Tarbiat Modares University

The International Journal of Humanities

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Received: 2023/03/8
Accepted: 2023/04/17
Published: 2023/09/01

# Alienation, Inferiority, and Assimilation in Edward P. Jones's *The Known World*

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How to cite this article: Pourgharib, Behzad; Maleki, Maria (2023). Alienation, Inferiority, and Assimilation in Edward P. Jones's The Known World, *The International Journal of Humanities* (2023) Vol. 30 (4): (78-93).

**Abstract**: In Postcolonialism the issue of the influential power of dominant hegemony over the resultants of cultural confrontation between colonized and colonizer is preponderantly under scrutiny. Frantz Fanon is an influential figure in building upon this conceptual framework; whose oeuvre is bestrewed with postulations regarding the consequences of colonization and racism on the identity, experience, and the psyche of colored people. By utilizing Fanon's thought, this paper intends to analyze different aspects of the black experience, such as alienation, inferiority, and assimilation in Edward P. Jones's Pulitzer-winning novel, *The Known World* (2003). Throughout the novel, the conduct of free or bonded black characters within the institution of slavery reflects that of the white culture, and Fanon's ideas are called upon to investigate the origin and possible consequence and implications of such behaviors.

**Keywords:** Post-colonial; White Gaze; Double Consciousness; Colonization; Racism; Identity.

## Introduction

Edward Paul Jones's neo-slave narrative novel *The Known World* (2003) is one of the few novels to feature a black slave owner. As expected, the institution of slavery takes central stage in the novel, and Jones builds on this crust a story which revolves around the former slave turned slave owner, Henry Townsend. The novel presents a plethora of different characters that are affected

by the social rules and conditions of their time; shedding light on how the dominant power structure shapes the identity of these characters is of primary concern in Jones's critical investigation.

In relation to the people of the color's suffering, Frantz Fanon published his seminal book *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952) which extensively deals with the neurosis permeating the psyche of black people as a result of the perceived difference in their character on account of their skin color. Fanon argues that living under such conditions creates a mental pathology among the black folk whose consequences include alienation. Additionally the perceived difference between the two races in racist communities could lead to an infestation of inferiority complex from the black people; "a lack of self-esteem when the person is unable to rectify his feelings of inferiority" (Hoffman, 2020: 6) which, according to Adler, would result in overcompensation in the form of "striving to find a situation in which they excel" (p.74). In Southern plutocracy, these types of situations are generally found through positions of power, and as such, there are a lot of characters in *The Known World* attempting to climb up the social ladder. This desire originates from "the wish to attain the level of humanity accorded to whites in racist/colonial contexts" (Hook, 2014: 118). Furthermore, an assimilation of the white culture takes place inherently among black people whereby they tend to replicate the structure of oppression that has smothered them historically.

As a postcolonial analysis which mainly draws upon Fanon's ideas, this research aims to investigate the alienation, inferiority complex, and assimilation in *The Known World*. After a quick review of literature, the first section deals with alienation and how capital is a deciding factor in determining someone's worth. The second section will investigate how certain characters in the novel venture to camouflage their inferiority by attaining positions of power. And finally the third section will look into the assimilation exhibited by various characters throughout the novel, followed by a concise conclusion.

**Literature Review**

As the most prominent theme in *The Known World*, many critics concentrated on the slavery and anti-slavery movement of the antebellum South. Among them, Carolyn Vellenga Berman (2009) in her "*The Known World* in World Literature: Bakhtin, Glissant, and Edward P. Jones" discusses the ambiguities resulting from having a black slave owner. It might have looked promisingly, yet the novel would represent the destruction of such an idyll, which is represented by the plantation. Furthermore it points out the significant importance of the property and the fact that the black owners would have to wear masks if they wanted to simply rule over the slaves.

In the same way, in "Imagining Other Worlds: Gender, and the "Power Line" in Edward P. Jones's 'The Known World'", Katherine Clay Bassard (2008), while analyzing Jones's novel, concludes that the writer would dismantle the past as well as the present notions of power which have resulted from race and gender. She has an almost historical reading of the novel in which she considers some related notions such as property right and family ties in the background of the novel.

Looking differently on the novel, Ignatius Chukwumah in "Mimetic Desire and the Complication of the Conventional Neo-Slave Narrative Form in Edward P. Jones's *The Known World*" offers a new insight into it. While mentioning that it has been taken as an example of the neo-slave narrative, the author argues that the novel is something more complicated, since although it claims to be anti-slavery, it has a black person who has achieved the status of an owner.

The concept of white supremacy is considered in "White Supremacy under Fire: The Unrewarded Perspective in Edward P. Jones's *The Known World*" by David Ikard (2011) who undermine the claims of the black owners attributing more moral and ethical view to themselves, compared to the white owners. Rather than perceiving such owners who would do their best in order to compensate for the cruelty they experienced before entering the business, the paper

proves that such a purpose was futile as there would be no significant difference between the white and black landlords.

While emphasizing the difference between *The Known World* and some other black narratives, Seger (2014) believes that ekphrasis in the novel results in two different conclusions; the fact that this novel is more a pseudorealist work of art and that it is taken to belong to postmodern slave narratives which create a different historiography of slavery. Doing so, the paper would be expanding the limited definition of the postmodern slave narrative as defined by Spaulding.

