CHAPTER TWO

ANALYSIS OF “THE BLUEST EYE”
2.0. Preliminaries

This research is an attempt to have a feminist analysis of Toni Morrison’s novels. Therefore, the representative novels will be analyzed according to feminist features. First, in this chapter, the researcher attempts to present an overview of “The Bluest Eye” the most well-known novel of the author. Next, a short summary and a critical analysis of the novel along with exposure of feminist features in the novel will be presented.

2.1. Overview

During the 1970s, we come across a great and grand creative urge coming out from the art and mind of Toni Morrison. As a novelist, she explores all the dimensions and dynamics of relationship to ponder over it comparatively to the western parameters of women's beauty and the socio-psychological suppression of the Black community particularly of the woman.

*The Bluest Eye* saw the light in 1970 and the centrality of this novel is designed around the obsession of blacks with an American measurement of beauty. In fact it has become almost impossible to desert the mode of determination in connection with beauty. The novel
denounces the American traumatic tale of a black girl: A search in American parameter of beauty, to obtain white blue eyes, blonde hair and white skin are the requisite elements and ingredients to fathom the charm and grace of a woman. *The Bluest Eye* traces the painful condition of blacks especially women in America where to abate racial consideration commands everything. The American society boasts of the development of individuality irrespective of race and gender. Traditionally, the African American society has been witnessing excesses and atrocities perpetrated against them by the whites and Morrison makes a thorough inquiry of this peculiar state. In her thought-provoking surveys, Toni Morrison receives disrupted emotions, which came out from living in a world where white standards and goals are presented to blacks as uniquely important and, at the same time, impossible for them to achieve. The entire story rotates around Pecola Breedlove, the young black girl who is of the mind that blackness condemns her to ugliness. This is not the singular consideration of the novelist; rather she justifies it by exposing the ugliness of black poverty and powerlessness of black people.

*The Bluest Eye* unearthed that racism is hazardous to the self-image of the African society in general and the black female in particular. The novel gives the pricking story of Pecola who comes of a poor family detached from the mainstream of life of a community. The Breedloves
cultivate hatred against themselves and they believe that they have translated their unworthiness into ugliness. No doubt, woman as a creature is the precious creation of the Almighty. It is realized that the body of woman is one of the essential elements in her situation in the world, but the body is not enough to define her as a woman. In American context, the blackness has been held as an unfavourable connotation in the popular mind. There are numerous phrases and proverbs designed by the people with various intentions like black is evil, black as sin, black as the devil which reflect the emotional and aesthetic implications. The evil and ugliness of blackness have been presented and denoted like antithesis of the goodness and sanity of whiteness. It has almost acquired moral connotation. In order to establish the holy domination, the black race was by nature incapable of freedom and marked out for slavery.

Toni Morrison represents the black people’s experiences by portraying events and situations through the life of different characters and their shocking experiences. The Bluest Eye is a deeply moving novel. It is generally regarded as Toni Morrison’s most important and remarkable literary work.
2.2. Plot Construction

Claudia MacTeer recounts the events of the year that lead up to her best friend's, Pecola Breedlove's rape and the death of her baby. The year is 1941, and Claudia remembers that no marigolds bloomed that year. She thought at the time that it was because of Pecola's rape by her father, Cholly Breedlove that no marigolds bloomed. Her memories go back to the fall of 1940 (one year before the marigolds did not bloom). Claudia and her older sister, Frieda, live in a home that takes in borders. Mr. Henry moves in and flatters the young girls by telling them they look like Ginger Rogers and Greta Garbo. Soon after that, a young girl named Pecola moves in with them, as ordered by the county. She will live there until the county can find a better home for her, as her father, Cholly, burnt down her old home. Pecola and the two girls become friends and go through many experiences together, including Pecola getting her first period.

Pecola's family background is then described. Her parents, Pauline and Cholly Breedlove, have a bad marriage. Her mother is always working hard and nagging Cholly, while Cholly is always coming home drunk and beating Pauline. They yell and fight, and Pecola and her brother, Sammy, each look for an escape in their own ways. Sammy will frequently run away to get away from his family. Pecola meanwhile,
prays that her eyes will turn into a beautiful blue colour. She thinks that if her eyes were blue, things would be different - they would be pretty, and more than that, she would be pretty. Pecola becomes obsessed in her quest for blue eyes.

Winter arrives and Claudia tells of a new girl, named Maureen Peal, who comes to their school. Maureen is respected for her white looks. She has long hair, green eyes, light skin, and nice clothes. She is very popular with teachers and other classmates. However, Claudia is disgusted with her. Claudia is very turned off from the part of her culture that seems to favour white things, or things that resemble white people. Pecola, on the other hand, is obsessed with white ways, and wants to look white herself. She wishes she had blonde hair and blue eyes, and is frequently found admiring Shirley Temple's picture on the cups in Claudia's house.

The next section describes Geraldine, her son Junior, and their blue-eyed black cat. Junior has Pecola come over one day. He meanly throws the cat on Pecola and it scratches her. Pecola wants to leave Junior's house, but he does not let her. The cat rubs against her leg and she is taken up with its beautiful blue eyes. Junior then takes the cat and starts swinging it around. Pecola goes to save the cat by grabbing Junior, but Junior throws the cat and it lands against the window. Geraldine walks in and Junior blames the cat's death on poor Pecola.
Spring arrives and Claudia tells of how Mr. Henry touched Frieda's breasts and then was beaten by their father. The two girls go to visit Pecola in her new house, a downstairs apartment. Above, there are three prostitutes, Marie, China, and Poland, whom Pecola often visits and talks with.

Pauline Breedlove's younger years are described. It explains how she would often go to the movies, and because of this eventually became fascinated with Hollywood ideals of beauty. She saw famous movie stars like Jean Harlow as true representations of beauty, and nothing straying from that was deemed beautiful. She even thought her own daughter, Pecola, was ugly. This is why Pauline treated the daughter of the people she worked for, the Fishers, as if she was her own daughter. She had blonde curls and blue eyes, and Pauline became absorbed with their white lifestyle. It was the closest she could get to having it herself.

