

## Comparative Study between *The Bluest Eye* & *Native Son*: Pitfall of Racism in 1930's America

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### Abstract

*This study aims to show the mental crisis of black population in 1930's America which are portrayed very vividly in Tony Morrison's 'The Bluest Eye' and Richard Wright's 'Native Son'. Blacks are sufferer from white oppression and a child is grown up in the midst of such a society where he or she thinks everything goes against him/her only because of blackness. They feel inferiority complex and blame whites for their own failure in lives. Here the pains of Pecola and Bigger Thomas remind us that how blacks are constantly fighting against their own blackness, whereas black is inside the white people. Both oppressors and oppressed are deceived from humanity. Both take each other as a group of community not as individuals. Both groups' pre-set mentality for others force them doing wrong steps against the opponents. Pecola has to lose her sanity and Bigger has to lose his life for the existing psychological trauma in the American society.*

**Key words:** Racism, Oppressor, Oppressed, Black, White, Justice, Blindness, Blue Eyes

Toni Morrison's first novel, *The Bluest Eye* was published in 1970. Her *Sula* (1973) earned a nomination for the National Book Award. *Song of Solomon* (1977) won her the National Book Critics' Circle Award. Her most well-known work, *Beloved* (1987) won the Pulitzer Prize. Meanwhile, Morrison was a professor at Yale and the State University of New York at Albany. Today, she is the Robert F. Goheen Professor in the Council of Humanities at Princeton University, where she teaches creative writing. In 1993, Morrison became the first -African-American woman to receive the Nobel Prize in literature.

*The Bluest Eye* contains a number of autobiographical elements. It is set in the town where Morrison grew up, and it is told from the point of view of a nine-year-old girl, Claudia. She uses the modernist techniques of stream-of-consciousness, multiple perspectives, and deliberate fragmentation. She wants to make a statement about the damage that internalized racism can do to the most vulnerable member of a community—a young girl. At the same time, she does not want to dehumanize the people who wound this girl, because that would simply repeat their mistake.

Richard Wright was born in 1908 in Mississippi. In 1934, Wright became a member of the Communist Party and began publishing articles and poetry in numerous left-wing publications. In his essay "How Bigger Was Born," Wright explains that Bigger is a fusion of men he had himself known while growing up in the South. Confronted by racism and oppression and left with very few options in their lives, these men displayed increasingly anti-social and violent behaviour, and were, in effect, disasters waiting to happen. In Chicago, removed from the terrible oppression of the South, Wright discovered that Bigger was not exclusively a black phenomenon. Wright saw, just as Bigger does in *Native Son* that millions of whites suffered as well, and he believed that the direct cause of this suffering was the structure of American society itself. *Native Son* thus

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represents Wright's urgent warning that if American social and economic realities did not change, the oppressed masses would soon rise up in fury against those in power. (Wright, xiv)

Wright's *Native Son* (1940), stirred up real controversy by shocking the sensibilities of both black and white America. He makes his readers feel the reality of race relations. The protagonist of the novel, Bigger Thomas, hails from the lowest class of society. Bigger is what one might expect him to be—sullen, frightened, violent, hateful and resentful.

Pecola is always oppressed by whites and other blacks those who are less ugly than her. Her mother does not love her so much as she loves the white girl, in whose house she works. The local grocer Yacobowski avoids eye contact with Pecola while she asks for anything to buy. Her schoolmates always make fun with her by addressing her name as a beloved with a boy as if it's a shameful matter for a boy to have Pecola as girlfriend. School teachers avoid eye contact with while teaching and try to avoid talking with her as far as possible. Geraldine's son Junior uses Pecola's name to kill his mother's loving cat. Soaphead Church uses Pecola to kill the sick dog of his landlady which he cannot stand.

