

## THE DESIRE FOR OTHER IN TONI MORRISON'S *THE BLUEST EYE*

**Payal Mathur**

Research Scholar

Amity University, Rajasthan

[payal.mathur95@gmail.com](mailto:payal.mathur95@gmail.com)

+91-9582177924

### **Abstract:**

Set in Ohio, after the Great Depression, *The Bluest Eye* depicts the miseries of an African-American family in the aesthetic world of the United States. The Breedlove family becomes the target of racial discrimination. Despite the abolishment of slavery, racism still prevails in America. Black feminism played a prominent role in spreading awareness among black females about their rights. I, then, compare the condition of Pecola with Jacques Lacan's theory of the 'mirror stage' where a child learns about her/ his identity between the age of six to 18 months. Lacan's concept of the 'small other/object' and the 'big other/object' demonstrates the psychological condition of the Breedlove women. Every section of the text opens with the narration of Dick and Jane with their children and pets that shows how happy rich Whites are in comparison to Blacks. Pecola's only wish has led to her downfall and made her psychotic, eventually changing her fate.

**Keywords:** Racism, beauty, mirror stage, the big other, the small other, seasons

### Introduction:

Racism is the practice that discriminates one's identity based on colour, tradition and ethnicity. Racism took hold of Africans since their advent in the United States. The Whites employed Africans in the worst way possible, making them their slaves. Africans were forced to change their religion and later sold for slavery. The Whites treated them in an inferior way and refused to give them equal rights. Though slavery has reduced in a way, racism still has its place in America as most of the high-rated white collared jobs are first offered to their citizens. After the shocking incident of Breonna Taylor and George Floyd, we come to know that even after decades of eradication of slavery and racism, they still have their roots in the country.

Black feminism came into existence in the late 20th century. Rich Whites treated black women as servants in their houses. Sojourner Truth was the first eminent figure who stood against the white people with her speech, *Ain't I a Woman?* (1851). "Look at me, look at my arms, I have plowed, and planted, and gathered in the barns, and no man can head me. And ain't I a woman? I could work as much, and eat as much as a man when I could get it, and bear the lash as well. And ain't I a woman? I have borne 13 children and seen most all sold off to slavery. And when I cried out with my mother's grief none but Jesus heard me. And ain't I a woman?" (Truth 0.58- 1.56 seconds). By doing the same amount of fieldwork as men and/or even more, she imposes a question on why women cannot enjoy the same amount of freedom as men. With this she made black women aware of their rights and aimed for the betterment of female and racial victims of society. Harriet Tubman became a strong supporter of the agonies of the dark-skinned women and intended to ameliorate the status of them and abolish racial operation. Following Tubman is Alice Walker, a black American writer who focuses on the pre-existing societal taboos by portraying black men as sexist and rendering the existence of brutalities in their houses. She published several essays on the subjugation of black women. The most appreciated work of Alice Walker is *The Color Purple* (1982). The arrival of Naomi Wolf's *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty are Used Against Women* (1990) throws light on how the standards of physical beauty of women have increased self-consciousness and hatred among them. "What editors are obliged to appear to say that men want from women is actually what their advertisers want from women." (Wolf 73). It shows how the media plays a crucial role in making women cognizant of themselves and their bodies, how they look and their distinction from each other. It focuses on the concept of 'beautiful' and 'ugly' and makes women stand in competition with one another. The first book talks about the problem while the second discusses the solution.

Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1970) is set in the 1940s after the Great Depression when many Africans were going through humiliations and insults from Americans who thought that being white is the symbol of superiority. The novel shows the conditions of the African American in the aesthetic world of the States. It emphasizes the physical contrasting world of Blacks and Whites and also the thin line of sexual division drawn by the Africans. Morrison's novels are appreciated worldwide as she shows the agonies of Blacks in America where they are not whole heartily welcomed. As the text focuses on the subjective opinion of a black female, we can consider it with the work of Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952). "The Negro enslaved by his inferiority; the white man enslaved by his superiority alike behave in accordance

