



## Research Article

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# Melancholic Relationship to Appearance: A Fanonian Reading of Amadu's Novel "No Past No Present No Future"

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## Abstract

*This study is an exploration of the melancholic relationship to appearance reflected in Amadu Maddy's "No Past No Present No Future". To this end, the researcher uses textual analysis and descriptive criticism to unravel the causes and consequences of melancholic relationship to appearance. The theory of racial melancholia which is dominantly informed by Fanonian approach to the psychology of racism is used to account for the intra-psychic forces which operate within the melancholic characters in the subject novel. As the finding discloses, Amadu's novel saw at close range that the immediate postcolonial world is dominated by two groups of people: some hermitized white souls whose mindset is stuck in more traditional forms of biological, and pseudo-scientific racism, and those black people with "black skin and white masks.". Both exist in a borrowed time, unable to come to terms with the psychological states upon which their conscious and unconscious thoughts are hanging, have long lost wellness. The former see their articles of racial superiority as a self-evident truth; the latter plunge into a psychic process whereby the loss of belonging becomes the cause of ongoing trauma, realizing that they belong nowhere, that they must live in a world that would never give recognition to their existence.*

**Keywords:** African literature, Amadu, Fanon, melancholia, racism

## 1. Introduction

It is an inevitable aspect of being human to have a lifelong hunger for recognition. That hunger to be admired, praised, seen, and known as an independent person mainly facilitates us a compass to find meaning in life. This function could bear fruit, however, when 'Others' can give sufficient recognition to our existence (Loewald, 1969:20). Peter and Paul (1995) stated that there are three major conditions that are vital for the construction of the self: the 'objective self', the 'subjective self', and the 'other'. The objective self refers to the constructed self. It is about the most familiar aspects, behaviors, and actions in everyday life. The subjective self, on the other hand, is all about the condition in which the self is the agent of the constituent behavior and actions of the objective self, "but the subjective self cannot create an objective self or public "me" out of these actions- for this, it

requires the Other for appraisal.” (Peter and Paul, 1995:267). This point, thus, shows that one must obtain the right amount of appraisal of ‘Others’ to construct his/her objective self so that he/she will be able to have a normal object relation.

The above notion of identity construction is going to go in a way quite compatible with Fanon’s view that suggests the concept of self or identity is relational in the sense that the self can understand its identity in relation to ‘Others’.

During colonialism, black people view themselves as negative of the whites. While the whites are the symbol of all good, the blacks are the deviants of all good. In addition, black people see themselves as objects of ‘the Other’ since the whites consider and treat them as only their objects. Thus, the only option for the black man to save himself from the tormenting feeling of being an object of the Other is to try to be white. This simple wish to be white often leaves an indelible scar upon the psyche of the black man since it at the same deprives the black man’s self-awareness and recognition (Pramod: 2013: 42).

Thus, Fanon builds his argument around the psychological implication of the black man’s simple wish to be white. He states that the black man essentially attempts to construct his identity around the central masquerade of his/her desire to be white. He further discusses that the black man’s desire to be white often finds expression in the domain of language, culture, sexuality, dreams, and behavior. The black man’s struggle to master the white man’s language and culture, wish to have a white spouse or sexual partner, and persistence in whitening one’s skin, all purely serve evidence to this sentiment of the black man (Fanon, 2008:9). This effort to embrace whiteness and to negate its own black identity has profound psychological repercussions. It results in a sense of alienation as to who they truly are and with whom they should identify. Sooner or later, Fanon argues the colonized subjects would realize that they have no visible identity. Having learned from an early age that to be black is to be subhuman, they cannot identify as black at the same time their aspiration to be white is destined to fail for a black person can never truly become white. Fanon notes that this profoundly damages the colonized people’s sense of identity, thereby precipitating their melancholic relationship to appearance (Fanon, 2008:81).

