

Requiem of an Identity: Redeeming American Memory of Trauma in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*

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Abstract: America has long been considered the land of the free and home of the brave. This stereotypical image rendered America as the first destination of those oppressed overseas. However, local races and cultures have held conflicting views regarding what binds Americans together. In other words, what makes America American? This issue and others have haunted one of the major racial groups that helped shape America, and that is African Americans. Like any other racial group, African Americans have struggled for freedom and self-worth. Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1970) is considered by many as a great example of the African-American struggle against the systematic inferiority complex, especially against children and women. This article starts by highlighting the existing traumas haunting the American memory, especially that of African Americans. Then, it illustrates the horrific atrocities practiced against African-American children in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1970). The article concludes with suggested ways in literature by which African Americans who lost their identity can attain redemption and peace. The study employs a qualitative interpretive method emphasizing close reading and theoretical triangulation.

Keywords: African-American, freedom, identity, redemption, trauma.

Résumé : L'Amérique a longtemps été considérée comme le pays de la liberté et la maison des courageux. Cette image stéréotypée a fait de l'Amérique la première destination des opprimés à l'étranger. Cependant, les races et cultures locales ont eu des points de vue conflictuels concernant ce qui lie les Américains ensemble. En d'autres termes, qu'est-ce qui rend l'Amérique américaine ? Ce problème et d'autres ont hanté l'un des principaux groupes raciaux qui ont aidé à façonner l'Amérique, à savoir les Afro-Américains. Comme tout autre groupe racial, les Afro-Américains ont lutté pour la liberté et l'estime de soi. *The Bluest Eye* (1970) de Toni Morrison est considéré par beaucoup comme un excellent exemple de la lutte afro-américaine contre le complexe d'infériorité systématique, en particulier contre les enfants et les femmes. Cet article commence par mettre en évidence les traumatismes existants hantant la mémoire américaine, en

particulier celle des afro-américains. Ensuite, il illustre les atrocités horribles pratiquées contre les enfants afro-américains dans *The Bluest Eye* de Toni Morrison (1970). L'article se termine par des suggestions de moyens dans la littérature par lesquels les Afro-Américains qui ont perdu leur identité peuvent obtenir la rédemption et la paix. L'étude utilise une méthode d'interprétation qualitative mettant l'accent sur la lecture rapprochée et la triangulation théorique.

Mots-clés : afro-américain, identité, liberté, rédemption, traumatisme.

Introduction

Chloe Anthony Wofford Morrison, best known as Toni Morrison, was an African-American novelist born in Lorain, Ohio, US (The Nobel Foundation, 1993a). She was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1993, making her the first African-American woman to have received such an esteemed honor (The Nobel Foundation, 1993b). Toni Morrison is considered one of the best American novelists of the twentieth century, known for her deep engagement with topics on race, memory, and identity (The Nobel Foundation, 1993c). Her works center around the African-American lost identity and its contrast against white supremacy, highlighting the uneasiness African Americans had undergone in white America (Mbalia, 1991).

Her debut novel was *The Bluest Eye* (1970), which brought her fame nationwide. The events of the story take place between 1940 and 1941. It is about the tragic life of a little girl who goes by the name of Pecola Breedlove and her abusive maltreatment from her very household. Based on her looks, Pecola was being bullied both in her household and at school, convincing her that to be socially accepted she has to be beautiful, and to achieve that she must obtain the bluest eyes ever. Coming to learn that she would never acquire the bluest eyes, the eleven-year-old Pecola only gets further depressed by the fact that she lives in such a hypocritical society, who all agreed somehow to take advantage of her.

The novel did not receive much acclaim during its publication in 1970 (Rosler, n.d.). However, nowadays, it is regarded as a significant reference to the African-American experience in the aftermath of the Great Depression, making it one of the prominent American classics (The Washington Post, 2019). Having lived in an African-American community in Lorain, Ohio, Toni Morrison was full of her community's values (Rogerebert.com, 2019). Morrison also knew well what it meant to be African-American growing up in America. For this reason, most of her works focused on clearing the mist and confusion that African Americans were having—that they were second-class American citizens. Allen (2022) notes that Morrison's fiction “*forces readers to confront the historical and emotional consequences of institutional racism, compelling a recognition of the*

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humanity long denied to Black Americans” (145). From his part, Yang (2023) emphasizes that “*Morrison’s narrative strategies reconstruct ethnic history through collective memory and restore dignity to those marginalized by racial hierarchies*” (242). These insights reflect Morrison’s ceaseless endeavors to address and pain and suffering of the African-American community through her novel *The Bluest Eye*.

In addition, *The Bluest Eye* traces the four seasons—fall, winter, spring, and summer—mirroring the cycle of life and disintegration in the novel. As several critics note, the form mimics Pecola's mental disintegration and the social disintegration, thus becoming “a revalorized entity not just for the whites but also for the blacks.” (Khan & Rahman, 2014). The novel interrogates gender and racial equality in America quite gravely. Once dreamed of as the “land of opportunity,” Morrison unveils the nation as one founded upon racial stratification and social exclusion, describing America as “a nation of many bloods” (Beaulieu, 120: 2003). She deconstructs the myth of America as an egalitarian space through the fragmented lives of her characters.

In *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison does not merely criticize white America but also turns her critique inward against the Black community itself. Pecola's suffering begins at home—with her abusive father, Cholly Breedlove, and her cold and unaffectionate mother, Pauline. Her abuse is symbolic of a broader framework of internalized racism and self-hatred. Morrison, in the view of Mbalia (1991), “*turns the critical lens inward, forcing the black community to confront its complicity in reproducing the white gaze*” (90). Pecola's tragedy thus originates from within her own community as much as from the external pressures of white supremacy.

