



# Racial Trauma and Microaggression in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*

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**Abstract**— Racial trauma is associated with the detrimental psychological impact of race-based discrimination having symptoms like those of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). With accounts of systemic racism across the globe, it is quite pertinent to discuss the distressing impact of living within a society of structural racism. Racial trauma involves exposure and re-exposure to race-based stress, which can be of different forms, microaggression being one of them. Microaggression shows how instances at a micro-level like insults and slights against black people, can have a detrimental effect on the mental health of those who experience it. *The Bluest Eye* (1970), the debut novel of Nobel prize-winning author Toni Morrison, is a tragic story of Pecola Breedlove, an African- American girl, longing for the socially constructed idea of beauty. A study of her character will highlight the effects of internalised racism based on the tragic events of discrimination and marginalisation in Pecola's life and her psychological response to it. This paper will focus on racial trauma and Chester E. Pierce's concept of microaggression to foreground the psychological distress that Pecola is grappling with, in the narrative and how apart from acts of violence, offensive and derogatory statements against the people of colour damages their psyche.

**Keywords**— Racism, trauma, microaggression.

## INTRODUCTION

In an article in the First Post on 'Black Americans' collective Racial Trauma' (April 18, 2021), Carlil Pittman, the co-founder of the Chicago-based youth organization GoodKids exposes us to the systemic racial trauma that plagues Black Americans. The article informs that there have been numerous instances of violence against black Americans at the hands of police. Pittman said that "We're constantly turning on the TV, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and seeing people that look like us who are getting murdered with no repercussions.... It's not normal to see someone get murdered by the click of a video on your phone, yet it has become the norm for our people, our Black and brown communities". Pittman cites many instances in addition to George Floyd Memorial Day

killing by a Minneapolis officer which sparked protests across the world. Such horrifying acts of violence against Black Americans are not new and it is extremely heart-wrenching to note the spiraling cases despite rigid policies and international laws against such discrimination. A study of racial trauma emerging from oppressive systems and racist practices helps us to understand the racist practices deeply embedded in the fabric of a nation.

Stories are the best way to understand the cultural fabric of a nation. Stories make us experience, rich emotions and feelings of joy, sorrow, hardships, and failures. Virginia Hamilton, the author of *The People Could Fly* said that "storytelling was the first opportunity for black folks to represent themselves as anything other than property" (qtd. in Collier). Toni Morrison is one such

storyteller who makes a reader feel all the feelings. A study of her narrative will help a reader make cognitive and emotional connections that shape our perspective of the world. It helps one to analyze the lived experiences of racism and resistance in various contexts. Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* expresses the frustration of an eleven-year-old Pecola Breedlove following the devastating emotional turmoil she undergoes being a black destitute girl. Harrowing incidents in her life leaves Pecola dejected, praying for her eyes to turn blue like the blue-eyed children of America to escape the drudgery of being born as a black girl. The focus of this paper is to foreground the elements of racial trauma and microaggression embedded in the discourse of the narrative. Eleven-year-old Pecola accepts herself as an ugly girl and fantasizes about having blue eyes to feel counted in the world of beautiful people. Throughout the novel she is imaginative and distressed, feeling isolated from the warmth and affection of her family and other people.

Racism is like a regular activity in the room that we pretend is not there. However, we currently perceive that it's humongous and we're adept at taking over it but it is far from the reality. Along with racism and sexism, trauma and microaggression situations leave a permanent scar on the psyche of girls and women subject to it. It is worth noting that microaggression is equally damaging to the psyche as racial trauma. On certain occasions, a small incident gets scorched into one's memory that affects one's survival and attitude towards life. These incidents concerning African-Americans are closely connected to the repetitions of exclusion and violence that lead to trauma. Such psychologically distressing situations resulting from microaggression echoes in the definition of Torino et al. in *Microaggression Theory* (2019) which explicitly mentions that "Microaggressions are derogatory slights or insults directed at a target person or persons who are members of an oppressed group. Microaggressions communicate bias and can be delivered implicitly or explicitly" (3). Microaggression theory shows how systemic discrimination based on sociocultural identity can traumatize a person.

