

Investigating Racial Dehumanization, Distortion of Perspectives, and Perpetuation of Trauma in Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*

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Abstract: As the world continues to struggle with violence and the devastating legacies of racism, colonialism, and slavery, the systems and structures designed to subjugate and enslave fellow human beings still plague human society, even in an age of human dignity, freedom, and civil liberties. The brutal murders, lynching, and crimes of hate we witness against black people in America point to the existence of racism as a thriving, underground force, often institutionalised and perpetuated by the very system mandated to eradicate this menace. Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* offers several insights into how inhuman portrayals of black people inform white discourse. Blackness evokes fear and insecurity in the minds of white supremacists, and systemic racism even creates a hierarchy among black people. Some, having grown up with a deeply disturbing self-image, develop an all-consuming desire to be white in order to count as human. This study focuses on how racism is perpetuated by financial interests and white supremacy, coupled with discrimination and prejudice within law enforcement and ambiguities in the laws enacted to eradicate these issues. The study suggests that systemic racism dehumanises not only the black victims but also the white oppressors, distorting perspectives and perpetuating a vicious cycle of violence.

Keywords: black people, dehumanisation, systematic racism, traumatised existence, vicious cycle of violence

1. Introduction

As the devastating legacies of racism, colonialism, and imperialism continue to plague lives, the systems and structures designed to eradicate racism and other inhuman practices are often thought to have institutionalised these issues and thus perpetuated them. With Barrack Obama's election as the first black president, many prophesied that the world's oldest democracy had entered a post-racial era. However, in the US, hate crimes against people of colour and others of African heritage continued unabated. The brutal murder of George Floyd, one of many killings by a police officer, has reignited the debate about the existence of racism. Such hate crimes, combined with institutional bias and prejudice, demonstrate how racism not only survives but also continues to thrive and plague American society in different forms. Cultural racism, for example, is the belief that one's own culture is better and that another culture, including the people to whom the culture belongs, is inferior and incompatible. As Johnson et al. noted, 'racism in its many forms has always been part of America's social system' (2014: 11). Indeed, even today,

demonisation and horrendous images of ethnic groups, among them African Americans, continue to shape the psyche of the vast American population.

Despite the mass of legislation and mechanisms created to deal with racism, it has merely gone ‘underground’ by being ‘less visible’ (Tyson 2006: 367). What we now see in terms of brutal murders and lynchings is a chilling reminder of how racism remains strong in the USA. In this regard, Frunkin noted that ‘it is equally absurd to refute the prominence of institutionalized racism in today’s society. America remains a nation of haves and have-nots and, unfortunately, race continues to be a reliable predictor of who belongs in each category’ (2012: 2). Such systemic racism feeds on the economic interests of white supremacists and the fears and anxieties that blackness evokes in the white consciousness. However, as Feagin (2013: 2) suggested, ‘systemic racism is far more than a matter of racial prejudice and individual bigotry. It is a material, social, and ideological reality that is well embedded in major US institutions’. Lois Tyson (2006: 367) echoed the same view:

As many Americans of all colours know, however, racism has not disappeared: it’s just gone ‘underground’. That is, racial injustice in the United States is still a major and pressing problem; it’s simply become less visible than it used to be. Racial injustice is practiced on the sly, so to speak, to avoid legal prosecution, and it has flourished in ways that, in many cases, only its victims really know well.

By the turn of the 20th century, the institutionalisation of racism within law and governance systems had become clear, such as in the mainstream use of expressions such as racial scientism. This implied that only more intelligent races and groups emerge and stay dominant, thereby offering a rationale for white supremacy, black oppression, and the low status of the latter in society. It is this acclaimed white supremacy which W.E.B. Du Bois, in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), sought to deconstruct. In showing how racism became entrenched within the American bureaucratic system, he laments the continuing and systemic oppression of black people even after the eradication of slavery, saying that ‘the nation has not yet found peace from its sins; the freedman has not yet found in freedom his promised land’ (2015: 7). Addressing white people, he appealed to them to recognise that they are part of a problem that continues to pose a formidable menace to their social existence.

2. Understanding dehumanisation and its devastating legacies

The dehumanisation and inhuman portrayal of people of colour are issues of debate across the academic disciplines. The terms usually refer to the phenomenon of perceiving a group, class, or person as lacking humanness. De Ruiter (2021: 1) says that ‘dehumanization seems to require that perpetrators both deny and acknowledge the humanity of their victims in certain ways’. Thus, dehumanisation is a perspective in which certain people are denied basic humanness and intrinsic values. Markowitz and Slovic (2020: 9262) suggested that dehumanisation refers to ‘a cognitive perspective related to treating people as less than human’. Perpetrators often identify victims with animals and use animal analogies and metaphors to justify atrocities and cruelties committed against the dehumanised.

Current research contends that such depictions have left a devastating legacy of human suffering and psychological violence. The trauma caused by this dehumanisation can be experienced even today, particularly in a nation that prides itself on championing human dignity, freedom, and equality. In this way, such racial dehumanisation perpetuates a vicious cycle of violence that affects both the oppressor and victims in different ways.

Grosfoguel (2016) states that both the oppressor and oppressed undergo traumatic experiences. For white people, the oppression and psychological trauma of those living in 'zones of being' is mitigated by racial privilege. For non-whites, the oppression and psychological trauma of those living in 'zones of not a human being' is aggravated by racial oppression and social discrimination. Fanon (2008), in the colonial context, talked about how racism strips black people of their culture, identity, and often even a sense of their existence, leaving them in a state of profound alienation. He argued that black people are pushed to live lives 'in relation' or 'in comparison' to the white standard of beauty. Trauma is also manifest in the obsession to appear less black to other people of colour and to appear whiter to white people, leading to confusion about the sense of self and a troubled existence.

