



RESEARCH PAPER

Exploring Racial Injustice in Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* and *a Mercy*

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ABSTRACT

The main objective of this article is to examine the racial injustice as portrayed in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1970) and *A Mercy* (2008) with a specific focus on the experiences of Black individuals in American society. Using Critical Race Theory (CRT) as a theoretical framework and employing qualitative research methods. This study meticulously explores the depiction and resistance of racial injustice in Morrison's narratives. This research explores the unique struggles faced by characters like Pecola and Florens. When they make efforts in the face of the difficulties of self-identity in the societal norms of both White and Black communities. By emphasizing themes of racial identity, oppression, and belonging, this research uncovers the intricate layers of systemic racism deeply ingrained in American social structures. It also delineates various forms of racial injustice depicted in the novels, ranging from overt acts of discrimination to more subtle manifestations of structural oppression.

KEYWORDS Critical Race Theory, Gender and Class, Race, Racial Injustice, Self-identity

Introduction

Learning literature is an important aspect of understanding life itself. Literature is an expression of life conveyed through the art of language. In fact, literature is the reflection of life and it offers vital perceptions on the experiences of human life. It is said that literature springs from the soil of life. It suggests us another method to experience and view the world around us through the lens of our powerful imagination. Primarily, literature is directly connected with human life which makes human life beautiful and colorful. According to Reichert (1977), "The forms of literature are the forms of life". Moreover, literature also serves as a feasible means to address crucial social problems and issues like gender discrimination, class distinction, violence, racism and racial injustice. According to Janken (2010) racial injustice was a system designed by white Americans to keep African Americans unequal and separate from them. Morrison also illustrates such sort of themes of racial injustice and the struggle of African American women in her novels especially in *The Bluest Eye* (1970) and *A Mercy* (2008).

Toni Morrison is one of the eminent literary figures and American novelists of the present times. She noted down her novel, *The Bluest Eye* (1970) in 1970 which addresses the impacts of racism and racial injustice and in a racially divided society. In *The Bluest Eye* (1970) Morrison utilizes Pecola's experiences to bring to light to the deep rooted issues of racial injustice and standards of beauty in African American community. She employs a variety of narrative techniques to reveal the story of Pecola. The main character of the novel Pecola Breedlove, is a powerful emblem of the struggle of the African American society.

Pecola's longing for blue eyes and efforts, she renders to match to the society's narrow definition of beauty standards are met with harsh criticism and leave deep rooted emotional fears. *The Bluest Eye* (1970) is a discerning commentary on the effects of colorism and racism, which shows the struggles confronted by black women and community as a whole. Her masterful storytelling in *The Bluest Eye* (1970) serves as a testament to her literary talent and offers heartrending and enlightening prospective on the hard challenges posed by racial injustice and beauty standards in the African American community. Toni Morrison wrote down her novel, *A Mercy* (2008), which was published in 2008. The book is set in colonial America during the late seventeenth century and which explores the theme of racial injustice in a unique way. Through this novel she presents the themes of racial slavery, the superiority of upper class to lower class, and white race's attitude towards other races, social and economic issues, and the struggle of black women in the new world. This novel reveals the heartbreaking tale of young black girl named Florens whose mother sells her and she is shifted to a farmhouse to reside with others in the same economic class. Regardless of their racial differences, they all face racial injustice and gender discrimination at the hands of dominant class. Their past life and life lessons educate Florens to struggle for her identity. The authoress presents the real picture of racial injustice through the characters mainly focusing on women characters and their struggles in the aforesaid novel. The above cited novels by Morrison depict the persistent racial injustice that serves as a tool to demoralize the recognition and respect of the black community. Morrison expertly exposes the ways in which the black community particularly black women are suppressed by the white male dominant community. Morrison highlights the complexities of racial injustice and the negative impact it can have on individuals and communities' alike. Her writings are bear witness to the lasting power of literature to address the most crucial issues of the contemporary world.

