate the negative impact racism can have on one's self-confidence and worth. As she concluded in her interview, she "wanted people to understand what it was like to be treated this way."

Morrison was also honored with the 1996 National Book Foundation's Medal of Distinguished Contribution to American Letters, which is awarded to a writer "who has enriched our literary heritage over a life of service, or a corpus of work." In 2000, *The Bluest Eye* was chosen as a selection for Oprah's Book Club. In addition to her novels, Morrison has also written books for children with her younger son, Slade Morrison, who worked as a painter and a musician. But, Slade died of pancreatic cancer on December 22, 2010, aged 45 Morrison's novel *Home*, was only half-written when Slade died and is dedicated to him. Her 11th novel, entitled *God Help the Child*, was published in 2015.

Although her novels typically concentrate on black women, Morrison does not identify her works for feminist only. When asked in a 1998 interview "Why distance oneself from feminism?" she replied: "In order to be as free as I possibly can, in my own imagination, I can't take positions that are closed. Everything I've ever done, in the writing world, has been to expand articulation, rather than to close it, to open doors, sometimes, not even closing the book – leaving the endings open for reinterpretation, revisitation, a little

ambiguity. She went on to state that she thought it "off-putting to some readers, who may feel that I'm involved in writing some kind of feminist tract. I don't subscribe to patriarchy, and I don't think it should be substituted with matriarchy. I think it's a question of equitable access and opening doors to all sorts of thing".

In Lorain, Ohio, 9-year-old Claudia MacTeer and her 10-year-old sister Frieda live with their parents, who take two other people into their home: Mr. Henry, a tenant, and Pecola Breedlove, a temporary foster child whose house is burned down by her unstable and alcoholic father, Cholly: a man widely gossiped about in the community and who raped Pecola. Pecola is a quiet, passive young girl who grows up with little money and whose parents are constantly fighting, both verbally and physically. Pecola is continually reminded of what an "ugly" girl she is, fueling her desire to be white with blue eyes. Most chapters' titles are extracts from the *Dick and Jane* paragraph in the novel's prologue, presenting a white family that may be contrasted with Pecola's. The novel, through flashbacks, explores the younger years of both of Pecola's parents, Cholly and Pauline, and their struggles as African-Americans in a largely White Anglo-Saxon Protestant community. Pauline now works as a servant for a wealthier white family. One day in the novel's present time, while Pecola is doing dishes, a drunken Cholly rapes her. His motives are largely confusing, seemingly a combination of both love and hate. After raping her a second time, he flees, leaving her pregnant.

Claudia and Frieda are the only two in the community that hope for Pecola's child to survive in the coming months. Consequently, they give up the money they had been saving to buy a bicycle, instead they started planting marigold seeds with the superstitious belief that if the flowers bloom, Pecola's baby will survive. The marigolds never bloom, and Pecola's child, who is born prematurely, dies. In the aftermath, a dialogue is presented between two sides of Pecola's own deluded imagination, in which she indicates conflicting feelings about her rape by her father. In this internal conversation, Pecola speaks as though her wish for blue eyes has been granted, and believes that the changed behavior of those around her is due to her new eyes, rather than the news of her child's death. The two major themes in marginalized literature are slavery and colonialism. The inhuman cruelty of slavery and the frustrations generated by colonialism are yet raw wounds on the African sensibility. When a woman starts writing, she invests the nation's womanhood with its unique significance and presents her heroine as the eternal feminine caught in the web of "living" with its criss-crossing sorrows, frustrations and tragedies. Pecola, Toni Morrison's heroine, is thus many things in one—an African "everywoman", hardworking, suffering and patient; a symbol of the universal woman who is also the mother of sorrows.

The following passage will help us relate with the sufferings of African woman in the country of white skinned human-being.

