

The Views of Whiteness as The Standard of Beauty in Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*

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ABSTRACT

The objective of this research is to study the way Pecola Breedlove, the main character in *The Bluest Eye*, views whiteness as the standard of beauty, Toni Morrison's historical and social conditions and its correlation to the novel *The Bluest Eye*, and also Toni Morrison's worldview through the work of *The Bluest eye*. To achieve the objective of this research, I use Lucien Goldmann's theory of genetic structuralism to see how it applies to the novel *The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison. The methodology is a combination of comprehension and explanation. The comprehension part discusses the mental structure of society in the novel. The explanation part compares the mental structure in the novel and society in real life.

The findings gained from comprehending the novel are that Pecola Breedlove's obsession with whiteness as the standard of beauty is indeed a result of being pressured by the mental structure of society in the novel regarding the beauty standard.

On the other hand, while writing *The Bluest Eye*, Toni Morrison also encountered the same cognitive structure of society regarding whiteness as the beauty standard in real life. Hence, Morrison's worldview, seen in the novel, is related to the perception and acceptance of the environment or society towards whiteness as the beauty standard. Morrison wants to spread the idea that whiteness is not the standard of beauty.

1. INTRODUCTION

Literature is indeed one of the mediums to spread knowledge, whether in the form of literature as works of art or any writing with general intellectual distinction. It is also said that the study of everything connected with the history of civilization in a specific time is introduced in literature itself (Wellek & Warren, 1966). Wellek and Warren also say in their book, *Theory of Literature*, that "in practice, literature can take the place of many things – of travel or sojourn in foreign lands, of direct experience, vicarious life: and the historian can use it as a social document" (Wellek & Warren, 1966, p. 31).

In literature, a study is also considered best when the two core elements, intrinsic and extrinsic, are combined (Goldmann, 1980). Lucien Goldmann's theory of genetic structuralism states that literature is a structure constructed as a continuous product of a particular social and historical background. To put it into perspective, literary work is not merely fiction but also a medium through which its creators express their ideology. This ideology is not born out of nowhere. Instead, it is born as a response to the social phenomenon that becomes the concern of its creator.

Toni Morrison is one of the most compelling American writers. Born in Ohio in 1931, Morrison is seen as one of the feminist writers in American history. *Song of Solomon* (1977) and *Beloved* (1987) are the two major works which position Morrison in the world of literature. However, Morrison's first published novel, *The Bluest Eye* (1970), is one of the novels which brought much discussion and close critical attention. The book is located in Lorain, Ohio, the same place as where Morrison was born. It is important to note that most of her writings concern women who are discriminated against by their gender, class, and race differences. Based on the explanation above, in this research, I choose to critically read and study *The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison from both the intrinsic and extrinsic elements using Goldmann's genetic structuralism theory. This theory is selected because it is deemed appropriate in this situation in that it does not only focus on the text for its analysis but also on the historical and social conditions of the work itself. Hence, the objectives of this research are to describe the way Pecola Breedlove

views whiteness as the standard of beauty affected by the environment in the story, to describe the way Toni Morrison's historical and social conditions affect the constructs and elements of the text in a significant way, and to explain Toni Morrison's worldview through the work of *The Bluest Eye*.

2. METHOD

This research is a qualitative-descriptive-research, which discusses the main object of the study based on its fact (Nawawi & Martini, 2005). The primary data of this research were taken from the novel *The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison, published in 1970. Meanwhile, the secondary data of this study were taken from outside sources such as books, journals, and articles that focus on the discussion and application of Genetic Structuralism Theory by Lucien Goldmann, the socio-cultural construct of whiteness as the standard of beauty, as well as the author's social and historical background that are deemed relevant to the topic of this research. The data analysis of this research is conducted through the following steps. First, finding the mental structure of the imaginative society in the novel through objective analysis of the work. Second, social-cultural background analysis finds society's cognitive structure in real life. Then, the mental structure of the imaginative society is compared in the novel. Third, finding the worldview, Toni Morrison wants to offer in her book.

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Summarizing the results, it is necessary to point out that Pecola's view of whiteness as the standard of beauty is affected by the environment in the story. Pecola's surroundings, society, and even her own family are the main reasons why she insists on having blue eyes. The discriminations from those people cause Pecola's obsession with the standard beauty of White People. Pecola's family life is violent and lacks love and support. Her parents fight regularly, and these altercations lead to physical violence. Cholly Breedlove, Pecola's father, is an abusive alcoholic. While Pecola's mom, Mrs. Breedlove, does not care about Pecola at all and chooses to work and take care of the baby in a white family.

