

## **White Masks on Black Skin: A Critical Examination of Black Identity and Psychological Trauma in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye***

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### **Abstract**

This article examines Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* through the lens of Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks*, highlighting how the pursuit of white beauty standards erodes the selfhood of Black individuals. Fanon explores the pressures imposed by a racist society that compels Black individuals to conform to white norms of beauty, only to leave them trapped in a futile cycle of rejection and self-doubt. To exist and belong in a world that privileges whiteness, Black people often sacrifice everything in their struggle for acceptance. Despite relentless efforts to attain societal acceptance, Black individuals face an unbridgeable gap between their identity and the unattainable white ideal. This struggle often results in profound psychological distress, as they confront the impossibility of escaping their Blackness. Fanon asserts that Black individuals cannot shed their racial identity, and this conflict between their intrinsic Black identity and the oppressive expectations of a white-dominated society frequently culminates in a devastating loss of self-identity. In *The Bluest Eye*, Pecola Breedlove becomes the tragic embodiment of this struggle. Convinced that blue eyes would make her beautiful and worthy of love, she yearns for whiteness as the only escape from her suffering. However, as Fanon argues, Black individuals cannot get rid of their racial identity, no matter how much they internalise white ideals. This tension produces profound psychological trauma. The Black subject is forced to negotiate between an imposed ideal of whiteness and their own lived reality of Blackness, a contradiction that inevitably leads to a fractured sense of self.

**Keywords :** Beauty, idealization, mask, catastrophe, loss.

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## Introduction

The concept of beauty has long occupied a central role in human society, shaping perceptions and influencing interactions. Historically, beauty has been framed through a series of binary oppositions: beautiful versus ugly, white versus black, and lovely versus repulsive. *The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison delves into the complex interplay of these oppositions, particularly examining beauty and the obsessive pursuit of its societal ideal. As Jyolsna V.N says, the novel exemplifies how the white ideal of beauty symbolized by "blue eyes" becomes the yardstick whereby the blacks measure their success and failure (61). Toni Morrison is one of the most prominent Afro-American writers who is quite aware of the psychological agony of black people in a white-dominated society. She depicted a society dominated by white people in *The Bluest Eye*, where people of color are consistently devalued and despised. They gradually begin to idealize the white ideals of beauty as a result of feeling inadequate, and they even wish to have that chimerical beauty themselves. Their fixation on the illusory concept of beauty causes them to lose sight of the reality that they will always have darkness on their skin. They become disconnected from their roots and true identities as they strive to embody and idealize the white standards of beauty. In this article, it will be shown how black people fail to wear a white mask on their black skin and how that leads to a catastrophe for them. They consider themselves ugly since it has been ingrained in their brains by white dominated society that they are awful because they are not white. Due to this unpleasing feeling, they possess low self-esteem and want to become beautiful and superior by possessing the features that have been set as the touchstone of beauty by the white people. In this article, Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, will be studied under Fanon's ideas in his *Black Skin, White Masks* in terms of displaying the reasons behind the idealization of beauty of black people and how they suffer and lose themselves because of their idealization of beauty.

## The Rationale of the Study

There are many critical papers on Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*. For instance, Josephine and Fatima (2018) have focused on the physical and psychological deterioration of Pecola in their article. Muhi and Ridha (2010) have addressed the timeless problem of white racial dominance and traced out the impact it has on the lives of black females in their writing. Another scholar, Wajiran (2024) has explored how Toni Morrison's novels *Beloved*, *The Bluest Eye*, and *Song of Solomon* portray the intertwined effects of racial discrimination and gender injustice on African-American women's identities through the lens of Black feminism. Kumaunang, Moge, and Rorintulus(2022) have also analyzed how racism is expressed through rejection, insults, and violence, which affects the mental health of African Americans in *The Bluest Eye*. On the other hand, Zimring's essay (2021) examines how urban space in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* reveals racial and social injustices. None of these researchers have studied this text in relevance to Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* to trace out how black people completely lose their self-identity due to trying to possess the white standard of beauty. Therefore, the researcher has put forward the following research questions:

1. What are the white standards of beauty?
2. What factors contribute to Black people's idealization of beauty?
3. What causes Black people to lose their authentic identity in a society centered around whiteness?

