

A Critical Analysis of Internalized Inferiority Complex in *The Bluest Eye* and *Coming Out as Dalit*

Debashish

Email ID: devashish.Kumar9876@gmail.com

Research Scholar

ORCID:

Hemwati Nandan Bahuguna Garhwal

0009-0005-4502-9493

University, Srinagar, Uttarakhand (India)

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Abstract

Inferiority complex and identity-shame constitute some of the most corrosive psychological conditions produced by systems of social stratification, and their manifestations in literature reveal how power inequities are internalized within marginalized subjects. Toni Morrison's The Bluest Eye (1970) and Yashica Dutt's memoir Coming Out as Dalit (2019) provide two historically and geographically distinct but psychologically resonant explorations of how oppressed individuals come to see themselves through the distorting lens of dominant hierarchies—race in Morrison's African American context and caste in Dutt's Indian context. Despite the different structures of oppression each text confronts, both articulate how inferiority is not merely imposed from above but rooted deeply within the individual psyche, emerging through processes of socialization, discrimination, humiliation, and internalized ideology. This paper undertakes a comparative critical analysis of inferiority complex and identity-shame in both texts. Using Alfred Adler's inferiority complex, Frantz Fanon's racial epidermalization, Silvan Tomkins' affect theory, and Erving Goffman's stigma theory, the study situates both texts pwithin global structures of oppression that shape emotional selfhood.

Keywords

Inferiority complex, identity shame, caste, race, self-loathing, stigma, child-psychology.

In *The Bluest Eye*, Pecola Breedlove embodies the most extreme consequences of internalized racial inferiority. Morrison reveals how racial hierarchies filter into children's psyches through beauty standards, commercial advertising, schoolyard taunts, and familial neglect. Pecola's yearning for blue eyes symbolizes the psychological violence inflicted by white supremacist aesthetics that equate whiteness with beauty, innocence, and value. From the opening scenes, Pecola is subjected to external denigration teachers who patronize her, shopkeepers who look past her, white girls who mock her, and a community that sees her as ugly. Morrison underscores Pecola's internalization of this humiliation: she interprets 'White-

gaze' not as racial prejudice but as her own inadequacy, thinking, "I am not worth seeing" (49). Pecola sees herself through the eyes of white people who deny her humanity, thus absorbing the racial hierarchy into her sense of self. In racially segmented America, Pecola Breedlove's inferiority is catalyzed by a cultural environment where whiteness is equated with beauty, morality, and worth. Pecola's desire for blue eyes "the bluest eyes" (Morrison 46) is a desperate fantasy aimed at resolving her internalized conviction that Blackness is inherently ugly and inferior. Importantly, she learns this conviction not only from white-centered media but from her own mother. Pauline Breedlove's own inferiority complex manifests through her fixation on white beauty standards, her near-religious devotion to the Fisher family, and her self-description as "ugly" (Morrison 123). Pauline's internalization of whiteness as synonymous with order and beauty becomes an emotional pedagogy for Pecola, who is forced to conclude that her mother's coldness is a reflection of her own inadequacy.

Meanwhile, Dutt's memoir *Coming Out as Dalit* reveals a more intellectualized but equally painful trajectory of internalized inferiority originating in the caste system. The memoir foregrounds how caste operates not only through visible discrimination but through the secretive, shame-laden pressure to hide one's Dalit identity in order to be accepted within mainstream Indian society. Dutt describes growing up with the unspoken rule that her family's caste must never be revealed, leading to an internal conflict between outward performance of respectability and inward fear of exposure. When her grandmother warns her, "Never tell anyone you are Dalit" (Dutt 12), Dutt learns to erase traces of her background, adopting mannerisms, speech styles, and cultural tastes that will allow her to pass as non-Dalit. This results in a sustained inferiority complex, one marked by hypervigilance, chronic anxiety, and a belief that acceptance can only be secured by disowning her own identity. Her academic accomplishments and professional achievements are shadowed by the dread that she will be "found out," revealing the psychological burden of caste mobility within a system that continues to stigmatize Dalit identity. A comparative reading shows that both Pecola and Dutt internalize inferiority not spontaneously but through repeated interactions with societal norms and daily microaggressions. In Morrison's text, Pecola's inferiority is tied to beauty and racial hierarchies; in Dutt's, shame is tied to caste purity and social stigma. However, the psychological mechanism is identical: each protagonist encounters a world structured to deny her value, just because of belonging to a particular 'race' and 'caste'.