Cholly and Mrs. Breedlove fought each other with a darkly brutal formalism paralleled only by their lovemaking. Tacitly, they had agreed not to kill each other. He fought her the way a coward fights a man—with feet, the palms of his hands, and teeth. She, in turn, fought back in a purely feminine way—with frying pans and poker, and occasionally, a flatiron would sail toward his head. They did not talk, groan, or curse during these beatings. There was only the muted sound of falling things and flesh on unsurprised flesh. (*The Bluest Eye*, 1970. Chapter 1, p. 43)

Pecola's parents always had quarrels in front of their children. It is their routine activity. Every time Cholly went home drunk, the condition in the house turned terrible, so quarrels could not be avoided. They quarrelled with words, their hands, or any kitchen tools. They often beat each other daily. Whenever Pecola saw those quarrels, it hurt her deeply. She was different from her brother, who could leave the house whenever he wanted.

Meanwhile, Pecola could only stay there and get hurt inside. From that situation, we know that Pecola is feeling sick to see the quarrels; she wishes to disappear, for she can no longer stand the situation in her family. It looks like Pecola wants to disappear because she does not want to see any quarrels anymore.

There was a difference in the reaction of the children to these battles. Sammy cursed, left the house, or threw himself into the fray. By the time he was fourteen, he was known to have run away from home no less than twenty-seven times. Pecola, on the other hand, restricted by youth and sex, experimented with methods of endurance. Though the methods varied, the pain was as consistent as it was profound. (*The Bluest Eye*, 1970. Chapter 1, p. 43)

Pecola continued to receive confirmation of her sense of her ugliness. She received rejection and was despised not only in her school but also in society, especially by white people. They did not want to talk to her or touch her. They felt disgusted. When she entered Mr. Yacobowski's store to buy candy, he gave her a distasteful and belittling look, and then he pretended that she was invisible.

At some fixed point in time and space, he senses that he need not waste the effort of a glance. He does not see her because there is nothing to see for him. How can a fifty-two-year-old white immigrant store-keeper ... his sensibilities blunted by a permanent awareness of loss, see a little black girl? Nothing in his life even suggested that the fact was possible, not to say desirable or necessary. (*The Bluest Eye*, 1970. Chapter 1, p. 48)

Pecola's rejected experiences do not only come from the Whites but also from the Blacks, in particular from light-skinned Blacks. Light-skinned Blacks feel that they have a better position or higher status than Blacks because their skin colour is much lighter than that of Blacks, for they are consumed with the idea of white beauty. This group even consider themselves different from the other Blacks.

Maureen Peal, Pecola's schoolmate, is a black girl with lighter skin. People say she is "a high-yellow dream child" and that "they adored her." Maureen Peal considers herself cuter than the other black girls. She is proud of her skin colour because she gets adoration from people, and she considers blackness ugly.

"Black? Who are you calling black?"

“You!”

"You think you are so cute!"

"I am cute! And you ugly! Black and ugly black e mos. I am cute!"

(*The Bluest Eye*, 1970. chapter 2, p. 73)

Rejection increases Pecola's suffering. It is difficult for Pecola to interact with people who do not offer acceptance. How people appreciate others depends on how worthy they are in society's eyes.

The reason why white people dislike and reject Pecola is because of her skin colour. The Whites consider the Blacks as minorities in both caste and class. The Whites considered themselves to be a superior race and had the highest status in society. "White people set standards of humanity by which they are bound to succeed, and others are bound to fail" (Wynter, 2002). This makes black people feel neglected and that they are nothing in society. It makes them inferior.

Pecola's exposure to constant images perpetuates white beauty standards, including references to Shirley Temple and pictures of Mary Jane appearing on her candy wrappers. It seems that Pecola is trying to find the power associated with whiteness. She develops a destructive craving for blue eyes in her attempts to fit in. In the end, Pecola has an identity crisis when she develops a negative self-concept that she is black and ugly because of the rejection from her parents and society.

Her parents reject Pecola, her schoolmates, her teachers, and society to the point that they reject her because she is black and ugly. At this point, blue eyes are attracted to Pecola because she knows they will change her life.

For generations, black people have been playing an inferior role to get along in white society. As stated by Richard Dyer, "being white means having a secure position of power", and "white people have the power to create the dominant images and set standards of humanity by which they are bound to succeed, and others are bound to fail" (Wynter, 2002).

Whites symbolize the purity and greatness of the world's finest and most successful race. They have the highest status in society, and as a consequence, Blacks are excluded from society. The people around Pecola are the people who are affected by the idea of racism. They create a separation between different races. The physical difference between Blacks and Whites causes the different treatments between the people in the novel. Society respects white people only.

Meanwhile, considerably, black people are unworthy. This perception has influenced the lives of black people. When the Blacks conform to white society's standards, they begin to think that the lighter their skin, the better their position and role in society, and they consume the idea that white is beautiful and that black is ugly. Through the example below, the writer will explain the standard of beauty in society in the novel.

