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Fractured Selves: A Psychoanalytic Study of Identity, Trauma, and Hegemony in *Native Son* and *The Bluest Eye*

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Abstract:

Richard Wright (1908-1960), a prominent African American author from the early 20th century, examines the impact of racism on African American communities in his renowned novel *Native Son* (1940). The narrative recounts the tragic life of Bigger, a 20-year-old Black man, who becomes a victim while navigating the injustices imposed by white Americans. His struggle to establish an independent identity ultimately ends in failure within a hostile environment. Similarly, Toni Morrison, an acclaimed African-American writer, portrays the hardships and psychological trauma endured by Black-American communities as victims of systemic racial oppression in her fiction. Her debut novel, *The Bluest Eye* (1970), tells the poignant story of Pecola, a young African American girl who suffers a mental breakdown under the weight of racial prejudices during the 1940s. Pecola and Bigger embark on separate yet equally unachievable quests: Pecola's obsession with conforming to white beauty standards and Bigger's pursuit of self-determination both prove illusory. Drawing on Lacan's psychoanalytic theory, this study investigates how anxiety, trauma, neurosis, and delusions embedded in their psyches emerge during identity formation in the mirror and imaginary stages, culminating in disruptions during the symbolic stage. Their authentic selves either clash with or are subsumed by the dominant symbolic framework. Within these stages,

Pecola and Bigger confront the construct of the big "Other," which has engineered a culturally oppressive world for Black individuals. This tension between the imaginary and symbolic realms creates a rift between reality and the 'Real' for Pecola and Bigger, leaving them unable to reconcile their inner desires with external realities. Pecola's descent into madness and Bigger's reluctant acceptance of his societal role as a criminal underscore the devastating psychological toll of these conflicts. Bigger's actions stem not from inherent criminality but from a fractured sense of self and unresolved internal turmoil. This paper discusses the mechanisms by which cultural hegemony sustains racial hatred in early 20th-century American society. Employing a qualitative methodology, it applies Lacan's psychoanalytic framework alongside Antonio Gramsci's concept of cultural hegemony to illuminate the psychological disintegration of Bigger and Pecola. Furthermore, it highlights the mutually dependent dynamic between the ruling and subordinate classes. This research demonstrates that the unattainable aspirations imposed on individuals like Pecola and Bigger serve to perpetuate their suffering, revealing how their psychological breakdowns were structurally rather than incidentally constructed.

Keywords: Psychoanalysis, Lacan, Cultural Hegemony, Mirror Stage, Symbolic Order, Racial Trauma, Identity Crisis.

Introduction

Richard Wright wrote during the Great Depression, a time of widespread economic hardship and resentment in the United States. During this period, Black Americans continued to endure systemic racism and entrenched social inequalities, leaving them with few avenues to escape victimization. In his *Native Son* (1940), Wright examines the effects of segregation and racial injustice on African American communities. The novel offers a compelling portrayal of oppressive white domination in the South Side of Chicago. It tells the story of Bigger, a young Black man, whose descent into criminality is neither a choice nor a reflection of his true nature. Instead, it prompts readers to question the forces driving him toward violence and his quest for self-identity. What underlying conditions shape his actions, and what internal struggles render him irrational to society but rational to himself? Wright provides insight into Bigger's psychological makeup, stating: "And in a boy like Bigger, young, unschooled, whose subjective life was clothed in the tattered rags of American 'culture' this primitive fear and ecstasy were naked, exposed, unprotected by religion

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or a framework of government or a scheme of society whose final faiths would gain his love and trust" (Wright xxv).

Toni Morrison, another prominent African-American author, adeptly addresses complex subjects through her storytelling. Her works explore themes such as systemic racism, slavery, cultural hegemony, and the doctrines of the ruling class. Morrison captures the lived experiences of African Americans and underscores the persistent impact of discrimination. In *The Bluest Eye* (1970), she portrays the tangible struggles and psychological trauma of the African-American community during the 1940s. Widely regarded as one of her most celebrated works, the novel remains relevant for psychoanalytic analysis by providing critical insights into contemporary discrimination and the emotional scars borne by marginalized groups. By the 1960s, African-American writers began to confront Black audiences directly, rejecting the need to shield their communities' flaws from white criticism. Instead, they adopted a defiant tone, asserting their self-worth and denouncing the harmful effects of dominant white ideologies (Dobie 217). Pecola's tragic fate transcends mere racial victimization and invites deeper exploration. What unconscious forces fuel her obsession with white beauty standards? Why does this unattainable ideal consume her reality? What loss renders her recovery impossible and drives her toward madness? These questions, viewed through psychoanalytic and cultural-hegemonic frameworks, reveal critical layers of her story.

