

The Causes of Pecola's Tragedy in *The Bluest Eye* from the Perspective of Feminism

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Abstract

The Bluest Eye is a masterpiece published in 1970 by the famous American writer Toni Morrison, which has received widespread attention and acclaim. The novel is based on a tragic story of a black girl, Pecola physically and mentally cruelly crushed under the heat of white aesthetic standards, and it is famous for its outstanding feminist vision. Through the concept of intersectionality in feminist theory proposed by Kimberle Crenshaw, this study analyses the research results on feminism and *The Bluest Eye* at home and abroad. As an important tool for critiquing sexism and revealing social inequality, feminist theory can provide strong support for in-depth analyses of the causes of Pecola's tragedy. Through this intersectional theoretical framework, this paper reveals how patriarchal society oppresses women, especially black women, through distorted standards of beauty, gender roles, and family functioning, forcing them to give up their self-identity and pursue unattainable white standards of beauty, thus leading to the tragedy. Through these analyses, this paper reveals that Pecola's tragedy stems from the interaction between the individual and the social structure, embodying the deep-seated contradictions between gender, race, and social class. The aim of this paper is to explore the causes of Pecola's tragedy in *The Bluest Eye* by employing documentary and textual analysis methods. In terms of internal factors, Pecola's identity fragmentation under intersectional oppression and the internalization of white aesthetic standards are explored; while external factors cover the impact of domestic violence (e.g. the violence of her father, Cholly, and the indifference of her mother, Pauline) as well as the social structural oppression (including the intersection of gender and racial discrimination) on her fate. By analyzing these causes in detail, this paper not only shows the tragedy of Pecola's personal fate but also reveals the injustice and prejudice of the entire social structure. Finally, this study digs deeper into the feminist ideology embodied in *The Bluest Eye*, especially by analyzing the theory of intersectionality from a perspective of feminism, and calls on all sectors of society to face up to and commit to the elimination of racial and gender discrimination, and to work together to promote the construction of a more just and inclusive social environment.

Keywords

Feminism, *The Bluest Eye*, Pecola, Tragedy, Intersectionality

Introduction

As an important text in the feminist literary critical rhetoric, *The Bluest Eye* narrates racial as well as gender and identity struggles. The thesis focuses on how Pecola walks through her story as an African American girl while digesting white beauty standards until her psychological collapse and foreshadowed end. This study applies intersectionality theory to explore how situations of racial constraint combined with gender domination result in Pecola's mental disintegration. It also highlights the constant cycle between the mental oppression they

face and the violence they experience every day. In accordance with feminist theory, environmental influences compel Pecola to accept her absence of self-identity and to search for beauty in a manner which represents societal oppression. Women, and especially those from an ethnic background, are pressured into wearing masks on top of masks to suppress the authentic self. Two main external forces that cause Pecola to suffer more are first from her abusive father Cholly, and emotionally distant mother Pauline, and second by the

vast racial and gender discrimination that exist in society. Using the concept of intersectionality in feminist theory, this research shows that oppression at both personal and cultural levels can and must be attended to. The aim of the research is to broaden knowledge on how patriarchal institutions have contributed to the marginalization of Black women and at the same time advocate for a varied social response in the fight against gender inequity issues along racial discrimination.

Background

The Bluest Eye by Toni Morrison stands as a key work of American literature that commands large attention from both feminist and post-colonial scholars. The novel attracts wide interest because it deeply investigates gender and racial concerns specifically related to the experiences of Black women who live in a Eurocentric-dominated society. The narrative follows Pecola Breedlove as she lives in the early 20th century United States where she wishes for blue eyes to achieve beauty and acceptance despite dominating racial discrimination. Through Pecola's tragic narrative, Morrison critiques the ways in which white beauty ideals are internalized by those marginalized by race and gender, ultimately leading to destructive consequences [1].