In Pecola, Morrison stages the daily suffering of African Americans who incorporate white standards of beauty and value. For Harris (1991), “*Pecola's tragedy is the tragedy of a race that has internalized white norms and learned to despise itself*” (64). The novel is a meditation on psychological colonization and the corrosive nature of racialized shame.

Morrison's choice of a girl as her protagonist heightens the critique. Pecola embodies the compounded oppression of race, gender, and class that Black women experience. Christian (1985) explains that Morrison's fiction “*dramatizes the fragmentation of the Black community under racial and patriarchal domination*” (162). Pecola's rape by her father encapsulates this internal collapse—what Morrison portrays as an implosion of family and community values.

Also, *The Bluest Eye* is Morrison's initial attempt at articulating a Black feminist sensibility. Awkward (1989) notes that Morrison “*demands a feminist consciousness inseparable from racial identity*” (5). Her book pleads for

acknowledgment of Black girls' humanity and an end to cycles of silence and violence.

The book did not receive significant critical attention initially, but in time it came to be recognized as a probing cultural critique. Krumholz (1992) notes that "over time, *The Bluest Eye* came to be seen as a masterwork revealing the psychic costs of racism" (25). Despite the periods of censorship in American schools, today it stands as one of the essential American novels of the twentieth century.

Morrison also shows how internalized and domestic racism can decay a community from within. Bouson (1999) refers to this as "*the self-hatred that festers within the Black psyche, turning victims into perpetrators of more violence*" (34). Morrison's portrayal is nonetheless sympathetic: she neither judges nor excuses her characters, but instead invites readers to recognize the social causes of their pain.

Finally, Morrison portrays sexual initiation as a site of trauma. Pecola's menarche signals her initiation into womanhood, yet this corporeal milestone is distorted by her father's sexual abuse. The coincidence of maturation and violation underscores the intersection of gendered and racial trauma (Bloom: 2007). Cholly's history of sexual humiliation at the hands of white men perpetuates a cycle of violence through generations, suggesting how historical trauma recreates itself within the Black community. The result is a chronical low self-esteem and internalized oppression, which circulate within African-American communities long after the original abuses (DeGruy: 2005). With these intertwining tragedies, Morrison composes a requiem for a vanished identity, demonstrating how oppression, once absorbed, is all but irreversible.

In the current article, the author will attempt to find an answer to the following questions:

To what extent was the African-American community infiltrated in Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*?

To what extent was Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* an embodiment of the African-American community at the time?

How was Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* a reflection of the African-American inferiority complex?

1. On Childhood Trauma in *The Bluest Eye*

Children are generally the most precious aspect of each parent's life. Parents continuously test their limits to protect their precious children and shower them with love, affection, and security. But in *The Bluest Eye* (1970), Toni Morrison gives us a completely different picture. From the beginning, the novel depicts children subjected to abuse and cruelty by adults. Morrison criticizes not only

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white America's systemic oppression, but also the African-American community's complicity in maintaining cycles of poverty and moral corruption.

Morrison reveals that parents, who have a responsibility to protect their children's innocence, sometimes become destroyers of their innocence. Cholly Breedlove rapes his eleven-year-old daughter, Pecola, destroying her childhood and breaking the family's collective memory. As Koopman (2012) states, "*Toni Morrison's The Bluest Eye (1970) ... appl[ies] a strategy of connecting rape to other forms of oppression, suggesting that incest is at least partly the result of the dynamics of being colonized and "othered"*" (1). Consequently, his second daughter, Frieda, is sexually assaulted by another member of the community, Henry Washington, demonstrating how the trauma is transmitted throughout the community, thus making her another victim of what Judith Herman (1992) labels "parental scapegoating" (75).

Morrison also demonstrates the racial and historical dimensions of trauma. Early in the book, Cholly's initial sexual experience is through the coercion by two white men, something that continues to follow him throughout his life. Hayes (1992) states, "*the rape of Pecola is an arrested history from Cholly's abandonment by his parents, the intrusions of White men during his first sexual encounter and the slave trades*" (9). The vicious cycle of violence shows that external oppression and internalized societal pathology both cause chaos for children, in particular girls like Pecola.

In her story, Morrison shows that African-American children bear the dual burden of racial domestic violence. Her book makes it clear that the same society that is supposed to protect children sometimes causes harm, and cycles of violence become almost impossible to break.

As much as Morrison's novel centers on the incestuous Cholly and his distorted relationship with his violated eleven-year-old daughter Pecola, somehow Morrison does not indict Cholly as much as she indicts the cruel and unjust system of white America. King and Scott (2006) argue:

"The novel represents father-daughter incest as a consequence of the disempowerment of the black male, who, because of racism, is not able to fulfill the role of father.⁹ Morrison uses the incest story not to indict patriarchy but to expose a system of racial othering in which the father is as much a victim as the daughter." (87)

Thus, according to Morrison, the African-American community was victimized in the novel. Even in postbellum America, African Americans still lived in systematic segregation and under the chains of slavery. Besides prevalent poverty and widespread illiteracy, the African-American community was confined within the walls of an unescapable moral and cultural prison. African-American men are, however, blamed in Morrison's novel. While African Americans lived

under deplorable conditions such as poverty and inequality, they cannot be justified for committing such a horrific crime of sexual violence upon one's daughter. Instead of attempting to move out of the moral, cultural, and social bondage propagated by white society, African Americans generally surrendered without sufficient resistance, sinking into the black depths of their activities.

