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TITULO: BLACKNESS AS A DIALOGICAL CONSTRUCT IN TONI MORRISON'S FICTION

Identity can be defined in terms of an ideological relationship with others, especially “significant others”, that generally mirror back an image of the self in question within a social context. The human mind is not monological; therefore, we define identity in a dialogue with or a struggle against others.

This paper presents how the identity of black female children in Toni Morrison's *THE BLUEST EYE* (1994) is dialogically built up within a context that is American, canonical and whose literary supremacy is eminently white.

First, it is necessary to point out the concepts of identity and race which in turn will inevitably lead to the idea of empire, power and hegemony. This theoretical framework is appropriate to establish a dialogical relationship with a further analysis of an extract from the section “*Winter*” in *THE BLUEST EYE*. In this extract, alternative conceptions of beauty/ugliness, good/evil are interwoven with hegemonic aesthetic norms. The analysis is based upon Norman Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) which views discourse as social practice.

According to Paul Gilroy to share an identity is “to be bounded on most fundamental levels, national, racial, ethnic, regional and local” (Gilroy, 2002: 98). It is socially bounded because it marks divisions and subsets. In this way, it contributes to establish boundaries between “us” and “others”. Indeed, the very utterance of the word “us” is dangerous because it implies sameness among a given group. Consequently, there are “others” who are excluded for they share different systems of beliefs. So, the concept of identity is linked to political operations that contribute to measure the relationship between sameness and otherness. Collectivities reflect upon what makes their sameness possible. This very act indicates the existence of the concept of otherness which is extremely linked to the conception of ethnicity.

Race is an ideological construct that reflects social and structural arrangements in a cultural dimension. Indeed, it is cultural imperialism that establishes the categorization

of humankind into ethnic groups. Since, it is the Eurocentric notion of hierarchy the one that views the primitive and the colonial as races or groups that lack any aesthetic or historical dimension.

In the 18th century, no distinction is made between anthropology and taxonomy of racial difference. Physical attributes and specific social patterns of the community are identified and judged according to the European norm. In this way, the innate superiority of European race is established as the ideal of imperialist expansion.

Whenever the notion of empire and expansion arises, two other concepts acquire importance: power and language. One of the main features of imperial oppression is control over language. The standard version of the language spoken by the empire becomes the norm. So, all local linguistic variants are considered linguistic impurities. Thus, language becomes the medium through which a hierarchical structure of power is perpetuated. In other words, it is the medium that determines the conception of “truth”, “order” and “reality”.

As a consequence of this, when institutionalized conceptions convince and pre-established ways of accessing the world prevail, the notion of hegemony materializes.

In Norman Fairclough's words this concept stands for:

a leadership as much as domination across the economic, political, cultural and ideological domain of a society... Hegemony is the power over society is about constructing alliances, and integrating rather than simply dominating, subordinating classes through concessions or ideological means to win their consent. (Fairclough, 2002:92)

Therefore, if an Eurocentric hegemony determines the way of perceiving ethnicity, beauty, art, good and evil what is the prospect of the periphery, the margin, those ethnic identities and cultures that are not purely white and dominant?

Toni Morrison provides an answer to this question through her literary production. Her situation as a female black writer stands as a great challenge. As a writer, she has to fight against both: the rules and ideas imposed by Western hegemony. And as a woman, she has to face the situation of being a “black female “writer. So, she presents a very complex matrix of her view of “the real “ in her work. Her task is to present the black female American experience, not simply as it has been read by the dominant canon but

as it has emerged in terms of multi-levelled, differential struggle that attempts to re-create tradition and defy the supremacy of the dominant.

In order to view how the hegemonic and the counter-hegemonic are embedded in discourse and the making up of black and white identity, an extract taken from the section “Winter” of *THE BLUEST EYE* is going to be analyzed under the light of N. Fairclough’s CDA. This method of analysis embraces discourse and its implications. There are three main components in this analysis: the text, the text analysis and discursive practice and the social and cultural practice of discourse.