Then they had grown. Edging into life from the black door. Becoming. Everybody in the world was in a position to give them orders. White women said, "Do this." White children said, "Give me that." White men said, "Come here." Black men said, "lay down." The only people they need not take orders from were black children and each other. But they took all of that and re-created it in their own image. They ran the houses of white people, and knew it. When white men beat their men, they cleaned up the blood and went home to receive abuse from the victim. They beat their children with one hand and stole for them with the other. The hands that felled trees also cut umbilical cords; the hands that wrung the necks of chickens and butchered hogs also nudged African violets into bloom; the arms that loaded sheaves, bales, and sacks rocked babies into sleep. They patted biscuits into flaky ovals of innocence – and shrouded the dead. They plowed all day and came home to nestle like plums under the limbs of their men. The legs that straddled a mule's back were the same ones that straddled their men's hips. And difference was all the difference there was. (BE 108)

Claudia, is the child of Pecola's foster parents, she describes the recent phenomenon of Pecola's insanity and suggests that Cholly (who has since died) may have shown Pecola the only love he could by raping her. Claudia laments on her belief that the whole community, herself included, have used Pecola as a scapegoat to make themselves feel prettier and happier. One of the main characters of the novel, Pecola is a young African American girl who comes from a financially unstable family. Between a combination of facing domestic violence, bullying, sexual assault, and living in a community that associates beauty with "whiteness", she

suffers from low self-esteem and views herself to be ugly. The title *The Bluest Eye* refers to Pecola's fervent wish for beautiful blue eyes. Her insanity at the end of the novel is her only way to escape the world where she cannot be beautiful and to get the blue eyes she desires from the beginning of the novel. Cholly Breedlove is Pecola's father who is abusive and an alcoholic, Cholly's violent and aggressive behavior reflects his troublesome upbringing. In addition to being rejected by his father and discarded by his mother as a four-day-old baby, Cholly's first sexual encounter is ruined when it is interrupted by two white men, who force Cholly to continue while they watch and sneer. Traumatic events like these influence Cholly to become a violent husband and father who beats his wife and eventually rapes his daughter. These gestures of madness are said to be mingled with affection, as they are his way of showing love. Pauline "Polly" Breedlove is Pecola's mother. Mrs. Breedlove is married to Cholly and lives the self-righteous life of a martyr, enduring her drunken husband and raising her two awkward children as best she can.

Mrs. Breedlove is a bit of an outcast herself with her shriveled foot and Southern background. Mrs. Breedlove lives the life of a lonely and isolated character who escapes into a world of dreams, hopes and fantasy that turns into the movies she enjoys viewing. After a traumatic event with a foul tooth, however, she relinquishes those dreams and escapes into her life as a housekeeper for a rich white family who give her the beloved nickname "Polly". Sam Breedlove is Pecola's older brother. Sammy, as he is more often referred to in the novel, is Cholly and Mrs. Breedlove's only son. Sam's part in this novel is minimal like his sister Pecola, he is affected by the disharmony in their home and deals with his anger by running away. Auntie Jimmy Cholly's great aunt, takes him in to raise after his parents abandon him. The rich, white couple who employ Pauline as their servant and as the caretaker of their little girl Geraldine. A socially conscious upper class black woman in the community who exaggerates the fact that she is above traditional black stereotypes and is more "civilized" than other black families in Lorain, Ohio. When she feels that her husband isn't fulfilling her need for love, she finds a cat and pours her affections into it. Her lack of attention to any but the cat causes unintended hatred for the cat from her son, whom she neglects often. Louis Junior Geraldine's son who bullies Pecola and blames her for accidentally killing his mother's beloved cat. Maginot Line Marie is a prostitute who lives with two other prostitutes – named China and Poland – in an apartment above Pecola's. These ladies are ostracized by society, but teach Pecola a lot about being a social outcast, and offer her the support that few others do. Rosemary Villanucci they are MacTeers' next-door neighbor who constantly tries to get Claudia and Frieda in trouble. Mr. Yacobowski the discriminatory white immigrant, owner of the grocery store where Pecola goes to buy groceries. Maureen Peal an African-American girl of Pecola's age, who considers herself and other people "of color" to be above black people. Frieda and Claudia mock Maureen, calling her "Meringue Pie". Soaphead Church born Elihue Micah Whitcomb, he is a light-skinned West Indian misanthrope and self-declared "Reader, Adviser, and Interpreter of Dreams". He hates all kinds of human touch, with the exception of the bodies of young girls. He is a religious hypocrite who keeps hiding in his own disguise.

