



The Melancholic Subject and *The Bluest Eye*

Camellia Talebian Sadehi^{1,*}; Helen Ouliaei Nia²

¹M.A. of English Literature, Isfahan, Iran

²Ph.D. Assistant Professor of English Literature at Isfahan University, Iran

*Corresponding author.

Email: cml_talebian@yahoo.com

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Abstract

Julia Kristeva, the Bulgarian-French critic, claims that the melancholic subject has a sense of loss and s/he cannot share it with other people as s/he considers it private. S/he is stranger to her/his mother tongue and cannot express her/his feeling through language; however, s/he should use language in order to get rid of her/his sense of loss. In *The Bluest Eye*, Toni Morrison devotes herself to the slaves' experience. She believes that the slaves suffer from their past and feel a sense of loss, and they should use language to express their feeling. This article intends to apply Julia Kristeva's theory of the melancholic subject to Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* and shed light on the fact that through language the characters become able to deal with their past.

Key words: Julia Kristeva; The melancholic subject; Toni Morrison; *The Bluest Eye*; Language; Loss

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INTRODUCTION

Julia Kristeva (1941) Bulgarian-French is psychoanalyst, literary critic, linguist, socialist, feminist and recently novelist. She received her M.A. degree from the University of Sofia in 1966 and moved to France for her

doctoral fellowship. In France, she worked with Lucien Goldmann, Roland Barthes and Claude Lévi-Strauss. Barthes describes Kristeva as the one who "always destroys the latest preconception, the one we thought we could be comforted by, the one we could be proud" (Lodge, 2000, p.206). She published many books such as: *Revolution in Poetic Language*, *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia* and *Strangers to Ourselves*. This article intends to apply Julia Kristeva theory of the melancholic subject to Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*.

In *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*, Julia Kristeva talks about the melancholic subject. Kristeva's theory of melancholia fits Freud's theory of loss. Moreover, her emphasis on self-identity and specifically her connection between melancholia and narcissism follow Freud. By considering Freud's theory of death wish with melancholia she formulates the notion of depression. As she claims, she shall "speak of depression and melancholia without always distinguishing the particularities of the two ailments but keeping in mind their common structure" (Kristeva, 1980, pp.10-11). She admits that depression is the "hidden face of narcissism, the face that is to bear him away into death, but of which he is unaware while he admires himself in mirage" (ibid, p.5). Therefore, like Freud, Kristeva considers melancholia as a disorder of self-identity and a sense of loss. However, she connects melancholia with the mother, the fact that Freud has never mentioned in his theories.

In the *chora*, the child is in the mother's embrace. In this psychic space, there is no difference between the child and the mother; moreover, the child's needs are satisfied without asking them. As there is no need to ask for the needs, the child does not speak. If by accident the child loses her/his mother, s/he will learn language in the future, but s/he cannot articulate her/his loss. The sad child suffers this loss, but s/he cannot express it. In fact, there is no adequate word, which can substitute this sense of loss, and this loss can "neither be replaced nor forgotten"

(Iannetta, 2002, p.196).

The child king becomes irredeemably sad before uttering his first words; this is because he has been irrevocably, desperately separated from the mother, a loss that causes him to try to find her again, along with other objects of love, first in imagination, then in words. (Kristeva, 1980, p.6)

S/he may behave normally in her/his early life, but gradually one can recognize the effect of this loss in her/his life. For example, the child speaks little, or s/he sleeps most of the time. Kristeva defines melancholia as:

Abyss of sorrow, a noncommunicable grief that at times, and often on a long term basis, lays claims upon us to the extent of having us lose all interest in words, actions, and even life itself. (1980, p.3)

