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The Cost of Freedom: Intersectionality and Socioeconomic Inequality in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*

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Abstract - Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* is a powerful study of race, gender, and class that uncovers the deep-seated inequities underlying individual and group selves. This paper addresses how intersectionality—the crossroads of systems of oppression along the lines of race, gender, and economic status—shows up in the novel, most notably in the life of Pecola Breedlove and other Black individuals. This essay examines the complicated interaction of intersectionality and economic inequality in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, examining how both impact the characters' identities and experiences, particularly Pecola Breedlove. The essay examines how race, gender, and class interact to create new types of oppression that have significant impacts on the psychological well-being of the characters as well as their sense of self-worth. Pecola's desire for blue eyes is a potent metaphor for her internalized racism and the hegemony of social beauty standards that reify whiteness, which exacts the high cost of freedom in a world that devalues her very existence. Through an analysis of the systemic barriers facing Black women in a racially stratified world, this study brings to the fore the complexities of identity formation against deep-seated social inequalities.

Keywords - Intersectionality, Psychological Trauma, Identity Formation, Race, Gender, Class.

Originally coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989, the term intersectionality has evolved into the main analytical tool used by feminist academics across many disciplines concerning the structural identities of race, class, gender, and sexuality. This paper adds to Morrison's scholarship by illustrating how intersecting oppressions—racial, gendered, and economic—meet to articulate the 'cost of freedom' in *The Bluest Eye*. Drawing on Kimberlé Crenshaw's intersectionality theory and Marxist literary theory, this research investigates how Morrison deconstructs capitalism's perpetuation of racialized structures of superiority, illuminates internalized racialized oppression, and juxtaposes the reactions of Pecola and Claudia to structural injustice. In so doing, this critique connects Morrison's literary concerns to current debates surrounding racial capitalism, beauty, and economic inequality. The new insights to explore from the article are about the freedom of Black women by implementing laws in contemporary days and other reforms as well.

This research adds to the body of work by analyzing how Morrison criticizes systemic forces that construct Black identity using an intersectional lens. This study centers on the socioeconomic inequalities that constrain agency and perpetuate oppression in the African American community represented in the novel. It examines the psychological and social impacts of internalized racism, class conflicts, and Eurocentric ideals of beauty, all of which inform the lived realities of Morrison's characters. Although prior research has analyzed race and beauty ideals in *The Bluest Eye*, not as many have investigated the role of intersectionality on the psychological and social agency of Black women within the work of Morrison. This research adds to current discourse by illustrating how economic oppression, gender relations, and internalized racism configure the price of freedom within Morrison's work.



Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* explores the intricate intersection of race, gender, and economic inequality and how these dynamics define Black identity and self-esteem. Although there have been some studies on Morrison's critique of racism and the beauty ideal, there have been fewer that have examined the intersectionality of these forces in constructing freedom, oppression, and economic marginalization. The article ponders over;

- ✓ How does Morrison represent the intersection of race, gender, and class in *The Bluest Eye*?
- ✓ What is the role of economic inequality in constraining the agency of Black women and girls in the novel?
- ✓ How does Morrison represent the "cost of freedom" for oppressed characters in an oppressively structured society?

Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* beautifully portrays the confluence of race, gender, and class and how these co-constitutive identities contribute to the lived reality of Black women and girls. By her characterizations of Pecola Breedlove and Claudia MacTeer, Morrison methodically makes visible the profound impact of economic disparity on agency, i.e., the way institutional poverty reinforces the internalization of cultural beauty ideals. The tragic yearning of Pecola for blue eyes shows an intense desire to be accepted by a society that equates worth with whiteness, where the "cost of freedom" is a heart-wrenching struggle against exploitative systems. Claudia's refusal to embrace these norms, in turn, underlines the potential of self-assertion and communal solidarity as means of resisting oppression. This analysis of intersectionality not only goes towards filling an important gap in the theory of Black women's identity but also resonates with contemporary controversy over racial and economic inequalities, underlining that complete liberation hinges on acknowledging and coming to terms with the compound nature of oppression.

