
A Study on the Mainstream's Gaze in the Works from Margin

Banani Biswas

Lecturer, Department of English, Comilla University, Cell no:+88-01739217440,
E-mail: bbiswas_31engju@yahoo.com

Tasnima Aktar

Lecturer, Department of English, Comilla University, Cell no:+88-01710538758,
E-mail:tasnima_30ju@yahoo.com

* E-mail of the corresponding author: bbiswas_31engju@yahoo.com

Abstract

The imagery of 'eyeing', 'gazing' and 're-visioning' recurrently occur in the works of the writers who belong to the marginalized (in terms of race, sex, and class) communities. They examine their images in American literature and society as well and feel to re-construct identity that has so far been constructed in the 'gaze' of the mainstream. Their essential selves have been castrated and essentialized within some stereotypes by the racist and phallogocentric culture. So, after a long period of subjugation, they look back afresh with a view to gain sovereignty over their own sense of identity. This paper seeks to study those marginalized writers' view over the gazing process of the dominant groups. To pursue the study I have concentrated upon some works by the writers who belong to the marginalized communities in America. These are the novels, *The Native Son* (1940) by Richard Wright and *The Bluest Eye* (1970) by Toni Morrison, and some poems of Adrienne Rich. In their writings, each writer has explored the functioning of the mechanism of 'gaze' leading to the internalization of the hegemonic ideology and inferiority. Thus, they dismantle the dominant 'gaze' and reconstruct identity in a fictional world which result in en-visioning a new world to come.

Keywords: Gaze, Revision and Reconstruction of Identity, Mainstream, Marginalized in terms of Race and Sex, Ideology.

1. Introduction

From birth to death, we experience a world of binaries. The unequal dichotomy between races and sexes has divided it into specific power relations where a group of people finds their privileged positions as 'master', therefore, creates 'other' on the basis of bodily differences. Thus, the existential 'other'¹ of Jean Paul Sartre turns out to be the Freudian or Lacanian 'other'². This 'other' with small 'o' gains subjectivity in the 'gaze' of the 'Other'³ with capital 'O' who represents the dominant groups such as the White or the male parts of the society. So, the Blacks and the females, the marginalized communities, attain their identity as inferior 'other' in the 'gaze'⁴ of the dominant groups. This paper aims at to study how the writers from marginalized communities react towards the gazing process of the dominant culture that forms the mainstream culture. To pursue the study I have concentrated upon an era after 1940s when the marginalized writers started occupying an important space in the critical body of American literature. For my study I have selected the novels, *The Native Son* (1940) and *The Bluest Eye* (1970) by two Afro-American writers Richard Wright and Toni Morrison respectively, and some poems of the Jewish American poetess Adrienne Rich. In their novels, Wright and Morrison examine how the white ideology contributes to the psychic erosion of the Afro-Americans. The protagonists, Bigger Thomas and Claudia Macteer, are restless and adrift in the white American society to establish identity of their own assumptions. Again, Rich, in her poems, has explored the mechanisms of the 'male-gaze' and tried to re-construct the identity of the women as it was before being distorted by the phallogocentric ideology. So, each writer has directed his/her 'gaze' upon the gazing process of the mainstream. They examine their allotted positions in American society, and pry open a space in the critical models available for reconstructing identity and, rewriting the canon that result in en-visioning a new world to come.

In America, the act of writing for the marginalized communities itself becomes the reconstruction of identity. Numerous writers express their fear of their writings being unpublished and misinterpreted. Such as,

¹ That is not the 'self' and that makes assure the 'self', the subject 'I'.

² The 'self' in the mirror.

³ That is the colonial masters or the dominant groups.

⁴ The ideological mechanism of the dominant groups that constructs the identity of the marginalized people.

Richard Wright was anxious to portray the ‘authentic’ picture of the Negro as he says:

What will white people think if I draw the picture of such a Negro boy? Will they not at once say; ‘See, didn’t we tell you all along that niggers are like that? Now, look, one of their own kind has come along and drawn the picture for us!’ (Wright, 1940, p. XXI)

