

**Incestuous rape, abjection, and the colonization of psychic space in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* and Shani Mootoo's *Cereus Blooms at Night***

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[AUTHOR VERSION, BEFORE CORRECTED PROOFS]

Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1970) and Shani Mootoo's *Cereus Blooms at Night* (1996) both apply a strategy of connecting rape to other forms of oppression, suggesting that incest is at least partly the result of the dynamics of being colonized and "othered". This article brings out the problems of closely associating colonization and (incestuous) rape by exploring the associations made in these two novels. It uses Kelly Oliver's concept of "the colonization of psychic space" to argue that the novels demonstrate that without a positive space of meaning, victims of racial oppression and of sexual violence find themselves among the abjected. The close association made between colonization and incest is criticized for ignoring the specificity of the processes by which incest and rape function to make one feel abjected.

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Applying the trope of rape to the colonial situation has been common practice among postcolonial theorists and novelists, from Edward Said's *Orientalism* to J.M. Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians*. The "concept-metaphor" that equates colonialism with rape has been used abundantly by colonizers themselves, and has been reiterated by colonized subjects to emphasize the oppression of colonialism (Sharpe 137; Tschofen 502). As Tschofen has pointed out, using this metaphor effectively brings out "the violation of the colonized, their powerlessness and voicelessness, and the web of desires binding the colonizers and the colonized" (505). However,

Tschofen also stresses that the tendency to use rape as a metaphor for colonialism needs to be criticized, since “[t]he ‘rape of the colonized by the coloniser’ [ ... ] may be typologically similar to the rape of a woman by a man, but it is produced by different ideologies, power relations, institutions, and practices, and has different significations” (503). To extend this argument, I would propose that whenever we find that rape is used strategically in a novel to emphasize other processes of oppression, we need to critically evaluate the reasons for and pitfalls of that strategy (cf. Higgins and Silver 2).

Both Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* (1970) and Shani Mootoo’s *Cereus Blooms at Night* (1996) apply the strategy of connecting rape to other forms of oppression. These two novels present the reader with a main character who is sexually abused by her father. In the narratives leading up to the rape, both novels suggest that the incest is at least partly the result of the dynamics of being colonized and “othered”. In *The Bluest Eye*, African-American Cholly Breedlove’s rape of his own daughter, as well as her response to it, are associated with the humiliation that comes with being black in a racist society. *Cereus Blooms at Night*, set on the fictional Caribbean island Lantanacalara, implicitly connects the abuse the little girl Pohpoh (later renamed Mala) suffers from her father Chandin Ramchandin with the colonial oppression that mediates his failed attempts to fit in with the white foster family he idealizes. Why do these novels portray becoming an incestuous rapist as a ‘logical’ consequence of being colonized?

Being colonized corresponds to being deemed racially inferior by the hegemonic powers within one’s society. This process continues after an actual colonial regime has ceased to exist, in the postcolonial or “parcolonial” situation.<sup>1</sup> To the extent that the antagonistic ideals of the colonizer are internalized by the colonized, we can speak of “psychic colonization”. Oliver, building on the work of Fanon, uses the concept “colonization of psychic space” in a broader

manner to designate the oppression experienced by people who belong to a marginalized subgroup within a society and are thus banned from having a positive space of meaning, a social space for signification (96). Oliver's concept can help us understand why and how Morrison and Mootoo connect colonization and (incestuous) rape.

The fact that the rape in these novels is incestuous immediately triggers the discourse of abjection, since incest has been argued by the influential Lévi-Strauss to be the most "universal" taboo. The "abject" is literally "that which is cast off". Following Mary Douglas' definition of "uncleanness" as "matter out of place" (41), Julia Kristeva has developed the notion of the abject as that "what disturbs identity, system, order" (4). Processes of exclusion are always imperfect, as the displaced subject or object continuously haunts the system that has displaced it. As Kristeva expresses it: "from its place of banishment, the abject does not cease challenging its master" (2). Following that definition, the colonized subject can be seen as abject. As Cynthia Sugars has put it: "In a colonial context, the abject becomes metaphorized as the subordinate colonial object that constantly brings the imperial self into question" (81). However, both Bataille and Kristeva remind us that the prime examples of the abject are rotting corpses and excrement (Bataille 57; Kristeva 3-4). The abject is closely related to transgression of the law, to the "taboo" that is untouchable in its simultaneous dirtiness and sacredness (Bataille 63-69).

