

## The Appalling Tragedy: Sexuality, Beauty Standard, and Racism in *The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison

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### Abstract

Being about the tragic lives of African American black families who encounter traumatic circumstances, the novel *The Bluest Eye* especially focuses on the unbearable life of a little black girl, Pecola. The horrible atmosphere of the novel can be seen from the very beginning. It is heart-wrenching to see from the first pages of the novel that a young girl is raped by her father; and consequently, she is pregnant. Pecola is so severely affected by the traumatic events such as the racial discrimination, internalized ugliness as being black, whiteness as the accepted beauty standard, and sexual abuse by her father that in the end, she goes mad and hallucinates a dream friend seeing her blue eyes. As a child, she associates blackness with the burden of her life and she considers that having blue eyes would be the solution to all her sufferings. Moreover, other black male and female characters such as Frieda, Claudia, Cholly, Darleine, Paulina are affected by the racism, sexual abuse, beauty standard, discrimination, and humiliation in the society. They have an internalized belief of blackness and ugliness; for this reason, they believe they experience poverty and discrimination. The aim of this paper is to discuss the traumatic tragedy caused by beauty standards, sexual abuse, and racism.

**Keywords:** Beauty Standard, Sexual Abuse, Racism, Class, *The Bluest Eye*, Toni Morrison

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## Dehşet Verici Trajedi: Toni Morrison'un *En Mavi Göz* Romanında Cinsellik, Güzellik Standardı ve Irkçılık

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### Öz

Travmatik koşullarla karşılaşan Afrikalı Amerikalı siyah ailelerin trajik hayatlarıyla ilgili olan *En Mavi Göz* romanı özellikle küçük siyahı kız Pecola'nın dayanılmaz yaşamına odaklanır. Romanın dehşet verici atmosferi ilk sayfalardan anlaşılabilir. Romanın ilk sayfalarında küçük bir kızın babası tarafından tecavüze uğramış olduğunu, dolayısıyla hamile olduğunu görmek yürek parçalayıcıdır. Pecola ırk ayrımı, siyahı olarak içselleştirilmiş çirkinlik, güzellik standardı olarak beyazlığın kabul edilmesi ve babası tarafından cinsel istismara uğraması gibi travmatik olaylardan o kadar şiddetli etkilenmiştir ki sonunda aklını kaybeder ve mavi gözlerini gören hayali bir arkadaş halüsinasyonu görür. Bir çocuk olarak siyahiliği hayatının sıkıntılarıyla ilişkilendirir ve mavi gözlere sahip olmanın tüm sorunlarının çözümü olacağını düşünür. Aynı zamanda Frieda, Claudia, Cholly, Darleine, Paulina gibi diğer siyahı kadın ve erkek karakterler de toplumdaki ayrımcılıktan, güzellik standardından, istismardan, ırkçılıktan ve aşağılanmadan etkilenirler. İçselleştirilmiş bir siyahılık ve çirkinlik inancına sahiptirler bu yüzden de yoksulluk ve ayrımcılık yaşadıklarına inanırlar. Bu yazının amacı güzellik standardı, cinsel istismar ve ırkçılığın sebep olduğu travmatik trajediyi tartışmaktır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Güzellik Standardı, Cinsel İstismar, Irkçılık, Sınıf, *En Mavi Göz*, Toni Morrison

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## **Introduction**

*The Bluest Eye* published in 1970, is a novel written by American writer Toni Morrison (1931 - 2019), who has a deep love of black culture. Khan and Rahman (2014, p. 1) state that Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* is notable for demonstrating the interrelationship between the internalization of blackness and opposition to racial abuse in contemporary culture. Being about the traumatic life of an African American black family, the novel has extraordinary circumstances. The daunting atmosphere of the novel can be understood from the beginning pages, "it was because Pecola was having her father's baby that the marigolds did not grow" (Morrison, 2007, p. 5). It is heartbreaking to see from the beginning pages that a young girl is raped by her father; consequently, she is pregnant. The psychology of the raped little girl is tragic. This paper aims to discuss the traumatic tragedy caused by beauty standards, sexual abuse, and racism.

