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A SHATTERED WORLD: SUSAN ABULHAWA'S APPROPRIATION OF TONI MORRISON'S *THE BLUEST EYE* IN *THE BLUE BETWEEN SKY AND WATER*

Majd Alkayid

Assistant professor, Applied Science Private University. Amman, Jordan. m_alkayed@asu.edu.jo

Amal Riyadh Kitishat

Associate professor in Literature, Al-Balqa Applied University-Ajloun University College, Jordan.
Dr.amal.kitishat@bau.edu.jo

Murad Al Kayed

Al-Balqa Applied University, Salt, Jordan. murad.alkayed@bau.edu.jo

Abstract:

The purpose of this paper is to investigate how and why Susan Abulhawa is influenced by Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* and how she appropriates it particularly in her representation of the character Nur as a subverted version of Morrison's character; Pecola. Both novels expose the traumas of rejection, humiliation, sexual abuse and oppression and make a statement about the damage that these traumas can do to the most vulnerable members of society; young girls. Abulhawa rewrites the passive and schizophrenic Pecola into the stronger and more independent Nur. She rewrites *The Bluest Eye*'s characterization, themes and tropes to challenge, subvert and resist the canonical narrative of Morrison. While Morrison dramatizes the trauma of racism and oppression of whites against blacks in America, Abulhawa dramatizes the trauma of racism and oppression of Israelis against Palestinians in Palestine. The study explains these issues depending on Harold Bloom's theory of anxiety of influence.

Key words: appropriation, anxiety of influence, Morrison, Abulhawa

抽象的 :

本文的目的是调查苏珊·阿布哈瓦如何以及为何受到托妮·莫里森的《最蓝的眼睛》的影响，以及她如何将其特别是在她将角色努尔描绘成莫里森角色的颠覆版本时加以利用；佩科拉。这两部小说都揭露了拒绝、羞辱、性虐待和压迫的创伤，并阐述了这些创伤对社会中最脆弱的成员可能造成的伤害；年轻的女孩们。阿布哈瓦将被动和精神分裂的佩科拉改写为更强大、更独立的努尔。她重写了《最蓝的眼睛》的人物塑造、主题和比喻，以挑战、颠覆和抵制莫里森的经典叙事。莫里森戏剧化了美国白人对黑人的种族主义和压迫的创伤，而阿布哈瓦

戏剧化了以色列人在巴勒斯坦对巴勒斯坦人的种族主义和压迫的创伤。该研究根据哈罗德·布鲁姆的影响焦虑理论解释了这些问题。

关键词：挪用，影响焦虑，莫里森，阿布哈瓦

1. Introduction:

The Bluest Eye tells the story of the eleven-year-old black Pecola who longs for blue eyes because she believes that if she has blue eyes she will be loved and respected by others. She is rejected and humiliated by her schoolmates, teachers and neighbours because she is black and ugly. This bad treatment and her father's rape that impregnate her worsen her sense of ugliness, depression and weakness. These traumatic experiences lead to her isolation, madness and schizophrenia. The narrator, Claudia, and her sister plant seeds of marigold believing that if they germinate, Pecola's baby will be born in a good health. However, the baby dies prematurely, and they start to blame the community/earth itself because this soil "is bad for certain kinds of flowers." (p. 204) Through Pecola, Morrison exposes the trauma of shame and self-contempt among black people that result from White Americans' discrimination, violence and racism. The young girl Pecola leads a very difficult life of humiliation, abuse and rejection. Morrison clarifies that black people hate the blackness of their bodies because the color of their skin make whites experience physical and psychological violence and racism against them. As a result, blacks take this hatred out on their children. Accordingly, Pecola's mother, Pauline, leaves her children and her house most of the time in order to serve a white family. The father, Cholly, also escapes from his traumatic experiences of racism through drinking and fighting with his wife. His frustration and shame result in raping and impregnating his own daughter. Therefore, the cruelty that Pecola goes

through makes her hopelessly desire blue eyes. Tragically, her wish is only achieved in her imagination or madness.

The Blue Between Sky and Water gives a clear vision of communal political and personal trauma. It tells the story of the Palestinian and Israeli conflict and dramatizes the suffering of Palestinian refugees and emigrants. The novel centres on the Baraka's family who are forced to leave their village Beit Daras in 1948 for a refugee camp in Gaza. Some of the Barakas, Mamdouh's family, immigrate to America and others stay in Gaza as refugees. Most of the novel revolves around Nur, Mamdouh's granddaughter, who is born in America. Nur, like Morrison's Pecola, goes through a traumatic experience of rape, rejection, isolation and displacement in America. She returns to Gaza to live with her aunt Nazmiyah and her family. Nur has an affair with Jamal and gets pregnant.