Since the abject is infused with these mystical notions that mingle the horrific with the sacred, using the discourse of abjection to illustrate processes of colonization becomes questionable. At the same time, abjection is closely linked to the concepts of hybridity and mimicry, both expressions of "matter out of place" with positive as well as negative connotations. In order to shed light on the extensive use of references to abjection – from displacement to dirtiness to the ultimate examples of rape and incest – in *The Bluest Eye* and

*Cereus Blooms* it is necessary to distinguish between different modes of abjection.<sup>2</sup> This will prove to be crucial in determining the problems in the connection between colonization and (incestuous) rape in *The Bluest Eye* and *Cereus Blooms*. Comparing these two novels, with their differing colonial contexts, brings out the extent to which abjection is a socio-cultural construction, as well as highlighting the individual freedom of the artist to reconstruct the meaning of abjection. I will argue that it is dangerous to use the discourse of abjection – particularly in the instance of incestuous rape – strategically. Indeed, the making of connections between colonization, abjection and rape is itself hazardous. On the other hand, however, I want to show how, especially in the text of Mootoo, readers are invited to question these connections.

In Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* we find two important themes intertwined through the imagery of seeds, flowers, and "unyielding" land: Pecola's deluded desire for blue eyes, for beauty based on a white ideal, and Pecola's miscarrying her father's child. In the second chapter, Pecola's childhood friend Claudia narrates:

*Quiet as it's kept, there were no marigolds in the fall of 1941. We thought, at the time, that it was because Pecola was having her father's baby that the marigolds did not grow. A little examination and much less melancholy would have proved to us that our seeds were not the only ones that did not grow; nobody's did. [...] It never occurred to either of us that the earth itself might have been unyielding. We had dropped our seeds in our own little plot of black dirt just as Pecola's father had dropped his seeds in his own plot of black dirt. Our innocence and faith were no more productive than his lust or despair.*

(5-6)

Through these introductory lines, the novel sets the stage for the story of Pecola's abjection, as well as the abjection of blackness in general, using the metaphor of the unwelcoming barren earth for the hostile society in which the African American girls Pecola, Claudia, and her sister Frieda come to adulthood. The novel emphasizes the ideal of whiteness these girls grow up with through constant allusions to William Elson and William Gray's "Dick and Jane" stories, as well as through extensive attention to Pecola's and Frieda's adoration of the blond starlet Shirley Temple.<sup>3</sup> Claudia ridicules this adoration, but recognizes in retrospect that "I had not yet arrived at the turning point in the development of my psyche which would allow me to love her" (19). The suggestion made in the longer passage quoted above is that the hegemony of the white ideal denies the possibility of finding beauty in blackness: the possibility for black girls to flower. In making this suggestion, *The Bluest Eye* can be seen as a literary equivalent of Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks*, in which he gives a psychoanalytic account of the inferiority complex suffered by colonized individuals in (post)colonial societies. Both Fanon and Morrison deal with the desire among oppressed people to comply with the hegemonic ideal of their "oppressors": to become white. While making this desire understandable, both Fanon's essay and Morrison's novel condemn this desire as a pathological reaction to an oppressive situation. That oppressive situation has been characterized by Oliver as the "colonization of psychic space", to indicate the way that oppression "operates through a debilitating alienation based on estrangement from the production of value in a hierarchical system of values through which some bodies are valued and others are devalued or abjected" (13). The devaluation, or "abjection" of blackness, is already evident from the black girls' Shirley Temple obsession, but the narrative amplifies it by connecting it to extreme cases of abjection: rape and incest.

The association between racism and abjection is most clearly pronounced in the “explanation” the narrative offers for Cholly Breedlove’s raping his own daughter. Before presenting the reader with the incestuous rape, an omniscient narrator (who needs to be distinguished from Claudia) takes care to introduce the perpetrator’s history, with specific attention to one event that appeared to have shaped his life in its devastating racial humiliation. When he was a boy, having his first sexual experience with the black girl Darlene, their intercourse was interrupted by two white men, at the point when Cholly was about to orgasm. The white men threatened him at gunpoint, using the derogative terms “nigger” and “coon” multiple times. As Morrison has noted herself, the term “nigger” “occupies a territory between man and animal and thus withholds specificity even while marking it” (*Playing* 71). This description of the word “nigger” as neither man nor animal (thus “monstrously” unspecified) corresponds to Kristeva’s notion of the abject as that in-between “place where meaning collapses” (2). Simply by using the word “nigger”, the white men are rendering Cholly abject, and this process of abjection is intensified tremendously in its connection to sexuality. The terrified Cholly can only respond by saying “Sir?” (148) and by trying to obey. In his “total helplessness” (148), Cholly turns his hatred towards Darlene instead of towards the white men:

