CHAPTER - III

Toni Morrison: Search for Authentic Existence in
The Bluest Eye

Toni Morrison’s first novel The Bluest Eye (1970) makes a scathing attack on the imposition of white/Anglo-Saxon standards of beauty on black women and the creation of cultural perversion. It presents a critique of the dominant aesthetic that is internalized by majority of the black community, and attempts to deconstruct the meta-ethnicity, which exercises a hegemonic control over the lives of blacks in America. The political connotations of ethnicity are derived from the desire of minority ethnic groups in a multi-ethnic society to resist oppression by the dominant culture. The celebration of a separate identity constitutes its cultural corollary. Thus The Bluest Eye becomes a powerful expression of Toni Morrison’s ethnic cultural feminism which according to Carolyn Denard differs from existential, political feminism that alienates black women from their ethnic group.¹ The feminist analysis takes into account the intra-racial and intra-racial contexts and locations in the discourse of Pecola, the chief black female protagonist.

The Bluest Eye, set in a black neighbourhood in Lorain, Ohio, 1947 presents a critique of black poverty; powerlessness and loss of positive self-image represented by Pecola, the young, poor, black girl who feels that blackness has condemned her to ugliness and neglect. The text informs us that eleven-year old Pecola is pubescent, half-child, and half-woman. In the defining moment of sexual and psychic awakening, she is raped and impregnated by her father. Ironically he is the only person who regards her as lovable.
The incestuous rape occupies centrality in her blighted search for blue eyes and the subsequent destruction of her mind. The forbidden act is committed in the part of the novel, titled 'Spring'. The first-person narrator, Claudia makes a revealing comment as the novel opens: "We had dropped our seeds in our own little plot of black dirt just as Pecola’s father had dropped his seeds in his own plot of black dirt. Our innocence and faith were no more productive than his lust or despair."2

Spring is generally associated with sexuality and the seeds and earth symbolize hope and growth. However in the novel, the season when no marigolds bloom parallels the deflowering of Pecola by her father. As a result of the rape, Pecola gives birth to a stillborn child, loses her mind and her life becomes a wasteland. Claudia, the first-person narrator again makes an illuminating observation as the novel comes to a close: "And Cholly loved her. I’m sure he did. He, at any rate was the one who loved her enough to touch her, envelop her, give something of himself to her. But his touch was fatal, and the something he gave her filled the matrix of her agony with death."3

The black feminist analysis of violence in domestic space does not endorse the simplistic racist/sexist contention that “black men are motivated in especially powerful ways to commit sexual violence against women.”4 The feminist perspective on incestuous violence against Pecola reveals that as no other expression of male superiority is within the reach of Cholly, he resorts to subduing and possessing his own daughter. Access to her body through force is, well, within his reach. Viewed in this light, the incestuous assault is not an expression of black men’s proclivity towards sexual violence against women but of Cholly’s essential powerlessness, emasculation, passivity and social impotence which are symptomatic manifestations of the humiliation that Cholly
had suffered at the hands of the white hunters/captors during his first sexual encounter with a black girl and of his traumatized/pathological response to rejection by his father in boyhood. As it is not just triggered off by uncontrollable and unrestricted black phallic power, it is not to be viewed as a reenactment of "the myth of the black rapist." 

The feminist viewpoint is reiterated by Michael Awkward who argues that the delineation of incestuous encounter between Pecola and her father is Toni Morrison's intertextually charged revision of the Ellisonian incest in the Trueblood episode of Invisible Man. Morrison's text has a parodic relation to Ellison's incestuous clan. There is a marked similarity between the situations of Matty Lou and Pecola in terms of the utter poverty of two black families and lack of space for sleeping. Moreover, Matty Lou, according to Houston Baker, "is her mother Kate's double - a woman who looks just like her mother and who is fully grown and sexually mature." In the case of Pecola also it is her scratching of her leg in a manner that reflected "what Pauline was doing the first time he saw her in Kentucky" that arouses Cholly Breedlove's incestuous lust. The textual evidence suggests that Toni Morrison has subjected Ellisonian incest to feminist revision. It furnishes a fine illustration of what the feminist critic Annette Kolondy calls "revisionary reading which opens new avenues for comprehending male texts."

Toni Morrison's revision of Ellison is based on the feminist contention that male/phallocentric texts, rooted in the Western literary canon, have an overt/covert anti female slant, and under the cultural sway of phallocentrism, the female reader tends to internalize the antiwoman messages of male texts. Judith Fetterly exhorts women readers to "begin the process of exorcizing the male mind that has been implanted" in women. The
resultant freedom from phallocentrism facilitates revision, which according to Adrienne Rich involves “the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction.” Feminist revision, Judith Fetterly opines, “frees the reader/critic from the hold of male texts which lose their power to bind us unknowingly to their designs.”

The feminists’ looking afresh at Ellison’s delineation of incest reveals that his phallocentric text validates male perception of incest and silencing of the voice of the female victim. It implies that Matty Lou is at the mercy of the uncontrollable phallic power of her father and what happens to her, as a result of the forbidden act, is presented as of no consequence. In refiguring Trueblood in the character of Cholly Breedlove, Toni Morrison presents a critique of the phallocentric representation of incest. Unlike Ellison, Toni Morrison focuses on the tragic and painful journey that Pecola has to traverse in the wake of her violation by her father. It is an instance of how "The Bluest Eye, then, has served to change permanently the overwhelmingly male disposition of the Afro-American literary canon.”

