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Internalized Ugliness: Systemic Racism and Psychological Trauma in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*

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ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* as a profound critique of systemic racism conceived not as isolated personal bias but as a deeply embedded psychological and social structure. Drawing on sociological and psychological perspectives, the study argues that Morrison reveals how racial hierarchies are internalized through beauty ideals, media representation, family relations, respectability politics, and gendered norms. Through close readings of key characters—Pecola, Pauline, and Cholly Breedlove, Soaphead Church, Geraldine, and the MacTeer sisters—the paper demonstrates how racism generates interconnected yet divergent forms of trauma. Black women often absorb oppression inwardly, manifesting self-negation, aesthetic obsession, and moral discipline, whereas Black men more frequently externalize trauma through violence, emotional alienation, and ethical disorientation. Extending Morrison's critique beyond its American context, the paper introduces a comparative perspective by examining colorism and internalized racial hierarchies in contemporary Bangladesh. Despite ethnic homogeneity, Eurocentric beauty standards continue to influence media, marriage practices, and self-worth, revealing racism's persistence as a psychological condition rather than a legal or spatial system. Ultimately, the paper contends that *The Bluest Eye* reframes racism as a collective mental health crisis that fractures identity, weakens communal solidarity, and sustains intergenerational suffering.

INTRODUCTION

"Oh, how I wish that I had a daughter with skin white as snow, lips red as blood, and hair black as ebony." ("Snow White") This wish, voiced by the mother in the fairy tale Snow White, encapsulates a deeply ingrained racialized ideal of beauty that privileges whiteness as purity, desirability, and moral worth. Far from being an innocent fantasy, such narratives function as cultural instruments that normalize racial hierarchies and condition individuals—particularly children—to associate beauty and value with white physical traits. Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1970) interrogates this inherited ideology by exposing how systemic racism operates not merely through overt discrimination but through psychological internalization. Written during the height of the "Black is Beautiful" movement, the novel portrays Black characters who remain psychologically imprisoned within a racial order that venerates whiteness and devalues Blackness. Morrison reveals racism as a structural force that permeates family relationships, media representations, gender roles, and individual consciousness. Through characters such as Pecola Breedlove, Pauline Breedlove, Cholly Breedlove, Soaphead Church and Geraldine Morrison illustrates how systemic racism produces severe psychological consequences, including self-loathing, emotional fragmentation, and displaced violence. While female characters often internalize racialized beauty standards, male characters tend to externalize their trauma through aggression, revealing the gendered nature of racial oppression. Although *The Bluest Eye* is rooted in mid-twentieth-century American society, its critique resonates beyond its original context. In contemporary Bangladesh, Eurocentric beauty standards and colorism continue to shape media representation, marriage practices, and self-perception, despite the country's relative ethnic homogeneity. These parallels demonstrate that systemic racism can persist even in monoethnic societies through internalized hierarchies and cultural conditioning. This paper argues that Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* exposes systemic racism as a psychological and social mechanism that generates internalized self-hatred, gendered trauma, and mental disintegration, and that comparable mechanisms operate in contemporary Bangladeshi society through media-driven colorism and internalized racial attitudes.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Defining Systemic Racism and Psychological Impact

Early scholarly discussions of racism often framed it as a biological or ideological belief system rooted in assumptions of innate superiority and inferiority. Ruth Benedict defines racism as "the dogma that one ethnic group is condemned by nature to congenital inferiority and another group is destined to congenital superiority" (Benedict 87). While this definition was foundational in identifying racial prejudice as a social phenomenon, it largely conceptualizes racism as an explicit belief held by individuals rather than as an embedded social structure.

Contemporary sociological scholarship has significantly expanded this understanding by conceptualizing racism as a systemic and institutionalized process. Eduardo Bonilla-Silva argues that racism should not be understood as

an aberration or the product of individual moral failure; rather, it is "Bonilla-Silva argues that systemic racism is reproduced through behavior that is "normative, habituated, and often unconscious" (Bonilla-Silva 513). From this perspective, racism operates independently of personal intent and is sustained through social participation, institutional arrangements, and cultural norms. As a result, even individuals who reject overtly racist beliefs may unconsciously perpetuate racial hierarchies.

Systemic racism is embedded within multiple social domains, including legal frameworks, educational institutions, media representations, and cultural standards of beauty. These structures collectively reinforce racial inequality and shape the psychological experiences of marginalized individuals. Bonilla-Silva emphasizes that systemic racism operates regardless of individual awareness or intent, making it particularly resistant to dismantling (Bonilla-Silva 516). Consequently, racial oppression persists not only through direct discrimination but also through subtle, everyday practices that normalize inequality.

