

## **Colour as Identity: Colorism in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye***

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### **Abstract**

While Racism traces its roots back to the subjugation of the non-white communities by white 'masters', Colorism emerges as an offshoot of Racism. Colorism, or the discrimination amongst individuals, solely on the basis of skin colour is practiced not only by the members of a different race, but also by the members of the same race towards each other. Toni Morrison, in her novel, *The Bluest Eye*, reveals how colorism is embedded in the psyche of African-American people. She demonstrates how "Black People" are not also subjected to Racism, but also Colorism by their own people. Morrison portrays a nuanced version of Racism, where the characters have internalized the set notions of Superiority and inferiority viz a viz race. This internalization creates a cycle of victimization and oppression which in turn strengthens the dominant cultures' oppressive standard of beauty. Though Colorism stems from Racism, it acquires a life of its own. This paper seeks to show how Morrison's novel, besides addressing the issue of racism, also tackles the issue of Colorism in the novel and shows the twin forces of racism and colorism are used by and against the members of the same community.

**Keywords-** *Colorism, Colour, Discrimination, Race, Identity, African-American*

## Introduction

The person who is most often credited with first using the word colorism is the Author and Activist Alice Walker. Walker defined Colorism as 'prejudicial or preferential treatment of same-race people based solely on their colour' in her 1983 book, *In Search of our Mothers' Gardens*. Colorism is not only a characteristic feature of the African American communities, but is also found in other non-white cultures such as Asian, Hispanic or Middle Eastern. The Root of Colorism is not only Racism, but the internalization of the racist ideas. Rather than accepting the skin colour they are born in, they spend their lives in idealizing a white standard and subsequently trying to come near to that standard. As a result, the non-white communities spend their entire lives trying to correct the non-standard. The mixed races or the colored people take pride in their white lineage and try to repress the black side of their persona. Straightening of hair and strategic makeup are thus seen as corrective measures adopted by them in order to differentiate themselves from the Black people. A major contributing factor to colorism in America has also been the Hollywood. Movie stars, who often became role models for the people were white and thus they eternalize the notions of white beauty. The lack of any black female or male leads failed to provide an icon with whom the young black folk could relate to. As a result, the Hollywood stars they saw on the screen were always an antithesis to who they were, in their own lives. One of the key concerns of the novel is the concept of beauty. The African-American Society in America has, over the years of exploitation, come to accept the European Standards of beauty and thus they hold an apologetic view about themselves. Appropriation to the white ideals is desired. The closer a person comes to the white standard, the more beautiful that person is deemed in the eyes of the society. Young Children like Claudia and Frieda are brainwashed into thinking that white is beautiful from their early childhood. They are given white porcelain dolls as birthday gifts. Their mothers, who have themselves grown up with the idea of white superiority perpetuate the same over their daughters. Black women not only adore young white girls but also inculcate among their daughters a fascination border lining on love for whiteness. A young black girl's love of Shirley Temple, a white icon, as Anne Anlin Cheng argues, can be 'read not merely or primarily as a gesture of social compliance but rather a response to the call of the mother, as a perverse form of maternal connection' Black girls can only be like their mothers 'by learning to love little white girls' (Cheng 200).

The most brutal form of Colorism in the novel is shown through the character of Pecola Breedlove, a young black girl in Lorain Ohio, in the 1940's who, after being shunned by the members of her community, believes that the society as well as her family would come to love her only if she loses her some of her 'blackness' or consequently, have deep ocean blue eyes. Pecola is a part of a dysfunctional family where love and acceptance find no place. Her family consists of an Alcoholic

father, an embittered mother and an indifferent brother. Pecola is bullied at the school for being black by young boys who themselves belong to the same race as her. They see as blackness as ugly while being complacent in the thought that they are not as 'black' as her or even as contempt for their own skin Color:

It was their contempt for their own blackness that gave the first insult its teeth. They seemed to have taken all of their smoothly cultivated ignorance, their exquisitely learned self-hatred, their elaborately designed hopelessness and sucked it all up into a fiery cone of scorn that had burned for ages in the hollows of their minds—cooled—and spilled over lips of outrage, consuming whatever was in its path (Morrison 65)

Pecola's mother disapproves of her own daughter. She hasn't the tiniest bit of affection towards the child that she gave birth to. She shuns the child whom she is supposed to love, only because that child isn't beautiful by her ideals. She has spent her whole life obsessing over film stars and failing to achieve what she so earnestly wanted, she looks at her daughter as a symbol of failed expectations and desires. Marriage to Cholly and bearing children made her bitter and unable to love her own children. Pecola represents, to her, the unachievable dream of desired beauty. Having idealized actresses like Jean Harlow her entire life, Pecola is the anti-thesis of that standard. She recoils at the sight of her own daughter and prefers to soothe the daughter of her white mistress over Pecola when there is a commotion at the house where she works. She is never sympathetic toward her daughter, she almost loathes very presence:

I used to like to watch her. You know they makes them greedy sounds. Eyes all soft and wet. A cross between a puppy and a dying man. But I knowed she was ugly. Head full of pretty hair, but Lord she was ugly (Morrison 126)

Maureen Peal, a lighter skinned girl is fed with a sense of superiority right from her childhood. Though she is not white, she thinks of herself as being superior to other girls in the school on the account of being closer to the white standard. The farther a girl is from the Black colour, the more beautiful she is. This notion is not only harboured by Maureen Peal, but also by the other girls in the school, who by default, accept Maureen's superior position and willingly submit to it.