It is essential to recognize that slavery persisted in the United States long after its formal abolition, evolving into belief systems and social practices that authors like Wright and Morrison critique. The sociohistorical settings of *Native Son* (1940) and *The Bluest Eye* (1970) demonstrate that Black Americans in the 1940s faced relentless racial injustice. In the southern United States, Black communities endured systemic repression and the detrimental effects of Jim Crow laws. Public institutions enforced segregation, barring Black citizens from accessing spaces shared with white elites and exacerbating structural discrimination. African Americans were stripped of voting rights, and their political participation was systematically undermined. Black electoral victories were perceived as threats, prompting intensified efforts to suppress them. These social and legal barriers extended to education and employment, where opportunities were scarce, poverty was rampant, and violence and intimidation were pervasive. The Great Depression further exacerbated these challenges, amplifying discrimination in the job market (Edis 2038).

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Wright's and Morrison's works provide a psychological lens for understanding Black existence, revealing how historical trauma, hegemonic practices, and racial hatred shape identity and self-perception. Both authors delve into the systematic nature of cultural hegemony and its oppressive impact on African Americans within a racist societal framework. In *Native Son* and *The Bluest Eye*, Black individuals are stripped of basic dignity and subjected to persistent hostility, brutality, and prejudice. This context illuminates the psychological dimensions of Bigger and Pecola, whose struggles embody the conflict between their authentic selves and the identities imposed upon them by society. The ideological dominance of white culture, often internalized by Black communities, perpetuates unease and despair. Both novels demonstrate how deeply entrenched hegemony exacerbates hardship and drives individuals toward psychological collapse. Employing Lacan's psychoanalytic theory, this study examines their psyches as shaped by distorted, illusionary constructs imposed by societal norms.

Bigger's Inner Battle Between Real Self and Societal Reality in Native Son

In *Native Son* (1940), Bigger's psychological and emotional vulnerability stems from his disconnection from biased cultural, religious, and societal frameworks. His detachment from his own people further intensifies his isolation. Bigger's inner self is overshadowed by the dominant culture, which fragments and distorts his cultural perceptions. As a result, his primal emotions, such as fear and anxiety, remain unprocessed and later manifest violently. "And toward himself he was more exacting. He knew that the moment he allowed what his life meant to enter fully into his consciousness, he would either kill himself or someone else" (Wright 14). Bigger has developed a deep, almost instinctive belief that white people expect him to behave in a particular manner when in their presence. As he internalizes this belief during his mirror stage, it becomes ingrained and unquestionable.

His desire to assert his authentic self-clashes with the socialization process that shapes psychological growth. While no explicit authority compels him to act in a specific way, the attitudes, behaviours, and subtle expectations of others communicate these norms indirectly. "A feeling of being forever commanded by others so much that thinking and feeling for one's self is impossible" (Wright 307). A hegemonic society imposes tacit norms and behaviours, subtly shaping individuals' self-perceptions and actions through indirect means rather than overt commands. French Marxist Althusser underscores the role of dominant ideologies in this process:

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"The power of the state is maintained more subtly, by seeming to secure the internal consent of its citizens, using what Althusser calls ideological structures or state ideological apparatuses" (Berry 158). According to Althusser, "We misrecognize the world around us, like the infant that Lacan describes, which misrecognizes itself as identical to its mirror image. By misrecognizing imaginary conditions as real, we do not see the real condition" (Parker 290).

Lacan's concept of "misrecognition" explains how Bigger exists in a constant state of illusion, struggling to reconcile his real self with the mirrored "I." His identity is shaped by the concepts of the "Other" rather than being rooted in an authentic self, leaving him vulnerable to external control. The realization of his visibility as a social entity aligns with Lacan's notion of the "Gaze," an anxious state triggered by the awareness of being observed. The "Other," as a construct of societal norms and language, shapes individuals' reflections, beliefs, and identities. Lacan argues that during the psyche's development, overlapping lacks emerge: the first concerning self-awareness and the second arising from dependency on societal structures and language for understanding. This dependence creates a persistent sense of insufficiency (Lacan 203-204). Bigger's identification with the "Other" manifests in societal labels such as criminal, "nigger," and brutal. These labels, projected onto him by societal norms, reinforce dehumanizing stereotypes. Lacan's theory highlights how individuals rely on external factors like language and societal structures to make sense of themselves, generating a lack that influences their identity formation.