A growing body of interdisciplinary research has examined the psychological consequences of systemic racism. Gee et al. conceptualize racial discrimination as a chronic and cumulative stress process, employing the iceberg metaphor to illustrate how overt acts of bias represent only the visible tip, while institutionalized and everyday forms of discrimination remain largely submerged yet profoundly damaging to mental health (Gee et al. 132–33). Their work demonstrates that prolonged exposure to racial discrimination can result in internalized self-hatred, emotional distress, and identity fragmentation, particularly among racial minorities who are continuously positioned as inferior within dominant social narratives.

Empirical psychological studies further corroborate these findings. Research by Nyborg and Curry reveals that perceived racial discrimination is strongly correlated with increased psychological symptoms such as anxiety, depression, and diminished self-worth among African Americans (Nyborg and Curry). Similarly, Clark et al. propose a biopsychosocial model in which racism functions as a persistent stressor capable of producing long-term emotional and cognitive consequences, including paranoia, helplessness, anger, and emotional withdrawal (Clark et al.811). These effects do not necessarily manifest as clinical mental illness; rather, they often appear as sustained psychological distress that shapes behavior and interpersonal relationships.

Importantly, scholars emphasize that the psychological impact of racism is not uniform but is mediated by gender, class, and social context. While some individuals internalize racial oppression through self-blame and withdrawal, others externalize their trauma through aggression or destructive behavior. This dynamic is particularly relevant to literary representations of racism, where characters often embody the psychological consequences of systemic inequality in complex and contradictory ways.

Within this theoretical framework, Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* emerges as a literary text that dramatizes systemic racism not as an abstract concept but as a lived psychological reality. Morrison's characters are not merely victims of individual prejudice; they are shaped by a racial system that dictates beauty,

worth, and belonging. By situating personal suffering within broader social structures, the novel aligns closely with sociological and psychological theories of systemic racism, making it an apt subject for examining the intersection of race and mental health.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative research approach to examine the depiction of systemic racism in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* and its psychological impact on the novel's characters, while drawing a comparative analysis with contemporary Bangladeshi society. The methodology combines literary analysis with sociocultural observation, aiming to explore how systemic and internalized forms of racism shape individual psychology and social behavior across distinct historical and cultural contexts.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data were collected through a close reading of *The Bluest Eye*, focusing on character interactions, dialogues, behaviors, and narrative descriptions that reveal experiences of racialized oppression and internalized racism. The analysis identifies patterns in the novel that illustrate the psychological consequences of systemic racism, particularly in relation to beauty ideals, social exclusion, and self-perception.

To establish a comparative framework, the study also examines contemporary Bangladeshi society using multiple sources, including newspaper articles, academic publications, government and industry reports, and personal observation. The focus is on identifying manifestations of colorism, aesthetic hierarchies, and internalized racism in social institutions, media, marriage practices, and public discourse. Examples include the pervasive privileging of fair skin as a marker of beauty and social value, media representation, consumer practices related to skin-lightening products, and the social treatment of ethnic minorities and Black foreigners.

Theoretical Framework

Postcolonial theory provides the primary analytical lens. Drawing on Frantz Fanon's insights on the psychological legacy of colonialism (Fanon 9–14) and Ashis Nandy's work on the internalization of colonial values (Nandy 2–4), the study interprets colorism and internalized racism in Bangladesh as a continuation of historical hierarchies that operate through desire, self-perception, and social norms rather than formalized legal or political segregation.

Comparative Approach

Unlike the legally enforced racial segregation depicted in *The Bluest Eye*, racism in Bangladesh manifests primarily through skin-tone stratification, Eurocentric beauty ideals, and internalized hierarchies. Nevertheless, the psychological consequences in both contexts—self-doubt, insecurity, social anxiety, and alienation—are strikingly similar. By juxtaposing Morrison's literary representation with contemporary Bangladeshi social structures, this study highlights how systemic racism functions as a psychological and cultural system that persists across different societies and historical periods.

DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

Systemic Racism in The Bluest Eye: Media, Beauty Ideology, and Racial Conditioning

Media functions as a powerful ideological apparatus through which racialized standards of beauty are produced, circulated, and normalized. In racially stratified societies, visual culture—including films, advertisements, toys, magazines, and consumer products—plays a central role in defining what is considered beautiful, desirable, and worthy of admiration. Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* foregrounds the media as a crucial mechanism of systemic racism, demonstrating how Eurocentric beauty ideals infiltrate the consciousness of Black characters and shape their perceptions of self-worth from early childhood.