Cholly, moving faster, looked at Darlene. He hated her. He almost wished he could do it – hard, long, and painfully, he hated her so much. The flashlight wormed its way into his guts and turned the sweet taste of muscadine into rotten fetid bile. He stared at Darlene’s hands covering her face in the moon and lamplight. They looked like baby claws. (48)

This scene presents us with a double rape: Cholly is raping Darlene, unwillingly, but he is also presented as ‘being raped’ by the white men with their flashlight (“worming its way”) and gun, their demeaning words and looks. At the moment when Cholly was supposed to “become a man”, the white men emasculate him, once and for all. The result for Cholly is a complete confusion concerning his own desire, which he is no longer in charge of. Since this desire has been appropriated by the white men, Cholly’s sexuality will forever be tainted with violence and disgust. In the passage above, the displacement of sexuality is stressed through the discourse of abjection: muscadine changing into bile, Darlene’s hands changing into baby claws. At the same time, the extreme abjection of rape functions to illustrate horrifically the workings of racism or “the colonization of psychic space”.

As Fanon observed, the neurotic colonized subject does not resist the oppressor but instead tries to become more like them. *The Bluest Eye* follows this logic in portraying Cholly as the rapist of his own daughter; a repetition of his traumatic sexual humiliation, but this time with him in the role of oppressor. The rape scene itself is focalized through Cholly, paying extensive attention to his mixed emotions in his drunken haze:

Her back hunched that way; her head to one side as though crouching from a permanent and unrelieved blow. Why did she have to look so whipped? She was a child – unburdened – why wasn’t she happy? The clear statement of her misery was an accusation. He wanted to break her neck – but tenderly. Guilt and impotence rose in a bilious duet. What could he do for her – ever? (161)

The passage links Pecola and Cholly in their abjection. Pecola looks like a sacrificial victim, and irritated by his own 'impotence' in preventing her from being like that, Cholly's love for her turns into hate and disgust: "His hatred of her slimed in his stomach and threatened to become vomit" (163). We find a move here similar to what happened between Cholly and Darlene. However, with Pecola the rape is also accompanied by tender feelings. Afterwards, Cholly again feels "hatred mixed with tenderness. The hatred would not let him pick her up; the tenderness forced him to cover her" (163). By stressing Cholly's prior humiliation as well as his confused but partly tender feelings for his daughter, *The Bluest Eye* allows the reader to sympathize with him, threatening to present the rape as understandable. The combination of the general framework of the novel (stressing the white ideal) and Cholly's background history suggests that Cholly's inability to love his daughter in a healthier way is directly linked to his oppression within white-dominated society. The rape functions to show how humiliation is transmitted through generations, but also brings out the extent of this humiliation: if racism makes someone commit the ultimate transgression of incest, then it must truly be horrific. Incestuous rape, in its capacity to evoke horror and shock, is thus applied functionally to abject racism itself.

While Cholly is portrayed as being powerless apart from being able to use his penis as a weapon against the only person lower in the social hierarchy than himself, Pecola is portrayed as having no power at all. Her reaction to the rape is striking: she does not rebel against her family, or against society. Instead, she invokes the help of a "magician", a man of mixed blood called "Soaphead Church", who is ironically portrayed by the omniscient narrator as a misguided misanthropic homosexual vainly trying to pass for white, British, and religious. In his attempts to separate himself from everything he finds "unclean", Soaphead renounces his homosexuality and instead abuses little girls: "his patronage of little girls smacked of innocence and was associated



in his mind with cleanliness” (166-67). In the passage describing Soaphead, it is thus suggested that complying with the colonizer’s ideal, suppressing one’s blackness and one’s “natural desires” leads to abjection striking back with a vengeance. Once again, the novel invokes the trope of the sexual abuse of (innocent) girls to make this connection.