On the other hand, analyzing the role of the big 'Other' in shaping the identity of the Black subject reveals how signifiers significantly influence hegemonic practices. In *Native Son*, it becomes apparent that crimes within the Black community, often committed against other Black individuals, were habitually neglected by law enforcement. Conversely, crimes involving white individuals were treated with utmost seriousness. This discrepancy underscores the profound division between the white world and the Black community, as highlighted in an early conversation between Bigger and Jack. Their discussion illustrates how Black individuals form their perceptions of white people through media representations, leading to prejudice, fear, and animosity. At the same time, affluent white individuals remain largely unaware of the psychological distress experienced by the Black community. The novel also introduces the 'reds' or communists, depicted as advocates for equality, but societal institutions and media rigorously uphold power structures favoring the privileged white class.

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Since white Americans controlled the media, they perpetuated stereotypical images of Black people, reinforcing racial injustice and fostering self-hatred among minorities. Gramsci offers an alternative perspective by challenging the notion of the economy as the sole determinant of culture and politics. He argues that culture, politics, and the economy exist in a dynamic and reciprocal relationship. This interconnected and perpetually shifting system of influence, which he terms hegemony, helps explain the persistence of power structures (Jones 5). Bigger's fears, trauma, and doubts are deeply rooted in these hegemonic dynamics, resulting in his hatred toward both his race and white individuals. He never intended to harm Mary; instead, Mary and Jan's kindness toward him provoked irritation. Their sympathetic attitudes made him feel diminished and inferior. "There was in him a kind of terrified pride in feeling and thinking that some day he would be able to say publicly that he had done it. It was as though he had an obscure but deep debt to fulfill to himself in accepting the deed" (Wright 101). While not a premeditated murderer, Bigger finds a fleeting sense of power and equality during the trial as he reflects on the crime.

In reality, Bigger suffocates Mary accidentally, in a panic to avoid discovery by Mrs. Dalton. His overwhelming fear, heightened anxiety, and fractured personality drive the series of events that follow. "There was just the old feeling, the feeling that he had all his life: he was black and had done wrong; white men were looking at something with which they would soon accuse him" (Wright 206). Lacan identifies trauma as a fundamental force that shapes the human mind, linking it to what he terms 'cause,' a central impediment marked by failure, conflict, and inner turmoil. This 'cause' acts as a traumatic center around which the mind constructs defenses, often manifesting in mistakes, failures, and repetitive behaviors. These behaviors unconsciously trace back to unresolved past experiences, which simultaneously evoke fear and allure.

Lacan's concept of 'cause' disrupts signifiers, destabilizing meaning and distorting an individual's perception of reality. This disruption creates a split within the self, amplifying the tension between what is understood and what lies beyond comprehension. Such a split heightens the conflict between the known and the unknown, intensifying the dissonance in personal experience (George 16). Bigger's transformation from a powerless individual into a perceived "beast" reflects the culmination of long-standing psychological conflicts. His desire to reject societal constructs and embrace his 'Real' self-drives him to transcend the boundaries of the known and confront the inexpressible.

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If external forces or signifiers are relevant in this context, the issue of hegemony naturally arises. Antonio Gramsci, in his discussion of cultural leadership or hegemony, provides alternative explanations to Hegelian ideas and Marx's perspective on the connection between civil society and economic relations. Instead of merely aligning with the traditional Marxist concept of the substructure, Gramsci uses the term to highlight a vital analytical distinction. His categorization of the superstructure into two domains and his differentiation between hegemony and domination contribute a significant expansion to the theory of the superstructure. A central theme in Gramsci's analysis is that governments can gain support through mass media and other ideological mechanisms, largely because of shared perspectives and lifestyles among political elites. Civil society's institutions, even those not directly governed by the state, operate within a legal framework of rules and regulations, reinforcing this support. Furthermore, Gramsci observes a growing tendency for state involvement in civil society, particularly in cultural domains (Femia 27-28). Bigger reflects this notion of societal imposition when he concludes, "Maybe they were right when they said that a black skin was bad, the covering of an apelike anima. Maybe he was just unlucky, a man born for dark doom" (Wright 236).