Author Phillip Page focuses on the importance of duality in *The Bluest eye* claims that Morrison prevents an "inverted world", entirely opposite from the Dick and Jane story that is at the beginning of the novel. The idea of breaks and splitting is common, as seen in the context of the war occurring in the time period of the story, the split nature of Pecola's family, and the watermelon that Cholly observes break open during a flashback. Page argues that breaks symbolize the challenges of African American life, as seen in the rip in the Breedloves' couch that symbolizes poverty, or the break in Pauline's tooth that ruins her marriage and family. He goes on to identify how each of the characters are broken personally, since Cholly's former and present life is described as chaotic and jumbled, and Pauline is responsible both for her biological family as well as the white family she works for. The epitome of this, Page argues, is seen in Pecola at the end of the novel. The events of her life, having broken parents in a broken family, have resulted in a totally fractured personality which drives Pecola into madness.

Literary critic Lynn Scott contends that the constant images of whiteness in *The Bluest Eye* serve to represent society's perception of beauty, but the idealization of white beauty standards ultimately proves to have destructive consequences and leads to Pecola's demise. Scott explains that superiority, power, and virtue are associated with beauty, which is inherent in whiteness in the novel. She further asserts that white beauty

standards are perpetuated by visual images in the media as well as attitudes of the family. When Pauline first arrives in Lorain, she feels pressure to conform to white beauty standards and begins to develop a construct of femininity based on the actresses she watches in the movies. For example, she begins to model her hairstyle after Jean Harlow. Pecola is also surrounded by constant images of whiteness that perpetuate white beauty standards, including references to Shirley Temple and an image of Mary Jane that appears on her candy wrappers. Scott claims that Pecola, "...is the victim of a power that values and classifies bodies according to norms established and disseminated by visual images". These images become a constant reminder of her inability to attain these white beauty standards. Pecola attempts to seek the power associated with whiteness, and in her attempt to conform to these cultural ideals, she develops a destructive desire for blue eyes. In addition to the white beauty standards promoted by the media, Harihar Kulkarni, an author of a book on African American feminist fiction literature, recognizes that these ideals are often transferred generationally. Kulkarni asserts that Pecola's feelings of inferiority are linked to Pauline's own diminished sense of self-worth which she has acquired due to her obsession with white beauty standards. This acceptance of inferiority and ugliness, which has been passed on generationally, makes Pauline complicit in Pecola's descent into madness and the psychological damage she experiences. In contrast, Claudia has maintained her self-esteem due to Mrs. MacTeer's refusal to surrender her sense of identity to white cultural standards. Ultimately, Pauline and Pecola develop a sense of shame and internalized self-hatred since they cannot achieve the beauty ideals that exist in society. This shame is particularly damaging for Pecola, because as Pecola strives to attain these unobtainable white beauty standards, she is consumed by her own destructive self-hatred resulting in irreversible psychological damage.

When analyzing Morrison's characters, it is important to remember that along with combating prejudice and injustice stemming from society, they are also overcoming inner struggles that are unique to a member of a minority. And because Morrison suggests a healing, vital process to freedom and self-awareness, her novels go beyond protest literature. Morrison incorporates the naturalistic theme of the "waste of individual potential" (Hamilton 115) due to environmental circumstances in many of her novels and most emphatically in the character of Pecola Breedlove in *The Bluest Eye*. Pecola is victimized by a society that conditions her to believe that she is ugly and therefore worthless, because she does not epitomize white Western culture's idea of beauty. In studying Pecola from a psychological perspective, one can say that Pecola and much of her community are trapped in Showalter's first phase of growth for a subculture—"imitation of the prevailing modes of the dominant tradition, and internalization of its standards of art and its views on social roles" (1108). Sethe in *Beloved* occupies the second phase as she "protests against these standards and values" (Showalter 1108). Sula naturally comes under Showalter's third phase of "Self-discovery,... a search for identity"(1108).