She enchanted the entire school. When teachers called on her, they smiled encouragingly. 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; black girls stepped aside when she wanted to use the sink in the girls' toilet, and their eyes genuflected under sliding lids (Morrison 62)

Geraldine, a colored woman is the prime example of Cultural appropriation. She tries to suppress the black part of her personality and makes desperate attempts at making herself and her son

look less black. She explains to him the difference between the colored people and the “niggers” and how he must stay away from “niggers” She gets her son’s hair trimmed close to the scalp so that the rough texture of his curls is less evident. She rubs lotion into his skin to make it look less ashy. Geraldine’s attempts arise from a need to feel important and worthy in a society where colour is a pivotal part of self worth. Their loathing of the black community seeks to bring them closer to the white community and steer them away from the black community. Colored Women like Geraldine strive, their whole lives, to suppress the ‘funk’. They straighten their hair, wash themselves with soap, soften their skin with Lotion, try to hide their ‘black’ features by not applying lipstick to their entire lips, for the fear that they might seem too big and Black. “Wherever it erupts, this Funk, they wipe it away; where it crusts, they dissolve it; wherever it drips, flowers, or clings, they find it and fight it until it dies. They fight this battle all the way to the grave” (Morrison 82)

Morrison’s novel provides a deep insight into the idealized notions of beauty, where White is the standard which becomes a measuring scale for beauty. Both Black and Mixed Race women have internalized these set notions and everything they view is coloured by this scale.

Though these notions of beauty stem from racism, where the dichotomy between the white master and the black servant gave rise to the concept of the White as beautiful and Black as Ugly, they acquire a new dimension while operating in a single Race or community. Colour itself becomes a major factor in discrimination and it is evident in the treatment of Pecola by her own mother. Because of deeply entrenched racism, that dark skin is a synonym for ugliness and white skin is a coveted trait. While Colored women like Geraldine take pride in differentiating themselves from the Niggers and make every attempt at suppressing the ‘funk’, the African-American community instead of embracing the race they are born in, are engaged in a continual process of distancing themselves from ‘blackness’ As a result, Pecola, a dark skinned girl is abused throughout her life, her mother prefers her white skinned mistress over her own daughter, white skinned Shirley temple is idealized and lighter skinned Maureen Peal is considered to be more beautiful than the other girls in her school. Morrison shows the inhumane side of an exploited race. Morrison shows the basest and the crudest form of rejection and self hatred in the novel. She gives a painful portrayal of a young innocent girl who is hated and despised for something she had no control over. In the words of Morrison herself, while writing the novel, she wasn’t interested in ‘resistance to the contempt of others’ but ‘the tragic consequences of accepting rejection as legitimate’. Pecola collapses into madness and accepts her doom as her inevitable fate. As a vulnerable young female, she is crushed under the pressure of all those around her; her indifferent parents, the disapproving society, the contemptuous young boys, the haughty colored women. It is interesting to note that Morrison doesn’t project white people as demons who victimize the black community. Instead she shows, how, after having internalized the white

ideals, they victimize their own selves. Also, the characters who are responsible for Pecola's predicament are themselves caught in the web of same racial profiling. Her mother Pauline, after having lost her tooth is despised by other black women, she is treated like an animal by the white doctors at the hospital when she is pregnant with Pecola. She is made to feel wanting in beauty and she projects that frustration into despise for her little girl. Pecola's father is subjected to humiliation as a young man and he carries that bitterness to his fatherhood. The young black girls in the Society make Pecola a scapegoat for their own beauty standards, as they think of themselves as beautiful when compared to her. The only form of near acceptance that Pecola receives in her life is at the hands of Claudia and Freida, but this acceptance is also short-lived as she is stripped of any possible affection after her own father violently rapes her. Morrison draws a painful picture of the devastation that racial contempt causes and offers a striking critique of colorism and how it works as a double edged sword, destroying the lives of young vulnerable black girls in America, who remain subjugated as ever. These girls are not only victimized racially, but also sexually. The doubly marginalized women, on the basis of both race and color as well as gender form the lowest rung of the society. Gloria Gyles notes how these subjugated women form the lowest tier of the society, characterized by powerlessness:

There are three major circles of reality in American Society, which reflect degrees of power and powerlessness. There is a large circle in which white people, most of the men, experience, influence and power. Far away from it there is a small circle, a narrow space, in which there are the black people, regardless of sex, experience, uncertainty, exploitation and powerlessness. Hidden in this second circle is a third, a small dark enclosure in which black women experience pain, illation and vulnerability. These are the distinguishing marks of black womanhood in white America.

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