Wright identifies two dominant psychological factors shaping Bigger's revolt. "First, through some quirk circumstance, he had become estranged from the religion and the folk culture of his race. Second, he was trying to react to and answer the call of the dominant civilization whose glitter came to him through the newspapers, magazines, radios, movies, and the mere imposing sight and sound of daily American life" (Wright xiii). Wright also critiques the racial bias in media coverage: "Negroes are rarely mentioned in the *press unless they've committed some crime!"* (Wright xv). This pervasive bias and fear lead Bigger to conclude, *"This was not his world"* (Wright 46). His yearning to stay with his family becomes a futile attempt to escape the oppressive emotions of fear and hatred. Bigger's self-perception and struggles are deeply influenced by societal images, systems, and interactions imposed upon him during his mirror and symbolic stages. While his unconscious desires seek self-autonomy, the ideas imposed by the big "Other" create unresolvable inner conflicts. The deep-rooted trauma, fears, and oppressive rules of a white-dominated society ultimately drive Bigger toward actions he might not have otherwise committed. These societal prejudices, embedded in his psyche from an early age, are perpetuated by media portrayals that label him a "beast," "Negro rapist," and "ape." Bigger's awareness of this treatment is acute: "They were having this sport with him before they did it" (Wright 261).

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Bigger internalizes the belief that Black individuals are inherently criminal, destined for lives of slavery or death, and sees no alternate reality. This belief, shared by the wider Black community, becomes a legally sanctioned condemnation that constrains their intellectual freedom from childhood. Deviating from these imposed rules results in severe punishment. "There was just the old feeling, the feeling that he had all his life: he was black and had done wrong; white men were looking at something with which they would soon accuse him" (Wright 206). Even Bessie's death becomes instrumentalized to expedite justice for Mary, as crimes against Black individuals were deprioritized by legal institutions. Bessie serves as a catalyst to reinforce Bigger's portrayal as a brutal beast. During the trial, false witnesses accuse him of crimes he never committed, including the rape of other women. The disbelief in Bigger's ability to compose the ransom note and act alone further erodes his autonomy and deepens his existential crisis. As a Black man, he is accused by the media, which serves the interests of the dominant class. The media's portrayal of him as a sex criminal intensifies his yearning to reclaim his real self, driving his rebellious nature to the forefront.

> REPORTERS FIND DALTON GIRL'S BONES IN FURNACE. NEGRO CHAUFFEUR DISAPPEARS. FIVE THOUSAND POLICE SURROUND BLACK BELT. AUTHORITIES HINT SEX CRIME. COMMUNIST LEADER PROVES ALIBI. GIRL'S MOTHER IN COLLAPSE. He paused and reread the line, AUTHORITIES HINT SEX CRIME. Those words excluded him utterly from the world. To hint that he had committed a sex crime was to pronounce the death sentence; it meant a wiping out of his life even before he was captured. (Wright 228)

The inception of a criminal mind, oblivious to its creation, can be traced to the pervasive influence of a racist society. Civil society, as part of its structure, incorporates the legal system, yet it also encompasses everyday activities such as "children's parties, shopping trips, and going on holiday. As it becomes more and more a matter of 'everyday life,' it becomes increasingly difficult to recognize that civil society has some connection with the operations of power" (Jones 32). Gramsci "identified civil society with the ideological superstructure, the institutions and technical instruments that create and diffuse modes of thought" (Femia 26). In *Native Son*, the novelist intricately examines the systemic structures that constrain individuals like Bigger, ultimately casting them as monsters in the eyes of society. This raises significant psychological

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questions about how social and cultural bias, alongside systemic oppression, influences the formation of criminal behavior. As Bigger reflects, "He would dream of making a stand against that white force, but that dream would fade when he looked at the other black people near him" (Wright 109).

Considering on the ideas of Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser, who integrated Lacan's concept of the imaginary, this stage of human psychology can be interpreted as a social space where shared identity takes precedence over differences. For example, ethnic or national communities provide a sense of unity where individuals identify with each other based on perceived similarities in ethnicity or nationality. Althusser links this phenomenon to ideology, which he describes as a distorted way of relating to reality. Within the imaginary, individuals misrecognize what they see, mistaking dissimilarity for sameness. Emotional attachments formed within this stage may diverge from actual truths. When individuals focus on similarities, they engage with the imaginary; however, when they emphasize differences, they interact with the symbolic, which deals with the concrete realities of language and societal structures (Parker 182). For Bigger, focusing on his perceived similarities with others aligns him with the imaginary, while recognizing his differences forces him into the symbolic. This dynamic illustrates how power operates across various social and psychological layers. Bigger's failure to stand against the oppressive white force stems from the imaginary stage, where misrecognition arises, initiating his struggle with the 'Real' self upon confronting the symbolic world. As he reflects, "He really did not know just where that fear and shame had come from; it had just been there, that was all" (Wright 108).