In the novel, Mr. Yacobowski represents white society, a man who is proud of his status. The way he treats Pecola when she wants to buy candies at his store as if she were invisible and with disgust shows how the Whites treat the Blacks and how racist and discriminating society is toward the Blacks. This phenomenon indicates that white society never wants to accept black people.

The life story of Soaphead Church in the novel shows white superiority that leads to racism. The Whites are proud of their superiority because of their white strain. They feel better than the blacks.

Moreover, people surrounding Pecola are consumed by popular culture, like Shirley Temple, who has white skin, blonde hair, and blue eyes. The Shirley Temples of the world are adored and cherished by all people, including Pecola. When she stayed at the MacTeers, she took every opportunity to drink milk from a cup pictured Shirley Temple to see Shirley's face. Pecola also admires the picture of Mary Jane candy.

Each pale yellow wrapper has a picture on it. A photo of little Mary Jane, the namesake of the candy. Smiling white face. Blond hair in gentle disarray, blue eyes looking at her out of a world of clean comfort.To Pecola, they are pretty. (*The Bluest Eye*, 1970. Chapter 1, p. 50)

The explanation of Shirley Temple and Mary Jane has given the perception of white beauty. Unconsciously, this image has developed Pecola's self-concept, as she believes that she is black and ugly, while Shirley Temple, who has blue eyes, white skin, and blonde hair, is what people consider to be beautiful and loved.

The Blacks live in a racist and discriminatory white society that considers whites as superior and of high-class status. They find themselves discriminated against in all aspects of life. The discrimination also comes from the culture industry, which produced a single standard image of beauty, and that standard insisted on excluding them. It is the image of white skin, blonde hair, blue eyes, and economic privilege. Black people begin to believe the idea that white is the most lofty and beautiful and that black is the most degraded and ugly. Blacks think the lighter their skin is, the better they are in society's role. The scale of judgment has been modified to white standards, forcing the Blacks to be judged inadequate. Shirley Temple, who is beautiful, adored and loved by the people, has the characteristics of white skin, blonde hair, and blue eyes. Shirley Temple has become society's ideal image.

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. (*The Bluest Eye*, 1970. Chapter 1, p. 20)

Based on this, the standards of beauty seen in society in the novel are white skin, blonde hair, and blue eyes, which belong to White characteristics. From the explanation above, the society where Pecola lives has a mental

structure that praises white superiority. The society believes that white is beautiful while black is ugly, so whiteness becomes the standard of beauty in that society.

3.1. *The Historical Context of The Bluest Eye*

The *Bluest Eye* was inspired by a real-life interaction Toni Morrison had with a girl who wanted blue eyes. Her reaction to the girl, anger, stayed with her, and later, she began to wonder what led a young girl to desire such a radical transformation. These thoughts led to the writing of *The Bluest Eye*. The origin of the novel lay in a conversation I had with a childhood friend.

We had just started elementary school. She said she wanted blue eyes. I looked around to picture her with them and was violently repelled by what I imagined she would look like if she had her wish. The sorrow in her voice seemed to call for sympathy, and I faked it for her, but astonished by the desecration she proposed, I "got mad" at her instead. (*The Bluest Eye*, 1970. Foreword, p. X)

For further information, the socially constructed "whiteness" represented in *The Bluest Eye* has a lengthy historical background. First, the root of it is recalling Kincheloe's observation that the Irish, Italians, and Jews have all been viewed as non-white in particular places at specific moments in history (Kincheloe, 1999). Before the late 1600s, Europeans did not use the label black to refer to any race of people, including Africans. Only after the racialization of slavery by around 1680 did whiteness and blackness come to represent racial categories.

Another fact about *The Bluest Eye* is that Morrison wrote it during the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. This Movement was a struggle for social justice that took place mainly during the 1950s and 1960s for Black Americans to gain equal rights under the law in the United States. The Civil War had officially abolished slavery, but it did not end discrimination against Black people. They continued to endure the devastating effects of racism, especially in the South (Jancken, 2021)

Another movement emerged during the Civil Rights movement, the "Black is Beautiful Movement." This Movement aimed to eliminate the idea that black people's natural features, such as skin colour, facial features, and hair, are inherently ugly.

Black Beautiful is a cultural movement African Americans started in the United States in the 1960s. It then spread beyond the United States, most notably in the writings of Steve Biko's Black Awareness Movement in South Africa. However, while the Black is Beautiful Movement began in the 1960s, the struggle for equal rights and a positive perception of African-American bodies started much earlier in American history. Black is Beautiful has its roots in the Négritude movement of the 1930s. This Movement was the impact of the media, and society as a whole had a negative perception that African-American bodies were only fit for slave status (Jackson, 2011).