In other words, CDA views discourse as 1) a contribution to the construction of “social identities”, “subject positions”, and “types of selves”, 2) it helps to construct social relations between people and 3) it contributes to the construction of a system of knowledge and beliefs. Indeed, discourse practice is constitutive in both creative and conventional ways. It reproduces society. (Fairclough, 2002: 65-6)

Fairclough marks that ideology is inherent to discursive practices and that its power is most effective when discursive practices become naturalized and achieve the status of common sense. From his view point, ideological struggle is a dimension of discursive practices, a struggle that reshapes social practices. Ideology is built precisely in the very heart of these practices, in the context of re-structuring or transforming the relationship of domination.

In the following analysis, the piece of discourse provides material for two paradigms: the hegemonic and the counter-hegemonic one. The former perpetuates the hegemonic view and the latter re-structures and transforms the dialogue between black and white identities.

Each paradigm is made up of discourse topics that are developed through different sentences that act as linking stretches or fragments. The notion of topic is defined as: “an intuitively satisfactory way of describing the unifying principle which makes one stretch of discourse about something and the next stretch about something else” (Brown Gillian, George Yules, 1988: 71)

The hegemonic paradigm focuses mainly upon the ideal of virtue and beauty established for white female kids. This paradigm is actually made up of three major discourse topics: 1- The **ideal of beauty**, stretches a), b), d), e), f), o) and p), 2- **hegemonic practices**, stretches g), h), i), j), k), l) and m), and 3) **the impact on the Afro-American socius**, stretches c), d) and q).

THE HEGEMONIC PARADIGM

- a) This disrupter of seasons was a new girl in school Maureen Peal. A high –yellow dream child with long brown hair braided into two lynch ropes that hung down her back.
- b) She was rich, at least by our standards, as rich as the richest of the white girls, swaddled in comfort and care.
- c) The quality of her clothes threatened to derange Frieda and me.
- d) Patent-leather shoes with buckles, a cheaper version of which we got only at Easter and which has disintegrated by the end of May.
- e) Fluffy sweaters the colour of lemon drops tucked into skirts with pleats so orderly they astounded us Brightly coloured knee socks with white borders, a brown velvet coat trimmed in white rabbit fur, and a matching muff. There was a hint of spring in her sloe green eyes, something summery in her complexion, and a rich autumn in her walk.
- f) She enchanted the entire school.
- g) When teachers called on her, they smile encouragingly.
- h) Black boys didn't trip her in the halls;
- i) white boys didn't stone her,
- j) white girls didn't suck their teeth when she was assigned to their work partners;
- k) black girls stepped aside when she wanted to use the sink in the girls' toilet, and their eyes genuflected under sliding lids.
- l) She never had to search for anybody to eat with in the cafeteria – they flocked to the table of her choice.
- m) Where she opened fastidious lunches cut into four dainty squares, punk-frosted pancakes, sticks of celery and carrots, proud dark apples. She even brought and liked white milk.
- n)Safe on the other side, she screamed at us," I *am* cute! And you ugly! Black and ugly black e mos. I *am* cute!"
- o) She ran down the street, the green knee socks making her legs look like wild dandelion stem that had lost their heads.
- p) The weight of her remark stunned us, and it was a second or two before Frieda and I collected ourselves enough to shout .

As regards the first discourse topic, **ideal of beauty**, the statement in a) is made up of sentences that describe Maureen and her physical appearance. This allows the reader to identify Maureen as beautiful, as if she were a dream-like creature. Consequently, the

narrator presents a chain of positive assertions: *“disrupter of seasons”*, *“A high-yellow dream-like child”* and *“long brown hair braided”*. The fact that she is presented as “the disrupter of seasons” means that she is disturbing Pecola and Frieda’s world. Indeed, Maureen’s appearance strengthens the difference of being black and poor. The latter is introduced as the one that brings chaos even to the cycle of nature. This idea is further reinstated at the end of the paragraph in stretch f). The second sentence of this discourse topic is mainly assertive and descriptive: *“A high-yellow dream-like child with long hair braided into two lynch ropes that hung down her back”*. It reinforces the new dream-like quality of the new girl at school with her neatness and warmth. These characteristics create an atmosphere of the context within which Pecola and her friends are judged. The next stretch, b): *“She was rich, at least by our standards, as rich as the richest of the white girls, swaddled in comfort and care”* is a positive assertion in which a subjective position is marked. The black girls’ situation has been overtly stated by the use of the inclusive possessive adjective *“our”* in *“our standards”*. This statement openly confirms the idea that there is sharp contrast between Maureen’s economic position and that of Pecola and Frieda. To mark this gap even more effectively, the narrator compares Maureen’s with the economic position of rich white girls. The comparison used signals the hegemonic convention held and reproduced among Afro-American girls, they equalled whiteness to economic supremacy. Next, stretch c) is linked to d) for they present material goods: *“the quality of clothes”* and *“patent leather shoes with buckles”*. These elements are markers of Maureen’s economic prosperity. It is important to stress that the narrator generates contrast by presenting immediately after the positive connotation of Maureen’s pieces of clothing, the low quality of the black girls’ outfit: d) *“... a cheaper version of which we got only at Easter and which was disintegrated by the end of May.”*

