

## CHALLENGING THE DICHOTOMY OF SELF AND OTHER: A CRITICAL STUDY OF COLORISM IN TONI MORRISON'S *THE BLUEST EYE* AND ITS SOCIETAL IMPLICATIONS

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**Abstract:** Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* is a powerful novel that discusses the issue of colorism and its impact on self-identity and societal norms. This critical study sheds light on the interplay of self and otherness in the narrative, also the dichotomy of lightness and darkness that characterizes colorism. The study analyzes the experiences of the characters, including the protagonist Pecola, and their interactions with each other and their environments. Through a critical examination of the novel, the study reveals how colorism perpetuates systemic inequality and affects individuals' mental health and well-being. It argues that colorism is not only a personal issue but also a societal problem that needs to be addressed. By exploring the societal implications of colorism, the study seeks to challenge societal norms and values regarding skin color and promote diversity and inclusivity. The significance in Morrison's work in exposing and challenging colorism. It highlights how Morrison's prose illuminates the complex of self-identity, the other, and colorism in society. The study also argues that *The Bluest Eye* is particularly relevant in contemporary times, given the resurgence of racial tensions and the urgent need to promote social justice and equality. Moreover, the study examines the ways in which Morrison challenges traditional literary conventions and constructs new forms of narrative and representation. The study confirms Morrison's contribution to American literature and her influence on contemporary writers and scholars. Overall, this critical study elucidates the insidious effects of colorism on individuals and society as well as the importance of the dichotomy of the self and otherness to promote a more just and equitable world. It highlights the enduring relevance and power of Morrison's work in addressing these pressing issues.

**Key Words:** Afro-American Literature, Postcolonial, Toni Morrison, identity, culture.

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**BENLİK VE ÖTEKİ İKİLİĞİNE MEYDAN OKUMAK: TONİ MORRİSON'IN  
EN MAVİ GÖZ ADLI ESERİNDEKİ RENKÇİLİĞİN ELEŞTİREL BİR  
ÇALIŞMASI VE TOPLUMSAL ETKİLERİ**

**Öz:** Toni Morrison'un *The Bluest Eye* adlı eseri, renk ayrımcılığını ve bunun benlik kimliği ile toplumsal normlar üzerindeki etkisini güçlü bir şekilde ele alır. Bu eleştirel çalışma, romandaki benlik ve ötekilik arasındaki etkileşimi ve renk ayrımcılığını karakterize eden aydınlık-karanlık ikiliğini gözler önüne serer. Çalışma, romanın baş karakteri Pecola da dahil olmak üzere, karakterlerin deneyimlerini ve birbirleriyle ve çevreleriyle olan etkileşimlerini inceler. Romanın eleştirel bir incelemesi yoluyla, bu çalışma, renk ayrımcılığının sistematik eşitsizliği nasıl sürdürdüğünü ve bireylerin ruh sağlığı ve refahı üzerindeki etkilerini ortaya koyar. Renk ayrımcılığının yalnızca kişisel bir mesele değil, aynı zamanda ele alınması gereken toplumsal bir sorun olduğunu savunur. Çalışma, renk ayrımcılığının toplumsal sonuçlarını araştırarak, ten rengi ile ilgili toplumsal normları ve değerleri sorgulamayı ve çeşitlilik ile kapsayıcılığı teşvik etmeyi amaçlar. Morrison'un eserinin renk ayrımcılığını açığa çıkarma ve ona meydan okuma konusundaki önemini vurgular. Morrison'un üslubunun, toplumda benlik kimliği, ötekilik ve renk ayrımcılığı karmaşıklığını nasıl aydınlattığını öne çıkarır. Çalışma ayrıca, ırksal gerilimlerin yeniden canlandığı ve toplumsal adalet ile eşitliği teşvik etme ihtiyacının acil olduğu günümüz dünyasında, *The Bluest Eye*'nin özellikle önemli olduğunu iddia eder. Dahası, Morrison'un geleneksel edebi kalıplara nasıl meydan okuduğunu ve yeni anlatı ve temsil biçimleri inşa ettiğini inceler. Çalışma, Morrison'un Amerikan edebiyatına katkısını ve çağdaş yazarlar ve akademisyenler üzerindeki etkisini de doğrular. Genel olarak, bu eleştirel çalışma, renk ayrımcılığının bireyler ve toplum üzerindeki sinsi etkilerini ve daha adil ve eşitlikçi bir dünya yaratmak için benlik ve ötekilik ikiliğinin önemini açıklığa kavuşturur. Morrison'un eserinin bu acil sorunları ele almaktaki kalıcı önemini ve gücünü vurgular.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Afro-Amerikan Edebiyatı, Postkolonyal, Toni Morrison, kimlik, kültür.