The novel has primarily been studied using concepts of colonialism and race relations together with psychological trauma analysis, but scholars increasingly advocate for feminist approaches to *The Bluest Eye*. Feminist theory enables critical exploration of the parallel discrimination Pecola experiences because of her race and gender aspects. Patricia Hill Collins explains how race and gender interactions produce Pecola's damaged self-esteem and create negative influences on both her social interactions along with family dynamics which intensify her suffering [2]. This research evaluates Pecola's internal identity struggles alongside familial and sociocultural external forces which result in her tragic destiny.

The tragedy of *The Bluest Eye* does not lie in the oppression of one aspect of gender or race, but the intersection of varied social identities (race, gender, class). Kimberle Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality is an important analytical tool for this [3]. Crenshaw notes that the traditional feminist theory is likely to focus on experiences of the white women without

consideration of the overlapping effects of the other identities like race and class in oppression of the women. Pecola's identity as a poor black girl is marginalized in the intersection of patriarchy, white supremacy and economic inequality. Her tragedy is not simply the result of individual decision-making but an imposition of her subjectivity by social structures via intersectional violence. As intersectionality theory aptly demonstrates, Pecola's pursuit of blue eyes is at its essence a double colonization of the bodies and psyches of black women by the aesthetic prejudices of the dominant white race, while the brutality and neglect of the Breedloves' family offer an example of differential oppression of black men and women by racialized patriarchy.

Purpose and research questions

This research investigates the elements that cause Pecola's downfall in *The Bluest Eye* using feminist theory which explores the dynamics between gender and race and social elements. The research investigates both external elements and internal causes to provide integrated knowledge about Pecola's pain as well as the implications for related social matters. The study investigates gender and racial discrimination which determines the tragic nature of her fate. The analysis uses the feminist framework to investigate these elements which expand knowledge about related social phenomena.

There are the two main research questions in this study: (1) How do internal factors contribute to Pecola's tragedy in *The Bluest Eye* under feminist theory? (2) How do external factors contribute to Pecola's tragedy in *The Bluest Eye* under feminist theory?

Approach

This study conducts a documentary method through textual analysis as its approach to address research objectives alongside research questions. The research utilizes the documentary method to consult academic sources such as books and journals and articles for contextual and theoretical support. The researchers examine *The Bluest Eye* through an exhaustive textual analysis by investigating important narrative elements and character dynamics and symbolic textual symbolism. The combined evaluation of external and internal elements through these two research approaches delivers a complete analysis that demonstrates Pecola's decline.

Literature review

The feminist movement began in the late 18th century as thinkers like Mary Wollstonecraft used her 1792 work *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* to advocate for education as women's path toward liberation [3]. The evolution of feminist theory resulted in liberal, radical and socialist feminism which study power relationships and social frameworks that maintain gender inequality. *The Second Sex* by shows how women function as social others under patriarchal structures because Beauvoir explains gender to be a product of social construction. Modern feminism tackles multiple cross-sectional problems linked to racial status and economic status as well as sexual identity to achieve equal opportunities for women and social justice in politics [4].

Toni Morrison considers *The Bluest Eye* to be a cornerstone text in African American literature and feminist literary studies. The release of this book attracted extensive academic interest in both the author and the work, as it examined the intersection of race and gender as well as racial beauty standards within the context of racial segregation. Through the character of Pecola Breedlove, Morrison critiques how societal ideals of whiteness and beauty impact Black women's identities and sense of self-worth [5]. *The Bluest Eye* has been researched in its literature using feminist approaches in the last five decades in scholarly research that looks into the interconnected racial, gender and economic constructs in studying Pecola Breedlove's oppressive social environment.

