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Alienation in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*

A Fanonian Racial Psychoanalytic Reading

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CONTENTS

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All works are cited in accordance with the seventh edition of MLA style. However, in order to enhance the readability of the text the parenthetical citations of Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* appear without the title and author's name.

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Abstract

Alienation has always been one of the central concepts in the history of human existence and few writers can resist its dramatic potential. However, for Toni Morrison, alienation means the distortion of the Negro's self by the imposition of white values. Focusing on the white concept of beauty in Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* and hanging to Frantz Fanon's racial psychoanalytic ideas in *Black Skin, White Masks*, this study tries to present a racial psychoanalytic interpretation of the novel, with particular reference to the living experience of the young girl protagonist, Pecola Breedlove. Here, Morrison indicates the influence of white values not only on the disintegration of mind but on the creation of intra-racial tensions and parental failure.

Keywords: alienation, psychoanalysis of Negro, recognition.

Introduction

I do not care a damn for any art that is not used for propaganda.

W. E. B. Du Bois[1]

Can nobody see the preposterous and perverse arrogance in thus reducing Africa to the role of props for the break-up of one petty European mind?

Chinua Achebe[2]

African American Literature

African American literature is simply defined as the literature written by Americans of African descent. Nevertheless, this hybrid concept demands a soulful discussion of the context in which it was inaugurated and developed. Having the history of imperialist marginalization under the different masks of racism, classism and sexism in mind, this discussion proves useful in a clearer understanding of a literature that "talks back and talks black" (Lee-Price 250). This self-conscious response to the issue of color demonstrates its immense national significance for the

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[1] "Criteria of Negro Art," *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, eds. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Nellie Y. McKay (1926; New York: W. W. Norton, 1997) 757, qtd. in Lee-Price 249.

[2] *Hopes and Impediments* (Oxford: Heinemann International, 1988) 8, qtd. in Coates 272.

blacks. However, without offering background information about the issue of race, this significance would remain vague.

Race comes from the 15th century Italian *razza*, which means sort or species. The term is generally defined as divisions of human beings based on physical characteristics. However, loaded with a tremendous amount of cultural weights, the concept has different meanings. The mainstay of the present discussion is the *black* race that is relevant in African American context. This sense of the concept evolved as a struggle to account for the problem of human differences. Although from ancient times people had exposure to such differences, it can be argued that their accounts did not conceptualize racial issues and the history of race began with European expeditions in the 15th and 16th centuries (Cavalli-Sforza).

Michael Banton categorizes the history of race into three phases which begin with the concept of lineage "based on the creation stories in Genesis and then on the work of naturalists such as Linnaeus and the German *naturphilosophie* school" (Yee). Pointing to the significance of Biblical thinking in the conceptualization of race, Robert Norton remarks that "in European thought until well into the 1700s, human physical and cultural diversity was often understood to be the manifestation of divine grace, or of a fall from grace." It can be argued that the idea of grace or fall from grace is particularly significant in the construction of racialist ideas. This stems from either the story of Noah or the idea of Great Chain of Being. According to Bruce, the racialist idea of blackness is based on "a biblical thinking that, drawing on the story of Noah, described black Africans as the descendants of Noah's son Ham, cursed as a result of his own indiscretions to a state of permanent and eternal servitude" (2). Therefore, it can be assumed that Biblical interpretation

of human diversity is, at least, partially helpful in triggering the preoccupations which link the black race with ideas such as servitude, inferiority, malevolence and incapacity for intellectual accomplishment and cultural development.

Furthermore, the idea of Great Chain of Being in combination with taxonomic schemes provoked the notion of natural inferiority based on physical characteristics especially skin color (Cavalli-Sforza). Among the prevalent speculations on inferiority and even humanity of races one can point out to the accounts of Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) and G. W. F. Hegel (1770-1831).

Kant grounds his classification on the mental capacities of each race. He claims that "humanity exists in its greatest perfection in the white race. The yellow Indians have a smaller amount of talent. The Negroes are lower, and the lowest are a part of the American peoples" (qtd. in Hachee). Considering the difference between whites and blacks, he asserts that "it appears to be as great in regard to mental capacities as in color." However, his ascription of smaller talent has a significant implication that would not be grasped completely unless considering two points: essential characteristics of all rational beings in Kant's view, that is, reason and will, and the minimal requirement of moral agency, that is, rationality. Juxtaposed with his assertion that "they [blacks] can be educated but only as servants; that is, they allow themselves to be trained," it can be argued that Kant does not consider the black race as rational beings and, therefore, moral agents: for the reason that being educated by someone else requires will, not reason.