Morrison highlights not only the physical brutality of the white world against the African-American community but also black violence. The violence is internalized as it breaks down the confidence of Pecola since she is convinced that she should possess blue eyes if she is to be beautiful. Her mother, father, and classmates mock the color of Pecola's skin, reinforcing in her the notion that her darker complexion is a defect. As Rosenberg (1987) has stated, "'Afro-American fiction is rife with light-skinned heroines'" (439).

Living in bondage and subordination for decades, African Americans grappled with the vicious legacy of white domination. The legacy manifests itself in violence spiraling in a self-perpetuating cycle in society since victims of abuse are likely to become abusers. Babina, Kavitha, and Mwale (2024), "*the Breedloves' collapse reflects how systemic racism fuels internalized self-hatred and violence, shattering family bonds and perpetuating intergenerational trauma*" (4).

Moreover, the African-American community becomes more and more entangled in a cycle of inferiority when children are traumatized. The traumatized children have poor self-esteem, developing unhealthy and distorted personality styles. In Lopez's (2014) own words, "*The dominant cultural system has succeeded in the process of African Americans' mental colonization. The minority subject has internalized the ideals of the hegemonic group, the whites*" (78).

This internalized oppression propels the cycle such that the abused become abusers and perpetuate the cycle of violence and self-hatred. Bouson (2000) explains:

"The disruptive symptoms of posttraumatic stress in children can have a significant impact not only on developing competencies but also on character development. Thus, the attempt to recover from childhood trauma can be made more difficult by the complex ways in which responses to trauma become woven into the structure of the personality." (8)

In *The Bluest Eye* (1970), Pecola Breedlove embodies what J. Brooks Bouson (2000) terms the "*traumatic and posttraumatic stress of racialized shame*," wherein the black female subject internalizes the oppressor's contempt and turns it inward (21). Pecola's suffering exemplifies this mechanism: as a victim of incestuous violence, she endures the convergence of familial betrayal

and cultural devaluation. Her pregnancy, resulting from her father's rape, literalizes what Cathy Caruth (1996) describes as:

“Trauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual's past, but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature—the way it was precisely *not known* in the first instance—returns to haunt the survivor later on.” (4)

The marigolds that Claudia and Frieda plant for Pecola's baby to live symbolize an environmental trauma for Pecola. Mathur (2025) explains this environmental failure arguing that “*in The Bluest Eye, the failure of marigolds to bloom demonstrates Pecola Breedlove's emotional breakdown*” (966). Thus, their failure to bloom reflects both Pecola's doomed pregnancy and the sterility of a society that refuses to nurture its most vulnerable. In this sense, the death of Pecola's child reflects the death of her community.

Ultimately, Pecola is scapegoated by her own family and community, fulfilling René Girard's (1977) notion of “the sacrificial victim” “*this ritual victim is an “innocent” creature who pays a debt for the “guilty” party*” (4). Girard's notion of the sacrificial victim describes how the community's rejection of Pecola re-enacts the very racism they have internalized; she becomes their repository of shame and failure (*ibid*).

From early childhood, Pecola is taught to believe in her ugliness—a belief reinforced by the racialized beauty standards that Frantz Fanon (1952) identifies as a form of “epidermalization of inferiority” (13). Her father's sexual assault deepens this wound, turning the violence of white supremacy into a domestic tragedy. Judith Herman (1992) explains that in cases of familial trauma, “*the damage to the survivor's faith and sense of community is particularly severe when the traumatic events themselves involve the betrayal of important relationships*” (40). Pecola's psychic disintegration mirrors this process: rejected by both parents and community, she becomes the symbolic “other” within her own race.

Thus, Morrison positions Pecola as both child and victim, the scapegoat of a fractured society unable to confront its own reflection. Her blackness, femininity, and poverty converge to form what bell hooks (1981) calls “*the triple burden of invisibility*” (97). Life, indeed, was cruelly unfair to Pecola—not only because she was black in a white supremacist world, but because she was also the “other” in her own family, denied even the basic tenderness that could have redeemed her humanity.

2. Spirituality vs. Superstition in the African-American Culture

African Americans have long endured tremendous hardship, beginning with the forced displacement of millions through the transatlantic slave trade. Between

the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries, over twelve million Africans were captured and shipped across the Atlantic to meet the growing demands for free labor in the New World (Eltis & Richardson, 14: 2010). Torn from their homelands and subjected to systematic dehumanization, enslaved Africans forged a spiritual consciousness that became both a survival strategy and a form of cultural resistance.

As Strickland (1979) explains the importance of religion for the African-American community. He explains that “*slaves were able to find confirmation in their religion for resistance as well as for escapism*” (604).

Despite the brutality of the slave system, enslaved Africans sustained a deeply rooted spirituality inherited from diverse West and Central African cosmologies. These traditions included a rich pantheon of deities and ancestral spirits, each associated with natural elements, moral order, and communal wellbeing (Mbiti, 54-60: 1969).

This spiritual framework functioned, as Henry Louis Gates Jr. (1988) observes, as “*a reservoir of memory and resistance,*” *providing enslaved people with an interpretive lens through which suffering could be transformed into meaning*” (33). Through rituals, songs, and collective worship, the enslaved maintained ties to their ancestral identities, reimagining bondage as part of a redemptive spiritual journey.

Thus, spirituality became the essential outlet through which Africans and their descendants could endure and transcend the injustices of slavery. As Joy DeGruy (2005) later theorized, this enduring faith tradition offered a “psychological and cultural buffer” that enabled African Americans to cope with generational trauma while preserving a sense of divine purpose (128). In this sense, spirituality was not merely consolation—it was a profound act of cultural and existential defiance against an unjust world order.