Farmer (1996: 22) argued that racism constitutes an assault on human dignity, as 'racial classifications have been used to deprive certain groups of basic rights, and therefore have an important place in considerations of human suffering'. While describing the damaging effects of racism in the South African context, Farmer's study highlighted that the infant mortality rate among black South Africans was ten times higher than among whites, although other factors are also responsible for such a large number of deaths.

Sears et al. (2000) deal with raging debates on the sources and forms of racism plaguing American society. The essays in the book consider racism from a socio-psychological and socio-structural perspective which is non-racially inspired. Racism in its various forms can be seen in almost all ages and countries. Perry argues that 'the idea that human biological differences show distinct boundaries that define and separate populations is a fallacy' (2007: 1). Indeed, the research shows that the science of genetics offers no such evidence for such a racial categorisation. He does, however, state that the present form of racism has its roots in the English colonies of North America and the early United States. His collection provides fresh insights into how the current issues and problems shape discourse on racism in the US.

Feagin (2013) offers a sociological theory of oppression through which racial-ethnic relationships can be analysed. His theory posits that white-on-black racism was a founding principle in America at its inception. The consequences of this are apparent today in the brutalising impacts of institutionalised racism on the social, physical, sexual, emotional, and economic lives of African Americans. Sullivan (2014) identifies common attitudes among well-meaning white people and unravels the complicated relationships between race and class in contemporary supremacist sections of white society. She argues that whites need to transform their whiteness and supremacy in the pursuit of racial justice.

The roots and practices of American stereotyped images and policies against South Asian and Middle Eastern countries were explored by Love (2017). This detailed account discusses how Islamophobia has always constituted a part of America racism, and demonstrates how hate-related crimes against Americans of Middle Eastern origins increase following refugee crises, stoked by calls from public figures such as Donald Trump to ban migrants from select countries.

Tate (2017) studied black identity, focusing on daily conversations between black women, family members, friends, and colleagues. The work fills a void in contemporary black cultural studies. Lamenting how scholars have focused too much on the demise of essential black subjects, the study calls for work on the process of identity construction in terms of lived experience, and points to the continuation of skin politics in imagining black identities. Yancy (2018) addresses white readers who claim to be non-racist and makes them aware of the pervasiveness of racism and white supremacy. The book is an important work embodying personal reflection and philosophical analysis and is, above all, a wake-up call to white Americans to acknowledge their complicity in the cycle of oppression that shapes the daily lives of people of colour. Mekawi et al. (2019: 299) discussed how dehumanisation as a psychological process that maligns people of colour has been of great interest to researchers and scholars. The study describes this process as a potential tool to aid 'our understanding of the way human beings justify harm toward out-groups'.

McKittrick (2000: 125) says, while drawing on anti-racist theory, that 'Morrison's novels and characters bring forth the links between the interrelated categories of race, racism, gender, and place'. The study expounds on how these factors and material disparities are interconnected and interdependent. The meaning of being black in a white society is an instance of complex realities existing in places and civilisations that deny lived human experiences. Bouson says that in her fiction Morrison brings readers into an uneasy confrontation with issues around racism. Her novel *The Bluest Eye* 'explores the chronicle of shame of being poor and black in white America' (2000: 24). In its relentless efforts to portray the self-hatred of the Breedlove family, the novel points to the pernicious and deforming effects of internalised racism on society. Mbalia (2004: 32) says that the central idea of the novel is that 'racism devastates the self-image of the African female in general and the African female child in particular'. The study reveals that, according to Morrison, African Americans' self-image is deformed at a very early stage due to prevailing white standards of beauty. Czajkowska refers to the corrosive effects of racism in *The Bluest Eye*, and describes how the oppression and cruelty inflicted on people evoke elements of self-destruction in other individuals, making them blind to their moral conscience. The study finds that Pecola Breedlove 'epitomizes a symbol of disaster and pain of black people existing in a world of whites' (2015: 29).

Breaking with the usual discussion and depiction of racism, the present study views it as a process that dehumanises and degrades not only the victim but equally the racist and oppressor, and thus perpetuates a cycle of violence as people/nations compete to assert cultural or racial superiority. Although it often remains invisible

to the oppressor due to racial privilege, racism both creates and kills an individual's true human character.

3. Tracing institutionalised racism and slavery

The roots of race and white supremacy in America can be traced back to the arrival of the colonisers who described the native people as less qualified and inferior human beings. Later, white plantation owners depicted African slaves as simple-minded, as it suited their needs. These false representations and stereotypes facilitated the enslavement and continued oppression of generations of black people. With the conquest of additional territories and an increase in farming activities, the colonisers searched for an additional source of labour, as the modest population of indentured servants became insufficient (Frunkin 2012: 4). As a result, Africans became a much sought-after source of cheap labour. To pacify discontent among poor whites, the elite white landowners provided poor whites with additional privileges to reassure them that their social mobility was not endangered by the import of cheap African labour. This division of labour was accepted by the white poor, and so the white elite started using the concept of race and social hierarchy to maintain their status and supremacy. As such, rich whites institutionalised and practised racism and slavery in their desire to advance personal financial interests and to feel superior to others. Tyson (2006: 371) describes this as 'interest convergence', which is often referred to as 'material determinism':

Racism is in the financial interest of upper-class whites who exploit black laborers by paying them less than their white counterparts, and it's in the psychological interest of working-class whites whose own experience of being underpaid and exploited by wealthy whites makes them need to feel superior to someone else.