Lacan's concept of the 'Real' refers to something fundamental to our being—an essential aspect of existence that cannot be fully expressed or represented through language or symbols. To explain this paradox, Lacan coined the term 'extimate,' signifying that the 'Real' is simultaneously the most internal part of human existence and something excluded from the symbolic order. The 'Real' is often ignored when discourse centers solely on representation. It can be likened to slavery, which Lacan describes as an "exclusion within the social Symbolic." Though society has attempted to repress or exclude slavery's legacy, its profound impact continues to shape perceptions of race and identity, particularly within African-American and American contexts. This unspoken influence resembles the "extimate Real"—a central yet inarticulate force that is difficult to fully express (George 14-15).

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Bigger's journey can be seen as an effort to transgress the boundaries imposed by white society, as he begins to feel his true self emerging. "The knowledge that he had killed a white girl they loved and regarded as their symbol of beauty made him feel the equal of them, like a man who had been somehow cheated, but had now evened the score" (Wright 155). However, reality ultimately confronts Bigger, revealing that he can never fully realize his authentic self. His existence remains partially eclipsed by the symbolic order, shaped by the unattainable ideal of the 'I' image.

> The real is a mysterious concept that is not the same as reality. We can represent reality with signifiers, but we cannot represent the real. The language we would use to represent the real evokes our distance from the real. The real is the raw kernel over which the imaginary and the symbolic operate and compete. It cannot be explained or described, but only inferred. The real is the origin of hunger and trauma of the indescribable that can never reach meaning. It is the in-between of competing explanations, shaping reality without being part of reality. (Parker 181)

Pecola's Endeavor with Unrealistic Beauty Ideals, and a Distorted Sense of Self in a Hegemonic Culture in *The Bluest Eye*

The Bluest Eye provides a poignant examination of Black existence, their intellectual subjugation, and the lived experiences of the African-American community. Toni Morrison looks deeply into the deceptive growth of dominant ideologies and the oppression endured by Black individuals within a racist societal framework. Racial discrimination perpetuates mental subjugation, instills self-hatred, and fosters internalized anger within the psyche of Black individuals. These discriminatory practices extend beyond interpersonal encounters and are systematically ingrained, resulting in profound and enduring consequences for society. Pecola's tragic story is emblematic of the struggles faced by other Black girls, illustrating the pervasive and structural nature of their plight.

Pecola's misfortune is rooted in the formative stages of her psychological development. During her mirror stage, she encounters an idealized reflection of herself that is inherently flawed, and this distorted self-perception persists into her extended imaginary stage. Her ability to establish a cohesive, independent identity is systematically eroded by the racist ideologies imposed on her

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and her community. Consequently, her authentic self becomes obscured, leading her and others to develop contempt for their Blackness. This internalized self-loathing is exacerbated by their acceptance of the desires and values of the 'Other' as their own.

The influence of the 'Other' on individual desires underscores the mechanisms of cultural hegemony, which shapes and controls identity by enforcing dominant societal norms. Lacan's theory explains how individuals internalize the desires of the 'Other,' mistaking them for their own. This aligns with Gramsci's concept of hegemony, as analyzed by Jones (2006). For a governing power to sustain its authority, it must exhibit flexibility and responsiveness to the evolving desires of the people it governs. This process involves aligning the ruling power's actions with the perceived interests and values of its subordinates, creating the illusion that the exercise of power reflects the will of the people. In doing so, the dominant power integrates elements of the subordinate group's values, reshaping its principles to maintain legitimacy. This dynamic reinforces the authority's control over its subjects by blending dominance with apparent responsiveness to their needs (Jones 3).

The erosion of indigenous cultural practices among marginalized groups further demonstrates the insidious nature of hegemony. As the dominant culture is relentlessly promoted, enforced, and normalized, the cultural traditions of Afro-Americans are systematically marginalized and devalued. Within this framework, Black individuals are compelled to validate the dominant culture as the standard, one dictated and sanctioned by the privileged class. The coexistence of two distinct cultural paradigms becomes untenable, as the dominant culture exerts overwhelming influence on the social and political environment of the nation. Allowing marginalized communities from the periphery to access the center of society represents a perceived threat to the power and privilege of the ruling class. To mitigate this threat, the dominant class perpetuates power imbalances and inequitable practices, ensuring their authority remains intact. Rather than resorting to overt force, it becomes more expedient to suppress marginalized individuals through less conspicuous means, further entrenching their exclusion and subjugation.

