



## **Sexism and Racism in "The Bluest Eyes " by Toni Morrison**

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التحيز الجنسي والعنصرية في رواية " العين الأشد زرقة " لتوني موريسون

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## الملخص:

توني موريسون روائية أمريكية أفريقية شهيرة فازت بجائزة نوبل في الأدب عن الرواية المحبوبة. يستكشف هذه الحث القضايا المتعلقة بالتحيز الجنسي والعنصرية التي تتجلى بوضوح في حياتها وعملها. الرواية التي التي تمت دراستها هي "العين الزرقاء" لموريسون ، فالنصوص تعيد صياغة إيديولوجية الأنوثة الأمريكية الأفريقية التي تميز تعريف الذات. تصنع موريسون شخصيات نسائية سوداء رائعة في الرواية. تحاول الشخصيات تحديد هويتهم الخاصة وسط الاضطهاد متعدد الطبقات والمترابط للتمييز الجنسي والعنصرية ، وبعد ذلك ، تمكنت هؤلاء النساء من الاحتفاظ بهوياتهن طوال الروايات.

يعتمد البحث على تحليل الرواية ويعكس التعقيدات المتنوعة التي تنتج عنها الأنوثة السوداء في الثقافة السائدة وكيف أن كل شخصية إما تستوعب أو تقاوم سياسات العرق والجنس والجنس لتزويد القراء برؤى جديدة لفهم رواية موريسون. هذه البحث عبارة عن نظرة ثاقبة لمناقشة حياة النساء الأمريكيات من أصل أفريقي اللواتي يقعن ضحايا للتحيزات في كل مكان في المجتمع وفي أسرهن. تكشف هذه العلاقة الوضع المعقد للمرأة الأمريكية الأفريقية. تنتقد موريسون كلاً من القوى الظالمة في ثقافتها (السوداء) والعنصرية البيضاء ، بينما يستغل البيض التاريخ لتبرير حقهم في الحكم على أساس دونية العرق وتفوق الآخر.

## Abstract

Toni Morrison is a famous Afro-American woman novelist who wins a Nobel prize of Literature for the novel beloved. This study explores issues related to sexism and racism which are manifested in her life and work. The novel examined by this study are Morrison's The Bluest Eye, The texts recreate an ideology of African-American womanhood which privileges self-definition. Morrison creates remarkable black women characters in the novel. The characters attempt to establish their own identity amidst the multilayered and interconnected oppressions of sexism and racism. Thereafter, these women managed to retain their identities throughout the novels.

The research adopts to analyze the novel and reflects the varied complexities that black womanhood yields within the dominant culture and how each character either internalizes or resists the politics of race, gender and sexuality to provide readers with new insights to understand Morrison's novel.

They are not human beings but simply things to be used and this is why they are subhuman, exploited and tortured all their life. This paper is an insight to discuss the life of African-American women who are the victims of the prejudices everywhere in the society and in their own families The Bluest Eye addresses sexism and racism. This relationship exposes the African American women's intricate situation. Morrison criticizes both the oppressing forces in her (black) culture and white racism, whereas the whites take advantage of history to justify their right to rule based on the inferiority of a race and the superiority of another

**Introduction** Toni Morrison is a uniquely distinguished contemporary novelist in the history of American literature of the 20th century. All her novels do with African American characters and communities. As the first black woman who won the Nobel Prize for literature, Morrison is qualified to be the opinion leader for black. Born in a worker's family in Lorain, Ohio, Morrison was brought up in a black community where she imbibed much of the black cultural heritage. Morrison grew up with love of literature and received her undergraduate degree from Howard University.

This dissertation aims to let the reader know more about the racial discrimination and sexual discrimination in *The Bluest Eye*. This work starts with a black little girl of 10 years old as the heroine, telling a story of the girl's miserable experiences, and eventually ended in a tragedy story. It is valuable for Morrison that she could be so serious in her first book. In this work, the author tells the story of the heroine of being bullied and yearning for the change of the situation.

The heroine was raped by her father and was pregnant. The premature infants died shortly after it was born. The poor black girl Pecola Breedlove has the desire to have a pair of blue eyes and becomes insane at last. In the novel, Pecola had to endure pressure and scorn from many aspects, both from the neighbourhood and also from her mother. Pecola's tragedy is the epitome of the victims of racial discrimination in American society. The personality of her parents is distorted and twisted severely. So blue eyes became the spiritual attachment for Morrison.

The whole work fully expresses oppression and the situation of being bullied of the black, especially black women. This reality is the foundation of feminism. The author wants to call the human nature with the sad ending of

tragedy and to show the importance of feminism. Moreover, it was the time that ecological feminism arose when this novel was published.

