

Virginia Hamilton's *The magical adventures of Pretty Pearl* (1983): a narrative of blacks' history in America

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Abstract: The present essay examines Virginia Hamilton's *The Magical Adventures of Pretty Pearl* (1983) as a chronicle of the history of the African Americans in the American society. It contends that Blacks' contribution to the American history overpasses their purported passiveness due to the overwhelming yoke of the institution of slavery. For a rigorous study of Blacks' contribution in the American history, the trauma theory has been used to give away the impacts of historical and cultural trauma that weigh on the Black people in America. For the same objectives, a postmodern reading has been applied in this work so as to reveal the silenced stories that contradict the Eurocentric metanarratives and its totalizing discourses on Blacks. Through these readings, it has been demonstrated that the history of the African Americans on the American soil has started as a truncated history and they are still going through unceasing struggles to be rehabilitated and to live as whole citizens.

Keywords: African Americans, historical trauma, cultural trauma, metanarratives, cultural redefinition

***The Magical Adventures of Pretty Pearl* (1983) de Virginia Hamilton: un récit de l'histoire des Noirs en Amérique**

Résumé : Le présent article examine l'œuvre *The Magical Adventures of Pretty Pearl* (1983) de Virginia Hamilton comme une chronique de l'histoire des Afro-Américains dans la société américaine. Il soutient que la contribution des noirs dans l'histoire américaine surpasse leur prétendue passivité dû au joug écrasant de l'institution de l'esclavage. Pour une étude rigoureuse de la contribution des noirs dans l'histoire américaine, la théorie du trauma a été utilisé pour déceler les impacts du traumatisme historique et culturel qui pèsent sur les noirs en Amérique. Visant les mêmes objectifs, une lecture postmoderne a été appliquée dans ce travail afin de révéler les histoires tues qui contredisent les métarécits Euro-centriques et leurs discours totalisants sur les noirs. À travers ces lectures, il a été démontré que l'histoire des Afro-Américains sur le sol Américain a commencé comme une histoire tronquée qui fait qu'ils continuent de mener des luttes incessantes afin d'être réhabilités et vivre comme des citoyens à part entier.

Mots-clés: Afro-Américains, traumatisme historique, traumatisme culturel, métarécits, redéfinition culturelle

Introduction

It is a notorious reality that the history of the Black people in America is tightly linked to their experience of the institutionalized practice of slavery. The practice of slavery represents an unavoidable piece of the history of the United States of America. This causes the debate on the issue to be one of the most discussed in the art and literature when evoking Blacks' concern even till today. In the domain of literature, most of the time, writing about slavery gives vent to subjective interpretations depending on the author's social and/or ideological position. The realm of science fiction does not escape to the ideological orientations that weigh on the narratives about slavery. In science fiction whether on its literary or cinematographic version, the issues of bondage and racism have always held an important thematic place in the narratives.

As an illustration, James Cameron's *Avatar* (2010) chronicles the invasion of blue aliens' territory by white humans in the quest of unobtainium, a precious natural resource. John Russel perceives that:

The plot of the *Avatar* film parallels with the historical ways that Europeans sought out new countries to colonize for their resources, such as parts of the jungles in the African Congo. The idea that there is a historical parallel is strengthened throughout the film with glimpses of the scenery, tribal dress and the Na'vi language. The Na'vi people speak in a dialect that could be easily mistaken for a mixture of the Khoisan and Bantu language that is spoken countries throughout present day Africa, with its distinctive click consonants. (J. Russel, 2013, p. 192)

As noticed in this passage, the story in the film *Avatar* (2010) is far from being an ex-nihilo (M. Greaney, 2006, p. 2) story. On the contrary, the interpretation of Russel is that the story recounted by James Cameron's *Avatar* is an allegorical demodulation of the history of colonialism in Africa. It is worth acknowledging that the tragedy of colonialism as well as imperialism rests on the fact that they have deprived Africa from its substantial and material resources necessary for its development. However, what makes the particularity of this storyline is that aliens are not those who come to colonize foreign territories but, they are those undergoing human colonization. Basing on the parallelism established by Russel, African people would be the real aliens on their own soil spousing, thus, the Western/Eurocentric perspective. As a consequence, they should be destroyed, replaced and their natural resources must be snatched from them.