Cholly Breedlove's background is then explained. He is abandoned by his mother and father and is raised by his great Aunt Jimmy, who later dies. Cholly has his first sexual experience with Darlene. They are caught in the woods by two white men and Cholly is humiliated. He thinks Darlene might be pregnant so he runs away to Macon, Georgia to try to find his real father. He finds him, but discovers that his father is a drunk and a gambler who wants nothing to do with Cholly. Cholly runs
to Kentucky where he meets and marries Pauline. They eventually have two children, Sammy and Pecola.

The rape of Pecola by her father is then described. Cholly comes home drunk one afternoon and sees Pecola in the kitchen washing dishes. She reminds him for a moment of his wife, Pauline, and in a fit of confusion and love, he rapes his daughter. He leaves her on the kitchen floor feeling ashamed and alone.

The character of Elihue Micah Whitcomb (Soaphead Church) is introduced. He is a psychic healer of sorts, who hates people. He comes from a racially mixed family; he is part white and part Chinese, which accounts for his attitude of superiority over others. Pecola visits him one day, and asks him to make her wish come true of having blue eyes. He tricks her into poisoning an old, sick dog that he hates. He tells Pecola that if the dog behaves strangely, then that was a sign from God that her eyes would turn blue the next day. After Pecola feeds the dog the strange meat, which had poison on it, she sees that the dog chokes, falls down and dies. Horrified, she runs out of the house.

Summer comes and Claudia tells of how she and Frieda learned from rumours and gossip that Pecola was pregnant by her father. Claudia feels so badly for Pecola that she decides not to sell the marigold seeds she was planning to sell for money for a bicycle. Instead, she and Frieda
bury the seeds and say that if the marigolds bloom, then everything would be fine. And if not, then things would be bad.

Pecola is left to talk to her only friend, an imaginary friend about the new blue eyes that she thinks she now has. She is only concerned that they are the bluest eyes in the world. She has driven herself into a state of madness over these blue eyes, and she is all alone. Claudia says that she saw Pecola after the baby was born and then died. Pecola walks up and down the street flapping her arms, as if she was a bird that could not fly. Pauline still works for white folks, Sammy ran away, and Cholly died in a workhouse. Claudia finally says that the marigolds did not bloom because some soil is just not meant for certain flowers.
2.3. Analysis of *The Bluest Eye*

2.3.1. Feminist Analysis according to Race, Gender and Class

Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* was written during a period of an emerging Black aesthetic, the cultural arm of the Black military movement. The novel is an incisive probe into the complex dynamics of Black self-hatred. Morrison examines how aesthetic standards derived from White culture can be detrimental to the Black people.

The opening lines of the novel imply the keeping of a dirty little secret, not just of personal aesthetics, but also of race, gender and class, which prevailing the end of the Civil Rights movement. It covers the African-American experience in the mid-nineteenth century, where individuals lived in less fear but still felt the effects of social marginalization.

The novel concerns with the painful acts engaged in by and perpetrated against its Black characters, which are forced to measure themselves in terms of Western standards of beauty. This is particularly true of the black girls and women in the novel. The now-adult Claudia MacTeer tells the story of Pecola Breedlove's destruction in a retrospective narration that recollects their childhoods. This woman as
the storyteller and the rememberer shares what she has seen from her Black woman’s space along the periphery of the society. Her language is distinctly female, but also relies upon the performance aspects of the African-American oral tradition, the music of Gospels and the blues, and the blurring and interplay between poetry and prose.

The textual structure of *The Bluest Eye* and the construction of its characters support the woman's unique understanding and use of alternative communicative devices. Just as the novel is an extended blues lyric itself, it also tells the life of the blues lived by its women characters. Claudia's mother, Mrs. MacTear, periodically stops talking traditional language and moves into singing the blues as she works in the kitchen. She merges prose with poetry. The hard, desperate lives of the three prostitutes, China, Poland and Miss Marie are also summed up in their singing of the blues as they blur the hard lines of male language. In addition to representing the racial struggles of these characters, woman's singing also addresses gender oppression and class oppression in *The Bluest Eye*.

Mrs. MacTear is presented as a poor, struggling Black wife and mother trying to instil a sense of pride in her daughters while pursuing the American Dream. She does not realize that by reinforcing Western ideals of beauty through the white baby dolls she gives her daughters
Claudia and Frieda at Christmas, she is compromising their ability to recognize their self-worth. Morrison demonstrates Claudia's recognition of the racially selective nature of the American Dream when she depicts Claudia decapitating the white dolls and rejecting the image of Shirley Temple that everyone else, including her sister Frieda and Pecola, adores.

Pecola's experience inside the walls of the ugly storefront represents a microcosm of the violence and oppression she witnesses and experiences in the larger world. Cholly and Pauline Breedlove routinely enact for the children not scenes of love but fierce physical and verbal battles stemming from their life frustrations. Pauline rejects her own family in favour of her White employer's home and children. She is a typical mammy figure in the novel. After Cholly sets fire to their storefront home, Pecola temporarily escapes the brutal epithets that her parents inflict upon each other and their children when she moves in with the MacTeer family. Pecola drinks several quarters of milk from their home just to use their Shirley Temple mug and gaze at young Temple's blue eyes which she very much yearns for herself. However, even Mrs. MacTear, ostensibly more motherly than Pauline, does not fail to voice, quite loudly, her discontent with the “case” who burdens the family budget by drinking so much milk. Thus, even when Pecola resides with
the supposedly more nurturing MacTeer family, she is in the environment that deprives her of milk, synonymous with maternal nourishment.

The three prostitutes pretend to be victorious in their battle to defeat efforts to minimize them as Black women by acting hard, by focusing on their material gains and by laughing at the men, they purport to control with their sexuality. However, without uttering words in the traditional way, they demonstrate through sighs and song their failure and their regret at having to sacrifice their individual selves in order to find a place in the White man's world. These prostitutes are the outsiders in the community due to their profession but they befriend Pecola and their apartment is a haven of sorts for her. They accept her for who she is and they are the only people who make her feel beautiful and loved. They never ascend to middle-class status as a result of their associations with many of the well-to-do men of Lorain, Ohio.