## **Beauty standard**

Numerous intellectuals and writers have debated the notion of beauty; notwithstanding, it is most usually associated with a pleasant physical appearance, especially in ladies (Wylene, 2021, p. 1). Facial characteristics, skin color, and body shape all contribute to the sense of physical beauty. Internalized white beauty standard has resulted in unhappiness and guilt among non-white populations (Wylene, 2021, p. 1). The society in the novel internalized a standard of beauty, which means that whiteness is beautiful and blackness is ugly. They think that a light-skinned and blue-eyed person is beautiful. On the other hand, a dark-skinned and dark-eyed person is ugly. "All the world had agreed that a blue-eyed, yellow-haired, pink-skinned doll was what every girl child treasured" (Morrison, 2007, p. 20). Almost everybody in the novel accepts that white skin and blue eyes are beautiful. Hyman (2009, p. 256) asks that Why? What was it about the white dolls that drew these kids' attention? He adds that the implicit understanding of these youngsters was that the cultural structure in which they existed valued whiteness. As a result, if I play white, I will be acclaimed, exalted, and housed inside; if I play black, I will be humiliated, enslaved, and sent outside. There are several messages in the novel that whiteness is perceived as good, such as Pauline Breedlove prefers the little white girl of the family she works for instead of her own daughter Pecola; they give Claudia a white-skinned, blue-eyed baby doll as a present; they idealize white actress Shirley Temple; there is praise to white beauty in the movies; they see that light-skinned Maureen is sweeter than other black girls; Mr. Henry jokes Claudia and Frieda by greeting them with white actresses' names which the girls enjoy. The beauty standard can also be studied in terms of the schoolgirl Maureen, the society's internalized ugliness, Claudia's puking, the Shirley Temple cup, and Pecola's praying for blue eyes.

White is accepted as beautiful. Each character is affected by this belief; however, Pecola is the most affected victim in the novel. For example, Maureen humiliates Pecola, Frieda, and Claudia for being black. She expresses this thought by saying, "Black and ugly black e mos. I am cute" (Morrison, 2007, p. 73). Although she herself is black, she sees herself as rightful to humiliate them as she has lighter skin and better economic conditions. "A high-yellow dream child . . . She was rich, at least by our standards" (Morrison, 2007, p. 62). As she is rich and has lighter skin, everyone at school likes her. Whiteness is associated with value, wealth, and cleanliness; however, blackness is associated with worthlessness, poverty, and dirtiness. For instance, at the beginning of the novel the nine-year-old Frieda and eleven-year-old Claudia collect coal to burn at home to get warm. Due to the cold out, Claudia becomes ill, and she pukes. Claudia considers that "She is not talking to me. She is talking to the puke, but she is calling it my name: Claudia" (Morrison, 2007, p. 11). After the illness and puke, Claudia's mother gets angry at her for being ill and puking. She sees that nobody talks to her and asks her feelings; furthermore, she hears her mother scolding. She has in mind that

“I believe she despises my weakness for letting the sickness take hold” (Morrison, 2007, p. 11). Claudia’s mother is not angry with her, but she is angry about her illness. She internalizes blackness with sickness, dirtiness, and worthlessness; thus, she gets angry at Claudia for becoming sick by not wearing tight. “How many times do I have to tell you to wear something on your head” (Morrison, 2007, p. 10)? She scolds her for becoming ill as they think blackness is associated with dirtiness.