### **Objectives of the Study**

The general objective of this article is to expose how black people suffer in every step of their lives because of their dark skin complexion. And this study has the following specific objectives as well:

1. To analyze the socio-cultural and psychological hardships endured by Black individuals in a predominantly white-dominated society.
2. To investigate the underlying causes behind the internalization and idealization of Eurocentric beauty standards among Black Communities.
3. To reveal how Black people struggle to preserve their identity in a society shaped by white dominance.

### **Literature Review**

This section provides an overview of research that has been done on Toni Morrison's writing over different periods. This section focuses on relevant studies on ideal beauty and the illusion of ideal beauty in Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*. The researcher for this study has reviewed the works that are directly relevant to the present study. The reviewed literature mainly comprises scholarly articles on Morrison's writing. Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* opens up the widows for the readers to speculate on the reasons behind the black people's inferior complexity in a white-dominated society and the reasons behind their idealization of the standards of beauty that are set by the white people.

Josephine and Fatima (2018) have said in their article *Inaudible Voice of Pecola in Toni Morrison's Novel The Bluest Eye* that Morrison shows the physical and psychological destruction of Pecola in her writing. Pecola's classmates and her community have created an impression that she is ugly. This cruel remark has created a disturbance in the heart and mind of Pecola. The whole black community was under the control of racism, and in this novel, Pecola becomes a victim due to that.

Muhi and Ridha (2010) have said, in *The Bluest Eye*, Toni Morrison addresses the timeless problem of white racial dominance in the United States and points to the impact it has on the lives of black females growing up in the 1930s. If an individual or group is constantly being put down, and told that they are not good enough, they themselves begin to believe it.

Wajiran's paper (2024) explores how Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, *The Bluest Eye*, and *Song of Solomon* depict the intertwined effects of racial and gender oppression on African-American women. Using Black feminism, it examines characters like Sethe and Pecola to show how racism and patriarchy impact identity and mental health. The study highlights the resistance of Morrison's female characters against systemic marginalization. Through comparative analysis, Wajiran uncovers the intersectional struggles shaping Black women's lives and identities.

Kumaunang, Moge, and Rorintulus (2022) examine the impact of racism on the mental health of African Americans in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*. Using a qualitative, mimetic approach, they analyze data from the novel and various secondary sources. The study highlights racism in the form of rejection, insults, and violence. It also reveals how such racism is perpetuated not only by white characters but within the Black community itself.

Zimring (2021) has located the role of urban space in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* using cultural geography theories by Soja, Harvey, and Mitchell, which connect space to justice and injustice. It also incorporates Black Geographies perspectives, especially Lipsitz's emphasis on race in power-place relations. These approaches align well with Morrison's focus on racial and social injustices in African American communities. Analyzing her work through cultural geography uncovers deeper understandings of her characters' spatial experiences.

### Conceptual Theory

Frantz Fanon has stated in his *Black Skin, White Masks* that black people are always told that they are ugly and uncivilized. A black person acts differently against a white man than toward another black person, because he feels like a deficient individual in front of white people, as Fanon says:

A Negro behaves differently with a white man and with another Negro... its major artery is fed from the heart of those various theories that have tried to prove that the Negro is a stage in the slow evolution of monkey into man." (Fanon 8)

Due to this kind of inferior complexity, they start to idealize white standards of beauty. They desire to be white by negating their blackness, as Fanon says, "He becomes whiter as renounces his blackness, his jungle" (Fanon 9). Fanon has depicted the desire of black people to become white by analyzing the interracial relationship between black and white people. He has showed obsession of the black people with white standards of beauty. He talks about Mayotte from *Je suis Martiniquaise*, who loves a white man and to whom she submits everything (Fanon 29). When she tries to give herself a thought about whether he is handsome or not, she comes to think of only the white features: 'blue eyes', 'blond hair' and 'light skin'; which are considered to be the white standard of beauty.