In the novel, whiteness is repeatedly presented as the unquestioned standard of beauty. Dolls, candy wrappers, films, and popular images consistently feature blue-eyed, blond-haired, pink-skinned figures, reinforcing the association between beauty and whiteness. Claudia, one of the novel's narrators, observes that the adult world unanimously endorses this ideal: "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" (Morrison 20). This collective agreement illustrates how racial conditioning operates not through coercion but through consensus, making whiteness appear natural, universal, and inevitable.

Morrison emphasizes that such conditioning begins in childhood, long before individuals possess the critical capacity to question dominant norms. The omnipresence of white dolls and images does not merely suggest a preference; it actively marginalizes Blackness by rendering it invisible or undesirable. Claudia's instinctive urge to dismember her white dolls reflects an unconscious resistance to an aesthetic ideology that denies her racial identity any positive representation. Her reaction contrasts sharply with Pecola Breedlove's response, which is characterized by passive internalization rather than resistance. Pecola does not reject the beauty ideal imposed upon her; instead, she longs to embody it, believing that possession of blue eyes would grant her love, safety, and social acceptance.

Pauline Breedlove's character further demonstrates how media-driven beauty ideology conditions adult identity. Initially resistant to Anglo-American beauty standards, Pauline gradually internalizes white aesthetic values through her exposure to Hollywood films. Morrison writes that Pauline "was never able, after her education in the movies, to look at a face and not assign it some category in the scale of absolute beauty" (Morrison 122). This cinematic "education" teaches Pauline to evaluate herself and others according to a racial hierarchy in which whiteness occupies the highest position. As a result, she comes to perceive her own Black body as inherently flawed, leading to deep-seated self-loathing and emotional alienation from her family.

The novel also exposes how media images do not simply influence personal taste but actively structure social relationships. Pauline's devotion to the white Fisher household—where she performs the role of the ideal servant—stems from her belief that proximity to whiteness offers moral and aesthetic

validation. In contrast, her own home, children, and Black community become symbols of disorder and failure. Morrison thus reveals how beauty ideology functions as a disciplinary force, rewarding compliance with racial norms while punishing deviation.

By presenting media as a central agent of racial conditioning, *The Bluest Eye* aligns with broader critiques of systemic racism that identify cultural representation as a site of power. Beauty, in Morrison's narrative, is not a neutral or subjective concept but a racialized construct that legitimizes inequality and sustains psychological domination. The constant visual reinforcement of white beauty creates an environment in which Black characters learn to see themselves through a lens of deficiency, internalizing racial inferiority as personal truth.

Ultimately, Morrison demonstrates that media-driven beauty ideology is one of the most insidious forms of systemic racism because it disguises domination as desire. Characters like Pecola do not merely suffer from exclusion; they come to believe that their suffering is deserved. Through this portrayal, *The Bluest Eye* exposes the devastating psychological consequences of a society that teaches individuals to measure their worth against an unattainable and racially exclusive ideal.

Internalized Racism within the Black Community

Internalized racism constitutes one of the most insidious consequences of systemic racial oppression, compelling marginalized individuals to absorb and reproduce the very hierarchies that dehumanize them. In *The Bluest Eye*, racism does not function solely as an external force imposed by white society; rather, it infiltrates the Black community itself, shaping self-perception, interpersonal relationships, and moral judgment. Toni Morrison depicts internalized racism as a learned psychological response to prolonged exposure to white supremacy—one that fractures communal bonds and transforms victims into participants in their own oppression.

This internalization parallels George Orwell's critique of institutionalized inequality in Animal Farm, where proclaimed equality conceals entrenched hierarchy: "All animals are equal, but some animals are more equal than others" (Orwell). Similarly, Morrison reveals how hierarchical distinctions based on skin tone, class, and cultural conformity emerge within the Black community, even in the absence of direct white intervention. Racism, once internalized, becomes self-regulating and self-sustaining.

Geraldine exemplifies this process. A light-skinned, middle-class Black woman, she defines respectability through discipline, cleanliness, and emotional restraint—values modeled on white, middle-class norms. Although she is not white, she measures worth according to proximity to whiteness and equates Blackness with disorder and vulgarity. Morrison underscores this internalized hierarchy through Geraldine's meticulous grooming rituals—"slim ankles; long, narrow feet," Lifebuoy soap, Cashmere Bouquet talc, and Jergens lotion—which symbolize her desire to sanitize and control Black identity rather than embrace it (Morrison 82). These practices reflect an implicit belief that Blackness must be regulated to be socially acceptable.