Soaphead Church's feelings for Pecola shows here,

"Here was an ugly little girl asking for beauty. A surge of love and understanding swept through him, but was quickly replaced by anger. Anger that he was powerless to help her. Of all the wishes people had brought him - money, love, revenge - this seemed to him the most poignant and the one most deserving of fulfilment. A little black girl who wanted to rise up out of the pit of her blackness and see the world with blue eyes." (Morrison, pg. 138)

He says about Pecola's wish for a pair of blue eyes, "A little black girl yearns for the blue eyes of a little white girl, and the horror at the heart of her yearning is exceeded only by the evil of fulfilment". (Morrison, pg. 162 )

Her new classmate Maureen Peal tells her, "I am cute! And you ugly! Black and ugly black e mos. I am cute!" (Morrison, pg. 56) Pecola is obsessed with her ugliness. That is why she longs for blue eyes. Everyday she wishes to God for blue eyes. She thinks through blue eyes, her vision will be changed and everyone will love her. Here 'blue' for her is not only a matter of beauty but also a way of getting loved by people.

"Long hours she sat looking in the mirror, trying to discover the secret of the ugliness, the ugliness that made her ignored or despised at school, by teachers and classmates alike." (Morrison, pg. 34 )

Bigger's psychological vice gives us a new perspective on the oppressive effect racism had on the black population in 1930s America. Bigger's psychological spoil results from the constant racist propaganda and racial oppression he faces while growing up. The movies he sees portray whites as wealthy sophisticates and blacks as jungle savages. He and his family live in overcrowded and dirty conditions, continuing socially enforced poverty and having little opportunity for education. Bigger's resulting attitude toward whites is an explosive combination of powerful anger and powerful fear. He identifies "whiteness" as an overpowering and hostile force that is set against him in life. Just as whites fail to treat Bigger as an individual, he does not really distinguish between individual whites—to him, they are all the same, frightening and untrustworthy.

Throughout the novel, we see the ways in which white racism forces blacks into a pressured—and therefore dangerous—state of mind. Blacks are plagued with the hardship of economic oppression and forced to act subserviently before their oppressors, while the media consistently portrays them as animalistic brutes. Given such conditions, as Max argues, it becomes inevitable that

blacks such as Bigger will react with violence and hatred. Wright emphasizes the vicious double-edged effect of racism: though Bigger's violence stems from racial hatred, it only increases the racism in American society, as it confirms racist whites' basic fears about blacks. In Wright's portrayal, whites effectively transform blacks into their own negative stereotypes of "blackness."

The harmful effect of racism extends to the white population, it prevents whites from realizing the true humanity inherent in groups that they oppress. In the *Native Son* the psychology not only of the oppressed but of the oppressors as well is depicted very well. Here racism is shown as destructive to both groups, though for very different reasons. Many whites in the novel, such as Britten and Peggy, fall victim to the obvious pitfall of racism among whites: whites' unthinking sense of superiority deceives them into seeing blacks as less than human. Wright shows that this sense of superiority is a weakness, as Bigger is able to use it in his cover-up of Mary's murder. Bigger realizes that no white would ever believe a black man could be capable of what he has done. Indeed, for a time, Bigger is out of suspicion. The vicious circle of racism emphasizes that even well-meaning whites show prejudices that feed into the same black behaviour that confirms the racist whites' sense of superiority.

After losing her sanity she starts believing that she has blue eyes, which are only visible to her. Her unfulfilled wish becomes fulfilled but for that she has to pay her sanity.

"[Pecola beat] the air, a winged but grounded bird, intent on the blue void it could not reach - could not even see - but which filled the valleys of the mind." (Morrison, pg. 162 )

Bigger Thomas wished to continue his studies, wanted to be an army officer or naval officer, but he thinks as he is a black, so no wish of his can be fulfilled. He thinks that if he would join army, he would never be allowed to do prestigious job. "All they want a black man for is to dig ditches. And in the navy, all I can do is wash dishes and scrub floors." (Wright, pg. 327)

From a conversation of Bigger with Mr. Max, his lawyer , we can understand his psychology,

"What were you afraid of?  
Everything. Did you ever hope for anything, Bigger?  
What for? I couldn't get it. I'm black. ... How did you think you could be happy?  
I don't know. I wanted to do things. But everything I wanted to do I couldn't. I wanted to do what the white boys in school did. Some of them went to college. Some of them went to the army. But I couldn't go." (Wright, pg. 328)

Bigger is a timid boy who is afraid of everything. Afterwards he is internally changed after killing Mary but he pretends to be the same kind of timid person to save himself from being suspected.