All human beings have equal rights to live their lives freely and happily. They are endowed with equal privileges, respect, and dignity. However, inequality still persists due to issues of gender discrimination, racial injustice, and class conflict. Among these, racial injustice stands out as a deeply rooted problem which is affecting people worldwide. This study focuses on Toni Morrison's novels, *The Bluest Eye* (1970) and *A Mercy* (2008) and which illustrate the issue of racial injustice. These novels also show how racial discrimination affects the lives of others, and how it defines white internalized beauty in the African American community. In both novels, *The Bluest Eye* (1970) and *A Mercy* (2008), Pecola and Florens, the main characters, struggle for self-recognition. The study aims to explore their traumatic experiences and present an accurate portrayal of racial injustice in African American society. The following questions have been raised to be addressed in this research article.

Literature Review

According to Omi and Winant (1994), the word race may be explained a kind of "a concept which means to utilize the human body as a powerful symbol to reflect tensions, social conflicts and shared interests." (p. 55). These bodies are organized in a communally established grouping of phenotype, such as their hair texture, race, skin color and class in a particular historical epoch. The crucial insight here is that race is not exclusively a social created phenomenon but also symbolizes the efforts of dominant groups for authority and identity. Whereas, ethnicity is frequently used alternately for race, normally it symbolizes the common ethnicity rather than social supremacy of the groups.

Diangelo (2018), articulated that he had just completed presenting a description of racism which admits the cultural and social supremacy of whites over the black people. (p. 1). According to Schaefer (2008), racism is commonly understood as practices, beliefs and

actions which reflect the racial worldview, and it is a deep-seated ideology that divides humans into distinct and exclusive biological groups and it is termed as “races.” In her doctoral thesis titled “White's Racism Faced by Afro-Americans Depicted in Sue Monk Kidd's *The Secret Life of Bees*”, Laili (2007), discusses instances of racism experienced by Afro-Americans, specifically focusing on Negro Afro-Americans. Her research probes into the oppression faced by this community, emphasizing the impact of racial discrimination that leads to the marginalization of Negro Afro-Americans by the White population.

Nisar Ahmad Mohd Mir & et al (2018), authored an article titled “Racism: Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*(1970) a Mouthpiece of Colored People”, wherein they assert that racism basically entails a conviction in the supremacy of one race over another, leading to inequality and prejudice against communities based on their ethnicity or race (Nisar et al., p. 939-940). They argue that racism today encompasses a broader sense of ideology, wherein human beings are divided into different groups based on societal norms and inherent capabilities, often leading to the categorization of individuals as good or bad. Morrison's novel, *The Bluest Eye* (1970) is widely recognized for its exploration of racism. In her paper titled “Persuasive Strategies towards Racial Appeal in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*,” Shabani (2017) not only addresses the racism depicted in the novel but also examines the persuasive strategies employed to illuminate the racial themes within the narrative. Shabani reveals novel aspects which highlighting that the racism depicted in “*The Bluest Eye*” by Morrison is effectively conveyed through clear dialogues. The societal dynamics concerning white individuals are articulated through logos, and the narrator's emotions in the novel, representing the sentiments of black individuals towards the white community, include feelings of anger, fear, and hatred. Abbas (2023), posits that Toni Morrison's *A Mercy* (2008), unfolds within a historical American backdrop marked by the rigid delineation of racial boundaries in society. The narrative introduces a spectrum of women characters, each originating from diverse social strata. Abbas further contends that during this period, the identity of being black became intertwined with the institution of slavery and impacted the religious convictions of society, wherein blacks were unjustly recognized as malevolent. In the article, Abbas asserts that Morrison scrutinizes the lives of black slave-women and positioning them primarily as subjects, subordinate to white individuals who claim racial superiority. These women bear the dual burden of their gender, confronting both the oppressive consequences of their gender and their inferior status in the racial hierarchy. Many enslaved women lose their individual identities, becoming victims of prolonged sexual and physical exploitation by both their masters and society at large. Abbas emphasizes that their perpetual victimization is rooted in their subordinate position based on gender, race, and color. Morrison's writings draw extensively from personal experiences and keen observations and the main focus is to highlighting the challenges and issues faced by black Americans, particularly African American women.

