

PROTEST AGAINST STEREOTYPE THREATS REFLECTED IN TONI MORRISON'S THE BLUEST EYE NOVEL

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Abstract

*This study explores the stereotype threats portrayed in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, focusing on how racial identity and societal norms shape the lived experiences of Black characters. This study projects three main issues, namely (1) Exploring the historical background of the novel, (2) Identifying Toni Morrison's protests against negative stereotypes, and (3) Deciphering the author's concerns about stereotype threats. This study applied qualitative data to document analysis from *The Bluest Eye* Novel and used a note-taking techniques. The study showed that Morrison depicted the black family conflicts emerged as a result of a lack of welfare, social discrimination, and cultural discord from his novel. She appeared in some protests against the negative stereotypes, 1) Fighting for women's existence by calling for the right to freedom and legal protection; 2) Raising the role of the black family; 3) Claiming that black has its beauty; 4) Opposing the white-racial doctrine of educational literacy. In realistic threats, Morrison criticized life inequality, moral damage, and lack of legal protection. Meanwhile, in symbolic threats, Morrison deflected the white beauty standards and opposed literacy books that raised racial differences. Thus, Morrison explored the racial conflict by showing her empathic protest.*

Keywords: *Black Family, Stereotype Threats, Realistic and Symbolic Treats*

INTRODUCTION

Racial violence and social discrimination against Black communities remain deeply embedded in American society, despite the nation's foundational ideals of freedom and equality. This issue is a legacy of enslavement and continues to manifest in various forms, impacting areas from the criminal justice system to public services and education. The rise in racial violence and group segregation continues to have a widespread effect. Errington (2011) stated, "There is little question that racism is still pervasive and deeply ingrained in America, particularly in the central and southern regions". It takes a very long time to eradicate racism from the foundations of American society. The Black community is a victim that has frequently impacted many facets of life since long-standing American history. The Bureau of Justice Statistics

(Deutsche Welle's Annual Report, 2017) published, "More than 50% of Black Americans regard these four concerns as discrimination fields - jobs, courts, schools, and police treatment. On the other hand, less than 30% of white people are affected."

The Bluest Eye, a novel, is one of the studies that highlights African American existence. The novel was first published in 1970, Toni Morrison's debut book. It shows how a black family is dealing with a racial issue. Diane Johnson in Grewal (1997) said, "The novels are about black people who victimize one another, they merely validate Morrison's white audience's prejudices about black people". *The Bluest Eye* examines black identity, self-love, and self-hatred in a society where many people struggle to achieve dignity due to racial, gender, and class violence (Andrew and McKay, 1999).

This study is based on the stereotype process that emerged in America, specifically about black racial treatment. Baron, Branscombe, and Byrne (2008: 188) defined stereotypes as "beliefs about the nature or features of social groups that are assumed to share." They confirm preconceptions as a shared belief within a community. Black stereotypes have emerged since the Black Slavery Period and the Black Civil Rights Movement. To take advantage of the circumstance, white people purposely injured black people by using numerous stereotypes. Green (1998) said, "Recent research has demonstrated that whites are inclined to maintain these prejudices, particularly regarding issues of crime and welfare". Meanwhile, Beaumont (2012) identified stereotype threat can be debilitating for any group linked with negative preconceptions.

Morrison addressed racial strife throughout her life as stereotype threats depicted in many ways. She demonstrated the timeline of stereotype threats originating from black families. According to Spencer and Castano (2007), "Stereotype danger occurs when persons who share a specific identity, such as race or socioeconomic status, perform below their ability on a given task out of worry that their performance will reinforce negative stereotypes people already hold about them." Stephan et al. (2009) provide two prototypical threat motives: realistic and symbolic threats. Realistic dangers include the welfare of life, primary needs, and strength, whereas symbolic threats entail the belief system, ideology, and morality.

Stereotype risks have a direct impact on individual and group attitudes and behaviors. Toni Morrison's behavior toward each character in *The Bluest Eye* changes significantly as the novel progresses. Hilton and von Hippel (1996) stated, "Stereotypes are more than just ideas about the traits and actions of human or social groupings and their members." They also made judgments about why certain qualities and actions are associated.

From those perspective points, interestingly, many previous studies have highlighted the issue of discrimination, as described by Kuenz (1993), Bhardwaj (2017), Josephine & Fatima (2018), Bhardwaj (2016), Bharati & Joshi (2009) and Mahdi (2015). Racism has a very traumatic impact (Sharma, 2018) and various other impacts such as anger, regret, low self-esteem, and meaninglessness (Evensson, 2016). Most studies highlighted discriminatory treatment had dismal implications. It not only brought down the black community but also alienated their families in their social circle.