The article also analyzes how Morrison's narrative style and symbolism criticize the institutional forces that deny Black individuals, particularly Black women, true freedom. Through analyzing the price of freedom, or both the price of freedom literally and figuratively, this paper hopes to deliver a more intricate understanding of the ways in which race, gender, and economic class intersect and produce recurring cycles of oppression. Through such analysis, the essay hopes to emphasize *The Bluest Eye's* usefulness in current discourses on racial and economic justice, feminism, and literature as social critique.

Morrison not only derides racism and the beauty culture but also demystifies the function of capitalism in perpetuating racial and gender oppression. The working life of Pauline Breedlove as a maid for affluent white people emphasizes the way that Black labor is economically exploited and white fortunes are maintained. Her commitment to her employer's household—compared to the abandonment of her own kin—demonstrates the way capitalism dislocates Black women from their own lives, a subject treated in **Bell Hooks' (1981)** discussion of Black women's exploitation. This financial reliance on white bosses repeats cycles of racialized work, from slavery to domestic service under Jim Crow. As a maid to a white family, Pauline is in a situation that provides her with minimal economic security but also reminds her of her subordination and inferiority. Pauline's job exacerbates her inner struggle for identity and self-concept. The economic pressure that she is under makes her prioritize the whiteness values of beauty and cleanliness over her own family's needs, resulting in neglect of her children, particularly Pecola. Her disregard is also motivated by her desire to be embraced by the white community since she adopts the manners and tastes of what is anticipated of her employers' norms and thus distances herself from her own family.

Furthermore, Pauline's interactions with her managers reflect the complexities of racial relationships; when she wants approval from them, their condescending attitudes strengthen their power over her. For instance, when a white woman urges Pauline to leave Cholly for her own well-being, it reinforces the confluence of gender and race in capitalist structures—wherein Pauline's existence hinges on obeying white domination. This economic dependence not only shows the systemic barriers that Black women face but also illustrates how capitalism undervalues their identities while simultaneously taking advantage of their labor. Through Pauline's character,

Morrison condemns the societal norms that create these patterns of dependency and oppression, highlighting the imperative for agency and self-acceptance among marginalized communities. [10] In addition, Pecola's father, Cholly Breedlove, grapples with Black male economic disenfranchisement, which is in keeping with **Cedric Robinson's (1983) theory of racial capitalism**, that capitalism depends on racial subordination to keep class divisions intact. Morrison thereby dispels the illusion of American meritocracy, revealing how race and class complicate one another to keep Black people from economic mobility.

Capitalism in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* sustains racial hierarchies by upholding a system that disvalues Black identity and life but values whiteness. This dynamic is seen in the structure and devaluation of labor in capitalist economies. For example, women, and especially women of color, are frequently confined to low-paying, insecure jobs that have no benefits or job security and perpetuate economic inequalities. The devaluation of care work—historically done by women—illuminates the way capitalism devalues gendered labor while also depending on the unpaid reproductive labor of women in households to maintain the labor force. As discussed in several scholarly works, including those that are consistent with feminist critical theory, the intersection of gender and race under capitalism produces a specific set of problems that enhance economic inequality. In addition, racial capitalism works by draining resources from marginalized populations while keeping them in economically poor positions, as observed in the warehousing of people in for-profit prisons and the gentrification of communities. This systemic exploitation is not incidental but integral to capitalist systems, whereby racialized and gendered distinctions are used to optimize profit at the cost of social justice. This critique of capitalism via racial and gender structures renders clear the complicated interrelation of these systems with one another, and an integrated model is needed in response to reconcile the multistranded nature of oppression within contemporary society. The novel illustrates how economic systems produce internalized racism, with individuals like Pecola Breedlove victimized through a consumer culture that equates value and beauty with white norms. This commodification of beauty not only affects personal aspirations but also reflects the broader cultural values that favor white beauty over Black being. The struggle of the characters for independence is exacerbated by economic marginalization, as they operate in a capitalist society that shuts them out and holds their potential for upward mobility in check. Morrison condemns this dynamic by showing how the oppressive power of capitalism overlaps with racism and sexism to entrap Black women in poverty cycles and self-hatred. In doing this, Morrison depicts the necessity of dismantling these interconnected systems of oppression to bring about real equality and self-acceptance within oppressed groups[12].

In Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, intersectionality, that is, on the basis of race, class, and gender, has a significant influence on the experiences of socioeconomic inequality[1]. The novel illustrates how these intersecting factors produce marginalization and discrimination and have an impact on the lives of the characters and how they view themselves in a society where whiteness is highly valued[1,2].

The principle of intersectionality is shown by the Black, destitute Breedlove family, who are stigmatized even within their own community due to the confluence of their disadvantages [1]. Morrison indicates how identities connect among the characters to come up with isolated experiences of disadvantage or advantage in the existence of a white-dominated world. According to the novel, positives are associated with whites, and negatives with blackness. This establishes that the Black female characters absorb white beauty standards, affecting their self-esteem[2].

The Bluest Eye examines how Black girls' growth from girlhood to womanhood is undermined by the psychological struggle they endure as they deal with discrimination and desertion in a racist society[2]. The book demonstrates how gender and race interact and influence the protagonists' lives at the same time[3].

Capitalism, inextricably bound to racial and gender hierarchies, deeply structures Black women's lives, generally resulting in economic insecurity and exploitation. Black women are devalued and marginalized at work,

school, and healthcare settings, such that it becomes impossible for them to accumulate wealth, and many get stuck in debt. Black women are most often placed in lower-paying jobs without benefits and disproportionately serve as the single heads of households, increasing their burden. This is a fact that highlights how racial capitalism depends on the exploitation of Black labor power. The labor of Black women is central to social reproduction but undervalued and tied to struggle, stress, and few prospects for mobility.

Morrison infers that freedom is an elusive and intricate thing, seriously blocked by the social forces in such areas as race, gender, and class, in *The Bluest Eye*. Although the male characters, such as Cholly, interpret freedom as having the power to do anything they please without restrictions, this turns out to be superficial and wrecking. Freedom for women is more complex, with some finding it is synonymous with having a man while others think it means not being dependent on men. The novel then shows how institutional racism, internalized oppression, and economic inequality more or less eliminate the capacity of the characters to enjoy authentic freedom, particularly for Pecola, whose yearning for blue eyes represents her aspiration to break free from the confines of her identity. Morrison's characters are impacted by all aspects of their identity as they are Black, impoverished, and women who struggle due to such markers⁴. Morrison does appear to indicate that moving "in the direction of freedom" can be achieved if one utilizes said freedom to "free somebody else".

Intersectionality is the related nature of social categorizations like race, class, and gender, which can result in multiple forms of discrimination. This can be described in *The Bluest Eye* when the Breedlove family is not only Black but also impoverished and viewed as ugly during a time when white beauty is admired. This amalgamation of circumstances marginalizes them even within their own social group, illustrating how their circumstances are distinct from others who might possess only one or two of these traits[1].

As Pecola succumbs to internalized racialized oppression, Claudia MacTeer assails society norms with fierce criticism and contradicts white beauty norms openly resists and subverts societal norms. It is a different survival mechanism. Claudia's rejection of Shirley Temple dolls, the icons of idealized whiteness, is her rebellion against the imposition of tales of inferiority. Whereas Pecola would fantasize about blue eyes as a measuring stick, Claudia is incensed and distrustful, denouncing that whiteness represents beauty. Such a contrast parallels Morrison's broader contention that liberty is possible but through critical consciousness. Claudia's ideology aligns with Paulo Freire's (1970) theory of critical pedagogy, where liberation results from consciousness and struggle against oppressive ideologies. Morrison, therefore, introduces Claudia not just as a witness but also as a symbol of Black woman resistance, offering an alternative form of survival other than self-destruction[12].

Pecola's desire for blue eyes is indicative of her internalization of mainstream beauty standards. She would be accepted and loved if she just had blue eyes, which accentuates the deeply rooted sense of belief that to be Black naturally is ugliness. This craving is supplemented by economic difficulties within the family and parental rejection within the home, where the two parents provide no emotional support [2,4]. This is in response to the negative impact of society's expectations that render whiteness as the measure of beauty, hence distorting her self-worth and perception of value. The case of Pecola depicts how intersectional identities may lead to a unique form of social isolation and psychological trauma.