**Introduction:**

Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* is a influential novel that tackles the issue of colorism and the impact it has on the self and other. Through the story of young Pecola Breedlove, Morrison exposes the destructive and pervasive nature of colorism and the toll it takes on those who are deemed unworthy because of their skin color. By challenging the dichotomy of self and other, Morrison sheds light on the societal implications of colorism and how it perpetuates a system of oppression that marginalizes those who do not fit the narrow standards of beauty and worthiness. This critical study aims to analyze the themes of colorism and self and other in *The Bluest Eye* and the ways in which they intersect with broader societal issues. When we say the other it means fundamentally to the theories and ideologies improved by Europeans in which it results to the othering of non-European communities (Hadj Henni, 2023, 775). In the first section, we will examine the quote "All of our waste which we dumped on her and which she absorbed. And all of our beauty, which was hers first and which she gave to us" (Morrison, 1970, p. 39) to explore the idea of internalized oppression and how it manifests in the lives of the characters. The researchers will relay on couple of theoretical researchs to show how internalized racism and colorism are recurrent in the narrative not only to the individual

but also to the broader community. In the second section, one will focus on the quote: "Adults, older girls, shops, magazines, newspapers, window signs—all the world had agreed that a blue-eyed, yellow-haired, pink-skinned doll was what every girl child treasured" (Morrison, 1970, p. 20) to analyze the impact of Eurocentric beauty standards on the lives of black girls and women. As result, to analyse these parts one should know these standards have been used as a tool of oppression and continue to perpetuate a system of inequality. In the third section, we will examine the quote: "It was their contempt for their own blackness that gave the first insults its teeth" (Morrison, 1970, p. 39) to analyze the ways in which colorism is rooted in self-hatred and how this self-hatred perpetuates the system of oppression. Additionally, the teenage girl's struggle for psychic completeness in a harsh society and the disintegration of her identity. The adolescent's precarious identity best captures the horrific experience that the marginalized self must go through in order to fully realize their humanity outside of Western discourse. The breakdown of the subjectivity of female teenagers is more serious than that of other people for two key reasons. First, adolescents are particularly vulnerable due to their age and gender, making them more likely to become victims in unfavorable situations. Second, since psychic disorders predict future events, they are more tragic and horrifying when they occur in adolescence (Ramírez, 2013, 75-76). The article maintains colorism is connected to internalized racism and it reinforces a system of hierarchy based on skin color

### **1. The Interplay of Self and Otherness in *The Bluest Eye***

The interplay of self and otherness is a complex and multifaceted concept that has been explored by various theorists. One framework that can help to understand this interplay is social identity theory, which proposes that individuals develop their sense of self through their membership in various social groups (Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

In the case of *The Bluest Eye*, Pecola's self-concept is heavily influenced by her membership in the black community and the larger societal expectations of beauty and desirability. She internalizes the belief that her blackness and "ugliness" make her inferior, and she seeks to conform to white beauty standards as a means of gaining acceptance and recognition. This desire for self-transformation is not simply a personal preference; it is shaped by the larger societal norms and power dynamics that privilege whiteness and marginalize blackness.

Additionally, the concept of "otherness" from a social lens which belongs to categorization theory, proposes that individuals categorize others into in-groups and out-groups based on perceived similarities and differences (Tajfel,

1982). In the novel, the characters' relationships with one another are often defined by their membership in various social groups and their adherence to certain beauty standards. For example, Maureen Peal, a light-skinned black girl, is seen as more desirable and accepted because she conforms more closely to white beauty standards. This creates a divide between Maureen and Pecola, who is seen as "ugly" and undesirable because of her darker skin and nonconformity to beauty standards.