Hegel, in *The Philosophy of History*, lays aside all thoughts of reverence and morality about Africans simply for they are not human:

> The Negro, as already observed, exhibits the natural man in his completely wild and untamed state. We must lay aside all thought of reverence and morality–all that we call feeling–if we would rightly comprehend him; there is nothing harmonious with humanity to be found in this type of character. The copious and circumstantial accounts of Missionaries completely confirm this, and Mahommedanism appears to be the only thing which in any way brings the Negroes within the range of culture. (93)

Confirming his view with the accounts of missionaries, though excluding Islam, a complementary point, Hegel denies the humanity of an entire race and still is not satisfied to leave Africa without mentioning that "what we properly understand by Africa, is the Unhistorical, Undeveloped Spirit, still involved in the conditions of mere nature, and which had to be presented here only as on the threshold of the World's History" (99).

In the second phase, according to Banton, racial theories emerged as the biological concepts of type and subspecies (Yee). Drawing on scientific studies based on biological and anthropometric ideas, polygenetic views prevailed during the 19th century (Cavalli-Sforza). Such views triggered racialist idea of biologically fixed inferiority or superiority which sparked off the malicious notions like subhuman state and servitude of the Negroes and survival of the fittest that were used by imperialists to validate unequal treatment, enslavement and even extermination of inferior species.

Despite the misconception that the evolutionary theory developed by the British naturalist Charles Darwin (1809-82) was in support of racialist ideas, R. G. Price points out, "Darwin argued that people cannot be classified as different

species, all races are related and have a common ancestry" (2). Darwin in his book *The Descent of Man* (1871) wrote:

> Every naturalist who has had the misfortune to undertake the description of a group of highly varying organisms, has encountered cases . . . precisely like that of man; and if of a cautious disposition, he will end by uniting all the forms which graduate into each other, into a single species; for he will say to himself that he has no right to give names to objects that he cannot define. (qtd. in Cavalli-Sforza; ellipsis in orig.)

It is interesting to add that Darwin also argued on the extension of social instinct not only to the members of a nation but to those of all nations and races. In the same book he wrote:

> As man advances in civilization, and small tribes are united into larger communities, the simplest reason would tell each individual that he ought to extend his social instincts and sympathies to all the members of the same nation, though personally unknown to him. This point being once reached, there is only an artificial barrier to prevent his sympathies extending to the men of all nations and races. If, indeed, such men are separated from him by great differences in appearance or habits, experience unfortunately shows us how long it is, before we look at them as our fellow-creatures. (qtd. in Price 2)

However, by the 1940s, advances in genetics revealed the fundamental similarity of all human genetic makeup.

Nevertheless, stuck fast in the history's power-structured mind, race preserved its cultural weight. In the third phase, according to Banton, racial theories emerged as social concepts of status and class (Yee). Drawing on fixations ranging from religious, biological or anthropological, the discriminatory social practices that were based on physical differences persisted in 'hybrid' societies. The decision in

1896 of the case of Plessy v. Ferguson by the United States Supreme Court, which legalized the segregation of black people, lasted for more than half a century to be changed in 1954 by the Supreme Court's decision in the case of Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka.

Therefore, from their first documented arrival in Virginia in 1619 to the civil rights and Black Power movements in the early second half of 20th century, African Americans struggled to fight back racial oppression. It can be said that this struggle virtually paid off when Barack and Michelle Obama could be elected as the First Family of the United States in 2008.

Having this brief history of race in mind, the word *African* obtains especial significance in African American literature. It can be argued that black literature has its origins in the strenuous struggle of blacks to fight back racialist ideas. Dickson D. Bruce suggests that African American literature has its origins in the framework produced by "complex issues of voice and authority, appropriation and attribution in colonial America and metropolitan Britain" (1). Bruce continues that:

> Such issues grew out of the tendencies and ambiguities of race relations in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, as well as the tensions and tendencies in understandings of color, similarity, and difference during the first 150 years of British settlement in mainland North America. (1)

According to Bruce, one reason for these ambiguities is the ambiguous relationship between blacks and whites growing, in part, out of varying expectations with which Africans has arrived in America, as well as their varying approaches to

colonial American conditions (3). Bruce, citing Ira Berlin,[3] refers to the "charter generation" arriving from Creole world and suggests of Africans early arrivals "familiar with Europeans and with European society" (3). Brent Campbell has even suggested of African presence in America before Columbus discovery in 1492, "not as slaves, but as explorers and traders who helped to build the Olmec civilization." Another reason is the varying modes of exclusion in colonial societies fostered by demographics or time and place differences (Bruce 3-5). The greater importation of the blacks to the South and, therefore, the greater proportion of the blacks to whites caused stricter discrimination and wider cultural distance in the South than in the North, where "blacks and whites lived and worked in close proximity to each other" (5-7).