Fanon talks about the psychological complexity and breakdown of black people in a white dominated society. Black people are always belittled in a white-dominated society. Due to this they suffer from inferior complexity. As they cannot change the way society treats them, they start to adopt their mind and body with the white standards of beauty, as Fanon says, "So, since she could no longer try to blacken, to negrify the world, she was going to try, in her own body and in her own mind to bleach it" (Fanon 31). Due to the constant pressure from a white-dominated society, black people either want to possess whiteness or they want to establish a relationship with whiteness through marrying white men or less colored men, as Fanon says,

All these frantic women of in quest of white men are waiting...they have consented to run this risk; what they must have is whiteness at any price." (Fanon 34)

This reflects the obsession of black people with the white standard of beauty. They want to attain whiteness at any cost.

Fanon says that in the pursuit of possessing beauty, black people forget the greatest truth of their lives that they can never get rid of the traces of their blackness. The black people may aspire to look like the white people. They may adopt all the white manners, but one thing is certain that they are never going to be white, and they cannot renounce their blackness, as Fanon says,

...would like to be a man like the rest, but he knows that this position is a false one. He is a beggar. He looks for appeasement, for permission in the white man's eyes.” (Fanon 55)

As black people renounce themselves due to the pressure of a white-dominated society, they neither become white nor remain completely black. They fall into a very ambivalent situation, as Fanon says: “Affective self-rejection invariably brings the abandonment-neurotic to an extremely painful and obsessive feeling of exclusion, of having no place anywhere....” (Fanon 55). This means that in the process of attaining whiteness, they achieve nothing; rather they end up losing their self-identity.

### **Methodology**

This study employs a qualitative research approach to achieve its objective. It carefully examines a selection of existing literary analyses on *The Bluest Eye*, integrating relevant scholarly perspectives. Through the lens of Frantz Fanon's theories, this paper aims to investigate the psychological processes that lead Black individuals in a white-dominated society to internalize a sense of inferiority and idealize white standards of beauty.

### **Textual Analysis**

Fanon believes that black people always suffer from a sense of inferior complexity since they go through a towering number of experiences of being humiliated and detested due to their dark skin in a society that is only fond of white skin. Fanon has endeavored to unveil how racism dehumanizes black people, and he has done so by exploring the psychology of both white and black people in racist societies. Fanon argues that only by examining psychology can we fully understand the struggles of people in racist societies. This article deals with the reasons for which black people suffer from inferior complexity in a white-dominated society. In Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, it is found that all the black characters are very conscious of their appearance and skin tone. They feel like they have fallen into the pit of a never-ending struggle, where they always have to fight against their own black skin to make themselves agreeable in a white-dominated society. For instance, in this text, Morrison describes the Breedloves, a Black family who believe themselves to be inherently ugly because they are black. Although they have attractive features, such as small, closely set eyes and heavy eyebrows, as well as high cheekbones and shapely lips, they still perceive themselves as ugly because a "mysterious, all-knowing master" has labeled them as such (Morrison 28). Psychologically, they have accepted that they are ugly since they are part of a racist society that only considers the white to be beautiful. The Breedloves have continuously been told by society that they are ugly. Due to this, they suffer from inferior complexity, and they have accepted that they are ugly. As a black child, Pecola Breedlove faces the greatest

struggles as the daughter of Pauline and Cholly Breedlove. She likes having candies wrapped in Shirley Temple's picture. A white man gives her a disgusted look when she attempts to buy the candy from his store. She has witnessed this type of glance in the eyes of all white people; therefore, it is nothing new to her-

She looks up at him and sees the vacuum where curiosity ought to lodge. It has an edge; somewhere in the bottom lid is the distaste. She has seen it lurking in the eyes of all white people. The distaste must be for her, her blackness. (Morrison 36-37)