With the Enlightenment, racism and slavery were formalised in America and many thinkers sought to legitimise it to assert white supremacy. This idea is substantiated by Schrom (2016: ii), who suggested that 'the Enlightenment shaped the world into the form that it is today, but it also marks the start of colonization and the slave trade'. Enlightenment thinkers such as Thomas Jefferson, Immanuel Kant, and David Hume wrote at length about racial differences. For example, in *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1785), Jefferson talked about white supremacy and black inferiority, depicted blacks as lacking in beauty, imagination, and reason, and described miscegenation as a crime against nature. Within six years of this publication, Jefferson and forty-four other delegates signed the American constitution, effectively institutionalising racism and condoning white supremacy as an integral part of American cultural and social life.

4. *The Bluest Eye*: How racism dehumanises and perpetuates trauma

Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1970) is widely seen as a trauma novel, with the protagonist, Pecola Breedlove, embodying the traumatised and emotionally shattering existence of black people in supremacist sections of white society. As such, the novel primarily depicts both a profound sense of loss and the intensity of lived fear at both the individual and collective levels. The text offers an insight into

how rampant institutionalised racism in the US dehumanises its victims, distorts their perspectives, and perpetuates a vicious cycle of psychological violence. Balaev (2008: 157) noted that ‘Morrison’s construction of female African American oppression and survival relies upon narrative conventions of nineteenth-century American slave narratives that portray the agony of slavery for African and African American women’. In the novel, Pecola’s sense of inferiority and blackness creates a divided, fragile identity, and the novel therefore prompts questions about the fundamental value of human dignity. We are given an insight into the ‘history, memory, toleration, hatred and racism inscribed on the bodies and minds of the characters’ (McKittrick 2000: 129).

Set during the American civil rights movements of the 1950–1960s, the novel addresses psychological issues among black people and contradicts the false values of white supremacy. When it was written, the concept of cultural aesthetics was widely discussed among African Americans. The launch of the ‘Black is beautiful’ movement was an attempt to instil belief and counter what Morrison called the ‘damaging internalization of assumptions of immutable inferiority originating in an outside gaze’ (Morrison 2007: xi). The movement encouraged black people to feel proud of their colour and avoid straightening their hair or attempting to lighten or bleach their skin. The novel revolves around the trauma Pecola Breedlove experiences trying to fit into white standards of beauty. Through her character, the author shows how the power and cruelty of a racist society can force someone like Pecola to become consumed with a desire for white beauty.

Breaking with the conventional depiction of white hatred for black people, Morrison deals with how intergenerational racism deforms black lives and true character. She also depicts how internalised standards of white beauty leave black people emotionally shattered and filled with self-contempt. The dehumanisation and self-distortion are evident not only in the way a lighter-skinned character, Geraldine, curses Pecola’s blackness, but also in how Pecola’s mother, Pauline Breedlove, loathes her own child but loves and cares for the white daughter of her employers. These women, having become accustomed to hating the blackness of their bodies, transfer this hatred to their children. However, the person who suffers the most and experiences a complete self-distortion is Pecola, who believes having blue eyes will bring her love and affection. This hopeless desire leads her into madness and insanity. It is to this that Hudson et al. (2016: 131) refer when they say that the stress related to race is a risk factor for African Americans’ mental and physical health. Indeed, both racism and false standards of white beauty legitimise racial supremacy on unjust and inhuman grounds, with the result that there is an ever-continuing struggle by black people to align with white standards of beauty. In turn, this leads to self-contempt and self-hatred as the achievement of a cherished desire is far away. As Bump says, ‘Morrison makes visible the invisible, in her case not only discrimination but also that fear of ugliness that enables more readers to identify with this basic situation of racism’ (Bump 2010: 160).

The fact that each member of the Breedlove family suffers from the burden of feeling ugly and has a consuming desire to be white demonstrates the debilitating and destructive effects of internalised racism on the lives of these characters.

McKittrick (2000: 129) notes that ‘the characters in the text are black bodies, corporeal Others, who both look out at and absorb dominant discourses and standards; they are assessed according to such standards’. The family unquestioningly accepts the master’s dictum that they are ugly, ‘and they took the ugliness in their hands, threw it as a mantle over them, and went about the world with it’ (Morrison 2007: 39). As readers, we see how racism defines and shapes their lives through Morrison’s descriptions: ‘No one could have convinced them that they were not relentlessly and aggressively ugly’ (Morrison 2007: 38). Although they all believed they were ugly, each reacted differently and adopted various ways to cope with their ugliness. For example, Mrs. Breedlove acts smartly, moves to a white employer’s household, and escapes into the fantasy world of film. Pecola dreams of possessing blue eyes to transform herself into a thing of beauty and seeks comfort to lead a happy life. However, her obsessive belief that possessing blue eyes will bring her love and affection leads her into insanity and psychological disorders. Cholly and Sammy act in ugly ways and anger others with their abhorrent ways and wild behaviour, but their own pursuit of love, affection and a life of dignity also results in psychological disorders. This is evident from the way they look at violence as a means of bringing life to the monotonous rooms of the storefront; violence helps them overcome fatigue and the pain of poverty. Mrs. Breedlove endures her husband’s immorality and excesses in order to maintain her personal status in the religious society in which she lives. Violent fights and her strained relationship with her cruel and immoral husband give her some sense of a meaningful existence. Similarly, Cholly uses her as the medium for unloading his own burden and the hatred in his heart towards the oppressive white society. Their desire to mould themselves in the white imagination of beauty deforms their lives, as is clear from the following quotation:

Out of the blackest part of my soul, across the zebra striping of my mind, surges this desire to be suddenly white. I wish to be acknowledged not as black but as white. Now—and this is a form of recognition that Hegel had not envisaged—who but a white woman can do this for me? By loving me she proves that I am worthy of white love. I am loved like a white man. I am a white man. Her love takes me onto the noble road that leads to total realization. (Fanon 2007: 44)

As Cholly and Pauline Breedlove are always locked into violent fights, the children brace themselves daily to endure their troubled existence and miserable lives. Being almost ostracised and abandoned, Pecola chases her desire to possess blue eyes as an escape route from her unhappiness and sense of ugliness into a world of prosperity, happiness, and beauty. With no friends except Claudia and Frieda, she led a very troubled life, always ridiculed and insulted both by her community and black boys due to her dark skin and ugly features. She is a victim of violence inside the home and in the outside world. For example, she is sexually assaulted by her drunkard father, loses her baby, is duped into believing she will be given blue eyes, and then descends into madness. Therefore, we see Pecola is a victim of internalised racism as she struggles with racism not only from white society but also her own

community, which hopes for the death of her unborn baby in order to escape its embarrassment. Claudia and Frieda, however, hope the baby will live, echoing their earlier resentment of the white dolls. Their love for Pecola's baby is rooted in a noble desire to counteract and reverse the automatic association of whiteness and beauty so pervasive in American society. In this respect, Morrison commented:

More strongly than my fondness for Pecola, I felt a need for someone to want the black baby to live—just to counteract the universal love of white baby dolls, Shirley Temples, and Maureen Peals. And Frieda must have felt the same thing. We did not think of the fact that Pecola was not married; lots of girls had babies who were not married. (Morrison 2007: 190)

Pecola's tortured and troubled psyche is also revealed in how her mother, Pauline, is distressed by baby Pecola's appearance when she is born. Pauline is not happy to see Pecola's ugliness as she has imagined her differently in her womb, and her obsession with white beauty has led her to expect an ideal white baby. This unattainable ideal distorts her perspective of her own child and her sense of ugliness is passed on to Pecola, who grows up with her own self-disturbing images. In these ways, we see the devastating intergenerational effects of racism. A child who is raised by a mother who considers her ugly is bound to develop the same psychology. Thus, Pauline's sense of her own ugliness is transferred to Pecola in a vicious cycle. Pecola spent long hours 'looking in the mirror, trying to discover the secret of the ugliness that made her ignored or despised at school, by teachers and classmates alike' (Morrison 2007: 45). She is consumed by the desire to possess blue eyes to overcome her sense of ugliness, make herself beautiful, and effect a change in herself and the way people look at her. Then, she will no longer have to witness endless fights and violence in her family. In possessing blue eyes, she feels she will be empowered to attain unreachable standards of beauty:

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. Her teeth were good, and at least her nose was not big and flat like some of those who were thought so cute. (Morrison 2007: 46)

At a young age, Pecola has encountered multiple challenges brought about by racism and her blackness. She is deemed ugly for her birth and poverty and is thus robbed of her innate goodness. Her sense of self-contempt and self-hatred is clear from her identification with the cracked pavement and the dandelions, and her distorted perception makes her lose any sense of inner beauty. She is quite confused as to why black women ditch the yellow heads of the dandelions they symbolically associate with the blonde girls who represent the standard of white beauty. This dehumanises her and her sense of internalised racism develops into self-contempt and self-hatred:

They were the codes and touchstones of the world, capable of translation and possession. She owned the crack that made her stumble; she owned the clumps of dandelions whose whiteheads, last

fall, she had blown away; whose yellow heads, this fall, she peered into. And owning them made her part of the world, and the world a part of her. (Morrison 2007: 47–48)

As a traumatised girl, Pecola finds herself unable to articulate words properly when she goes to Mr. Yacobowski's and he cannot comprehend what she wants to communicate. The gulf between the worldviews of these two characters metaphorically symbolises the disparity between their different worldviews as an immigrant white man and as a black girl. She increasingly becomes aware of how the actions and remarks of people like him make her appear ugly. Her palms perspire and she becomes aware of how she and her body are abhorrent to a white man. However, a darker aspect of racism is brought out by the way he looks at her and avoids touching her hands, so that 'She does not know how to move the finger of her right hand from the display counter or how to get the coins out of her left hand' (Morrison 2007: 49).