Pecola’s request to Soaphead Church adds perversity to perversity: she asks him for blue eyes. Her abjection is so complete that she cannot imagine a potential power might spring from her own qualities, or from the black community in general. She has been raped by her father, and the only thing she thinks will cleanse her are blue eyes, that prime signifier of white beauty. Pecola’s blue eyes are a haunting image of the “matter out of place” that constitutes “mimicry”, Homi Bhabha’s term for the colonized subject’s attempts to look and act like the colonizer. According to Bhabha, “mimicry” undermines the stability of the relation between colonizer and colonized, disrupting the authority of the racist colonial discourse (86). Indeed, even though Pecola herself does not question the white ideal of beauty, her uncanny “mimicry” does disturb this ideal.

Blue eyes on a black girl are an uncanny displacement, but Claudia dramatizes the extent of this abjection by stating the following: “A little black girl yearns for the blue eyes of a little white girl, and the horror at the heart of her yearning is exceeded only by the evil of fulfillment” (205). Moreover, immediately after this sentence, Claudia continues to describe Pecola as mad, shunned and excluded, making strange movements and rummaging through the trash, through “all the waste and beauty of the world – which is what she herself was” (205). Claudia’s choice of imagery brings out the confusion within the discourse of abjection in *The Bluest Eye*: Pecola is waste and she is beauty. Both of these terms overstate, mystify even, what is actually going on

with Pecola. That mystification is further elaborated through Claudia's description of how she and the black community in general used Pecola as a scapegoat:

All of our waste which we dumped on her and which she absorbed. [ ... ] All of us – all who knew her – felt so wholesome after we cleaned ourselves on her. We were so beautiful when we stood astride her ugliness. (205)

Pecola is ugly, but at the same time the narrative wants to reevaluate blackness, and thus needs to present her as beautiful as well.

This switch from waste, or abjection, to beauty is made most significantly in Claudia's prayer for Pecola's baby:

I felt a need for someone to want the black baby to live – just to counteract the universal love of white baby dolls [ ... ] we did not dwell on the fact that the baby's father was Pecola's father too. [ ... ] We thought only of this overwhelming hatred for the unborn baby. (190-91)

Even though Claudia and Frieda (partly) cancel out the self-hatred society makes them feel about their blackness by assuming a dominant position vis-à-vis Pecola, using her as a scapegoat, they still secretly hope that society itself could be changed, could start valuing blackness, including the most abjected of the abject: Pecola's baby, this black product of incest. Since they do not take into account the aspect of incest, which forms a more "universal" abjectness of this baby than its blackness, their prayer becomes perverted, suggesting that it is almost as impossible for

society to value blackness as it is for society to value incest. While making this connection can make readers start to think about their own internalized conceptions of blackness as “dirty”, the problem is that the comparison is skewed. The poetic alignment between the marigolds and Pecola’s baby, even though it is made by “children” who “do not know better”, endows Pecola’s baby with a possible beauty and hope that is in stark contrast with the way it was conceived. If it is the earth’s “fault” that the flowers do not bloom, is it also society’s fault that the black baby of incest cannot thrive, cannot live? Incest is the element that makes this comparison a troubling one.

The narrative strategies in *The Bluest Eye* put the emphasis on the problem of devalued blackness, which is indeed, according to her “Afterword”, what Morrison wanted to stress. The rape scenes with Darlene and Cholly and with Cholly and his daughter are used quite effectively to emphasize the horror of the colonization of psychic space: to establish the connection between racism and abjection. The uncanny figure of Soaphead Church, in his renunciation of blackness and his sexual preference for little girls, reinforces this connection. Strategically using rape, incest and pedophilia in close association with (internalized) racism, the novel appears to overstate the case of devalued blackness, ultimately collapsing the associations, as happens when we are confronted with the prayer for Pecola’s baby.

Incestuous rape may seem to be a useful metaphor for the processes of identity confusion, but the comparison between incestuous rape and colonization or racism falls flat, particularly if we keep thinking of the colonized subject through Bhabha’s concept of “mimicry”, as the abject that brings the system of colonialism into question. It needs to be remembered that the relation between colonizer and colonized is perverted from the beginning, while the parent-child relation (ideally) starts out with a positive identity distinction, which dissolves as soon as the parental

love turns into sexual desire. While the colonized can bring out the flaws in the colonial discourse, what flaws in which discourse could the incest victim bring out? The difference is that colonization is a structural, social process, while incest remains the ultimate taboo, the exception, practically mystified in its unspeakability. While racism and colonization allow abjected subjects to still find support within their own community, the incest victim is cast off by her own family. Generally, in the absence of support, rape establishes the strongest form of abjection insofar as victims experience intense feelings of guilt as well as shame, and exclusion from the out-group as well as the in-group (cf. Diken and Laustsen 124). It is important to distinguish between forms of abjection that are still generative in a capacity to question dominant ideas and structures, and forms of abjection that are so taboo in society that what needs to be questioned is how to speak them in the first place. Shani Mootoo's *Cereus Blooms at Night* can help us in further exploring the distinctions between different forms of abjection.