Abbas contends that in *A Mercy* (2008), all the female characters are shaped by prescribed roles enforced by the patriarchal structure. These women lack the autonomy to operate beyond the confines of sexist policies defined by figures such as D'Ortega and Jacob Vaark. Their existence is dependent upon their willingness to fulfill roles such as wives, concubines, or plantation laborers which reinforce a societal structure dictated by gender norms. This review examines how Morrison depicts racial injustice in her novels *The Bluest Eye* (1970) and *A Mercy* (2008). By analyzing a variety of scholarly perspectives, this paper establishes a robust framework to understand the complex relationship between race, identity, and power in Morrison's literary works. These novels go beyond fiction to reflect historical struggles and contemporary challenges facing marginalized groups. The findings of this review offer a basis for further exploration of racial injustice in literature and its societal implications.

Material and Methods

Design of the Study and Theoretical Framework

The researcher intends to utilize a Qualitative methodology, employing textual analysis as the primary analytical tool. To identify systematic findings, a descriptive method is employed. Qualitative research is a widely recognized research method that is frequently employed in the social sciences, humanities, and some natural sciences. Its primary objective is to investigate, explain, comprehend, and interpret, the complexities of human behavior, experience and phenomena in their natural settings. This method uses non numerical data such as words, phrases, sentences, discourses, images, and observations, and employed textual analysis to uncover patterns and themes in the data. Additionally, the phrase Qualitative method denotes to a study that offers descriptive data from people s printed or verbal words, and from perceptible activities of the people in the broadest perspective. According to Bogdan and Bikiein (1977, p.2), "Qualitative research might be exercised as the most important method for gathering information , or in connection with examination, text analysis or any new method". Creswell (2012), explains Qualitative research as examining a problem and gaining thorough information about it. The researcher aims to provide a thorough and a detailed analysis of racial injustice portrayed in Toni Morrison's literary works specifically *The Bluest Eye* (1970) and *A Mercy* (2008). Through a descriptive analysis, this research will contribute a deeper comprehension of the prevalent issues of discrimination, racial injustice and racism as depicted in the aforesaid novels of Toni Morrison. This study will utilize Critical Race Theory (CRT) as a theoretical framework to examine racial injustice in Toni Morrison's novels, *The Bluest Eye* (1970) and *Mercy* (2008). Critical Race Theory which came out in the field of legal studies in the late 20th century and has since been applied to different fields which comprised of literature, sociology, and education, to determine the intersectionality of gender , race, and social structures.

Key texts in the development of CRT include the writings of academics like Bell (1989) Delgado and Stefencic (2001), and Crenshaw (1989). Critical race theory (CRT) is a movement led by scholars and activists who look at how race, racism, and power affect people of Color in society and institutions. They say these systems often give advantages to White people and reinforce ideas of Whiteness. Back in the 1970s, lawyers like Derrick Bell, Alan Freeman, and Richard Delgado started this movement as part of critical legal studies. They were worried that even though the Civil Rights Movement had made progress, things were still unfair for marginalized groups. They argued that legal and civil systems claiming to be fair to everyone actually helped white supremacy to keep going and oppress those who were already struggling (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Matsuda, 1991; Zorn, 2018). Delgado (2001) argues that traditional legal scholarship and mainstream narratives have overlooked the viewpoints and experiences of black people. In Critical Race Theory (CRT), stories are key to grasping and challenging how race and racism intersect with other forms of oppression, shaping the lives of marginalized communities (p. 45). By honoring and learning from the narratives of marginalized groups, CRT enables a deeper comprehension of how race and racism influence society (pp. 45-46). The central concepts of CRT include the social construction of race, structural racism, counter-storytelling, and intersectionality. These are different forms of oppression that intersect and interact with each other. CRT puts a great emphasis on the significance of amplifying the strangulated voices and experiences of marginalized communities and challenging dominant narratives. By applying this theory, we can better comprehend the injustices exist in society. Through analysis how racism operates in laws, education, and narratives, we can observe its impact on non-white people. CRT highlights the need of listening to the experiences of those who are treated unfairly, and questioning the stories we are told.

When this theory is applied to Morrison's books, readers become able to know and understand the struggles of characters who encounter racial injustice, social class issues and gender discrimination. Through exploring these themes a just and more equitable communities can be ensured and created for all irrespective of religion, race, gender and class.