That is such imperialistic trend that forges the ideological conception of Western people's interactions with other racial groups. Therefore, this essay studies Virginia Hamilton's *The Magical Adventures of Pretty Pearl* (1983). This novel retraces the adventures of two African demigods; John De Conquer and his female companion Mother Pearl from their home on the highest point of Mount Kenya to the shores of America in order to protect and set free some enslaved African people. Together they track the voyage of Africans kidnapped from their motherlands to America by following the slaves' ships and localizing where exactly are these fellow Africans held in bondage.

Accordingly, this essay purports to revise the narratives about Blacks' history as released by the metanarratives constructed by Western's canals. For that matter, a postmodern reading will guide the analyses in this essay. In the landscape of literature, Postmodernism posits as a counter-discourse that aims to question the Western discourse that tends to totalize a truth as universal. Questioning the past in order to overthrow the totalizing discourses comes back to reveal the "silences" (M.-R. Trouillot,

1995, p. 27) imposed to it. In this sense, history is no more a set of oriented discourses to build the glory of a particular people at the expense of others. If for Linda Hutcheon, narratives about history “constitute systems of signification by which we make sense of the past” (L. Hutcheon, 1988, p. 89), its narration must consider the experiences of the margins. That process of making sense of historical facts discloses the postmodern posture, which “problematizes the entire notion of historical knowledge” (ibid, 89). Far from aligning on the Eurocentric narratives, the postmodern posture gives the floor to different standpoints. These different standpoints imply the Blacks’ traumatic experience. That is why Jeffrey Alexander’s theory of cultural trauma will be also of an important use in this essay.

Therefore, this essay aims to revisit the Blacks’ experience throughout the American history under the angles of their own perspectives. The argument in this essay is that Blacks’ contribution to the American history overpasses their passiveness due to the overwhelming yoke of the institution of slavery. Therefrom, the problematic is to comprehend: why is the history of African American typically summarized to bondage? Is the Black able to cultivate a nobler image today in America? These questioning leads to study the problematic in three points. First, there will be a study of the impacts of Blacks’ deportation in America. Second, a study will be made on the Blacks’ experience along the era of slavery and the sociopolitical changes in America. To finish, the condition of the post-slavery Blacks will be apprehended for the construction of the new African American.

1. African Americans’ History; A Truncated Beginning

The history of the African Americans on the American soil is made up of many unhappy occurrences. Indeed, there is a long process from the practice of indentured servitude to the institution of slavery and their later condition as people still suffering from discrimination. Indentured servitude starts “when a Dutch vessel dropped off twenty Africans in Jamestown. Some of the first were treated as indentured servants, with a limited term, and achieved freedom and landownership” (G. B. Tindall and E. D. Shi, 1984, p. 100). This clarification shows that indentured servitude functions on the free-will rule. However, from this practice to the institutionalization of slavery, there is a remarkable glide that sounds like a deceitful trap for the Black people, especially for once established and starting making money, some of them have acquired “white indentured servants” (ibid p. 100). Therefore, entrapping them in an institutionalized practice of slavery after having reached such a status is of the most cynical. This confirms that the history of the Black people in America cannot have an only one explanation nor can it be summarized to a unique narrative.

This reality poses the Blacks’ experience beyond any centric narration. For that matter, racist or supremacist narratives concerning the history of the Black people is amenable to serious counter-discourses. An illustration of this porosity of the supremacist narratives about Blacks’ concern to the counter-discourse is inscribed by Virginia Hamilton’s *The Magical Adventures of Pretty Pearl* (1983). In this novel, the reality of the African people’s embarkation to America is described as a violent episode in these people’s life. Such a narrative is depicted: “The crowd wept pitifully. All were shackled—neck, wrists and ankles—with chains. Dirty and tired, they jibbered and jabbered in twenty tongues” (13). This account describes the bewilderment of these young African people abducted from their land. Their anguish as described by this account is not necessarily linked to the dire condition of their detention, but rather, their removal from their natural environment and their deportation to an uncertain destination.

