

# Exploring the Identity of Black Americans in Alice Walker's "Everyday use" and Tony Morrison's "The Bluest Eyes"

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**Abstract:** *The influence of white cultural hegemony on the life and identity of black people has led to their own negation of the mainstream cultural influence of white people. Some black women seek identity recognition and achieve self redemption through different means. This helps the majority of black people, especially female compatriots, establish correct aesthetic values, identify and construct their self-identity in the society and culture dominated by white culture. Furthermore, it points out that only by obtaining the correct identity can African Americans continue and develop their personal survival while preserving their national identity.*

**Keywords:** *white culture, black identity recognition, identity exploration, "The Bluest Eyes", "Everyday use", identity crisis*

## 1. Introduction

Identity attributes are different from other ordinary attributes, as they are one of the signs that a person enters society, recognizes and communicates with others in a certain way. [1]In works depicting black identity, some black people weaken their traditional culture and instead apply white values to themselves, attempting to whiten themselves.[2]As seen in "The Bluest Eyes," Jerodan and Pekola unconsciously identify with the aesthetic concepts and values of white people, in order to gain recognition from the white world. However, there are still some black people who remain calm and sober in the pursuit of white culture, always sticking to their own racial culture. In "The Bluest Eyes," Claudia and her family affirm their dark skin from the bottom of their hearts and possess spiritual happiness. But there are also people who pursue black identity but find it difficult to achieve true inner happiness, such as Dee in his youth in "Everyday use". Why do people feel different when they have the same self-identity? This article will analyze the characters in "The Bluest Eyes" and "Everyday use" to explore the identity loss and two different identity issues of black people.

## 2. The loss of black identity and distortion of values

### 2.1. Pekola - a victim of self-identity loss

In a world dominated by white people, most black people believe that it is this black skin that creates the void with hateful edges in the eyes of white people. "When black people do not receive affirmation of themselves in society, many black people begin to shape some white characteristics in themselves to achieve psychological balance.". Pekola in[3] "The Bluest Eyes" completely lost her identity concept, abandoned national culture and values, and began to distort her ideology under the invasion of dominant white culture. Pekola's loss of self-identity was not only fueled by her own disgust, but also by her fellow black people around her. The black compatriots she comes into contact with are almost all the same image: losing or even denying oneself in mainstream society, affirming white culture in mainstream culture and abandoning one's own culture. She was called to play at home by the neighbor's little boy Jerodan, but the boy hit the cat hard on her. Joanne's mother, Jerodan, called her the "annoying little black girl" and ruthlessly kicked her out. When she went to the candy store, the white shopkeeper's eyes were filled with a sense of disgust. In school, no one wants to sit with her at the same table, and teachers try to avoid communicating with her. The classmates made up doggerel to mock her dark skin, even though they themselves had the same skin color. If one blindly values white culture, aesthetic concepts, and way of life, the black community will only be confused about their own culture and self-identity. Morrison once stated, "Judging a person's character by their appearance is one

of the most foolish, harmful, and destructive notions in the Western world, and we should not associate with it in any way. The concept of beauty in appearance held by whites has no connection with our nation's past, present, and future. However, the protagonist of the novel, Pecola, falls victim to this 'beauty' ideal. In fact, Pecola's self-loathing complex is not limited to her alone; it is a common ailment among many African Americans." Fanon once pointed out in his work "Black Skin, White Mask": "Black people... in order to gain the recognition of white people, break free from the shackles of their inferior race and squeeze into the upper society, erase the shame of their innate black identity, will unintentionally hate themselves, and thus be in a state of inferiority and self destruction both spiritually and physically." Therefore, from this perspective, Pecola's tragedy is not simply an individual tragedy, but a tragedy of a race and a nation.

### ***2.2. Jerodan--whose value distorted when breaking free her black identity***

Jerodan is one of the light skinned black people in the novel "The Bluest Eyes". Her skin tone is lighter, and she has received white-dominated education. She identifies herself as a person of color, constantly guarding against associating with blacks in her surroundings. She also restricts her children from playing with black children and maintains a clear distinction between people of color and blacks. She avoids her innate black identity and often reminds herself to distance herself from black people, believing that she is different from black skin and proud of it. She looked at Pecola with prejudice, thinking that all black little girls were equally dirty, messy, and bad, so she scolded her and immediately got out of her house. In her eyes, Pecola is not a flesh-and-blood human being, but a chronic illness and the greatest hidden danger existing in society. More importantly, Pecola represents her past and racial history that she does not want to look back on. Her worship of white culture has taken over her entire soul. By abandoning Black culture, Geraldine has also lost all the pleasures of life: the love between husband and wife, the bond between mother and child, and the ability to interact with others. In fact, the vanity that Jerodan painstakingly fabricated is a manifestation of her own weakness and powerlessness. Pecola is like a microcosm of Geraldine, representing the past she does not want to recall, and she dare not face her national identity and culture. Jerodan not only abandoned her black identity, but also lost her emotional attachment. She blindly pursues a well-organized life, and neither her husband nor her son are her ties. She is like her own cat, gently curled up in the laws of white culture. Under the oppression of racial discrimination, she refused to face the value of black traditional culture and actively abandoned her own identity and traditional culture of the nation, immersing herself in her own circle and unable to extricate herself.