Results and Discussion

Toni Morrison, born on 18 February 1931, in Lorain, Ohio. She rose in the American Midwest in a family deeply rooted in African American culture. Despite facing racism, her family thrived in a steel-mill town. Morrison's career as a celebrated author, renowned for her impactful storytelling about African American experiences, culminated in winning both Nobel Prize for Literature and Pulitzer Prize. Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1970), accomplishes a lot of the objectives of Critical Race Theory. Morrison in *The Bluest Eye* (1970), finds out instants of racial injustice which bears out that racism is "a normal, not abnormal or unusual fact of everyday life in American society" (Taylor, 2010, p. 122). All over, *The Bluest Eye* (1970), characters face racial injustice to a great extent. Pecola confronts racial injustice in a racist society that can be seen in the attack on Pecola by a group of boys at school. In this passage the authoress shows that their own disregard for blackness caused their mean behavior:

"Black e mo. Black e mo. Yadaddsleepsnekked. Black e mo black e moyadadd sleeps nekked. Black e mo ..." (Morrison, 1970, p. 65).

Thus, this above given example accentuates how internalized racism can manifest as cruelty in marginalized communities. Although, sharing the same racial identity as Pecola, the boys' disparaging actions towards her highlights their own internalized contempt for their blackness. This cycle of internalized racism perpetuates racial injustice in communities, promoting an atmosphere where individuals harbor contempt for their own racial identity and perpetuate harm onto others who belong to the same marginalized class. Morrison's landmark novel, *The Bluest Eye* (1970), challenges the conservative idea of the typical American family subjugated by white people. The novel embarks on questioning the idealized household structure, leading to a poignant examination of racial inequality and its devastating effects. The opening pages of the book read:

"Here is the house. It is green and white. It has a red door. It is very pretty. Here is the family. Mother, Father, Dick, and Jane live in the green-and-white house...Do you want to play with Jane?" (Morrison, 1970, p. 3)

In the above mentioned passage Morrison draws the sketch of a "nuclear family" in her novel *The Bluest Eye* (1970), Morrison puts questions before the readers to face the idealistic and racially prejudiced society which she condemns and, throws light on the pervasive presence of racial injustice. However, the above said example is lucid and plain, yet it indicates at the greater communal forces that Morrison's characters persistently face is racial injustice. The idealism depicted in Dick and Jane's very beautiful house and "glad" family shows a strong picture of "ideal" house in the mentioned book. She even by taking this picture of a white middle-class American ideal and deconstructs it poetically as well as draws attention to its continuation of racial injustice, racism and discrimination. In Morrison's portrayal of the "perfect" white family in a "pretty" house; she subtly reveals the racial biases in societal ideals. By only showing white characters and implying that happiness is exclusive to them, the passage perpetuates a narrow view of family life. This exclusion of non-white families reinforces stereotypes and marginalizes diverse experiences. Thus, while seemingly innocent, the passage serves as a commentary on

systemic racism, emphasizing the need for broader representation and recognition of diverse families to combat racial injustice. One of the most damaging encounters Pecola has which occurs with Mr. Yacobowski whose eyes are rather unresponsive. The narrator asserts:

“At some unchanging point in time he imagines that he must not waste the effort of a glimpse. He cannot 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.” (Morrison, 2007, p. 48)

The mirror of Mr. Yacobowski's eyes and those of other white people become the inverted reflection through which Pecola sees herself and the world. (Morrison, 2007, p. 115) Thus, this passage illuminates one of the most damaging encounters Pecola has, occurring with Mr. Yacobowski, whose unresponsive eyes serve as a mirror reflecting society's racial injustice and devaluation of blackness. Through this encounter and others like it, Pecola internalizes society's message that her blackness is unworthy of acknowledgment or respect. Mr. Yacobowski's gaze, devoid of recognition or empathy, symbolizes the broader systemic racial injustice that perpetuates the erasure of black identity and reinforces Pecola's sense of insignificance. Pecola's conviction that one's worldview is determined by the color of one's eyes reflects her deep-seated psychological beliefs. For nine years, she fervently appeals to God for "pretty eyes, pretty blue eyes," viewing them as a pathway to redemption (Morrison, 1970, p. 34). This belief underscores her innocence and vulnerability, particularly in her youth. The most profoundly damaging interracial encounter Pecola experiences is with Geraldine, When Pecola goes to Geraldine's residence on the call of her son. Geraldine orders her to get out of her house by call her with names, “... You , little black bitch. Get out of my house” (Morrison, 1970, p. 54). Pecola's desire for blue eyes shows how racial injustice can deeply affect black women due to their race and skin color. Her interactions with characters like Geraldine highlight how hurtful words and actions can make people believe they are inferior because of their skin color, race and class. Pecola's story makes us think about how society's standards of beauty can be unfair and how racism can harm someone's sense of self-worth. It challenges us to confront racial injustice and its lasting impact on individuals and communities.