The ultimate victim of the novel, Pecola, is totally lacking in self-esteem. She cannot claim power from man's language because of her femaleness. She watches and admires the bravado of the prostitutes, but finds herself unable to emulate them because of her poverty. She cannot inspire the love that the lemon- yellow Maureen Paul receives and that she so desperately wants because of her Blackness. She can never be the
blonde-hair, blue-eyed ‘Mary Jane’ whose face stares at her from the label of the candy she devours.

Pecola's father, Cholly Breedlove, is used to depict the minimization of women when a flash-light in the hand of a White man figuratively rapes him. This emasculation, with its accompanying destruction of Cholly's ability to love, is instrumental in his rape of Pecola. Innocent, passive, rejected by the White standards of society and starving for love, Pecola is the perfect sacrifice. She cannot resist this victimization because every Western ideological concept tells her that she does not have the right to resist, rather it tells her that she, as a Black and as a woman, is nobody. Her insanity brings her partial freedom because through it, she acquires ‘the blue eyes’ that make her acceptable to a society that places such importance and admiration on this endowment.

One of Morrison's many important contributions to African American literary history is her groundbreaking treatment of sex and sexuality. She was one of the first Black American writers to explore and depict sexuality's full spectrum of possibility, its capacity to express love, hate, joy, sadness, compassion, lust and even longing for spiritual transcendence. For her, sex is as much a part of life, as birth and death. She treats it in the same way that she approaches all aspects of human
relationship without sentiment or censure. Her treatment of sexuality locates her in the larger historical context of Black American history.

The novel details the psychological disintegration of Pecola after she is raped by her father. Morrison deliberately broke the taboo of speaking openly about such a dark issue, as she insisted on producing fiction that described every aspect of the Black community including good and bad experiences. The author presents rape in the novel as symptomatic of American race relations. Pecola's rape is partly the result of her father, Cholly, having been raped by White men when he was a teenager. These men surprise Cholly while he is having sex with a girl in the woods and then force him at gunpoint to continue the act. Morrison tells us that Cholly hated the girl who was his sexual partner because she had witnessed his failure and that he later transfer this shame and hatred to Pecola, another girl whom he can not protect from the destructive forces of a racist American society.

The Black characters in the novel appear to act violently towards other Blacks. The self-proclaimed spiritualist and psychic, Micah Elihue Whitcomb, alias Soaphead Church, ministers to the people through false promises and services his own needs by molesting little girls. He considers both his ministry and molestations as ordained by God and that they are expressions of God's love through him. Pecola is obsessed by the
idea that only people with blue eyes can ever be truly beautiful. She is misled by Soaphead Church when she comes to him with the request for blue eyes. As a result she metaphorically blinds herself in an attempt to conform to this idea. Despite his earlier crimes against the community and his inability to see its ugliness, he genuinely empathizes with Pecola. He knows that she is in search of the thing that all the people he meets, including himself, desire: she wants to be loved. His perversions illuminate the perversions of a world driven by race as a determinant of love. We find his endeavours loathsome. He himself is a product of inbreeding and incest. Like everyone else, he abuses Pecola's need and uses her desperation to help alleviate a nuisance in his own life.

Pecola's rape by her father, the death of her child whom she conceived as a result of the rape, compounded with Soaphead's trickery and the community's abuse, causes Pecola to spiral into madness. In her madness, Soaphead leaves her with the belief that she has blue eyes. In his own madness, he chastises God in a letter for not bestowing upon Pecola the one thing she desires. He assigns a level of greatness to his own person in his ability to give her and other little girls, the love that they want, the love that he himself is denied. Ultimately, he becomes not just a critique of the world but a critique of how the world justifies who and what it loves.
In explaining Pecola's descent to insanity, Morrison explains why such tragedies occur. In her desire for blue eyes that she associates with beauty and acceptance, Pecola sets herself up for disappointment. As she details this loss, Morrison exposes how the culture in which Pecola lives creates the false standards of beauty she strives for. She also exposes how these standards lead her to ultimate doom. The Black's feeling of inferiority is the result of the values of America's White patriarchal system, which treats and perceives Blacks as objects of contempt. Pecola embraces this value system along with the consequent sense of inferiority that stems from dominant racial stereotypes and Whites' projection of racist shame.

There is no figure in *The Bluest Eye* who ascends from darkness and emerges into the light, which finds enlightenment and chooses it over the shadow. In Pauline Breedlove and the sugar-brown mobile girls, we find the unwillingness to step outside of the cave, when they are given the opportunity, an unwillingness driven by fear and a need to exist within a false, albeit familiar construct because it is comfortable and safe rather than emerge from the cave and face the painful light of the sun. Most of the characters in the novel are thus internally colonised. Through the character of Pecola, Morrison investigates how a vulnerable child internalizes and embraces damaging racial stereotypes with the potential
to destroy her. Pecola's displacement leaves her with no place to go or to grow. Just as the marigolds die because Claudia plants them too deep, Pecola cannot blossom because she finds herself planted in non-nurturing soil.

The Black community in *The Bluest Eye* is envisaged as existing like a cell within the larger white body of America, sustained by traditional strengths and values but being weakened by divisions within it. These divisions are the result of a complicated process of Black people's adjustment and accommodation to white norms. In the novel, whiteness appears not as a racial category but as the norm against which all other races are measured. Whiteness appears here as an ideal rather than a race.

The story does not end with Pecola's destructions. However, Morrison salvages the Black woman by designating Claudia as the voice of survival. It is the story coming from Claudia that redeems the Black woman in the end.

We are led to conclude that the narrator, Claudia MacTeer and her sister Frieda probably dodged this pervasion by directing an inordinate malice at their Shirley Temple dolls. Although they were born in a family that rough, they did know how to breed love unlike the Breedloves who are unable to do so, in contradiction to the meaning of their name. Claudia tries to understand her own involvement in Pecola's tragedy as
the narrative also seeks to explain why a father in the ironically named Breedlove family should impregnate his own daughter.