Morrison's first book, *The Bluest Eye* (1970) is a novel towards the first step of transcription regarding a person treated unfairly who is an adolescent black girl obsessed by white standards of beauty and longs to have blue eyes. Pecola is described as hiding behind her looks to the point where she prays for being invisible by the age of eleven. Here, the standard of beauty concerns itself with the very existence of an unpleasant state of mental uneasiness pertaining to the personal mindsets of the characters especially the protagonist Pecola in the novel. Pecola's attempt to search for blue eyes is implicitly representing

the African-Americans' strong desire for acceptance in the white-centric world. Pecola wanted to fit into the standard concept of beauty as "all the world had agreed that a blue-eyed, yellow-haired, pink-skinned doll was what every girl child treasured." (20). Pecola's desire can be read from Judith Herman's perspective of trauma. In her book *Trauma and Recovery*, Herman writes, "the core experiences of psychological trauma are disempowerment and disconnection from others"; consequently, "traumatic events have primary effects not only on the psychological structures of the self but also on the systems of attachment and meaning that link individual and community" (1997, 133,51). It is important to note that in the process of marginalization, their psychological safety is threatened as it has a damaging effect on their psyche which can be noticed in the case of Pecola.

As Pecola internalizes racial prejudice, she crosses the border from sanity to insanity and starts hallucinating. As Morrison says, "She is not seen by herself until she hallucinates a self" (1990: 220). In the words of the narrator "A little black girl yearns for the blue eyes of a little white girl, and the horror at the heart of her yearning is exceeded only by the evil of fulfillment" (158). Pecola's yearning for blue eyes finally leaves her psychologically vulnerable and hallucinating. She enumerates that the way people notice her is more acceptable than what she notices about herself. She internalizes what white people think about her and then she thinks about it seriously and considers it ugly. She takes consolation in a time of loneliness while eating the candy, but more importantly, and symbolically she adopts the smiling picture of the blue-eyed, blond-haired little girl on the wrapper. Pecola's feeling as she eats the candy is a metaphorical representation of her psyche. The narrator's description of the act corroborates it:

Each pale yellow wrapper has a picture on it. A picture of little Mary Jane, for whom the candy is named. Smiling white face. Blond hair in gentle disarray, blue eyes looking at her out of a world of clean comfort. The eyes are petulant, mischievous. To Pecola they are simply pretty. 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. (50)

Pecola's wish for blue eyes is her way to escape the microaggression situations she faced again and again. As the narrator says, "It had occurred to Pecola some time ago that if her eyes, those eyes that held the pictures, and knew the sights—if those eyes of hers were different, that is to say, beautiful, she herself would be different...Pretty eyes. Pretty blue eyes. Big blue pretty eyes" (46). Pecola's

yearning represents the yearning of the black community to move from the marginalized space to the mainstream. The West Indian self-proclaimed misanthrope, Soaphead Church's empathy for Pecola and his wish for acceptance can be read in the narrative in his empathetic lines for Pecola when he says that "Here was an ugly little girl asking for beauty. A little black girl who wanted to rise up out of the pit of her blackness and see the world with blue eyes" (174). This is a clear expression of a tormented black self. For Pecola, Blue eyes seem the ultimate solution for her tormented self as she feels that "If there is somebody with bluer eyes than mine, then maybe there is somebody with the bluest eyes. The bluest eyes in the whole world. That's just too bad, isn't it? Please help me look. No" (202-03). This is considered a solution to come out of social exclusion, stigma, and discrimination. This is Pecola's way of enduring her traumatized self. The following lines in the narrative substantiate her desperate attempt for it:

Long hours she sat looking into the mirror, trying to discover the secret of the ugliness, the ugliness that made her ignored or despised at school, by teachers and classmates alike. . . . It had occurred to Pecola some time ago that if her eyes . . . were different, that is to say, beautiful, she herself would be different. . . . If she looked different, beautiful, maybe 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". (46)

It is pertinent to note that all attempts to deal with microaggressions lead to trauma. The term microaggression was originally coined by Chester Pierce in the 1970s (Pierce, 1970, 1974) to describe ways that Black people were put down by their White counterparts. Pierce (1974) stated "one must not look for the gross and obvious. The subtle cumulative mini-assault is the substance of today's racism" (qtd. in Solorzano 60). Sue and colleagues (2007) define microaggressions as "brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults toward persons of color" (p. 271). Current definitions have expanded the scope of microaggressions to describe both conscious and unconscious acts that reflect superiority, hostility, discrimination, and racially inflicted insults and demeanors to various marginalized groups of people based on such identities as race/ethnicity, gender and gender identity, sexual orientation, ability, religion, class, and age. Notwithstanding the literature on microaggressions has proliferated over the past decade, the social work literature has been relatively quiet.

