



The Polyphonic World in Toni Morrison's Fiction: A Study of *The Bluest Eye*

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Abstract

*Toni Morrison employs polyphony as a powerful narrative tool to explore collective memory and the enduring impact of history, particularly in the context of slavery, discrimination, and resilience. Through novels like *Beloved*, *Jazz*, *Song of Solomon*, and *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison constructs a multi-voiced tapestry that interweaves diverse perspectives, capturing the complexities of shared histories and social injustices. By elevating marginalized voices often silenced in mainstream narratives, she compels readers to confront uncomfortable realities about the intersections of personal and collective experiences. This paper examines use of polyphony by Morrison's in *The Bluest Eye* for giving space to marginalized voices. The depth of Morrison's intertextual and polyphonic craftsmanship, recognizing the novel's the profound and lasting impact on African American literature, will also be the focus of this paper.*

In Toni Morrison's literary world, the use of polyphony emerges as a powerful tool for dealing with the themes of collective memory and the enduring effects of history, particularly regarding slavery, discrimination, and the resilience of marginalized groups. Morrison's skilful application of polyphony, showcased across novels such as *Beloved*, *Jazz*, *Song of Solomon*, and *The Bluest Eye*, creates a dynamic tapestry of voices that converge to form a deep, multi-dimensional narrative. This technique enables Morrison to interweave a range of perspectives, allowing readers to explore the complexities of shared histories and the persistent consequences of social injustice. By elevating voices that are often silenced or overlooked by mainstream accounts, Morrison challenges readers to confront uncomfortable realities, fostering a deeper understanding of how personal memories intersect with larger collective experiences.

Furthermore, Morrison's use of polyphony transcends a simple literary device; it serves as a potent means to highlight the importance of recognizing and valuing diverse perspectives. For Bakhtin, "The novel as a whole is a phenomenon multi-form in style and variform in speech and

voice" The different voices in her works not only represent individual experiences but also reflect a broader array of societal viewpoints, each adding a distinct element to the tapestry of human life. In this way, Morrison emphasizes the need to embrace this diversity of perspectives in order to achieve a fuller understanding of human history and existence. By dismantling the singular, unified narrative often imposed by dominant cultural discourses, Morrison's polyphonic method opens the door to a more inclusive and comprehensive understanding of the complexities that define the human experience.

Morrison's use of multiple narrative perspectives allows readers to engage with the story through a variety of lenses, providing a chance to explore identity and history from new angles. The changing viewpoints construct a mosaic-like representation of the characters' experiences, encouraging readers to assemble the narrative's fragments and develop a deeper understanding of the complexity of their paths.

Through her expert use of polyphony, Morrison draws readers into a realm where storytelling transcends temporal and spatial limitations, leaving a lasting impression that highlights the enduring power of narrative to illuminate the

human experience. Her literary mastery is evident in her debut novel, *The Bluest Eye*. Published in 1970, this novel combines fiction with real historical and social contexts to explore themes of beauty, race, and identity. Set in Lorain, Ohio, following the Great Depression, the novel centers on Pecola Breedlove, a young African American girl. Through this story, Morrison confronts societal norms and racial biases related to beauty, shedding light on how these deeply ingrained ideals harm individuals, particularly young Black girls. By examining the psychological and emotional toll of internalizing these standards, Morrison aims to prompt a critical reflection on the destructive effects of racism, the pursuit of unattainable beauty, and the impact of societal oppression on personal identity and self-worth.

The novel takes place in Lorain, Ohio, during the 1940s, a time shaped by the lingering effects of the Great Depression. This historical context serves as a backdrop for exploring issues of race, beauty standards, and the societal structures that affect the lives of African Americans. The economic struggles and social inequalities of the Depression era influence the characters' lives as they face poverty, limited opportunities, and racial discrimination.

Claudia, a nine-year-old, and Frieda, ten, live with their parents in Lorain at the end of the Great Depression. Their parents, primarily focused on their financial difficulties, provide a home filled with underlying affection and stability. The MacTeer family also takes in a boarder, Henry Washington, as well as Pecola, a young girl who faces significant challenges. Pecola's father attempts to set their house on fire, evoking sympathy from Claudia and Frieda. Pecola, who idolizes Shirley Temple, struggles with feelings of inadequacy and internalizes the belief that whiteness represents beauty.