The child is mourning for his/her lost mother. As this lost object is part of her/him, s/he thinks that s/he is incomplete without it. As the result of such an emotion, the child becomes unable to use language, and this is the first symptom of melancholia. From Kristeva's view, "the collapse of the symbolic is a tell-tale sign of melancholia" (Sabo, 2010, p.57). This sense of incompleteness results in the sadness and noncommunicable grief. The melancholic subject considers this grief as a private feeling and s/he cannot share it with other people, neither could s/he put it into words. Even the melancholic subject speaks a dead language; s/he is foreigner to her/his maternal language. As Kristeva admits "the depressed speak of nothing, they have nothing to speak of: glued to the Thing, they are without objects" (Kristeva, 1980, p.51). Sometimes, the melancholic subject speaks but his/her "sentences outgrows grammatical/linguistic structure, it breaks out of language and denies its sense" (Iannetta, 2002, p.221). His/her speech is repetitive and monotonous. Moreover, Kristeva states that:

They utter sentences that are interrupted, exhausted, come to stand still. Even phrases they cannot formulate. A repetitive rhythm, a monotonous melody emerges and dominates the broken logical sequences, changing them into recurring, obsessive litanies. Finally, when that frugal musicality becomes exhausted in its turn, or simply does not succeed in becoming established on account of the pressure of silence, the melancholy person appears to stop cognizing as well as uttering, sinking into the blankness as asymbolia or the excess on unorderable cognitive chaos. (1980, p.33)

When the child recognizes the distinction between herself/himself and her/his mother, s/he enters the symbolic. In fact, s/he uses language to express her/his needs and desire for her/his mother. However, the melancholic subject loses her/his mother before s/he can perceive the difference between herself/himself and her/his mother. In other words, the child does not enter the symbolic realm. As the consequence, the child is not able to name or to symbolize what s/he has lost and the lost object remains unnamable. Since the melancholic subject loses what s/he loves, s/he loses her/his motivation to speak.

Through the symbolic realm and use of language, the

child becomes a unified subject and s/he becomes able to express her/his individuality as 'I'. The child moves from the realm of plentitude to the symbolic realm and distinguishes herself/himself from her/his mother and her/his surroundings. When the child leaves her/his mother behind, s/he brings her back to life in signs and language (Sabo, 2010, p.63).

As a result, he becomes an "I" through language. In fact, a traumatic separation from object of love is the necessary foundation of human identity. As a product of individuation, this crisis is in essence individual and is therefore timeless and unrecorded in the history. (Iannetta, 2002, pp.194-195)

If the child does not enter the symbolic realm, s/he will not have a unified subjectivity; therefore, s/he remains a heterogeneous subject.

The early ego largely lacks cohesion, and a tendency towards integration alternates with a tendency towards disintegration, a falling into bits...the anxiety of being destroyed from within remains active. It seems to me in keeping with the lack of cohesiveness that under the pressure of this threat the ego tends to fall into pieces. (Kristeva, 1980, p.19)

In Kristeva's view, the melancholic subject does speak, but in an imaginary and creative ways. As Sabo states, "unlike the true psychotic the melancholic has not lost the use of signs together" (2010, p.60). The melancholic poets and writers recognize their imaginary father and they express their sadness and sense of loss within language. In order to share her/his sense of loss with other people, the writer reaches the realm of signs and gives name to the object that s/he mourns. As Kristeva mentions, the writer must at one time or another had the experience of loss in order to write about it (Rice and Waugh, 1989, p.133).

In *Black Sun*, Kristeva deals with some poets and novelists such as Nerval, Duras and Dostoyevsky. "The text of Marguerite Duras are about suffering, the experience of sadness, death, suicide. As are the texts of Dostoyevsky. The texts of Nerval, with all their references to the cultural tradition, show us to what extent sadness and suffering can be themes" (Rice and Waugh, 1989, p.133). As she analyses Nerval's poem, Dostoyevsky's and Duras' novels, one can understand that the writers' biographies are important in their writings. All these writers show their sense of loss and their suffering within their works. Therefore, one should be familiar with the writer's biography and trace its reflection within his/her works. One can consider Toni Morrison as the melancholic writer who suffers from the pain of racial discrimination and now intends to cure herself through writing the novels. She uses language and explains her suffering; therefore, gains a unified and stable subjectivity through using language.