Tony Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* was also, as she said in the “Afterword” to the novel, “Dismissed, trivialized, misread” (Morrison, 1993, p. 172). Again, Barbara Smith and Helen Sexuous were afraid to write as the publishers might be reluctant. Adrienne Rich also faced the misinterpretation of being ‘lesbian’. The problem lies in the fact that whereas these writers examine the mechanism of their ‘being’, the American body of the critics guilefully justify that as ‘being’ overlooking the mechanism. Upto twentieth century, the Afro-Americans in the American literature were most commonly represented as either dangerous barbarians or as the embodiment of Rousseau’s idealized noble savage. Despite having the wide variety of indigenous culture they were most often depicted in monolithic terms; their differences elided in handful of stereotypes, that posits in the negative poles of the binaries. The women, on the other hand, were not considered as autonomous being. They were someone’s daughter, wife, or mother either romanticized or trivialized, justified as ‘imperfect man’⁵. So, there arose a heavy burden upon some intellectuals. They were being torned between the responsibility to re-construct the identity and the fear of being mis-interpreted. But their conscience overcame their suffocation and led to a volcanic outburst on the pages. So, in their writings the authentic ‘self’ comes out of the wreckage of the American culture.

2. The Native Son

The critical truism is that after the publication of *The Native Son* in 1940, America was aroused out of her contemptuous indifference to the Black writers. Wright’s work galvanized the readers with a new genre, the gritty social realist novel, which redefined the Afro-American literature and accordingly provided a template for ‘authentic’ work for the Black writers to come. It shows the world that in America the fate of the Negroes are pre-destined. They can only be the street-boys, committing all sorts of crimes and, therefore ending life in death penalty. The protagonist, Bigger Thomas, becomes the all-American symbol for the Negroes.

Here in the novel the ‘gaze’ of the mainstream functions as the ‘panopticon’⁶ and makes the blacks so conditioned that either they become blind or reacts in a violent way. Bigger follows this pattern on cue when he goes to Mr. Dalton’s house for a job. His knees are slightly bent; lips partly open, and his shoulders sloped. This very image is the image of an ape. Wright shows us how conditioned, subconsciously, Bigger is to play the ‘nigger’ role only because of the perennial assertion of the white world that blacks are actually a ‘little lower than brutal beasts’. No one has told him to act like this but ‘their manners had made him feel that’ (Wright, 1940, p. 50). This is the poison that the white ideology has poured into the psyche of the Blacks.

Wright explores how the ISA⁷ functions within American racism. The popular culture, as conveyed through films, magazines and newspaper, serves to the American racism constantly bombarding citizens with images and ideas that reinforce the nation’s oppressive racial hierarchy. They represent pictures of the Blacks determined by white ideology. In the Movie, “Trader Horn”, Blacks are represented as jungle beasts. Then, the newspaper presents Bigger Thomas as an ape, a rapist, a jungle beast, ‘untouched by the softening influence of modern civilization’ (Wright, 1940, p. 260). It is also one of the forces that lead to Bigger’s execution as the sensationalist press strips up a furor over his case in order to multiply its sale. Thus, it arouses the mob’s sentiment; they cries ‘kill that ape’, pointing to which Buckley, the state’s attorney, hurries up Bigger’s case and seeks the death penalty.

Wright, however, deconstructs the American consensus that essentialized the Blacks as violence. He unfolds the mechanism that makes the niggers violent. The conflict between what the society wants to see them and what they really are creates a sort of suffocation inside them that on a spur of moment finds outlet as violence. Bigger, though confirms the white ideology, inwardly refutes that. He burns with hate and pain. He has brought with him his gun. He has attempted to be a man, to be equal, but something inside him won’t let him be a man. The white has created ‘fear’ almost inborn, this is the fear of being killed anytime for no reason except that he is a ‘nigger’. If he could internalize the white assumptions of the Blacks, he did not feel violently.

Bigger’s life, indeed, demonstrates an alternative view presented by the American culture. He defines himself as the creator of his own fate and faces the complex task of his own worth. Once he recognizes the

⁵ Beauvoir, Simone de. (1949). “Introduction.” *The Second Sex*. ed. and trans H, M, Parshley. London: Vintage.

⁶ The white ideology that induces among the blacks a sense of constant surveillance and makes them behave as the cue.

⁷ Ideological State Apparatus.

accident murder is what he cherished for long, he takes its responsibility. If he acts, he may save his life; yet if tells what he has done, he might be a black-champion. A new kind of excitement thrills him. He wants to shout his accomplishments to the universe. He feels now that he is no longer conditioned by what white people think of him. He has created his own image. For the first time, he has become the 'master' who can see the things as they are. Drunken now with the power of creation, he feels himself as a 'man' not the 'nigger'. He no longer has to despair at being 'nobody' in a world filled with white 'somebody'. Raping and killing a white heiress from the world of white blur, he becomes his own god in a godless existence. So, he is no longer an ape as persistence by America.