In statement e): *“Fluffy sweaters the colour of lemon drops”*, the soft light quality of Maureen’s sweater narrator reinstates the idea of “the golden girl that disrupts seasons”. The following fragment of stretch e): *“Brightly coloured knee socks with white borders, a brown velvet coat trimmed in white rabbit fur, and a matching muff”* enhances the airy quality that surrounds Maureen. The narrator uses words that suggest light, brightness and warmth: *“brightly coloured”*, *“white”*, *“velvet”*, *“furry”*, and *“muff”* to foster Maureen’s ideal image. Prose becomes almost poetry in these lines. Finally, in f): *“There was a hint of spring in her sloe green eyes, something summery in her complexion, and a rich autumn ripeness in her walk”*, the narrator provides an effective

closure for the first idea presented in a)...“the disrupter of seasons”. In the former stretch, Maureen is described as the embodiment of all seasons, except one. She has “*hint of spring*” in her green eyes, summer “*in her complexion*” and autumn “*in her walk*”. It is important to point out that the hardest of all seasons is not mentioned: winter. It seems that this time of the year is Pecola and Frieda’s private property. All its harshness has been preserved for them to stand.

The topic of **ideal of beauty** closes with statement o) and p). Identity is built in relation with others and Maureen stands as “the significant other” with whom Pecola and Frieda establish a dialectical exchange. So, what Maureen says in p), “*I am cute*”, has a strong effect upon the girls. Indeed, they truly believe the hegemonic assertion expressed through Maureen’s discursive practice which equals blackness to ugliness.

The stretch in o): “*She ran down the street, the green knee socks making her legs look like wild dandelion stem that had lost their heads*” is just another assertion that acts as intensifier of Maureen’s beauty.

The second discourse topic in the paradigm, **hegemonic practices**, is made up of stretches f), g), h), i), j), k) and l). The paragraph opens with a generalization in g): “*She enchanted the entire school*”. This discursive practice is overloaded with ideological and hegemonic constraints. As a positive epistemic assertion, it assumes the status of a self-evident, common sense truth, no one dares question. To back up this “truth”, the narrator provides arguments that sustain it. The following are examples given by the narrator to introduce different “subject positions” within the educational context: the teacher’s position, g): “...*they smile encouragingly*”, the black boys’ attitude, h): “...*didn’t trip her in the hall*”, the white boys’ treatment, i): “...*didn’t stone her*”, the white girls’ behaviour, j): “...*didn’t suck their teeth when she was assigned to their work partners*”, and finally, the black girls’ predisposition: k) “*Black girls stepped aside when she wanted to use the sink*”. Eventually, the negative assertion in l): “*She never had to search for anybody to eat with in the cafeteria-they flocked to the table of her choice...*” provides an effective closure to the sequence of examples above mentioned. This last stretch is an accurate statement which complements the idea that she has “*enchanted the entire school*”.

To sum up, all the stretches given by the narrator in this topic are examples of social practices that present the attitude of different social subjects towards the female hegemonic conception of beauty imposed by white standards.

The third discourse topic, **impact on the Afro- American socius**, can be observed through segments from c), d) and the entire stretch in p). In c): “*The quality of clothes threatens to derange Frieda and me*”, a positive assertion is introduced; yet it has a negative connotation upon the narrator and her friend. The use of the verb “*to derange*” stands as an attack upon the girls’ mental and emotional balance. What follows, a segment from e): “*...skirts with pleats so orderly they astounded us*”, evidences the impact of Maureen’s neatness and comfort upon the black girls. Moreover, the verb “*to astound*” reinforces the original meaning of “*to derange*” for both share the element of shock and surprise. Notice in p) the use of the verb “*to stun*”, similar in meaning to the former verbs: “*The weight of her remark stunned us, and it was a second or two before Frieda and I collected ourselves enough to shout...*”. The verbs under study share the ingredient of shock and surprise that leads Pecola and Frieda to helplessness, anger, and emotional imbalance.