Geraldine's internalized racism is most clearly articulated in the moral framework she imparts to her son, Junior. She draws a rigid distinction between "colored people" and those she derogatorily labels "niggers," associating the former with neatness and silence and the latter with dirt and noise (Morrison 87). This binary does not challenge racial hierarchy; instead, it reproduces it by relocating white supremacist values within Black domestic space. Survival, in this context, becomes a form of self-policing, where respectability is purchased through the rejection of other Black lives.

Pecola Breedlove bears the full weight of this internalized contempt. When Geraldine encounters Pecola in her home, she responds not with empathy but with disgust, ordering her out and refusing to acknowledge her vulnerability or humanity (*The Bluest Eye* 92). Pecola's presence threatens Geraldine's carefully constructed identity, as it embodies the Blackness, she has spent her life attempting to disavow. This moment reveals how internalized racism enables acts of cruelty that would otherwise be unthinkable within a shared racial community.

Morrison extends this critique beyond individual characters to institutional spaces such as schools, where internalized racism is normalized through neglect and humiliation. Teachers avoid calling on Pecola, while classmates weaponize her name as an insult — "Bobby loves Pecola Breedlove!" (Morrison 46). Pecola is transformed into a symbol of undesirability, a social object against which others measure their relative worth. These everyday acts of exclusion demonstrate how systemic racism infiltrates communal behavior, rendering cruelty habitual and socially sanctioned.

Pauline Breedlove further illustrates the psychological damage of internalized racial inferiority. Her dehumanizing experience during childbirth—where white doctors treat her body as an object—solidifies her sense of worthlessness (Morrison 124-125). Rather than resisting this humiliation, Pauline absorbs it and redirects her resentment inward, expressing emotional detachment from her children and harshness toward Pecola. Her behavior reflects a displaced response to racial trauma, in which anger is turned against those nearest rather than against the system that produced it.

Through these interconnected portrayals, Morrison exposes internalized racism as a self-perpetuating cycle that fragments Black solidarity and intensifies psychological suffering. Characters who seek proximity to whiteness gain only conditional validation, while those deemed irredeemably Black—like Pecola—become repositories for collective contempt. In this way, internalized racism operates as an extension of systemic racism, ensuring its survival even without overt white presence.

Ultimately, *The Bluest Eye* challenges simplistic narratives of racial victimhood by revealing how oppression reproduces itself through psychological conditioning. Morrison does not absolve her characters of responsibility; instead, she situates their actions within a social order that rewards conformity to white norms and punishes deviation. Internalized racism, as the novel demonstrates, is not a moral failing but a devastating psychological consequence of living within an inescapable racial hierarchy.

Gendered Psychological Trauma: Female Internalization

Female characters in *The Bluest Eye* experience systemic racism primarily through internalization, manifesting as self-loathing, emotional repression, and an obsessive desire to conform to Eurocentric beauty standards. Morrison presents this internalization as a learned survival strategy in a society where Black female bodies are consistently devalued and rendered invisible.

Pecola Breedlove embodies the most extreme form of this psychological internalization. From an early age, she absorbs the belief that her Blackness is synonymous with ugliness and unworthiness. Repeated exposure to white beauty ideals—through dolls, films, advertisements, and social interactions—leads Pecola to conclude that her suffering stems from her physical appearance rather than from structural injustice. Her longing for blue eyes reflects not vanity but desperation: she believes that possessing the physical markers of whiteness will transform how others treat her and restore emotional safety. Morrison makes clear that Pecola's desire is not irrational within the logic of her world; rather, it is a tragic consequence of racial conditioning (Morrison 46).

Pauline Breedlove's internalization follows a parallel yet more socially complex trajectory. Initially resistant to dominant beauty norms, Pauline gradually adopts Eurocentric standards through her immersion in Hollywood cinema. Morrison notes that Pauline learns to assign value to faces according to a "scale of absolute beauty" absorbed from films (Morrison 122). This internal hierarchy causes Pauline to perceive her own body as defective and her domestic life as a site of failure. Her emotional withdrawal from her children and devotion to the white Fisher household reflect an attempt to secure validation through proximity to whiteness rather than through self-acceptance.

Morrison further highlights how internalization disrupts maternal bonds. Pauline's preference for the Fisher family over her own children demonstrates how racialized beauty ideology reshapes emotional priorities. Her harsh treatment of Pecola—particularly during moments of vulnerability—reveals how internalized racism transforms victims into enforcers of the same standards that oppress them. Rather than offering protection, Pauline reproduces the cruelty she has endured, directing it inward toward her daughter.