DISCUSSION

Chloe Anthony Wofford was born in 1931, in Ohio. She got her degrees from Howard and Cornell Universities.

Then, she became a college teacher, later on she became an editor. In 1970, she published her first novel *The Bluest Eye* and it gained great success among the readers and the critics. In 1975, *Sula* was nominated for the national book award. In fact, her novels caught the eyes of national attention. Later on, she received the Pulitzer Prize for *Beloved*. The most important award that she received, was the Nobel Prize in literature in 1993. "Louis Gates Jr, a well known scholar of African American studies, reached to the news of her noble prize by saying: 'just two centuries ago the African American literary tradition was born in slave-narrative. Now our greatest writer has won Nobel Prize'" (Pal, 1994, p.2440). About Morrison's art of novel writing, Crichlow and Mc Carthy state:

Morrison speaks repeatedly about the aesthetic of black art and the character of black language that she wants her reader to hear in her novel. Language is the distinguishing feature in the work of any story-teller: "anybody can think up a story. But trying to breathe life into characters, allow them space, make them people whom I care about is hard. I only have twenty-six letters of the alphabet; I don't have color or music. I must use my craft to make the reader see the colors and hear the sounds." (1995, p.309)

In addition, they continue,

Morrison puts this art of language in motion... Morrison's metaphor of the dance for language is one of the most often cited images in discussions about orality and literacy in this novel. (1995, p.310)

One should notice that Morrison's great achievements were based on her attempt to bring Afro-Americans in American literature. She intended to make the black visible, as they were invisible in the past. She considered Afro-American as the subjects not the objects; therefore, she focused on their life, emotions, and experiences. Through language, she permitted them to articulate their physical and psychological pain. She claimed, "black women writers look at things in an unforgiving loving way. They are writing to repossess, rename, reown" (Pal, 1994, p.2439).

As she observed the blacks' condition in American society and their marginalization, she set the black characters at the center of her novels. She wishes the American literature could have a wider landscape; she regrets that the American literature is ignorant of Afro-Americans in the United States. Besides, she claims that the Afro-Americans are fabricated by the Americans to serve their purpose and she calls these imaginative Afro-Americans "American Africanism" (Rivkin and Ryan, 2000, p.924). She asserts that the white writers imagine the blacks' situation and write whatever they have imagined; this fabricated story is dishonest and ludicrous. As she was conscious of the blacks' marginalization, "she started valuing her peripheral existence because 'it was deeper, more complex, it has a tension, it related to the center but was not the center'" (Pal, 1994, p.2439).

Her novels are exploration of the meaning of blackness. What does it mean to be black in white American? To be a black

woman in a white male hegemonic society? (Pal, 1994, p.2439)

She observed how her parents were influenced by the racism; moreover, she heard their speech about discrimination; therefore, she decided to reflect all these tensions in her novels. She permitted the black people to come to their consciousness. She displayed how the American ideologies and the whites' mastery over the black tortured the black all these years. She displayed all the blacks' lives; moreover, she allowed them not only to cope with their memories, but also to take action against all racial discriminations.

As the novel begins, the third paragraph of the premier does not have any punctuation or capitalization and even spacing:

Hereisthehouseitisgreenandwhiteithasareddooritisveryprettyhere
isthEfamilymotherfatherdickandjaneliveinthegreenandwhitehou
setheyareveRyhappysseejanesheshasaredressshewantstoplaywho
willplaywithjaneseetHecatitgoesmeowmeowcomeandplaycomep
laywithjanethekittenwillnotplays. (1994, p.2)

There is chaos in the symbolic order and it represents the disorder in the family. "The sentence outgrows its grammatical/linguistic structure, it breaks out of language, denies its sense and inhabits the room" (Iannetta, 2002, p.221).

Adults do not pay attention to the children. Even Mrs. MacTeers does not talk to her daughter directly. "My mother's voice drones on. She is not talking to me. She is talking to the puke, but she is calling it my name: Claudia" (1994, p.7). Claudia suffers from her mother's indifference; she does not show her affection to her daughter.