Pecola feels like all the things within her are in flux except her blackness. Her blackness is "static and dread" (Morrison 36). The shopkeeper avoids any kind of eye contact with Pecola, as if he cannot bear the sight of Pecola. The shopkeeper gives the candies to Pecola and takes the pennies from her in a way so that he does not have to touch Pecola's hand- "She holds the money toward him. He hesitates, not wanting to touch her hand. Finally, he reaches over and takes the pennies from her hand. His nails graze her damp palm" (Morrison 37). This demonstrates how Black people are systematically oppressed and marginalized in a predominantly white society. Black people are positioned as inferior and undeserving of equal treatment in a world where social interactions are governed by racial hierarchy.

At the school, the situation gets even worse for Pecola. She literally gets bullied by the white boys; they taunt her by calling her "Black e mo. Black e mo" (Morrison 50). Not only Pecola, but other black girls are also bullied at the school. In this regard, Davis says All of Morrison's characters including Pecola, Frieda, and Claudia are part of a world that isolates, denies, and threatens their lives by executing prejudices of hatred. Morrison presents psychic violence as a more severe form of oppression (27). On the other hand, a light-skinned girl, Maureen Peal is appreciated in the school. No boy dares to tease her. The teachers smile when they call her name. She charms the entire school-

She enchanted the entire school. When teachers called on her, they smiled encouragingly. Black boys didn't trip her in the halls; white boys didn't stone her, white girls didn't suck their teeth when she was assigned to be their work partners; black girls stepped aside when she wanted to use the sink in the girls' toilet..... (Morrison 48)

The black girls feel inferior in front of the white girls. At a certain passage of the text, it is found that Maureen becomes quite abusive towards Pecola and two of her friends Frieda MacTeer and Claudia MacTeer. Maureen says to them that she is pretty and they are ugly: "I am cute! And you ugly! Black and ugly black e mos. I am cute!" (Morrison 56). This remark from Maureen makes a huge impact on these girls' psychology. Claudia secretly starts to worry about the things that Maureen has told them. They feel a certain threat from Maureen's words, which puts them in an existential crisis: "If she was cute\_ and if anything could be believed, she was then \_ we were not. And what did that mean? We were lesser. Nicer, brighter, but still lesser" (Morrison 57). Due to the harsh remarks from Maureen, all the black girls start to despise themselves. Taylor has said that the most prominent type of racialized ranking represents blackness as a condition to be despised (16). They feel out of place in a world that idolizes white girls like Maureen Peal, leaving them with a deep sense of anxiety and inferiority.

Morrison strongly critiques a society that unquestioningly upholds white beauty standards. The notion of beauty has been shaped and influenced by a society where white ideals dominate. These standards typically emphasize features such as fair skin, blue eyes, delicate facial features, and blonde hair. As a result, many Black girls develop feelings of inferiority and begin to internalize and aspire to these narrow definitions of beauty. They desire to adorn their black skin with white features of beauty. Fanon has stated that black people want to be white by renouncing their 'blackness' (Fanon 9). In *The Bluest Eye*, many Black women impute white beauty standards, distancing themselves from their own racial identity. Unable to gain acceptance in a society that favors whiteness, they attempt to conform by adopting an appearance that aligns with these imposed ideals, masking their true selves in the process. In this text, Pecola is found to be racked with pain due to society's refusal to accept her as she is. Despite being a Black girl, she notices that her nose is not flat or broad like those of many white girls who are considered beautiful. Yet, society still looks down on her. Longing for acceptance, she wishes for blue eyes, believing they will transform her life and make her feel different- "...if those eyes of hers were different, that is to say beautiful, she herself would be different" (Morrison 34). Pecola prays every night for blue eyes, hoping that they will transform her appearance. However, she is disappointed when, despite her heartfelt prayers, her eyes remain unchanged. Still, she refuses to lose hope, believing that one day, she will have blue eyes (Morrison 35). This illustrates Pecola's deep obsession with the white standard of beauty. Shirley Temple, a well-known child actress praised for her beauty, is someone Pecola looks up to. While staring at the actress's face, she excitedly consumes milk from a Shirley Temple cup. Claudia notes, "We knew she loved the Shirley Temple cup and seized every chance to drink milk out of it just to handle and see sweet Shirley's face" (Morrison 16). Pecola's devotion to this practice implies that she is internalizing and metaphorically ingesting Shirley Temple's beauty in addition to simply drinking milk. This shows Pecola's obsession with beauty. Pecola desperately desires blue eyes, believing that they would make her beautiful, as she is deeply dissatisfied with her own appearance. She goes to Soaphead Church, a self-declared interpreter of dreams, and asks to help her eyes become blue: "My eyes... I want them blue" (Morrison 138). However, he tells Pecola that he can't help her. She breaks out after hearing this. It is impossible to describe the agony she endures because of her dark complexion.