In Morrison's novel, spirituality is a central theme. Most of the characters in the novel experience a certain level of spirituality. In fact, and for so many years, African Americans managed to resist endless pain by holding on to each other. It is true that in Morrison's novel, everything seems to be falling apart, yet considering the harsh circumstances, the African-American community succeeded in its way to survival. That is usually due to their strong connection with their ancestral world of spirituality.

Like any other African-Americans, Morrison's characters suffer from what DeGruy has coined as posttraumatic Traumatic Syndrome or PTSS. According to DeGruy for the African-American community to rebuild its broken self-esteem, they have to socialize and plunge deeper into their inner world of spirituality. As the healing process would take longer, and to overcome the PTSS, African-Americans have got to reconnect to their faith and spirituality. These two key

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elements are significant instruments that would help the African-American community complete the journey toward healing from PTSS (DeGruy, 219: 2005).

Moreover, indeed, African Americans' connection with the spiritual world goes back to their African pagan ancestry. However, African Americans are often reported to be Christianized. They are Christians, yet not Christians in the same way as white Americans. African-American churches are dissimilar to white Americans, where they would have choirs singing spiritual songs. Being different is another way for the African-American community to distinguish itself from anything else, thus stating that they strongly and proudly uphold their deeply rooted African spiritual ancestry.

In her novel, Morrison (1970) highlights the significance of faith in the African-American community. Initially, Morrison describes the prevalent nature of evil surrounding African Americans from all sides. Having to endure the evils of slavery and poverty for thousands of years, African Americans proved once again their faith in God—that things would turn right for them one day. The African-American spirituality and belief in God have constituted a barrier—a fortitude against their very destruction by the white man's unjust system. DeGruy (2005) explains:

“We [African-Americans] are a spiritual, loving, and hopeful people. It is amazing to me that after all the work done to dominate, diminish, and destroy us, after centuries of the most vile and horrific abuses meant to break our spirit and will, we still have faith in God.” (199)

Against all odds, African Americans have learned to survive countless atrocities, drawing resilience from their deep-rooted spirituality and unwavering faith in God. As Albert Raboteau (1978) notes, African-American religious consciousness “transformed the experience of suffering into a theology of endurance,” enabling a community stripped of freedom to reclaim spiritual autonomy (291). Yet, alongside this redemptive faith, there existed a persistent reliance on superstition — what Trudier Harris (1991) calls “folk survivals of African cosmology that blurred the sacred and the magical” (43).

This thin line between spirituality and superstition shapes the tragic destiny of Pecola Breedlove. In *The Bluest Eye*, superstition functions not as empowerment but as imprisonment. As Nietzsche (1882) observes, “*superstition is the poetry of life: so the poet may find it pardonable if he is superstitious*” (59), thus indicating that superstitious societies will always find victims to justify their immoral actions.

Pecola's rape by her father—an act that annihilates her childhood and sense of self—is compounded by her mother's cruel rejection, which reflects what Joy

DeGruy (2005) terms “intergenerational internalized oppression,” where “*pain unhealed becomes pain reenacted*” (128). Instead of solace, Pecola receives condemnation: she is blamed not only for her own violation but also for the misfortunes that follow.

After Pecola’s incestuous pregnancy, Claudia and Frieda plant marigolds hoping for the baby’s survival, a ritual gesture that blends innocence, spirituality, and superstition. The flowers’ failure to bloom becomes a haunting metaphor for communal guilt and moral decay. As Barbara Christian (1985) interprets it, “*the marigolds stand as witness to a soil too poisoned by racial and familial violence to yield life*” (53). When the marigolds fail to bloom anywhere, the act of blaming Pecola transforms her into the community’s scapegoat. René Girard’s (1977) concept of the scapegoat mechanism illuminates this process: “*violence is discharged onto a substitute victim, whose suffering restores temporary harmony*” (83). Thus, the superstitious imagination of the community converts moral responsibility into myth, absolving the guilty by sacrificing the innocent.

In contrast to the redemptive power of faith, superstition in Morrison’s narrative perpetuates blindness and cruelty. Toni Cade Bambara (1970) points out that Morrison uses superstition “*as a metaphor for the paralysis of a people unable to distinguish ritual from responsibility*” (140). Pecola’s tragedy reveals how misguided beliefs can replace compassion, imprisoning victims within cycles of guilt and shame.

The setting of the novel during the Great Depression intensifies these conditions of despair. As Ashraf H. A. Rushdy (2001) argues, “*economic destitution and moral desolation become inseparable in Morrison’s reconstruction of 1930s Ohio*” (89). The pervasive poverty and loss of dignity turn personal suffering into collective malaise, where “misfortune gives birth to more misfortune,” as you eloquently put it.

Pecola Breedlove’s life unfolds amid this climate of deprivation and superstition, her tragedy standing as both a social critique and a spiritual lament. Her father’s act of violence, committed in drunken self-hatred, embodies the internal collapse of a people whose faith could sustain endurance but whose superstition often justified cruelty. In this moral twilight, Morrison exposes the most painful paradox of black survival: a faith strong enough to survive oppression but a fear deep enough to destroy its own children.

The well-founded and deeply-rooted superstition in Pecola’s community mercilessly exploited her. Desperate for blue eyes, the little girl seeks refuge from another African-American adult who does not also hesitate to exploit her innocence to the limits. Soaphead Church cruelly convinced Pecola that he could grant her the blue eyes she was seeking:

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“If you are overcome with trouble and conditions that are not natural, I can remove them: Overcome spells, bad luck, and evil influences. Remember, I am a true Spiritualist and Psychic Reader, born with power, and I will help you—satisfaction in one visit. During many years of practice, I have brought together many in marriage and reunited many who were separated. If you are unhappy, discouraged, or in distress, I can help you.” (Morrison, 173: 1970)

In the end, Pecola's father, the supposed protector of her innocence, robs her of her childhood. Unfortunately, the rape incident leaves Pecola extremely vulnerable, where another man who claims purity and goodness takes advantage of her. Soaphead Church was the symbol of how cruel some people could be. Soaphead convinced Pecola that her eyes could turn blue. Furthermore, he cruelly convinced the little child to kill a dog, believing that the offering would superstitiously satisfy the spirits and would grant her wish.