The Movement also encouraged black people to embrace their natural features and refrain from straightening their hair or attempting to lighten or bleach their skin. Thus, the Movement was an effort to counteract the then-prominent idea that white people were more beautiful and desirable than black people.

Morrison reflects the notion of this Movement in her novel, where Pecola, a young African-American girl with black skin, is obsessed with whiteness as the standard of beauty and even makes some efforts to look like a white girl so that she can be beautiful like the other white girls in town. In some lines in her foreword in the novel, Morrison wrote:

The assertion of racial beauty was not a reaction to the self-mocking, humorous critique of cultural/racial foibles common in all groups but against the damaging internalization of assumptions of immutable inferiority originating in an outside gaze. I focused, therefore, on 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. (*The Bluest Eye*, 1970. Foreword, p. XI)

3.2. *The Worldview of Toni Morrison*

As explained before, in order to understand the author's worldview, we need to understand the mental structure of society in the novel and the mental structure of society in real life. By understanding mental structure from both sides, one can determine the relation between the novel and the author's real-world social context so that the author's worldview can be interpreted.

From the analysis in the previous chapter, we know that the mental structure of society in the novel believes that white is beautiful while black is ugly. Pecola, the main character in the novel who is black, has proven that mental structure. In the novel, Pecola is discriminated against by other people, not only from society but also from her family. This discrimination is all because she is black. Since the idea that white is superior to black is embedded deeply in the mind of society, it makes all the black people in the novel, including Pecola, live a hard life. In the novel, Pecola experiences ostracism from society. Other people did not want to be near her and felt disgusted whenever they were together with Pecola. Even Pecola's mom did not want to be affectionate with Pecola, her daughter, and preferred to be with her master's daughter, who was white. That is for the reason that she thinks Pecola is ugly since she also believes that white is more beautiful than black. With that mindset, the beauty standard

in the novel is primarily white skin and blue eyes, which belong to white characteristics. We can see it through Pecola's point of view, who is a victimized girl who is obsessed with whiteness and longs to have blue eyes. She wants to have blue eyes due to the harassment she got from other people for being black. She truly believes that once she gets those blue eyes, her life will improve, and her family will look out for her more.

On the other hand, the mental structure of society in the novel and the mental structure of society in real life are also the same. As previously explained, society in real life also shares the same cognitive structure as the society in the novel, which is the superiority of white people that is creating the mindset that white is beautiful while black is ugly. As in real life, Toni Morrison, the author of the novel, discovered the experience of racial beauty with her childhood friend. Morrison's friend, a black girl, wanted to have blue eyes. The encounter with that friend makes Morrison think about why her friend desires to have blue eyes while being black since blue eyes are not characteristic of black people.

Along with the writing of *The Bluest Eye*, there was the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960's. This Movement was a struggle for social justice that took place mainly during the 1950s and 1960s for Black Americans to gain equal rights under the law in the United States. Even though the Civil War abolished slavery, discrimination against Black people continued. Black people still had to endure the horrible effects of racism, and it included the reclamation of racial beauty in the sixties, which then created the mental structure of society into believing that white is beautiful while black is ugly.

By comparing the mental structure of society in the novel and the mental structure of society in real life, we can learn about the author's worldview. Toni Morrison, the author of the book *The Bluest Eye*, has a worldview that she wants to share through her work. The novel's worldview is related to the perception and acceptance of the environment or society towards white culture and its impact on African Americans. Hence, through her book *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison hopes she can contribute to society by promoting critical thinking and thoughtful reflection, not only on literature but also on the impact of racism and gender-based constructs of beauty in society. Along with the correlation of mental structure about the beliefs that white is beautiful and black is ugly in both society in the novel and real life, Morrison, with her worldview, wants to criticize these beliefs and broaden the perception of people regarding the beauty standard, since the discrimination that started with people's skin colour can cause a horrible impact on people of colour especially on Black people.

4. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

The first thing that can be the conclusion in this research is that Pecola is obsessed with blue eyes. She sees whiteness as the standard of beauty since she witnesses that everyone always praises the beauty of white people while degrading people of colour, especially black people. The second conclusion from this research is that Toni Morrison's historical and social condition affected how she wrote her novel, *The Bluest Eye*. When Toni Morrison wrote *The Bluest Eye*, there were a lot of racial problems in society. Racial issues in social interactions become the cause of social distancing and separation between black and white population groups. The last thing that can be concluded is that this research is about the author's worldview. The worldview shown by Toni Morrison in *The Bluest Eye* is related to the perception and acceptance of society towards white culture and its impact on African Americans. Morrison shows the dynamics of whiteness superiority and the standards of beauty in society, especially for black people, in her novel *The Bluest Eye*. So, through her book, she wants to spread the idea that whiteness is not the standard of beauty.

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