In his world of extreme excitement, Bigger enjoys the reversal of power. Throughout his life, he has seen the whites that play God to the blacks. Now, he has done away with one of the whites and will play God to the whites. So, he writes a kidnap note. He is now a complete master, turns the whites blind, as they cannot even imagine that a 'nigger' could have planned and manipulated the random note idea, that he could secretly and sadistically manipulate the white detective and reports. It is in the repeated cross examinations and interrogations between Bigger and Britten that one sees a new and different picture of Bigger. With all of Briten's skill and power in tracking down 'nigger-criminals' he never really breaks through Bigger's alibi. Bigger may be caught up but what Wright is establishing is the 'nigger' are equally courageous and intelligent like the white people. They fail to exercise it, because when they put their first foot in America, they entered into an existing system where they are objectified. Through Bigger, Wright hints at the possibilities lies inside the blacks .

Wright's endeavour stretches merely reconstructing identity towards re-writing the canon. His estimate of the white people is reflected in his 'gaze' when he states 'he(Bigger) looked at Jan and saw a white face, but an honest'. And such a notion is born out of his first-hand experience in America. Bigger may die but Wright has his own way in warning the white world it is not the Bigger who is a 'bad nigger'; rather it is the American culture that needs to be opened for all people equally irrespective of sex, race, and class.

3. The Bluest Eye

Alike *The Native Son*, Tony Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* examines, the tragic effect of imposing white American standards on an Afro-American girl, Pecola, during the early 1940s. It poignantly shows the psychological devastation of a young girl who searches for love and acceptance in a world that denies and devalues people of her race. It implies what is suggestive in Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin White Mask* (1965), the corrupting power of the 'Other'. The black community sees itself as the image in the eyes of the 'Other'. The novel explores the functioning of the mechanism of 'gaze' leading to internalization of hegemonic ideology. Morrison is extremely repulsive towards this dominant 'gaze' and has left a subtle suggestions for the Afro- American to validate their own values in order to dismantle the society's allotted places for them.

The Dick-Jane mythology at the beginning of the novel is demonstration of how white ideologies are induced into the black people. It offers a model of all-American happy family membered by white people in comparison to which the Breedlove and other black families find their world ugly. Thus, it functions as a 'panopticon' and has significantly been established through the pedagogical system. The Dick-Jane primer is taken from a first-grade book used to teach children read. To read it is to internalize the ideology the book contains. The primer is repeated twice in a way the students memorize what they read. So, the very technique shows how the white ideology enters into one's consciousness and becomes one's consciousness. But Morrison's objectives do not end in merely projecting the mechanism of white 'gaze'. She always leaves a subtle suggestion to dismantle it. So, she dismembered the Dick-Jane mythology in the novel by negating the essentials features of the white world - the house, family, cat, mother, father, dog, and the friend.

Morrison's undertakings stretches from reconstructing identity towards rewriting canon. The white concept of beauty, the most fatalistic of all, has been redefined in her hands. She relates in the "Afterwords", "Beauty was not simply something to behold; it was something one could do"(Morrison, 1970, p.165). She explores physical features has nothing to do with beauty. It is the white ideology that has associated physical features of the whites with beauty, in comparison to which the black people find themselves ugly. Morrison cannot help declaring:

You looked at them and wondered why they were so ugly; you looked closely and could not find the source. Then you realize it comes from convictions. (Morrison, 1970, p. 28).

What she gives voice to is that the black people are ugly in so far they accept the white concept of beauty upon them.

Then, the question comes why, therefore, the black people are humbly caught by the white people. When the Africans came to America as slaves, the master had said "you are ugly people"(Morrison, 1970, p. 28) and looking around the American world, they found hundred of eyes nodding to this. So, they found nothing to contradict it. The Breedlove family "wore their own ugliness, put it or, so to speak, although it did not belong to

them” (Morrison, 1970, p. 28). They are brain-washed by the white eyes. These eyes are the popular culture and the disciplinary power that work in such an injecting way that United States itself becomes a mirror where the black people see their images not realizing distorted:

Adults, older girls, shops, magazines, newspaper, window sign-all the world had agreed that a blue eyed. Yellow- haired, pink-skinned doll was that every child treasured. Here, they said this is beautiful.... (Morrison, 1970, p. 14).

Then, the Media present Shirley Temples, Mary Jane, Greta Garbo, and Ginger Rogers as icons of beauty. It becomes more dangerous when Shirley Temples stands for the quality of milk. Morrison says:

The concept of physical beauty as a virtue is one of the dumbest, most pernicious and destructive ideas of the western world. (Morrison, 1970, p. 35)

School and hospital also contributes to these illusions. They become passive workforces of white ideology. School assures one luxurious life in future but black people in America go to school to accept white policy. They learn:

How to do white man’s work with refinement; home economics to prepare his food; teaching education to instruct black children in obedience; music to soothe the weary master and entertain his blunted soul. (Morrison, 1970, p. 64)

Hospital says black women are “just like horse and deliver baby right away with no pain” (Morrison, 1970, p. 97). It echoes Foucault’s view of medical practice in securing dominant ideology.