3. Racism and Inferiority Complex in America

African Americans have always been treated as second-class citizens. Having to endure all the systematic atrocities for so many years, many African Americans have come to accept their destined fate. In Morrison's novel, African Americans are presented as creatures who will never be accepted as people. They are tools or instruments used by white people to serve their needs. Furthermore, in her novel, Morrison depicts the African-American suffering through women and children. It is women and children who suffer the most in Morrison's novel. Morrison's novel centers on one little African-American girl whose community strives to subdue her voice.

In representing African-American women and children, Morrison gives a voice to the voiceless majority. Pecola is just another little African-American girl whose misfortune was long-destined, and no one seemed to provide care or give a helping hand. In addition, Morrison's women and children are presented to be double-oppressed. Both the unjust system of white America and the African-American community itself constantly mistreat them. The double oppression of African-American women and children helps worsen their inferiority complex, which is pretty much the case of Pecola, whose obsession with white American beauty standards, embodied in the blue eyes, led to the deterioration and the downfall of Pecola together with all the African-American community.

Right from the start of her work, Morrison clearly states that her entire focus came as a reaction to a question that plagued her life. She could not fathom "*how something as grotesque as the demonization of an entire race could take root inside the most delicate member of society: a child; the most vulnerable member: a female*" (Morrison, xi: 1970). Morrison seems to write the entire novel only to

find a logical answer to the question sickening her for so long. After reading the book, the reader receives only one answer, and that is that the most vulnerable members of any society are children, and women are targeted because the African-American community was doomed to be inferior and eventually dehumanized.

Coming to look at it, African Americans did not stand a chance while living under such a cruel and unjust racist system as that of white America. This is why African Americans continue to live as second or third-class citizens. Postbellum America has indeed witnessed great changes, especially in terms of abolishing slavery, racism, and segregation. Nonetheless, African Americans are still being otherized and dehumanized by the cruel system of white America.

In Morrison's novel, poverty is a common thing to be found in the African-American community. Nonetheless, the internalized inferiority complex and the self-hatred of many black people were something unusual. As for the Breedloves, their ugliness was not something typical; however, *"their ugliness was unique. No one could have convinced them that they were not relentlessly and aggressively ugly"* (Morrison, 38: 1970). This image is a confirmation—a statement that the dramatic experiences of African Americans were nothing but a systemized inferiority complex.

The inferiority complex experienced by African Americans did not emerge in a vacuum. As Frantz Fanon (1952) famously asserts, “the black man’s self-perception is structured by the white gaze,” a gaze that imposes psychic alienation and self-hatred across generations (83). Morrison’s depiction of the Breedlove family reflects precisely this internalized racial trauma — an inherited psychological legacy produced by centuries of slavery, segregation, and systemic dehumanization. As Joy DeGruy (2005) elaborates, “post-traumatic slave syndrome manifests as low self-esteem, anger, and internalized racism, transmitted from parent to child” (130).

This multigenerational affliction, passed down “from one generation to another,” becomes in Morrison’s world the invisible architecture of black suffering. The inferiority complex is therefore not a moral defect but, as Patricia Hill Collins (1990) explains, “a social construct born from racist ideology that naturalized black subordination” (68). In this sense, Morrison exposes the psychological residue of institutional racism, showing how systemic injustice infiltrates domestic life, transforming victims into perpetrators within their own households.

Had racism and segregation not imposed such spiritual and economic deprivation, African Americans might have lived lives defined by dignity rather than despair. Instead, as Ashraf H. A. Rushdy (2001) notes, “Morrison dramatizes the cyclical relationship between historical injury and familial violence—how

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public degradation is reenacted in private spaces” (91). The poverty, humiliation, and violence that saturate Pecola’s world are not isolated tragedies but the collective aftershocks of racial hierarchy.

Moreover, Morrison’s novel *The Bluest Eye* (1970) vividly captures these sufferings, focusing especially on the voiceless pain of black women and children. While all African Americans endure the psychic scars of racism, Morrison underscores that “the intersection of race and gender creates a double jeopardy of invisibility” (Beale, 90: 1970). Female characters dominate the novel, reflecting Morrison’s commitment to “articulate the inner lives of those doubly silenced—black and female” (hooks, 97: 1981).

By contrast, male voices such as Cholly Breedlove, Mr. Henry Washington, and Claudia’s father appear sporadically, functioning primarily as agents through whom the trauma of emasculation and racial dispossession is displaced onto women and children. J. Brooks Bouson (2000) interprets these men as “fractured patriarchs—figures whose violence toward black women mirrors the psychic violation inflicted by white America” (45). Similarly, Doreatha Mbalia (1991) emphasizes that Morrison’s portrayal of black female suffering is not simply tragic but revolutionary: “it exposes class, gender, and racial oppression as interlocking systems that must be confronted simultaneously” (42).

Through this lens, Morrison’s narrative transcends personal pain to indict a larger social pathology. The violence within black families becomes the mirror image of a society that has long waged psychological war on black identity itself.