However, Pecola's humiliation at the store effects a change in her perception and reinforces the old idea that ugliness is inherent and cannot be changed by perceiving the world differently. Although Mr. Yacobowski glances at her with a blankness tinged with distaste, she does not blame him for this humiliation; rather, she blames her own ugliness. She perceives that her mistreatment is her own fault as she has more faith in how she looks to other people than how she looks at herself. Having bought some Mary Janes (a kind of candy), she looks jealously at the wrappers featuring a smiling white girl with blue eyes and blonde hair. While eating, she draws a parallel between her consumption and her desire to be Mary Jane, who symbolises how white features represent beauty in this racist society. What this implies is the extent to which racism pervades American society, as even while eating Pecola is reminded of her low status and inferiority in a society that does not recognise black people as equal. Racism and the belief in white supremacy are often indoctrinated and transmitted through social interactions, advertisements, and popular discourse and, thus, Pecola aspires to be white. This obsession with being white points to mental instability and insanity, and demonstrates effectively how racism and slavery debase and degrade people. Similarly, in *Black Skin, White Masks*—although speaking of a colonial context—Fanon 'examines how colonialism is internalised by the colonised, how an inferiority complex is inculcated, and how, through the mechanism of racism, black people end up emulating their oppressors' (Fanon 2007: x). As Pecola leaves the store, she devours the Mary Jane candies and stares at the perfect, beautiful, blonde, blue-eyed girl on the pale cover:

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, and 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. (Morrison 2007: 50)

An instance of how racism may rob people of their sense of self is the way Pecola talks to her imaginary friend, who chides her for always looking up in the mirror. Quite convinced that she has had her cherished desire for blue eyes fulfilled, she accuses Mrs. Breedlove and her imaginary friend of being envious of them. Her fictitious friend is the only one she talks to after being removed from school and ostracised by the community for, thinks Pecola, possessing blue eyes. It is important to note here that the destructive extent of the black obsession with white standards of beauty pushes Pecola to experience trauma, slip into a psychosis, and become self-consumed, as evidenced by the conversation she has with her imaginary friend. Thus, left alone and ostracised, she develops more psychological problems by believing that other people ostracise her not for what she discloses about them but because they hate her for possessing blue eyes:

The total absence of human recognition—the glazed separateness. She does not know what keeps his glance suspended. Perhaps because he is grown, or a man, and she is a little girl. But she has seen interest, disgust, and even anger in grown male eyes. Yet this vacuum is not new to her. It has an edge; somewhere in the bottom lid is the distaste. She 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. (Morrison 2007: 49)

When Maureen offers to buy ice cream for Pecola, Claudia begins to speculate about the flavour she herself will choose, with no indication in this regard from Maureen. When Maureen asks Claudia and Frieda if they also wish to buy one, they feel embarrassed. This reminds both girls of their relative poverty and exposes the paternalistic superiority Maureen extends toward Pecola. Pecola and Maureen have a certain fondness for the blonde-haired, blue-eyed Betty Grable, leaving no doubt about white beauty standards. Claudia, however, takes a defiant stance and says that Hedy Lamarr is better. Claudia's disagreement demonstrates that, although she is unaware, the colour of her skin is one of her most tender insecurities. Despite being called black by Maureen, Claudia retaliates by hitting Pecola hard, thereby implying that anger and violence in a racist society are directed disproportionately at the weak and poor, particularly the black. Thus, Claudia begins to believe that light skin, green eyes, and wealth are the factors that make Maureen beautiful, and she also begins to believe that racism and the white standard of beauty are her true enemies.

To a large extent, Claudia and Frieda, being strong-willed individuals, remain independent of the influence of white standards of beauty. Growing up in a poor black family, they are the complete opposite of Pecola. While Pecola is consumed by her desire to be white, they rebel against the idolisation by their black community of white standards of beauty. Claudia's violent reaction to the white dolls suggests an indomitable spirit and determination to survive in a hostile and oppressive white society. They destroy the white dolls and denunciate the white values that reduce their existence to that of animals and non-human beings. In

contrast to Pecola, they have a loving mother who taught them how to become strong and assert their identity. Their mother also taught them how to fight for their dignified space and not be brainwashed by the white standards of beauty. In so doing, they are acutely aware of how they must create their own self-worth in the world of beauty to which they are strangers. Claudia's statement that 'Mrs. Breedlove's skin glowed like taffeta in the reflection of white porcelain, white woodwork, polished cabinets, and brilliant copperware' (Morrison 2007: 107) shows that she sees blackness as beautiful. While everyone else has deep reservations about the ugliness of Pecola's baby and wishes for his death, Claudia, uninfluenced by the white standards of beauty, prays for the life of the baby, thereby implying that she not only sees beauty in blackness but that blackness can be beautiful:

However, the way characters suffer and lead a traumatised existence in an oppressive society is a clear manifestation of how institutionalised racism and the values of white society debase their lives. For example, although Claudia, unlike other characters, sees blackness as beautiful, as the plot progresses she becomes obsessed with white cultural supremacy. Her urge to destroy the dolls progresses into the desire to harm white women but at the same time she feels an immense sense of guilt and expresses a false love which leads her to love things she always hated. She is a light-skinned girl with green eyes who comes from a wealthy family, owns good clothes, and brings good food for lunch. As she possesses all the markers of whiteness—class, education, and a wealthy family—she is treated with the utmost respect by all her classmates and even teachers always encourage her. However, with Maureen's entry into the novel, we see how Claudia is adversely affected by white standards of beauty, and she often feels a sense of self-contempt and self-hatred. Maureen's wealth and class make Claudia feel that she lacks something. The way in which Claudia and Frieda search for flaws and defects in Maureen, and use them against her, reflect the cyclical and persistent nature of racism that often resulting in self-denigration. This illustrates how there is a racial hierarchy, even within the black community, that is guided by notions of white beauty as well as how black hatred for white culture often results in a black obsession with white beauty:

Frieda and I were bemused, irritated, and fascinated by her. We looked hard for flaws to restore our equilibrium, but had to be content at first with uglying up her name, changing Maureen Peal to Meringue Pie. Later, a minor epiphany was ours when we discovered that she had a dog tooth—a charming one to be sure—but a dog tooth nonetheless. (Morrison 2007: 63)

Discrimination, systemic racism, and inhuman treatment dehumanise black people, who develop feelings of revenge that can be seen in the way Claudia views her friendship with Maureen. She thinks that it will be a 'dangerous friendship' (Morrison 2007: 63) because she thinks of herself as being under violent and wild assault when she compares herself to Maureen. 'I felt the pull and slack of my brown stockings, I wanted to kick her' (Morrison 2007: 63), she says, because the barriers of class, caste, and race still shape the behaviour of black people in their

society. Similarly, when a group of black people taunt Pecola for her black skin, they reveal a contempt for their own blackness that makes them taunt and assault Pecola:

That they themselves were black, or that their own father had similarly relaxed habits was irrelevant. It was their contempt for their blackness that gave the first insult its teeth. They seemed to have taken all of 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. (Morrison 2007: 65)

In the way Geraldine behaves and interacts with others we can see another instance of the shattered lives and traumatised existence of black people in white society. A strict, upright black woman, she has migrated to Lorain from a southern town. Having given birth to Louis Junior, she remains indifferent to the baby, and while she feeds him she does not talk to him or kiss him, leaving him to cry for hours. She denies her son love and instead directs all her love towards the cat she so emotionally coddles. Having been brainwashed by the values of white society, she told her son that ‘coloured people were neat and quiet; niggers were dirty and loud’ (Morrison 2007: 87), stressing that he was different from ‘niggers’ as he was coloured. She used to ‘put Jergens Lotion on his face to keep the skin from becoming ashen. Even though he was light-skinned, it was possible to ash’ (Morrison 2007: 87). When one day Geraldine found Pecola in her house after she had been called to by her son, she said to her, ‘You nasty little black bitch. Get out of my house’ (Morrison 2007: 92). As a woman who firmly believes in white standards of beauty, Geraldine moulds herself in line with the white imagination. In Pecola, Geraldine is reminded of certain features which signify blackness, but Geraldine herself looks different from Pecola due to their respective skin colours. Geraldine’s deformed understanding and distorted perspective is revealed in how she judges Pecola from the standard of white beauty, calling Pecola a ‘black bitch’. She does not allow her son to play with other children or provide him with emotional care, and so her son develops racist behaviour and feels superior, although simultaneously he also begins to feel alienated and frustrated. His attempts to overcome these feelings make him all the more hateful. Thus, her cruelty to her son reflects her dehumanisation, corrosive impact, and the perpetuation of the vicious cycle of trauma. Junior’s sadistic pleasure in watching the cat suffer highlight how these corrosive effects are transferred to the next generation. As a grown-up man, Junior is not only racist, he leads a traumatised life.

Like other characters, Pauline is also a woman with distorted perspectives seeking to construct an identity in line with the values of white society. In the beginning, she resisted Anglo brainwashing and neither combed her hair nor wore makeup. However, when she left her job after becoming pregnant, she starts going to see films and develops an interest in the values of white society. She experiences a renewed interest in the adolescent dreams of love and ideals of physical beauty being propagated through the cinema. The renewed obsession with white beauty

alters her ways of looking at things and she undergoes unexpected changes. This newly developed interest makes her hate everything about her own life and herself, and so she transforms herself into an imagining of a white woman, parroting white attitudes with no concern for her daughter and son. For example, while watching Jean Harlow and Clark Gable, she straightens and untangles her hair like Jean Harlow's and imagines herself as Jean. When she loses a tooth from biting into candy, this is a blow to her efforts to be white. The loss of the tooth symbolises the loss of her dream of achieving whiteness and acceptance of ugliness:

Along with the idea of romantic love, she was introduced to another—physical beauty. Probably the most destructive ideas in the history of human thought. Both originated in envy, thrived in insecurity, and ended in disillusion. In equating physical beauty with virtue, she stripped her mind, bound it, and collected self-contempt by the heap. (Morrison 2007: 122)

Pauline's obsession with the values of white society and its standard of beauty makes her develop an obsession with having an ideal child, and she is distressed after the birth of Pecola. Being acutely aware of how Pecola has not fulfilled her desire and the emptiness she experiences in her life, she becomes pregnant again so that the second child might be according to her expectations. Before the baby was born, she talked to it and wanted to give birth in hospital, where the doctor makes indecent remarks. However, the most revealing aspect of her behaviour, in terms of the damaging effects of racism, is the way she cares greatly for the children of the white family, often deriving too much pleasure in bathing them in a tub with hot water and combing their blond hair. In turn, she ignores her children, becomes increasingly cruel to them, struggles to overcome the desire to escape to her son, Samuel, and is consumed by the fear that Pecola will grow up ugly. The extremity of this dehumanisation and enslavement is suggested in Pauline's differing reactions to her daughter Pecola and the little white girl. She slaps her daughter twice, despite her leg being burnt by a cobbler but soothes the little white child, promising to replace the cobbler. This reveals the level of enslavement and servitude inculcated in black people. Her trauma and emptiness come from her longing for white standards of beauty. Since this ideal is impractical, it causes her to develop psychological trauma and behave in strange ways.