> There is a difference between being put *out* and being put outdoors. If you are put out, you go somewhere else, if you are outdoors, there is no place to go. The distinction was subtle but final. Outdoors was the end of something, an irrevocable, physical fact, defining and complementing our metaphysical condition. Being a minority in both caste and class, we moved about anyway on the hem of life,

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> struggling to consolidate our weakness and hang on, or to creep singly up into the major folds of the garment. Our peripheral existence, however, was something we had learned to deal with- probably because it was absurd (Morrison 11)

Gaining consent for accepted cultural beliefs becomes an effective means of governing and controlling people. In *The Bluest Eye* (1970), Pecola Breedlove yearns for an idealized beauty standard perpetuated by White Americans—one that is unattainable for her. During the mirror stage of her psychological development, Pecola confronts an idealized image of herself, internalizing the belief that she must possess blue eyes and fair skin to align with American white beauty standards. This stage engenders a "misrecognition" of her authentic self, as Pecola identifies with an image that is not truly hers but rather an external ideal imposed by society. This distorted self-perception forms the foundation of her psychological growth. As this mirror stage extends into the imaginary phase, Pecola's fixation on this unachievable ideal intensifies. She remains ensnared by the illusion of the ideal image, unable to break free from the false expectations first encountered during the mirror stage. Adding to her turmoil, the presence of a dismissive mother and the internalized racial self-hatred profoundly influence her psychological state.

Upon entering the symbolic stage, Pecola confronts a patriarchal societal order. Her father, paralyzed by his feelings of inadequacy and humiliation in the presence of white individuals, fails to assume the role of a protective figure. This absence leaves a significant void in her psychological framework. Furthermore, the symbolic stage, through its network of signifiers—media, educational institutions, billboards, and advertisements—reinforces white ideals of beauty and value. These pervasive societal messages tactically compel Pecola to internalize the belief that whiteness represents beauty and worth. The dominant ideology ingrained in this symbolic order prescribes these norms, dictating what is desirable and shaping Pecola's unconscious acceptance of these ideals. Consequently, Pecola conforms to this prevailing criterion, mistaking the desires of the societal "Other" for her own. Her identity becomes increasingly disconnected from her true self, as dominant cultural forces perpetually reshape her beliefs and desires into something she can never genuinely attain. This illustrates how hegemony operates, as Claudia poignantly questions, "We were lesser. Nice, brighter, but still lesser . . . What was the secret? What did we lack? Why was it important?" (Morrison 57).

Artz and Murphy (2000) explain:

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> The mass media, educational institutions, the family, government agencies, industry, religious groups, and other social institutions elicit support for such hegemonic relations through patterns of communication and material reward. Hegemony considers how the conditions of society take shape in our minds—philosophically, religiously, culturally, politically, and ideologically—and how humans are thus brought into various social relationships and their explanations. (3)

Gramsci emphasizes that power operates through a blend of coercion and consent, highlighting the critical role of ideas in generating societal compliance (Artz and Murphy 11). Importantly, Gramsci rejects the notion that ideology is merely an illusion. Rather than viewing ideas as passive byproducts of history, he asserts that ideology actively drives social change. According to Gramsci, ideologies exert substantial influence by guiding and shaping human actions, effectively securing consent for hegemonic systems (12).

> You looked at them and wondered why they were so ugly, you looked closely and could not find the source. Then you realized that it came from conviction, their conviction. It was as though some mysterious all-knowing master had given each one a cloak of ugliness to wear, and they had each accepted it without question. The master had said, 'You are ugly people.' They had looked about themselves and saw nothing to contradict the statement; saw, in fact, support for it leaning at them from every billboard, every movie, every glance" (Morrison 28).

Morrison's writing lays bare the mechanisms of cultural hegemony and the oppressive dynamics embedded within societal frameworks. Racist ideologies are so deeply entrenched that Pecola finds herself unable to escape the pervasive white standards of beauty; instead, she absorbs them entirely, leading to her tragic downfall. Black individuals, shaped by these social constraints, internalize a sense of self-hatred, which fuels their desire to conform to cultural ideals that are unattainable. As a result, domination is achieved without overt force. Victims internalize their subjugation, perpetuating the cycle of oppression. "Adults, older girls, shops, magazines, newspapers, window signs—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 14).