2. Analysis:

In *Anxiety of Influence*, Bloom employs Freudian terminology to discuss two motivations or drives to explain the theory of influence. The first drive concerns the desire to imitate the precursor's art from which the poet first learnt what poetry is. The second concerns the desire to be original and creative rather than imitating others. According to Bloom, poets imitate previous literature but they rewrite, transform and reform this literature in new ways in order to give an illusion that their writing is not influenced by any other source. He argues that "a poet antithetically 'completes' his precursor, by so reading the parent-poem as to retain its terms but to mean them in another sense." (p. 14) He emphasizes that "the precursor

poem went accurately up to a certain point, but then should have swerved, precisely in the direction that the new poem moves.” (p. 14) Moreover, a text is “a relational event” and the intertext is a product of the anxiety of influence. (Allen, p. 133) Therefore, this paper attempts to expose the intertextual relationships between Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* and Abulhawa’s *The Blue Between Sky and Water*. The latter novel is an appropriation of the previous one “to respond and write back to an informing original from a new or revised political and cultural position.” (Sanders, p. 98)

Abulhawa rewrites Morrison’s Pecola who is rejected by her mother, and raped by her father. As a young girl, Nur is also rejected by her mother, who is always cruel to her. After the death of Nur’s grandfather, the mother refuses to take her “until we get the trust.” (p. 81) She “had little interest in her daughter, claiming to be financially unable to care for Nur.” (p. 98) The mother is extremely cruel to her daughter ignoring her needs and pains. She does not listen or talk to her except when she rebukes her. This maternal rejection and her loneliness make her feel like being “an old shoe. The lurking thing inside her.” (p. 93) Tragically, this little girl is raped for many times by Sam, her step-father. However, unlike Pecola, she reacts and defends her self. She tells Nzinga, her friend from the Social Services, that the one who hurts her is Sam. She does not only tell what happens in words, but she also draws what Sam did to her. After that, Nur has to keep moving from foster family to another. This is similar to Pecola when she has to stay with another family after her father has burnt their house.

Pecola is harassed by “a group of boys [who] was circling and holding at bay a victim.” (Morrison, p. 63) What she is able to do is only

crying and covering her eyes with her hands. Abulhawa rewrites this scene when Nur is “always being the new kid who either got bullied or who made friendships that were torn like paper in short order.” (Abulhawa, p. 100) The novelist challenges and deviates from Morrison’s narrative when she lets Nur go on in her life, make friends, thrive at school, graduate from college and become a psychotherapist “helping teens confront histories of rape, incest, abuse, neglect, drug use and inconceivable traumas.” (p. 163) Therefore, Nur becomes a stronger person who helps abused children, like her, to overcome their traumas. Her strength is based on her belief in hope. In her memory, she always thinks about a song from her childhood: “Hope is not a topic, / It’s not a theory. / Its’s a talent.” (p. 171)

When Cholly impregnates his daughter, the whole society (except for the narrator Claudia and her sister Frieda) wants the death of the baby. It dies when it is prematurely born. In Abulhawa’s novel, Nur is impregnated out of the maternal lock by Jamal. Her aunt Nazmiyah and Alwan tell her that she cannot have this baby because society does not accept a child from adultery. Later on, they tell her that they want the baby but they have to make up a story that the child is adopted or that Nur has married someone. Unlike Pecola, Nur challenges her society and decides to keep the baby. She wants to overcome her trauma of the rejection of her mother. She finds out that the best way to do that is through “a commitment to being the kind of mother I always wanted to have myself.” (p. 274) She admits that “I have no choice but to have and love this baby, no matter what it means.” (*Ibid*) Her understanding of life and desire to love and be loved are the ways through which she becomes a strong and independent person. She wants to be a mother because “I want someone to

love who will love me back. Someone who is mine. Not in the owning way, but in the spiritual way.” (p. 269) Therefore, Abulhawa rewrites and subverts the silent and passive Pecola in creating Nur, a strong and independent person. Appropriation has “a joint political and literary investment in giving voice to those characters or subject-positions they perceive to have been oppressed or repressed in the original.” (Sanders, p. 98) She rewrites the story of oppression in a different political and social context.