For the first time, feminist reviews in the 1970s and 1980s looked at how Morrison portrayed the harmful effects of white beauty standards on Black women through his novel [6]. Barbara Christian was one of the first to write about the literary work of Morrison in an attempt to discover how the novel revealed the mental problems caused by racial and sex oppression. Christian then examined Pecola's psychological condition as a symbolic representation of the obsession she had with her white eye, or the desire for the elimination of her Blackness. The study by Patricia Hill Collins, a sociology professor at University of Maryland, has been very important for the research of racial and gender dynamics in *The Bluest Eye*. In her 1990 work *Black Feminist Thought*, Collins used *The Bluest Eye* as an example of

the dual oppression of Black women by both racism and sexism. Collins' intersectional approach helps researchers to see that Pecola's suffering comes from being marginalized as both a woman and a black woman because she is subjected to notions of patriarchal and white supremacist ideals that make her disappear and worthless.

It is only after that, in feminist studies, that intersectionality emerged as a core method of the study of *The Bluest Eye*, following legal expert Kimberle Crenshaw's introduction of the term at Columbia University in 1989. Crenshaw is able to build upon intersectional theory, which enables scholars to analyze the suffering of Pecola as a poor Black girl, since the oppressions of race, gender and class are united to create intensified suffering. By utilizing the analytical framework, researchers can explore the identity crisis that Pecola encounters because she suffers from marginalization as different social forces tend to unite.

The internal causes of Pecola's tragedy

Chapter 3 examines how Pecola's fragmented identity under intersectional oppression and beauty standards as sites of intersectional violence are primarily driven by internal struggles. Not only is the tragedy of Pecola one produced by external pressure from society and racial discrimination, but it is exacerbated by her internal sense of self crisis. With the lenses of the intersectional feminist theory, the author can see Pecola's slow development of self-conflict and self-denial, with the predicament of oppression on gender, race and social class impelling her.

Fragmented identity under intersectional oppression

Intersectional feminist theory initiated by Kimberle Crenshaw strives to reveal how various identities such as race, gender, class are intertwined and work in order to form the image of how life should be lived. While traditional feminist theory narrows the focus to one dimension of oppression, such as oppression based on gender, intersectional feminism argues that an individual's social identity is the interweaving of multiple oppressions. These systems of oppression interact with each other and work together to determine how an individual experiences the world.

It's especially relevant in the context of the Pecola's case because not only because she is, in fact, a woman, but

also a woman of origin which is simply black, and it is the intersection of gender and racial oppression that works out tragedy for the woman. Intersectionality in feminism allows us to see that Pecola's identity conflict does not only come from her social status as a woman but there is a large influence deriving from her social role and social perception being a black woman. These racial discrimination and gender roles in society directly relate to her inner conflict and her identity crisis.

Based on intersectional feminism, the author can unveil Pecola's identity conundrum at the intersection of gender, race and social class. Through her racial and gender identity she is subjected to a double oppression at both levels of society and family, and Pecola is unable to acknowledge herself in the black woman because of these oppressions and instead rests her self-identity on the standard that the white society advocates.

As Morrison writes: "The Breedloves did not live in a storefront because they were having temporary difficulty adjusting to the cutbacks at the plant. They lived there because they were poor and black, and they stayed there because they believed they were ugly. Although their poverty was traditional and stultifying, it was not unique. But their ugliness was unique [7]." Kimberle Crenshaw's intersectionality framework charts rationales, upon which intersecting kinds of oppression (race, gender, class) inflict certain psychological pains on marginalized individuals. This section outlines how these intersecting identities split up her sense of self.

Internalized racial, gendered and class-based dehumanization, this passage reveals. The Breedloves' conviction on their "ugliness" is based on the intersection of their race (Blackness as socially inferior), gender (Black femininity as insufferably unattractive) and class (poverty as a sign of defeat). Crenshaw's theory describes the way in which marginalized groups internalize systemic hierarchies as personal truths [8]. When Pecola adopts this "ugliness" the author can see her fractured identity - she internalizes the hate that occurs when her Blackness and her poverty are held up by society, seeing herself through a lens of shame.

Beauty standards as sites of intersectional violence

The purity and perfection itself dominate American society as its standard of white beauty and on its images the superiority, purity and perfection are often put into

evidence. For black women, this standard of beauty goes beyond sociocultural term of beauty. It also involves great levels of entrenched forms of racial discrimination and gender oppression as a form of intersectional violence. Intersectional feminist theory gives us an analytical framework to help us understand how white aesthetics themselves become internalized oppression of black women on the backdrop of intersectional gender and racial oppression.