Unlike Ellison, Toni Morrison captures the raw horror of Cholly Breedlove’s violation of his daughter without using the veneer of metaphoric and symbolic figuration. First, he is stimulated by Pecola’s gesture of scratching her leg, which brings to his mind a similar gesture of Pauline and how he had responded to it many years ago. He relives that youthful response by holding Pecola’s foot in hand and nibbling at the back of her leg. According to Madonne M. Miner, “Of consequence here is not Pecola’s gesture, but Cholly’s belief that he can regain an earlier perception of himself as young, carefree and whimsical by using this girl/woman as medium.” Finding Pecola
unresponsive unlike Pauline, Cholly receives a second stimulus to incestuous rape:
The rigidness of her shocked body, the silence of her stunned throat, was better than Pauline's easy laughter had been. The confused mixture of his memories of Pauline and the doing of a wild and forbidden thing excited him, and a bolt of desire ran down his genitals, giving it length.... The tightness of her vagina was more than he could bear. His soul seemed to slip down to his guts and fly out into her, and the gigantic thrust he made into her then provoked the only sound she made.... a hollow suck of air in the back of her throat.15

Michael Awkward has pointed out that “the tight sexual space represents for Cholly the forbidden area that must be forcibly entered and existed.”16 The text of The Bluest Eye informs us: “Removing himself from her was so painful to him he cut it short and snatched his genitals out of the dry harbor of her vagina.”17 Ostensibly Cholly's “wild”, “confused act” does not have the symbolic significance of Trueblood's raping his daughter. Trueblood's inability to withdraw from his daughter's vagina, unlike the painful experience of Cholly in the same position and posture, is evocative of the image of castration of black men because of the peril of black male sexuality. The image is brought to his mind by his dream of a sexual encounter with a white woman. Trueblood's fear of getting castrated by the whites for his black phallic power and the psychological castration of Cholly are to be regarded as symptomatic manifestations of racial oppression and victimization.

The feminist text of Toni Morrison, unlike the phallocentric text of Ellison, takes into consideration the consequence of incestuous rape for the daughter/victim. In the Trueblood episode of Invisible Man, incest is conceptualized as material gain. Morrison's revision delineates it as an irreparable loss in terms of its devastating consequences. As a result of the fatal touch of the father, Pecola becomes the mother of
her father's stillborn baby. Her ostracism from society is also a reaction of the incest. Besides this, the forbidden act of Cholly robs Pecola of her vision of love. Madonna M. Miner, thus, highlights the consequences of loss of the vision of love:

Following the rape, Pecola, an unattractive eleven year old black girl, knows that for her, even love is bound to be dirty; ugly, of a piece with the fabric of her world. Desperate, determined to unwind the threads that compose this fabric, Pecola falls back on an earlier notion: the world changes as the eyes which see it change.  

In this way, the incestuous rape and the subsequent loss of the vision of love intensify Pecola's craving for blue eyes. Pauline's blaming Pecola for the incestuous rape makes Pecola realize that her mother is conditioned to act as the "great arm of parental conjugal phallocentrism." Evidently, the gulf between mother and daughter has been created by patriarchal/racial constructions of female subjectivity. Mainstream culture's norms of beauty and identification of beauty with virtue have been inculcated into Pecola by her mother, herself a victim who leads a life of drudgery as a domestic servant in a white, affluent household. Natalie M. Rosinsky underscores Pauline's condition as a victim: "Because class and color separate Pauline's reality from the illusory one that cinema projects and her employers seem to embody, her own destructive separation of maternal duty from affection is validated."  

Pauline's abdication of maternal duty makes Pecola seek her redemption through blue eyes. The desire for blue eyes springs from the impingement of the Anglo-Saxon model of beauty on her sensibility. Claudia and Frieda are of the same age as Pecola but they perceive blackness in a positive manner. Though a minority in both class and caste, they are unfazed by the meanness of their lives and the hegemony of the whites.
Pecola's destruction is caused by her alienation from the folk knowledge and values that have not been transmitted to her by her mother. The cultural wisdom, enshrined in the blues lyrics, punctuating the narrative at critical points and crucial to the survival of a vulnerable young black woman, has not been handed over to Pecola by the mother. On the other hand, Claudia's and Frieda's caring though stern mother has systematically initiated them into folk wisdom and values, which have, helped them in developing self-esteem. Claudia's sense of self-worth is further heightened by her father who protects her from the amorous advances of Henry, the potential rapist, while Pecola's father rapes his daughter.

The St. Louis Blues transmit cultural values, crucial to Claudia's and Pecola's survival. The verses address caste prejudice or intra-racism based upon skin tone. The caste hierarchy has percolated from the dominant white culture into Lorain's black community. It privileges light skin, Anglo-Saxon features and blue eyes. In the novel, it is represented by Maureen Peal; light skinned black girl whose whiteness enslaves most of her black schoolmates. By worshipping blindly that which is white they are putting their head in a noose, symbolized by Maureen's two lynch ropes of hair. It is suggestive of the noose that strangulates Pecola.