Since Shani Mootoo is less well-known than Toni Morrison, a few short facts about her life may serve to contextualize her novel.<sup>4</sup> Mootoo was born in Dublin in 1958, but raised in Trinidad. When she was 19, she moved to Canada, applying herself to visual arts to express the abuse she suffered as a child. While she finds it easier to express this trauma using images rather than words, her first literary publication, the collection of short stories *Out on Main Street* (1993), tackled exactly this issue. Her first novel, *Cereus Blooms at Night*, further explores the theme, connecting it with the theme of hybridity.

In *Cereus Blooms at Night* we appear to find a reincarnation of Cholly Breedlove in the character of Chandin Ramchandin. Just as with Cholly, before we are presented with Chandin's rape of his daughter we get a detailed background of his journey to adulthood in a society that

privileges whiteness. Chandin's father slaved his life away, saving money in order for his son to be able to study in Britain. Completely obsessed by his British foster family's way of life, Chandin falls madly in love with his foster sister Lavinia. In order to win her love he tries to become as much of a British gentleman as he possibly can, mimicking the Reverend's behavior in a complete "betrayal" of his own background. Chandin's self-denial in his mimicry of this "unnatural" behavior does not get him anywhere with Lavinia though; she does not recognize him as a potential object of desire. Even though he keeps longing for Lavinia, Chandin eventually gives up on trying to be white; he marries the Lantanacamaran Sarah and sheds his learned behavior: "His body began to accede to its in inherited nature. A faint echo of his father's curvature developed, all the more evident as he shed Wetlandish fashion and fell into dressing like an overseer" (49). However, when Lavinia comes to visit him and Sarah, Chandin immediately reassumes his British posture: "He began to dress impeccably, to speak with the accent and strut with the airs of the Wetlanders he once again seemed to so admire" (51).

While Chandin, in the neurotic pathology of the colonized object as described by Fanon, tries desperately to be more like Lavinia (or her father) in order to be loved by her, his wife Sarah does not change herself at all for Lavinia. Given the attention that the narrative pays to Chandin's displaced, "unnatural", transformation, it is suggested that this failed attempt to become like "the colonizer" adds to the insult when Lavinia ends up running away with her beloved Sarah. The extreme humiliation Chandin experiences when the two women leave him is similar to the emasculation of Cholly; in both cases we find a betrayal of desire. It is relevant in this respect to notice that the Reverend told Chandin to give up his desire for Lavinia, even though Chandin did not heed this command. With both Cholly and Chandin we thus find a white "colonizer" trying to control the desire of a colonized man. In Chandin's situation, however, the

insult has not just to do with race, but also with gender and sexual orientation. Cholly was humiliated by the white racists and turned his hatred towards the girl he was with, and implicitly towards himself. Chandin was basically humiliated by his own attempts to pass for white, while it was actually his sex that would have had to change for Lavinia to become potentially interested in him.

The connection in *Cereus Blooms* between the processes of psychic colonization and incestuous rape, then, is different from that in *The Bluest Eye*. This difference can be explained through the concerns of the narrator. The narrator, Nurse Tyler, is a Lantanacamaran who has studied in Britain, as well as a cross-dressing homosexual. In his narration of what happened to Chandin's daughter Pohpoh (later Mala), he continuously struggles (and fails) to keep his own story in the background. Simultaneously, he believes that his "queerness" is what allows him to narrate Mala's story in the first place:

I wonder what Nana would think if she knew the positions I was in that enabled me to gain the full story. For there were two: one, a shared queerness with Miss Ramchandin, which gave rise to the other, my proximity to the very Ramchandin Nana herself had known of. (48)

By mentioning his "proximity" to Chandin, Tyler links Chandin's incestuous sexual perversion to his own homosexual orientation:

I was preoccupied with trying to understand what was natural and what perverse, and who said so and why. Chandin Ramchandin played a part in confusing me about these

roles, for it was a long time before I could differentiate between his perversion and what others called mine. (48)

Given these remarks, we can interpret Tyler's narration as this attempt to distinguish between forms of "abnormality" that are actually perverse and those that are only perverse because they do not correspond to the hegemonic ideal: incest versus homosexuality.