with a neurotic orientation.” (Fanon 42, 43). Here, Fanon puts forth the juxtaposition prevailing in society- Blacks and Whites. Black is equated with Africans (colonized) and white, with Britishers (colonizers) or in other words ‘Black’ is considered as inferior and ‘White’ as superior. The gazes of Whites bring about a sense of self-consciousness among Blacks making them feel uncomfortable in their skins. The division can be clarified by taking into notion Jacques Lacan's 'mirror stage'. The mirror stage formats the ego by the process of identification and subjectivity of a child at the age of six months to 18 months. When a baby looks at the mirror, s/he recognizes itself through bodily movements. Thus, forming an image that is the primary identification of the baby (I). The mirror stage is the first step when a baby gets to know her/his identification and psychic evolution. This creates the subjective identity of a child. Lacan theorized that what we conceive as our identity is the image behind which our real identity resides. In the mirror stage, the authenticity of being a whole subject is lost when s/he first understands herself/ himself as having an identity. This is what causes a split between what Freud called the ‘Id’ or the ‘unconscious self’. The subject and the ego formation of a self that we conceive as ‘I’, in doing so, this ‘I’ becomes another. The ego becomes altogether apart from the whole subject that the child experiences before this new idea of self is evolved by the use of language, but Lacan insists that it means we are detached and oblivious to our real self. When an infant starts to develop this new identity, the ego can be ordered in a way that can protect her/him against inconsistency and control desires. Lacan's theory gives the illusion that the identity is whole when in reality the desires and inconsistency of life experience by the subject before the mirror stage are what’s authentic and real.

In *The Bluest Eye*, the same kind of feeling was sensed by Pecola as the gaze of the outsiders made her self-conscious, thus shrunk her confidence to stand around people. The novel is an answer to the Americans who see dark-skinned people in a way that they feel conscious of their appearance and make them long to be like the Whites. The novel puts forth the psychological condition of the Africans in American society, where at that time racism was at its peak. The prime victims of the mental torture were innocent children who were unacquainted with the inferior treatment given to them.

#### **Into the minds of Breedlove women:**

Pecola Breedlove, an eleven-year-old protagonist of the novel gets into the clutches of society's racial discrimination. As the novel opens, we learn that Pecola has a deep obsession with the ideal beauty standard which she finds in Shirley Temple and Mary Jane. She is fascinated by the idea of getting blue eyes, as she thinks that if she gets those eyes, society would see her differently and accept her. We observe the psychological condition of Pecola when she starts talking to herself believing that she has got blue eyes, at the same time worrying if someone else has got much bluer eyes than her. She longs for bluer and bluer eyes and ultimately, the bluest. She is enchanted by the world of white people, blonde hair and blue eyes: an image of a typical American girl. In the latter half of the novel, she is molested by her father, Cholly and receives disgust from the neighbours around her.

Pauline Breedlove is the mother of Pecola who is troubled with the same obsession as her daughter, but her condition is a little better. She was deformed as a child when she stepped on a nail, but simultaneously had a huge inclination towards the white standard of beauty. She loved

watching movies and the virtual world inside them. After her marriage with Cholly Breedlove, she accepted her ugliness and started working for a rich white family. She loved the fragrance and the cleanliness of her master's house, everything that was missing in hers. The Breedlove family has a little apartment with two rooms, but the whole family shares only one. There is no bathroom, only a lavatory. Living at the level of poverty, the mother is the sole earner. The novel depicts the condition of the African Americans in the claws of Americans where there is no way out but to go through the humiliation of the white people.

According to Lacan, "...man's desire find its meaning in the desired of the other, not so much because the other holds the key to the object desired, as because the first object of desire is to be recognized by the other. ...it is ...as desire of the other that man's desire finds form." (Hill 65). Desire usually dominates our lives and distinguishes us from other creatures. We desire something because we lack and want it severely. Desire is for an object that sometimes can be reached but if we get the object we desire, then there will be no object of desire and another thing will substitute its place. People usually get confused between need, demand and desire, but according to Lacan, there is a huge distinction between them. A need is physiological and can be given while a demand cannot be attained and a desire is for something that can sometimes be given. Usually in a child desire emerges from her/ his frustration and/or deprivation. It comes out from a child's impossible demands. Desire is a longing for something to attain and it stays there until we get the object. To discover your desires, you must have experienced your demands being unfulfilled.