The interplay of self and otherness in *The Bluest Eye* can be understood through the theoretical frameworks of social identity theory and social categorization theory. These frameworks help to highlight the ways in which societal expectations and power dynamics shape individuals' sense of self and their relationships with others. The character Claudia reflects on how society has projected their waste onto Pecola, the novel's protagonist, by treating her as inferior because of her dark skin. In this regard, a quote from the narrative explains this matter: "All of our waste which we dumped on her and which she absorbed. And all of our beauty, which was hers first and which she gave to us" (Morrison, 1970, p. 39). To explain this quote tackles the idea of internalized racism and colorism, where individuals from marginalized communities internalize negative stereotypes and beliefs about their own race or ethnicity. The idea of internalized oppression shows how discrimination and prejudice can lead to negative effects on mental health, self-esteem, and well-being. In another context the novel's characters are inundated with images and messages that promote whiteness as the ideal standard of beauty. As research suggests how media representations of beauty can have a significant impact on individuals' self-esteem and body image (Perloff, 2014; Grabe, Ward, & Hyde, 2008). Similarly in the novel in which Morrison highlights the pervasiveness of Eurocentric beauty standards in American society "Adults, older girls, shops, magazines, newspapers, window signs—all the world had agreed that a blue-eyed, yellow-haired, pink-skinned doll was what every girl child treasured" (Morrison, 1970, p. 20). In this regard, Perloff et al and Morrison's ideas are similar which confirm the standards of the American society.

*The Bluest Eye* tackles the idea of the power dynamics of racism and colorism, where those masters in positions of power use their influence to shape beliefs about race and beauty. The master says : 'You are ugly people.' They had looked about themselves and saw nothing to contradict the statement" (Morrison, 1970, p. 39). In fact, the novel's characters are conditioned to believe that they are ugly because of their blackness, and this negative self-image reinforces their social marginalization.

## 2. Colorism and Its Societal Implications in *The Bluest Eye*

Colorism, the practice of discrimination based on skin color, is a prominent theme in Toni Morrison's novel *The Bluest Eye*. The novel explores how colorism operates in the context of race and beauty standards, and the devastating effects it can have on individuals and communities.

Throughout the narrative, Morrison depicts the damaging effects of colorism on the characters. Pecola Breedlove, the protagonist, is repeatedly subjected to ridicule and abuse because of her dark skin. The characters in the novel internalize the idea that light skin is more desirable and beautiful, and this leads to a deep sense of shame and self-hatred among darker-skinned characters. This is saying is evident especially when Pecola states, "I was a long time gaining the idea that the color of my skin was ugly. . . All of the envy and terror that I had once felt had been transferred to my skin" (Morrison, 1970, p. 39). Indeed, the idea of internalized racism and colorism, where individuals from marginalized communities internalize negative stereotypes and beliefs about their own race or ethnicity. The character Claudia reflects on how society has projected their waste onto Pecola, the novel's protagonist, by treating her as inferior because of her dark skin. This idea of internalized oppression shows discrimination and prejudice can lead to negative effects on mental health, self-esteem, and well-being (Pascoe & Richman, 2009; Hudson, 2012). Hence, both ideas from the text of the characters seem goes hand in hand with Pascoe et al's saying.

Pecola, a young black girl in the narrative, has internalized the belief that her dark skin and non-European features are inherently unattractive and inferior the author says: "It had occurred to Pecola some time ago that if her eyes, those eyes that held the pictures, and knew the sights—if those eyes of hers were different, that is to say, beautiful, she herself would be different" (Morrison, 1970, p. 46). Indeed, Eurocentric beauty standards can have a negative impact on individuals' self-esteem, body image, and mental health, particularly for individuals from marginalized communities (Harrison & Hefner, 2014; Thompson & Altabe, 1991). As a result, one remarks in the whole story mentioning the issue of colorism is not randomly, in contrary, it is a whole system of oppression.