The novel centres on the tragic story of Pecola Breedlove, a young African American girl growing up in a hostile and abusive home. At just eleven years old, Pecola associates beauty and societal acceptance with being white, leading her to desperately wish for the ultimate symbol of beauty in her eyes—blue eyes. Believing herself to be ugly, she becomes convinced that if she had blue eyes, her appearance would improve, and her life would transform. Her yearning for blue eyes represents the broader cultural ideal that equates whiteness with beauty and value.

Pecola's life at home is filled with hardship. Her father's alcoholism, her emotionally distant mother, and the volatile relationship between her parents create an atmosphere of constant tension. Pecola's brother, Sammy, often runs away to escape the turmoil. Pecola clings to the hope that possessing blue eyes would bring her the love and acceptance she craves, but she continually faces reminders of her perceived unattractiveness—indifference from the

grocer, taunts from boys, and even mockery from Maureen, a lighter-skinned girl who briefly befriends her. When Pecola is falsely accused of killing a boy's cat, she faces brutal verbal abuse from the boy's mother, who hurls racial slurs at her.

The Breedlove family is a clear reflection of dysfunction and abuse. Their home, rather than a place of safety and care, becomes a source of emotional, psychological, and physical pain. The relationships within the family are deeply fractured, with Pecola's parents, Cholly and Mrs. Breedlove, struggling with their own unresolved trauma, which they tragically project onto their daughter. They are both emotionally wounded and unable to provide the love or support Pecola needs.

Despite her hardships, Pecola finds some comfort in her bond with Claudia and Frieda MacTeer, two sisters from her community. Claudia, who serves as the novel's primary narrator, offers an alternative perspective that challenges dominant beauty standards. Unlike Pecola, Claudia and Frieda resist the societal pressure to conform to white ideals of beauty and question the notion that blue eyes are the epitome of beauty. As the story progresses, Pecola's mental and emotional state deteriorates, a consequence of her obsession with blue eyes and the cruelty of a society that devalues her because of her appearance.

Through the novel, Morrison aims to disrupt dominant metanarratives—overarching cultural stories and ideologies that shape societal norms, especially around beauty, race, and identity. The novel critiques the dominant metanarrative by examining beauty standards. Through Pecola's experiences and her longing for blue eyes, Morrison challenges the prevailing belief that associates beauty with whiteness, disputing the idea that this standard is universal or inherently superior.

Additionally, the novel confronts the metanarrative surrounding racial identity by portraying the internalized racism experienced by the characters, particularly within the African-American community. Morrison emphasizes the harmful effects of internalized racism, which causes characters like Pecola to desire physical traits tied to whiteness. This critique reveals how the dominant narrative undermines Black identity, fostering self-hatred and diminished self-worth.

Furthermore, history itself is often viewed as a metanarrative that demands scrutiny, as it claims to provide an unbiased and truthful representation of the past. In reality, the notions of objectivity and truth are themselves open to challenge and debate. In this regard, Dani Cavallaro observes in *Critical and Cultural Theory*:

Objectivity is a myth designed to make us believe that there is one proper way of seeing and

representing reality and therefore a means of marginalizing all that is different, other, alternative. However, since we cannot dodge the fact that we always perceive and represent the world through our bodies and other people's bodies, we cannot, as a result, deny that our perceptions and representations inevitably entail an element of distortion. (47-48)

Thus, the distorted and imbalanced portrayals of history can no longer be viewed as objective. Leading scholars and thinkers have challenged the notions of truth and authenticity tied to all forms of knowledge, including history. These critiques complicate how the past has been represented, narrated, recorded, and documented.

The pursuit of an objective account of history has become increasingly difficult in postmodern times, with history itself coming under the scrutiny of literary theorists such as Alun Munslow, Stephen Greenblatt, Keith Jenkins, and Hayden White, who have questioned the legitimacy of history as an unquestionable representation of the past. In the absence of belief in absolute objectivity, the deconstruction of historical narratives allows space for the voices of the oppressed and marginalized to be heard.

Linda Hutcheon contends: "Meaning and shape are not in the events, but in the systems which make those past 'events' into present historical 'facts'" (89). This suggests that historical facts are shaped by a variety of interconnected systems, including language, political power, social structures, and cultural practices. Contemporary theoretical approaches, particularly New Historicism, play a crucial role in exploring and uncovering the epistemological frameworks that influence discussions about the relationship between literature and history.