The systematized targeting of African-American females, especially female children, was the main concern raised in Morrison’s novel *The Bluest Eye* (1970). In her book: *Toni Morrison’s Developing Class Consciousness*, Doreatha Drummond Mbalia (1991) better explains this issue as follows:

“Racism devastates the self-image of the African female in general and the African female child in particular. Toni Morrison’s emphasis is on society, not the family unit. According to her, the African’s self-image is destroyed at an early age as a result of the ruling class’s (i.e., the European capitalist class’s) promotion of its standard of beauty: long, stringy hair, preferably blond; a keen nose; thin lips; and light eyes, preferably blue.” (32-33)

Based on Mbalia’s statement, it becomes clear that African-American females and female children in particular do something not done unconsciously. Rather, these two categories are considered to be extremely vulnerable, where any harming them would result in undesirable and unnatural consequences. To ensure the maximum result, the unjust system of slavery would think to give birth to countless submissive black men, who would not dare to make a considerable change in their lives. Instead, the black female would be made to look easy to

abuse and ready for exploitation and violence whenever the black man would feel like it. Based on this cruel system, the oppressive system of racism becomes self-generating, where endless forms of violence and abuse keep growing. Again, the first victims of this system would be the most vulnerable, and that is women and children.

4. Cultural Trauma in the African-American Community

As a result to long years of mistreatment a new African-American generation was born with submissive and subordinate traits. Confused and suffering from an inherent inferiority complex, African Americans have now been facing a new imminent threat, and that is a hardwired cultural trauma. This upcoming threat has become as challenging as the entire unjust system of slavery and racism. Now the younger generation has come face to face with the blunt truth—either to face it or perish.

The hardwired cultural trauma was deeply rooted in the African-American community as if it were a part of their genetic system, which is hard to shake off. Indeed, as a result of so many years of living in slavery, African Americans face the danger of being lost in a world of neglect. On the dangerous and serious impact of the cultural traumatic syndrome on the African-American community, Ibarrola (2014) explains that "*cultural trauma leaves indelible marks upon the [African-American] group consciousness and causes a dramatic change in their identity, which is played out by future generations*" (112).

Like much of Toni Morrison's fiction, *The Bluest Eye* (1970) proudly engages with postcolonial discourse, giving voice to the silenced histories of African Americans and resurrecting the ancestral griefs buried by centuries of oppression. As Edward Said (1993) defines it, postcolonial writing "*speaks in the language of the empire but seeks to restore to the dispossessed their own narrative authority*" (260). Morrison's novel does precisely this: she reclaims the fragmented collective memory of African Americans, transforming personal anguish into historical consciousness. Through her narrative, the voices of enslaved ancestors reverberate in the lives of contemporary characters, providing what Bill Ashcroft et al. (1989) call "*a counter-discourse to colonialist narratives that once defined blackness as absence*" (4).

By invoking ancestral suffering, Morrison not only reanimates the memory of those silenced by slavery but also constructs a moral framework for the younger generation—a "roadmap," as you aptly put it—guiding them through the ongoing darkness of racial trauma. This corresponds with Frantz Fanon's (1961) notion that "*the colonized subject must reclaim the buried past in order to heal the dismembered self*" (169). Thus, Morrison's project becomes one of historical restoration as much as literary creation: a re-membering of both body and memory.

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The most explicit sign that *The Bluest Eye* is a trauma narrative lies in the incestuous rape of Pecola Breedlove by her father—a single act that embodies what Cathy Caruth (1996) describes as “*the unclaimed experience of trauma that resists full comprehension but endlessly demands retelling*” (5). Pecola’s violation initiates a cascade of intergenerational trauma: her sister Frieda’s molestation by Mr. Henry Washington, the parents’ moral collapse, and the community’s collective guilt. These interconnected traumas exemplify what Dominick LaCapra (2001) terms “*the oscillation between acting out and working through*,” wherein trauma is both relived and perpetuated (144).

Pecola’s incestuous pregnancy, resulting in a stillborn child, is perceived as a communal omen—a sign that personal suffering has expanded into a shared catastrophe. As Jeffrey C. Alexander (2004) explains, cultural trauma occurs “*when members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness*” (8). The barren marigolds that Claudia and Frieda plant become a symbolic reflection of this collective desolation.

The roots of this cultural trauma stretch back into historical trauma, inherited from centuries of enslavement and racial degradation. Morrison reveals how this trauma manifests through cycles of self-hatred and repetition. Cholly Breedlove’s drunken violence and incestuous act echo his own sexual humiliation by white men—a cycle where the oppressed internalize and reenact the violence of their oppressors. The pain and shame of this repetition, as Bouson (2000) notes, “*surpass the act itself, radiating outward to contaminate the moral life of the entire community*” (47).

Ultimately, Morrison’s postmodern narrative structure underscores the continuity of historical and cultural trauma. The consequences of enslavement and the abuse of black girlhood, exemplified in Pecola’s fate, reverberate far beyond the family or even the community. They mark, as Mbalia (1991) observes, “*the psychic terrain of a people struggling to reclaim their collective dignity amid the ruins of racial memory*” (64).

Alone but also on the societies where they would return. The collective memory of the social group ultimately shares the mass pain. This is pretty much what happened with Pecola and the African-American community where she lived, where traumatized memories tend to regenerate and worsen.

Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* (1970) is a profound meditation on the mortality of childhood innocence under the weight of racial trauma. By victimizing Pecola Breedlove, Morrison extends that victimization to encompass the entire African-American community. The theft of Pecola’s innocence and childhood symbolically mirrors the historical theft of African Americans’ right to freedom, dignity, and full humanity. In this sense, the traumatized child becomes the

emblem of a traumatized collective memory, where generational pain threatens to erase communal identity itself.