We know that our desires are private, and we can hide them from others and our consciousness, but if we try to hide them, they somehow will find their way of coming out like misspeaking, dreams, or as a symptom. In simpler words, it means the want-to-be of an ideal image or thing that a person wants. Desire is expressed symbolically, as the type of language that is understood. "Desire is desire for difference" (Hill 74); meaning that desire of a person is something that will make her/him stand out from other people.

In the novel, Pecola Breedlove wanted the bluest eyes to differentiate herself from all the girls and become the symbol of beauty in society. "Just because I got blue eyes, bluer than theirs. They're prejudiced..... Please. If there is somebody with bluer eyes than mine, then maybe there is somebody with the bluest eyes. The bluest eye in the whole world" (Morrison 195, 201). When she sees/ imagines herself in those blue eyes, she wants bluer eyes and at the end, the bluest eyes. She wants to make sure that no one gets the bluest eyes so she can be the most unique amongst all. The desires of Pecola are everlasting and cannot be fulfilled. Since her childhood, she has faced the consequences of being a black girl in school, a punishment for a mistake that she did not even commit. In her house, she is rejected and ignored by her parents. She wants to gain her confidence, love, respect and most importantly, an identity in the white society which is biased towards their people.

### **The power of 'big other' and 'small other':**

Lacan's theory of the 'big other' and the 'small other' also plays a vital part in the book. The 'small other', is not an other but the reflection of our own (ego). When the 'small other' lacks something it causes or starts desire. "There is something necessary about the cause that has the effect of desire" (Hill 82). Both causes and reasons are required to have a desire for something.

The 'small other' seems to be the same, but its relation with everyone is subjective and imaginary. In the case of *The Bluest Eye*, Pecola Breedlove drinks three quarts of milk from the cup with Shirley Temple's face on it, thinking that she might get Temple's perfect white skin. "Three quarts of milk. That's what was in that icebox yesterday. Three whole quarts. Now they ain't none. Not a drop" (Morrison 21). Mrs. MacTeer always complains about Pecola drinking milk all the time. "Each pale yellow wrapper has a picture on it. A picture of little Mary Jane, for whom the candy is named. Smiling white face. Blonde hair in gentle disarray, blue eyes looking at her out of a world of clean comfort. the eyes are petulant, mischievous. To Pecola they are simply pretty. she eats the candy, and its sweetness is good. to eat the candy is somehow to eat the eyes, eat Mary Jane. Love Mary Jane. Be Mary Jane." (Morrison 48). Here, we see the obsession of Pecola with Mary Jane, how minutely she notices the little girl's face and characters. When she goes to the counter to give the pennies, even the fifty-two-year-old white storekeeper stares at her with anger and disgust, the staring that Pecola has seen throughout her life as being inferior. It is not just she who has suffered as being dark-skinned but also her mother, who wishes to be a charming woman and wants her respected place among other ladies. She wanted the physical beauty which originated in envy and ended in the destruction of thoughts and deconstruction of her face. "Every time I got, I went. I'd go early, before the show started. they'd cut off the lights and everything be black. then the screen would light up, and I'd move right on in them pictures..... I was sitting back in my seat, and I taken a bite of that candy, and it pulled a tooth right out of my mouth. I could of cried. I had good teeth, not a rotten one in my head" (Morrison 121) During her pregnancy days, she used to go to the movies and reach much before the other people to hide her skin colour. She desires to be like Jean Harlow, but all her dreams were shattered when she lost her tooth and looked ugly. Pauline, unlike Pecola, accepted her fate and moved on in her life.