Society connects blackness with poverty. For instance, it is written in the novel that “They lived there because they were poor and black, and they stayed there because they believed they were ugly” (Morrison, 2007, p. 38). This sentence is about Pecola’s family. They see themselves as black; as a result, they are poor. They connect their poverty with their blackness. They think their whiteness and blackness decide their value, economic condition, and well-being. Moreover, their acceptance of their ugliness is apparent. “. . . wondered why they were so ugly... they had each accepted it without question” (Morrison, 2007, p. 39). Both the black society see themselves as ugly, and the whites see them ugly. This is not questioned in society. Their ugliness is accepted without questioning. Furthermore, they are convicted of it from birth and internalize it. For instance, when Paulina bears Pecola, she thinks that Pecola is ugly as she is black. “Head full of pretty hair, but Lord she was ugly” (Morrison, 2007, p. 126). Although Paulina believes Pecola’s intelligence by saying, “She caught on fast . . . Pecola look like she knew right off what to do. A right smart baby she was” (Morrison, 2007, p. 126). She neglects her cleverness. Aside from this, she thinks as if her intelligence is not important. She thinks of her ugliness from birth. She stigmatizes her as ugly, for she is black as soon as she bears. Preetha and Balachandran (2020, p. 53) mention that Paulina didn't think much of her daughter. They add that Pecola was informed from the moment she was born that she was "ugly" and Pauline is more obsessed with her just-born baby's appearance than with its health. Mahaffey (2004, p. 161) mentions that instead of relying on one another for strength, Pauline looks at her baby and is aware of the "blackness", while Pecola looks at Pauline and sees a stranger named "Mrs. Breedlove" rather than "Mother." Pecola's mother does not give her any favorable opportunities to grow into a strong, self-loving, and subjective adult girl (Mahaffey, 2004, p. 161). They also tell that Pecola learns from her mother that she is ugly, and she begins to despise herself due to her skin color.

Seeing that whiteness imposes dominating beauty ideals on black people, blacks suffer significant psychological consequences (Vimalan & Subbiah, 2018, p. 150). He blames both blacks and whites for Pecola's compulsive yearning for blue eyes, claiming that she has been forced to play with toys and adore famous actors who have defended white world standards since she was a toddler. The eleven-year-old girl, Pecola, lacking love in her life, sees everywhere that white skin and blue eyes are beautiful. Therefore, she is ugly being black. “The ugliness that made her ignored or despised at school, by teachers and classmates alike” (Morrison, 2007, p. 45). She often looks at the mirror and sees herself ugly as she is black. She is attracted by white actresses as well. Claudia says “Frieda and she had a loving conversation about how cute Shirley Temple was “ (Morrison, 2007, p. 19). The girls talk about her beauty and love to see her on the cup. For instance, once Pecola drinks a lot of milk; as a consequence, Mrs. Macteer gets angry with Pecola for drinking so much milk. “What the devil does anybody need with three quarts of milk” (Morrison, 2007, p. 23)? Mrs. Macteer means Pecola with her utterances. Accusing Pecola of being greedy, she gets angry at her for drinking so much milk. However, Frieda and Claudia are aware of the fact that she drinks so much to see Shirley Temple as they say “We knew she was fond of the Shirley Temple cup and took every opportunity to drink milk out of it just to handle and see sweet Shirley’s face” (Morrison, 2007, p. 23). Pecola’s intention is not to drink so much milk but to see white actress Shirley Temple on the cup. Portales (1986, p. 497) says, according to the girls, Shirley Temple embodies all society thinks adorable, everything worth possessing. Claudia recognizes that it is Shirley Temple's face,

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not the milk that has Pecola sucking sensually from the cup (Hyman, 2009, p. 260). Pecola consumes milk from a Shirley Temple cup because Shirley Temple's attractiveness fascinates her.

The little black girl, Pecola, is tired of whiteness as the standard of beauty. She is so distressed by this standard that she begs for blue eyes every day. "Each night, without fail, she prayed for blue eyes" (Morrison, 2007, p. 46). She thinks that if she had blue eyes, everyone would see her differently. Moreover, if she had blue eyes, she would see the world differently. Pecola thinks that "If those eyes of hers were different, that is to say, beautiful, she herself would be different" (Morrison, 2007, p. 46). She considers that having blue eyes will be the solution for her miserable condition, her poverty, and her ugliness. If she has blue eyes, she thinks that the others in society, her friends at school, or her family at home will see her differently; as a result of this, they will not misbehave in front of her beautiful blue eyes. This belief is absolutely supported by the event that the boys at the street stopped quarreling and misbehaving Pecola when Maureen met them. "Maureen appeared at my elbow, and the boys seemed reluctant to continue under her springtime eyes so wide with interest" (Morrison, 2007, p. 67). They pretend as if there was no need to bother themselves with the girls and they leave. In fact, they do not want to misbehave or do awful things in front of lighter-skinned and cute Maureen.