1. Socioeconomic Inequality

1.1. The Role of Poverty

The poverty of the Breedloves is depicted as "traditional," yet their ugliness—grounded in cultural perception—sets them apart from the rest of the poor families. The exception demonstrates that one's economic status does not determine the level of marginalization but is added to along with their race and perceived physical attractiveness[1]. The novel suggests that economic hardship intersects with racial identity to create a special kind of oppression.

1.2. Impact on Identity Formation

Morrison's narrative identifies how systemic racism and classism frame Black girls like Pecola and Claudia. They are confronted not only by external societal pressures but also with internalized self-esteem issues. Claudia's rejection of the white dolls portrays her battle with internalized racism, as she resists societal norms that devalue her own definition of herself[2,4]. This inner conflict is most important in grasping the psychological impact of intersectionality on Black girls.

Morrison deploys the person of Pecola Breedlove in *The Bluest Eye* to demonstrate the significant influence that intersectionality, by way of confluence between race, gender, and class, has on identity[5]. Pecola's quest to have blue eyes represents the aspirational wish for conformity with Caucasian standards of beauty, evidencing the injurious impact of internalized racism as well as communal norms upon self-esteem[5].

Some crucial elements of the personality of Pecola and how they tie in with intersectionality are;

- (i) **Internalized Racism:** Pecola's notion that blue eyes will make her beautiful and welcome is indicative of the overall perception that whiteness equals beauty[5]. This internalized perception of white beauty indicates the way in which dominant narratives reinforce Black women's identities[5].
- (ii) **Effects of Violence and Trauma:** Pecola endures severe abuse and trauma, which has a big influence on her identity and her capacity to function in society [5]. Morrison shows how racism and socially created power dynamics threaten Pecola's emotional health.
- (iii) **Marginalization and "Othering":** Pecola's experiences with sexism and racism are entwined since she is discriminated against based on both gender and race[5]. Morrison points out how Pecola's quest for identity is compounded by her dysfunctional family and cultural standards of beauty that favor whiteness[5].
- (iv) **Scapegoating:** Pecola is used as a scapegoat for the self-hatred and conviction of the Black community that it is ugly. Her ugliness makes them beautiful, her suffering makes them comparatively lucky, and her muteness allows others to talk.

Morrison uses Pecola's story to analyze the corroding power of social norms and how they can manipulate one's self-image [5]. Pecola's fate serves as a reminder of the heartlessness of humans and an icon of human suffering.

Intersectionality and economic inequality in *The Bluest Eye* cross to define the "cost of freedom" as an idealized hope for subjects like Pecola Breedlove, who are trapped by intersecting systems of oppression. Pauline Breedlove's financial subordination to white employers in *The Bluest Eye* offers a critical lens for examining how race, gender, and class intersect. Pauline is employed as a maid by a white employer and subjects herself to temptation and humiliation by her job. Her labor offers her a certain economic security but also reinforces her subordination and highlights the racial hierarchies that are typical of capitalist models. This dependence is also evident in the way she longs to imitate the white employers' ideal of beauty, leading to an acute sense of self-hatred and inadequacy. Pauline's obsession with tidiness and orderliness in the white household is contrasted harshly with her lack of concern for her own family, revealing how economic hardship warps family relationships and self-conception. Moreover, her interactions with her employers illustrate the complexity of racial dynamics; while she wishes to be accepted within their world, she is simultaneously dehumanized by their patronizing attitudes. Lastly, Pauline's economic reliance illustrates the broader concerns of systemic repression and limited agency of Black women in a racially divided society, reflecting how capitalism exacerbates their struggles over identity and autonomy.

2. Elements of the "Cost of Freedom"

- (i) **Psychological and Emotional Well-being:** The intersection of race, gender, and class leads to psychological trauma for Black girls like Pecola, which inhibits their development and self-esteem in a whiteness-favoring society[2]. The "cost" manifests as internalized racism, ugliness feelings, and a skewed sense of identity[2].