St. Louis Blues present an anti thesis of the aesthetic code of the dominant class. The aphorism: "Blacker di berry sweeter is de juice," constituting an integral part of the collective unconscious of African Americans, attaches the highest aesthetic value to dark skin. While Claudia is exposed to the lyrical deconstruction of the Shirley Temple aesthetic by her mother, Pecola is rejected by Pauline who invests her fond affections in the corn yellow haired child of her white employers who claim her attention
and loyalty more than any one in her family had done because “they gave her what she never had.” She keeps drawing sustenance from her relationship with Fishers but miserably fails to find in her daughter a similar craving for being claimed. It is evident from her slapping Pecola when she accidentally drops a pan, containing blueberry cobbler, burning her legs. Pauline unleashes a life-long fury of hatred on her daughter and hugs the white Fisher child who, assuming racial superiority, calls her “Polly” while Pecola is instructed to call her mother “Mrs. Breedlove.” As a result of this mistreatment, Pecola comes to believe that she is just an object like the dark berries which she represents.

In rejecting Maureen Peal, whom Pecola befriends, Claudia denounces the Shirley Temple aesthetic and the gospel of intra-racism. Pecola craves for what Claudia scoffs at i.e. light skin, blonde hair, blue eyes and the social status. Claudia’s defiance is an acquired/cultural defiance, nurtured and promoted by a fond mother. Pecola internalizes, the Anglo Saxon aesthetic that the St. Louis Blues mediate against because her mother has not exposed her to black heritage and culture. Thus Pauline’s rejection of Pecola becomes the cause of her self-deception and doom. Though similarly situated, Claudia’s response to the dominant culture is opposed to that of Pecola. She comes to embrace the caste aesthetic tentatively, reluctantly and consciously. In this context, Inger Anne Softing observes: “Claudia is only character in this novel who consciously makes an attempt at deconstructing the ideology of the dominant society. This is seen in her dismembering of the dolls.”

The dismemberment of the white baby dolls is motivated by Claudia’s impulse to locate the source of white beauty. The same impulse prompts her sadistic torturing of
white girls. As Claudia's violent attempt at identifying the source of white beauty is disapproved,

"she moves from pristine sadism to fabricated hatred to fraudulent love ... I learned much later to worship (Shirley Temple) just as I learned to delight in cleanliness, knowing, even as I learned, that the change was adjustment without the improvement."23

Though, it seems to be an observation of adult Claudia, engaged in the act of remembering and interpreting the childhood memories, yet Claudia is the only character who presents a critique of a reigning aesthetic that is internalized by Soaphead Church, Geraldine, Louis Junior, the bully boys, Pecola and Pauline. While Cholly rapes Pecola's body, Pauline rapes her mind because she does not expose her to the black aesthetic.

From the feminist viewpoint, both are to be looked upon as transgressors. Thus Pecola's alienation from her racial heritage makes her vulnerable to the pernicious effects of internalized colonialism: "At every turn Pecola is confronted with attitudes and images based on the myth of white superiority that reinforces her tendency towards self-hatred."24

An overview of the life and predicaments of Pecola's parents offers an explanation of their abuse of Pecola. Cholly was born to an unwed mother who had abandoned him on a garbage heap after his birth and a father who had rejected him, without ever recognizing him. When fourteen-year-old Cholly seeks his father, Samson Fuller, out at dice game the aborted encounter traumatizes the adolescent boy and as he strains to:

stop the fall of water from his eyes.... his bowels suddenly opened up, and before he could realize what he knew, liquid stools were running down his legs. At the mouth of the alley where his father was, on an orange crate in the sun, on a street full of grown men and women, he had soiled himself like a baby.25
The trauma, caused by his outright rejection by the father, is further deepened when he is humiliated by the white hunters who interrupt his first sexual encounter with a young black girl. Wilfred D. Samuels and Clenora Hudson Weems trace a similarity between the situation of Paul D. in Beloved, captured by rifle and lamp carrying whites and that of Cholly, taunted by the white hunters during his first intercourse with the young black girl. They observe:

One is immediately reminded of the rifle-and lamp carrying hunters who intrude upon Cholly’s first sexual initiation in The Bluest Eye and of the resulting psychological castration and damage that would not only last a life time for him but that lie at the core of his vicious raping of his daughter. Where as the phallic rifles symbolize the denied and lost manhood of the slaves, the lamp undoubtedly symbolically sheds light on the path of life of emasculation to which both Paul D. and Cholly are heir. Indeed the lamp carried by the hunters in The Bluest Eye casts a beam that leads retrospectively to the historical genesis of this legacy, one that was deeply rooted in the physionomistic conviction of school teacher, the leader of the capturers (hunters), who assessed and measured human personality according to physical indices, in this case race.26

The text informs us of what happens to Cholly in psychosexual terms as a result of his degrading experiences:

Cholly was free. Dangerously free. Free to feel whatever he felt.... He was free to live whatever his fantasies, and free even to die, the how and the when of which held no interest for him.... abandoned in a junk heap by his mother, rejected for a crap game by his father, there was nothing more to lose. He was only with his perceptions and appetites, and they alone interested him.27