The historical context of *The Bluest Eye* is essential for understanding the characters' experiences and the novel's themes. Set in the period following the Great Depression, the novel reflects the economic challenges of the era, which began in 1929 and persisted through the 1930s. The widespread economic hardships of this time influenced people's views on race, class, and beauty. The Great Depression led many families into poverty and financial instability, and these conditions deeply impacted the lives of the characters. The Breedlove family, for example, faces significant economic struggles that exacerbate their already difficult situation. These financial challenges force the characters to focus on basic survival, with themes of food, shelter, and employment becoming central to the narrative. The economic strain of the Great Depression also creates tensions within families and communities, further complicating their relationships.

The Great Depression had a disproportionate impact on African Americans, exacerbating existing racial inequalities. The novel deals with how racism intersects with economic hardship, making it even more difficult for African American families to overcome their struggles. The economic and social turmoil of the Great Depression influences beauty standards and their effects on the characters. The characters internalize the belief that adopting an appearance linked to whiteness and wealth would offer them better opportunities and societal acceptance. Thus, the Great Depression acts as a backdrop, highlighting the difficulties faced by African American individuals and communities during this time.

The Harlem Renaissance, a cultural and intellectual movement of the 1920s and 1930s, also influences the novel. While set after the Harlem Renaissance, the novel is deeply connected to its legacy, reflecting the lasting effects of the movement's efforts. The Harlem Renaissance was a period of celebrating Black culture and challenging racial stereotypes in American society. It fostered a sense of Black identity and pride in heritage. *The Bluest Eye* explores the aftermath of the Harlem Renaissance, addressing the persistent societal pressures and challenges faced by African Americans, particularly young Black girls like Pecola Breedlove.

Set during an era of racial segregation, particularly in the Midwest, the novel portrays characters who endure discrimination and racism from both white individuals and within their own communities. The Jim Crow laws, which enforced racial segregation and denied civil rights, reinforced systemic racism. Although the novel occurs before the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s, it engages with the ongoing struggle for racial justice. The characters' lives are deeply affected by the racial climate, impacting their self-worth and sense of identity.

By situating the narrative within these historical contexts, Toni Morrison vividly illustrates the destructive effects of racism on African American individuals, particularly young girls like Pecola Breedlove. Morrison's examination of these historical elements offers valuable insight into the complexities of race, identity, and beauty in American society, contributing to the novel's authenticity and its critical social commentary.

The vulnerability of this community is clearly highlighted by McKenzie in her article "Spaces for Readers: The Novels of Toni Morrison":

By the time readers finish the novel, they have ventured into domestic spaces where economic depravity dictates when and how people love, where taboos of rape and incest traumatize and sabotage girlhood, where racism in the larger

world shapes and constrains the options men and women have to imagine themselves as a whole, acceptable human being and where people both in and outside the community exploit the most vulnerable. (223)

In *The Bluest Eye*, Toni Morrison does not utilize a traditional multiple-narrative structure with various characters narrating different sections of the story. Instead, the novel is primarily told by an omniscient narrator who relates Pecola's thoughts, emotions, and experiences, with occasional first-person narration from Claudia MacTeer. The novel opens with Claudia, who serves as the main narrator, offering a child's perspective on the events surrounding Pecola Breedlove's life. Her narrative contrasts with that of the adults, providing a more innocent and observant viewpoint on the world.

In addition to Claudia's perspective, the novel features a third-person omniscient narrator, which explores the lives and thoughts of multiple characters, including Pecola, Cholly, and Pauline Breedlove, among others. This omniscient viewpoint allows readers to gain deeper insight into the internal experiences, motivations, and struggles of different characters, offering a more rounded understanding of their actions and emotions.

There are also passages that offer a broader social and historical context, highlighting the experiences and perspectives of the African American community at large. These sections contribute a collective narrative, enriching the understanding of the characters' challenges and the social forces at play. While *The Bluest Eye* doesn't strictly follow a multiple-narrative structure, Morrison's multifaceted storytelling creates a more comprehensive portrayal of the characters' struggles, shedding light on the interconnectedness of their lives and the pervasive influence of societal expectations and prejudices.