Both texts illuminate how inferiority complexes form through the internalization of oppressive structures and how shame functions as a psychic regulation tool for maintaining social hierarchies. During their formative years of life, children form their self-concepts by imagining how others perceive them, evaluating these imagined judgments, and developing self-feelings most significantly pride or shame based on these perceptions. In Pecola's world, whiteness is the imagined judge, omnipresent through Shirley Temple, Hollywood movies, school primers, and marigold advertisements. Pecola imagines how white society sees her, and this reflection distorted, contemptuous, and dehumanizing constructs her sense of self. She perceives herself as ugly because the world teaches her that Blackness is an aesthetic and moral flaw. Yashica Dutt's upbringing mirrors this process: she internalizes upper-caste expectations as the imagined standard and learns to evaluate herself through a Savarna gaze. Every gesture her clothes, speech, friendships, academic performance becomes filtered through the anxiety of being discovered as Dalit. Both Morrison and Dutt reveal that when external systems define worth, individuals learn to evaluate themselves through those systems. Pecola learns to believe that blue eyes are the ultimate marker of beauty and thus of worth; Dutt learns that caste purity determines social acceptance. Both protagonists develop compensatory strategies Pecola through fantasy, Dutt through concealment that reflect attempts to overcome inferiority but ultimately reinforce the underlying shame. In both cases, identity is shaped by societal narratives that render certain bodies undesirable or impure, demonstrating how deeply structural inequalities infiltrate personal psychology.

Theoretical scholarship on shame deepens this comparison. Psychologists like Silvan Tomkins and Gershen Kaufman identify shame as the most painful affect because it strikes at the core of the self, signaling a perceived failure to live up to internalized standards. Shame becomes especially toxic when these standards originate from discriminatory systems. In Pecola's case, the standard is whiteness; in Dutt's, the standard is caste purity. Tomkins argues that chronic shame produces self-alienation, making the individual turn inward against herself / himself, interpreting structural injustice as personal deficiency. Pecola exemplifies this: rather than questioning why beauty standards exclude her, she takes these exclusions as confirmation of her own deficiency. Dutt, too, internalizes caste shame, describing how she felt compelled to detach herself from aspects of her culture in order to appear "acceptable." Social theorist Beverly Skeggs explains that marginalized groups internalize shame when society labels them as lacking value; this affects how they carry themselves, speak, and

imagine their futures. Pecola internalizes shame so profoundly that she stops imagining any future at all; Dutt imagines a future, but only through self-erasure.

The psychological impact of a mother's internalized shame on her children is a crucial but often overlooked dimension in both *The Bluest Eye* and *Coming Out as Dalit*, where maternal self-perception becomes an emotional blueprint for the next generation. Contemporary trauma psychology emphasizes that children learn not only through parental instruction but through parental affect; they absorb the mother's anxieties, fears, and emotional wounds through what developmental theorists call "emotional modeling." Research in intergenerational trauma argues that when mothers experience chronic shame, inferiority, or stigmatized identity conflict, these emotions inadvertently shape the child's self-understanding, producing what psychologists identify as "inherited shame." In both Morrison and Dutt, the mother's response to oppression becomes the emotional environment in which the child learns what it means to exist within a stigmatized identity; therefore, the mother's shame becomes a psychic inheritance.

In *The Bluest Eye*, Pauline Breedlove functions as a powerful example of how maternal shame anchors a child's psyche in self-loathing. Pauline's internalization of racial beauty standards her belief that her dark skin, her tooth loss, her lack of glamour, and her poverty determine her worth shapes the emotional ecosystem in which Pecola grows up. Pauline finds her sense of identity not within her Black family or community but through her role in the Fisher household, a white space where she performs cleanliness, order, and service to be validated (Morrison 127–135). Her admiration for the white family, and her emotional withdrawal from her own children, communicates to Pecola that Blackness is inferior, that whiteness is aspirational, and that love is conditional on conforming to white standards. Trauma psychology explains that when mothers direct their internalized shame outward often unconsciously the child interprets this as a reflection of their own worth. Thus, Pauline's racial self-hatred becomes Pecola's earliest lesson about beauty, dignity, and love. Pecola's later desire for blue eyes is rooted not only in societal beauty norms but in the emotional absence and identity shame of her mother, who teaches her, through rejection, that Blackness is an identity to escape. The psychological impact of Pauline's shame aligns with contemporary theories of intergenerational trauma, which argue that unresolved parental shame transmits to children through emotion, behavior, and silence. Pecola internalizes not only the racial standards of American beauty but also her mother's conviction that Blackness

is inherently unworthy of love. Fanon's theory of racial epidermalization explains this process: social stigma becomes inscribed onto the skin, transforming the body into a site of humiliation. Pecola's body becomes a repository of her mother's internalized racism. Her obsession with blue eyes is an attempt to erase the body her mother has taught her to despise.