The 'big other' is other people's ideas or signifiers but at the level of logic and meaning. Here, language is the most primary source of expression of desire and is symbolic. It determines our understanding of ourselves that we take from outside. Here, we don't have internal knowledge of who we are, therefore, the self-image comes from others, specifically from our local and family culture. The 'big other' maintains the fiction of our existence. Our minds have been censored by the ideal object of desire and we try to make it free from all the constraints. It is what we seek which is hidden, what we want which we don't get, the ideal thing or person that we want to become. The first person is Mrs. Macteer, who taunts her in the first phase of her life. Then, some black boys who stood near the streets also make fun of Pecola, where Claudia saves her. Another person who comes across Pecola's life is Maureen Peal, who at first, pretended to be sweet to her but later mocks her for being impoverished. Later comes Junior, a boy almost of the same age as Pecola's. He throws a black cat on Pecola's face to shows her how disgusting she is. But the worst person is her father, Cholly Breedlove, who not only neglects her throughout but also rapes her that changed her whole life.

The text opens with the narrative story of Dick and Jane of a white family which consists of a mother, father, Dick and Jane who lives in a green and white house along with a cat and a dog. The story portrays how happy the family is in comparison with a black family. This affects the psyche of black people since they know that they will never be able to achieve the status of rich American people. Most of the black female characters in the novel preach the embellishment of the white society thinking that if they could attain that standard of beauty, they would be

welcomed in society. The image created by the 'big other' becomes so dominant on Pecola that she starts to hate herself because of the colour of their skin and wishes to wear a different mask. She wants to become something that she is not and wants to live in a place where she doesn't belong.

### Conclusion:

The one desire of Pecola to have blue eyes has made her dismal. Just the one wish of looking beautiful, in a society where racism reigns, that cannot be fulfilled by anyone, has made her detached not just from her surroundings but from herself too. The instability of her identity and unacceptance from society made her a maniac in the end that she imagines her wish to be fulfilled. As a small girl when she sees herself in the mirror, the realisation of being black-skinned tortured her so much so, that all she wished was a little warmth from others and love from her parents. She was crushed by the treatment from the Whites that she was broken and wanted a new identity, an identity that the Whites accepted. She let the opinions of others overpower herself which led to her tragedy with no one to help the little soul. In the end, the readers sympathise with the little girl as she loses everything she had. Because of the behaviour of others, the age where she should have bloomed, she faded.

### Work cited:

- Banerjee, Dr. Pallavi. "The Bluest Eye to Love: Thematic and Structural Evolution in the Fiction of Toni Morrison." *An International Journal in English*, vol. 5, no. 2, Apr. 2014, pp. 312–320., [www.the-criterion.com/V5/n2/Pallavi.pdf](http://www.the-criterion.com/V5/n2/Pallavi.pdf).
- Becker, Kyle. "10 Charts Show How 'Racist' America Really Is." *IJR - Independent Journal Review*, April 27, 2014. <http://ijr.com/2014/04/133024-10-charts-show-racist-america-really/>.
- Belsy, Katherine. "Desire in Theory: Freud, Lacan Derrida." *Taylor & Francis Online*. Volume 7, 1993. Web. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09502369308582173>
- Bloom, Harold. *Bloom's Guide Toni Morrison's The Bluest Eye*. Bloom's Literary Criticism. Infobase Publishing. 2010.
- Converse, Caro. *Pecola's Obsession with Blue Eyes*, 1 Jan. 1970, [lundbluesteye.blogspot.com/2010/05/pecolas-obsession-with-blue-eyes.html](http://lundbluesteye.blogspot.com/2010/05/pecolas-obsession-with-blue-eyes.html).
- Darda, Joseph. "A New New White Man: Toni Morrison's 'Playing in the Dark' Turns 25." *Los Angeles Review of Books*, 17 Aug. 2017, [lareviewofbooks.org/article/a-new-new-white-man-toni-morrison-s-playing-in-the-dark-turns-25/](http://lareviewofbooks.org/article/a-new-new-white-man-toni-morrison-s-playing-in-the-dark-turns-25/).
- Evans, Dylan. *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis*. Routledge, 1996.
- Fanon, Frantz. *Black Skin, White Masks*. United Kingdom, Pluto Press. 2008.
- Hewitson, Owen. "What Does Lacan Say About... Desire?" *LACANONLINE.COM*, 9 May 2014, [www.lacanonline.com/2010/05/what-does-lacan-say-about-desire/](http://www.lacanonline.com/2010/05/what-does-lacan-say-about-desire/).
- Hill, Philip, and David Leach. *Lacan for Beginners*. Orient Longman Private Limited, 2008.
- Jenainati, Cathia, and Judy Groves. *Introducing Feminism*. Icon Books, 2014.
- Johnston, Adrian. "Jacques Lacan." *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Stanford University, 10 July 2018, [plato.stanford.edu/entries/lacan/](http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/lacan/).
- Lacan, Jacques-Marie Emile. *Ecrits: A Selection*. Routledge, 2001.