Through these female characters, Morrison illustrates that internalization is not passive resignation but an active psychological process shaped by repeated social messages. The women's suffering is marked by silence, self-blame, and emotional suppression, revealing how systemic racism trains Black women to locate the source of injustice within themselves rather than in the structures that dehumanize them.

Male Trauma and Displaced Violence

In contrast to the inward-directed trauma experienced by female characters, male characters in *The Bluest Eye* often externalize their psychological pain through violence, sexual domination, emotional abandonment, and social withdrawal. Morrison portrays this outward expression not as inherent brutality but as the distorted outcome of racial emasculation within a white supremacist society.

Cholly Breedlove represents the most devastating manifestation of male trauma. His early sexual humiliation—when two white men force him to perform an intimate act under surveillance—marks a pivotal moment in his psychological development (Morrison 148–50). This experience strips Cholly of agency and dignity, associating sexuality with shame, fear, and powerlessness. Unable to direct his rage toward the white men who violated him, Cholly displaces his anger onto those who are socially and physically vulnerable, particularly women.

Cholly's subsequent sexual violence against Pecola constitutes the tragic culmination of this displaced trauma. Morrison does not excuse his actions; rather, she contextualizes them within a system that denies Black men legitimate expressions of masculinity, intimacy, and authority. As Morrison suggests, it is psychologically less destructive for Cholly to hate "the small, black, helpless" teenager than to confront the "big, white, armed men" who symbolize absolute power (Morrison 150). His violence thus emerges as a perverse attempt to reclaim control in a world structured to deny him autonomy.

Soaphead Church presents a different but equally revealing model of male psychological damage. As a light-skinned man of mixed ancestry, Soaphead internalizes white supremacist values through familial indoctrination that glorifies whiteness and distances him from Black identity. His self-perceived moral and intellectual superiority results in misanthropy, emotional detachment, and sexual deviance. Soaphead's predatory behavior toward children reflects a pathological need to exert power without emotional risk, revealing how internalized racism distorts ethical boundaries (Morrison 167–68).

Morrison's portrayal of male trauma complicates traditional narratives of victimhood by illustrating how systemic racism produces victims who, in turn, become perpetrators. Male characters are denied vulnerability and emotional expression, leaving violence as one of the few socially legible outlets for pain. This dynamic reinforces gender hierarchies while sustaining racial oppression, ensuring that trauma circulates rather than dissipates.

Comparative Context: Colorism and Internal Racism in Bangladesh

Although Bangladesh is often perceived as a relatively homogeneous society in terms of race and ethnicity, colorism and internalized racism remain deeply embedded within its social and cultural structures. Unlike the legally enforced racial segregation depicted in *The Bluest Eye*, racism in Bangladesh operates primarily through aesthetic hierarchies, skin-tone stratification, and inherited colonial values. Nevertheless, the psychological consequences of these hierarchies closely parallel those portrayed in Morrison's novel, demonstrating that systemic racism can persist even in the absence of overt racial division.

Postcolonial theory helps explain this persistence. Frantz Fanon argues that colonial domination survives through psychological internalization, whereby colonized subjects come to associate whiteness with beauty, virtue, and legitimacy (Fanon 9–14). This framework clarifies how colorism in Bangladesh functions not merely as personal prejudice but as an internalized value system shaped by colonial history and global cultural flows. Ashis Nandy similarly contends that colonialism's most enduring legacy is psychological, operating through desire and self-perception rather than direct political control (Nandy 2–

4). Read through this lens, Bangladeshi colorism reflects what Morrison exposes in *The Bluest Eye*: a racial hierarchy sustained through internal consent rather than constant coercion.

One of the most visible manifestations of internalized racism in Bangladesh is the pervasive privileging of fair skin as a marker of beauty, virtue, and social value. Eurocentric beauty standards, historically reinforced through discriminatory practices, social hierarchies, and the promotion of Western aesthetic ideals, continue to shape cultural perceptions of attractiveness. Racist attitudes are often so subtle that everyday language normalizes them; the term forsa (fair), for instance, is commonly used as a synonym for beauty. As cultural commentary observes, "For many in Bangladesh, everything the affluent west does is good and most people in the west or with white skin are superior to Bangladeshis" ("Racism and Reverse Racism in Bangladesh"). This normalization of color hierarchy produces internalized feelings of inferiority, even in the absence of overt racial segregation. Unlike the community-based racism associated with Western contexts, racism in Bangladesh operates primarily as an internalized psychological condition, making it particularly difficult to identify and challenge. This dynamic closely mirrors Toni Morrison's depiction in *The Bluest Eye*, where whiteness becomes an unquestioned aesthetic ideal shaping self-perception and sustaining internalized oppression.