Similarly, Yashica Dutt's narrative in *Coming Out as Dalit* reveals how a mother's caste-based shame can deeply influence a child's psychological development, especially within an oppressive system where identity visibility is dangerous. Dutt's mother, like many Dalit parents navigating casteist environments, engages in constant concealment, passing, and hyper-vigilant self-monitoring to protect her daughter from discrimination. Her mother's fear of exposure changing speech, modifying behavior, maintaining a façade of castelessness creates an emotional atmosphere in which Dutt learns early that Dalitness is something to hide. Dutt describes how her mother avoided mentioning caste, discouraged the use of their native dialect in public, and insisted that their home appear indistinguishable from that of upper-caste households, all in an effort to protect her child (Dutt 44–51). From a psychological standpoint, this protective concealment functions as a form of inherited shame: the mother's survival strategy teaches the child to associate her own identity with danger, stigma, and contamination. Even though Dutt's mother seeks to protect her, the emotional message that passes to the child is that Dalit identity is something shameful, something that must remain invisible to ensure safety and belonging. The silence surrounding caste combined with the everyday performances of blending in shapes Dutt's early self-perception, embedding a sense of inferiority that she later recognizes as internalized casteism. Thus, the mother's shame becomes a transmitted emotional script that structures the child's relationship with her own identity.

In both texts, the mother becomes the first mirror through which the child sees herself. Morrison and Dutt demonstrate that when this mirror is clouded by oppression-induced shame, the child receives a distorted reflection that compounds societal prejudice with maternal emotional imprinting. Pauline's inability to love her own Blackness means she cannot provide Pecola with an affirming mirror of Black beauty and dignity. Her maternal identity is built around loving what she can never be a white ideal so she cannot model pride or acceptance for her daughter. As a result, Pecola inherits not only societal racism but her mother's deeply internalized racial inferiority. Dutt, on the other hand, inherits her mother's

silence and caution, which teaches her to fear her own Dalit identity before she fully understands what caste means. This emotional inheritance shapes her adolescence, influencing her decisions, friendships, and sense of belonging. In both cases, the mother's shame does not remain an individual emotional experience; it becomes a psychological blueprint for the child's understanding of self.

The intergenerational transmission of shame in these texts highlights how identity oppression functions not only structurally but emotionally and familially. Mothers, positioned as emotional anchors within families, often bear the heaviest burden of navigating stigma while attempting to shield their children from it. Yet the very strategies they use withdrawal, concealment, idealization of dominant norms, silence become emotional cues that the child internalizes as truths about their own identity. Pecola and Dutt develop their earliest understandings of themselves not only from society at large but from observing the emotional patterns modeled by their mothers. The mother's identity shame thus becomes a powerful force in shaping the child's self-loathing, low self-esteem, inferiority complex, and identity fracture. Morrison and Dutt demonstrate that maternal worldview can become emotional legacies for the child, shaping the trajectory of his/her selfhood.

Alfred Adler's theory of the inferiority complex lays the psychological foundation for understanding how shame becomes internalized. Adler posits that feelings of inferiority are common and even necessary to motivate growth, but they become pathological when an individual repeatedly encounters messages of inadequacy from their environment. When inferiority becomes chronic and unresolvable, it evolves into a full inferiority complex characterized by persistent self-doubt, self-loathing, and the belief that one can never measure up to societal standards. What distinguishes the inferiority complex from ordinary insecurity is its structural reinforcement: an individual made to feel inferior not by isolated events but by entrenched social hierarchies learns to see this inferiority as a natural condition. Frantz Fanon extends this view by examining how racialized systems produce psychological damage in the colonized subject. Frantz Fanon's analysis of the colonized mind in *Black Skin, White Masks* offers another crucial lens through which to view the internalization of racial and caste-based stigma. Fanon theorizes that colonized individuals begin to see themselves through the eyes of the colonizer, a process he calls "epidermalization." This term aptly describes Pecola's desire for blue eyes her belief that beauty, worth, and love belong to the realm of whiteness. Pecola's longing to see the world through blue eyes is an embodiment of