A Mercy (2008) vividly exposes the entrenched racial injustice of slavery during America's colonization era, offering insights into the social conditions of the time. The narrative unveils the dehumanization faced by African women and slaves at large, initially treated as mere commodities subject to trade and bargaining. This systemic discrimination later evolves into compounded racial and gender-based injustice against black women in the society. As slaves were forcibly taken from their African homelands, many experiencing their first departure from familiar territory, they were enveloped in confusion and terror. Florens' mother poignantly tells their harrowing journey on the cramped ship; where the unfamiliar skin tones of fellow captives add to their disorientation and distress. She says that their journey was fraught pains and untold sufferings, they were confined to very small rooms with no facility of cleanliness. Their journey was too horrible to stand up and face the pain

“I preferred the sharks but they turned down me as if knowing I preferred their teeth to the chains around my neck my waist my ankles...” (Morrison, 2008, p.164)

Moreover, Minha Mae says that the voyage was very horrible and she desired to be swallowed by fishes rather than to be in the boat to reach the shore with chains that strangled her freedom. In Toni Morrison's *A Mercy* (2008) the profound impact of racial

injustice is vividly illustrated through the character of Minha Mae, a black mother whose heart-wrenching plight epitomizes the struggles faced by African American women during the era of slavery. When faced with the harrowing prospect of separation from her child, Minha Mae implores the slave owner, "Please, Take my child. Not me" (Morrison, 2008, p. 26) It encapsulates the painful choices forced upon black mothers within the dehumanizing institution of slavery. Morrison's narrative poignantly captures the constricting contradictions imposed upon black mothers, highlighting the pervasive nature of racial injustice in American society. Furthermore, Angela Davis, in her analysis presented in "Women, Race, and Class," sheds light on Morrison's nuanced portrayal of motherhood, asserting that Morrison's works "problematize the mother, rather than romanticize her" (Davis, 1981, p. 145).

Davis underscores how Morrison's narratives reveal the multifaceted challenges confronted by black women within a racist culture, echoing the complexities depicted in Minha Mae's desperate plea. Florens' mother experienced profound racial injustice upon her arrival in America. She was immediately sold into slavery, becoming a mere commodity for landowners seeking unpaid laborers. This exploitation was compounded by her gender, as women were expected to toil alongside men in the fields. In this deeply unjust society, being a black woman meant enduring systemic oppression and marginalization. Authoritative voices, predominantly white and male, dictated the lives of African women like Florens' mother, perpetuating a cycle of racial and gender-based inequality. The quote, "To be a woman here is to be an open wound that may not heal..." (Morrison, 2008, p.163).

Florens also experiences racial injustice toward her race during her task to look for for the blacksmith. While staying overnight at a widow's house, white individuals falsely accuse her of being the source of their problems.

"I entered into the room. Standing there are a man, three women and a little girl who reminds me of myself when my mother sends me away. One woman speaks saying I have never seen any human this black. I have says another, this one is as black as others I have seen. She is Afric. Afric and much more, say another...The Black Man is among us. This is his minion" (Morrison, 2008: 111).