Claudia conceives of the world in terms of race alone when she reconstructs white dolls. Eventually, she learns to have the regard for those dolls that her parents have. She understands the limitations of her perspective. She recognizes that due to her femaleness and economic status, she is subject to the same social forces moulding others. Her experience demonstrates that in a land where the bluest eye holds hegemony, none of the dispossessed escapes its gaze.

The novel inscribes identification in terms of fantasy while reversing the movement from Black to White and exposing both the cultural construction of racial difference and the harrowing effects to which it gives rise. In these ways, identification whether from Black to White or White to Black-emerges as a complex, highly charged and multi-faceted phenomenon, linking the violent histories of slavery, colonialism and racial oppression by which they are traversed. They are sights of political struggle and friction’, the crossings of identification and constitute spaces in others where psychic and historic realities, the subjective and the ideological, dramatically collide. Thus, her novels have created space for Black and feminist texts, changing the overwhelming male makeup of the African-American literary canon.
2.3.2. Analysis of Marriage and Gender Relations in the Novel

The institution of marriage as a social phenomenon does not offer any solution to the complexities of man-woman relationships in the novels of Toni Morrison. Morrison focuses on the inadequacies between the couples who have acceded to the wedlock and those who attempt it. She explores marital relationships in *The Bluest Eye* and her other novels.

Toni Morrison explores both the male and female psyche to detect the problematics of gender relations. To understand the incompatibility of the couples, Morrison feels it is necessary to understand the circumstances, which shape the masculinity as well as femininity of the individuals. She believes that in the contemporary context, one’s masculinity/femininity also becomes sexuality rather than just that because that is perceived as weak. Masculinity and femininity have functional roles to constitute a sexual bond, which can provide the creative impetus for a sense of community.

Cholly Breedlove is abandoned by his parents in his infancy. He is born free and he is dangerously free. Without any sustaining values of family life, he refuses the difficult challenge of constructing a coherent self. He constantly severs ties with others, operating randomly in contradiction to community imperatives. In ‘Blues lyrics’, escape is often
represented as a masculine option. Cholly’s mode of existence echoes Baldwin’s refrain: “Now when a woman gets the blues, Lord, she hangs her head and cries. But when a man gets the blues, Lord, he grabs a train and rides”. The narrator claims that pieces of Cholly’s life could be organized only in the head of a musician. But, he should know how to connect the heart of a red watermelon to the asafetida bag, to the fists of money, to the lemonade in a Mason jar, to a man called blue. The word ‘free’ acts as a refrain in the description of Cholly and ironically echoes the tyranny of the past which he contains within him.

The narrative produces an uneven rhythm that shifts the sentences off the balance to effect syncopation. The jazzy note depicting his life reverberates with semiotic meanings through which the history of the Black race seeps in, spilling over the narrative until it shocks the reader with Cholly’s final act of rape of his own daughter. The act of violence harks the reader’s mind back to Cholly’s abortive experiences in his adolescence. It recalls Cholly’s feelings on listening to his aunt’s friends gossiping.

While slavery has estranged men from their women and killed them, the scars are inflicted on the next generation men and women. They have to survive with the memory of their agonizing past. The redemptive power lies in the hands of these powerful women who can
transform a male into an infant or a man. When a white man doubts a Black man’s masculinity, the Black mother is able to restore it. Individual freedom, Cholly’s freedom is to be analyzed in this perspective. His reckless ways of life echo his underlying urge to free himself from his ‘blackness’, from his ‘history’ and from his own self.

*The Bluest Eye* is not only a story of a girl yearning for a pair of blue eyes; it is a story of mourning for “waste and beauty”. Cholly’s sexuality is warped not only by historical imagination, which is signified in his dreams, but also by an episode, which is fundamental in the shaping of his masculinity.

After his aunt’s funeral, which also offers him a momentary release from his burden of history, he goes with his cousin and two girls to a wild vineyard. The narrative anticipates the thrill and sensual pleasure of Cholly’s first sexual experience in the description of unripe muscadines with their promise of sweetness that was yet to unfold. The boys improvise a game where they pelt their companion with unripe grapes. The promise of an initiation into sexual pleasure is imaged in the dark juice staining the white dress of Cholly’s partner, Darlene. Cholly finds that their bodies began to make sense to him. But, this sexual initiation is interrupted by the appearance of two White men who establish their own dominance by commanding the young boy to perform. The intervention
of the two onlookers, who project onto the young couple their obsessive fantasies about black sexuality, emasculates the boy. While it fractures the relationship between the young lovers, it also complicates the boy’s sexuality. Unable to perform as a man, either in lovemaking or in defending Darlene, Cholly projects the hatred and violence towards the hunters, on to the girl who bore witness to hide failure, his importance. The one whom he had not been able to project, to spare, to cover from the round glow of flashlight. The pressure from outside that divided the youthful Cholly from his first partner prefigures the outcome of his marriage. In fact, Cholly’s first meeting with Pauline anticipates the fractured relationship. The intimations of the disaster are encoded in the very terms Pauline expresses her desire for him. Her staining of her hips with berries after a funeral connects the episode with Darlene’s stained white dress and the abortive sexual experience.

Prior to meeting Cholly, Pauline’s sexuality is defined only through vague fantasies of rescue and redemption. She hoped for a lover who hovered somewhere between Christ and a fairy tale prince. Her sexual response to Cholly is very different from these vague abstractions. It is expressed through the deep purple of berries that stained through her dress, the yellow of the lemonade that her mother made to greet her father’s return from the greenfields, and the green of the June bags from
down home. Such sensuous and lyrical chiaroscuro of colours which echo deep personal and erotic resonances within her, represent a promise of a ‘wholeness’ or unity which move beyond the repressive binary oppositions of Black/White or Male/Female. The semiotic in the language which describes her inner self, holds within it the key to the solvent of a disruptive community with broken relationships. Yet, the marriage fails. The Symbolic stases enforced on Cholly by the fact of his ‘Blackness’ maims him psychically. He becomes a victim of the history of slavery, which denied him a home and his sense of dignity.