The Bangladeshi media industry plays a crucial role in reinforcing these standards. Television advertisements, films, and beauty campaigns overwhelmingly feature light-skinned models and actors, while darker-skinned individuals are either marginalized or stereotyped. According to market data, the Beauty and Personal Care industry in Bangladesh reached a projected revenue of over US$11.74 billion in 2025, reflecting the widespread consumption of cosmetic products—many of which explicitly promise skin whitening ("Beauty & Personal Care – Bangladesh"). This commercial obsession with fairness parallels the cultural saturation of white dolls and film images in *The Bluest Eye*, where visual repetition conditions individuals to equate beauty with whiteness.

The material consequences of colorism are not merely symbolic. In July 2022, the Bangladesh Standards and Testing Institution banned seventeen skin-whitening creams after laboratory tests revealed dangerously high levels of mercury and hydroquinone, underscoring how fairness ideology translates into tangible public health risk rather than empowerment ("BSTI Bans 17 Face Creams").

Colorism in Bangladesh also extends into intimate social institutions, particularly marriage. Studies and journalistic accounts indicate that fairness is frequently prioritized over education, character, or professional competence in the marriage market. As one cultural commentator observes, "The marriage market always demands a fair bride," regardless of a woman's qualifications (Islam). Feminist scholars argue that such preferences disproportionately discipline women's bodies, turning skin tone into a form of social capital (Parameswaran and Cardoza 214). This preference echoes Pauline Breedlove's internalization of beauty hierarchies, where proximity to whiteness becomes a measure of worth and social legitimacy.

Internalized racism in Bangladesh is not limited to beauty norms; it also manifests in the treatment of ethnic minorities and Black foreigners. Despite being indigenous to the land, members of ethnic minority communities are often socially marginalized and treated as outsiders. Bangladesh is home to approximately forty-five distinct indigenous and ethnic minority communities, many of which remain socially and geographically marginalized ("Bangladesh: Indigenous/Tribal Population" 1). Despite their historical presence, these communities continue to experience social exclusion and stereotyping, demonstrating that internalized racism in Bangladesh extends beyond colorism to shape attitudes toward racial difference itself.

Many Africans come to Bangladesh to pursue higher education, while South American and African footballers play prominent roles in local clubs. Despite their visibility and contribution—particularly in the Bangladesh Premier League—their racial identity remains a source of stigmatization. "I have personally seen African football players being harassed on the streets with the words 'kaula' (meaning black, in a derogatory way)," writes a local observer discussing everyday racism in Bangladesh (Khan). Such attitudes reflect a broader tendency to associate Blackness with criminality. Ayoola Kehinde Asisat, a 26-year-old Nigerian student at Daffodil International University, explains that shared housing often exposes African students to police surveillance: "We share an apartment so we can split the costs but the police may come at any time to search our place and pat us down … It makes me afraid to live here" (Khan). Reports further indicate that African students and athletes routinely experience racial profiling, verbal harassment, and heightened scrutiny by law enforcement (Khan). Interpreted through Fanon's framework of psychological internalization, these practices demonstrate how racial hierarchy is reproduced through normalized social behavior rather than formal exclusion. These experiences resonate with Toni Morrison's depiction of normalized humiliation and institutional neglect in The Bluest Eye, where racialized suffering is rendered ordinary rather than questioned. In one observed instance within an educational setting, a child—despite being the strongest singer in his group—was instructed to stand in the back row of a school performance on the grounds that he was not sufficiently "cute," a term frequently tied to skin tone and facial features. The individuals involved belonged to millennial and Generation Z cohorts, underscoring that these aesthetic hierarchies are not relics of the past but continue to shape contemporary socialization. Although rarely codified as formal policy, similar biases are widely acknowledged in extracurricular and cultural organizations, where selection often reflects unspoken preferences for lighter skin. These everyday practices mirror Morrison's portrayal of how racialized beauty standards are internalized, normalized, and reproduced without explicit coercion

Importantly, as in *The Bluest Eye*, internal racism in Bangladesh is frequently perpetuated by members of the dominant community themselves. Discriminatory practices are often informal and unwritten, making them difficult to challenge. For instance, participation in cultural events, media representation, and even classroom activities may be influenced by perceived physical

attractiveness or conformity to aesthetic norms. Such practices reinforce social hierarchies while allowing individuals to deny responsibility, much like the teachers and community members who silently participate in Pecola's exclusion.