In vein with this, Freud in his seminal essay “Mourning and Melancholia” draws a clear distinction between these two psychic states. Mourning, unlike Melancholia, is a healthy capacity to process a painful ending. It is a psychic process whereby normal grief takes place for the experience of loss, gradually withdrawing cathexes from the lost object to invest in new objects for replacement. But in some circumstances, this psychic process of mourning fails to get an end, growing into melancholia because “the inner world becomes dominated by the continuing presence of a dead object towards which reparation (both actual and internal) is felt to have failed.” (Freud, 2008:248-50). Therefore, Melancholia, for Freud, is pathological since it is a psychic condition that leads to endless mourn or grief, thereby the ego failing to detach cathexes from the lost objects. Though mourning and melancholia are triggered by the same event, and they create dejection, loss of interest, inability to love, inhibition of all activities, they are not the same emotionally. While mourning is a healthy response to loss, melancholia is a pathological response to loss. The melancholic individual often acknowledges the pain but sees no end to it. A mourned person, on the other hand, acknowledges the pain but he/she also recognizes that this is a pain that must be worked through.

Freud’s view of melancholia as an endless mourn for a lost object, environment or ideals best serves a room where identity loss could be seen as a form of melancholia. This identity loss precedes a melancholic relationship to appearance. Fanon demonstrates this by describing the experiences of different black people encountering their colonizers for the first time. These stories share a common theme of the shock that black individuals experience upon realizing that despite their desperate desire to be white and loyalty to Western ideals white people perceive them to be fundamentally different and inferior (Fanon, 2008:21).

Thus, the problem that Fanon essentially identifies is that society puts the black subject in a melancholic relationship to appearance. The melancholic relationship in psychoanalytic terms means a psychic process whereby the loss of belonging becomes a source of ongoing trauma. The black man,

Fanon says, is a white construction in the sense that black is indigenous to the world that produced that black as a negative subject. As a negative subject, that world says black doesn't belong in it. Because that black doesn't belong in it then that black is indigenous to a world to which he/she doesn't belong. Most of the time when someone is lost, there is a place to go back to but the problem that black can face is there is no black of that kind to go back to because he is original to that world. The world that is saying he/she doesn't belong says he/she doesn't belong to the future (Fanon, 2008: 111-12). Thus, a melancholic relationship to appearance occurs when the black subject suddenly realizes that he/she neither belongs to the black world nor the white world.

The European-born and raised black subjects who view themselves as whites suddenly realize that the world that they think belongs to them no longer accommodates them and are traumatized by this awareness. Consequently, they begin to strand on their whiteness as a 'lost' object, the step where their melancholia begins. In such conditions, we see the black subjects trying a lot to divorce their blackness from them because it becomes a constant reminder of their lost 'whiteness'. In contrast, those African-born and raised non-white subjects, cultivating white sensibility though, fell into an indelible mourn when they suddenly become aware that they don't belong to this world. For them, thus, the melancholic blackness serves as the 'shadow' of their lost whiteness.

These non-white subjects, when their original world (black) doesn't to accept them, immediately try to find a space that fits their identity in the other world (white). When the other world refuses to accept them, they then begin to feel rootless, the step by which their melancholic relationship to appearance begins. In this context, the non-white subjects try to avoid or hurt the whites because they start to think of the whites responsible for their loss of belonging. In this context, the appearance of the white people functions as the 'shadow' of their lost whiteness. Thus, the non-white subjects develop a sense of rage and resentment towards the people, group, or particular race which they perceive responsible for the loss of their ideals:

*"situations of difficult or failed mourning may be accompanied by bitter recriminations against those held to have responsibility for harm to, or the death of, the loved object" (Rustin, 2005: 55).*

By the same token, Amadu Maddy in "*No Past No Present No Future (1973)*", demonstrates as if the relationship between the historical and the psychological is almost in existent or at best tangential. This novel vibrantly depicts the racial trauma of his people through the characters' everyday lives, their socio-historical conditions, their personal relationships, and their identities. However, what this novel does in the way it alters the psychological experience of colonialism is the most ignored and unstudied phenomena. Thus, this study is intended to make an opening effort of revealing how a melancholic relationship to appearance can take up a socio-historical form in this novel using the Fanonian approach to the psychology of the colonized.