Morrison is very much subversive here in the novel. She presents the pain enduring capability of the black women to survive. When she gives birth, Pauline’s eyeballs loll back but she does not make hooping or hollering. Very much like Sisyphus, black women are “disinterested enough to accept the idea of pain while ignoring the presence of pain” (Morrison, 1970, p. 108). So, to see the image of the black people in the whites’ eyes is to see a misrepresentation.

Morrison is very critical of accepting an imposed identity as trying to internalize another’s values recounts madness. The eyes around Pecola Breedlove, makes her internalize white concept of beauty, which results in her losing sanity. At school, the teachers’ glances do not fall upon her. Even the black class-mates bully her “Black e mo Black e mo ya daddy sleeps naked,”(Morrison, 1970, p. 50). Morrison shows that the authentic black self is buried so deep in some of the black people that their perceptions of themselves amount to self-hatred. Geraldine, the middle class black , sees pecola as “nasty little black bitch”(Morrison, 1970, p. 72). Her ideology does not count Pecola as human. However, the horrible experience for Pecola is the casual glance of Mr. Yacobowski, which does not even acknowledge her presence. She is too ugly to him to be looked at. She is not seen at all. So, to feel her existence, she desperately craves for to be seen, craves for the bluest eye (which ‘beauty’ means to her) which will cast her ‘seeing’. This unattainable desire makes her desperate to the extent that she does not even protest when her father rapes her as She feels, at least, someone has thrown his ‘gaze’ upon her. But perhaps nobody has mental stamina to bear such an act. So, for Pecola it retreats into ‘schizophrenia’. Her ‘self’ gets a split. She creates an ‘alter-ego’ who will accept her and make her capable to feeling existence.

Claudia Macteer, the narrator of the novel, however, gives a different dimension. She questions the white concept of beauty and disfigures the white baby doll, part by part, to investigate what makes it beautiful. This act of dismembering the baby doll is indeed, her refusal of the white concept of beauty. It becomes clear when her resentment transfers to the white girls. She wants to beat Rosemary, to kick Maureen Peal; she hates Shirley Temple. Instead of accepting white ideology she embraces the ideology of her own black self. She negates the white ideology totally and prays for the safe delivery of Pecola’s baby fathered by her father. In a fictional world, She establishes a counter ‘gaze’ and achieves the power to ‘interpellate’ as she names Maurine Peal ‘six-finger-dog-tooth-meringue-pie’. She embodies the authorial voice. Examining the gazing of the mainstream, Morrison emerge as voice of her community that by only nurishing black values and culture they may attain their identity.

4. Adrienne Rich

Adrienne Rich also appeared as a subversive writer. The vision of her poetry is to reconstruct identity. This reconstruction requires a gazing process which embraces both what it sees and what it ought to see. So, her mission transgresses from making identity towards monitoring the patriarchal ‘gaze’. Her poem, “Aunt Jennifer’s Tiger” explores the structured condition of women with all its possibilities of challenging the patriarchal ‘gaze’ upon the women. Aunt Jennifer is mastered by Uncle’s ‘wedding band’. She is the archetype whose creative energies are spoiled by males’ desire to see the women in traditional roles like knitting. But surprisingly enough Aunt Jennifer portrays tigers prancing ‘across a screen in sleek chivalric certainty’, ‘proud and unafraid’ that embodies her inner impulse for freedom.

Then her “Knot” is, indeed, a battleground where male and female gazes confront. The whole poem is built upon

the imagery of 'eyeing' and counter 'eyeing'. 'I am eye' is used in the poem to guard the male construction. At first, Rich's seeing is connected with the subject 'I' that refers to subjective observation, which is dazzled by the 'metallic vision' of patriarchy. That is why, for the subjective 'I', Rich uses 'I never saw it'. But when the seeing is associated with the objective 'eye', it learns to see 'the knot of blood'-the politics and violation of all encompassing phallic power.

Then the "Orion" marks a transitional point when Rich resolves to get out of the society's gazing process. This time she looks with single-minded desire, 'with a star like eye' and confident-'cold and egotistical' to break the compassionate and social bondage. Now, she can recognize the 'spiritless pirate'-her inner spirit that has robbed her compassion and made her free. She sees the 'animus'-the logical part of rationality inside her and advances with it do reconstruct identity.