- (ii) **Socioeconomic Disadvantage:** Poverty increases the impact of racial and gender discrimination[6]. The financial struggle of the Breedloves limits their access to resources and opportunities, further entrenching their marginalization and making upward mobility nearly impossible.
- (iii) **Limited Agency and Resistance:** The characters in *The Bluest Eye* are subject to all aspects of their identity since they are Black, poor, and women who are confronted with challenges due to these identifiers.
- (iv) **Loss of Identity and Self-Worth:** Excessive representation of white images in media causes the characters to look at themselves through the comparison to the white images surrounding them and affects their self-esteem negatively. Pecola's wanting of blue eyes reflects her wanting to break out of the bounds of her identity, pointing towards the price paid in living within a society where Blackness is downgraded.
- (v) **Marginalization in the Black Community:** The novel also speaks to the exploitation of African Americans by other members of their own race in the context of racial domination[2]. Pecola is marginalized in her own community due to her darker complexion, showing how shadism overlaps with other discrimination to further marginalize Black women. The Breedloves' economic crisis is reflected on a national level as economic disenfranchisement faces Black families across America. Exacerbated both by race and by gender is this marginalizing of conditions in which Black women face lower income, diminished job accessibility, and inherited poverty.

Pecola's history mirrors greater ones throughout the Black community regarding hatred for self and perceptions of beauty. She becomes the community's scapegoat for their insecurities, reflecting on how trauma in common destroys one's forming self. The travesty describes how external social pressure damages underclass identities negatively. Though subjected to roundabout torment and mind-wrenching bullying, she daydreams of having blue eyes. The escape is her last attempt to cope with the realities of her world but is also a pointer to her inability to confront the harsh realities of her life. The fantasy culminates in complete withdrawal into reality by the novel's end, the sad awakening to her identity crisis [7]. Pecola's domestic situation exacerbates her identity issues. Her parents, Pauline Breedlove and Cholly are themselves impoverished victims of racism, and they treat her abusively and neglectfully. The neglect further isolates her and denies her the establishment of a secure sense of self [7].

3. White Beauty Standards: Claudia Resistance-Pecola's Internalizing

Claudia MacTeer and Pecola Breedlove both present diametrical responses to the Eurocentric ideal standards of beauty in their world[8]. Pecola internalizes these standards and fantasizes that it will make her happy and accepted if she can own blue eyes, a sign of white beauty[8]. This fantasy takes her on a path of self-loathing and psychological breakdown, incapable of attaining this "ideal" [8]. In stark contrast, Claudia rejects white dolls and condemns Shirley Temple, using critical consciousness that will not conform to the racially legislated beauty standards imposed on her[8]. Claudia's resistance is rooted in empathy and sensitivity towards racial injustices, challenging the notion that beauty must be equal to whiteness and offering an alternative reading of how Black girls can relate to the world in general[8]. Claudia's refusal is a stepping stone towards empowerment, a means of making room for alternative notions of beauty that acknowledge her identity as a Black girl[8].

Black economic disenfranchisement, deeply entrenched during Jim Crow by deliberate segregation, disfranchisement of voting rights, and limited economic and educational opportunities, has had long-lasting effects extending into the post-Civil Rights period. Despite the repeal of Jim Crow laws, persistent economic inequalities continue to plague Black communities, with the legacy of past oppression limiting socioeconomic advancement. Circumstances such as limited access to education and the lingering legacy of slavery and Jim Crow have created wide economic disparities that remain challenging to overcome. Access to education and special programs have provided promise in correcting these disparities, but addressing the fundamental reasons for racial inequality is essential to achieving true economic justice for Black Americans[9].

While *The Bluest Eye* defines internalized racism as self-destruction, Morrison creatively offers other paths to freedom through figures like Claudia, who resists the societal constructions of beauty and turns to her community for support. Morrison also points toward the magic of imagination and words, suggesting that individuals can reclaim their identity and dignity by fighting against oppressive systems and creating new worlds in their minds. In the end, Morrison implies that true freedom means the individual's emancipation and one's pledge to emancipate others, intimating that joint efforts and ethical decisions will guide us towards more long-term freedom paths.