Cholly defines himself as a “freeman” because not only does he live on the margins of society like other blacks but he is also an outsider in the society of the black community and its butt of ridicule. His failure to relate to his wife further marginalizes him. His wife Pauline’s deformity, caused by an accident in childhood, foreshadows their
estranged relationship. The narrator highlights Pauline’s traumatized awareness of the
deformity and the damage done by it:

Slight as it was, this deformity (a maimed foot) explained for her many things that would have been otherwise incomprehensible: why she alone of all the children had no nickname; why there were no funny jokes or funny anecdotes about funny things she had done; why no one ever remarked her food preferences - no saving of the wing or neck for her - no cooking of the peas in a separate pot without rice because she did not like rice, why nobody teased her; why she never felt at home anywhere, or that she belonged to any place. Her general feeling of separateness and unworthiness she blamed on her foot.28

Cholly and Pauline move to the North, carrying their respective psychic traumas with them. Their experience in the North furnishes a compelling evidence of the racial problems and pressures to which the transplanted southern blacks are exposed. To them, the north strikes as cold, inhospitable, impersonal and anonymous. Pauline’s uprootedness and alienation from her southern African-American way of life and worldview aggravates the situation and brings about the dismemberment of her family. The whites look down upon Cholly and call him “an old dog,” “a snake,” “a ratty nigger.”29 Obviously, the prevalent racial oppression is the root cause of Breedloves’ deprivation and depravity though Pauline perceives him as the author of their misery. Her confrontation with Cholly is symptomatic: “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 pokers and occasionally a flat iron would sail towards his head.”30

The feminine way of Pauline is actually the masculine because Cholly is labelled a “coward” and his opponent (Pauline) “a man”. The wife fights like a man whereas
the husband fights like a coward. In this way the text reverses the role of the white father, referred to in the primer section of the novel: "See father, He is big and strong." As this does not hold true in the case of an impoverished and debased black man/father, Cholly is posited as a coward.

In the North, Pauline embraces the trapping of the African-American Christianity. She looks to white society for guidelines for her manner of living which are provided by the films, produced for the white majority, and the religion of the dominant white class. Pauline’s acceptance of her poverty and suffering reflected in her belief that "it don’t make no different about this old earth because there is sure to be a glory" echoes the teachings of slave masters who manipulated Biblical sayings to exploit the slaves. Pauline clings to the western notion of linear history which glorifies the future, undervalues the past and belittles the present. Situated as she is, Pauline performs neither the role of a mother nor that of a wife. She regards Pecola as ugly and holds her responsible for the rape and scorns her. She is no better than the other members of black community who ostracize Pecola. She dubs Cholly "a model of sin and failure" and "bore him like a crown of thorns, and, her children like a cross". Into her son "she beat a loud desire to run away, and into her daughter she beat a fear of growing up."

Trudier Harris dwells on the devastating effect of the cultural uprootedness of Cholly and Pauline on their children:

Their move to the North parallels dissolution in their abilities to use the forms of Afro-American culture to which they have been exposed for many sustaining purposes. Thus they break the chains of continuity in culture and can only produce children who are outside that which had the potential to nurture them. Pecola and Cholly must therefore exist in a world of fragmentation, in a world where Mrs. MacTeer and Poland might show signs of the more sustaining Southern black culture, but
which they cannot effectively transmit to the Breedlove children. They, like other characters in their isolated existence in the novel, are tied together by cultural forces stronger than all of them, but the strands of that cultural net keep breaking from Pecola to slip her back into a sea of confusion about herself and about her place in the world of Lorain, Ohio.34

Besides her parents, other black characters like Geraldine, Louis Junior, Maureen Peal and a group of black schoolboys represent the intra-racial forces that rob Pecola of her personhood, push her into the abyss of a fatal fantasy and lead her to self-destruction. Geraldine, a black woman, has separated herself from African/black heritage and suppressed her racial identity by getting rid of “the dreadful funkiness of passion, the funkiness of nature, the funkiness of the wide range of human emotions” with a view to appeasing the white man’s “blunted soul.”35 She leads her son, Louis Junior, to disown his real self. Her investing affections in a cat creates cruel sibling rivalry in the mind of Junior. He sadistically lures Pecola into his house, pretending to show her kittens. Once she is inside, Junior makes her a scapegoat of his neglect by his mother and the cat a victim of cruel sibling rivalry.

Junior said, ‘Here!’ Pecola turned. ‘Here is your kitten!’ he screeched. And he threw a big black cat right in her face. She sucked in her breath in fear and surprise and felt fur in her mouth. The cat clawed her face and chest in an effort to right itself, then leaped nimbly to the floor.36

All of a sudden, Geraldine appears on the scene and immediately Junior blames Pecola for killing the cat. Geraldine regards Pecola not only as a nuisance and blight but a threat to the anti black environment that she has constructed around her son. As Pecola is thrown out of Geraldine’s house, she sees a portrait of an anglicized Jesus “looking down at her with sad and unsurprised eyes”37 representing an image of God who seems either incapable of helping her or is an accomplice in her suffering. With
the portrait of Jesus, "Morrison introduces us to one of shortcomings of the western model of God, namely the problem of how a supposedly omnipotent God and loving God can allow the existence of evil and suffering." Geraldine’s aping the white and imbibing negative perceptions of blackness and Pecola’s fascination for the blue eyes of the black cat contextualize the motifs of race, power and cruelty of white/western definition of beauty and cultural mutilation of the blacks in America.