Skin colour, eye colour, hairstyle and body type is usually used to define beauty, and such people are perceived to be more valuable and attractive to society. Pecola's desire for blue eyes in *The Bluest Eye* is an internalized form of white aesthetics that identify her as an absentee citizen who has endorsed a society's ideal of beauty. The intersectionality theory informs us that this internalized norm of beauty is not just a mere extrinsic requirement of a beauty but intense form of psychological enslavement that makes Pecola to be all the time in a denial of who she is as a black woman and inability to come to terms with her uniqueness as a black woman.

Morrison describes: "Each night, without fail, she prayed for blue eyes. Fervently, for a year she had prayed. Although somewhat discouraged, she was not without hope. To have something as wonderful as that happen would take a long, long time." Pecola's daily prayers exemplify internalized misogynoir - racism from those towards those, the distinctive oppression of Black women that can only be experienced by the Black women because of both resentments. It is a longing for blue eyes that follows the imbibing of white beauty ideals, which equate whiteness with humanity. Crenshaw's framework develops the process through which such standards weaponize race and gender to scourge identities of the marginalized [9].

Furthermore: "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." This statement reveals intersectional self-negation. Pecola identifies physical transformation (blue eyes) with existential change revealing how white beauty standards blank out her Black and female self. Crenshaw's theory identifies the effects of system of oppression of forcing

the oppressed to disown their identities for survival. Pecola's faith in "beauty" requiring whiteness is an example of psychological violence of intersectional norms.

The external causes of Pecola's tragedy

In Chapter 4, the focus shifts to the external causes of Pecola's tragedy, particularly her family violence and social structural oppression. The combination of patriarchal abuse from her father Cholly with racist and classist prejudice and her mother's racially and economically influenced neglect drives Pecola to believe she deserves worthlessness. Pecola's psychological distress intensifies because her surroundings prevent her from recognizing any worth in herself.

Family violence: The intersection of patriarchy and motherhood

Pecola experienced at home serves as the main force which shaped both her self-identity and the tragic events which followed. The lack of value caused by Cholly and Pauline Breedlove creates a fundamental worthlessness inside Pecola. The conflicts of marital relationships along with their personal challenges arising from racial, gender and class oppression lead to Pecola's destructive sense of self.

In the case of Kimberle Crenshaw's concept of intersectional feminism, it takes a look at how both race and gender as well as race and class have been left out of such frameworks and as a consequence have resulted in specific marginalization experiences of both gender and race. *The Bluest Eye* is based on Cholly's experience as a powerless black man, and he has to prove his authority to patriarchy by committing violent acts. The violence on Pecola is the most extreme violence in the novel because violence against Pecola is double oppression from when race and gender are both oppressive.

Cholly became a hate filled Black man because the discriminatory circumstances in which he was disempowered caused him to stop believing he was esteemed by society and financially security and personal value. Using Kimberle Crenshaw's intersectional feminism, theft of oppression sources, such as racism and patriarchy, means double discrimination on marginalized people in different forms. This is because in a racist society, Black men have been denied a societal role, and as such Cholly expresses his own powerlessness by

abusing his daughter Pecola and every other individual with less social status than him.

Morrison writes: "Cholly picked her up and knocked her down with the back of his hand. She fell in a sitting position, her back supported by Sammy's bed frame... Dropping to his knee, he struck her several times in the face." The violent act duplicates his experience when white men humiliated him in earlier years thus transferring his feeling of powerlessness due to racism into patriarchal violence.

Pauline's emotional neglect toward Pecola emerges from the combined effects of racial discrimination with traditional gender norms and social class competition. Morrison notes: "Pauline loved her white employers, loved their house and their children, but she hated her own life and her own children." Pauline works in a household where she faces both racist discrimination against Black laborers and societal dismissal of motherhood duties because her employment as a domestic servant suppresses both her caretaker role and her racial identity [10].