As Florens enters the room, she meets a man and three women, and a frightened little girl. Despite initially appearing sweet, the little girl cries and conceals herself behind one of the women's skirts at the sight of Florens. Each visitor then turns to look at her, one of the women gasping and the man's stick clattering to the floor. By pointing at Florens, he demands to know, "who this be?" One of the women wraps her eyes, exclaiming, "May God help us ," Another woman remarks, "I have never seen any human like this black girl," while another woman confirms, that She is Afric." One woman goes further, stating, "Afric and much more. They collectively conclude that "The Black male who is here. She is his subordinate" (Morrison, 2008: 111).

In the context of racial injustice, Florens is perceived by the white community as a terrifying figure, wrongly blamed for bringing illness to their village. The white man's accusatory gesture toward her with his stick reflects their fear and suspicion towards her. Even the innocent reaction of a little girl, who recoils in fear at the sight of Florens' black skin, underscores the dehumanizing effect of racial prejudice. Florens' very existence is viewed as abnormal, her natural skin tone considered unnatural by the white people, leading them to associate her with demonic forces. In *A Mercy* (2008) racial injustice is further depicted through the character of Sorrow, who is burdened with a name that reflects the racial injustices of her white oppressors: "Don't be careful about her name,"

said the sawyer. "You can give her any name that you want. My wife calls her Sorrow because she will labor without complaint" (Morrison, 2008, p. 142).

This act of renaming exemplifies the racial injustice pervasive in the institution of slavery. Ultimately, Sorrow's story serves as a powerful indictment of the racial injustices perpetuated under slavery and underscores the ongoing struggle for equality and liberation. It highlights the importance of confronting and dismantling systems of oppression that continue to deny black women their dignity, agency, and humanity. Both Pecola from *The Bluest Eye* (1970) and Florens from Morrison's *A Mercy* (2008) grapple with the crucial issues of self-identity, but their struggles unfold in different contexts in the white and black communities. Pecola's struggle is rooted in her to conform to white beauty standards, which she believes will earn her acceptance and validation in a society dominated by white people. Her dark skin and perceived lack of beauty make her vulnerable to racial prejudice and self-loathing. Pecola's search for self-identity is closely linked to the racism and oppression she faces, as she tries to find place in a world where her value is measured against European beauty ideals. Whereas Florens' journey in *A Mercy* (2008) takes place in a historical context where slavery and colonization shape the dynamics of black identity.

As a slave girl, Florens faces issues of abandonment, displacement and belonging in a world where her identity is defined by her status as property and her experiences of trauma. Her struggle for self-identity is influenced not only by external forces of oppression but also by internal conflicts stemming from her relationships in her community and her desire for love and acceptance. While both Pecola and Florens confront the challenges of racial injustice and oppression, their journey reflect the nuances of identity formation in different socialhistorical contexts. Pecola's story highlights the impact of white supremacy of individuals self-worth and beauty standards, while Florens' narrative explores the complexities of black identity within the context of slavery and colonization. Ultimately, both characters' struggles underscore the profound ways in which societal structures shape and constrain individual's identities.

Conclusion

This paper has maintained that Critical Race Theory can provide a useful framework for analyzing how race, caste, class, and gender are portrayed in the books *A Mercy* (2008) and *The Bluest Eye* (1970). This study highlights the struggles of marginalized groups in American society and reveals how racial injustice perpetuates social inequalities. Through her novels, Morrison challenges dominant narratives and offers alternative ways of thinking about these social and political issues. She provides a platform for suppressed and marginalized voices to be heard, exploring intersectionality and resistance in the context of racial injustice.

The study shows the devastating impacts of racial injustice faced by the characters, especially the main characters Pecola in *The Bluest Eye* (1970) and Florens in *A Mercy* (2008), and their quest for identity and freedom in a racially divided society. It concludes that black individuals, particularly black women, often face discrimination, hatred, oppression, and unfair treatment solely because of their skin color. It is unjust to generalize all black people as being inherently bad, evil, violent, or criminal owing to their gender, class, race, religion and skin colour.

Ultimately, this paper emphasizes the need for a shift in mindset towards black and colored individuals, promoting fairness and equality, and rejecting harmful stereotypes. It is essential that we treat everyone with the respect and dignity they deserve,

regardless of their background, gender, class, and race and skin color. The study also suggests that further research could explore the potential for transformative approaches in education and political action arising from the analysis of literature.

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