## 2.The Bluest Eye

The Bluest Eye is a novel written by American writer, Toni Morrison. This novel was published in 1970. As her first novel, Toni Morrison succeeded to get achievement proven as the winner of Noble Prize in 1993. Before starting her career as a writer, she teaches English in Houston and Howard. Her writing career started after she divorced with her husband. She first began her career as an editor in Syracuse and moved to New York where she works as a senior editor. While she works as a teacher in Howard, she already writes a fiction. The first fiction she wrote is about a black girl who wants to have a blue eye. This is how The Bluest Eye idea came up. The other work of Toni besides The Bluest Eye are Sula (1973), Song of Solomon (1977), Tar Baby (1981), Beloved (1987), Jazz (1992), Paradise (1997), Love (2003), A Mercy (2008), Home (2012), and her latest novel entitled God Help The Child released on April 2015. Inspired by her own life, where her parents moved to Ohio for avoiding racism in South America, her novel focused on the black people as well as in The Bluest Eye novel.

As the Noble Prize winner in literature, this novel gives a topic which become trending at that time. It is told about a black ugly girl named Pecola. Indirectly, Pecola is the stereotype of an African-American girl who experienced discrimination because of her skin colour. This novel indirectly reflects the society around Morrison.

The interesting thing from this novel is although Morisson achieved the Noble Prize through this novel, she got many criticisms from society. Some schools even banned her novel including in the student reading list. The



reason is because of the presence of sexual elements and rude words which is inappropriate for children and youth.

The Bluest Eye, Morrison explains her goal in writing the novel. She wants to make a statement about the damage that internalized racism can do to the most vulnerable member of a community—a young girl. At the same time, she does not want to dehumanize the people who wound this girl, because that would simply repeat their mistake. Also, she wants to protect this girl from “the weight of the novel’s inquiry,” and thus decides to tell the story from multiple perspectives. In this way, as she puts it, she “shape[s] a silence while breaking it,” keeping the girl’s dignity intact.

### 3. Sexual Initiation and Abuse

To a large degree, The Bluest Eye is about both the pleasures and the perils of sexual initiation. Early in the novel, Pecola has her first menstrual period, and toward the novel’s end, she has her first sexual experience, which is violent. Frieda knows about and anticipates menstruating, and she is initiated into the sexual experience when she is fondled by Henry Washington. We are told the story of Cholly’s first sexual experience, which ends when two white men force him to finish having sex while they watch. The fact that all of these experiences are humiliating and hurtful indicates that sexual coming-of-age is fraught with peril, especially in an abusive environment.

In the novel, parents carry much of the blame for their children’s often traumatic sexual coming-of-age. The most blatant case is Cholly’s rape of his daughter, Pecola, which is, in a sense, a repetition of the sexual humiliation Cholly experienced under the gaze of two racist whites. Frieda’s experience is less painful than Pecola’s because her parents immediately come to her rescue, playing the appropriate protector and underlining, by

way of contrast, the extent of Cholly's crime against his daughter. But Frieda is not given information that lets her understand what has happened to her. Instead, she lives with a vague fear of being "ruined" like the local prostitutes. The prevalence of sexual violence in the novel suggests that racism is not the only thing that distorts black girlhoods. There is also a pervasive assumption that women's bodies are available for abuse. The refusal on the part of parents to teach their girls about sexuality makes the girls' transition into sexual maturity difficult.

### 3.A Story of A Young Black Girl

Morrison's first novel *The Bluest Eye* projects the tragic life of a young Black girl of eleven years, Pecola Breedlove, who craves to be loved by her family and her school friends. On the other hand, she is neglected and branded as 'ugly' by her mother. In her quest for identity and beauty, she has been exploited. She longs to have blue eyes and blond hair which she considers as a mark of beauty. But her self-image is unable to bear the brutality meted out to her and she goes insane and lives in her imaginary world in which she is the most lovable as she has the bluest eyes of all.

### 4, Sexism

Sexism is the first side of the theme of hatred that contributes to the effacement of black womanhood in the novel. In her book *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism*, Hooks (1981) argues that sexism is temporarily disregarded and postponed by women activists, compared to racism: "When the women's movement raised the issue of sexist oppression, we argued that sexism was insignificant in light of the harsher more brutal reality of racism" (p.1). Hooks confesses that this was a big mistake made

by black feminists at that time as it worsened the problem of sexism and led up to more devaluation of black womanhood. He further quotes S. Truth's warning that "If coloured men get their rights, and not coloured women theirs...the coloured men will be masters over the women, and it will be just as bad as it was before" (qtd. in Hooks, 1981, p. 4).