The incertitude surrounding their destiny is a first element of a trauma. As a matter of fact, the initial formation of a Black community out of their motherland is linked to a traumatic memory. This historical trauma is to be appreciated as the core element in the formation of the African American identity. In his *Cultural Trauma: Slavery and the Formation of African American Identity* (2001), Ron Eyerman exposes an analytic reflection on the Black identity amidst the American society arguing that:

Slavery defined, in other words, group membership and a membership group. [...] the recollection of slavery was articulated as cultural trauma. [...] the idea of an African American was one result of this identity struggle. It is important to keep in mind that the notion "African American" is not itself a natural category, but an historically formed collective identity which first of all required articulation and then acceptance on the part of those it was meant to incorporate. (R. Eyerman, 2001, p. 16)

Through this passage, Eyerman presents the central or constitutive base at the origin of the formation of the black identity in America. For him, the memory of slavery is the core element around which revolves the African American identity. So, unlike the other ethnic groups in the United States of America, slavery is the catalyst element that formed the African American identity. Consequently, referring to "African American" is primarily not as such a reference to an ethnic group. On the contrary, it points to a mark of memory. It functions as an identity memorial that contains the history of the Blacks in America; a history made of slavery and its corollaries that are violence, discrimination and segregation.

This particularity of the formation of the African American identity on the American soil confirms the truncated beginning of their history as an existing community amidst the other communities. This reality is an occurrence that is detrimental to their integration as a whole community. The fact is that the African Americans' history starts with a cultural trauma. Neil Smelser examines this kind of trauma in his *Cultural Trauma Theory and Applications* where he describes it as:

A memory accepted and publicly given credence by a relevant membership group and evoking an event or situation which is (a) laden with negative affect, (b) represented as indelible, and (c) regarded as threatening a society's existence or violating one or more of its fundamental cultural presuppositions." (In J. Alexander et al., 2001, quoted in R. Eyerman, 2003, p. 2).

Distinctively to Eyerman's perception of memory, Smelser describes the nature of memory in the process of building of cultural trauma. He focuses on the fact that "memory" plays a central role in the process of creation of a cultural trauma. For him, cultural trauma comes as the result of inherited horrendous occurrences that the members of a community receive from their ancestors. Therefore, cultural trauma is transferred. This implies that the impacts of cultural trauma overlive those who experienced it and are transferred as a legacy to their offspring.

This theory of cultural trauma is still echoing in the African Americans' life nowadays. Assuredly, the violence and abruptness of their arrival in America play as a historical burden that disturbs their life conditions. In addition, the brutal change of Blacks' life condition from Africa to America is detrimental to their social wellbeing. Indeed, leaving one's motherland to an unknown territory to live as a slave destroys not only the self-esteem but also it bewilders a lot to create post traumatic effects. The conditions of transportation suffice to destroy them psychologically: "Weeks passed, and they landed at Savannah, Georgia, along with one hundred eight half-death black African human beings. Human

prisoners, soon to be slaves.” (16) This testimony may be awful but it describes the real condition of the Black people transported from Africa to America.

Moreover, the atrocity linked to their abduction and transportation is nothing else than an introduction to the life made up of hardship that awaits them in America. Used as chattels in the bonds of slavery, the Whites use these “black Africans to suffer the hardships of laboring from dawn to dusk, while they rose higher in self-esteem and grew rich” (55). Definitely, the history of the African American people on the American soil is a truncated history for its starts with violence and oppression. Thus, the subsistence in America has never been something else than a story of survival in a hostile environment.