At one point of time in school, Pecola begins to feel worthy when she is seemingly befriended by Maureen who is both hated and admired for her beautiful clothes, light skin, long hair and green eyes. Unlike Pecola, Claudia and Frieda want to counteract the universal love for the black community’s flawed beauty Maureen Peel and subvert her Mulatto aesthetics, which uphold that the blacks, closely resembling the whites, are considered the most beautiful. According to Philip Royster, Mullato aesthetics is a residue of “the enslavement and colonization of black people in the United States.” However, Pecola, soon, realizes that she is being tricked into revealing “humiliating” facts about her family in exchange for Maureen’s spurious information about sex:

‘Did you ever see a naked man?’
Pecola blinked and then looked away.
‘No. Where would I see a naked man?’
‘I don’t know. I just asked.’
‘I wouldn’t even look at him, even if I did see him. That’s dirty. Who wants to see a naked man? Pecola was agitated. ‘Nobody’s father would be naked in front of his own daughter. Not unless he was dirty too...’ How come you said ‘father’? Maureen wanted to know.

Pecola’s foreshadowing encounter with the Macteer girls also accentuates her sense of self-pity and deprivation. Officials place Pecola at the Macteer house after her father Cholly Breedlove burns down the family house and they are thrown ‘outdoors’.
Here she experiences the onset of menstruation. Pecola and her friends Claudia and Frieda are curious, puzzled and enticed by their sexuality. Claudia’s and Frieda’s inquisitiveness is coloured with romance. Their vision of love and sexuality finds an eloquent expression in the song sung by Frieda: “When the deep purple falls over sleepy garden walls, someone thinks of me....”

For Pecola, the sexual experience is shrouded in terror and fear:

> What did love feel like? She wondered. How do grown-ups act when they love each other? Eat fish together? Into her eyes came the picture of Cholly and Mrs. Breedlove in bed. He making sounds as though he were in pain, as though something had him by the throat and wouldn’t let go. Terrible as his noises were, they were not nearly as bad as no noise at all from her mother. It was as though she was not even there. May be that was love. Choking sound and silence.

The self-pity that Pecola feels at the Macteer house is further heightened by the taunts of the black schoolboys who, like Louis Junior, make her a scapegoat of their own humiliation and pain:

> ‘Black e mo. Black e mo. Yadaddsleepsnekked. Black e mo black e mo ya dadd sleeps nekked. Black e mo...’ They had extemporized a verse made up of two insults about matters over which the victim had no control: the color of her skin and speculations on the sleeping habits of an adult, wildly fitting in its incoherence. That they themselves were black and that their own fathers had similarly relaxed habits was irrelevant. It was their contempt for their own blackness that gave the first insult its teeth. They seemed to have taken all their smoothly cultivated ignorance, their exquisitely learned self-hatred, their elaborately designed hopelessness and sucked it all up into a fiery cone of scorn that had burned for ages in the hollows of their minds-cooled and spilled over lips of outrage, consuming whatever was in its path.

The boys’ contempt for their own blackness emanates from their internalized notions of white superiority, which have also been imbibed by Geraldine, Pauline, Pecola and Soaphead. The humiliation that they heap on Pecola is suggestive of the
ignorance, self-hatred and hopelessness that they have acquired as a result of their cultural uprootedness and alienation from black heritage.

Pecola’s intra-racial encounter with the black boys is followed by her falling a prey to the inter-racial superiority of Yacobowski, the white storekeeper. She likes to eat the Mary Jane candy because of her fascination for blonde blue eyed Mary Jane on the wrapper. An intratextual parallelism, provided by Pecola’s drinking gallon after gallon of milk during her stay with Macteers simply because she loves to gaze at the golden haired, blue-eyed dimple faced Shirley temple on the special drinking cup, reinforces Pecola’s fatal fascination for the white dominant culture’s much advertised images of beauty. When she goes to buy the candy, she is made aware that she does not exist for the white storekeeper:

He does not see her because for him there is nothing to see. How can a fifty-two-year-old white immigrant shopkeeper with a taste of potatoes and beer in his mouth, his mind honed by the doe-eyed virgin Mary, his sensibilities blunted by a permanent awareness of loss, see a little black girl? ... She looks at him and sees the vacuum where curiosity ought to lodge. And something more. The total absence of human recognition - the glazed separateness. She does not know what keeps his glance suspended. Perhaps because she is grown...and she is a girl. But she has seen interest, disgust, even anger in grown male eyes... it is blackness that accounts for, that creates, the vacuum edged with distaste...

Pecola sees “the total absence of human recognition - the glazed separateness” in the shopkeeper’s eyes. Identifying Yacobowski’s petrifying look as the one that she sees “in the eyes of all white people” Pecola concludes, “the distaste must be for her, her blackness” as “her blackness is static and dread” and creates “distaste in white eyes.”