### **Racism**

In Morrison's novel, racism and beauty standards are interconnected as whiteness is regarded as superior and blackness is regarded as inferior; society sees whiteness as beautiful and blackness as ugly. Camp (2015) states that early modern European travelers called Africans savages and they also observed the differences in skin tones across African ethnicities, as well as the lifestyles and physical characteristics of the various groups (as cited in Wylene, 2021, p. 4). Camp (2015) situates white folks' perceptions of blacks as ugly and inferior in the circumstances of slavery in the America, a period during which white racists linked beauty with European color and characteristics and characterized blacks who did not conform to that criterion as an ugly, inferior race (as cited in Wylene, 2021, p. 4). Miniotatite (2014, p. 51) states that the book focuses on the influence of white supremacy ideology on the self-esteem and destiny of Afro-Americans, who have been considered as the "Other" and hence inferior for generations. He adds that the pressure of white standards of beauty on black identity can be destructive. Their innate, inborn wickedness, sloth, ignorance, irresponsibility, violence, illiteracy, docility, bodily ugliness, and other negative perceptions characterized and objectified them, and were absorbed by many blacks (Miniotatite, 2014, p. 52). The unfavorable prejudices that were put on them were accepted by many of them (Miniotatite, 2014, p. 56). From the beginning pages, "They lived there because they were poor and black, and they stayed there because they believed they were ugly" (Morrison, 2007, p. 38). It can be understood how they have internalized their blackness and ugliness. They accept their condition without questioning. The family lives there in poverty as they think that they are black and ugly. When Cholly's aunt is ill, the women reflect their life about their race's inferiority. They think "Everybody in the world was in a position to give them orders" (Morrison, 2007, p. 138). They even see the white children as superior to themselves. Everyone orders them as they see themselves as the most inferior. Moreover, racism can be explicitly seen in the relationships between Mr. Yacobowski and Pecola, Geraldine and Pecola, Cholly and the two white men.

Pecola goes to a store to buy a candy; however, the shopkeeper Mr. Yacobowski pretends not to be seeing her and he does not regard her even as a human. "He does not see her, because for him there is nothing to see" (Morrison, 2007, p. 48). Pecola enters and Mr. Yacobowski does not look at her. Pecola sees "interest, disgust, even anger in grown male eyes" (Morrison, 2007, p. 49). After taking the candies, Pecola gives the money; but "He hesitates, not wanting to touch her hand"

(Morrison, 2007, p. 49). After the event, Pecola thinks that although he does not know anything about her, he is prejudiced against her. Then, what can be the reason for his rude behavior, she thinks. She considers that only the fact that she is black can be the reason of the white American man. He has decided what kind of a person she is only looking at her blackness. Mahaffey (2004, p. 159) mentions that Pecola is fully aware of the significance of Mr. Yacobowski's disrespectful attitude toward her when she tries to acquire her favorite Mary Jane candy; she is well aware that her blackness is to blame for it.

Junior tricks Pecola by bringing her to his home and throwing the black cat at her and causing the cat's death. However, he accuses Pecola of this and complains his mother. Geraldine's behavior, when she sees Pecola at home, is only because of her blackness. "You nasty little black bitch. Get out of my house" (Morrison, 2007, p. 92). Geraldine does not ask anything. She does not question the reality or who she is. She talks hatefully towards Pecola. Geraldine dismisses her only by looking at her blackness. She is so obsessed with blackness and whiteness that she does not want Junior to play with blacks. Mbalia as cited in Mahaffey (2004, p. 162) says that Geraldine does not feel concern for Pecola because she is reminded of everything she has attempted to avoid; everything connected with the impoverished, suffering African public: their outward appearance, behavioral tendencies, lives, and language patterns. Instead of complimenting her, Geraldine kicks her out of her home (Mahaffey, 2004, p. 162). Geraldine teaches Junior color distinctions. She warns him about different skin colors. "She had explained to him the difference between colored people and niggers . . . Colored people were neat and quiet; niggers were dirty and loud" (Morrison, 2007, p. 87). Junior's family is black, as well. However, as they have a well economic condition, they see themselves as upper class than other blacks; even they see themselves as if they were from a different race. She straightens her hair like white women. She combs Junior's hair well. She cares about her house. They wear beautiful clothes and have more money. She warns her children for this reason. She wants Junior to behave well; otherwise, white kids will not play with them.