The decision that Rich takes in her "Orion" comes true in the "Diving into the Wreck". She starts a perilous journey to negate the patriarchal structure, to re-discover the 'reality'. She becomes an observer and discoverer. Her journey is to record the source of the origin, 'the wreck', the thing itself before being distorted by 'the story of the wreck', that is the conventional myth. At her venture she takes with her the books of sexual myth. She will discover the causes behind 'half-destroyed women' and this knowledge will drive her to reconstruct identity. But the ending of the poem offers no resolution as her new vision is still needs more experiences.

Rich's search for an identity becomes extensive in her Snap Sorts (1963) volume. In the poem "Double Monologue", she searches for a position in the universe, which she considered as her 'Mighty Object'. She is, yet, afraid of knowing the truth or the 'self' because it is not constructed by a single 'gaze' of male constructed society or by the philosophical idea-'know thyself', rather these are some sorts of obsessions and make traps to make the women asleep. It is politically, culturally and religiously made. So she is anxious the truth may be disappointing.

The expectation of what the women want to see becomes a challenge to them. As the existence needs 'seeing, reconstructing identity is half of the women's effort. So, she requires a third eye, an eye that can see with 'clarity'. The other half is to respond. The response she visualizes is 'anger' which hopefully may precede 'tenderness'. Thus, the third eye creates a dualism in the experience of the women, yet it is integral to the processes and a struggle of being female. It is just as the 'spider's genius/ to spin and weave in the same action from her own body, anywhere'(Rich, 1981, p. 92). This indivisibility of the polar opposite is part of Rich's subversive process. Identifying herself and other women who fall short of the nurturing ideal women, Rich transgressively restores to languages that which had been silenced and delegitimated within a patriarchal culture. To profoundly accept own split 'self' is to validate and to transform sensory experiencing self-esteem, sense of own power, the meaning of existence. This poem is remarkable in her mission of reconstructing identity.

5. Conclusion

So, from being formed within essentialist injunctions that insist that women's nature is to nurture, Women may now move from a position of disempowerment and self castigation towards a greater sense of integrity. A discursive shift has occurred that significantly permits new identification to be made, different position to be taken up, new inner and outer perspective to be considered, and thus a new future may become conceivable, and other potentials may be rendered possible. Rich deals with that power of the women which is to engender, to create, to bring forth fuller life, unlike the exploitative power of the males.

So, all these writers from the marginalized communities have dealt with the contents usually considered as taboo. They have searched for their authentic selves in existing literature but got disillusioned finding either a horrible vacuum of nothingness or a distorted version of their selves. They have spoken the 'unspoken' by the dominants. Thus, diving deep into their very 'being', they have moved the culture makers of America to rethink about whom they knew as 'bad nigger' or 'incomplete being'. Refuting the claims of the American culture, they not merely prove their worth but also subvert the literary power tradition of the mainstream.

And the 'new' tradition has strucked to the very core of the dominant ideology. Intruding into the mainstream American literature they deconstruct the ideology that literature so far has generated. After a long period of subjugation they aim at to gain sovereignty over their own sense of identity. The experience they experience at the hem of the American culture reflects the dirt of seemingly polished American culture. On the contrary, the representation of a black nigger raping a white girl, a black father fucking his daughter not only say what it costs to be black in racist, chauvinist America, but reinforce the goodesense of those non-white writers.

So, the mechanism of the mainstream 'gaze' explored in the works discussed above results, indeed, in a 're-vision'. It surpasses the process of deconstruction and reconstruction identity. Taking his own responsibility upon himself, Bigger Thomas becomes his own creator. He lives in a world of his own values. Claudia Macteer also embraces the ideology of her own black 'self'. By dismembering the white baby doll she dismantles the white beauty concept. Bigger and Claudia are, infact, symbolic - the figures who hold within them a prophecy.

They outline the action, the feeling and the power, which a racist, patriarchal world will encounter on vast scale in the days to come. Is Cholly Breedlove's search for a father throughout the novel and finally his vision of a 'black figure blotting the sun and setting ready to spilt open the world' (Morrison, 1970, p. 105), anything other than a subtle suggestion? The Negro who didn't have the right to vote in America, has cast votes. And the women who were considered as incomplete being are now controlling power of some states. Though the achievements are not complete, it is not less indeed. In their venture for reconstructing identity, these writers en-vision a world to come where every person, irrespective of race and sex, would be estimated by personal worth that American dream once assured.

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