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A Psychological Reading of The Problem of the Black in John Steinbeck's *Of (Mice and Men)*

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Abstract

The present paper applies Fanon Psychological reading of the problem of the Black introduced in his book *Black Skin White Mask* to Crooks, The black Character in John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*. The analysis of this character infers three essential points regarding the artistic achievement of the author. First, he uses a fictional character that offers a psychological interpretation of the black problem of alienation and loneliness in a way that does not disgrace the black. Second, he applies Fanon's way of showing the various attitudes that the black adopts in contact with the white society. Third, he affirms that the black inferiority complex comes as a result of double process: economic and the internalization of this complex.

Keywords: alienation, Fanon, psychological impact, racism, segregation.

1. Introduction

The paper attempts a psychological study to the black character Crooks in John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*. It aims at analyzing the character in terms of Fanon's psychological reading of the problem of the black and racism. Racial discrimination was a reality in the American Society and was not illegal during the 1930s. It is as old as the first encounter between the cruel English masters and the Africans who were cruelly taken off their lands, separated from their families, societies, religions, languages and cultures, and sent as slaves to a new land where they were supposed to be no more than a shadow of their white masters. The African Americans or the Negroes or the colored or the blacks had no identity of their own. Violence was the means used by the whites to subdue the blacks and put them within a social frame of limitation in a society that pays no sort of any welcome of their part in it (Chace & Collier, 1970, p.v).

Racialism as a term refers to the unequal power relations that grow from the sociopolitical domination of one race by another one. In other words, to be a racist is to be in a position that enables someone to segregate, dominate, or persecute someone else. People of color who are subjected to the psychological programming of the racist society believe in their inferiority and the white superiority. They usually tend to consider themselves less attractive, less worthwhile, and less capable (Tyson, 2006, pp.360-362). The American society has fostered cemented feelings of inadequacy among the African Americans as a whole. The white masters developed certain doctrines and scientific theories especially designed to enhance the blacks' feelings of inferiority. H. Bruce Franklin sheds light on that matter "in 1830, there emerged in America a worldview based on the belief that the Blacks

were inherently a race inferior to whites and...being half ways between animals and white people” (2007, p. 528) .

2. The problem of the black to Frantz Fanon

According to Frantz Fanon, in every civilized and civilizing country, the Negro is the symbol of sin. The archetype of the lowest values is represented by the Negro. He Believes that:

the black man is the symbol of evil...The torturer is the black man, Satan is black, one talks of shadows, when one is dirty one is black—whether one is thinking of physical dirtiness or of moral dirtiness. It would be astonishing, if the trouble were taken to bring them all together, to see the vast number of expressions that make the black man the equivalent of sin. In Europe, whether concretely or symbolically, the black man stands for the bad side of character. As long as one cannot understand this fact, one is doomed to talk in circles about the “black problem”. Blackness, darkness, shadow, shades, night, the labyrinths of the earth, abysmal depths, blacken someone’s reputation; and, on the other side, the bright look of innocence, the white dove of peace, magical, heavenly light (2008, pp.145-146).

Skin color in Europe, according to Fanon, has been the trait that decides the goodness or the evil in Man. When one is black, one is bad, and when one is white skinned, one is good. Similarly, such racial notions, in USA, have been the reasons behind creating great damaging effects on the African

Americans. The black skin of the black has been the direct cause behind creating poor health, different mental and mood disorders including hallucinations, delusions and impairment of judgment.

3. Discussion

John Steinbeck (1902-1968) is an American author of German descent. He discusses the theme of racism with all its damaging effect in his novella *Of Mice and Men* (1937). The story that takes place during the Great Depression talks about George Milton and Lennie Small. They are two migrant ranch workers moving from the town of Weed to another town near the Salinas River, a few miles south of Soledad in California, hoping to find a job at the town ranch. They are both dressed the same way, in Denim trousers and coats, black hats and carrying blanket rolls over their shoulders. They are so much the opposite. George is “small and quick, dark of face, with restless eyes and sharp, strong features” (Steinbeck, 1978, p.2). Everything of his physical traits reflects his smartness. While Lennie Small is his opposite in everything with his shapeless huge face, large eyes and sloping shoulders. The relationship between the two men is reflected through their interactions: George takes care of Lennie, who despite his huge body is childlike and mentally handicapped. He constantly reminds him of the instructions he gives, for Lennie forgets everything but the things George says. He forgets even his misbehavior, which can be dangerous and fatal. When they start working at the ranch, Lennie, by mistake enters the room of Crooks, the black stable man.

Crooks, the black stable man, is the best representative of all the African – Americans subjected to the acts of racism. If Lennie is mentally handicapped, Crooks, in addition to his skin color, is physically handicapped.