When Cholly is having his first sexual experience with Darlene, two white men encounter them. They force Cholly and Darlene to continue. Cholly cannot escape. He directs his hate towards Darlene. "Never did he once consider directing his hatred toward the hunters" (Morrison, 2007, p. 151). Cholly's psychology about their races can be understood from a few sentences in Cholly's mind during this force: "They were big, white, armed men. He was small, black, and helpless" (Morrison, 2007, p. 151). Cholly should hate the two white men who force him to go on. However, he sees them superior as they are white men. He has internalized that the white men have a superior race and he has an inferior race. Therefore, it is impossible for him to hate them, dominate them, or humiliate them. Instead of this, he directs his hate only to his own race and powerless girl. He hates the one who is the witness of his impotence. From that time on, he hates women, which is easier for him. Khan and Rahman (2014, p. 1) mention that in African American society, the existing structure of racism causes trauma and self-hatred.

### **Sexual abuse**

Another aspect that can be deeply studied in Morrison's novel *The Bluest Eye* is the sexual abuse. As a matter of fact, there is sexual abuse and rape within families. Walker (2019) states that in literature, rape has grown more open and victim-centered; it is a crime of power. He adds that rape is a criminally accepted method of oppression; rape is intrusive, invading the victim's privacy, jeopardizing their feeling of control, and undermining their self-worth. Rape is the male sexual dominance and the expression of one human being's desire over another. In the novel, sex is presented in a violent form; rape is depicted directly, in the form of terrible horror. Sex should be a natural and enjoyable act between the two people who are willing; on the contrary, the novel depicts

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sex in a violent and immoral form. The novel has several sections which can be accepted as a form of violent sexual abuse such as Cholly's first forced sexual experience, Frieda's abuse by Mr. Henry, Pecola's rape by her father, and the little girls' abuse by Soaphead Church.

Cholly has his first sexual experience with humiliation and hatred. "Get on wid it. And make it good, nigger" (Morrison, 2007, p. 148). The two white men force him to rape Darlene, which is shameful. He cannot resist them and has to continue having sex with Darlene while they are watching. "Cholly looked at Darlene. He hated her" (Morrison, 2007, p. 148). His first forced sexual experience causes her to hate Darlene and all the other women in the world. After the forced sex, he even flies for fear that Darlene can be pregnant. He gets away and never sees her again. Cholly was abandoned by his mother. Cholly's aunt, the only person caring for Cholly, dies. He is forced by the two white men to rape Darlene. Portales (1986, p. 501) tells that Cholly is naturally confused after this horrible experience and he is lost. He flies and tries to find her father; however, his father rejects him. He becomes a free man. "Cholly was truly free" (Morrison, 2007, p. 160). Cholly becomes a free and dangerous man. He marries Paulina at that vacancy and years later rapes her own daughter, Pecola; which is all about his hate towards women.

Pecola is raped by her father who is so hard to name him father. "He staggered home feeling drunk and saw his daughter in the kitchen" (Morrison, 2007, p. 161). Cholly, Pecola's cruel father, comes home drunk and watches his daughter in the kitchen washing the dishes. He sees her miserable and he forces her. "A hollow suck of air in the back of her throat. Like the rapid loss of air from a circus balloon" (Morrison, 2007, p. 163). Cholly rapes Pecola, which cannot be accepted. A father should protect his daughter from everything and everyone; on the contrary, this father rapes his own daughter and his daughter becomes pregnant. Preetha and Balachandran (2020, p. 51) mention that as a parent, he should be the barrier between her and danger, yet Pecola is raped by her own father, Cholly, and the entire community seems unconcerned about her. Even her mother, Paulina, bites her for this. Pecola's rape by her father is a violent form of sexuality from which Pecola cannot recover.