## 2. Analysis and Interpretations

### 2.1 *Melancholic Relationship to Appearance in Amadu's "No Past, No Present, No Future"*

Amadu has fashioned his characters in such a way that they are true to life with thoughts, feelings, emotions, and dreams, allowing the reader to understand the psychic state of the characters as well as their resultant behaviors and actions. His novel 'No Past, No Present, No Future' is a rare piece of art that indeed testifies to the status of the writer as a creative genius. Prostitution, racism, shattered dreams, the problems faced by African students in the Western world, the politics of difference and identity, and many other themes are the central issues of the narrative not to mention the skills contrived to maintain the artistic balance of these themes.

The novel is a transitional post-colonial novel. It unveils the journey of the subject character Santigie from melancholic relationship to appearance because his striving to gain recognition of his existence in both his original society and the white world sank deep into a daydream. Santigie was a

little boy when his country was languishing under the yoke of colonialism. He, as a little boy in the colonial period, experienced the deplorable condition of colonialism. He was stripped of his culture, religion, and language, and made to endorse the white man's culture and sensibility. He has been subjected to a form of white supremacy which produces in reverse his black inferiority, eventually influencing his view of self and the world around him.

The colonial education is the cause of his endorsement of the colonizer's culture which elevates and leads him to rationalize the idea that the colonizer's culture, knowledge, and practice should somehow replace the traditional culture, knowledge, and practice of his people. This has become more apparent when he flies with disappointment about his father's constant preference for the indigenous medication to cure his illness by undermining the white man's advancement in the area of health:

Santigie tried to persuade his father. 'It's no good staying here with all your wives and families. Everybody wants to give you a different kind of medicine of their own concoction. They don't even know what your illness is.' Chief Bombolai was aware that the end was approaching him, because of his pain, the treatment, and the general hubbub. 'Santigie, son, all my life I was looked after, cured, and helped through difficulties with native potions. There is no reason why I should go into hospital now, just because the white man has come to Bauya with his white medicine... now suppose there was no white man. No white medicine man. Don't you think we people of Bauya could serve as our ancestors survived, on roots and leaves and bark of trees from our sacred bushes?' (Amadu, 1973:19).

The above dialogue describes how the young generation has become a conceptual lens through which negative perspectives on African culture, value system, and knowledge and practice have emerged due to the colonial structures that were inherently disruptive. The colonial experience reshaped Santigie to advocate the colonizer's whims which forces him to devalue everything that's African. His inherent loyalty to the white civilization is more pronounced in his plunge into a dispute with his father about the use of traditional medicine.

In addition, Santigie's loss of identity which was exacerbated by colonialism is also reflected in the dreams he wants to achieve in life. Among the dreams he has tried to create in the postcolonial world, what gives him hope and meaning in life is the illusory promise he was offered to succeed his father as a chief in his province. There is no doubt that his hope to succeed his father as a leader of his province is a great source of strength to him.

Along the way, he interprets the postcolonial world through his colonial sensibility and view of the world. He thinks that his colonial education will be a merit for him to succeed his father as a chief of his province, given he is the only one who goes and continues school in the hierarchy. He also thinks the contribution he can make in bringing development to his province through bilateral business deals if he is voted as a chief in the province, which is of course an orientation he has gained from the colonizers' culture. Thus, the ironic depiction of Santigie's obsession with the issues like education, colonial language, and bilateral trade relations which are found to be very essential in the colonizer's culture vividly elucidates his inherent tendency to view the post-colonial world with the state of mind which is conditioned by the former colonizers' world view.

