

Internalized Racism & Unconscious: The Psychoanalytic Reading of Trauma in *The Bluest Eye*

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to examine the psychological trauma and the internalized racism in *The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison through a psychological lens. It draws upon the Freudian concepts of repression and the unconscious, along with the trauma theory, to examine the psychic fragmentation of Pecola Breedlove and the unresolved childhood trauma of her father, Cholly Breedlove. This study argues that trauma experienced by an individual does not rely solely on the psychological wounds of the past, but is viewed as a culturally inherited condition, shaped by systematic racial oppression and beauty standards. It explores how idealizing white culture has a significant impact on the human psyche and the unconscious, which further creates an existential crisis. This paper studies the passing of the inter-generational trauma, creating devastating consequences of trauma, self-harm and self-hatred, thereby situating literature as a powerful medium to study the sufferings of the marginalized and the under privileged communities.

Keywords: Racial oppression, Identity crisis, Existentialism, Trauma studies, Human psyche.

Introduction

The Bluest Eye provides an extended depiction and a disturbing portrayal of the beauty standards and oppression in the 1940s America. The novel explores the ways in which internalised white beauty standards deform the lives of black girls and women. Pecola Breedlove's strong desire for blue eyes, which

is highly delusional and unrealistic, makes her think that external beauty is the root cause for acceptance. She believes that the cruelty she witnesses and experiences is connected to how she is seen. The novel does not portray trauma through one story, but is linked with multiple interlocking narratives. Characters tell stories to make sense of their lives, and these stories have tremendous power for both good and evil. This paper argues that Morrison's portrayal of trauma is not an individual psychological condition, but a socially constructed narrative shaped by internalised racial oppression and discrimination.

Trauma and Internalised racial Ideology

In the novel, *The Bluest Eye*, beauty serves as a social weapon that triggers trauma. It explores the impact of home on childhood, the formative years of any human. Since childhood people become familiar about white beauty standards and the amount of hatred on dark skinned people. Childhood is the foundation of one's life and it creates a severe impact on one's minds and bodies. The initial emotional reactions during the event include anger, fear, sadness, and shame. Individuals who are particularly vulnerable may internalise these emotions, allowing them to shape and distort their developing consciousness. They may encounter difficulty in identifying any of these feelings for various reasons. They might lack experience with or prior exposure to emotional expression in their family or community. However, in environments where emotional expression is neglected or suppressed, individuals may struggle to recognize or articulate these internal conflicts.

This is related to external or societal factors that surround a community by consciously or subconsciously influencing the nature of their interpersonal interactions. Morrison claims to investigate the link between bad childhood and its impacts on mental health. Within a society dominated by white beauty standards, dark-skinned individuals are subjected to subtle and overt forms of rejection, which gradually infiltrate their developing consciousness. This study aims to examine how Pecola's behaviour has been

shaped throughout the novel according to her situations and hardships. It has a lot more to deal with the term 'situationism' since a person's mental condition is determined by the immediate environment and surroundings.

The blue-eyed dolls gifted to these black girls symbolise the desire and desperation of the white beauty standards of the society. Claudia has seen dismantling the doll in one of the scenes which symbolises the quest to know the real meaning of beauty and the exhaustion that comes from survival crisis. By presenting the doll as an object of unquestioned affection, Morrison exposes how beauty standards are normalised and transmitted from childhood.

Pecola's admiration for white beauty is evident when she states, "I am drinking milk out of a Shirley Temple cup" (Morrison 19). The act of drinking milk, which is associated with whiteness and the admiration of his image, serves as the primary evidence for beauty standards.

Repression and the Freudian Unconscious in Cholly Breedlove

Cholly Breedlove's psychological instability can be fully understood only when we explore more about his traumatic experiences of his early life marked by emotional abandonment and rejection. Cholly is abandoned by his biological mother at the railway track when merely four days old. Later, he is rescued by his aunt Jimmy, whose death during his adolescence, removes the only source of stability in the society. Cholly attempts finding his biological father, only to encounter rejection again.