Portales (1986, p. 498) says that Claudia manages to survive all of the pressures that heartbreakingly damage Pecola in *The Bluest Eye* because, despite being confused and continually disappointed by widespread and frequent messages telling her that she, too, is a "nothing" - the kind of person dismissed by Mr. Yacobowski - she is able to analyze her world and gather and develop what strength she can. She could go on living before. Together with the humiliation in society, violence at school and at home, poverty; the rape is the last curial event Pecola lives before losing her mind by considering herself with blue eyes. Along with all the micro aggressions in her life, she cannot recover from being raped by her father. Freud, as cited in Rahman and Khan (2014, p. 27) describes that in the initial phase of psychosis, the victim's inner reality is broken and then re-created in an imaginative, unreal fantasy. Rahman and Khan (2014, p. 27) think that a similar thing is happening in Pecola's case as she tries to erase her identity as a black person before obsessively attempting to acquire blue eyes.

Frieda has her first sexual experience with Mr. Henry. Nine-year-old girl Frieda is forced by him. "First he said how pretty I was. Then, he grabbed my arm and touched me" (Morrison, 2007, p. 99). She does not even understand what is happening. Frieda and her elder sister Claudia talk about what happened. Frieda says "He picked at me." and Claudia asks "Picked at you? You mean like Soaphead Church" (Morrison, 2007, p. 99)? Frieda and Claudia try to understand the situation. When Mr. Henry begins touching her, she screams for her mother and father; therefore, Mr. Henry escapes. She hears her mother talking to her friends and her father. They talk about taking Frieda to a doctor to see if she is ruined. "I don't want to be ruined" (Morrison, 2007, p. 101)! Although she is not sure about the matter, she listens to her mother, father, and the others. She cries and she is

afraid of being ruined. Even though Frieda's parents are protective in terms of her being forced, they do not explain anything to Frieda. As a result of this, Frieda has a blurred mind and she is not comfortable.

Another form of sexual abuse in the novel is the little girls' being abused by Soaphead Church. On grounds that he has a failed marriage, he hates women. As a result of this, he directs his sexual wishes towards children. "The little girls are the only things I'll miss" (Morrison, 2007, p. 181). The little girls come to him to pray for something, they have not learned about sexuality, yet. They do not know what is happening. They are not aware of being abused by Soaphead Church. "Do you know that when I touched their sturdy little tits and bit them - just a little - I felt I was being friendly" (Morrison, 2007, p. 181)? The little girls are abused by a kind of charlatan called Soaphead Church. Moreover, he finds himself rightful to do this. He feels as if he is not giving them harm. How he can even think that he is playing with them and they are having fun.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, Toni Morrison's novel *The Bluest Eye* is a kind of representation of the tragic lives of African American Black society who are accepted as inferior and ugly as they are black. The novel expresses worries, shame, and rage (Bump, 2010, p. 153). The guilt of sexual abuse in the family is significant, but so is the dread of ugliness, which is a more widespread feeling (Bump, 2010, p. 159). Dealing with the beauty standard, sexual abuse, and racism, the novel has an appalling atmosphere in terms of the characters' psychology. The pressure on the characters is so severe that even the eleven-year-old girl Pecola cannot stand against the traumatic circumstances such as her being humiliated at school or at home because of her race; her accepted poverty because of their accepted ugliness; the physical and psychological violence at home, at school, and at society; her being raped by her father and becoming pregnant; being tired of the beauty standard accepting whiteness as beautiful. Pecola prays for having blue eyes, considering that only the blue eyes will be the solution to all the violence in her life and the society. It can be understood that neither the blue eyes nor the end of the problems are possible. Pecola, who can be accepted as the representative of the society, cannot cope with the tragic suffering of life as a child; so, hallucinating a dream friend, seeing her bluest eye, Pecola goes mad at the end of the novel.

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