Similarly, Soaphead Church is obsessed with the white standard of beauty. His 'white strain' was introduced by the British nobleman who abandoned Soaphead and his mother. Obsessed with the part of his heritage which is white, as Soaphead matures into a man he instils his obsession into his children. Since the family has very consciously constructed their identity on its white heritage, he is obsessed with cleanliness and discipline, which are considered to be the indicators of white beauty. His upbringing and obsession with whiteness lead him to pervert his sexual desires. The contempt and abhorrence for decay and disorder taught to him by his father are transferred onto his black ancestry. Privilege has helped the family attain positions of power. However, his obsession with whiteness and self-righteousness has distorted his perspective and made him cruel, as demonstrated by his poisoning to death Bertha Reese's dog, even though he loves Bertha intensely.

He blames God for creating an imperfect universe, revealing the extremeness of the sense of superiority he feels from his whiteness. His self-righteousness and vanity lead him to believe that he is superior to God. He embodies how the obsession with the white standard of beauty dehumanises and degrades black lives.

5. Racism perpetuates a cycle of trauma and dehumanises both whites and oppressed

Commenting on the damaging effects of racism in the colonial context, Fanon (2008) said that white people create a sense of inferiority by claiming there is a difference between blacks and whites. Racism, he argues, creates a hierarchy which causes black people to internalise it. The cycle of psychological trauma that racism breeds affects both blacks and those who practice and perpetuate racism. Through the lens of supremacy, they look down upon their fellow human beings and unleash oppression and cruelties upon them. Although they are the victimisers and not the victims, they are imperceptibly affected and dehumanised through this process. This is what Professor Maxwell, a prominent right-wing figure in London, and Mustafa Saeed's former professor at Oxford, refers to when he says that 'the girls were killed not by Mustafa Saeed but the germ of a deadly disease that assailed them a thousand years ago' (Salih 2003: 95). Black people suffer as they are always obsessed with the consuming desire of being white. Due to their desire to be white, they lead tormented lives and a shattered existence.

The way that racism even dehumanises whites is seen in how they witness violence in their own homes. Pauline is surprised at the inability of the white family to live happily and she wonders why, despite their wealth and beauty, they cannot. The white woman's order to Pauline to leave her husband speaks of the racism afflicting the white woman. Her order stems from her own sense of supremacy, as it allows her to consider such a course of action for herself even if it may be inappropriate for Pauline. In this way, the white woman is also dehumanised and debased by this sense of supremacy because violence even in thought is a vicious cycle and comes back to the oppressor. The oppression to which they subject blacks returns to them proportionately but differently. Although the degree of their suffering is mitigated by the social privilege they enjoy, stripping fellow beings of humanity leads to the loss of their own humanity. Thus, the white man, whose sin against humanity is the enslavement of others, must himself slave to become human. This is what Fanon refers to when he says that 'the black man wants to be white. The white man slaves to reach a human level' (2008: 3). Pauline's troubled existence and self-contempt stem from the degrading effects caused by internalised racism. The dehumanising effects of inhuman practices and systemic racism can be seen in the troubled existence of the white family. The encounter of Pauline with the white woman suggests the trickiness of racism and its psychologically devastating effects on people and society. Similarly, the way Mr. Yacobowski looks at Pecola and avoids touching her hands shows racial pride and a complete lack of recognition of humanity in black people. In his understanding, Pecola is a worthless girl for being black:

He does not see her, because for him there is nothing to see. How can a fifty-two-year-old white immigrant storekeeper with the taste of potatoes and beer in his mouth, his mind honed on the doe-eyed Virgin Mary, his sensibilities blunted by a permanent awareness of loss, see a little black girl? Nothing in his life even suggested that the feat was possible, not to say desirable or necessary. (Morrison 2007: 48)

Thus, as Fanon says, it is clear that it is not only black people who suffer the damaging psychological effects of racism, as whites are also adversely affected through losing their sense of humanity and thus are trapped within their race and experience alienation as a result. As Fanon argued, ‘The Negro enslaved by his inferiority; the white man enslaved by his superiority alike behave in accordance with a neurotic orientation’ (2008: 42–43). What becomes clear is that the idea of being superior and treating others as inferior has a deeply damaging effect on a person’s psyche. The same argument is proposed by Césaire, who, speaking of colonialism, stated that colonisation dehumanises the coloniser just as it dehumanises the colonised:

The impossible dehumanization of the oppressed, on the other side of the coin, becomes the alienation of the oppressor. It is the oppressor himself who restores, with his slightest gesture, the humanity he seeks to destroy; and, since he denies humanity in others, he regards it everywhere as his enemy. (Memmi 2003: 24)

In the novel, we see that the weak and poor often become the target of redirected violence, potentially perpetuating trauma and the damaging effects of racism. For example, unable to retaliate against white people, Pauline directs her anger and cruelty toward her daughter after she is fired by the white family and mistreated in a hospital by a doctor. Cholly, finding himself unable to avenge the white men who forced him to continue having sex and humiliated him, directs his anger and hatred toward Darlene. As a man in the black community, he was powerless to take revenge on the white men, and so a female is a soft easy target upon whom to vent his anger. Similarly, Junior blames Pecola for killing the cat and directs his feelings of disgust about his mother toward both the cat and Pecola. Since Pecola represents the cat, much of the hatred and violence is directed at them. Thus, it demonstrates a chain of unfolding violence, in which the weak and oppressed harm those who are weaker than they. Where does it end? The oppressed become the oppressor. Thus, the author seems to suggest that racism and white people’s oppression have cumulative effects. The violence directed at black people evolves into a cycle of cruelty, psychological trauma, and violence, thereby killing human instincts, dehumanising people, and distorting their perspectives:

Sullen, irritable, he cultivated his hatred of Darlene. Never did he once consider directing his hatred toward the hunters. Such an emotion would have destroyed him. They were big, white, armed men. He was small, black, helpless. His subconscious knew what his conscious mind did not guess—that hating them would have consumed him, burned him up like a piece of soft coal, leaving only

flakes of ash and a question mark of smoke. (Morrison 2007: 150–151)

6. Misrepresentation of blackness and financial interests perpetuates racism and hate crimes

Stereotypes, negative portrayals, and utter distortions inform much of the Western discourse about non-Europeans, the Middle East, Islam, and Muslims, and black people in particular. Slavery, deep-rooted racism, and demonisation caused the development of a non-human image of black people in the white consciousness. A black man is considered an object of fear, criminality, and sexuality. In such a racist society, white people are considered human but black people are instead ‘Other’ to humans and often considered beasts and animals. In this regard, Fanon (2008: 1) argues that ‘at the risk of arousing the resentment of my coloured brothers, I will say that the black is not a man’. The disproportionate number of black people in American prisons and the rate of criminal conviction point to deep-rooted racism against, and the criminalisation of, black people. The stereotypes and misconceptions held by many Americans about black criminality and animal instincts have been institutionalised by the prejudicial handling of crimes by intelligence and law enforcement agencies. For example, Tyson (2006:368) argues that possession of 5g of crack cocaine, used predominantly by black people, will trigger a five-year prison term, but possession of 500g of powder cocaine, used predominantly by white people, are needed to trigger the same prison sentence. In the white consciousness, blackness evokes criminality, and creates fears and anxieties. Such stereotypes and horrible images afflict even law enforcement agencies:

The black American male in the white American gaze has long been an object of fear: excessively sexual, insufficiently cerebral, physically imposing, instinctively criminal. It’s no mystery where these assumptions came from: if you enslave people, break up their families, humiliate, brutalize and denigrate them and spend far more on their incarceration than their education, then the mere prospect of them reaching their full human potential will strike fear in you. (Younge 2017)

In a racist society, blackness is maligned and negatively portrayed, while whiteness is associated with virtue, intelligence, and perfection. Blackness stands for animal instincts, sexuality, and inhuman practices, as is clear from the way a look of fear dances across the face of the little white girl when she happens to see Claudia, Frieda, and Pecola. Since childhood, she has been taught to fear black people. Cholly, on the other hand, associates whiteness with beauty and cleanliness, beauty, and God: ‘He wondered if God looked like that. No. God was a nice old white man, with long white hair, flowing white beard, and little blue eyes that looked sad when people died and mean when they were bad’ (Morrison 2007: 134). As a black man, by this logic he imagines he must represent the opposite of God—the devil. He feels he cannot attain the perfection and goodness of the white man

and therefore he assumes the likeness of the devil and gives up any desire to be good.

As is clear from the above discussion, one of the primary reasons for the introduction of slavery and racism in America was the financial interests of a white elite who sought cheap labour. The same motive remains even today. The inherent human desire for personal advancement in a material world, and to feel better about oneself, speaks of the ways the white elite perpetuates and practises systemic racism. Therefore, what we see in terms of the rising crime and systematic violence against black people in the recent past is a reflection of how institutionalised racism, despite much legislation and judicial verdicts, continues to plague one of the world's oldest democracies. Black men continue to be murdered, triggering the Black Lives Matter movement. Although the modes of practising racism have changed, according to Tyson, it remains one of the greatest potential menaces in the US:

Racism is in the financial interest of upper-class whites who exploit black laborers by paying them less than their white counterparts, and it's in the psychological interest of working-class whites whose own experience of being underpaid and exploited by wealthy whites makes them need to feel superior to someone else. (2006: 371)

7. Conclusion

The devastating legacies of slavery, racism, colonialism, and imperialism continue to plague human existence. Although many thinkers prophesied after the election of Barack Obama, as the first black American president, that the one of the world's oldest democracies had officially entered a post-racial era, their euphoria quickly disappeared as soon as America continued to witness brutal racially motivated crimes against black people. The murder of George Floyd by a police officer in the name of self-defence triggered fresh debates about the existence of racism in white American society. This study has argued that racism was institutionalised by rich and elite Americans during the Enlightenment and continues to be perpetuated even today by groups of white supremacists and white elites pursuing their financial interests. They ignore it as their sufferings and the vicious cycle of psychological trauma is mitigated due to the social privileges they enjoy. However, the oppressed and the people of colour undergo inhuman suffering and lose their humanity as they pursue the impossible dream of conforming to white standards of beauty. They strive for social affection and respect in an inherently racist society.

This study asserts that institutionalised racism even today is a thriving underground force despite claims to the contrary. With the help of Toni Morrison's, *The Bluest Eye*, the study has discussed how the systems and structures aimed at eradicating racism in fact perpetuate it to maintain white supremacy. The misrepresentation of blackness as an object of fear, repulsion, and criminality, and its association with non-human traits, continue to inform the white contemporary discourse. The study has argued how racism and the inhuman portrayal of people of African origin constitutes an assault on human dignity, dehumanises equally the oppressed and the white oppressors, distorts their perspectives, and perpetuates a

vicious cycle of violence posing a threat to an already fragile peaceful coexistence in the contemporary world.

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