The counter-hegemonic paradigm is made up of two major discursive topics: 1) **rituals and perceptions** and 2) **the counter-hegemonic issue**.

THE COUNTER- HEGEMONIC PARADIGM

- a) We walked quickly at first, and then slower, pausing every now and then to fasten garters, tie shoe laces, scratch, or examine old scars.
- b) WE were sinking under wisdom, accuracy and relevance of Maureen's last words:
- c) If she was cute-and if anything could be believed, she *was*-then we were not.
- d) And what dis that mean? We were lesser, Nicer, brighter, but still lesser.
- e) Dolls we could destroy but we could not destroy the honey voices of parents and aunts, the obedience in the eyes of our peers, the slippery light in the eyes of our teachers when they encountered the Maureen Peals of the world.
- f) What was the secret? What did we lack? Why was it important? And so what?
- g) Guileless and without vanity, we were still in love with ourselves then we felt comfortable in our skins, enjoyed the news that our senses released to us, admired our dirt, cultivated our scars, and couldn't comprehend this unworthiness.
- h) Jealousy we understood and thought natural-a desire to have what somebody else had; but envy was a strange new feeling for us.
- i) And all the time we knew that Maureen Peal was not the Enemy and not worthy of much intense hatred.
- j) The *Thing* to fear was the *Thing* that made her beautiful, and not us.

The first discourse topic- **rituals and perceptions**- consists of stretches a), b), c), f), g) and h). In a): "*We walked quickly at first, and then slower, pausing every now and then to fasten garters, tie shoe laces, scratch, or examine old scars*", the narrator presents a traditional "walk back home". The dynamic nature of the kids is evident through the use of verbs that convey motion and the arrest of it: "*walked*", "*pause*", "*fasten*", "*scratch*", "*examine*". The next statement asserts that the girls are still reflecting upon Maureen's last words (stretch b). The narrator use of abstract nouns like, "*wisdom*", "*accuracy*" and "*relevance*" underlines the impact of Maureen's words on Pecola and Frieda's mind.

Indeed, their minds are being colonized by Maureen's "good judgement" and "practical knowledge". Therefore, her discursive practice is loaded with ideology and leadership. As a consequence of this, Pecola and Frieda reflect upon their perception of beauty, in c): "*If she was cute-and if anything could be believed, she was-then we were not*". In the first part of the sentence, the conditional sentence their wondering, and in the second part, the negative assertion, paves the way for the succession of rhetorical questions, as

in f): *“What was the secret? What did we lack? Why was it important? And so what?”*. These open questions are linked to the process in b): *“WE were sinking under wisdom, accuracy and relevance of Maureen’s last words:”* and stand for the girls’ realization of the Afro-American condition of “otherness”.

In h): *“Jealousy we understood and thought natural-a desire to have what somebody else had; but envy was a strange new feeling for us”*, the contrast the girls perceive between one feeling and another is precise and shows that they are trapped in their own emotional instability.

The second discourse topic in this paradigm is the **counter – hegemonic issue** which is built up by stretches d), c), h), i) and j). In d): *“And what does that mean WE were lesser, nicer, brighter, but still lesser”*, the narrator describes and presents blackness from the hegemonic view point. The selection of comparative adjectives: *“lesser”, “nicer”, “brighter”, “but still lesser”*, shows how the narrator compares herself and her peers with people like Maureen. The social distance between these two exponents belonging to two different cultural groups is self-revealing. Next, the narrator expresses what they can do with the impotence of feeling lesser: *“Dolls we could destroy”* but they cannot stop the reproductive cycle of social hegemonic practices: *“the honey voices of parents and aunts, “the obedience in the eyes of her peers”, “the light in the eyes of teachers”*. Indeed, these social practices have an origin that the girls acknowledge: j) *“The Thing that makes her beautiful and not us”*. In other words, what they could not destroy is the matrix: cultural hegemony. Its reproductive effect perpetuates Western white standards for perceiving and judging people and reality. Constantly, the little girls know that Maureen does not deserve such an intense feeling i) *“And all the time we knew that Maureen Peal was not the Enemy and worthy of much intense hatred”*.