Microaggression is usually expressed in three forms: microassaults, microinsults, and microinvalidations. In *Microaggression Theory* (2019) Torino et al. define the term microassault as a blatant verbal, nonverbal, or environmental attack intended to convey discriminatory and biased sentiments. This notion is related to overt racism, sexism, heterosexism, ableism, and religious discrimination in which individuals deliberately convey derogatory messages to target groups" (4). There are several instances in *The Bluest Eye* that can be related to such intended discriminatory attacks. When Geraldine, a middle-class black woman who hates her race arrives on the scene to find her inert cat on the floor, she looks at Pecola—dirty torn dress, unruly hair, muddy shoes—and instantly assumes the little girl from an impoverished family is the culprit. Geraldine starts hurling racist abuses at Pecola regarding the latter's upbringing while unjustly blaming her for injuring the former's cat:

The girls grew up knowing nothing of girdles, and the boys announced their manhood by turning the bills of their caps backward. Grass wouldn't grow where they lived. Flowers died. Shades fell down. Tin cans and tires blossomed where they lived. They lived on cold black-eyed peas and orange pop. Like flies they hovered; like flies they settled. And this one had settled in her house. Up over the hump of the cat's back she looked.

"Get out," she said, her voice quiet. "You nasty little

black bitch. Get out of my house. (75)

Besides being an example of microassault, it is also an example of blacks who have internalized white society's racism. In addition to Geraldine, her son Junior's treatment of Pecola as he deliberately injures their cat and frames Pecola is also an instance of microassault.

As Torino et al. elaborated in *Microaggression Theory*, "Microinsults are unintentional behaviours or verbal comments that convey rudeness or insensitivity or demean a person's racial heritage/identity, gender identity, religion, ability, or sexual orientation identity. Despite being outside the level of conscious awareness, these subtle snubs are characterized by an insulting hidden message" (4). The incident at the grocery store in the novel is an apt example of microinsult as it illustrates the cultural ideals and psychological responses as a result of it. Mr Yacobowski's treatment of Pecola at his grocery stores shows the extent to which racism is deep-rooted in the psyche of African-Americans. When Pecola visits the store to buy candies, Mr Yacobowski fails to notice her presence in the store. There is a "total absence of human recognition—the glazed separateness" (48). For Pecola this

“vacuum is not new to her” (48). As the narrator says, “She [Pecola] has seen it lurking in the eyes of all white people. So the distaste must be for her, her blackness. All things in her are flux and anticipation. But her blackness is static and dread. And it is the blackness that accounts for, that creates, the vacuum edged with distaste in white eyes” (49). Pecola prefers to remain hidden from white eyes as a result of self-disgust and humiliation. Pecola’s attitude reflects her acceptance of the treatment. It can be read as a case of internalised racism. The visibility of a person here depends on how beautiful a person is and Blacks are ugly according to the White’s idea of beauty. Here, the shopping experience of Pecola reflects the way she perceived beauty.

Pecola prefers to dream about the white girl Mary Jane with blue eyes, whose picture is on the wrapper of the candy Pecola enjoys. Repeated instances of microaggression affect the psyche of Pecola, she prefers to enter the world of illusion by dreaming about having blue eyes like Mary Jane. Pecola's vulnerable state of mind gave way to insanity when her father Cholly Breedlove violated her. Pecola started to behave strangely and imagine herself as a bird. “Elbows bent, hands on shoulders, she flailed her arms like a bird in an eternal, grotesque futile effort to fly. Beating the air, a winged but grounded bird, intention on the blue void it could not reach- could not even see- but which filled the valleys of her mind”(204). Pecola’s behaviour throws light on her mental state as she loses her sanity. She comes under the illusion that she has attained freedom and now she can fly away from the place by fulfilling her dream of having blue eyes. Pecola’s tormented psyche also finds expression in the words of critic J. Brooks Bouson describes *The Bluest Eye* as a complicated shame drama and trauma narrative, in which Pecola is the victim of inter-and intraracial shaming, who is traumatized by both physically and sexually abusive parents (207).

The analysis of discourse in *The Bluest Eye* foregrounds the way an African-American girl, Pecola struggles to find her identity and how she deals with situations related to racial trauma and microaggression. This paper traces the way racial contexts manipulate the identity development of a protagonist. White people are glamourized as superiors and thus the quality of being attractive is presented in a prejudiced manner which makes a reader question the essence of beauty. It raises pertinent questions like: Is beauty restricted to the colour of skin? Can black be ever considered beautiful? Furthermore, Pecola's mental health represents the psychological impact of racial trauma and microaggression faced by numerous black people who often internalize the discrimination they face in their day-to-day life that scars their lives. The narrative presents a

dominant view of beauty associated with the colour of skin and the social constraints faced by a woman of colour. Pecola does not meet the social standards of being a black girl and is annihilated from the normal lifestyle even before she has stirred to a wistfulness of herself. *The Bluest Eye* represents our society's inability to deal with social-psychological trauma as a result of white supremacy which forces the black people into severe socio-psychological illusions. This narrative is a testimony of the traumatic histories of the people of colour that calls for greater empathy and activism, as across the world, every day the people of colour experience racism and carry unhealed racial trauma.

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