Fanon's theory: she seeks transformation not for aesthetic reasons but because she believes that only whiteness can liberate her from the self-loathing imposed upon her by a racist society. This aligns with Dutt's candid admission that she constantly attempted to "pass" as non-Dalit by altering her speech, clothing, cultural preferences, and public behavior (Dutt 59–64). While the specifics of racialized beauty differ from caste-coded behavioral performances, both reveal how marginalized individuals internalize the dominant group's value system and evaluate themselves according to oppressive norms. Fanon's framework reveals that Pecola and Dutt respond to discrimination by developing deep-seated desires to escape their own identities: Pecola through fantasized physical transformation, Dutt through lived performance and concealment. Both forms of self-alteration reflect a profound emotional consequence of inferiorization: a psychic split between the self and the self-as-seen-by-others. These frameworks collectively explain how inferiority and shame manifest not only as personal emotions but as the internal echoes of structural inequity. Adler's theory of inferiority suggests that children integrate perceived deficiencies into the very core of their being, developing compensatory mechanisms fantasy, perfectionism, denial, or submission to cope. Pecola chooses fantasy: blue eyes become her imagined escape from racial abjection. Dutt chooses hyper-performance: academic success and cultural assimilation become her compensatory tools. Yet both strategies reveal the emotional cost of surviving in societies that deem their identities deficient. Fanon's racial theory and Ambedkar's caste theory converge here: both argue that oppressed individuals develop compensatory identities that are ultimately unsustainable because they are built on negation of the self, not acceptance. Dalit feminist theorist Cynthia Stephen argues that caste shame uniquely shapes girl children, producing "fractured subjectivities" where the inner self is perpetually at odds with the external identity demanded for survival. Pecola becomes the extreme manifestation of this fracture: her inner world becomes so incompatible with social reality that she collapses into psychosis. Dutt's fracture is less visible but deeply felt: she describes her adolescence as a constant negotiation between who she was and who she was permitted to be. Her testimony reflects Stephen's insight that caste-oppressed girls are taught early that their authentic selves are incompatible with social acceptance. This insight also aligns with Gopal Guru's distinction between humiliation and dignity. Guru argues that oppressed individuals oscillate between internalized humiliation and the desire for dignity.

Building further on the intergenerational transmission of shame, it is essential to recognize that the psychological dynamics in both *The Bluest Eye* and *Coming Out as Dalit* are not merely shaped by mothers but by the structural systems that produce maternal subjectivities. Dalit theorist Gopal Guru emphasizes that humiliation “settles into the body,” reshaping emotional responses and self-understanding for generations. This embodied humiliation explains why mothers in oppressed communities often become unwilling carriers of history’s wounds, transmitting anxieties to their children even without explicit intention. Pauline Breedlove does not consciously teach Pecola that Blackness is a curse; instead, she acts from her own internalized racial injury. Similarly, Dutt’s mother does not intend to teach her daughter to hate her caste identity; rather, she seeks to protect her, operating from a lifetime of caste-conditioned fear. These maternal psychic wounds reflect what Sara Ahmed calls “sticky affect,” where emotions adhere to bodies over time and circulate within intimate spheres. Shame becomes inherited, even when unspoken.

The tragic ending of *The Bluest Eye* and the upward arc of *Coming Out as Dalit* reflect the political intentions of each author. Morrison chooses tragedy to expose the structural cruelty of American racism, showing how society destroys vulnerable Black girls. Dutt chooses reclamation to demonstrate that caste shame can be undone through awareness, solidarity, and resistance. Yet the two narratives share a central message: identity shame is socially constructed and intimately tied to systems of domination. Whether through race or caste, oppressive ideologies shape emotional life, teaching individuals to measure themselves against standards designed to devalue them. Healing requires dismantling these standards, reconstructing identity on one’s own terms, and rejecting the internalized gaze of the oppressor.

Ultimately, the comparative analysis of Pecola Breedlove and Yashica Dutt reveals that inferiority complexes and identity shame are not individual weaknesses but collective injuries inflicted by historical systems of power. A crucial difference between the two texts is the possibility of narrative reclamation. Pecola has no voice; her story is mediated through Claudia, whose reflections register both empathy and guilt. Claudia recognizes that the community scapegoated Pecola because of its own internalized racism, noting that they “looked down on her to keep from looking down on themselves” (Morrison 205). Morrison’s narrative structure emphasizes the communal complicity in Pecola’s psychic destruction; her tragedy exposes the collective investment in hierarchical structures. Conversely, Dutt writes

from the position of survival and articulation. While Pecola succumbs to her inferiority complex, Dutt analyzes and resists hers. She describes the moment she publicly “came out” as Dalit as liberating, stating that “naming myself became the first step toward reclaiming myself” (Dutt 198). This shift illustrates the power of narrative to transform shame into empowerment.

Conclusion:

The integrated theoretical analysis shows that internalized inferiority, identity shame, and self-loathing are interconnected psychological outcomes of caste and racial oppression that profoundly shape the protagonists’ lived experiences in *The Bluest Eye* and *Coming Out as Dalit*. Pecola’s tragic disintegration exposes the devastating consequences of internalized racial beauty norms and emotional abandonment, while Dutt’s memoir demonstrates the painful but transformational journey of confronting and rejecting internalized caste shame. Through Adler, Fanon and contemporary trauma studies, we understand that the roots of self-loathing lie not within the individual but within the oppressive social structures that define certain identities as inferior. These texts ultimately reveal that reclaiming selfhood requires dismantling the emotional, psychological, and ideological foundations of caste and racial hierarchies. While Pecola’s story warns of the human cost of unchecked internalized racism, Dutt’s narrative charts a path toward healing, political activism, and self-reclamation. Together, they underscore the urgent need to challenge the hegemonic forces that produce a sense of self-disdain in the psyche of subjugated victims and to create a world in which marginalized identities can flourish without shame.

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