In essence, while many previous studies have highlighted discrimination and its impacts, this study aims to contribute by specifically investigating the role of stereotype threats

as a foundational element leading to discrimination, particularly through the literary lens of Toni Morrison's work and a social psychological framework.

METHOD

This research sought to answer how stereotype threats are depicted and protested in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* using a sociological literary lens. This study emphasized qualitative research and used a document analysis approach. Qualitative is commonly analyzed using sentences descriptively. Creswell (1994) stated that qualitative research occurs in a natural setting where human behaviors and events occur. The object of the study refers to the research problems. Through the sociological literature approach, the study focused on stereotype threats which are reviewed from the social background of Toni Morrison in constructing *The Bluest Eye Novel*.

The data of this study are precisely dialogue sentences and monologue text obtained from the text (words, phrases, clauses and sentences) of *The Bluest Eye Novel* authored by Toni Morrison. Lofland and Lofland (1995) said that the main data sources in qualitative research are words and acts, and the rest are additional such as documents, etc. Concerning this case, the source data came from the novel "The Bluest Eye" published in 1970. It still provided the ultimate reference in the assessment of the idea of a black racial minority. Whereas, secondary sources data took other supporting main data such as books, articles journals, web links, papers, etc. Data were collected through close reading and note-taking from Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, focusing on dialogues and narrative segments that reflect stereotype threats.

In analyzing the data, the study used Miles and Huberman's model. The model related to qualitative analysis by comparing "Three concurrent flows of activity", such as data reduction, data display, and conclusion (Miles and Huberman, 1994:10). The procedures to determine this analysis referred to the data collection obtained from note-taking, then analyzed into some steps (reduction, display and conclusion)

This study considered obtaining validity and acceptability through the efforts matching data with the assessment or instrument. To get the trustworthiness of the data, the study used the triangulation technique to avoid bias data. Most commonly triangulation is a way of checking the validity of the data. The study carried out this kind of triangulation, by asking and discussing the data with some literature experts. They were expected to confirm the quality of this the valuable data and to know the exact interpretation into being the reliable data.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Depiction of The *Bluest Eye*

Tony Morrison revealed the black identity dilemma in her novel, although the position of black people does not reflect low self-esteem (Sissman, 1971) and is openly sensitive to black human values (Perez-Torres, 1977). The novel delved into the complexities of black identity, portraying the struggles of two distinct Black families: the Breedloves and the MacTeers. The Breedlove family, exemplified by Pecola, grapples with severe internal dysfunction rooted in parental failures, economic hardship, and societal pressures, leading them to passively endure stereotypes and discrimination. In contrast, the MacTeer family, while facing adversities like

the father's imprisonment, is presented as more resilient, navigating their challenges through a different familial dynamic.

Ultimately, Morrison's narrative underscores the pervasive nature of institutional discrimination that has historically impacted Black American families across political, economic, legal, educational, and social spheres. Through these family narratives, the novel implicitly highlights the continuous struggle for Black Americans to assert their rights and counter the abuses of power inherent in a discriminatory society, thereby revealing the profound challenges to black identity and self-worth.

The Boundaries of Negative Stereotype

Beaumont (2012) conveyed stereotype risks originating from negative stereotypes. *The Bluest Eye Novel* explores various stereotyped themes, including gender stereotypes, racial stereotypes, and age stereotypes.

Gender Stereotypes

Toni Morrison provided opposing facts regarding gender. It highlights how men's and women's societal roles are interwoven based on their occupations. Eagly (1987) discusses the differences between men and women in their occupations. Morrison openly discussed gender concerns in the story. She highlighted how Pauline and Mrs. Macteer were able to fight for their children, while the father's part was removed from the story. Morrison raised both wives' roles to advance black women's positions by the humility of their struggles. It means that women should be able to do the same things as men, even if they only work at home.

Toni Morrison also described another feminist perspective, the three whores who resided in the same apartment as the Breedlove family: Marie, China, and Poland. Toni concluded that the world of prostitution is a motivation for sexual harassment, which is embodied by the survival factor. They did not receive protection because they were the victims of the male's brutality. Morrison believed men had the responsibility for protecting women, not undermining their dignity. Such prostitutes performed their employment obligations to meet their basic requirements.

Racial Stereotypes

According to Steele and Aronson (in Beaumont, 2012), "Stereotypes postulate that people tend to experience a self-evaluative threat as a result of social-psychological concerns that occur when commonly known stereotypes about one's group are known." Toni Morrison represented how racial preconceptions generated life gaps and lowered morals. For example, Morrison introduced multiple discrepancies in the plot once the Breedlove family arrived in North America. Many people mocked this family. Cholly, in particular, was unable to find suitable work. Fairlie and William (1999) stated, "African Americans would be unable to live with poverty while facing significant unemployment." As a result, it has an impact on life inequities and home conflicts.