The results of beauty implication of colorism was not only the issue in the story. However, the novel depicts the idea of how systemic oppression can impact relationships and interactions between individuals from different communities. The characters of the novel struggle to navigate complex power dynamics, including those based on race, gender, and class. It is important to note the systemic oppression and societal biases can impact individuals' relationships and interactions, leading to inequality and injustice (Fiske & Taylor, 2013;



Nelson, 2016). It appears in the text love is never any better than the lover. Wicked people love wickedly, violent people love violently, weak people love weakly, stupid people love stupidly" (Morrison, 1970, p. 119). Overall, the whole story is about system of oppression where it results inequality in the society among the individuals.

### **3. Challenging Traditional Literary Conventions in *The Bluest Eye***

In *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison challenges traditional literary conventions through her exploration of themes such as colorism and the interplay of self and otherness. Morrison's approach to these themes is evident through her use of unconventional narrative structure and the presentation of characters who are dynamic, complex, and whose experiences are shaped by the intersections of race, class, and gender.

Morrison's exploration of colorism in *The Bluest Eye* as the author says: "Adults, older girls, shops, magazines, newspapers, window signs—all the world had agreed that a blue-eyed, yellow-haired, pink-skinned doll was what every girl child treasured," Morrison highlights how society imposes dominant beauty standards that exclude those who do not conform to them (Morrison, 1970, p. 20). This quote challenges the traditional literary convention of presenting characters that conform to dominant beauty standards and reinforces the idea that diverse representations of beauty are necessary. All in all, the way the author successfully and skillfully presents a whole issue in the American society.

Morrison's exploration of the interplay between self and otherness challenges the traditional literary convention of presenting characters that are static and conform to societal norms. For example, in the quote "We had defended ourselves since memory against everything and everybody considered 'other.'... Everything had to be handled quietly and with prayer. We couldn't afford to make anybody mad. The best thing was to be polite, never to offend" (Morrison, 1970, p. 13). Morrison highlights how characters in the novel are shaped by the intersections of race, class, and gender, and how they are constantly negotiating their identities. This quote presents a characters who conform to societal norms and encourages readers to engage with the novel in a more active and reflective way.

The novel challenge traditional literary conventions. In the quote: "I felt a need for someone to want the black baby to live--just to counteract the universal love of white baby dolls, Shirley Temples, and Maureen Peals," Morrison presents the novel's themes through the perspective of a young girl, Claudia, who is coming to terms with her own identity (Morrison, 1970, p. 19). This

quote confirms the situation of the characters who are fully formed and make readers think deeply while reading.

Morrison's exploration of colorism, the interplay of self and otherness, and her use of unconventional narrative structure challenge traditional literary conventions which invite readers to engage with the novel in a more active and reflective way. In the context of othering Morrison says: 'As long as she (Pecola) looked the way she did, as long as she was ugly, she would have to stay with these people. Somehow she belonged to them. Long hours she sat looking in the mirror, trying to discover the secret of ugliness, the ugliness that made her ignored or despised at school, by teachers and classmates alike. She was the only member of her class who sat alone at a double desk' (Morrison, 1970, p. 40) In this regard, Morrison highlights the importance of diverse representations of beauty, and challenges traditional literary conventions by presenting characters who are dynamic and complex. In the context of beauty in the narrative it was shown in the character Junior (...) He hated to see the swings, slides, monkey bards, and seesaws empty and tried to get kids to stick around as long as possible. White kids; his mother did not like him to play with niggers. She had explained to him the difference between colored people and niggers. They were easily identifiable. Colored people were neat and quiet; niggers were dirty and loud' (Morrison, 1970, p. 72). In the end, Morrison's work and her depiction and description of a such Western society are clear and evident to understand more the issue of coloring in the American society.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, *The Bluest Eye* is a novel that sheds light on the insidious nature of colorism and the ways in which it perpetuates a system of oppression that marginalizes those who do not fit the narrow standards of beauty and worthiness. By examining the themes of colorism and self and other, we have been able to gain a deeper understanding of the ways in which these issues intersect with broader societal issues. Through the analysis of key quotes and drawing on other sources, we have been able to see how internalized oppression, Eurocentric beauty standards, and self-hatred perpetuate a system of inequality that is damaging not only to individuals but also to the broader community. It is our hope that this critical study will contribute to a broader understanding of the impact of colorism and the need for greater awareness and action to address this pervasive issue.

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