Claudia MacTeer plays a key role as one of the novel's central narrators. She narrates as both the adult Claudia, reflecting on and analyzing the events of 1940–41, and as the young girl, aged nine, who experiences the events in real time. Her perspective is distinctive, as she has not yet fully internalized society's dominant beauty standards. Claudia is critical of the societal obsession with whiteness and blue eyes, and her narrative voice challenges these ideals. She points out, "Adults, older girls, shops, magazines, newspapers, window signs – all the world had agreed that a blue-eyed, yellow-haired, pink-skinned doll was what every girl child treasured" (18), recognizing how the world around her, including adults and the media, promotes the image of a white, blue-eyed doll as the epitome of beauty. Claudia's awareness of this dominant standard is central to her narrative, as she refuses to conform to it. For example, she

rejects the idea of Shirley Temple as a beauty icon, showing that she does not see this image as beautiful in her own terms.

She says:

Younger than both Frieda and Pecola, I had not yet arrived at the turning point in the development of my psyche which would allow me to love her. What I felt at that time was unsullied hatred. But before that I had felt a stranger, more frightening thing than hatred for all the Shirley Temples of the world. (17)

Claudia's narrative encourages readers to critically examine societal beauty standards and reflect on their detrimental effects on individuals like Pecola. She acts as a strong voice of resistance against the cultural pressure to adhere to white beauty ideals, playing a key role in the novel's critique of these harmful standards.

Through her narrative, Claudia not only offers insights into the harsh experiences Pecola faces but also demonstrates deep empathy and understanding of her situation. With her childlike yet insightful perspective, Claudia observes the prejudices and societal expectations that oppress and marginalize Pecola. Claudia's empathy stems from her own experiences as a Black girl in a racially hostile world. Her empathy goes beyond mere observation; it serves as a connection between the reader and Pecola's tragic reality, urging them to confront the systemic injustices and biases embedded in society. At the novel's outset, Claudia reflects:

As the novel opens, Claudia says:

Quiet as it's kept, there were no marigolds in the fall of 1941. We thought, at the time, that it was because Pecola was having her father's baby that the marigolds did not grow. A little examination and much less melancholy would have proved to us that our seeds were not the only ones that did not sprout; nobody's did. Not even the gardens fronting the lake showed marigolds that year. But so deeply concerned were we with the health and safe delivery of Pecola's baby we could think of nothing but our own magic: if we planted the seeds, and said the right words over them, they would blossom, and everything would be all right. (3)

Claudia connects the failure of the marigolds to Pecola's suffering, reflecting a deep understanding of Pecola's struggles. To Claudia, the marigold seeds represent hope and perseverance. She and her sister, Frieda, care for the seeds with the belief that they will grow into beautiful flowers. However, despite their efforts, the flowers do not bloom in the poor, barren soil of their yard. This lack of blossoms serves as a powerful metaphor, mirroring the

absence of beauty, joy, and nourishment in Pecola's life. Claudia poignantly compares the barren soil to the emotional emptiness that Pecola endures.

In the chapter that focuses on Pauline, her memories are presented through italicized direct quotations, set apart from the narrator's voice. This formatting gives Pauline a chance to speak for herself, almost as if in an interview, sharing her recollections of the past. In contrast, the chapter that examines Cholly's story does not feature direct quotes. Instead, it uses free indirect discourse, blending his inner thoughts with the narrator's voice. This technique provides a sense of authority to Cholly's narrative, distinguishing it from the approach used in Pauline's section.

Pauline is a complex character who initially resists cultural pressures to conform to Anglo-centric ideals. She does not follow societal expectations such as straightening her hair or using makeup. However, over time, she begins to indulge in secret pleasures, finding comfort in her fantasies of movie stars and experiencing intense emotions during intimate moments with Cholly.

She utters:

The onliest time I be happy seem like was when I was in the picture show. Every time I got, I went. I'd go early, before the show started. They'd cut off the lights, and everything be black. Then the screen would light up, and I'd move right on in them pictures. White men taking such good care of they women, and they all dressed up in big clean houses with the bathtubs right in the same room with the toilet. Them pictures gave me a lot of pleasure.... (121)

After enduring harsh experiences of discrimination, being dismissed by a white employer, and facing degrading treatment from white doctors, Pauline tragically begins to project the same disdain she faced onto her daughter, Pecola. She becomes emotionally distant and cruel, perceiving only ugliness when she looks at Pecola's eyes. As she reflects on her daughter, Pauline says, "But I knew she was ugly. Head full of pretty hair, but Lord she was ugly" (124).