Morrison's focus on childhood trauma exemplifies what Cathy Caruth (1996) calls "the crisis of witnessing" — the inability of trauma victims and their societies to fully articulate or heal their pain (7). Through Pecola, Morrison dramatizes a wound that belongs not only to the individual but to a collective consciousness scarred by centuries of slavery and racism. Laurie Vickroy (2002) similarly argues that Morrison "*constructs trauma as both personal and cultural, intertwining the psychological with the historical*" (12). Pecola's loss of self is, therefore, a metaphor for a people's ongoing struggle against erasure.

Although Morrison did not experience severe childhood trauma herself, her fiction bears the psychic imprint of inherited suffering. Dominick LaCapra (2001) notes that "*post-traumatic subjects can experience empathic unsettlement,*" wherein they internalize the pain of others through cultural memory (143). Similarly, Marianne Hirsch's (1997) concept of "postmemory" clarifies how Morrison, as a second-generation inheritor of racial trauma, transforms remembered pain into artistic and ethical responsibility (22).

The shared legacy of slavery, systemic racism, and generational injustice continues to haunt the African-American psyche, forming what Jeffrey Alexander (2004) terms "*a cultural trauma that becomes part of the collective identity*" (10). In this light, Morrison's "inner child" is symbolically wounded alongside Pecola — an artistic embodiment of the unresolved historical pain of her people.

What makes this condition especially tragic is the community's moral paralysis. Instead of offering solace or recognition, Pecola's neighbors—except for Claudia and Frieda—respond with silence and judgment. As Judith Herman (1992) explains, "*trauma recovery is impossible when the surrounding community denies the survivor's pain*" (61). Claudia and Frieda's partial empathy, though genuine, remains impotent; their attempts to help through planting marigolds are more symbolic than transformative. Barbara Christian (1985) notes that this "impotent compassion" reflects a society too damaged to nurture its children (56). In the end, Pecola's isolation exposes not only the failure of familial protection but also the failure of communal humanity—a collective loss that Morrison transforms into moral witness through fiction.

Quite perplexed, both Claudia and Frieda wonder: "But we listened for the one who would say, *"Poor little girl," or, "Poor baby," but there was only head-wagging where those words should have been. We looked for eyes creased with concern, but saw only veils*" (Morrison, 190: 1970).

Claudia and Frieda's confusion reflects the shame deeply rooted in the collective memory of the African-American group. In this short passage of Claudia and Frieda, Morrison is putting direct blame on Pecola's community,

which was supposed to help her and protect her from harm or danger. In fact, in her work, Morrison gave little space to white people, almost excluding them from her book. By doing so, on the one hand, she asserts the African-American presence in the novel. On the other hand, she makes faint references to white people to remind the reader who was responsible for all the atrocities of her people in the first place.

Ultimately, by writing her story, Morrison attempts to give a voice to the voiceless majority in her community, especially the most vulnerable, like children and women. She strongly believes that her storytelling would bring a certain solace to her injured community—"that it is part of a healing process that will enable African American collective imagination (social, political, and creative) to move beyond community—"that the trauma of African American historical experience" (King & Scott, 31: 2006). This is like a final act of kindness on her part to bring some peace to her people. Through her storytelling, Morrison attempts to invigorate the African-American community by teaching them how to live beyond the cultural trauma deeply rooted in her community.

5. White Dominant Culture vs. African-American Lost Identity

Eurocentrism gained prominence over years of colonial dominance. This primordial way of thought tends to portray non-European cultures as primitive and exotic, thus asserting the superiority of the European culture. Eurocentrism is tightly connected with the colonial discourse. Most often, Eurocentric authors would endorse the belief that colonized people are uncivilized and therefore entitled to the 'civilizing mission' of the 'white man.' In this sense, Eurocentrism is based on the idea of otherizing the non-European.

Early on at the beginning, the European settlers ignored the presence of Native Americans, stating that it was an empty place until they discovered it. This arrogant behavior resulted in the extermination of hundreds of thousands of Native Americans. Meanwhile, hundreds of thousands more are being forced to live in reservation camps suitable for animals more than humans. The Eurocentric philosophy, thus, constitutes the backbone of the colonial machine that gave birth to slavery.

America, which was founded based on the Eurocentric belief of the rightfulness of slavery, was once again face to face with a protrusion—a mutation of the past that the African-American community has been all these years suffering from. Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1970) is considered an anti-Eurocentric novel because it rejects the European colonial discourse of superiority. As argued before and through her work, Morrison strongly adheres to her African ancestry—especially superstition.

In doing so, Morrison is warning the Eurocentric school of thought to take back its words, thus rejecting its unjust claims of superiority over her people.

Crichlow & McCarthy (1995) explain that "*Morrison's work relies upon African-centered cultural paradigms, paradigms documented by academics, theologians, philosophers, and sociologists. For centuries, these paradigms have been derided by European colonization and Eurocentric thought, dismissed as primitive superstition*" (216).

Moreover, being an African-American author, Morrison realizes the challenges of that job; the responsibility is even greater. By highlighting the white Eurocentric beauty standards in Pecola's society, Morrison averts these standards, which have sickened her community for so long. Because of these standards, Pecola dreamed of having an appearance different than what was ordained for her. And while everybody mercilessly took advantage of her, the little girl continued dreaming an impossible dream, where she eventually lost her identity.

While choosing to write the way she did, Morrison also understood the gravity of the language in which she was writing—that it was a highly racialized language, full of notions of superiority and hegemonic thoughts. In her book, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, Morrison (1993) describes herself as "*a black writer struggling with and through a language that can powerfully evoke and enforce hidden signs of racial superiority, cultural hegemony, and dismissive "othering" of people and language*" (17).