From a Freudian perspective, such childhood trauma does not really disappear, but is repressed into the unconscious, shaping a person's behaviour in both direct and destructive ways. During Cholly Breedlove's first sexual encounter in his adolescence with Darlene, suddenly he is interrupted by two white men who shine a flashlight on the couple and ask them to continue. What begins as an intimate act of

passion later turns into a tool of mockery and emasculation. The experience remains buried with him, disrupting his identity and understanding of intimacy.

Morrison's concept of 'free man' describes Cholly as a free liberal individual, yet his freedom is ironical. It is not the freedom of moral agency and autonomous behaviour, but the absence of emotional resilience, moral values and accountability. Cholly is raised without a model of healthy love or self-control because he is abandoned by his mother, rejected by his father, and lacks consistent guidance. Instead of being liberating, his so-called freedom turns destructive.

This accumulation of unresolved trauma leads to Pecola's rape. By implying that Cholly's act is intertwined with a warped form of affection, Morrison adds complexity to the scene. Although his touch was fatal, it is portrayed as an attempt to convey a bewildered desire rather than deliberate brutality. The lines separating violence, power, and love dissolve in that instant. His psychological regression is interrupted by Pecola's 'shocked body' which momentarily forces him to face the consequences of his behaviour. Thus, the assault on Pecola is presented as the culmination of years of humiliation, abandonment, and emotional unavailability rather than as a simple act of sexual desire.

Morrison illustrates through Cholly, how trauma persists even after it is denied and unprocessed. Rather, it reappears in the home environment in destructive forms. His violence is a tragic result of a broken-up childhood and a society that denied him emotional recognition, stability, and dignity rather than an isolated pathology.

Narrative Fragmentation and Psychological split

The Bluest Eye does not tell a single coherent story, but is framed by several interlocking narratives. Instead of being told as a single, cohesive event, trauma in the novel is told through a variety of

voices that try to understand, defend, or endure it. Morrison captures the fragmented reality of people subjected to emotional and racial oppression by rejecting a single authoritative narrative.

Claudia's narrative voice plays a central role in the novel's structure. The traumatic experiences unfolded in her childhood days get repressed in the unconscious and is reflected in her adult consciousness, thus creating a dual layer of interpretation. This dual perspective makes Morrison demonstrate how trauma is both experienced immediately and understood consciously. She is vulnerable in her early days to experience the traumatic sufferings and later revisits those experiences in her adulthood with critical awareness.

The novel includes collective & communal storytelling in addition to Claudia's point of view. The community makes disparaging remarks about Pecola's family, circulates rumours, and subtly contributes to her marginalisation. These collective voices help to fragment the narrative that trauma is carried away as a societal structure. The diversity of viewpoints shows how societal, cultural, and familial structures share some of the blame for Pecola's suffering. Therefore, the structure supports the notion that trauma is systemic rather than solely individual.

Pauline Breedlove and Internalised Beauty Ideology

Pauline Breedlove represents another powerful manifestation of internalised racism and psychological fragmentation in the novel. Unlike Pecola, whose longing for blue eyes emerges in childhood, Pauline's trauma develops gradually through displacement, physical insecurity, and cultural conditioning.

Her deformed foot becomes the earliest marker of self-consciousness, producing a sense of bodily inadequacy that later expands into racial self-hatred. Physical difference, in her case, becomes the entry point for psychological vulnerability.

Pauline's migration from the rural South to the industrial North intensifies her alienation. The urban environment fails to offer belonging; instead, it amplifies her sense of displacement. Her emotional refuge becomes the cinema. Through Hollywood films, Pauline internalises white standards of femininity, romance, and domestic perfection. The glamorous white actresses she admires redefine beauty in her imagination, replacing her own cultural aesthetics with an unattainable ideal. Cinema thus functions as an ideological apparatus that restructures her unconscious desires and reshapes her understanding of love, order, and self-worth.

Her employment in a wealthy white household further deepens this psychological split. In her employer's home, Pauline performs with efficiency, devotion, and competence. She finds validation in maintaining the spotless white domestic space, a space that symbolically contrasts with her own chaotic household. The white family recognizes her labor, offering her a sense of identity that she does not experience within her own home. This dual existence produces maternal displacement: she becomes emotionally invested in preserving the white household while withdrawing affection from her own children.