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The white beauty standard, deeply rooted in society, is propagated through advertisements, movies, and other media, causing even young children to unconsciously adopt and reinforce these ideals. From an early age, these standards become the ultimate benchmark of beauty, shaping self-perception and identity. Pecola's physical and psychological deterioration occurs in tandem as the novel progresses, though in incompatible ways. The dominant cultural norms and attitudes established by white society incite racial self-hatred within the Black community, thereby solidifying the existing power structures. In one conversation, Maureen, a white girl, references the movie, *Imitation of Life* and remarks on a character, saying, "This mulatto girl hates her mother 'cause she is black and ugly" (Morrison 52). This illustrates how cultural products reinforce racial biases and sustain internalized hatred.

Pauline, Pecola's mother, exemplifies this struggle. Despite her romantic disposition in her youth, Pauline faced ongoing challenges with self-perception as a Black woman. Her marriage to Cholly marked a turning point, leading to a disheartening transformation. Racial hatred became a defining element of their lives, manifesting in their inability to embrace their authentic selves. During the mirror stage of identity formation, their identification with the ideal 'I' prevents them from accepting their real selves. This distortion, coupled with societal impositions, leads them to adopt the desires of others as their own. Even as a baby, Pauline's view of Pecola reflects these internalized biases: "After Pecola was born, Pauline saw her as 'a right smart baby' but also remarked, 'I knowed she was ugly. Head full of pretty hair, but Lord she was ugly'" (Morrison 98).

The concept of race, shaped by the historical legacy of slavery, acts as a source of *'jouissance'*—a blend of pleasure and pain—for African Americans. This complex relationship with race ties individuals to a traumatic past that remains difficult to escape. In Lacanian psychoanalysis, race, as a signifier, perpetuates cycles of psychological trauma linked to this deeply embedded, unspoken part of identity known as the "Real." Despite attempts to overcome or reframe it, race continues to serve as an emotional and challenging connection to the history of slavery. Lacan's assertion that "the unconscious is shaped by language" underscores how words and societal narratives deeply influence the psyche (George 15).

Pauline's early life reflects the pervasive societal prejudices that not only perpetuate beauty myths but also instill feelings of unworthiness and inadequacy. These influences caused lifelong suffering and led her to divert her attention from her own family to the white family she served. She found

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a sense of "beauty, order, cleanliness, and praise" in her work with the Fishers. The Fishers' appreciation reinforced her subservience, as they remarked, "Really, she is the ideal servant" (Morrison 99). This dynamic demonstrates how systemic racism and societal biases distort identities and relationships, compelling marginalized individuals to find solace and validation in roles defined by the dominant culture.

On the other hand, Pecola's lack of love during her formative years hinders her transition from the imaginary to the symbolic realm. Deprived of maternal affection, she struggles to construct an authentic identity through societal projections and to integrate into the symbolic order. Her unmet needs from the earliest stages of development result in a confused and fractured sense of self. The pervasive influence of racist language, unequal social structures, and hegemonic practices erases her real self as a whole and independent human being. "A little black girl who wanted to rise up out of the pit of her blackness and see the world with blue eyes" (Morrison 138). Cholly, denied access to cultural codes of masculinity, represents the absence of traditional masculine traits. This void in Pecola's life complicates her psychological development, as her misrecognition of her identity prevents her from fully grasping her existence. Her failure to reconcile the fragmented images of her parents during the mirror and symbolic stages exacerbates her alienation.

The concept of the "Real" in Lacanian psychoanalysis is distinct from reality. Reality can be represented through signifiers, but the "Real" resists representation. The language used to describe the "Real" only serves to highlight our distance from it. The "Real" is the primal core beneath the imaginary and symbolic realms, operating as an elusive, indescribable essence. It is the origin of profound experiences like hunger and trauma—experiences that defy explanation. The "Real" exists in the liminal space between competing interpretations, shaping reality without fully being a part of it (Parker 181).