Pecola feels the lack of blue eyes in her life. She needs blue eyes to feel confident. "To eat the candy is somehow to eat the eyes, eat Mary Jane. Love Mary Jane. Be Mary Jane" (1994, p.38). She eats the candy to have Mary Jane's blue eyes.

Pauline has a crooked foot that is the main reason "why she never felt at home anywhere, or that she belonged anyplace. Her general feeling of separateness and unworthiness she blamed on her foot" (1994, p.86). She cannot express her melancholy, thus she tortures herself by her thoughts. She thinks that her crooked foot is the cause of her misery. "She missed--without knowing what she missed" (ibid, p.87). She does not know the source of her suffering; she only mourns for it. "She thought of the death of newborn things, lonely roads, and strangers who appear out of nowhere simply to hold one's hand, woods in which the sun was always setting" (ibid, p.88). Pauline is obsessed with the thought of death and sunset because she is lonely and enjoys no company. Her morbid mood is associated with sunset, symbol of death. No one loves her, or shows any affection for her. She craves for people's attention even after her marriage: "the sad thing was that Pauline did not really care for clothes and makeup. She merely wanted other women to cast favorable glances her

way” (ibid, p.92). She is invisible in the society because she is lame and black.

Sometimes black characters express their sense of loss through the “Blues.” The blues refers to Afro-American music which represents the blacks’ melancholy and depression. The repetitious form of the music is the same as the repetitious words the melancholic subject utters:

For brief periods during her early adulthood, Pauline does experience moments of blues expressiveness. Cholly comes with music—“a kind of city-street music where laughter belies anxiety, and joy is as short and straight as the blade of a pocket knife. She listened carefully to the music and let it pull her lips into a smile” (p.91). So when she narrates her experience of meeting him for the first time, she expresses herself in a rare blues idiom: “When I first seed Cholly, I want you to know it was like all the bits of color from that time down home when all us chil’ren went berry picking after a funeral and I put some in the pocket of my Sunday dress, and they masked up and stained my hips. My whole dress was messed with purple, and it never did wash out. Not the dress nor me” (pp.91–92). Cat Moses suggests that Pauline articulates a blues narrative of her own, “in lyrically expressing a longing for the rural Southern community that revolved around church (“Sunday dress”) and ritual (“berry picking,” “funeral”), Pauline accomplishes what the blues [80] Get in the Kitchen and Rattle Them Pots and Pans singer accomplishes: she recreates that which is lost and for which she longs, transforming lack into poetry. (Prince, 2005, pp.80-81)

When Cholly was a child, his mother abandoned him. This dissertation has a traumatic impact on him all throughout his life: “When Cholly was four days old, his mother wrapped him in two blankets and one newspaper and placed him on a junk heap by the railroad” (1994, p.103). Kristeva maintains that “the traumatic memories of a loved relative during childhood... are not repressed but constantly evoked” (1980, p.46). His misbehavior stems from his complex of being an outcast. He commits strange deeds in his mother’s absence and cannot behave himself. Moreover, he is annoyed by his father’s departures: “The traumatic partings ‘thrust us’ into a state of withdrawal ‘father, why have you deserted me?’” (Kristeva, 1980, p.133).

As mentioned before, Pecola suffers from blue-eyes complex. She does not express her sense of loss to other people. She stealthily prays for blue eyes when she is alone and she displays this desire in her actions too. She “learns that she is ugly, unacceptable and especially unloved” (Suprajitno, 2009, p.11).

Morrison writes that Pecola’s lack of self-esteem and “spunk” arises from the fact that almost from the beginning Pecola has not been brought up within an environment that stressed black values and self-esteem. The only way an “uprooted” black person can survive is to be as white as possible. (Suprajitno, 2009, p.11)

This feeling of being an outcast, who is excommunicated, leads to her constantly mumbling her thoughts to herself:

Please help me look. No. But suppose my eyes aren’t blue enough? Blue enough for what? Blue enough for ... I don’t know. Blue enough for something. Blue enough ... for you! I’m not going to play with you anymore. Oh. Don’t leave me. Yes.