2. Surviving Amidst Enmity

Since the first landing of twenty Africans on the American soil for indenture servitude in Jamestown, Virginia in 1619 to the contemporary American society, the life of the African Americans is made up of racism, oppression, discrimination and hardships. This social conditioning portrays the difficult path for a fair and just social integration of the Blacks in America. Obviously, living amidst such struggles to assure a peaceful life poses as a refutation of the metanarratives released by the ideology of White supremacy. Indeed, handicapping discourses trying to demonstrate that Blacks are a flabby-minded people incapable of leadership are infringed by the realities of Blacks’ social experience. In regards of the steady resilience and struggles accomplished by this community to reach their present social status, it is noticeable that the process of silencing the Blacks’ voice has failed.

For instance, when talking about the current African Americans’ high rates of poverty, people willingly or unwillingly silence the historical and institutional hindrances opposed to Blacks’ social and economic advancements. On the one hand, the institution of slavery properly uses Black people as chattels at the glory of some White slaveholders, on the other hand it continues by racist and discriminatory rules to impeach their social and economic rising. The reality is that within such steadily oppressive atmosphere, a people stricken by feeble faculties of mind cannot prosper. As a matter of fact, the practice of slavery is “a slow process of dulling” (O. E. Butler, 2003, p. 182) as recognized by Dana in Butler’s *Kindred* (2003). Besides, the work of the slaves does nothing to improve his own life but the life of his master. This inhumane and crook politics of slavery is confirmed in Virginia’s *The Magical Adventures of Pretty Pearl* (1983). In the novel, it is attested that: “Men carved huge lands in the forest. They brought in black Africans to suffer the hardships of laboring from dawn to dusk, while they rose higher in self-esteem and grew rich” (55). This testimony retraces the finality of the route of slavery after the abduction of the African people. There is no denying that the fact of toiling, without receiving a salary in return, favors the increasing of some people’s wealth in the most awkward manners which is detrimental to the workers.

All the same, the African Americans’ delay in the social and economic development finds its roots in the mishandling of the Reconstruction period. As a matter of fact, the official declaration of laws ending the institutionalized slavery has been nothing more than a dream deferred. This is vindicated by the lack of a thorough follow-up of the politics of Blacks’ liberation namely in its agrarian declension. The systematic carelessness of the following-up of the effective redistribution of land to former slaves paved the way for the implementation of a new politics of subalternity against the Black community. This unfortunate reality is rendered in the following:

Pretty and de Conquer fell silent as a period of better time called Reconstruction spread over the land. It was in human time a time to make life easier for some folks. But good times never came. Some of the former slaves were given land to work themselves. The Civil War was done with. Yet there were bad folks who fought the free folks and took away their land and what little else they had (V. E. Hamilton, 1983, p. 26-27)

This passage highlights the ineffectiveness of the expectations of the Reconstruction era where Blacks are still let apart from economic growth and from the country's social advancement. Here again, the only one opportunity left to the Blacks is the struggle. In this vein, the Eurocentric discourses alleging Blacks' laziness to justify their social delay is deconstructed for the historical truth gives evidence of a systemic politics of Blacks' social and economic repression.

Furthermore, the end of the institutionalized slavery during the antebellum period has succeeded to transmute into institutionalized racism after the end of the Civil War and precisely during the Reconstruction period. Though their social condition sets them as the most unprivileged community at the end of the Civil War, Blacks are still feared by Whites. This can be vindicated by the racist stereotypes concerning Blacks' so-called physical strength. For the Whites, a total freedom allowed to Blacks will give them more economic advantages than them because they are more physically endowed to work the land. The effects of that totalizing discourse engender violence against the Blacks. As an example, acts of planned assassination are committed by Whites to break Blacks' morale. These acts of sabotage are known to be the prerogative of the extremist groups such as the "Knights of the White Camelia, the Constitutional Union Guards, the Pale Faces, the White Brotherhood, the Council of Safety, the 76 Association, and the Knights of the Ku Klux Klan" (B. H. Evelyn and H. F. John, 2011, p. 256). Among all these groups of extremists, the Ku Klux Klan is known to have been the most notoriously active.