Pauline Breedlove, Pecola's mother, experiences a deep sense of insecurity because of her skin color. Throughout her life, she has never felt beautiful. She is often overwhelmed with sadness when other women judge her based on her appearance. She craves society's approval, which leads her to desire fashionable clothes that would make other women see her in a new light: "The sad thing was that Pauline did not really care for clothes and makeup. She merely wanted to cast favorable glances her way" (Morrison 92). This shows the struggle of a black woman, who wants to make herself acceptable in a society that is not inclined to welcome black women the way it welcomes and adores white women. Pauline is absorbed in and obsessed with "cultural icons portraying physical beauty: movies, billboards, magazines..." (Gibson 20). She takes refuge in the movies and develops destructive ideas about

physical beauty and romantic love. She tries to make herself look like a movie star, but one day, while chewing candy at a movie, she loses one of her front teeth. After that incident, she gets to know that she can never be as beautiful as the movie stars (Morrison 102). Thus, she again starts to feel ugly. Her desire to become beautiful remains unfulfilled. This reflects both the effort and failure of black women in terms of attaining the white standard of beauty.

In this text, Geraldine, a middle-class black woman, is also found to be obsessed with beauty and cleanliness. She does every possible thing to keep herself clean. She keeps on washing herself with soap. It seems she wants to wipe up all the traces of blackness from her skin: "They wash themselves with orange-colored Lifebuoy soap, dust themselves with Cashmere Bouquet talc, clean their teeth with salt on a piece of rag, soften their skin with Jergens Lotion" (Morrison 64). She is completely obsessed with the idea of beauty that has been set by white people. She is a woman who takes too much care of her lipstick and her hair: "... when they wore lipstick, they never covered the entire mouth for fear of lips too thick, and they worry, worry, and worry about the edges of their hair" (Morrison 64). This reflects how beauty standards impose pressure on individuals to modify or control their natural features to fit mainstream ideals. She does not have a healthy relationship with her husband and son because she considers them to be too untidy. She shows all of her affection to her cat, which is as clean as she is: "Occasionally some living thing will engage her affection. A cat, perhaps, who will love her order, precision, and constancy; that will be as clean and quiet as she is" (Morrison 66). She takes care of the cleanliness of everything in her house. For instance, she cannot stand any stains on her table. She cleans the table immediately after the end of a meal (Morrison 65). She feels ashamed of her dark skin, which is an integral part of her identity. It seems she desperately wants to rid herself and her surroundings of any trace of blackness and impurity. However, upon realizing that she cannot erase the darkness from her skin, she distances herself from her husband and son, perceiving them as unclean as well. Instead, she becomes fixated on maintaining the cleanliness of her house and cat. This reflects how the relentless pursuit of beauty can alienate a person from their own roots and family life.