Engulfed by shame, Pecola buys the candy and leaves. She identifies herself with the dandelion weeds she passes by. An overpowering sense of shame does not
allow anger to surface. While eating the candy, she internalizes the smiling picture of the blue-eyed, blonde haired little girl that adorns its wrapper. She eats the candy, and its sweetness is good. “To eat the candy is somehow to eat the eyes, eat Mary Jane. Love Mary Jane. Be Mary Jane.”46 Humiliated and hurt, Pecola tries to cover up her unearned shame with “nine lovely orgasms with Mary Jane. Lovely Mary Jane, for whom a candy is named.”47 The harrowing experience of not being seen by the white shopkeeper makes Pecola aware of her self as seen by ‘the other’ to whom she is just an object. By not recognizing her, the white shopkeeper judges, categorizes and castigates her. Not looking at her is a way of making her hate herself. It is an attempt on the part of the white shopkeeper to rob Pecola of her subjectivity and make her wear the mantle of invisibility and non-existence. Pecola’s foreshadowing encounter with the white shopkeeper, upon careful examination, testifies to her reification. It is to be noted that Pecola while savouring the sweetness of candy is in a state of pure consciousness. She is conscious only of herself and concerned only with the candy and its wrapper. Her encountering Yacobowski’s blue eyes brings about a qualitative change in the scene. As she steps out of the recesses of her thoughts, she, at once, steps into the hostile world of the white dominant culture. The shopkeeper feels “he does not need to waste the effort of a glance.”48 Though a little black girl stands physically in front of the shopkeeper, socially speaking, no one is there. To him, there is “nothing (no-thing) to see.”49 The perceived “object” is identified and negated.

Pecola interprets the shopkeeper’s indifference as distaste for her blackness. Along with internalizing the bewitching picture that adorns the wrapper, Pecola absorbs the store owner’s look and its signification for him and her. It is to be concluded that:
The total absence of human recognition Pecola sees in Yacobowski's glance corresponds to her own negative self-perception. She can be only thing, object, being for 'the other.' With this as her central standpoint, Pecola seems able to respond only with shame... shame means that the individual allows him or herself to be defined by "the other".... In her narcoleptic state of self-hatred, she takes solace in shame, abnegating her responsibility for self to Yacobowski. This is indeed a castrating act of "Bad Faith."50

The black feminist analysis of Pecola's self-hatred reveals the self-destructive obsession of the black girl with the dominant culture's standards of beauty i.e. blue eyes, blonde hair and fair skin. It is the standard that defines the core of western/white culture's aesthetic code that regards blue eyes as the symbol of beauty. Pecola's ardent desire for the blue eyes represents the collective desire of the black folks to be white. It highlights black obsession with whiteness and how the blacks conceptualize and fantasize whiteness and perceive their own blackness. It is a symptom of the pervasive and penetrating psychic and cultural impact of internalized colonialism and the racist/sexist ideology.

Pecola thinks that whiteness represents beauty, love, purity, and goodness while blackness represents ugliness, hatred, impurity and evil. Her longing for the blue eyes is symptomatic of her passionate desire for being liked, accepted and recognized as a person by her privileged blonde, white schoolmates who treat Pecola as a non-person, simply because of her blackness. Consequently, Pecola comes to believe that blackness has condemned her to a state of wretchedness and alienation. This forms the propelling impulse behind her quest for blue eyes.

Pecola's response to her blackness offers a telling illustration of the psychic impingement of white/racist/supremacist aesthetic values on her sensibility and of the
colonization of her mind and imagination. To corroborate the point, it is pertinent to quote bell hooks: "Systems of domination, imperialism, colonialism and racism actively coerce black folks to internalize negative perceptions of blackness, to be self-hating. Many of us succumb to this." Pecola comes to regard blackness and ugliness as synonymous. She painfully realizes that the white as well as the black adults love white children. Starved of love and attention, she pines to achieve beauty and recognition by acquiring a pair of beautiful, blue eyes. Her desperate longing finds a poignant expression in praying patiently for blue eyes: "Each night, without fail, she prayed for blue eyes. Fervently, for a year she prayed. Although some what discouraged, she is not without hope. To have something as wonderful as that happen would take a long, long time."

Pecola’s prayer to God for blue eyes is predicated upon her belief in what blue eyes will bring to her. This belief is as strong as some of the folk beliefs, expressed in the fictional discourse. Belief also forms the cornerstone of Christianity and Conjuration to which Pecola is equally exposed. Thus Pecola’s praying for blue eyes is based on the belief that such a feat belongs to the domain of possibility.

Pecola’s wish for blue eyes links her to all believers in fairy tales and other magical realms. In this regard, Trudier Harris comments:

It is Cinderella wanting to be transformed from chargirl to belle of the ball, or sleeping Beauty waiting a hundred year for the prince to awaken her. It is the classic tale of the ugly duckling turned beautiful swan, of the beast transformed through love and caring in the beautiful prince, of Sir Gawain’s pig lady turned into a dazzling woman."