In the storyline, Pauline was unable to adjust to the local culture, which led to her frustration. Many people regard her sarcastically as a strange woman when she appears stylish. Instead, white people scoffed at Pauline's attire and high heels as in an unpleasant situation. Pecola and Claudia were also involved in this case. Morrison presented two conflicting

viewpoints: on the one hand, Pecola emphasized beauty, while Claudia realized that beauty is unimportant. Morrison demonstrated that black beauty is intrinsically lovely and distinct, despite several paradoxes. Playing the role of a girl, representing free of innuendo and interest in being attractive, as well as her own principled belief that they have the same rights to be loved and pitied as any other white child.

Age Stereotypes

The racial system's influence on the age stereotype of *The Bluest Eye* can be traced back to its Black origins. Ironically, Morrison believed that hostility for young Black children was not limited to white adults or Black people. The children received assault from their familial group while receiving therapy from black adults. Pauline had no feelings for Pecola. Pauline loved the white girl who worked as a housemaid more than she loved her kid. Morrison presented black children as children who are ridiculed, shunned, taunted, deemed insane for their negligence, and even subjected to sexual abuse.

According to Longfellow, Zerkowitz, and Saunders (1982), "Moms who are depressed and under stress are more likely to be controlling and antagonistic toward their children and to be less receptive to their basic needs." Morrison depicted children's fear of their parents, the same as in the case of gender stereotypes. The collapse of home relations is the cause of this. In other words, they will express their eventual dissatisfaction through offspring. The majority of mothers do not offer adequate protection.

The Black Stereotype Threats

Realistic Threats

According to Stephan et al. (2009), "Life well-being, necessities, and strength are all considered realistic threats." In her novel, Morrison depicted realistic stereotypes such as poverty, a lack of social services, unfair laws, and sexual abuse. Black communities in America during the 20th century have, in theory, exposed such dangers. Toni Morrison understood the main source of the Breedlove family conflict is the income disparity. Cholly's attitude and emotions underwent a significant shift during that time. Cholly asked Pauline to work because he could not provide for his family. Because Cholly occasionally committed social crimes in black society.

According to pertinent research, in the late 1970s, black people of all economic classes experienced the same degree of crime abuse, although wealthy black people were less likely than poor black people to become victims of crime. The Breedlove family was excommunicated by the black middle class because their financial situation had collapsed. In the meantime, women frequently deal with morality cases about social and sexual crime. Morrison presented two instances of sexual abuse in Pecola and the history of the prostitutes in *The Bluest Eye*. After the story, Pecola was traumatized and shunned, while Marie, China, and Poland were forced into prostitution as a result of sexual abuse.

The underlying sexual cases above are the lack of family roles to protect their children. All of a sudden, they were socially isolated and not receiving any love or care. Lane (in Salvator, 1991) used the rate of homicide and delinquency among black children and their groups to gauge the morality and quality of life of black families. Cases of child abuse and neglect were frequently reported involving black families. This is because the family relationship became

strained as a result of the economic issues. Disruptive behavior in children is often exacerbated by these bad parenting practices (Mash & Johnston, 1990).

Symbolic Threats

African Americans have faced increasing moral threats since the legalization of slavery. The symbolic group threats that result in belief systems, ideology, morality, and life outlook (Stephan et al, 2009). Toni Morrison positioned herself behind a case of symbolic threats, such as the racial doctrine, sexual victim, and beauty standard issue.

Regarding beauty standards, the issue broke out in the early 20th century. Many beauty product advertisements, hairstyles, and appearance models became the main attraction. Toni Morrison described the standard of beauty in his novels. Black women were also following this trend. With the advancement of modernization, economic prosperity, and consumerism in 1920, style and fashion underwent a rapid renewal. Galaz (2014) noted that the shift away from gender roles and the exercise of women's right to vote, as well as their employment outside the home, were the reasons behind provocative fashion.

The beauty stereotypes were fiercely resisted by African Americans, by adopting the ideals of white "ladylike" womanhood and consciously presenting themselves as sophisticated, moral, and educated, many African Americans fought against the stereotypes associated with women (Harnett, 2009). By portraying Claudia's hatred of the white doll "Shirley Temple" and a white student named "Maureen Peal," Morrison challenged the stereotype of beauty.

Regarding gender equality, women in the feminist movement also battled for the protection of women and children. Toni Morrison exposed the issue of victim sexual gender from Pecola, Freida, and Miss Marie. They were sexually abused and lacked adequate legal defense. Morrison noted that the true evidence was the absence of legal protection and the inadequate role of family supervision. She confirmed that gender cases had not yet been settled for women and children at that time.