Intergenerational Trauma and the failure of Integration

The Bluest Eye dares to reveal the grey shades in an accurate manner. By applying the psychoanalytically informed case studies of Sigmund Freud and Levi Strauss, Willner proposes that incest is prohibited to reduce the trauma and psychic disruption that sexual activity can inflict on children, when it is imposed by a more adult transgressor.

Morrison's establishment of flaws in the character is very accurate, but the most troubling part is that of Pauline Breedlove, a woman who forsakes her family in search of her own desires. One of the earliest glimpses of formative years of Pauline Breedlove are those of a young girl isolated from her immediate family. She was highly traumatised by the disfigurement of her foot when she was two years old. Pauline

imposes on herself, a self-inflicted isolation and self-hatred because of her physical looks and unworthiness. She cannot find a single person to share her grief with. Sadly, there is never any mention of her having at least one sibling that she is close to, or of her having developed any friendships.

When it comes to trauma, there is a firm belief in the therapeutic effects of transforming the past traumatic memories into narrative ones. Many trauma survivors are only able to move on with their lives once they have revisited the shattering experiences which they have undergone and transform them into words that can be highly related to others. This healing journey is not an easy process, it may require revisiting, reviewing, and re-examining previous accounts of trauma and the learning.

Quality trauma counseling is highly beneficial in providing the tools to better cope with distressing memories, be resilient in future events, and function better to give themselves the best chance of growing from the past experiences, instead of feeling stunted by them. A proper education should be given to deal with the sufferings, and encouragement should be given to talk about the experiences, before developing strategies that will assist the people in coping with and overcoming the long-term effects of the incident.

Conclusion

This study has examined *The Bluest Eye* through the lens of psychoanalytic trauma theory, arguing that Morrison presents trauma not as an isolated psychological disorder but as a structural and intergenerational condition shaped by racial ideology. The black who suffers from the deep pain of trauma is doomed to fail to get rid of the nightmare which haunts for a long time. Cholly drinks excessively and transfers his hatred to his wife and daughter, by sexually abusing his daughter to escape from the nightmare of early experience, which means that he fails to integrate the past memory into the present life.

Cholly does not experience the bond and normal healthy love that an average child receives from a parent. Cholly doesn't know how to love his family. He hasn't learned how to respond or care for them in their time of need. Dorothy Willner's essay "*Incest and Incest taboos*" which was published in 1983 is possibly one of the first criticisms focusing on the incestuous/rape scene in *The Bluest Eye*.

Pecola's longing for blue eyes emerges not merely as a childish fantasy but as the internalisation of oppressive beauty standards that fracture identity at its core. Through Freudian repression, Cholly's early humiliation and abandonment resurface as displaced violence, demonstrating how unprocessed trauma mutates into destructive behaviour within intimate spaces.

Morrison's fragmented narrative structure further reinforces this psychological disintegration. The multiplicity of voices, the shifting temporal perspective, and Pecola's divided consciousness collectively reflect the collapse of coherent identity under systemic racial oppression. Trauma in the novel is thus not confined to individual pathology but embedded within communal memory and social structures.

In the realm of psychology, repression is generally viewed as a specific psychological defense mechanism, wherein the individual unconsciously suppresses thoughts, feelings, or desires that are perceived as unacceptable or undesirable.

Cholly represents a negative form of freedom. He is not free to love and be loved or to enjoy full dignity, but he is free to have sex and fight and even kill; he is free to be indifferent to death. He falls apart when this freedom becomes a complete lack of interest in life, and he reaches for his daughter to remind himself that he is alive.

Ultimately, *The Bluest Eye* reveals that when trauma remains unacknowledged and repression governs memory, the result is not healing but psychic fragmentation. Morrison's work stands as a

profound exploration of how racialised beauty ideals infiltrate the unconscious and perpetuate cycles of self-erasure and violence.

Works Cited

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