The folkloric perspective establishes the point that, to Pecola, blue eyes are a metaphor for love, security, recognition and acceptance which are denied to her at
home and school. She perceives blue eyes as a panacea of all her afflictions and imagines that her acquiring blue eyes would deter her parents from doing "bad things" in front of her beautiful eyes:

It had occurred to Pecola sometime ago that if her eyes... were different... she herself would be different... If she looked different, beautiful, may be Cholly would be different, and Mrs. Breedlove too. Maybe they'd say, 'Why, look at pretty-eyed Pecola. We mustn't do bad things in front of those pretty eyes.'

As Pecola's prayers for blue eyes and beauty come to no account, she, still believing in the magical transformation of herself, seeks the help of Elihue Micah Whitcomb known as Soaphead Church. He is a West Indian with lightly browned skin, claiming to be a reader, advisor and interpreter of dreams. He takes pride in racial intermingling that had brought him into the world. He is a self-proclaimed Anglophile who regards whites as superior and beautiful. He abhors women and prefers the company of young girls, thinking that "with little girls it is all clean and good and friendly, no hastiness, no filth, no odor, no groaning."

His landlord's mangy dog, the opposite of the perky dog of the picture perfect white family, torments Soaphead Church. To get rid of the dog he persuades Pecola to give the poisoned meat to the dog on the plea that if a reaction occurs her wish for blue eyes will be granted. The text, thus, records Soaphead's response to Pecola's petition:

He thought it was the most fantastic and the most logical petition he had ever received. Here was an ugly looking girl asking for beauty. A surge of love and understanding swept through him, but was quickly replaced by anger. Anger that he was powerless to help her. Of all the wishes people had brought him-money, love, revenge- this seemed to him the most poigniant and the most deserving of fulfilment. A little black girl who wanted to rise up out of the pit of her blackness and see the world with blue eyes. His outrage grew and felt like power. For the first time, he honestly wished he could work miracles. Never before
Soaphead Church deludes Pecola into believing that she has acquired blue eyes and become beautiful. Obviously he exploits Pecola’s tendency to divorce physical reality from her identity. As a result, she is beguiled and bamboozled by the conman. The delusion created by the misanthrope plays the role of a malignant force that hurls hapless Pecola deep down into the dungeon of lunacy. The conman, by fraudulently fulfilling Pecola’s wish, tends to excel God. His hoodwinking of the poor black girl forms part of the larger design of racial exploitation and victimization of Pecola. “The horror at the heart of her yearning is exceeded only by the evil of fulfilment.” This is indeed a cruel joke. The gently ironical and self-revealing letter that the conman writes to God offers a commentary on of the conman’s modus operandi:

“Do you know what she came for? Blue eyes. New-blue eyes, she said. Like she was buying shoes”. I would like a pair of a new blue eyes. “She must have asked you for them for a very long time and you had not replied. (A habit, I could have told her, a long-ago habit broken for Job - but no more. She came to me for them... You said, “suffer little children to come into me, and harm them not.”... You forgot. Lord, you forgot how and when to be God. That is why I changed the little black girl’s eyes for her, and I did not touch her; not a finger did I lay on her. But I gave her those blue eyes, she wanted not for pleasure, and not for money I did what you did not, could not, would not do. I looked at that ugly little black girl, and I loved her. I played you... I gave her the blue, blue, two blue eyes. No one else will see her blue eyes. But she will. And she will live happily ever after.”

Madness is the terrible price that Pecola pays for the illusory happiness, born of the phantasmal fulfillment of her hopeless wish by Soaphead Church who covertly connives with the racial systems of domination which play havoc with Pecola’s life.
The text informs us; “The damage done was total. She spent her days, her tendril, sap-green days, walking up and down, up and down, her head jerking to a beat of a drummer she alone could hear.”

In the black feminist analysis, Soaphead’s theological model is schizophrenic. It vacillates back and forth between African and Western traditions and between varying concepts of the physical and the metaphysical. His misanthropic perspective is a pointer to what will happen to Pecola because of her susceptibility to Soaphead’s trap. The total collapse of Pecola’s idea of self is brought about not only by Soaphead but also by the community, her family, schoolmates and the mainstream culture’s codes and messages. Allen Alexander’s observation is apt and illuminating:

Pecola becomes the ultimate tragic figure, who, in the words of Claudia Macteer, took “all of our waste which we dumped on her and which she absorbed.” In this sense, she becomes a Christ figure, one who takes on the ugliness (sin) of the world around her and consequently absolves others of their feelings of inferiority (guilt). But Morrison’s final image of God is an aborted one: unlike Christ, there is no resurrection for Pecola. In her world, “it’s much, much, much too late’ to keep hope alive.”