*Cereus Blooms* as a whole thematizes genderbending and transsexualism as forms of fruitful metamorphosis. Tyler, for example, is elated when Mala offers him a female nurse's costume to wear (75-76). He expects Mala to respond excitedly to his transformation as well, but when she does not, he realizes that "to her mind, the outfit was not something to either congratulate or scorn – it simply was. She was not one to manacle nature" (77). Since it springs from Tyler's own desire, this form of "mimicry", of trying to look like the other gender, is deemed to be "natural" instead of "perverse". Thus, if Tyler is found to be abject by the other nurses or by Lantanacamaran society in general, this is not because of an inherent "dirtiness", but because of societal processes of normalization through exclusion. On the other hand, the metamorphosis caused by identifying with the colonizer is condemned through the vilification of Chandin. While the colonized subject may be abjected by the colonizer, his identification with the colonizer affirms that abjection. As we have seen, Chandin's mimicry was depicted as a betrayal of "natural" behavior; it was a means to an end (receiving admiration and love through being "whiter"), instead of an end in itself.

Chandin's rape of his own daughter partly functions to accentuate the evil of his misguided "unnaturalness". The first occurrence of rape is initially described in terms of mistaken identity, mirroring Chandin's own identity confusion: "One night he turned, his back to

Asha, and in a fitful, nightmarish sleep, mistook Pohpoh for Sarah” (65).<sup>5</sup> However, the “mistake” turns into genuine abuse when Chandin wakes up and takes Pohpoh by force, “breathing heavily like a mad dog” (66). As emphasized by the words “mad dog”, at that moment, Chandin’s abjection becomes complete, by his own volition. He has changed from the colonized into the colonizer, abusing his own child as a way to revenge his powerlessness. Like Cholly, he turns to someone weaker to affirm his own strength. He continues to tyrannize and abuse Pohpoh into her adulthood, when she names herself “Mala”. Strikingly, the community does not interfere, and even continues to pay Chandin some respect, because of his British, Christian education:

While many shunned him there were those who took pity, for he was once the much respected teacher of the Gospel, and such a man would take to the bottle and to his own child, they reasoned, only if he suffered some madness. And, they further reasoned, what man would not suffer a rage akin to insanity if his own wife, with a devilish mind of her own, left her own husband and children. Whether they disliked him or tolerated his existence, to everyone Chandin was Sir. (195)

The whole community, then, seems to suffer from the imposed delusion that equates whiteness with superiority. The disparity between the novel’s portrayal of Chandin as a downright gothic monster – a bad-smelling, drunken, raging tyrant who sleeps with his daughter – and the community’s insistence on calling him “Sir” exposes the irony of this community’s values. Tyler’s narration suggests that in valuing whiteness while devaluing queerness, and excusing



incest while demonizing homosexuality, this community misperceives what is “natural” and what is “unnatural”.

While incest functions to bring out Chandin’s actual abjectness, it simultaneously brings out the processes of abjection of the incest victim. Chandin is still called “Sir”, but Pohpoh/Mala becomes fully abject, in her own eyes as well as in those of the community. As the narrative indicates, Mala “had learned early the emotional bruising that came from whispered jeers and ice-cold stares” (192). Because of her feelings of guilt for the delay she caused when she and her sister tried to escape with their mother, as well as because of the shame that comes with being the victim of incest, Mala complies with playing the scapegoat. Her endless capacity for self-sacrifice starts when she saves her sister from sexual abuse by offering herself to her father, “as if it were nothing at all” (67). As a grown woman, Mala engages in a romantic affair with her childhood friend Ambrose, but her father finds out about them and beats and rapes Mala in a scene of horrific violence. She sobs, cries, and pleads for mercy, but she does not fight him. The next day, bruised and hurting, she actually feels shame and guilt herself: “After all, Mala berated herself, she should have known better than to cheat on her father” (224). This portrayal of the incest victim’s intense sense of victimhood and shame foregrounds the fact that being a victim of (incestuous) rape is different from being a victim of colonization: a victim of incest stands alone, while a victim of colonization is humiliated within her own social group. Moreover, this portrayal stresses the difference between the abjectness of the perpetrator and of the victim.