When Pecola gazes into the mirror, she fails to see the blue eyes and white beauty she so desperately craves. Instead, the reflected image contradicts her desires, leaving her unable to reconcile her identity with her aspirations. This disconnect reflects what Derrida terms "differance," the constant deferral of meaning and the inability of desire to reach its object. "While we live in the symbolic, we also spend much of our lives chasing after the imaginary. The symbolic and the endless deferral and difference that Derrida calls differance mostly keep us from reaching the imaginary. Desire has trouble getting to its object" (Parker 183). Pecola remains trapped in an

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in-between space, misrecognizing the symbolic as the imaginary. Her descent into insanity stems from this unresolved conflict, as she cannot distinguish between the imagined unity of the imaginary and the fragmented nature of the symbolic. She convinces herself that she now possesses the bluest eyes, aligning with white beauty standards, yet her identity remains fractured by the simultaneous presence and absence of this unattainable desire. This liminal position denies her a stable sense of meaning or self-worth. While the imaginary world offers a sense of wholeness, the symbolic world, defined by language and difference, introduces incompleteness and separation. Derrida's theory of differance underscores this tension, revealing that language always falls short of fully capturing reality. For instance, our concept of "self" depends on understanding "absence" because presence can only be defined in contrast to its opposite (Parker 180-181).

Pecola's fragmented identity can be further understood through Lacan's concepts. The "Real," according to Lacan, represents the essential core of our being—something deeply fundamental yet beyond the reach of language or symbols. Lacan describes the "Real" as "*extimate,*" a paradoxical condition wherein the "Real" is both the innermost aspect of our being and simultaneously excluded from the symbolic realm. The "Real" is often overshadowed by discourse, much like slavery, which Lacan describes as an "exclusion within the social Symbolic." Although slavery is repressed or excluded in societal narratives, it continues to profoundly shape perceptions of race and identity, particularly within African-American and American contexts. This enduring impact, like the "extimate Real," is central yet remains difficult to articulate or confront fully (George 14-15).

The concept of subjectivity—how individuals perceive and experience themselves—is constrained by the pre-existing structures and meanings imposed by the big "Other." These societal frameworks confine individuals to a predefined linguistic and cultural order, disconnecting them from vital parts of their unconscious and the "Real." This disconnection creates a persistent sense of lack or incompleteness within the self (George 19). Through Lacan's psychoanalytic lens, this lack is magnified for enslaved or oppressed individuals, as illustrated in Pecola's experience. "If it appears on one side as meaning, produced by the signifier, it appears on the other as aphanisis" (Lacan 210). Lacan's concept of the "aphanisic effect" describes how language and societal structures obscure or erase aspects of identity. This erasure is evident in Pecola's internalized obsession with the beauty myth, which ultimately leads to her insanity. Her mental collapse results

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from the profound internal void created by repeated encounters with dehumanizing societal structures that deny her humanity.

In the context of Pecola and Bigger's experiences, their identities are shaped by interactions with others but are simultaneously constrained by the absence of their authentic selves. This absence arises from the influence of language and symbols, which are entrenched within systems of domination and control. Both characters' struggles highlight how hegemonic social orders systematically erase individuality and enforce conformity to oppressive societal norms.

Conclusion

Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* and Richard Wright's *Native Son* serve as literary examples of the psychological trauma inflicted on African Americans by racial and cultural hegemony in the early 20th century. Pecola Breedlove and Bigger Thomas represent the collective struggles of the African-American community during this era, accentuating the devastating impact of systemic oppression. Analysed through the lens of Lacan's psychoanalytic theory, it becomes evident that Pecola's and Bigger's identities are moulded and ultimately fractured by the pervasive societal structures enforced by the dominant white culture of that time. These structures, denoted by the "big Other," impose unattainable ideals that exacerbate internal conflicts, leading to their psychological disintegration.

The tension between the 'Real' self and societal realities is striking in both characters. Pecola's obsessive desire for blue eyes and Bigger's desperate pursuit of autonomy are products of a hegemonic social order that sustains racial subjugation. The dissonance between their essential desires—their 'Real' selves—and the harsh realities of a racially stratified society leaves them in a state of profound incompleteness and alienation. Their distorted identities are not merely personal failures but the outcomes of systemic cultural and linguistic forces designed to deny them a true sense of self-worth.

The psychological toll of these unattainable ideals is amplified by enduring cultural and linguistic frameworks that perpetuate marginalization. Pecola's and Bigger's experiences underscore that their inability to realize their aspirations stems from a society deliberately constructed to maintain white dominance. By examining these narratives through Lacan's psychoanalytic framework and Gramsci's concept of cultural hegemony, this study reveals the

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deliberate and systemic nature of their tragedies. These works underscore how oppressive social structures shaped the characters' lives and identities, ultimately leading to their tragic outcomes.

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