Like an extracted tooth, Cholly’s shame exists as a bad memory and as an abiding deficiency. This metaphor is mirrored in Pauline’s losing her front tooth later on, which puts an end to her delusive pursuit of feminine beauty when her marriage is failing. The religion that had saturated her earliest erotic fantasies, sanctions her martyrdom so she bears her husband like a crown of thorns and her children like a Cross. Pauline survives through repression, amnesia and the acceptance of culturally sanctioned substitutes for the more authentic experience of sexual love. Her physical deformity or her lameness acts as a signification where hers and Cholly’s inadequacies are configured. The conviction of their own insufficiency leads them to transfer their desire to the love of possessions; clothes and make up for Pauline and money for
Cholly. When poverty leads Cholly to utter despair, he returns home to find his daughter in the kitchen, in her pathetic mournful pose. Her pain infuriates him and creates a sense of rage as he discovers her torment to be his own. Fatherly affection gets distorted and he can express the convulsions of emotion by inflicting violence on her. As Toni Morrison explains in her interview with Jane Bakerman:

He might love her in the worst of all possible ways because he cannot do this and he cannot do that. He cannot do it normally, healthily and so on. Therefore, it might end up this way (in the rape). I want, here, to talk about how painful it is and what the painful consequences are of distortion, of love that is not fructified, is held in, and not expressed. (P.41)
2.3.3. Analysis of Black Female Characters in the Novel

In Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*, three whores live above the Breedloves’ storefront apartment. These three characters simply and generally are signified by their bodies and their names: Poland, China, the Maginot Line. With these characters, Morrison literalizes the whole novel and shows African-American experiences, particularly those of its women. She depicts how the culture of black people is suppressed by a seemingly hegemonic white culture.

In *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison’s project is to rewrite the specific histories of the black Americans whose positive images and stories have been destroyed by white culture. She does this formally by shifting the novel’s perspective and point of view, a narrative tactic that enables her, is the process, to represent black female subjectivity as a layered, shifting and complex reality.

The rejection of the specific culture and histories of African-Americans and black women especially is figured in *The Bluest Eye*. It is primarily a consequence or sideline to the more general annihilation of popular forms and images by an ever more all-pervasive and insidious mass culture industry. This industry increasingly rejects the representation of any image not premised on consumption or the
production of normative values conducive to it. These values are often rigidly tied to gender and are race-specific to the extent that racial and ethnic differences are not allowed to be represented. One lesson from history, as Susan Willis (1987) repeats several times, is that most of social contradictions in mass culture appear to us as if they had been resolved.

Despite of capitalism’s helpful influence we might include those oppositions continuing along the axes of economic privilege and racial difference. It is claimed that economic, racial and ethnic difference is erased and replaced by equal ability to consume, even though what is consumed is more or less a competing version of the same white image.

There is evidence of the presence and influence of this process of erasure and replacement throughout *The Bluest Eye*. For example, the grade school reader that prefaces the text was, and in many places still is, a very common, mass-produced presence in schools across the country. Its widespread use made learning the pleasures of Dick and Jane have commoditized life dangerously, synonymous with learning itself. Its placement first in the novel makes it the pretext for what is presented after: As the seeming given of contemporary life, it stands as the only visible model for happiness and thus implicitly accuses those whose lives do not match up. In 1941, and no less so today, this would include a lot
of people. Even so, white lower-class children can at least more easily imagine themselves posited within the story’s realm of possibility. For black children this possibility might require a double reversal or negation. For example, where the poor white child is encouraged to forget the particulars of her present life and look forward to a future of prosperity, the result of forty years in Lorain’s steel mills, a black child like Pecola must, in addition, see herself, in a process repeated throughout *The Bluest Eye*, in the body of a white little girl. In other words, she must not see herself at all. The effort required to do this and the damaging results of it are illustrated typographically in the repetition of the Dick-and-Jane story first without punctuality or capitalization, and then without punctuation, capitalization, or spacing.

Perhaps one function of the mass deployment of these stories was in the fact to raise hopes for a better future in order to counteract the oppressiveness of the present and, in the process, to delimit the chance of dissatisfaction or unrest and encourage unquestioning labour at the same time. If so, it also tempts, as these tactics always do, the opposite conclusion: The comparison of their lives to Dick and Jane’s seemingly idyllic ones will breed, among those unaccounted for in mass culture’s representations, resentment and class consciousness instead. That this is not the result for most of the characters in *The Bluest Eye*, as it is not for
most people in general bespeaks the extent to which mass culture has made the process of self-denial a pleasurable experience. Indeed, as I hope to show later, this process is explicitly sexual in *The Bluest Eye* and offers, particularly for women, the only occasion for sexual pleasure in the novel.

It can be concluded from above that interaction with mass culture is not represented therein. This interaction especially for an African-American, requires abdication of self or the ability to see oneself in the body of another. The novel’s most obvious and pervasive instance of this is in the seemingly endless reproduction of images of feminine beauty in everyday objects and consumer goods. For example, white baby dolls with their inhumanly hard bodies and uncanny blue eyes, Shirley Temple cups, Mary Jane Candies, even the clothes of “dream child” Maureen Peal which are stylish precisely because they suggest Shirley Temple cuteness and because Claudia and Frieda recognize them as such. But Claudia and her sister can recognize the Thing that made Maureen beautiful and not them only in terms of its effects on other people. Despite knowing that they are nicer, brighter, they cannot ignore how the honey voices of parents and aunts, the obedience in the eyes of their peers, the slippery light in the eyes of their teachers all pour out to the Maureen Peals of the world and not to them. From the response of other
people to girls like Maureen and others for whom Shirley Temple is the model the sisters learn the fact of their own lack, variously identified as ugliness or “unworthiness,” if not the essence of it.