In stretch g): *“Guileless and without vanity, we were still in love with ourselves then we felt comfortable in our skins, enjoyed the news that our senses released to us, admired our dirt, cultivated our scars, and couldn’t comprehend this unworthiness”*, the narrator sustains the counter - hegemonic conception of beauty. It is important to remark the positive connotation she uses to support what they love from themselves and their culture: *“we were still in love with ourselves”, “felt comfortable with their skins”, “enjoyed the news the senses release to us” and “admire our dirt”*.

To conclude, the counter - hegemonic paradigm presents the importance of Afro-American idiosyncrasy and how this ethnic group manages “to survive” and “coexist”

within the white milieu. Moreover, it is significant to underline, that the girls enjoy their colour and feel at ease with their skins. Therefore, they could not understand their unworthiness. For being black is only alternative condition of existence in the world. Certainly, blackness as a race should not connote inferiority, but just another “way of being real”.

CONCLUSION

In the previous analysis, it has been clearly stated that ethnic issues and identity are constructs, groups of concepts and ideas, which are generated and reproduced through discursive practices. Discourse is viewed as a social practice, through which hegemonic tenets are perpetuated. The production, reproduction and consumption of these norms take place almost unnoticed. Common sense statements and generalizations create a conception of reality that convinces of the “true” nature of its predicaments. Consequently, in Maureen’s world, blackness is equated to ugliness, dirt and unworthiness, whereas, whiteness is synonym of beauty, perfection and truth.

On the contrary, for Pecola and Frieda, blackness is their ontological condition, so they accept it with love and devotion. Their intelligence allows them to become fully aware about the issue that bothers them. It is not only the binary opposition between black and white, but also what other subjects’ attitudes convey through their social practices. Moreover, Pecola and Frieda realize that there is a matrix, by means of which these practices become permanent. Thus, hegemony achieves its goal by letting white standards pervade the Afro-American mind. Indeed, Pecola’s imbalance originates in her adherence to the ideals of beauty proposed by Maureen. In other words her mind is colonized by white aesthetic principles.

In the statements that built up the hegemonic and counter-hegemonic paradigm, Toni Morrison romanticizes blackness and vilifies whiteness. These lines also involve a self-reflecting practice through which the Afro-American girls reach a moment of intense revelation, an epiphany. In spite of all the negative connotations that surround the concept of blackness, the little girls get to know about their hatred, jealousy, envy and the astonishing capacity to love themselves.

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APPENDIX

This disrupter of seasons was a new girl in school Maureen Peal. A high –yellow dream child with long brown hair braided into two lynch ropes that hung down her back. She was rich, at least by our standards, as rich as the richest of the white girls, swaddled in comfort and care. The quality of her clothes threatened to derange Frieda and me. Patent-leather shoes with buckles, a cheaper version of which we got only at Easter and which has disintegrated by the end of May. Fluffy sweaters the colour of lemon drops tucked into skirts with pleats so orderly they astounded us. Brightly coloured knee socks with white borders, a brown velvet coat trimmed in white rabbit fur, and a matching muff. There was a hint of spring in her sloe green eyes, something summery in her complexion, and a rich autumn ripeness in her walk.

She enchanted the entire school. When teachers called on her, they smile encouragingly. Black boys didn't trip her in the halls; white boys didn't stone her, white girls didn't suck their teeth when she was assigned to their work partners; black girls stepped aside when she wanted to use the sink in the girls' toilet, and their eyes genuflected under sliding lids. She never had to search for anybody to eat with in the cafeteria-they flocked to the table of her choice; where she opened fastidious lunches cut into four dainty squares, punk-frosted cupcakes, sticks of celery and carrots, proud, dark apples. She even brought and liked white milk...

...Safe on the other side, she screamed at us," *I am* cute! And you ugly! Black and ugly black e mos. *I am* cute! "She ran down the street, the green knee socks making her legs look like wild dandelion stem that had lost their heads. The weight of her remark stunned us, and it was a second or two before Frieda and I collected ourselves enough to shout...

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