Man is designated to be the masters and women are never to be granted freedom. It has emerged from the debate of anthropologists and sociologists that the subservient role of the female gender is either the result of biological necessity or the construct of power relationship culturally determined by society. For centuries, Black women have been called the 'mule of the world' and 'slave of a slave' and had the status of the wretched on the earth. Uprooted from her native African culture and placed in a dominant, she was very often intimidated by racists. Initially, the main concern of the Black Women's organizations was to abolish all kinds of economic and political disparities against them. Now they are mainly concerned with the issues to black women who are oppressed by sexism, and racism. Kashinath Ranveer asserts:

Black Women in America are triply burdened and disadvantaged. They are black, female and economically underprivileged. This triple burden restricts them from a fuller and meaningful participation in American society mainly because they are confined to their race and the narrow enclosures of sex. As a result, they suffer as blacks amongst the blacks, slaves of the slaves and forced to occupy a very marginal place in the Americans social life. Not only this, their humanity and the black female self are denied by white men and also by their people, particularly black men. This made them feel insignificant, faceless, subservient, and devoid of identity. (68)

The Bluest Eye The Bluest Eye by Toni Morrison is just as much about sexual violence and gender disparity as it is racial hatred. Eleven-year-old Pecola Breedlove is raped and impregnated by her father, and slowly goes insane after the baby dies prematurely. She is not only violently assaulted to the point of fainting, but also ostracized and mocked by her community. Neighbours participate in victim-blaming, saying things like, "She carries some of the blame," and "How come she didn't fight him (Morrison, 1970, pg 189)?" Her mother is said not to believe her, choosing to either remain removed from the matter or take her abusive husband's side. Although Cholly is originally seen as evil, Morrison reveals that he dealt with racism and was forced to be sexually violent to Darlene when he was a teenager.

A second-wave feminist lens is the best way to critique Pecola's mother. Pauline uses her husband's adultery and violence as a gateway to a community of Christian women who view her as a martyr. She does this by complaining of how badly Cholly treats her. Pauline's foot is a source of embarrassment when she moves up north, and she tries to be beautiful like the white women in Hollywood. Like Pecola and Claudia, she is aware that whiteness means beauty. When she loses her tooth, she decides to put all her energy on serving her "white family," the Fishers. Pauline cares more about this family than her own, letting them call her "Polly" and baking a pie for the little white girl she watches.

When Pecola accidentally knocks down a pan full of blueberries, her mother slaps her twice in a rage and comforts the little white girl: "Hush, baby, hush. Come here. Oh lord, look at your dress. Don't cry no more. Polly will change it (Morrison, 1970, pg 109)." Pauline is not incapable of being a mother to her children, but chooses to nurture the white family because they



match her ideal household. In this way, she challenges biological essentialism, because she chooses whom to nurture.

Morrison offers a view of gender disparity through a race in *The Bluest Eye*, showing that black women and girls are doubly oppressed because of their race and gender. Pecola is a triple victim, because she is young, black and female. People take advantage of her size, her build, and her race. For instance, Junior lies to and terrorizes Pecola by luring her to his house and locking her in a room. When his mother comes home to see her cat injured, Junior lies and says Pecola killed the cat; the only thing Geraldine cares about. “Get out,” she says to her. “You nasty little black bitch. Get out of my house (Morrison, 1970, pg 92).” Pecola embodies “niggers” who are “dirty and loud,” who sleep “six in a bed, all their pee mixing in the night as they wet their beds each in his candy-and-potato-chip dream (Morrison, 1970, pg 91-2).” Geraldine calls the girl a “nasty black bitch,” using a gendered insult on top of racial insult. She is black instead of “light-skinned” or “coloured,” and the fact that she is a girl makes it worse.

Pecola’s and Darlene’s right to security of person/freedom from sexual violence is violated when Cholly rapes them. Because of this, they no longer have control over their bodies. It is doubtful as to whether Pecola ever had control of her body. Her mother constantly abuses her, her father uses her as sexual property, and the state forces her to have a baby born of incest. This is taking away her bodily autonomy, even if abortion was illegal and extremely dangerous in the 1940s (according to Wikipedia’s “History of Abortion”). Pecola’s sexual autonomy is taken away despite not being sexual, yet people still blame her.

Many authors speak to gender and sexuality theories, such as Rosalind Coward in "The Body Beautiful." Coward describes how the beauty ideal of slimness is "built on the disgust of fat and flesh (Coward, pg 347)." This constant assessment of fat serves to make the body look immature, especially when one counts the valuation of shaving. Since hair and fat on certain areas of the body are signs of a sexually mature body, Coward says women target these areas as a rebellion against adulthood. Ultimately, men want women that are mature but look much younger. This idealism is seen in *The Bluest Eye*, where Soaphead Church desires little girls because they have "buds" for breasts (Morrison, 1970, 181) and spurns human beings.