The psychological consequences of this internalized racism are profound. Continuous exposure to color-based discrimination fosters insecurity, diminished self-worth, and social anxiety, particularly among women and young people. The desire to alter one's appearance through cosmetic products or procedures reflects a deeper longing for social acceptance and validation. As Morrison demonstrates through Pecola's obsession with blue eyes, the pursuit of an unattainable beauty ideal often results not in empowerment but in psychological fragmentation and self-alienation.

By placing *The Bluest Eye* in dialogue with contemporary Bangladeshi society, this comparative analysis reveals that systemic racism is not confined to specific historical or geographical contexts. Whether expressed through racial segregation in mid-twentieth-century America or through colorism and internalized hierarchy in modern Bangladesh, racism functions as a psychological system that conditions individuals to measure their worth against exclusionary ideals. In both contexts, the result is a cycle of self-doubt, internalized oppression, and emotional suffering that sustains social inequality across generations.

Consequences of Systemic Racism: Mental Health and Social Breakdown

In The Bluest Eye, systemic racism operates not merely as a social hierarchy but as a pervasive psychological force that gradually erodes individual identity and communal cohesion. Toni Morrison presents racism as a structure that infiltrates thought, emotion, and behaviour, producing long-term mental health consequences rather than isolated moments of suffering. The cumulative effects of racial conditioning, internalized inferiority, and gendered trauma result in psychological fragmentation, emotional detachment, and social disintegration.

One of the most destructive consequences of systemic racism in the novel is the internalization of ugliness as an unquestioned truth. Morrison illustrates how characters come to accept their perceived inferiority as natural and inevitable. The Breedloves' belief that they are ugly exemplifies this psychological conditioning: "They lived there because they were poor and black, and they stayed there because they believed they were ugly" (Morrison 39). This belief does not arise from objective reality but from repeated social messages that equate Blackness with worthlessness. Over time, such internalization transforms external oppression into self-regulation, making resistance increasingly difficult.

Morrison emphasizes that racism functions through an invisible authority rather than through identifiable individuals. The metaphor of a mysterious "master" who assigns Black people a "cloak of ugliness" underscores how racial domination is maintained by collective participation rather than overt coercion (Morrison 39). This abstraction reflects sociological understandings of systemic racism as a structure sustained through normalized practices, cultural representation, and shared assumptions. As a result, characters often direct anger inward or toward one another instead of challenging the racial system itself.

The ideological roots of this hierarchy can be traced to nineteenth-century pseudo-scientific racism. Arthur de Gobineau's assertion that "all civilizations derive from the white race" and that social greatness depends upon preserving white bloodlines encapsulates the racial logic that continues to shape social imagination (Gobineau qtd. in Morrison 168). Although Morrison invokes Gobineau only briefly, the endurance of his racial logic is evident in the novel's depiction of characters who view proximity to whiteness as elevation. Families "married 'up,' lightening the family complexion and thinning out the family features" (Morrison 168), revealing how racial ideology reproduces itself biologically, socially, and psychologically.

Soaphead Church embodies the psychological distortion produced by this worship of whiteness. Often dismissed as a moral anomaly, Soaphead is ultimately a product of the same racial system he internalizes. His obsession with purity and superiority manifests as emotional detachment, misanthropy, and sexual deviance. Morrison describes his alienation as a condition in which "his disdain of human contact had converted itself into a craving for things humans had touched" (Morrison 168). Soaphead's self-perception as morally superior reflects how internalized racism fractures ethical judgment and emotional capacity, turning psychological damage into predatory behavior rather than self-awareness.

Pauline Breedlove's psychological decline further illustrates how systemic racism reshapes emotional life. Immersed in Eurocentric beauty standards through film and domestic service, Pauline comes to view her own body, home, and children as symbols of failure. Her belief in her own ugliness mirrors the Breedlove family's collective internalization of racial inferiority. Morrison writes that Pauline considers it her "good fortune to find a permanent job in the home of a well-to-do family" (Morrison 127), revealing how proximity to whiteness offers a temporary illusion of value. Her emotional devotion to the Fisher household—and corresponding rejection of Pecola—demonstrates how racism redirects affection away from Black communal bonds, producing emotional cruelty rather than solidarity.

The psychological consequences of systemic racism are also evident in the formation of resentment and displaced hostility among children. Claudia's initial hatred of Maureen Peal stems not from personal rivalry but from Maureen's proximity to whiteness and social approval. Claudia later recognizes that "the Thing to fear was the Thing that made her beautiful, and not us" (Morrison 47). This realization exposes how racial hierarchy breeds internal competition and self-directed anger, diverting attention from the system that produces inequality.