However, the issue of black race is significant not only in the formation of a black voice but also in deciphering that voice. Claudia Tate remarks that "the racial protocol among African Americans has also demanded that a black text explicitly represent their lived experiences with racial oppression" (3). Linden Peach also refers to the same fact when he emphasizes the resistance of black literary criticism to the separation of the literary text from its author and remarks:

> Reclaiming an identity and (narrative) voice has been important to the black writer in countering centuries of dispossession and misrepresentation. At the very moment when black writers have taken possession of the voice denied them by imperialism and racialism, they

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[3] For further information see Ira Berlin, "From Creole to African: Atlantic Creoles and the Origins of African American Society in Mainland North America" *William and Mary Quarterly* 53 (1996): 251-88, qtd. in Bruce 3.

> do not want to be robbed of it again by a European, theoretical sleight of hand. (1)

Regarding the imperialist use of racial ideas and the cultural connotations of blackness as irrational mind incapable of intellectual accomplishment, it can be argued that a black voice not only had the task of expressing "lived experience of racial oppression" but also, as Lee-Price refers to, "the unique task of proving the *humanity* of an entire race" (251; emphasis added). This task was, finally, fulfilled in the late Colonial Period. Although not published until 1855, the earliest piece of black literature in America is assumed to be Lucy Terry Prince's only surviving poem "Bar's Fight,"[4] written over 100 years earlier in 1746 (Folsom).

However, the first published piece was Jupiter Hammon's poem "An Evening Thought: Salvation by Christ with Penitential Cries" in 1761. However, it is generally believed that it was the publication in 1773 of *Poems on Various Subjects* by Phillis Wheatley that "inaugurated the long and distinguished, but until recently neglected, line of black writers (or by what has come to be the preferred name, African American writers) in America" (Abrams and Harpham 215). Nevertheless, aimed at expressing "lived experience of racial oppression," from the beginning of its life, African American literature took the form of autobiographical narratives. Evolving as abolitionist propaganda, these narratives, which are considered as the basis of African American literary tradition, came to be called slave narratives (Lee-Price 252).

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[4] "Bar's Fight" commemorates an Indian raid in 1746 and is assumed to be written in 1746. For the beginning of the poem see Bruce 31.

However, the first work of long fiction in African American literature emerged in 1853 when Fredrick Douglass, the author of one of the best known slave narratives, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (1845), published his novella, "The Heroic Slave," and in 1855 when William Wells Brown published the first African American novel, *Clotel, or the President's Daughter: A Narrative of Slave Life in the United States* (Lee-Price 253).

Although the American Civil War (1861-65) resulted in the abolition of slavery but legal racial segregation survived until the civil rights and Black Power movements early in the second half of 20th century. During this period African American writers focused on exploring racial identity and celebrating their cultural and historical heritage. Expression of African American dialect in works of Paul Laurence Dunbar and Charles Waddell Chesnutt at the turn of the 20th century and W. E. B. Du Bois' concept of Negro's "double consciousness" and his assertion that "he [Negro] would not bleach his Negro soul in a flood of white Americanism, for he knows that Negro blood has a message for the world. [. . .]" (qtd. in Lee-Price 254) anticipated the flowering of African American literature in the Harlem Renaissance. James Weldon Johnson, pointing to the significance of negritude in expression of racial spirit, emphasized "find[ing] a form that will express the racial spirit by symbols from *within* rather than by symbols from *without* [. . .] a form expressing the imagery, the idioms, the peculiar turns of thought, and the distinctive humour and pathos, too, of the Negro" (qtd. in Lee-Price 255; emphasis added). This drawing on sources from "within" was practiced by Countee Cullen, Langston Hughes, Jean Toomer, and Claude McKay among others to develop a black literary aesthetics.