A symbol that is employed by both novelists and emphasized in their novels' titles is the color “blue”. In Morrison's novel, it is a symbol of beauty according to white standards. Therefore, the color blue is the only refuge or peace for a black girl like Pecola. She believes that if she has blue eyes, she can be beautiful and therefore she can be respected, loved and accepted by her society. The color blue is her refuge. Likewise, Abulhawa employs this symbol to emphasize the spiritual refuge for the characters. It is associated with people's wishes as “imbuements of blue were the norm when people prayed ... yellow and blue were sincere and content.” (p. 8) Moreover, it is a spiritual space where Khalid (Nazmiyah's grandson) enters into his coma-like condition. It is “a quiet place of refuge, deep inside him. A place of blue.” (p. 150) Blue is also a symbol of the mysterious and sad memory of the characters. Nazmiyah, Alwan and Nur look at and contemplate the blue sea to express their sadness, feelings and secrets. The blue is a place where they find peace and refuge.

Another symbol depicted by both novelists is the eyes. Both novels portray eyes as something unusual, unnatural or different. It is unnatural for the black Pecola to have blue eyes. She longs for the unnatural blue eyes to be

beautiful according to the standards of white community. Like Morrison's criticism of these standards, Abulhawa/ Nazmiyah questions white's beauty saying, “I don't know why Allah made them so pretty with yellow hair and such... maybe to offset the badness in their hearts.” (Abulhawa, p. 138) She emphasizes that real beauty is not the color of one's skin or eyes; beauty is something that has to do with the inside; their hearts. Moreover, Morrison and Abulhawa use eyes to highlight the issues of racism and oppression. The first writer dramatizes the trauma of racism and oppression of whites against blacks in America, while the latter dramatizes the trauma of racism and oppression of Israelis against Palestinians in Palestine. Pecola, with her imagined distinctive blue eyes, represents many black children who are abused and oppressed by both black and white society. On the other hand, Mariam, Nur's aunt, has distinctive and unusual eyes that one is green and the other is brown. She is a young girl who is killed mercilessly by Israeli soldiers during their attack on Beit Daras. The distinctive Mariam with unusual eyes represents many Palestinian children who were killed by Israel. Having eyes with the same colors of her aunt's eyes, Nur is another type or symbol of the exiled Palestinians. She represents “how to be alone in the world without a family or a clan or land or country.” (p. 89) The exiled is a person who “must live at the mercy of others.” (*Ibid*) Abulhawa adds that “there are those who might take pity and those who will exploit and harm.” (*Ibid*) Nur's unique eyes make her a symbol of the dislocated and exiled person who “lives by the whims of the host, rarely treated with the dignity of a person.” (*Ibid*)

Plants are depicted by both novelists as symbols and themes of hope and rootedness.

Morrison's narrator, Claudia, and her sister associate the marigolds they plant with the safety and well-being of Pecola's baby. They believe that if the marigolds grow, Pecola's baby will be alright. However, the flowers do not germinate, and they think that "the land of the entire country was hostile to marigolds." (p. 204) This indicates the society's refusal of accepting a baby to be born out of incest. The death of the marigold seeds symbolize the death of the baby as well as the death of any possibility that White people will accept and treat black people as human beings. At that time, the land/ community refuses any hope of peace between blacks and whites.

In Abulhawa's novel, trees are depicted mainly to emphasize characters' sense of hope, rootedness and patriotism to their land, Palestine. The book begins with a vivid description of the village of Beit Daras that is "surrounded by gardens and olive groves." (p. 7) Because olive trees live for many years in the hardest conditions, they symbolize Palestinians' attachment to the land and their resistance to Israeli aggression. These trees that live and bear fruit for thousands of years parallels Palestinian history of rootedness to the land. To emphasize Nur's connectedness to her homeland, Abulhawa describes her as a tree because "her legs looked like tree trunks." (p. 195) Although Nur is displaced by living in America, she returns to her roots, Palestine, to live with her aunt Nazmiyah and her family. Moreover, as a symbol of resistance, trees are connected with Mazen, Nazmiyah's oldest son. When Israeli soldiers come to arrest him for plotting against the state, he resists and they "had difficulty dragging him away, as if his feet had spread roots in the ground." (p. 63) He is described as a tree and his feet as roots deeply planted in the ground. This metaphor is used as a testimony of the strength

of Palestinian resistance and their legitimate right of owning their land because they, like trees, are an integral part of the land.