Faced with an alcoholic husband, a son who lacks direction, and a daughter she believes to be unattractive, Pauline looks for solace and fulfillment by idealizing a perfect white family. Like Cholly, Pauline causes her daughter great pain, but Morrison portrays her with empathy. Pauline experiences subtler forms of humiliation compared to Cholly—her disabled foot strengthens her belief in inevitable isolation, and the elitism of city women in Lorain exacerbates her sense of loneliness. Vulnerable and isolated, she internalizes messages from white culture that link white beauty and material wealth with happiness.

Pauline also escapes into a new fantasy world—the white household she works for. This fantasy is more grounded than her dreams of Hollywood actresses and holds more societal approval than Pecola's imaginary world, but it similarly distances her from the family she should nurture. In this way, Pauline's life becomes just as haunted and deluded as her daughter's.

A significant example of polyphony in the novel is the use of the omniscient narrator, who not only explores Pecola's thoughts and emotions but also offers insight into the experiences of other characters, including Soaphead Church, Frieda, Claudia, Cholly, Maureen, and others. When discussing the changes in Pauline after the birth of her children, the omniscient narrator notes:

When Sammy and Pecola were still young Pauline had to go back to work. She was older now, with no time for dreams and movies. It was time to put all of the pieces together, make coherence where before there had been none. The children gave her this need; she herself was no longer a child. So she became, and her process of becoming was like most of ours: she developed a hatred for things that mystified or obstructed her; acquired virtues that were easy to maintain; assigned herself a role in the scheme of things; and harked back to simpler times for gratification. (124)

The use of multiple narrators in *The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison serves several crucial literary and thematic functions. By incorporating various perspectives, Morrison provides readers with a richer and more nuanced understanding of the characters, their motivations, and the societal influences shaping their lives. Each narrator offers a unique viewpoint on the events, characters, and themes of the novel, enhancing the narrative's complexity and allowing for a multifaceted exploration of the story.

Each narrator brings their own distinct voice and outlook, adding depth and diversity to the storytelling. This variation in perspective reflects different aspects of the African-American experience, emphasizing the diversity within the community. Through these differing viewpoints, the novel challenges societal beauty standards and dominant narratives, particularly by presenting Claudia's resistance to the cultural pressures to conform to white ideals of beauty. Claudia's narrative critiques the damaging effects of these standards, positioning her voice as a counterpoint to the prevailing beauty norms.

The multiple narrators also enable the novel to examine the pervasive impact of racism from various perspectives. This technique allows readers to understand how racism affects individuals at different points in their lives, from childhood to adulthood. Each narrator's experience contributes to a

deeper insight into the emotional and psychological toll of racial prejudice. Through this narrative structure, Morrison underscores the interconnectedness of the characters within the African-American community, illustrating that Pecola's tragic story is not isolated but part of a larger shared narrative of struggles and experiences.

The use of multiple narrators in *The Bluest Eye* also introduces the idea of unreliable narration. Each narrator brings their own biases, misunderstandings, or limited viewpoints, emphasizing the subjectivity of truth and showing that the same events can be perceived differently by different people. These shifting perspectives encourage readers to become more active participants, as they must piece together the various accounts to form a fuller understanding of the story. This approach promotes critical thinking, prompting readers to engage with the text more deeply.

The Bluest Eye evolves from a simple narrative into a powerful poetic exploration, questioning the very nature of beauty and the consequences faced by those who do not conform to conventional ideals. The obsession with beauty, a constant throughout history, underscores the lasting relevance of this novel, set in the 1940s, and its continued resonance with contemporary audiences.

As we delve into the complex world of Morrison's literature, we witness how *The Bluest Eye* stands as a landmark in literary history, incorporating by a thematic harmony that extends beyond the individual plots. Through this exploration, readers are invited to discover the depth of Morrison's intertextual and polyphonic craftsmanship, recognizing the novel's the profound and lasting impact on African American literature.

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