For the members of the Ku Klux Klan, acts of terror constitute a therapy against the danger of a possible Black power. The following testimony of the goddess-child Pretty Pearl lifts the veil on the barbaric acts of those extremist groups: "Sure enough, over there and not far she spied burned-out slave quarters where folks still lived. A charred black shape hung from a limb of a poplar tree beside a smoldering cabin" (27). This narrative sheds light on the types of stories that are most of time silenced in the construction of the Eurocentric metanarratives of the American story. In reality, the scorched earth policy applied by those supremacist and extremist groups aims to destroy the rising social balance that were being establishing after the Civil War. Once again, this puts the Black people in an uncomfortable situation and prompts the need to struggle for freedom. Seeing that their life is so disturbed by struggles, the hard conditions of life of Blacks cannot be put on a purported natural inferiority. On the contrary, it should be understood as the consequence of a thorough racial policy.

3. Living a Long Walk for Freedom as a Post-Civil War African American

The life of the African Americans after the Civil War is a not a life of rest after struggle. Instead of that, their life in that period is like an introduction to a new era of struggles. Contrary to the White people who take this period to reorganize the vision according to the new order fostered by the sociopolitical and economic changes, the Black people regard this period as an introduction to new orientations in their struggle. As a result, they prepare for these struggles by implementing a systemic subversion of the symbolism and discourses of domination.

As a priority, the former slaves start to dismantle the discursive anchorage of the Whites' domination on their individual life. In this vein, their body as the archive of domination and oppression is purified from the symbolisms of their former master's leverage. Then, this subversive politics against Whites' domination starts by a general process of renaming. For them, the fact of renaming themselves marks the real end of their life under subjection. This expression of freedom is recounted in the following passage:

I want everybody know me and us by de last name I has taken. And that be name of Perry. Don't know where it come from, but it be in my head all de time. Call me Mister Selah Black S. Perry. After Sunday, Swassi be my wife, Miz Swassi Perry. This be the land of Salt Perry and his party. Each one of you has a right to Perry if you wants it." And then Salt sang the words that he was most fond of singing to them:

You got a right, I got a right.

We all got a right to the tree of life. (V. E. Hamilton, 1983, p. 302)

This passage corroborates the Blacks' desire to express their freedom. Indeed, the rules of slavery do not let them a free choice to name themselves. It even does not let them the freedom to make a family for the family can be broken as soon as the master decide to sell some members. Theretofore, any simple decision concerning their life depends on their White master. By their freedom recovered, they decide to overturn that overwhelming politics of silencing as to their cultural identity.

All the same, the defense of their cultural identity leads them to look for leadership models coming from their community. This element marks an important behavioral change among the Black people. Looking for their Black fellow as model to resource themselves on the path for freedom is symptomatic of a psychological freedom from the totalizing discourses on the purported unfitness to leadership. This quest for Black leadership figure motivates John Henry to investigate on the history of representative figures like Frederick Douglass. He testifies that: "I hear by the words of a ex-slave name of Fred Rick Douglass. He de bestest leader colored man anybody hear of." (228) Indeed, this reference to the leadership of Frederick Douglass showcases a redefinition of the concept of leadership for them. In this vein, the leader is no longer the White master but rather a Black man like them.

Undoubtedly, this redefinition of the concept and figure of leadership resets the African American's mind from the historical trauma due to the experience of slavery. Therefrom fights for freedom becomes inspiring as the history of the life as slave, runaway, and later abolitionist such as Frederick Douglass. This redefinition of the social and political models meets a de-essentialization of the American history from the Eurocentric standpoint. This is what Benjamin Robertson tries to show when he states that: "if we could separate, say, black American culture from white American culture or being female from being male, we cannot claim superiority or "truth" for the individual identities these categories inform. (B. Robertson, 2010, p. 365)