Abulhawa associates the green and fertile land with Palestinians. On the other hand, Israeli existence on the Palestinian land is associated with the destruction and burning of trees. When they come to Beit Daras, plants are burnt and "the forest was engulfed in flames, swallowing homes to the north." (p. 31) Therefore, Israel's destruction of nature means that they are not a part of the land. Their existence in Palestine is destructive and unnatural because it is not their land; they robbed it from the Palestinians.

Palestinian honorable resistance, determination and hard work are also depicted through the description of the beekeeper's widow. She plants a small garden in the refugee camps and "picked the fruits of her labor for cooking, making herbal remedies and bartering." (p. 47) She is a symbol of the motherland Palestine. She prepares her delicious meals for the refugees, cooking "in cumin, cinnamon and allspice and sprinkled with brown pine nuts over a bed of rice, heaps of rolled grape leaves and stuffed zucchini; various salads; *mezze*; and cucumber in yogurt sauce with mint and garlic." (p. 50) Her food is very delicious because "she cooks with her heart." (p. 50) In addition, she is the one who helps sick people by giving them traditional herbal remedies or what she calls "our own Arab medicine." (p. 244) She uses marijuana leaves as a herbal remedy to many people like Alwan, who suffers from cancer. The beekeeper's widow believes that hashishah/marijuana is created by Allah and that "He put it in your life to heal your body." (p. 254) Therefore, her life revolves around the land and its plants, and "her days were spent digging, planting, harvesting and cooking. And when she

slept, she took the earth with her, under her nails and between her toes.” (p. 243) To sum up, the beekeeper’s widow represents the land of Palestine, with its fruitfulness, goodness, generosity and love for its people.

Moreover, to depict the connectedness of people with the land, Abulhawa describes women’s traditional clothes. Nazmiyah, like other Palestinian women, wears “a traditional fallahi black thobe, embroidered in fine patterns with the rose, olive, and lemon colors of the land ... [it] gave her a quality of maternal generosity.” (p. 173) For these people, trees and plants are food, clothes, remedy, trade and a whole way of life.

Having an imaginary friend is depicted by Morrison and Abulhawa. In *The Bluest Eye*, Pecola talks to her imaginary friend about her imagined beautiful blue eyes. In *The Blue Between Sky and Water*, Mariam, Nazmiyah’s young sister, has an imagined friend called Khalid. He is also Nazmiyah’s grandson and a narrator of the novel. In Morrison’s novel, Pecola’s friend is only a passive listener. However, Abulhawa’s depiction of Khalid is very functional for having a supernatural power that teaches Mariam to read and write. He is a benevolent spirit that accompanies Baraka family through many generations. Like Morrison’s supernatural friend of Pecola, Abulhawa uses the supernatural to emphasize the spirituality of Palestinians and the right of owning their usurped land. For example, the jinni Sulayman talks to Om Mamdouh and later on he helps the people of Beit Daras in defending their land against the Israeli attacks. Om Mamdouh’s connectedness with Sulayman makes her a very powerful and respected woman. When the chosen *mukhtars* come to her to ask about the plans of the Jews, she, with the help of

Sulayman, predicts that they “will spill the blood of the Bedrawasis of Beit Daras... [and] you will fight and you will live, but some of your brothers and sons will fall, yet that will not be the end. More Jews will return and the skies will rain death.” (p. 23-24)

Moreover, in Morrison’s novel, Pecola’s mother walks with “a crooked, archless foot that flopped when she walked.” (p. 108) This deformity increases racist acts against her. Her schoolmates, family and other people look down on her. This worsens her trauma of oppression for being ugly and “her general feeling of separateness and unworthiness she blamed on her foot.” (p. 109) On the other hand, Abulhawa employs the injured leg of Mamdouh to dramatize Israeli violence during their attack on Beit Daras:

The bullet to his leg during the Naqba had hit his growth plate, stopping it from growing, while the other had stretched on several centimeters more, warping his gait and making his movements awkward.” (p. 49)

Accordingly, Mamdouh’s injured leg highlights Israel’s destructiveness, inhumanity and violence against Palestinians.

3. Conclusion:

To conclude, both novelists, Morrison and Abulhawa, dramatize the shattered world and present the traumas of racism and occupation respectively. Abulhawa rewrites Morrison’s characterization, themes and tropes and deviates from the canonical narrative to draw on the destructiveness and violence of Israeli occupation of Palestine. Like Morrison, Abulhawa writes her novels because she believes

in the power of stories. For her, “stories matter... [and] we are composed of our stories. The human heart is made of the words we put in it.” (p. 69) Therefore, the novel tells the story of Palestine and the struggle of its people.

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