Jane Kuenz, Professor of English at the University of Southern Maine, states that *The Bluest Eye* reveals the role of mass media in shaping society. She argues that evidence of this is seen immediately, as the book opens with a story in the style of Dick and Jane, an example of a white family that is looked up to and aspired to be. Evidence of white-run culture is pervasive, especially "in the seemingly endless reproduction of images of feminine beauty in everyday objects and consumer goods", which Kuenz points out are representative of exclusively white beauty.<sup>1</sup> Kuenz shows that, as the novel progresses, Claudia becomes more and more similar to what white society expects of her, learning to "adore" Shirley Temple and other manifestations of whiteness, proving the power of mass media. Kuenz argues that *The Bluest Eye* shows the effects of mass produced images in a white-run society.

Critic Allen Alexander argues that religion is an important symbol and theme in *The Bluest Eye*, especially in how the God of Morrison's works possesses a "fourth face" outside of the Christian Trinity, and this explains and represents "the existence of evil, the suffering of the innocent and just--that seem so inexplicable in the face of a religious tradition that preaches the omnipotence of a benevolent God". Alexander claims that much of the tragedy of Pecola's character stems from her attempts to rationalize her misfortune with the notion of an all-loving, all-powerful God. He further argues that, for Pecola, much of the story is about "discovering the inadequacy of Western theological models for those who have been marginalized by the

dominant white culture". While this ideology has negative effects on Pecola's sense of self worth, it also negatively impacts her mother Pauline, who fully accepts Christianity and in doing so spends most of her time away from her own family and caring for a white household. Alexander suggests that the image of a more human God, rather than a purely morally upstanding one, is a more traditional African view of deities and that this model is better suited to the lives of the African American characters in *The Bluest Eye*

J. Brooks Bouson, English professor and assistant chair of the English department at Loyola University Chicago, claims that *The Bluest Eye* is a "shame drama and trauma narrative", that uses Pecola and its other characters to examine how people respond to shame. Bouson argues that some characters, like Claudia, show how people can respond violently to shame: Claudia does this by rejecting the racist system she lives in and destroying the white dolls. However, most characters in the novel pass on their shame to someone below them on the social and racial ladder. For example, Soaphead Church comes from a family obsessed with lightening their skin tone, and passes on the shame of his African American heritage by molesting young girls. Bouson suggests that all of the African American characters in *The Bluest Eye* exhibit shame, and eventually much of this shame is passed onto Pecola, who is at the bottom of the racial and social ladder. This novel has always had many far reaching effects on every strata of society and has been adapted in various forms to convey messages to the masses.

Toni Morrison has given a complete view of the society that we live in, various faults and a moving away from the accepted code of conduct for the decent behavior in any society. As human-beings how we have deviated from an acceptable way of living to our own denied ways of living. She has very intricately and carefully laid bare the insides of our society. The way human-beings make rules or everyone and how much they themselves follow it. It throws light on the act that we say something and when it comes to doing we take a course that would suit our well-being. We always remain selfish to our own needs and desires. We protect our own selves first and in the process we can harm and give pain to all people around us. They can be our relatives, friends, colleagues and other helpers around us.

Another important issue discussed and talked about is the treatment of women in our society. The ways in which they are given a lower status in comparison to a man. Than there is the issue of black and white woman the different treatment given to them and also exploited or the same reason. All this doesn't end here what follows is resentment and anger to fight or ones rights. The mental trauma that one goes through when a woman is suppressed and exploited in many harmful ways or being a black skin woman.

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