## 5.Racism

Racism, in the biological sense, is the classification of a population based on phenotypical similarities. Social race (which is the concept more generally implied by "racism") takes off from the premise of biological differences and not only states innate inferiority or superiority of peoples based on those genetic differences, but also justifies social oppression on the same subjective grounds (Berghe 266). This is the sense in which James Boggs defines racism, based on his observation of the black experience in America. He says it is the systematised oppression by one race of another. In other words, the various forms of oppression with various spheres of social relations - economic exploitation, military subjugation, political subordination, cultural devaluation, psychological violence, sexual degradation, verbal abuse, etc (147-8).

As a black woman, she is “the other”, as an image of not belonging created to “emphasize the significance of belonging” (Collins, 2008, p.70). She is equally subjected both to sexist and racial oppression. Unlike her husband, who falls an easy prey to his oppressors, Pauline struggles, however faintly. In her book *Sexual Politics*, Millet (1977) explains how racism affects blacks:

The study of racism has convinced us that a truly political state of affairs operates between the races to perpetuate a series of oppressive circumstances. The subordinate group has inadequate redress through existing political institutions, and is deterred thereby from organizing into conventional political struggle and opposition. (pp. 44-45)

Millet’s commentary on racism helps understand the situation of Pauline. As a black female, she does not possess the sufficient power to change her lot and keeps in her mind how she is treated. As Morrison puts it,

Everybody in the world was in a position to give them the black females 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. (p.381)

Thus, black women are structured in the hegemonic society just to serve both the white race and the black male gender. Their identities are oppressed and demolished. It is no wonder that the role assigned to Pauline as a black female is that of a servant. Her work as a servant in the Fischer family highlights the bad economic situation of black women. In this regard, H. Carby discusses in her article “White Woman Listen! Black Feminism and the Boundaries of Sisterhood,” the situation of black women as working labor:

What does the concept of “reproduction means in a situation where black women have done domestic labor outside of their own homes in the servicing of white families? In this example, they lie outside of the industrial wage relation but in a situation where they are providing for the reproduction of black labor in their own domestic sphere. (qtd. in Hennessy and Ingraham, 1997, p.115)

Carby’s words are suggestive of the economic status of Pauline. What worsens her living condition is the economic oppression based on racism which she has to tolerate in her society. One of her sad memories of racism is when her white employer compels her to choose either between her work and her husband: “She said she would let me stay if I left him. I thought about that. But later on, it didn’t seem none too bright for a black woman to leave a black man for a white woman. She didn’t give me the eleven dollars she owed me, neither. That hurt bad” (Morrison, 1982, p.369). Here, Pauline is economically exploited on the basis of her subordinate race and oppressed gender. The fact that she is compelled to choose between her husband and her work represents a state in which the black woman is seen as an economic slave by the dominant white society.

Sexism is discrimination based on gender, especially discrimination by males against females, arising from the opinion that females are less able than males in many ways. Within the context of this work, sexism and racism intersect in the black woman, who suffers discrimination both for her colour and for her gender.

Sometimes she gets further exploited sexually by the dominant race, making her the mother of mulattoes who straddle the racial fence uncertainly, tragically. In Daniel Defoe’s Roxana, for example, the underscoring concern about sexism is unmistakable when we read,



I thought a woman was a free agent, as well as a man, and was born free, and could she manage herself suitably, might enjoy that liberty to as much purpose as the men do; that the laws of matrimony were indeed otherwise... and those such that a woman gave herself entirely away from herself, in marriage, and capitulated only to be, at best, but an upper servant (qtd. in Encarta, my emphasis).

Generally, sexism describes the discrimination against one sex by members of another, especially by males against females, on the assumption that the male is superior. It underlies the conception of the feminine “as passive, acquiescent, timid, emotional,” in contrast to the masculine that is “dominating, adventurous, rational, creative” (Abrams 94).