"They can't say I did it. If they do, they can't prove it." (Wright, pg. 92)

After killing Mary, Bigger realizes that, "He was a murderer, a Negro murderer, a black murderer. He had killed a white woman." (Wright, pg 86)

Here he is a black murderer and the victim is white-that is more important. He also knows it. That is why he is serious to destroy Mary's deadbody to save himself.

Bigger feels stronger mentally after killing Mary. Now he thinks he can do the same thing again without hesitation. That's why while he was killing Bessie he was very cool headed. He says to Mr. Max, "After killing that white woman, it wasn't hard to kill somebody else. I didn't have to think much about killing Bessie. I knew I had to kill her and I did." (Wright, pg 326)

At the beginning of the novel it was impossible for Bigger to show such kind of boldness. But this change is possible for his ice breaking after killing Mary. A sudden change is occurred inside

of Bigger after this murder. Earlier he might have some kinds of softness in his mind but later he has lost of his power of love. He is always in a mood of hatred, revenge.

That is why he could easily say, “ I wasn’t in love with Bessie. She was just my girl. I don’t reckon I was ever in love with nobody.” (Wright, pg 326)

Cholly’s rape of Pecola is the most hateful incident in *The Bluest Eye*. Even Morrison did not explain exactly what was going on in Cholly’s mind. But for in this kind of attitude, his past is responsible. He hates whites from his boyhood and there is an association with whites and his first sexual experience with Darlene. After raping Pecola second time, he fled away and at the end he dies in a fire. Pecola conceived and gave birth to a dead child. Claudia explains love in this manner,

“Love is never any better than the lover. Wicked people love wickedly, violent people love violently, weak people love weakly, stupid people love stupidly, but the love of a free man is never safe. There is no gift for the beloved. The lover alone possesses his gift of love. The loved one is shorn, neutralized, frozen in the glare of the lover's inward eye.” (Morrison, pg. 163 )

Hatred for white people is so much internalized in Bigger’s mind that he feels satisfied for his accidental murder of Mary.

“Though he had killed by accident, not once did he feel the need to tell himself that it had been an accident. He was black and he had been alone in a room where a white girl had been killed; therefore he had killed her. That was what everybody would say anyhow, no matter what he said. And in a certain sense he knew that the girl’s death had not been accidental. He had killed many times before, only on those other times there had been no handy victim or circumstance to make visible or dramatic his will to kill.” (Wright, pg 101)

Communism plays a role in *Native Son*. When Mr. Max tries to convince Bigger that Whites also hate those who are communist or do trade union, but Bigger argues that , “But they hate black folks more than they hate unions.” (Wright, pg 322)

Bigger is used to ill behaviour of the whites. But when Mar Dalton and her boyfriend Jan behave very well with him, he cannot accept it. Their friendly attitude, sharing drinks together, shaking hands- nothing impress him. Rather he feels annoyed. Bigger expresses to Mr. Max in this way, “She acted and talked in a way that made me hate her. She made me feel like a dog.” (Wright, pg 324)

Now Bigger feels mentally stronger than before. His wall of fear is broken down. “Now the ice was broken, could he not do other things? What was there to stop him?” (Wright, pg 101)

Throughout *Native Son*, Wright portrays popular culture—as conveyed through films, magazines, and newspapers—as a major force in American racism, constantly portraying citizens with images and ideas that reinforce the nation's oppressive racial hierarchy. In films such as the one Bigger attends, whites are shown as glamorous, attractive, and cultured, while blacks are portrayed as jungle savages or servants. Wright emphasizes that this portrayal is not unique to the film Bigger sees, but is replicated in nearly every film and every magazine. Then both blacks and whites see blacks as inferior brutes. Later, this media acts as force that leads to Bigger's execution, as the sensationalist press stirs up a furor over his case in order to sell newspapers. Buckley, the State's Attorney hurries Bigger's case and seeks the death penalty. Scattered images of popular culture throughout *Native Son*, constantly remind us of the extremely influential role the media plays in hardening already destructive racial stereotypes.