Community and self-awareness are good antidotes to oppression in that they develop critical thinking and collective power. Self-awareness enables individuals to recognize their own biases and understand how systematic inequalities work. Community provides a safe context where people can share experiences, overcome internalized oppression, and build collective efficacy. Combined, these forces empower individuals to stand against social injustice, become effective allies, and make spaces safer for discussing sensitive subjects. Breaking up debilitating habits and creating a culture of solidarity, self-awareness, and community lay the groundwork for a more just society where people can challenge and destroy oppressive systems.

4. Contemporary Reformations

Discrimination is resisted, and freedom is systemized nowadays in the form of laws. In 2021-2022, the federal CROWN Act, a bill in the 117th Congress, made it illegal for people to discriminate in federally sponsored programs, housing, public restrooms, and the workplace based on hair texture or style. The media often fails to adequately represent the racial differences in missing persons reporting and treatment, particularly for Black women. Despite comprising 36% of missing females in the U.S., they are only mentioned in 19.59% of news articles, a 14 percentage point gap. The Urban Institute found that only 7% of missing person cases for individuals of color received national media attention. This highlights systemic issues and societal biases, requiring immediate action for balanced coverage and justice.

One of the things that is absent in Morrison's time and now is applied is black mental health advocacy groups like *The Loveland Foundation and Therapy for Black Girls*, which address specific mental health issues faced by Black women and girls. Established in 2018, these groups aim to make therapy accessible through programs like vouchers and fellowships, breaking down barriers to care. By focusing on the experiences of Black women, these organizations build community support and empower individuals to prioritize their mental health amidst societal hardships. These are some of the reformations made in contemporary days to empower society for the upcoming. We are witnessing Morrison's dream and voice for Blacks initiated in our times.

5. Conclusion

In *The Bluest Eye*, Toni Morrison artfully weaves intersectionality and socioeconomic inequality concerns to depict the rich lives of African American women. The conflation of race, gender, and class gives rise to a rich history of oppression that significantly shapes such characters as Pecola Breedlove. Through this, Morrison not only critiques societal beauty ideals but also exposes the broader effects of systemic inequality in shaping individual identities and experiences. Pecola Breedlove's path in *The Bluest Eye* is a portrayal of the complexities of identity formation against the backdrop of systemic marginalization. Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* not only exposes racial and gendered marginalization but also compels readers to reflect on the lasting impacts of such disparities today. By its analysis of the way Black girls navigate social hierarchies, Morrison's book remains an essential text in racial justice and economic equality discussions. Morrison uses the character of Pecola to illustrate how cultural race and beauty ideals warp self-perception and crush individual growth. Ultimately, Pecola's tragic death is a powerful commentary on the cost that one pays for being in an oppressive society that devalues Black lives and identities.

Toni Morrison's books, *The Bluest Eye* and *Beloved*, also denounce structural oppression in terms of sexism and beauty conventions in society. She emphasizes the legacy of white supremacy on Black girls and women, with blue eyes for Pecola Breedlove being a symbol of internalized racism. *Beloved* delves into the psychological damage of slavery, emphasizing its heritage. Morrison encourages united resistance and support from the community to defy entrenched structures and redefine identity and beauty, advocating freedom in solidarity and affirmation.

The novel's condemnation of intersectional oppression reflects contemporary racial wealth inequality, the beauty industry's endorsement of Eurocentric beauty, and the continuation of Black women's labor exploitation. Amidst a time when racial wealth inequality endures and colorism dictates media representation (Hunter, 2007), Morrison's work teaches us that freedom necessitates not just the dissolving of racial hierarchies but also economic systems that perpetuate disparity. Through its revelation of the price of freedom in a culture that upholds whiteness and economic privilege, Morrison asks readers to confront their complicity in institutionalized oppression and to imagine alternative means of achieving justice[13]. Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* addresses the effect of institutional oppression on Black identity and self-value, foregrounding Black women's exclusion from standards of beauty and representation. The book criticizes historical injustices that define socioeconomic conditions, calling attention to placing Black experiences at the forefront of discourse about race, gender, and power. The book continues as a timeless reflection on identity complications in oppressive worlds.

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