## **3. Searching for self redemption in a white dominated society**

### ***3.1. The Pursuit of Black Identity - Claudia's Path to Self Identity***

In "The Bluest Eyes," Claudia and her family live a poor material life with self-esteem and self love, not judging their skin color and value according to the standards of the white people around them. They affirm their black skin from the bottom of their hearts and have spiritual happiness. Claudia's parents, the McTil couple, strive to avoid being influenced by racism, adhere to their own values and aesthetics, and uphold national dignity. Their living conditions were not as satisfactory as the Pecola family, but the family was harmonious. The care of their parents gave the two black little girls confidence and deep sympathy for the weak (although they were seen as weak in life by others). After Jolly set fire to her own home, Pecola became homeless. The Claudia family once again carried forward their sense of community responsibility: they adopted her for a few days, changed her clothes and had food and drink. Claudia sisters, who were deeply influenced by their parents' role models, also maintained the dignity of the black people everywhere in the school: they dared to fight with the boys who bullied Pecola, and quarreled with the light skinned girl Mo Ling. Thanks to the correct guidance and careful care of black parents, daughters are able to maintain black self-identity and identity construction under the rule of white culture, and grow up healthy and happy. They truly accept their black identity from the bottom of their hearts in order to achieve true redemption, so black identity is not just about externalizing black clothing. In "Everyday use", Dee excessively flaunts black culture to white people and has no understanding of African culture, leading to an identity dilemma.

### ***3.2. Dee's Identity Dilemma***

Dee in "Everyday use" is a black girl with light skin. During adolescence, Dee was an attachment to

the "white culture" and wore clothing with upper class white characteristics to enhance himself. She detested herself and the old house that represented the black way of life. "She hated that house to the death," [4] and she even hated the patchwork quilt she longed for because "that quilt was outdated and not popular enough." [4] When she saw her house burned down, she instead gloated. In the 1960s, the United States launched a black cultural movement to eliminate racial discrimination, and black nationalism was promoted. During his youth, Dee began to pursue "symbolic" black fashion. Dee returned to her hometown to visit her mother, wearing a floor length skirt; In addition to clothing, Dee's accessories have also changed, including large earrings and necklaces; Dee also left a curly explosive head. Dee's fashionable clothing, jewelry, and hairstyle are all microcosms of black fashion during the period of black power. After returning home, Di changed his name to "Wangero Leewanika Kemanjo". Helga Hoel's research has found that this name has at least two misspellings [5], and Dee's new name is a mixture of names from several tribes in East Africa, a meaningless patchwork symbol. And her dressing style is also from West Africa, so Dee is just a pretended African. Dee is more like a follower who blindly follows the trend and rethinks her culture in a superficial way. She only shows her black identity to the public on the surface, but in reality, she knows very little about her own culture. The confusion experienced by African Americans like Dee is a pain that the African American civil rights movement must endure for a long time. Despite the existence of superficial imitation, attention to black culture has gradually broken the shackles of mainstream American culture dominated by white culture.

#### **4. External reasons for the loss of black identity - primarily analyzed through "The Bluest Eye"**

If the loss of black identity is attributed to internal factors within the black community, the intense onslaught of surrounding white culture significantly accelerates this process. Pecola's tragedy is not solely occasioned by self-loathing and neglect from her own people; instead, it is exacerbated by the pervasive influence of dominant white culture. This dominant culture, often unconsciously leveraging its absolute political dominance, colonizes weaker cultures, utilizing intensified dissemination and cultural infiltration as tools to saturate the minds of these vulnerable groups, aiming to penetrate and assimilate them.