His body is bent to the left because of his spine that is injured when a horse has kicked his back. Lynn considers Crooks' physical disability an introduction of a complexity regarding the genesis of his psychological damage — a psychic wound that may be interpreted either as a symbol for crippling restrictions of his color or as a nonracial excuse for his isolation. While every character in *Of Mice and Men* is portrayed as damaged by the loneliness, hardship, and disappointment forced on them by economic and social circumstances, Crooks, rejected even by others in the same position, stands out as perhaps the loneliest of them all (2015, p.152). When Crooks finds out that Lennie is not smart, he allows him to enter his room, and even starts to tell him the story of his life:

I aint a sothern negro , “ he said” I was born right here in California. My old man had a chicken ranch, ’bout ten acres. The white kids come to play at our place, ’an sometimes I went to play with them, and some of them was pretty nice. My ol’man didn’t like that. I never knew till long later why he didn’t like that. But I know now.”He hesitated, and when he spoke again his voice was softer. “There wasn’t another colored family for miles around. And Now there ain’t a colored man on the ranch (Steinbeck,1978,p.70).

Fanon considers the family a ‘psychic object’. In every civilized country, the family represents a piece of a nation. When a child encounters the outside society, he finds the same laws, the same principles and the same values. A normal white child brought up in a normal family would grow up into a normal adult, for there is no difference between the life of the family and that of the nation or the outside world. On the other hand, a normal black child grows up in a normal black family, would become abnormal at the slightest

contact with the outside white world. The abnormality of the blacks is considered psychic trauma in which the black child is exposed to a series of disastrous, painful events similar and repetitive (2008, pp.109-111). Fanon's psychological criticism of racism is best applied to Crooks. In the extract above, the black adult Crooks remembers the black child Crooks. This black child used to live in what he has considered a happy normal environment with what has seemed to him a happy normal black family. He used to enjoy the company of the white playmates, but, as a child, he could never comprehend why his father never liked his companionship with the white children. It is only when the black child grows up into a black adult and encounters the white world that he grasps the true reason behind that. Being black explains everything and causes his alienation from the white society due to his skin color barrier imposed on him by this same white society. The first encounter with this white society turns him into abnormal Crooks in accordance with the rules, values and principles of the whites. Fanon believes that "one can hear the glib remark: The Negro makes himself inferior. But the truth is that he is made inferior" (2008, p. 115).

In chapter four *Of Mice and Men*, The author presents a description of Crooks's room, a place where he has spent most of his life and where he is going to spend the rest of his life .It is the only territory where he can enjoy his own true self and real pride:

For being alone, Crooks could leave his things about, and being a stable buck and a cripple, he was more permanent than the other men, and he had accumulated more possessions than he could carry on his back. Crooks possessed several pairs of shoes, a pair of rubber boots, a big alarm clock and a single –barreled shotgun. And

he had books; too; a tattered dictionary ...there were battered magazines and a few dirty books on a special shelf over his bunk (Steinbeck,1978, pp. 66-67).

Crooks's room is a masterpiece of understatement, and its very nature shows how different, alone, and alienated he is, something that represents the damaging effect of the racism practiced on him. Crooks is segregated not only by the authority of the ranch where he works, represented by the boss and his son, but also by the other ranch workers. Crooks's room is a room for one man; his possessions scattered and accumulated around him on the floor, because, unlike the other migrant ranch workers at that time who tend to move from one ranch to another, Crooks is to stay in his job. His permanent stay at the ranch is not of his choice, but rather imposed on him by what he earlier has considered a normal white society. As a black ranch worker, who believes in his inferiority and the superiority of the other white ranch workers who are accustomed to change their job during that period of the Great depression, he knows that he will not find a job elsewhere because of his color; hence, he has to stay alone, segregated and persecuted:

May be you can see now. You got George. You know he's going to come back. S'pose you didn't have no body. S'pose you couldn't go into the bunk house and play rummy' Cause you was black. How 'd you like that? S'pose you had to sit out there an' read books. Sure you could play horseshoe till it got dark, but then you got to read books. Books ain't no good. A guy needs somebody ___to be near him (Steinbeck,1978,p.72).

Crooks shares, may be for the first time, his agonies and feelings of loneliness with a white person, Lennie. In the extract above, he explains how different and isolated he is, both physically and psychologically, from other ranch workers. His alienation, separation and loneliness imposed on him by the white society due to racial discrimination culminate in sickness:

A guy sets alone out here at night, maybe readin' books or thinkin' or stuff like that. Sometimes he gets thinkin', an' he got nothing to tell him what's so an' what ain't so. Maybe if he sees somethin', he don't know whether it's right or not. He can't turn to some other guy and ask him if he sees it too. He can't tell. He got nothing to measure by. I seen things out here. I wasn't drunk. I don't know if I was asleep. If some guy was with me, he could tell me I was a sleep, an' then it would be all right. But I jus' don't know (Steinbeck, 1978, p.73).