Fanon has talked a great deal about how an individual loses himself or herself in the process of chasing the white standard of beauty. He says that black people go through a psychologically painful experience in terms of adopting white manners since they feel like they have no place anywhere (Fanon 55). The black people cannot turn themselves completely white just by adopting their mind and body according to the white standard of beauty rather, in this manner; they go far away from their actual identity, which often brings devastating consequences for themselves. In *The Bluest Eye*, it is found that black people lose themselves in terms of pursuing white standard of beauty. In the pursuit of white beauty standards, Black individuals often lose their sense of self. In this text, Pauline becomes increasingly distant from her family due to her obsession with beauty. She longs to embody the beauty associated with white people but soon realizes that she can never fully attain it. As a result, she begins to idealize white beauty standards, leading her to prioritize the home of the white family she works for. She views their house as neat, clean, and

orderly—qualities she believes her own home and family lack. This growing admiration for her workplace deepens her detachment from her own household: “She looked at their houses, smelled their linen, touched their silk draperies, and loved all of it” (Morrison 98). She loves this place for all the beautiful things that it has, but she can never afford those at her own place. Due to that she starts neglecting her children and family-

More and more she neglected her house, her children, her man\_ they were like the afterthoughts one has just before sleep, the early-morning and late-evening edges of her day... here she could arrange things, clean things, line things up in neat rows. (Morrison 99)

In the process of attaining white cleanliness and orderliness, Pauline gets detached from her family and her own identity, which plunges her into a never-ending psychological quagmire.

Similarly, Pecola, too loses herself in the process of pursuing beauty. Pecola wants to be beautiful and accepted in white-dominated society. She believes if she has blue eyes, then everyone will accept her like other white girls. In this regard, she goes to Soaphead Church, but he tells her that he cannot help her. After this, Pecola loses her mental sanity. The inculcation of blackness as a “negative signifier” in the minds of the black community causes the destruction and madness of Pecola (Tally 14). She refuses to accept the reality that she cannot have blue eyes, so she retreats into a world of her own imagination, where she perceives everything through the lens of her desired blue eyes. Convinced that she possesses them, she seeks validation from her imaginary friend, asking, “Are they really nice?” (Morrison 153). When reassured that her eyes are beautiful, she becomes eager to see them for herself, exclaiming, “Oh, yes. My eyes. My blue eyes. Let me look again” (Morrison 159). She then urges her friend to look around and check if anyone has bluer eyes than hers. Though he assures her that no one does, she remains unconvinced, insisting that somewhere, in some other place, there might be someone with even bluer eyes- “Nobody “around here” probably has bluer eyes. What about someplace else?” (Morrison 160). Pecola's obsession with having blue eyes symbolizes her fixation on the white standard of beauty. She asks her friend whether her eyes are “blue enough,” to which her friend responds by questioning, “Blue enough for what?” Pecola struggles to provide a clear answer, eventually replying, “Blue enough for... I don't know. Blue enough for something. Blue enough... for you” (Morrison 161). Her desire for blue eyes reflects her deep longing for societal acceptance. She believes that by conforming to white beauty standards, she will be embraced by others and that the world will become a kinder place for her. Pecola yearns for a transformation that will change how people perceive her, hoping to escape the vague and disgusted looks she constantly endures. However, in attempting to mask her Black identity with an unattainable ideal, she ultimately loses herself, descending into madness and isolation, forever trapped in a world of delusion.

### **Conclusion**

This article has examined *The Bluest Eye* through the lens of Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks*, exploring the underlying reasons for Black people's idealization of

beauty and how this pursuit leads to a loss of self-identity. This article has projected light on both the efforts and failure of the black people in terms of getting rid of their blackness, and also the loss of their selves due to their vain endeavors to gain superiority by wiping up all the traces of blackness. This article has illustrated how Black individuals frequently experience humiliation and develop feelings of inferiority as a result of societal perceptions related to their skin complexion. They consider themselves ugly, as they are directly or indirectly told by the white dominated society that they are essentially ugly. Due to this displeasing feeling, they possess low self-esteem and want to become beautiful and superior by possessing the features that have been set as the parameters of beauty by the white. They keep on idealizing the white standard of beauty. In this entire process, they forget one certain thing that they can never erase the traces of their blackness. In the pursuit of beauty, black people lose their actual identity and often live a traumatic life, where they feel frustrated and disheartened for not being able to possess the features of the white standard of beauty.

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