Crenshaw's intersectionality theory highlights how systemic oppression operates through interconnected axes of race, gender, and class. Pauline's emotional burnout stems from her dual role as a Black domestic worker (racialized labor) and a mother (gendered responsibility), which exhausts her capacity to nurture Pecola. Through her chosen affection for white children and her separation from Pecola she demonstrates the harm caused by racial internalization and structural discrimination which impacts her entire life.

Social structural oppression

The Intersection of racial discrimination and gender discrimination functions as a vital social factor in *The Bluest Eye* that contributes to Pecola's tragic development. As both Black girl and female she suffers from doubled discrimination that leaves her highly susceptible to societal forces that devalue her worth.

The school's exclusion of Pecola stems from her identity as a Black girl which the racist society marginalizes both her racial background and her gender. To be both Black and female at the predominantly white institution marginalizes Pecola even more when she fails to conform to gendered beauty standards.

Through Kimberle Crenshaw's intersectionality theory Pecola becomes isolated because she holds both Black and girl identities thus her loneliness reaches its peak. Pecola faces heightened discrimination because of how her race and gender intersect which results in experiences distinct from those who face discrimination based on only one identity. Race distinguishes Pecola from others, but her gender intensifies the way people treat her.

Morrison describes the bullying Pecola experiences: "Black e mo. Black e mo. Ya daddy sleeps nekked. Black e mo black e mo ya dadd sleeps nekked." The bullying Pecola experiences at school demonstrates how educational institutions perpetuate racial order in society. Through their repeated use of the derogatory phrase "Black e mo" the children turn Pecola's identity into a racial insult and with "Ya daddy sleep snekked" they use gendered humiliation as a weapon. The schoolyard incident illustrates systemic oppression by degrading Pecola both through racial abuse with the slur and through humiliating sexual gestures.

The community's scapegoating is also significant: "We were so beautiful when we stood astride her ugliness. Her simplicity decorated us, her guilt sanctified us, her pain made us glow with health... We honed our egos on her, padded our characters with her frailty, and yawned in the fantasy of our strength." Black community members choose Pecola as their scapegoat which shows how racism gets internalized to sustain racial hierarchy.

Conclusion

This thesis uses Kimberle Crenshaw's intersectional feminist theory to examine the roots of the tragedy of Pecola Breedlove in the *The Bluest Eye*, both internal and external. Pecola's psychological collapse is a product of the systemic interaction between racial, gendered and class-based oppressions which disintegrate her identity and strip away her humanity.

Pecola's tragedy internally is based on her internal absorption of white supremacist norms of beauty. Her addictions to blue eyes represent the erasure of black femininity under intersectional violence, where race and gender act as agents of self-hatred. The novel depicts how such oppression she internalizes destroys her agency, turning her into passive prey to contempt of the society around.

From the outside, familial and societal structures compound her pain. Cholly's predominantly patriarchal violence and Pauline's emotional abandonment or inattention is rooted in racial emasculation and economic exploitation respectively as well as perceived racism from within and shaped their domestic life from systemic inequality. Aside from the family, Pecola is the victim of society's neglect driven by colorism and misogynoir, which sets her undone into the community that earns her alienation.

Intersectional feminism shows that Pecola's tragedy is not a personal mistake, but a larger system itself. Her mental breakdown reveals the cumulative damage done by frameworks that seek to undervalue black girlhood. The narrated story by Morrison prompts readers into confronting the lasting effects of racism, patriarchy, and classism. This study calls for intersectional methods to break down oppressive systems and voice emerging marginalized voices. Future research could develop this framework to include globalized expressions of intersectional violence to make sure that Black women and girls recover their voice and personhood.

Funding

This work was not supported by any funds.

Acknowledgements

The author would like to show sincere thanks to those techniques who have contributed to this research.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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