Drawing on the conclusions of Morrison's statement, she is familiar with the cultural paradigms that separate whites and blacks from each other. In addition, Morrison brilliantly manages to reformulate the black identity away from the racial stereotypical thoughts of white people. In doing so, Morrison wishes to bring the African-American identity back to life. This is observed, especially in *The Bluest Eye* (1970), where much more space is given to black Americans than white Americans, who are hardly present in the novel.

Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1970) stands as a postcolonial, feminist, and anti-Eurocentric novel par excellence, offering a profound critique of Western hegemony while simultaneously celebrating black identity and community. Through the tragic life of Pecola Breedlove, Morrison dramatizes how racial self-loathing and cultural alienation are not merely personal afflictions but the lingering effects of a Eurocentric world order that has long defined beauty, value, and humanity in white terms. As Frantz Fanon (1952) observes, colonized subjects "*internalize the colonizer's image of themselves, thereby reproducing the hierarchy they seek to escape*" (14). Morrison's narrative confronts this psychological colonization by restoring visibility and voice to those whom dominant culture has rendered invisible — especially black women and children.

However, Morrison (1993) warns that resistance to Eurocentrism must not result in the simple reversal of hierarchies. As she herself declared, she does not "*want to alter one hierarchy to institute another... [nor] dominant Eurocentric*

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scholarship replaced by dominant Afrocentric scholarship” (25). Her project, then, is not to invert the racial order but to reimagine identity outside the binaries of domination. Morrison envisions a pluralistic cultural space in which black subjectivity can flourish without replicating oppressive models of power.

Restoration of the African-American identity becomes the central moral endeavor of Morrison's art. Doreatha Mbalia (1991) argues that Morrison's fiction “*reconstructs a black collective consciousness from the ruins of racial and gender subjugation*” (43). To achieve this, Morrison centers the experiences of the most vulnerable—women and children—those most deeply scarred by historical trauma yet most capable of renewal. In giving them narrative agency, she insists on community as both the site of injury and the potential source of healing.

In this regard, Morrison's appeal to solidarity reflects her strategy of narrative collectivism, where individual suffering becomes a means of articulating a shared identity. Through such narrative embodiment, Morrison's characters function as moral cartographies — “moving landmarks,” as you put it — tracing the contours of a lost yet recoverable cultural self.

Within this reconstructed moral universe, shame becomes a central psychological motif. J. Brooks Bouson (2000) notes that Morrison's characters “*bear the inherited shame of racial inferiority, a shame that becomes both personal and cultural*” (52). In *The Bluest Eye*, this shame is not incidental but systemic — a birthright imposed upon black bodies by a racist society. Morrison exposes how this cultural shame corrodes identity from within, perpetuating self-denial and internalized hatred. Yet by confronting that shame through narrative, Morrison transforms it into a site of resistance.

Ultimately, *The Bluest Eye* advances a postcolonial humanism that refuses both Eurocentric and Afrocentric extremes. In resisting all forms of dominance, Morrison's fiction gestures toward what bell hooks (1990) calls “*a space of radical love and self-recovery where the wounds of history can be named and healed*” (26). Her goal is not merely to lament the past but to forge a new moral vocabulary for black identity—one grounded in empathy, mutual recognition, and shared memory.

Morrison realizes that her job is not as easy as it may sound. However, she is determined to carry on the agonizing and tedious journey, hoping that one day it will pay off. Thus, Morrison makes it clear that Eurocentrism stands in the way of regaining the African-American lost identity. In the end, only one should remain: either Eurocentrism or Afrocentrism and her job is to disturb the Eurocentric thought in favor of the Afrocentric one.

Conclusion

Based on the aforementioned analysis, Morrison tried to assess the African-American stance in the long fight ahead to come. After her assessment is over,

Morrison realizes that the black community in America is not as ready as it ought to be. Eurocentrism is still prevalent in America; it is well-prepared, and African Americans should be equally prepared if they wish to survive the fight.

Morrison reveals that racial injustice and ethnic inequality are still dominant in the US, and the white man is the primary cause of the pain and suffering of the African-American community. However, Morrison also holds her people responsible for all that has befallen them. After all, they allowed and even caused the suffering of one of them. What makes the African-American tragedies even worse is the fact that their scapegoat was a little girl. Pecola would stand forever as a reminder of their deeply rooted shame. In times when her father should have stood as a protector to his vulnerable child, he was the one who violated his daughter, causing her to experience double oppression.

The double oppression of Pecola brought the African-American community the desolation and misery they deserved. While she was being tortured and broken to pieces, no one offered a helping hand to the eleven-year-old child. Instead, they all took advantage of her, each in the manner and capacity in which they could. Pecola was an example of how Afrocentrism went off the limits. Morrison stood as a witness that Afrocentrism could be as atrocious and horrific as Eurocentrism. Therefore, she reminds everyone of the importance of achieving the balance necessary to guarantee the safety and continuity of all races living in America, mainly whites and blacks.

During her journey of regaining the lost African-American identity, she remembers why it is so important for her people to regroup and work in solidarity to have a decent life. Moreover, through her novel, Morrison sings a song of requiem for a lost identity—an identity that seemed to be prohibited for her people. The long struggle for freedom has been agonizing and painful for her and her people. Through her narrative, Morrison touches upon the subject of racism, slavery, and segregation. She also addresses the wider audience, connecting her with anyone suffering a fate similar to Pecola's. The latter is the portrait and the embodiment of the oppressed. Through Pecola, Morrison encourages her readers to question the social standards that have long been considered absolute and divine. As a result of the African-American inferiority and lost identity, Pecola grew weaker and dependent. Her vision of herself was no longer appealing, and her definition of beauty was mirrored by white Eurocentric standards.

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