As far as female figure is concerned, Claudia’s body has yet to be completely socialized in the process Frigga Haug (1987) calls “female sexualization.” By this, Haug means both the production of feminity through the complete performance of feminine skills including how to hold, move, and dress the body and the reproduction of subordination within and on women’s bodies as evidenced in the gradual sexualization of various body parts for example hair or legs, when girls mature. This process – inevitably modified, as *The Bluest Eye* indicates, by both race and class-results in bodies that are always the site of multiple discourses circling around and ultimately comprising what we call “femininity” or, as it is generally construed, the sexual. Claudia’s confusion about the source of her failure to arouse honey voices and slippery light indicates that, though she is catching on quickly. She has yet to experience the female sexualisation as Haug describes, Claudia wants to know what it feels like to have breasts worth touching and to have them touched. Instead, she asks questions about her sister’s near molestation.

Claudia’s question shows her innocence and it equals the delight with which Claudia revels in her own body’s myriad substances and
smells. While women like Geraldine are quick to dispatch with funk wherever it crusts, Claudia is fascinated with her own body. She is captivated by the menstrual blood her sister hurries to wash away. She studies her own vomit, admires the way it clings to its own mass, refusing to break up and be removed. She hates the dreadful and humiliating absence of dirt and the irritable, unimaginative cleanliness that accompanies it. She remembers the year recounted in the novel as a time when she and Frieda were still in love with themselves and felt comfortable in their skins, enjoyed the news that their senses released to them, admired their dirt, cultivated their scars, and could not comprehend this unworthiness that distinguishes them from Maureen and is already overwhelming Pecola.

Claudia attributes this ease with her body to her youth and admits that she eventually stops resisting to the pleasures of dominant discourse and its definitions of “femininity.”

_The Bluest Eye_ suggests that the sexualization of Claudia’s body (changes both in it and in how she experiences it) and the simultaneous transformation of her psyche is learned and achieved through commodities like the Shirley Temple cups that proscribe appearance and behaviour in accordance with the images they project. Claudia learns to love Shirley Temple when she learns to identify herself as Shirley
Temple, as a complete person-limited as that is for women in our culture to some variation of the sexual.

Femininity and the sexuality can be produced and reproduced as commodities, as Pecola’s belief that she can simply acquire blue eyes indicates. The mass dissemination of these images of femininity in American society was and is among the primary mechanisms by which women are socialized and sexualized in this country. It is no accident that Morrison links many of these images of properly sexualized white women to the medium of film which, in 1941, was increasingly enabled technologically to represent them and, because of the growth of the Hollywood film industry, more likely to limit the production of alternate images.

The effect of faces like Ginger Rogers, Gretta Garbo, Jean Harlow, and, again, Shirley Temple is to reintroduce and exaggerate; as it does for Pauline Breedlove, the most destructive ideas in the history of human thought. After waiting out two pregnancies in the dark shadows of the silver screen, Pauline was never able again to look at a face and not assign it some category in the scale of absolute beauty which she had absorbed in full from the movies. Among these faces to which she can’t help but assign a pre-determined value is her own, ironically made less
acceptable by her Jean Harlow hairstyle because of the rotten tooth that contradicts it.

Despite the hope implicit in naming Pauline after a fair character in a movie itself called Imitation of Life (1934) based on Fannie Hurst’s (1933) novel; Pecola, too, is, according to her mother and apparently everyone else, “ugly”. The consequences of this estimation, repeated as it is continually throughout Pecola’s life, are, of course, obvious: When others – Mr. Yacolowski, her teacher, etc. – cannot or will not see her, then she ceases to be seen at all or see herself in the iconographic image she can attain only in madness.

Fear of the industry is responsible for generating and continuing these repeated, static, and unattainable images. It is not just that, in the process of appropriating standards of beauty and femininity for white women. It does not allow alternate images and standards to coincide – though such is certainly horrible but, that in so doing it also co-opts and transforms a history of communal and familial relationships it cannot otherwise accommodate. This co-option was facilitated by the migration of African-Americans in the first half of last century and the end of the last to Northern, usually industrial, towns like Lorain, a process that accelerated the separation of families and friends as it removed them farther from whatever common culture existed in the rural South. In the
absence of a network of community members ready to step in – as Aunt Jimmy’s family and friends do – and make it their business to look after each other, blacks up north who feel isolated from their past and alienated in their present are more likely to look elsewhere for self-affirming context.

As Pauline Breedlove’s history bears out, the culture industry is always quick to provide its notion of what this context should be and thus assure the dependence necessary for its own continued existence, even, indeed especially, at the expense of alternate cultural forms. Although she had few fond memories of her childhood, it is her early married life in Lorain that Pauline remembers as the “lonesomest time of my life”. She is simply not prepared for the kinds of changes wrought by her transplantation in the north.

From this seemingly fragmented and hostile community, Pauline turns to day-jobs in the homes of nervous, pretentious people and to the movies. Her attachment to the former is due in part to the fact that at the Fishers she can exercise the artistic sensibility that otherwise cannot find expression. As a child in Alabama and especially Kentucky, Pauline linked, most of all, to arrange things. To line things up in rows – jars on shelves at canning, peach pits on the step, sticks, stones, leaves. But it is not until her job at the Fishers that Pauline can again “arrange things,
clean things, line things up in neat rows. At the Fisher’s, she found beauty, order, cleanliness, and praise. It was her pleasure to stand in her kitchen at the end of a day and survey her handiwork.

The other place she finds power, praise, and luxury is, of course, the movies, and unfortunately, it is to them that Pauline turns for help and validation rather that the few black women she has met in Lorain who, with their goading glances and privates’ snickers, were merely amused by her and her loneliness. It is at the movies that Pauline learns to equate physical beauty and virtue, where she stripped her mind, bound it, and collected self-contempt by the heap. As she watches white men taking such good care of their women, and they all dressed up in big clean houses, Pauline finds it increasingly difficult to return to her own life and, as a result, more and more neglected her house, her children, her man. Like the Dick-and-Jane story, Pauline’s movies continuously present her with a life, again presumably ideal, which she does not now have and which she has little, if any, chance of ever enjoying in any capacity other than that of the ideal servant. In the absence of alternate images which might validate and endorse a kind of virtue and not tied to physical beauty, ones offering competing definitions of beauty itself. It is in the absence of a network of family and friends, especially women friends, whose own lives would provide a differing model and the
context in which to erect her own. Pauline stops resisting to the simple pleasure of black-and-white images projected through a ray of light and curtailing freedom in every way.