##### ***4.1 The Impact of Dominant Culture***

Whites always occupy a central position, while blacks are degraded and marginalized. In order to maintain and uphold the supremacy and centrality of whites, the purported authority of white orthodoxy has never hesitated to strive for the creation of a "panopticon" state. Derived from Foucault, the "panopticon" refers to a state that not only uses its violence apparatus to intimidate and monitor every move you make, but also instills its ideology into your political consciousness through the power of "discourse practice". Ohio, as described in the novel, reflects this pervasive "state of panopticon" everywhere. After becoming pregnant, Polly walked into a cinema to kill time. Intending to relieve her boredom through movies, Polly instead embraced the white culture propagated in the movies and plunged into the abyss of white cultural control over non-mainstream cultures. In the movies of that era, heroes and other positive characters were portrayed as white, while gangsters, hooligans, and other negative characters were depicted as black. Although movies are merely media for mass entertainment, they undoubtedly reinforced the consciousness of white superiority. Since immersing herself in Hollywood movies, Polly began to define her appearance based on mainstream white aesthetic standards, developing a hatred for everything that identified her as black. Polly's transition from feeling out of place in the northern town to wanting the praise and even recognition of those around her was precisely her process of being "bleached." In the process of being assimilated by white culture, Polly lost herself amidst the dominant culture. Jolly, Pecola's father, once held ideals like any other young person. However, under the impact of dominant white culture, he descended into self-deprecation. When his first sexual encounter with a female companion was interrupted and humiliated by several whites, his helplessness and inferiority led him to blame his black female companion for her willingness to engage with him at that moment, rather than hating the whites who had insulted him. The silent erosion of black self-esteem had ensconced the superiority of white race in his mind. When Jolly imagined the figures of God and the devil, he pictured God as a physically robust black man, reflecting his racial identity. However, the omnipresent white ideas compelled him to immediately negate his own thoughts. The mass media and popular culture he encountered on a daily basis told him that the image of a black person was associated with ugliness, stupidity, clumsiness, and dirtiness, while the omniscient God should be white! The process of Jolly's formation, negation, and ultimate affirmation of the image of God mirrors the conflict between black and white cultures in reality, ultimately

resulting in the triumph of white culture over black culture. In a society dominated by white culture, blacks have lost their voice. Whites constantly disseminate and reinforce the superiority of their own culture, refusing to tolerate any voices that deviate from the mainstream. Antonio Gramsci, a prominent scholar, once delved into the issue of cultural dominance in the West. He pointed out that "the cultural mechanisms in the Western world - including the state, law, education systems, media, and the family - disseminate a significant amount of white cultural symbols and their meanings, unifying people of different classes, races, and genders into the belief that whiteness is superior." In American society, the dominant white population constantly disseminates white culture through various channels, causing the black race to adopt white values, cultural traditions, and lifestyle habits as their own direction for progress. For children like Pecola, whose minds are still "growing," their parents provide them with misinformation and misguided guidance at home. Additionally, the constant repetition of mainstream culture in daily consumer goods in social life leads them towards unhealthy paths of self-loathing and self-negation.

#### **4.2 The oppression of racial discrimination**

Pecola's tragic experience can largely be attributed to the longstanding racial discrimination in American society. The white race has a strong sense of national pride, believing that all civilization originated from the white nation, while harbouring profound discrimination and prejudice against other ethnic groups, especially the black race. In "The Bluest Eye", when a white doctor leads a young intern through the maternity ward, they greet each white parturient woman warmly, but say to Polly, a black parturient woman in labor pain, "These women won't have any trouble delivering. They give birth quickly and don't even feel the pain, just like giving birth to a colt." Obviously, the whites at that time categorized blacks as animals, believing that this ethnic group was unable to perceive the pains of birth, aging, sickness, and death experienced by normal people in society. Pregnant women are the most beautiful, and Polly looked forward to the birth of her child, striving to fulfill the role of a mother. However, upon hearing these words, she was devastated, realizing that in the eyes of whites, giving birth was no different from animals giving birth. At the end of the 19th century, a large number of blacks could no longer sustain the overburdened life in the southern plantations or endure the abuse of lynching by the white race. They longed to escape slavery and discrimination and live a life of equality. Therefore, they began to migrate northward. However, the north was not the ideal kingdom they had envisioned. Although there was no overt racial oppression, the hard work of blacks did not bring them the deserved rewards. Their living environments were dirty and disorderly, and they suffered discrimination and abuse everywhere, with even the emergence of segregated public areas. The black race has been constantly fighting against racial discrimination and pursuing freedom and equality. However, every time they rise up in resistance, they are faced with intensified racial persecution, leaving deep and hard-to-heal wounds on the black nation. The experience of discrimination and oppression has deeply imprinted on the hearts of blacks, and this shadow cannot be immediately eliminated by the "Emancipation Proclamation". This heartbreaking history has led American blacks to develop self-loathing emotions. Under the huge contrast between dreams and reality and the impact of powerful white cultural values, the inner life and spiritual beliefs of blacks have begun to undergo mutations. They started to imitate white mainstream culture and values, developing a sense of rejection towards their own ethnic culture and history. In the process of assimilation by white mainstream culture, blacks gradually lost their cultural identity, becoming victims of cultural beliefs.

#### **5. Conclusion**

The new generation of African Americans must come out of the rule of white values while accepting their "dual identity", accept themselves, adhere to the traditions of their own nation, and obtain the correct self-identity. On this basis, we can dialectically absorb the strengths and advantages of white culture, complement each other's strengths, and promote the common development of diverse cultures. In short, society is inherently multicultural and coexists and complements each other. In American society, only through the joint efforts of black and white people to restore human nature can the entire country achieve harmonious development.

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