Yet, his parents as well as his people were unable to ever see his advocacy because they are in the post-colonial world, desperately trying to create their own discourse and identity based on purely a pre-colonial African sensibility. As a result, he relapses when he heard that his father, on a deathbed, appointed his uncle instead of him for the throne:

He still felt pangs of disappointment about his father's death. He had not been elected to succeed his father as a chief. He had thought that with independence and political influence he would have been chosen as chief, being the only educated one among the hierarchy. His father had told him that he would become chief, and he had hoped that he would leave him the staff in his will. If he had been chief, it would have been different. Yet, it was he who did all the translating from paper into the spoken language for the people. He could mediate for them between the government and all those foreign companies that had opened up business in their province. Yet they had not made him chief. Why didn't they realize that he could be more important and play a better role in the

development of their province than his uncle could? (Amadu, 1973:47).

Therefore, his disappointment strikes when he realizes that his education, knowledge, and affiliation to the colonizer's culture for his father and his society is beyond dispute that it passed into their acceptance as a chief. But his response to this loss is a mourning response. He acknowledges the pain but he also recognizes that it is a pain that must be worked through. In other words, the loss triggers only mourning because he has an imagined white world to substitute the lost 'Bauya':

*"both he (Santigie) and Ade had agreed to leave Bauya as soon as possible. For them, the longer they went on staying in Bauya, the more they felt empty, unprogressive, and bitter" (Amadu, 1973:47).*

This realization that his original world is beyond his interpretation is part of the reason which compels him to decide to move to England in search of a world which might be a substitute for his lost country.

The hope of Santigie to find a place in London to live as a human equal is an important development in Amadu's articulation of the relationship between a racist society and the deadly compromised psychology of the victims of racism. As Amadu switches his setting from Bauya (a hypothetical African nation) to London, he allows the new locale to unveil the particulars of British racism and its consequent effect on the psyche of African students in general.

Santigie primarily dreams that he would be successful in the matter of European education and then live life happily ever after. However, he fails in his O-level exams:

*"I got my results today; I mean the college internal exam papers. I failed again for third time, Joe. For the third and final time." (Amadu, 1973:114). He comes to realize that the Eurocentric curriculum does not allow this to happen for him: "He had been the victim of an educational system which had not thought of his kind when it was instituted." (Amadu, 1973:138).*

The failure awakens his otherness.

In addition, Santigie grew up believing that he is just the same as the whites. Nothing, he believes, separates him from other white folks. He also believes that the new locale is a place where he would be able to be treated equally like the whites since he unconsciously identifies himself as white. In stark contrast to his expectation and view of the new world, he goes on to witness dire inequality and racial prejudice in the new world. Soon after he starts to live with the English society, he learns that he will never be seen as a human equal but as a complete stranger:

*"I am a stranger. You treat me like one. I am constantly reminded that I am a stranger. It is not only a heavy burden; it is a torture." (Amadu, 1973:106).*

His realization that he is seen as a stranger comes as a brutal shock that takes place upon his psyche. This moment of realization triggers a deep trauma because he also becomes conscious for the first time that he is only the function of his skin color:

*"Is it necessary for a black person to go about in healthy society feeling that he is being watched by unfriendly eyes? I know how it when hostile eyes peruse me because of my pigmentation." (Amadu, 1973:109).*

This mirrors in many ways the racial trauma which Fanon describes in "Black Skin, White Masks" when he suddenly realizes that he is only the black body at the white's gaze rather than a young professional man. This takes place when a French child starts crying upon seeing Fanon on the street because Fanon signifies the horrific figure of the "nègre" (Fanon, 2008:11-12).

Furthermore, skin color entraps Santigie, making it too much to bear for him since it indicates the barrier that prevents him from being liked and accepted as a human equal:

*"Europeans resent me because I am black. They mistrust me because they think I have a black brain,*

*black feelings and emotions, black thoughts, and imaginations.*" (Amadu, 1973:108).

He tries to accentuate the conflict between how he feels white and how he looks black. The extent to which he tries to explain the difference between why the Europeans resent him (because of his skin color) and why they mistrust him (because they think he has black feelings, emotions, and imaginations) explains how his blackness is an obstruction of his identification of himself as white which is formed through feelings, emotions, thoughts, and imagination that goes beyond the color of one's skin. He strongly believes that the whites have made him in their image but treat him as other subject:

*"Now, do you think that we are independent? Do you think that we are free from your image? Coming to the U.K. to learn from you, I have found myself in despair. We all are coloured in your eyes"* (Amadu, 1973:112).