Images projected on the screen and mass-produced items curtail freedom in other, less obvious and brutal ways as well, although the effects can be due as much to what is not seen or experienced as to what is. Claudia, for example, fosters a brutal hatred for her white baby dolls not just because they don’t look like her but because the gift of them is supposed to replace and somehow improve upon what she would really prefer for Christmas. The experience of sitting on the law stool in Big Mama’s kitchen with her lap full of lilacs and listening to Big Papa play his violin for her alone. Instead of family interaction – and the touching, playing, and ritual storytelling that might accompany it – Claudia is supposed to pretend to be the mother of this thing dressed in starched gauze or lace and sporting a bone-cold head. Similarly, Claudia hates Shirley Temple well enough because her socks stay up, but what really gets her is the presence in the films of Bojangles. This is the outrage and that is the rewriting of either a historical moment (the Civil War) or interpersonal relationship (an orphaned child and benevolent older friend) with her part edited or bleached out. Those few images of African-American life afforded space on the big screen are put there not
as evidence or proof of the experience itself, but as a tactic for further erasure, denial, or revisionism of just that experience. Instead of the ideologically opportune sight of an older black man soft-shoeing it and chuckling harmlessly, aimlessly, with a little white girl, the world should be seeing her, Claudia, socks around her ankles, enjoying, sharing, giving a lovely dance thing with her friend, uncle, daddy Bojangles.

However, Morrison signals the effects of these oversights-of supplanting or having supplanted both one's appearance and one's history and culture-repeatedly in *The Bluest Eye* in details of sexuality, especially women's but, as the life-stories of Cholly and Soaphead indicate, not exclusively so. Mr. Henry, for example, when first moving into the MacTeers' home, greets Claudia and Frieda. Thus, reducing them to type in a kind of objectification that will make it easier for him later to molest Frieda. He follows this greeting with a gift of money, a gesture repeated later when he wants them out of the house so he can entertain two of the more colourful members of his Bible class, China and the Maginot Line. The exchange of money and the objectification of women as types converge here in such a way as to align his interaction with the two women and with Frieda and Claudia under the heading of prostitution.
The incident with Mr. Henry suggests one way the mass circulation of images of femininity negatively affects women in the area of sexuality by negatively affecting the attitudes and thus behaviour of the people with whom they interact. *The Bluest Eye*, however, documents further the effect of those images on women themselves on the level of the body and in terms of how they understand and experience their own sexuality. For Pauline, for example, sexual pleasure depends entirely on the ability to feel a power that comes from a sense of herself as desirable.

Unfortunately, Pauline defines strength, beauty and youth solely in the terms she's learned from film; thus, as the possibility of ever attaining them is foreclosed, so too is sexual pleasure. Confident that her maker will take care of her, Pauline reassures herself that it does not make any difference about this old earth, thus hoping to cash in on one dream in exchange for relinquishing another.

Sexual pleasure is no longer even a consideration for Geraldine and the other “sugar-brown girls” who have lost the dreadful funkiness of passion or the wide range of human emotions almost as a consequence of moving north and away from family and towns like Mobile, Aiken, and Nagadoches. Geraldine's desire to eschew inappropriate manifestations of black American culture by maintaining the line between coloured and
nigger and thus to effect a bland respectability is connected in her portrait with a body that can give itself only sparingly and partially.

Geraldine's concern is focused on her hair, part of her appearance, which, along with her fair skin, she can control and adapt most easily to standards of white beauty. One is reminded at this point of Pauline and her Jean Harlow hairstyle or China who, with a flick of the wrist, converts herself from one feminine type to another: One minute she has the surprised eyebrows and cupid-bow mouth of a starlet, the next the Oriental eyebrows and evilly slashed mouth of a femme fatale. Pecola, however, whose ugliness came from conviction, has no such physical qualities capable of altering and thus redeeming what she and her family perceive as her relentlessly and ugly appearance. Pecola, in fact, is all sign like to see her body is to know already everything about her or at least everything her culture deems important about her.

The depiction of her sexuality is thus correspondingly total: Pecola gets off eating candy—nothing new here, except that for her, orgasm takes the form of a curious transubstantiation and, ultimately, transformation. Eating candy for Pecola is somehow to eat the eyes, eat Mary Jane, love Mary Jane and be Mary Jane. Unlike Claudia who cannot yet, Pecola not only can, but, from this denial of self and substitution of the store-bought image, actually gets in the process nine lovely orgasms with Mary Jane.
Whatever pleasurable resources Pecola's own body may harbour are available to her now, and this at the early age of eleven, only to the extent that, like her mother, she can experience them as the alienated effects of another woman's body.

Most of the time, however, she cannot do this and, rather than reconcile herself, as her mother has, to the prospect of greater glory and bigger rainbows in the next world, Pecola opts instead to make a life of her own erasure and annihilation. As her parents and brother fight in the next room, she prays to God to make her disappear and then performs the meditation to do so.

The inability to make her eyes go away prompts Pecola's final disappearing act. The ugliness of her entire body is dissolved in and absolved by the blue eyes only she and her new friend can see. Her breakdown at the end of the novel is the last in the sexiest of instances in which boundaries marking the space between inside and outside, self and other, sense and nonsense are broken, removed, or simply no longer perform their tasks. As the novel's prefatory Dick-and-Jane story turns from order to chaos with the gradual removal of punctuation and spacing, so too does the erasure of Pecola's body and sexuality lead to her madness and isolation.
It seems that it is at this point that we can begin to make sense of Morrison's notion of disinterested violence which she introduces first with Claudia and elaborates upon in her depiction of the three prostitutes, Cholly, and, by implication, the black community in Lorain, Ohio. After systematically destroyed her baby dolls in order to discover the dearness, to find the beauty, the desirability that had escaped her and then, finding this tactic unproductive, transferring the same impulses to little white girl's Claudia learned how repulsive this disinterested violence was, that it was repulsive because it was disinterested. Michael Awkward argues that what Claudia feels is repulsive here is her own failure to accept without question the standards of white America, a reading which, while it has a lot of general application in the novel, seems to misdirect the focus of this passage. Claudia's self-incrimination is, it seems to me, more in response to her failure to feel enough for her white victims, to have the interest that would make her actions meaningful. Willis claims that Claudia's realization that violence against whites runs the risk of being disinterested suggests that white people are little more than abstractions that all are deified subjects.