I am. Why? Are you mad at me? Yes. Because my eyes aren’t blue enough? Because I don’t have the bluest eyes? No. Because you’re acting silly. (1994, p.161)

When her wish is fulfilled, she loses her mind and talks to herself. As she does not use language to communicate with people, she does not have a stable subjectivity and she is a heterogeneous subject.

Pecola is an abject character gripped by “a violent dark revolt of being.” Kristeva defines abjection as a state in which the abject is opposed to herself experiencing ‘a violent dark revolt of being directed against a threat that seems to emanate from an exorbitant outside or inside. What characterizes the abject person is that she has not fully integrated her subjectivity, because she derives her being from an all-powerful, overpowering other. A person experiences an abjection only if an other has settled in place and stead of what will be [her]. Not at all another with whom she can identify and incorporate, but an other who precedes and possesses [her] and through such possession cause her to be. Because the abject is defined by the other, and seeks her being within the other, she is always gripped with longing for the unattainable and pursues pseudo-objects instead which offer her a medium of satisfaction... Pecola’s abjection hinders her attempts to integrate her subject hood. Born into a loveless and violent family, Pecola is rejected at birth by mother because of her ugliness, scorned and turned into a joke by her schoolmates and victimized by her community. The Breedloves, in spite of the name, are unable to show Pecola the love that would mitigate her rejection by society. The Breedlove family, with its ironic pun on its name, is both loveless and deracinated psychologically and economically. (Suprajitno, 2009, pp.12-13)

By the closing pages of *The Bluest Eye*, Pecola has only one story, the story of her beautiful blue eyes. Her identity is hopelessly fragmented and as Madonne Miner notes ‘tragically, even when combined, do not compose one whole being...she no longer exists as a reasonable human being’. (Bloom, 2007, p.137)

Knowingly disinherited of the thing, the depressed person wanders in pursuit of continuously disappointing adventures and loves; or else retreats, disconsolate and aphasic, alone with the unnamed Thing. (Kristeva, 1980, p.13)

Literature needs two speakers thus, Pecola talks to herself, as she cannot communicate her pain with other people. In fact, she cannot trust anyone to express her feelings.

The characters reveal Morrison’s unspeakable thoughts. They express other people’s lack of interest in them and their desire for the white appearance. Like Kristeva’s melancholic subjects, the characters do not express their thought, but show it through body language and in an indirect manner. They are haunted by the influence of the Eurocentric beauty standards, and at the same time, they adapt themselves to white doctrines in order to be approved by the dominantly white society.

CONCLUSION

In *The Bluest Eye*, The characters’ figurative language represents their unspeakable fears. Sometimes they express their desire directly and use language to shape their subjectivity; however, one can notice that other

people influence their subjectivity too. Some characters, such as Claudia, are not ashamed of their skin color, but she comes to believe in it as she grows older as a result of living with those who inculcate in her this inferiority complex. In this novel, some characters like Claudia can express themselves without any fear, whereas other characters like Pecola can hardly utter a word. Pecola is alienated from herself by the white beauty standards and one can consider her as the true representative of Kristeva's melancholic subject. She confronts many troubles in her life and she is tormented by people's reaction to her black skin; therefore, she prefers to keep silent and creates an imaginary friend for herself.

As she considers her ugliness as a horribly singular defect, she does not talk to other people but to herself. Therefore, the reader can trace the effect of white beauty standards on the deformation of Pecola's subjectivity; she loses her identity which is denied to her in a racist community. In the represented society, the black are punished not for what they have done, but for what they are. As Thomas holds,

Morrison's motivation behind her novel, *The Bluest Eye*, was based on lack and absence. It was based on a moral obligation to fulfill a need for representation not reflected in the books distributed in her time, and it was based on a violent rejection of representations of whiteness. (2008, p.155)

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