Mala and Chandin may be connected in a self-denial that only leads them to further abjection, but the processes of their abjection are clearly distinguished. They are valued differently by the narrator: Chandin’s “dirtiness” is the result of his own actions while Mala’s is not. Chandin’s self-denial is depicted as purely egotistic while Mala’s is altruistic. Furthermore,

Chandin's abjection is portrayed as utterly disgusting and purely negative, as is demonstrated most significantly by the fact that after Mala has killed him, his corpse, in a magic realist trope, continues to rot for decades. Chandin's rotting corpse establishes a haunting presence that signifies how colonialism, as well as other forms of abuse, continue to be present even in seeming absence.

Mala regains a sense of self after she has killed Chandin, her oppressor. Her abjection, or transformation, from then on is painted in rather celebratory colors. She excludes herself, retreating into a world of her own -- a world without language, but full of sensuous feeling:

Eventually Mala all but rid herself of words. The wings of a gull flapping through the air titillated her soul and awakened her toes and knobby knees, the palms of her withered hands, deep inside her womb, her vagina, lungs, stomach and heart. Every muscle of her body swelled, tingled, cringed or went numb in response to her surroundings – every fibre was sensitized in a way that words were unable to match or enhance. (126-27)

Mala thus rejects the modes of signification that society has handed her, to the point of rejecting language altogether. Instead, she prefers a discourse of bodily sensations: the sounds she still makes are “natural expansions and contractions of her body” (127). With both Chandin and Ambrose out of her life, she reclaims her body, her life, and her place in the world.

This place is among the abjected: “dirt” sustains the world of insects, plants and reptiles in her garden, in which life and death are inextricably linked. Like Pecola, Mala rummages through the dirt, but this dirt is her own, as the following description of her collection of decaying bugs points out:

The scent of decay was not offensive to her. It was the aroma of life refusing to end. It was the aroma of transformation. Such odour was proof that nothing truly ended, and she reveled in it as much as she did the fragrance of cereus blossoms along the back wall of the house. (128)

Through the detailed, sensual and gruesome descriptions of Mala's living among decay and transformation, Mootoo invites the reader to look at abjection and, like Mala, revel in it.

While the corpse of Chandin is a negative, traumatic haunting presence, the corpses of the bugs testify to a more positive conception of regeneration. It is important in this respect to notice that Lavinia first showed Mala that such creatures but specifically snails – which are not coincidentally hermaphrodites – can be beautiful (54). Moreover, Lavinia brought cereus cuttings for her and her sister, and when they were trying to escape together, the thing that slowed them down was Mala's forgetting her snail shells and cereus cutting (62). The bugs and cereus, then, are imbued with mixed emotions for Mala: innocence and guilt. By reclaiming them, she reconnects with her childhood and reworks her trauma. Corresponding to Kristeva's conception of the abject, "meaning collapses", but is also rebuilt. Through the metaphor of the blooming cereus – which is reminiscent of the mythological figure of the Phoenix – *Cereus Blooms* suggests that even, or especially, in the most abjected position there can be a sense of power – a rebirth waiting to happen.

Nonetheless, the celebratory aspect of abjection is countered by Mala's liminal status within society: she may have chosen to exclude herself, but she is also actually excluded. For the islanders, she becomes a crazy old lady. Without Tyler, who is himself excluded by society in a different way, her story would never have been heard. Tyler seems to offer Mala the "positive

space of meaning” that Kelly Oliver finds so crucial for gaining a sense of subjecthood within society. However, by becoming the narrator of her story, he has also appropriated her story, giving it his own interpretative framework of metamorphosis. He uses the discourse of abjection both to stress the evils of oppression and forsaking one’s self, and to romanticize the “naturalness” of “queerness”. Ultimately, in Tyler’s narration both colonialism and incestuous rape become subordinate to exposing homophobia and celebrating gender transformation. Within this account, Mala’s voicelessness is disturbing, offsetting Tyler’s positive valuation of her supposed dirtiness.