Cholly Breedlove represents one of the most devastating outcomes of racial trauma. His voyeuristic sexual humiliation by white men during adolescence strips him of dignity and agency, leaving him unable to process vulnerability or intimacy (Morrison 148–50). Denied socially acceptable avenues for emotional expression, Cholly displaces his rage onto those more vulnerable than himself. Morrison explains that it is psychologically easier for him to hate "the small, black, helpless" victim than to confront the "big, white, armed men" who symbolize absolute power (Morrison 150). His violence against Pecola thus

emerges as a tragic manifestation of unprocessed racial trauma rather than inherent monstrosity.

Pecola Breedlove ultimately becomes the collective casualty of this system. Convinced that her suffering is caused by her ugliness, she believes that blue eyes—the ultimate symbol of white beauty—will grant her love and safety. When this transformation remains unattainable, Pecola retreats into delusion, constructing an imaginary reality in which she possesses the bluest eyes. Her mental collapse is not portrayed as individual madness but as the logical outcome of prolonged rejection, emotional abandonment, and communal neglect. Pecola becomes the scapegoat of the Black community, absorbing collective self-hatred so that others may feel temporarily superior.

Beyond individual suffering, Morrison exposes the broader social breakdown produced by systemic racism. The Black community in The Bluest Eye participates—often unconsciously—in the marginalization of its most vulnerable members. Survival becomes competitive rather than collective, and solidarity is replaced by hierarchy and scapegoating. This dynamic ensures the continuity of racial oppression by transforming victims into enforcers of the very values that harm them.

The psychological consequences depicted in the novel closely align with contemporary research on racial trauma, which identifies racism as a chronic stressor contributing to anxiety, depression, emotional numbness, and identity disturbance (Clark et al. 811; Gee et al. 132–33). Morrison anticipates these findings by portraying mental illness as cumulative and intergenerational, transmitted through families, communities, and cultural memory.

Ultimately, The Bluest Eye reveals that systemic racism produces an environment in which mental health deterioration is not an anomaly but an expected outcome. The breakdown of identity, relationships, and communal bonds exposes the devastating human cost of a society that equates worth with racialized beauty and power. By tracing these consequences, Morrison reframes racism not only as a moral injustice but as a public mental health crisis that demands structural accountability and cultural transformation.

CONCLUSION

Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* offers a profound critique of systemic racism by revealing how racial hierarchies penetrate psychological life and reshape human relationships. Rather than portraying racism as a series of isolated discriminatory acts, Morrison exposes it as an all-encompassing social structure that governs standards of beauty, gender roles, emotional expression, and self-worth. Through this lens, racism emerges not only as a mechanism of social exclusion but as a formative force that produces internalized self-hatred, fractured identities, and enduring mental distress. By examining characters such as Pecola Breedlove, Pauline Breedlove, Cholly Breedlove, and Soaphead Church, this study has demonstrated that the psychological consequences of racism are deeply gendered. Female characters internalize racial oppression through silence, self-erasure, and obsessive longing for whiteness, while male characters externalize their trauma through emotional withdrawal, aggression,

and violence. These divergent responses, however, originate from the same racial system that denies Black individuals dignity, agency, and emotional security. Morrison's portrayal thus complicates simplistic moral binaries by situating individual suffering and wrongdoing within a broader context of structural injustice. The comparative analysis with contemporary Bangladeshi society further underscores the global relevance of Morrison's critique. Despite differences in historical and racial composition, both contexts reveal how colorism and Eurocentric beauty standards function as internalized forms of racism that shape media representation, social mobility, and personal relationships. In Bangladesh, as in *The Bluest Eye*, aesthetic hierarchies based on skin tone contribute to psychological insecurity, social exclusion, and the marginalization of vulnerable individuals. These parallels demonstrate that systemic racism does not require overt segregation or racial diversity to persist; it thrives through cultural conditioning, silence, and collective complicity. Ultimately, *The Bluest Eye* challenges readers to confront the psychological costs of a society that equates worth with racialized ideals. Pecola's tragic descent into madness serves not as an anomaly but as the inevitable outcome of a system that offers no refuge for those who fail to conform. Morrison's narrative urges a re-examination of beauty, normalcy, and humanity itself, calling for resistance not only against visible forms of oppression but also against the internalized values that sustain them. By exposing racism as both a social and psychological crisis, *The Bluest Eye* remains a powerful testament to the necessity of structural change, cultural accountability, and empathetic recognition in the pursuit of mental and social healing.

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