Consequently, the appearance of the whites around his flat functions as a constant reminder of his lost whiteness. Thus, he places himself in avoidance of the white people because he thinks that by cutting his relationship with the whites, he is going to avoid the people who constantly remind him of his lost whiteness:

*"Since I have come to this, your great metropolis, since I have experienced opposition virtually everywhere, and from your people, I have drawn the ultimate conclusion. You in your small corner, and I in mine. No togetherness. No evolution"* (Amadu, 1973:110).

The more he becomes isolated, the more his melancholia strikes because he spends time on his own, ruminating not finding closure to his loss. His severe melancholia causes increased depression. As a result, he becomes addicted to alcohol and drug. He excessively drinks and smokes and cries as if he can wash away his inescapable fate with his tears:

*"Santigie smoked and drank and talked to himself as if he is entertaining someone. He stood in front of the mirror and cried and smoked and drank. Finally, he slumped down on his bed and fell asleep. The cigarette in his mouth fell on the carpet and burnt and smoked and smelt. Slowly the carpet caught fire."* (Amadu, 1973:140).

This condition ultimately culminates in his pursuit of sexual affairs with different white women, from whom he thinks that he would be able to attain his equality with the white man and his belongingness to the white world. In other words, he takes sex with different white women as the best method to reclaim whiteness:

*"I know you are jealous of me, jealous of your women. That's where I take my cue. I will not break the law. I will not irritate you, although I know how very well. I will not accost you. But all these things I will do to your women. You will see it. I will let you see me do it all..."* (Amadu, 1973:112).

Thus, he directs his desire for white women with a tinge of hope to gain that recognition. Santigie's rationale mirrors Fanon's perception of a black man's desire for a white woman as a means to acquire whiteness (Fanon, 1956:45). He quits his education, and he is *"going to seek the fullness thereof from the maidens of this land. I will go in search of them."* (Amadu, 1973:114). He views sex with the white woman as an enactment of gaining recognition:

I am not ashamed to admit that by going to bed with white women I regard them as purely victims... I know what I am talking about. Let me tell you that the only way I can get my own back for the victimization, degradation and defeat I have suffered, is to do this. It is my only weapon (Amadu, 1973:190).

Built upon the premise of his dominance over white women, he presumes that these women view themselves as under him. He shows no sign of remorse over his project. He continues to

perform this plan. Having no future to hold on to, his affair with the white women seems to transcend to prostitution as he is persistent in taxing every white woman he sleeps with. This shows, thus, the loss of expectations and dreams caused him to get stuck in his definition of himself as a failure.

Generally, the new locale deprives Santigie of his hopes and dreams as it still functions by the rhetorical privilege which perpetuates racial hierarchies by projecting purity, rationality, and superior position upon the ideal whiteness. The world of his origin, on the other hand, refuses to give recognition to a black man of his kind. As a result, he flies into despair, realizing that he has to live in a world that would never give him recognition as a human equal; that he belongs nowhere; and that there is no space for him in the entire human race. This leads him to a melancholic relationship to appearance.

### 3. Conclusions

The melancholic relationship to appearance that ensues from failure to find self-identification, especially in a society of colour, is arguably nowhere more palpable than in Amadu's novel. Even more remarkable is the story's hidden suggestion that this prevailing polarization and racial othering will continue as long as the Western nation's vulgar culture is a factor that attracts racism peddlers and repels people of reason and conscience. After fifty years of the publication of *No Past No Present No Future*, the world goes on grappling with the same racism that Amadu has portrayed. Despite the implementation of various legal frameworks and public policies to combat racism, reports have provided evidence that racism is widespread, and its level and form increasing with an unprecedented range around the world today. This hints that Amadu's novel remains an important signpost that brings together the experiences and solutions to racism.

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