While the marigolds in Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* were not able to bloom at all in the unyielding earth, the cereus in Mootoo’s novel does bloom, in all its ugliness. However, the cereus only blooms at night, in the dark. Both novels, then, eventually suggest that without a positive space of meaning, victims of racial oppression and of sexual violence find themselves among the abjected, the dirt of the earth. As the emphasis of *Cereus Blooms* on “queerness” suggests, society has to show openness to alterity, both racially and sexually, in order to prevent the colonization of psychic space and its devastating effects. Yet, in all this emphasis on valuing that which society chooses to render abject, both novels confuse different forms of abjection. In *The Bluest Eye*, the connection between the abjection of blackness and the abjection of incest is made rather too directly. Like *The Bluest Eye*, *Cereus Blooms* portrays identity problems that come with being colonized as a fundamental factor in becoming a rapist, as if the dominant group’s exclusion drives the marginalized community incestuously inward.<sup>6</sup> These two fathers, in their intense self-hatred, turn toward their own flesh and blood, reclaiming it and simultaneously wounding it. The imagery is incredibly strong, but – as Tschofen has also argued in a different

context – the close association between colonization, or racism, and incest as abjected fails to account for the specificity of the processes by which incest and rape function to make one feel abjected.

*Cereus Blooms* does not use rape and abjection as metaphors as overtly as *The Bluest Eye*, which provides room for more nuanced interpretations. Also, the latter novel clearly makes a separation between abjection imposed by others and personal valuations of one's own abjection. Mala seems to have more critical distance to her abjection than Pecola, a distance which appears to correspond to the colonial contexts the authors are sketching. However, in *Cereus Blooms*' attempt to give a celebratory account of queerness on the island, even Mala's traumatic abjection becomes something positive, which does not seem to do justice to the traumatic nature of incest. If we follow Higgins and Silver's argument that it is crucial to look at who is telling the rape, we see that in both novels, the narrators have their own agenda: revaluing blackness and revaluing queerness. Meanwhile, the victims of incestuous rape are not in possession of their own stories. In that sense, the extent of these rape victims' abjection is emphasized at the same time that it is employed to stress less fundamental types of abjection.

The way incestuous rape is used in these novels to foreground other issues of victimization and abjection is thus effective but troubling. In order to make us take racism, or homophobia, seriously, is it necessary to invoke the comparison with incestuous rape? It hardly does justice to the particularity of incest and of rape to use them for a horror effect. However, precisely by offering us problematic associations between colonization or racism, incestuous rape and abjection, through narrators who are not too abjected to make meaning, both novels invite us to be critical of these associations. The horrors of incest and rape may be used strategically to stress the horrors of racism, colonization, and homophobia, but the extent of the

horror of incest and rape themselves collapses the association. Through their hyperbolic portrayals of abjection, these novels undermine the discourse of abjection at the same time as they reinscribe it. Moreover, in describing both the perpetrator and the victim of incestuous rape as abject, they bring out the different facets and values of abjection, and make us question our own conceptions of what constitutes an “abject” object. As the novels show, notions of contaminating uncleanliness can have devastating effects, which makes it important to revalue these notions, explore the social dynamics and question the processes of abjection and the rhetoric of rape.

## Notes

1. While the term “postcolonial” may suggest that colonialism is over, the term “paracolonial” clearly designates that the forces of oppression are ongoing (see Vizenor). The situation of African-Americans (especially during the period of racial segregation) would qualify as “paracolonial”. While the situation of having been brought by colonizers to a land that is not your own is different from having colonizers appropriate your land, in both cases we find the processes of racism and othering, as well as the colonized subject’s internalization of the values of the colonizer (as poignantly described by Frantz Fanon in *Black Skin, White Masks*).
2. This does not imply that either Morrison or Mootoo is consciously applying Kristeva’s theory or her specific discourse (which would be an anachronism in the case of Morrison). I am merely using the theoretical framework to suggest some possible mechanisms at work in these texts.

3. The cultural relevance of Morrison's references to the Dick and Jane stories, as well as to Shirley Temple, has been emphasized by many scholars; see, for example, Matus and Werrlein.
4. This biographic information has mainly been derived from Candice Dias' profile on Mootoo at emory.edu: <http://www.english.emory.edu/Bahri/Motoo.html>, visited: 23-04-2011.
5. For a more detailed account of how identity confusion and dislocated desire are connected to colonialism in *Cereus Blooms*, as well a discussion of homophobia in this novel, see May.
6. I would like to thank Professor Marlene Goldman of the University of Toronto for this specific comment, and for her general commentary on this article. Also, I would like to thank the anonymous *JPW* reviewers of this article for their suggestion that for further research on father/daughter rape in the context of the post-slavery Americas, the following novels might prove useful: Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, Octavia Butler's *Kindred*, and Simone Schwarz-Bart's *Ti-Jean L'horizon*.

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