- Morrison, Toni. *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*. Vintage Books, a Division of Random House, Inc, 2019.
- Morrison, Toni. *The Bluest Eye*. Vintage Classics, 2016.
- Naomi, Wolf. *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty Are Used Against Women*. HarperCollins Publishers, 2002.
- Osborne, Richard, and Maurice Meehan. *Freud for Beginners*. Orient Longman Private Limited, 2000.
- Plasa, Carl. *Textual Politics from Slavery to Postcolonialism: Race and Identification*. St. Martin's Press, 1999.
- Power, Jacob. "The Bluest Eye Themes." *LitCharts*, 21 Dec. 2013, [www.litcharts.com/lit/the-bluest-eye/themes](http://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-bluest-eye/themes).
- "Race And Beauty in Toni Morrison's Novel The Bluest Eye Essay." *Bartleby*, [www.bartleby.com/essay/Race-And-Beauty-in-Toni-Morrisons-Novel-P34VZRZTC](http://www.bartleby.com/essay/Race-And-Beauty-in-Toni-Morrisons-Novel-P34VZRZTC).
- Sharpe, Matthew. "Jacques Lacan (1901—1981)." *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, [iep.utm.edu/lacweb/#:~:text=Jacques%20Lacan%20\(1901%20E2%80%941981\)&text=This%20article%20seeks%20to%20outline,psychoanalysis%20and%20philosophy%20of%20ethics](http://iep.utm.edu/lacweb/#:~:text=Jacques%20Lacan%20(1901%20E2%80%941981)&text=This%20article%20seeks%20to%20outline,psychoanalysis%20and%20philosophy%20of%20ethics).
- Siddiqui, Samana. "A Brief History of Racism in the United States." *SoundVision.com*, 26 Apr. 2018, [www.soundvision.com/article/a-brief-history-of-racism-in-the-united-states](http://www.soundvision.com/article/a-brief-history-of-racism-in-the-united-states).
- Taylor, Ryan. "Ain't I a Woman?" *Speech Transcript - Sojourner Truth*. 3 July 2020, [www.rev.com/blog/transcripts/aint-i-a-woman-speech-transcript-sojourner-truth](http://www.rev.com/blog/transcripts/aint-i-a-woman-speech-transcript-sojourner-truth).
- Then & Now. "Jacques Lacan - The Mirror Stage." *YouTube*, 22 Sept. 2016, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=agTYUU4gTOo](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=agTYUU4gTOo).
- "The Issue of Discrimination and Prejudice in America." *The Issue Of Discrimination And Prejudice In America*, [bupogyfasowokyf.timberdesignmag.com/the-issue-of-discrimination-and-prejudice-in-america-41255jh.html](http://bupogyfasowokyf.timberdesignmag.com/the-issue-of-discrimination-and-prejudice-in-america-41255jh.html).
- "The Other." *Academic Brooklyn Cuny Education*, [academic.brooklyn.cuny.edu/english/melani/cs6/other.html](http://academic.brooklyn.cuny.edu/english/melani/cs6/other.html).
- "The Bluest Eyes By Toni Morrison." *UKEssays.com*, Nov. 2018, [www.ukessays.com/essays/english-literature/the-bluest-eyes-by-toni-morrison-english-literature-essay.php](http://www.ukessays.com/essays/english-literature/the-bluest-eyes-by-toni-morrison-english-literature-essay.php).
- Žižek Slavoj. *The Sublime Object of Ideology*. Verso, 2009.