A black's psychology damages severely when he himself starts thinking himself inferior. Same thing happens with Pauline Breedlove in *The Bluest Eye*. She thinks herself alive only when she watches White American's films. She even does not like to clean her own home rather she feels closer with her white employer's house.

Claudia does not like white dolls. That is why in a Christmas she tears off her gift, a white doll.

"Adults, older girls, shops, magazines, newspapers, window sign - all the world had agreed that a blue-eyed, yellow-haired, pink-skinned doll was what every girl child treasured. 'Here,' they said, 'this is beautiful, and if you are on this day "worthy" you may have it.'" (Morrison, pg. 56)

Again Claudia comments on Pecola's unborn baby,

"I thought about the baby that everyone wanted dead, and saw it very clearly. It was in a dark, wet place, its head covered with O's of wool, the black face holding, like nickels, two clean black eyes, the flared nose, kissing-thick lips, and the living, breathing silk of black skin. No synthetic yellow bangs suspended over marble-blue eyes, no pinched nose and bowline mouth. 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." (Morrison, pg. 149)

Wright shows the terrible inequity of the American judiciary system of his time. Taking example from actual court cases of the 1930s—especially the 1938–39 case of Robert Nixon, a young black man charged with murdering a white woman during a robbery—Wright portrays the American judiciary as an ineffectual hock caught between the garish interests of the media and the driving ambition of politicians. People give decision in Bigger's case before it goes to court because a black man who kills a white woman is guilty regardless of the factual circumstances of the killing – this is the vicious cycle of racism.

The judiciary system fails him as he does not get a fair trial or an opportunity to defend himself. With the newspapers presenting him as a murderous animal and Buckley using the case to further his own political career, anything said in Bigger's defense leaves no impact. The slogan of the American judiciary system is "equal justice under law," but Wright shows a judiciary biased by racial prejudice and corruption that the concept of equality is meaningless.

Mrs. Dalton's blindness plays a vital role in the circumstances of Bigger's murder of Mary. This set of circumstances serves us the picture of vicious circle of racism in American society. Mrs. Dalton's inability to see Bigger causes him to do violence, just as the inability of whites to see blacks as individuals causes blacks to live their lives in fear and hatred. Mrs. Dalton's blindness represents the inability of white Americans as a whole to see black Americans as anything other than they are represented in media. Indeed, Bigger later realizes that, in a sense, he was also blind, unable to see whites as individuals rather than a single oppressive mass.

In the same manner, Pecola's wishing for blue eyes represents symbolically a young girl's wish to be beautiful and lovable to others. She could wish for white skin, but she does not. Because for Pecola, beauty is incorporated with love. It's a matter of seeing and being seen.

From the above discussion we find that in 1930 to 40's American society black people are under severe mental pressure for the oppression of whites. They suffer from pre-set ideas of whites about blacks. Whites are also sometimes victim of black's counter-act. There are some barriers between these two races. One has superior complexity and other has inferior complexity. Both groups do the same mistake of treating other as a collective power, not individual person. Both

Pecola Breedlove and Bigger Thomas are victim of their social system where whites's lives are considered as better part. Though Bigger is not directly offended by any white, but his mental set up always keeps him awake to hate whites. That's why he feels no guilt after murdering white Mary. Again Pecola wants to be loved and honoured by family members, friends, neighbours but she finds that her ugliness and blackness is a barrier to achieve that. She is obsessed with the sense of contemporary concept of beauty. She wants to be beautiful for social acceptance. Likewise Pauline, Cholly are victims of white oriented life style. Popular culture with white concept affects Pauline severely which is crushing herself silently. She always wants to escape this real world with the disguise of dream world. But always there is a class between these worlds and she stumbles every time to face it. Claudia's reaction by refusing white doll's theory reminds us the child's psychology which also revolts the existing social system. Claudia wants to fight with her society by the help of Pecola's baby to show that in the world of adoration of white baby, a black baby can also survive. Thus in both *The Bluest Eye* and *Native Son* we can touch and feel the pain of black people over decades under the oppression of whites in America.

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