The responsibility of giving them back their rejected humanity and their womanhood falls on the shoulders of black women themselves. Consequently, they have developed certain peculiar ways of looking at the society at large

Jordan-Zachary explains that the image of “good” womanhood is connected to the image of the good wife and the good mother, who stay at the “woman’s natural sphere of activity” which is her home (2009, p.27). The sexist oppression of Pauline by her husband takes the form of beatings and the use of violence:

Cholly picked her up and knocked her down with the back of his hand. She fell in a sitting position...He put his foot on her chest...He struck her several times in the face...Mrs. Breedlove took advantage of this momentary suspension of blows and slipped out of his reach. (Morrison, p. 321)

Thus, Pauline suffers from a series of sexist and racial oppression. In this consideration, Carby refuses to separate racism from sexism: “racism and sexism are similar. Ideologically, for example, they both construct common sense through reference to ‘natural’ and ‘biological’ differences” (Hennessy & Ingraham, 1997, p.116). Carby’s words are significant enough right here as they shed much light on how racism and sexism are intertwined. The two reasons explain how black males take advantage of their biological strength to oppress their women, very much like the way the whites get privilege over blacks by their white skin. Thus, taking advantage of natural and biological differences as two of the major components of the falsely-based ideology leads to sexism and racism. This state of double oppression against Pauline leaves its tragic influence on her daughter Pecola.

Racism involves the belief in racial differences which acts as a justification for non-equal treatment of members of that race. The term is commonly used negatively. It is usually associated with race-based prejudice, violence, dislike, discrimination, or oppression; the term can also have varying and contested definitions. As a word, racism is an “-ism”, a belief that can be described by a word ending in the suffix -ism, about race. The exact definition of racism is controversial both because there is little scholarly agreement about the meaning of the concept „race“, and because there is also little agreement about what does and doesn't constitute discrimination. Critics argue that the term is applied differentially, with a focus on such prejudices by whites and defining mere observations of racial differences as racism. The Bluest Eye explores the tragedy of the oppression and internalized racism. This novel presents the story of two black families,

Macteers and Breedlove. Both are poor African-American families, though Macteer is a little better placed who have migrated from Alabama and Georgia (South American States) via Kentucky to Lorain- Ohio, an industrial state, in search of a job. The novel shows clearly the evil of racism through the African adolescent female - like Pecola. She, like other African girls, suffered from the evils of racism and sexism in America which was dominated by the white. Pecola was an eleven year old poor, ugly and black girl who longed to have blue eyes. She also hoped that then she would get that love which she desired to get and it would reduce her sufferings in the quarrelsome atmosphere in her parents' house.

She was raped by her own father and beaten by her mother because they had been badly influenced by the vicious standards of the white world. She not only suffered as a black girl but also as an unprotected female. Morrison, who had sympathy for Pecola, was conscious of the neglect and exploitation of black African people by the white. A perusal of the novel *The Bluest Eye* creates an impression that Toni Morrison intertwines the concerns of two main themes in her novel *The Bluest Eye*. She explores the tragedy of the oppression or violation of children, especially poor children and she explores a problem specific to groups targeted by racism, that of internalized racism. This is a kind of thinking produced when members of the targeted group, in this case, African-Americans, begin to believe the stereotypes about themselves and imagine that European-Americans are superior in beauty, morality and intelligence. Morrison focuses on this problem of internalized racism as if affects children. The psychological mechanism of internalized racism hinges on the cycle of oppression

## Conclusion

In conclusion, Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* discusses two important issues or sides of

sexism and racism. Both deeply portray the dilemma of black women at large and exposes their intricate situation. Sexism includes patriarchal oppression represented in black males who, under the stereotype of weakness and emasculation, practice the most sexist oppression against their fellow women. For instance, Cholly is the father figure who tragically shares in the plight of his family. His feeling of inferiority and rejection by his family makes him a sexist person. At the racial level, Morrison deals with racism as impacting black womanhood more than black manhood. Morrison conveys this through the victimization of the characters of Pecola and Pauline. Though Morrison strongly criticizes white racism, she also criticizes the oppressing forces in her culture. On the other hand, Church's letter to God is significant enough as it clarifies the nature of the institution of racism. It is a strong critique against the social ills that produce racism in the American society. Morrison create the emotion of the blacks more real. The cruel reality, as well as humanistic feelings as ecological feminism in this work are one of the reasons why this work can be able to be spread for such a long time That black women survived and flourished under these conditions is surely a testament to the human spirit, but that is precisely the point. Black women, in the midst of both racism and sexism, did survive, and their ability to do was the glue that wrapped together black communities both during and after slavery. Within racism, the author shows the relationship between racism and economic exploitation. The economic situation of black women is miserable as they are only offered chances to work in domestic labor in the white families' houses or become prostitutes.



The industrial prosperity does not reflect on them because they are still doing domestic labor. The novel shows how Pauline is economically exploited and used. This bad economic situation explains the dilemma of black women as domestic workers. What worsens the economic status of black women is the way they are dealt with by their white ladies: Pauline is compelled to choose between her work or her husband, and she is denied her wage.

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