Crooks's loneliness, alienation and physical as well as mental separation from others manifest themselves in hallucinations that involve seeing, hearing or feeling things that are not real. Mentally sick or "psychotic" people, as referred to by psychiatrists, are often diagnosed as to have severe mood disturbances that include hallucinations of various forms: visual, olfactory and auditory. Visual hallucinations include seeing things that do not exist like ghosts and spirits. Olfactory hallucinations include smelling things that are not real, while auditory hallucinations involve hearing voices that other people do not hear. Crooks tells Lennie that sometimes while he is alone, as usual, he can see and hear things but the problem is that he is not sure of what he sees and hears. He lacks the proper method by which he can decide whether he is hallucinating or not. Having someone nearby at such

specific moments of his probable hallucinations is necessary to decide that he is mentally disordered or not. Social relations, in his case, are considered a means through which he can measure his mental health. Crooks's alienation is what Richard E. Hart considers the result of the economic system of slavery and social injustice based solely on race (2004,pp.39-42) .

Crooks employs a passive coping strategy as a reaction to the act of racism represented by the various forms of harassment imposed on him. He chooses to avoid all the possible violent humiliation he would encounter if he keeps on changing his work environment. He prefers to stay in his room at the stable alone and alienated rather than leaves and faces racial discrimination due to his skin color. He keeps himself safe of all the possible traumas that a black man could face at that time.

Avoidance, according to Lois Tyson, is one of the passive coping strategies a man may employ to answer racism. It could be defined as staying away from all that are liable to make one anxious through stirring up certain unconscious, repressed emotions or experiences (2006,p.15). In the case of Crooks, as in the case of all the African-Americans during the Great Depression, avoidance is not always possible. When he tries to shut Curley's wife out of his room for annoying him with her sexual reference with Lennie, she stands as the wife of the son of the boss, the sole authority of the ranch. She threatens him with all kinds of humiliation that any colored man may experience, like getting him hung up on a tree. Being the representative of the legitimate power that is authorized to practice racism, she knows that she can hurt him and he knows that her white skin authorizes her to do that. So, he "reduced himself into nothing. There was no personality, no ego__nothing to arouse either like or dislike" (Steinbeck,1978,p. 81) . He once again retreats into himself like a snail into its shell. Hart suggests that the scourge

of racism has exacted its full toll, leaving him a man reduced to nothingness. The mental beating he has absorbed makes him stranger even to himself. The only right he has to proclaim is his right to have his own protected space, to be totally alone, rejected by everyone. What may appear in his autonomy is a defense against chronic loneliness and illness. A proud man is left with nothing to be proud of except his own isolation (2004 ,pp.41-42).

Like Lennie who is so eager to confine himself to his dream ranch where he would enjoy the sun and be protected of others' hurt and harassment, and unlike Lennie who confines himself to a Utopian world of justice and protection, Crooks , as a realistic man, who knows that such an ideal, heaven-like world does not really exist but in man's head, confines himself to the only possible real world where he is not threatened, even partially, by any danger caused by the world of the white man , that is his room at the stable. He tries only once to step the barrier he or the white man society imposed on him. The result is a psychologically damaging threat. Crooks knows and accepts his position in life and as a way of compensation for the loss of company, he tries to create a world of his own in which he confines himself only to reading, a world that is partially safe, and may include every now and then hallucinations of all types. Yet, it is enough for him to avoid the feelings of being abnormal in a world he once considered normal.

4. Conclusion

Considering Fanon's psychological reading of the Negro, the following points can thus be concluded: Crooks is a Negrophobic man, a neurotic person who has some anxious fear with mood disorders and an inferiority complex. Crooks phobia does not come out of nothing. It exists somewhere at the root of his world that considers color the condition of freedom. When

he describes George's and Lennie's dream ranch a notion that exists only in the imagination of men, he is actually acting as phobic personality that, by nature, is governed by the laws of rational prelogic, a method of thinking brings back the experience that impaired his sense of security and rendered him alienated. His probable delusions come as a result of that alienation. His inferiority complex is the outcome of his internalization of this inferiority because of all acts of discriminations imposed on him including estrangement, deprivation and separation.

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قراءة نفسية لمشكلة السود في رواية جون شتاينبك فئران ورجال

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خلاصة البحث

يدرس البحث قراءة فانون النفسية لمشكلة السود في كتابه الموسوم (بشرة سوداء قناع ابيض) ويقوم بتطبيقها على شخصية الرجل الاسود كروكس في رواية جون شتاينبك (فئران ورجال). تستدل الدراسة النفسية للشخصية على ثلاث نقاط اساسية تتعلق بالابداع الفني للروائي. تتمثل الاولى بأستعماله لشخصية خيالية تحتمل التحليل النفسي وتبين الاسباب الحقيقية الكامنة وراء معاناة الرجل الاسود من العزلة والوحدة اذ يتناول الكاتب المشكلة بطريقة تحفظ للرجل الاسود هيئته من دون المساس بكرامته. اما الثانية فتتمثل بأستعمال الروائي قراءة فانون النفسية في سبر اغوار الشخصية والاساليب المتنوعة التي اعتمدها للتعايش في مجتمع البيض. وتتلخص الثالثة بتأكيد الكاتب في روايته على ان شعور الرجل الاسود بالدونية ينبع من سببين مزدوجين احدهما العوز المادي الذي عانى منه السود في تلك المدة الزمنية ويتمثل الثاني باستبطانه لمفهوم الدونية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: العزلة، فانون، الاثر النفسي، العنصرية، الاضطهاد.