Assuredly, the politics of de-essentialization of a society that has prospered in part in the landscape of the direst form of racism that is slavery cannot be made without the risks of creating other forms of tensions. These tensions are materialized by discriminatory laws that intend to deprive Blacks from the total freedom that the end of the practice of slavery provided them. Consequently, institutional discrimination becomes the heir of institutional slavery. Here again, the supremacist ideologies erect

discrimination as a bulwark against Blacks' freedom and fair integration. Black Salt, a native American warns the new free Black men in these terms:

Oh, you is free. You is free! But outside, they gone make you work and slave like you not free, too. So I ask you, why they fought that war? Don't wants to pay you. And if'n they do pays you, they gone make you buy de food from them and take what they pays you almost back. (V. E. Hamilton, 1983, p. 134)

The reality described in this passage is about the contrast of freedom begotten by the Post-Civil War period. The fact is that the end of war has inaugurated the beginning of discrimination. The end of the Civil War has not put an end to racism; it has exacerbated it. Therefrom lies the next battle of the Blacks that is still not finished even in this contemporary America. Finally, the history of the African American on the American soil has started as a truncated history; it unfolds as a tormented history.

Conclusion

This essay has proposed an examination of the African Americans' history in Virginia Hamilton's *The Magical Adventures of Pretty Pearl* (1983). It has focuses of the conditions of access of the African people to that land formerly known as the New World, their experience there and how their condition is to be presented nowadays. Indeed, this essay has studied the conditions of accession of the Black people of Africa to the United States of American formerly known as the New Land. The study of these conditions matters for it differentiates the types of arrivals in America from the deal of Indenture servitude to the traps of abduction and sale as slaves.

The latter condition of Blacks' arrival in America being the means by which the overwhelming majority of them accessed to America has a devastative psychological issue. In reality, the violence and abruptness of the Atlantic Slave Trade have created a traumatic effect in the Black community. What is more is that this historical trauma has come to be transmuted as the core element that crystalizes the formation of the African American identity. In so doing, Black's history is hardly submissive to a totalizing narrative inspired by the Eurocentric metanarratives.

Besides, totalizing narrations about Blacks' history, namely those forged by the racist ideologies that fueled the slavery institution's propaganda stipulating Black's unfitness to perform any other activity than the work of the body, is openly amenable to subversion. That is so right that from their arrival in America till nowadays, the life of the African American has gone through unceasing struggles to be rehabilitate and to live as whole citizens. Thus, their delay comparatively to Whites concerning their social and economic conditions is not due to a natural inability of their mind as the Eurocentric metanarratives try hard to put forward. On the contrary, African Americans' current delay in the social and economic conditions is due to the mishandle of the social politics of the Reconstruction era. Concretely, this mishandling can be seen through the failure to annihilate institutional racism and its discriminatory rules. For that matter, African Americans' rights have been violated. Their access to the production of riches have been restrained and even their life has been jeopardized by White supremacist and extremist groups.

In revenge, African Americans have not remained still face to all these violences that target them. They have opted for a thorough and methodic struggle. They start by dismantling the anchorage of the discursive patterns of Whites' domination. In so doing, the process of renaming holds an important

political discourse against oppression. By this act the former slaves overturn the totalizing discourse of the Eurocentric universalism. They reject their former masters' naming as an act of proclamation of self-determination. Moreover, they celebrate Black leadership figures in order to show Blacks' ability to assume a powerful and positive leadership contrary to the racist totalizing discourse.

In overturning the Whites' totalizing and racist discourses, Blacks have taken a step to advance in the paths of a cultural redefinition as a therapy against their historical and cultural trauma. All these initiatives consist in de-essentializing the America society. Unfortunately, operating such a politics in a society that have risen on the foundations of racism cannot be without consequences; it has created a new form of tension fueled by discrimination of the demonizing of the racial other. As a result, it becomes clear that the history of the African American on the American soil has started as a truncated history and it unfolds as a tormented history. But they are still fighting to rehabilitate themselves as whole citizens.

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