Although this growth was hindered by the Great Depression and World War II, it pursued, however, with some ambivalences (Lee-Price 257). Richard Wright who opposed the Harlem school of expression developed a black literary realism or the so-called protest fiction and "urge[d] black writers to transcend sectional interests and adopt a perspective in their writing which connects the experiences of African Americans with the international proletariat and the 'hopes and struggles of minority peoples everywhere'" (258). Wright's view was challenged by other African American writers like Ralph Ellison and James Baldwin. Finally, by the failure of integrationist philosophy underlying civil rights movements and Wright's aesthetics, the separatist Black Power movement emerged that emphasized "black pride and distinctiveness" and fostered the Black Art movement which is concisely defined by Larry Neal:

> Black Art is the aesthetic and spiritual sister of the Black Power concept. As such, it envisions an art that speaks directly to the needs and aspirations of Black America. In order to perform this task, the Black Arts Movement proposes a radical reordering of the western cultural aesthetic. It proposes a separate symbolism, mythology, critique, and iconology. (qtd. in Lee-Price 259)

In addition to the separatist attitudes, the refutation of the ideology of cultural pluralism and emphasis on the distinctiveness of African American literary tradition, the patriarchal bias of the whole movement, the relation of gendered and racial oppression, and the influence of dominant ideology and culture on black psyche have great significance for African American writers like Maya Angelou, Toni Morrison, and Alice Walker.

Toni Morrison[5]

Morrison is mainly renowned for exploration of African American historical and cultural heritage and expression of African American women's experience. This study investigates the concept of psychic alienation in Toni Morrison's first novel, *The Bluest Eye* (1970). Having the vicissitudes of African American writing in mind, it would be apt at this point to consider Morrison as a *black woman* writer.

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[5] Toni Morrison was born Chloe Wofford on February 18, 1931 in Lorain, Ohio, as the second of four children, to Georgia born George Wofford and Alabama born Ramah Willis Wofford. Both sides of her family had moved from their southern states in the exodus known historically as the Great Migration to escape from the racial violence in southern states to find freedom in the north. Her birth certificate indicates that she was given the name of her maternal grandmother, Ardelia, as a middle name for which, according to some accounts, she adopted the name of her paternal grandmother, Anthony. In 1949, she left Lorain to pursue an undergraduate education at Howard University in Washington. She graduated with a Bachelor of Arts degree in 1953. Majored in English and minored in classics, she moved to Ithaca, New York to pursue graduate studies in American Literature at Cornell University and completed her Master of Arts degree in 1955. She wrote her master's thesis, under the name Chloe Ardellia Wofford on the treatment of the alienated in *Mrs. Dalloway* by Virginia Woolf and *Absalom, Absalom* by William Faulkner. Following the completion of her master's degree she began her long career as a university professor with teaching Literature at Texas Southern University. After two years, in 1957, she returned to Howard University as an instructor on the faculty and remained there until 1965. At Howard, she met Harold Morrison, a Jamaica born architect, and married him in 1958. She took her husband's name and began to use the first name of Toni. Morrison herself has said that Toni was a nickname that she acquired as a young adult during her undergraduate years at Howard and that she regrets having used the name when she published her first novel, *The Bluest Eye,* in 1970. Morrison has said that she submitted the manuscript under the name Toni Morrison because it was familiar to her editor. Morrison is well known as a novelist and editor; however, she has written nonfiction, drama, short story, children story and has produced several choreographies. For further coverage on Morrison's life account see Gillespie 1-15; Lister 1-12; and Peach 1-10.

When she was awarded the Nobel Prize in literature in 1993, she recalled in her interview with Claudia Dreifus: "I felt a lot of 'we' excitement. It was as if the whole category of 'female writer' and 'black writer' had been redeemed."

When Morrison was awarded the Nobel Prize, she was described as one "who in novels characterized by visionary force and poetic import, gives life to an essential aspect of American reality" (qtd. in Peach 17). Indeed, Morrison is very conscious of the authenticity and distinctiveness of African American literature and its role in "giv[ing] life to an essential aspect of American reality." In her critical work *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (1992) she points out the national literature's debt to Africans:

> These speculations have led me to wonder whether the major and championed characteristics of our national literature–individualism, masculinity, social engagement versus historical isolation; acute and ambiguous moral problematic; the thematic of innocence coupled with an obsession with figurations of death and hell–are not in fact responses to a dark, abiding, signing Africanist presence. (qtd. in Peach 10)

In his introduction to *Toni Morrison*, Harold Bloom, although cognizant of the fact that Morrison "prefers to be contextualized in African-American literature, or in an American literature that ceases to repress the African-American presence" (2), argues that Morrison resembles D. H. Lawrence and calls Virginia Woolf and William Faulkner as the parents of her art:

> Her curious resemblance to certain aspects of D. H. Lawrence does not ensue from the actual influence of Lawrence, but comes out of the two dominant precursors who have shaped her narrative sensibility, William Faulkner and Virginia Woolf. Faulkner and Woolf have little in