The ethnic/cultural/feminist analysis of Pecola’s discourse of madness denounces the internationalization of the Western standards of female beauty by the blacks like Pauline and Pecola and validates the traditional beauty and strengths of black women like Mrs. Macteer, the mother of the narrator. Bernice Reagon thus, defines the traditional black beauty:

I come out of a tradition where those things are valued where you talk about a woman with big legs and big hips and black skin. I come out of a black community where it was all right to have hips and to be heavy. You did not feel that people did not like you. The values that you must be skinny come from another culture. Those are not the values that I was given by the women who served as my models. I refuse to be judged by the values of
The image of the traditional black beauty is an antithesis of the mainstream culture's physical standard of female beauty as a measure of self worth. According to bell hooks "to be born light meant that one was born with an advantage, recognized by everyone. To be born black has to start life handicapped, with a serious disadvantage." As the Anglo Saxon physical traits like blue eyes and blond hair are glamorized, the woman not having these physical traits, are not regarded as beautiful and virtuous. Historically, the acceptance by blacks of the Anglo-Saxon physical standard of female beauty for their own women has made the black women victims of racist and sexist oppression. In this connection, Toni Morrison offers a critique of the white/dominant culture's notion of beauty:

When the strength of a race depends on its beauty, when the focus is turned to how one looks as opposed to what one is, we are in trouble.... The concept of physical beauty as a virtue is one of the dumbest, most pernicious ideas of the Western world, and should have nothing to do with our past, present or future. Its absence or presence was only important to them, the white people who used it for anything they wanted.

Toni Morrison's criticism of the belief in the synonymity of physical beauty and virtue offers an explanation of why black women simply do not qualify as beautiful and how the beauty of black women is destroyed by the cultural engine of racial prejudice. This is at the heart of the tragic story of the dehumanized and colonized little black girl, Pecola who prays every night for a pair of blue eyes. Her praying for a pair of blue eyes means attempting to live up to a paradigm that differs starkly from the essential nature of black beauty. It inevitably involves alienation from ethnic and cultural roots that leads to self-hatred and self-destruction.
Pecola lives in a world of her own fantasies, believing that she has miraculously acquired black eyes and become beautiful. Her schizophrenia has created an imaginary friend for her who will listen while she talks about her new blue eyes. She has some to believe that people avoid her because they are dazzled by her blindingly blue eyes. Wrapped in madness, Pecola lives in a make-believe world. Her mind has been destroyed by the dominant white culture that completely negates her dreams and aspirations.

Pecola is also to be held responsible for her destruction because she never fights back her oppressors. If she had been initiated into black aesthetic like Claudia and Frieda and experienced black rage like Sethe in Beloved, she would have been able to frustrate the racial and intraracial attempt at humiliating and dehumanizing her. She might have snubbed Junior who tricks her into his house to torment her and challenged Geraldine who calls her black to insult her; she might have shouted back at the black boys in the manner of Frieda; she might have thrown money at Mr. Yacobowski when he does not take notice of her; she might have fought back Maureen when she questions her about her father’s nakedness. She remains passive because she does not realize the positive power of rage and cannot wield it as a weapon against racism and sexism. As a result, she, unlike Sethe in Beloved, fails in her quest for authentic existence. For Pecola in Morrison’s words, “It is much, much, much, too late.”

The black feminist study of The Bluest Eye explores the psychic compulsions, travail and plight of a poor black girl, trapped in the web of gender, class and race. Black female identity and subjectivity are analyzed in an African American perspective, existing on the boundaries between the black and white cultures. The study moves towards an ethnic cultural sphere of perceiving and understanding the black female
reality. The ethnic cultural feminist position advocates allegiance to positive black traditions and rejects the embracing of blonde, blue-eyed, Anglo Saxon myth by the blacks. Ideologically this position is opposed to existential, political feminism that promotes the alienation of black women from their ethnic group and regards it as a remedy of their oppression.

The main thrust of the present analysis of *The Bluest Eye* lies in validating the viewpoint that the oppression, devaluation and destruction of black women has its roots in internalization by the blacks of western/white standards and stereotypes of beauty. By juxtaposing Pecola’s and Claudia’s contrapuntal responses to white dominant culture, the feminist analysis of the narrative reveals how, on the one hand, the alienation of black women from black cultural/aesthetic values promotes the assimilation of the majority’s standard of beauty, and on the other hand, the absorption of black aesthetic values empowers them to counteract cultural perversion. The analysis of Claudia’s assertiveness highlights the positive role of black aesthetic values and rage in resisting the imposition of white dominant culture while that of Pecola’s cultural uprootedness and absence of rage underscores her meek submission to white aesthetic values.

Starting with a feminist interpretation of Pecola’s incestuous rape, this study moves towards gaining an understanding of her divorce from objective reality, sinking into a world of fantasy and the destruction of her mind. It further undertakes an exploration of the private discourse of her parental abuse, caste prejudices and total lack of recognition and the public discourse of racist/sexist oppression, patriarchal pressures and cultural perversion. The close focus analysis of the interpenetration of
the private and public discourses furnishes an explanation of the failure of Pecola’s quest for authentic existence in *The Bluest Eye*.

Unlike Pecola, Sethe, the chief female protagonist in *Beloved*, succeeds in her quest for an authentic existence because of the stirring of black rage which finds expression in her impulsive attack on Boldwin, the white quaker philanthropist, who, in the given situation, is regarded as a surrogate slave captor. The attack is symptomatic of Sethe's identifying the real enemy and realising the absurdity of slaughtering her own child in order to spare her the life of slavery. This moment of self-realisation marks the success of her quest for authentic existence, identity and fulfilment. In the fourth chapter, Sethe's problematic is studied with the help of the tools of black feminist criticism in the racial perspective of American slavery.
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