What Claudia realizes is that her violence cannot help but be disinterested, since even the little girls she thinks she wants to dismember are finally only representatives to her of the system she resents and wants
to dismantle. Disinterestedness, then, is the result of not seeing individual people and how their actions combine in ways affecting you; disinterested violence, the prelude to adjustment without improvement, is possible precisely when the specificity of bodies, places, and histories is erased, as it is by commodity culture and those living under its aegis.

Though charming in their own way, China, Poland, and the Maginot Line are also condemned in *The Bluest Eye* for just this kind of refusal to take into account difference and history.

Neither their hatred for men nor the “mechanical” violence it spawns and nor Marie’s love for Pecola, however, has much effect on either their own standing in the community or Pecola's life. Any power moves they think they are making by indiscriminately hating all men are probably negated by the fact that they do not take into account differences in race and class, factors supremely affecting their position with men, especially in their profession. Their kindness to Pecola is similarly disinterested in that, by failing to see her and her situation clearly. In the words of Michele Wallace (1987), these three women failed to understand victimization or the fact that she was in danger.

This failure is finally the community’s as a whole, a fact Morrison repeatedly suggests by illustrating the extent to which as a group it too has absorbed in full dominant standards of value and beauty with little or
no inspection of or reflection on the effects to itself or to its individual members. In her conversation with friends, Mrs. MacTeer jokes about Aunt Julia who is still trotting up and down Sixteenth Street talking to herself. The significance of this remark is not apparent until the depiction of Pecola's breakdown is complete, and we are presented with a similar image of Pecola walking up and down, up and down, her head jerking to the beat of a drummer so distant only she could hear. Lorain sees Aunt Julia as an old hag floating by in that bonnet whom the County will not take and whom the sight of will scare the living shit out of you. One of the women attributes Aunt Julia’s fate to senility, but the designation still trotting implies she has been out there a while.

Their inability or refusal to make sense of her actions, to put them in context, foreshadows their eventual scapegoating of Pecola and suggests that the town has an undiagnosed and unexamined history of producing women like Pecola, that her experience—and the extremity of it—is not an isolated instance.

Morrison characterizes Cholly’s disinterestedness as the condition of being dangerously free. Free to feel whatever he felt—fear, guilt, shame, love, grief, pity. Free to be tender or violent. Her depiction of him laces the source of the freedom to his loss of mother, father, community, and
home and to the feeling that the history of people and events extends as far as his interest in them.

An explicit formal project of *The Bluest Eye* is to rewrite the specific stories, histories, and bodies of African-Americans which are quickly being made invisible in commodity culture and which, if written, will make disinterestedness and its unproductive or damaging results impossible. Morrison acknowledges this project in so many words when she says she wrote *The Bluest Eye* because she wanted to read the story it would tell. The novel's shifting focus and point of view, its willingness to let different people speak and not to reconcile contradictory explanations and claims where they arise is indicative of Morrison's preference for telling all sides of Pecola’s story rather the hammering home one of them. It would be to miss the point, then, to read *The Bluest Eye* looking to assign blame. One of the great virtues of the book is its capacity to empathize and to allow its readers to empathize - something not possible in the absence of history and context-with all of its characters, perhaps especially those who seem most irredeemable: Cholly, Soaphead Church, Pauline.

Finally, though, since *The Bluest Eye* and this project of representing African-American focuses most specifically on the histories and bodies of black women, the novel’s alternating perspective reproduces formally
their complicated subjectivity in particular. As she shifts from young girl to older woman to black man to omniscient narrator, Morrison seems to move her examination of Pecola's life back and forth from the axis of race to that of gender. This process allows her in turn to move through the story as both insider and outsider in what Mae Henderson (1989) calls a “contestorial dialogue” involving the hegemonic dominant and subdominant or [after Rachel Blau Du Plessis] ambiguously (non) hegemonic’ discourses. At one point Morrison writes as a black person among other black people speaking to a white audience, at others as a woman among womb speaking to men.

The movement between these positions allows Morrison to see the other, but also to see what the other cannot see, and to use this insight to enrich both our own and the other's understanding. Of course these categories can be separated only artificially since, as Valerie Smith (1989) notes that the meaning of blackness in this country shapes profoundly the experience of gender, just as the conditions of womanhood affect ineluctably the experience of race. By doing so here, however, Toni Morrison enables the reader to witness structurally the complexity of black female subjectivity as she writes it back into a culture whose social and economic mechanisms would otherwise try to write it out.
2.4. Conclusion

In chapter two, we analysed *The Bluest Eye* from feminist perspective and we realized that this novel is not only a story of a girl willing to have blue eyes; it is a story of beauty and ugliness.

From a feminist perspective, *The Bluest Eye* is a study of the various degrees of fulfilment women experience as women. Pauline is at one end of the spectrum. Other women characters are less obviously deprived, at least economically. Some are comfortable completely immersed in the motherhood and find peace in resignation to the limitations of their lives.

The novel inscribes identification in terms of fantasy while reversing the movement from Black to White and exposing both the cultural construction of racial difference and the harrowing effects to which it gives rise. In these ways, identification whether from Black to White or White to Black-emerges as a complex, highly charged and multi-faceted phenomenon, linking the violent histories of slavery, colonialism and racial oppression by which they are traversed. They are sights of political struggle and friction; the crossings of identification constitute spaces in others where psychic and historic realities, the subjective and the ideological, dramatically collide. Thus, her novels
have created space for Black and feminist texts, changing the overwhelming male makeup of the African-American literary canon.

The next chapter deals with feminist features in Toni Morrison’s second novel *Sula*. By analysing this novel, we will learn more about Toni Morrison’s style regarding feminism.