Toni Morrison exposed the implicit dangers of racial doctrine through books on educational literacy. In every chapter of *The Bluest Eye*, she interpolated the Dick and Jane tale. The harmony of the white family life is depicted in the story. Morrison presented two stories that contrasted black and white life. The Bluest Eye's characters' black circumstances did not align with the white stories.

The portrayal of the "Dick and Jane story" is an embedded form of satire about the typical discrimination against Black children, as Werrlein (2005) emphasizes. It indicates that the narrative is attempting to brainwash African Americans and their descendants. It was meant to crush the Black community's hopes of fighting and rebelling against white people. In the book, Toni Morrison explained Pecola's misfortune, including receiving bullying treatment, being isolated from classmates, and facing intimidation from his teacher.

Morrison held four protests to protest those unfavorable preconceptions, according to the researcher's study of the evidence in *The Bluest Eye Novel*. First, Toni Morrison fought to improve the rights and dignity of Black women. Unbalanced family dynamics and economic considerations fueled their want to live. Every female character was able to struggle for survival.

Secondly, Morrison created the black family role. She provided examples of how African Americans had a bad relationship with white society, which ultimately led to conflict

inside black families. It had an impact on the law of causation between parents and children as well as between husband and wife. Morrison explained that if the demands for their rights were not fulfilled, women might sometimes rebel against the males in a domestic conflict. Ironically, both men and women in a household frequently expressed their dissatisfaction with their offspring. Morrison disclosed that the threat of domestic violence not only brought unfavorable stereotypes from outside the organization but also surfaced within it.

Morrison, third, disagreed with the idea of white beauty. Morrison believed that black people could not attain physical attractiveness. Nonetheless, she believed that black skin had a certain beauty that set it apart from other types of beauty. Black people are urged by Morrison to preserve their individuality and Black identity.

Fourth, Morrison confirmed that the black community's dignity had been weakened by Dick and Jane's story. She incorporated a fragment of the story. While the Breedlove family had a difficult life, the Dick and Jane story demonstrated the peaceful white family environment.

In the plot twist, Morrison also provided evidence of the widespread criminal activity and sexual harassment of Black people. This is probably due to the significant issue of women's and children's legal protection. The insecurity of Black people in the eyes of the American public has been tragic ever since the government implemented the Jim Crow laws.

Toni Morrison highlighted this issue about racial theology and trend ideas in her symbolic threats. Cosmetics and beauty accessories gained popularity in the early 20th century as modernization progressed. Black women battled with white women for attention in the public sphere in an attempt to improve gender quality. Toni Morrison foresaw that white women would politicize their standards of beauty.

Morrison took into account the propagation of racist ideas that harmed Black generations in schools when discussing racial theory. Morrison expressed her disapproval of the white family tale "Dick and Jane" in her book. In the social community, they belonged to a high caste and enjoyed privileges.

CONCLUSION

In this study, *The Bluest Eye*, draws parallels with the pervasive racism experienced in 20th-century America. Morrison aimed to support Black families by addressing and combating prejudice and advocating for Black rights. During this period, racial discrimination fueled negative stereotypes about African Americans, affecting perceptions of gender, race, and age. She challenged these harmful stereotypes through several avenues. She championed women's rights by advocating for legal protection and employment equality. She also highlighted the significance of the Black family and promoted the idea that beauty extends beyond white women, emphasizing the inherent beauty within Black individuals. Furthermore, Morrison subtly critiqued the perceived superiority of white living standards, as exemplified in the "Dick and Jane" narrative.

Morrison's theories were influenced by the Intergroup Threat Theory, encompassing both symbolic and realistic threats. She questioned the lack of legal protection, moral harm, and societal disparities faced by African Americans, which she viewed as realistic threats. These challenges often led to economic instability, increased crime rates, and sexual harassment

within the Black community. Such threats not only fostered insecurity about leading a respectable life but also left individuals vulnerable without adequate legal safeguards, sometimes leading to unethical behavior for survival.

Morrison identified cultural and cosmetic trends as a source of imbalance, representing a symbolic threat. Black women were often unjustly labeled as "ugly" or "unattractive." Morrison countered this symbolic threat by creating strong opposing characters, such as Claudia, through whom she voiced her dissent. Racial theory within literature also presented a symbolic danger, as Morrison opposed numerous literary books that perpetuated racial and class biases.

Morrison employed "sympathetic protest" to address racial tensions affecting Black families, aiming to foster an objective understanding of the Black community. She sought to raise awareness of the pessimism and despair that often led African Americans to confront stereotypical dangers, creating a somber social environment. Ideally, these discussions will inspire further literary works that champion equality and human rights, and this study catalyzes upholding the freedoms and equality enshrined in human rights legislation.

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