**Alienation and Capital**

Frantz Fanon's conception of alienation in his master-slave dialectic is a continuation of Hegel's master-slave dialectic, in which Fanon asserts that the alienation a colonized subject feels is derived from the dearth of recognition from the master. This creates an inferiority complex in the slave, leaving him with the desire and obsession to emulate the master or, as Fanon declares, "to be white" (xiii). However, the alienation is not only limited to the psyche, but it also expands to the realm of economics. It is wealth that determines the value of human beings in the world of Southern plantocracy. The institution of slavery might have started with an agenda against dark skin, but its continuation through the century followed a desire to establish superiority over others through fiscal gains. Since slaves are denied this right, the prospect of gaining wealth, even by owning slaves, becomes an appealing possibility that could demolish their mental image of who they are as black people. This bifurcated conundrum of alienation is aptly demonstrated in *The Known World*, especially in regard to Henry.

Henry is a black man born into the slavery of William Robbins. His parents, Augustus and Mildred, were also Robbins's property until Augustus bought his freedom and that of his wife, leaving Henry to grow up under Robbins's care. Separated from his parents, Henry does not get the opportunity to be indoctrinated by his family on the values and beliefs that permeate the

black lives. Inspired by Robbins, he strives to redeem his "lost self" by yearning for power instead of freedom (Elahi & Nojoumani; 2019).As such, he does his utmost to ingratiate himself to Robbins "in order to 'fit in'" and secure a good position under his rule (Pourgharib & Kiani, & Ziadbakhsh; 2018).The relationship between Henry and Robbins continues as before even after former's emancipation. Conversely, his parents fulfilled no role in his growth during these years. Henry's alienation from his family is most markedly felt by Augustus when he is accompanied by Henry to a shipping agent:

About halfway the trip home, the man realized that these had been his son's first days of freedom. He and Mildred had planned a week of celebration, culminating with neighbors coming by the next Sunday. Augustus said, "You feelin any different?"

"Bout what?" Henry said. He was holding the reins to the mules.

"Bout bein free? Bout not bein nobody's slave?"

"No, sir, I don't reckon I do." He wanted to know if he was supposed to, but he did not know how to ask that. He wondered who was waiting now for Robbins to come riding up on Sir Guilderham. (49)

As it is evident, Augustus's son does not discern the meaning of emancipation. Born and raised in a white household away from his family, he is not familiar with the notion of fighting for one's freedom. That's why his supposed emancipation does not feel like one to him. He is too deeply entrenched in his bondage with his white master. Inspired by the ideology of "the economic opportunity that was imperative in order for former slaves to compete equally with whites and to realize the American dream" (Bell 8), Henry adopts the white attitude of equating success with ownership. He learns the workings of the power structure in the plutocracy and familiarizes himself with the institution of slavery. His purchase of a land and development of a plantation of his own is the key to his entry into the superior echelon of the society and grants him access into a "financial whiteness" (Kirlew, 2014: 75). Doubly alienated, both from his family and from the people with higher status, he emulates his white master in order to move up the ladder of social

status. The blueprint to having a good life for Henry is the only good life he knows, that of his master's. Thus, he proceeds to reconstruct his life in the same vein as his white master and becomes a slave owner, foregoing his identity as a black slave in the process. His relationship with his first slave, Moses, acts as a turning point in Henry's life regarding his alienation from his identity as a black man. Initially treated like a friend, Moses is soon degraded to the position of owned property when Robbins reminds Henry of the dynamics of slavery:

The law expects you to know what is master and what is slave. And it does not matter if you are not much darker than your slave. The law is blind to that. You are the master and that is all the law wants to know. The law will come to you and stand behind you. But if you roll around and be a playmate to your property, and your property turns round and bites you, the law will come to you still, but it will not come with the full heart and all the deliberate speed that you will need. (123)

Robbins's words perfectly capture the spirit of the South in that the institution is higher than any single individual. Standing at the top renders Henry a respectable man in public eye, thereby giving him the social status he craves. In his influential work *The Black Bourgeoisie* (1955), E. Franklin Frazier memorably lays bare this attitude among the black people, stating that, "the single factor that has dominated the mental outlook of the black bourgeoisie has been its obsession with the struggle for status" (1997: 236). In the abovementioned passage, Robbins touches exactly upon this principle. Indeed, as long as Henry is a master, "the law is blind" toward his skin color. Accordingly, upon hearing this, Henry embraces his complete transformation into a master by slapping Moses to remind him of his place as a slave (64). He learns that the whole institution of slavery is founded upon objectification of slaves and treating them like owned property and the legal set-up of the plantocracy resists any form of leniency in the composition. The master-slave boundary is too sacred to be broken. Henry's encounter with Moses maintains the already-established power equilibrium between the master and the slave.

This whole ordeal takes him one step further away from his identity as a black man, as delineated adroitly in his confrontation with Augustus:

"You mean tell me you bought a man and he yours now? You done bought him and you didn't free that man? You *own* a man, Henry?"

"Yes. Well, yes, Papa,"

. . .

"Don't you know the wrong of that, Henry?" Augustus said.

"Nobody never told me the wrong of that."

"Why should anybody haveta teach you the wrong, son?" Augustus said. "Ain't you got eyes to see it without me tellin you?"

. . .

"I ain't done nothin that any white man wouldn't do. I ain't broke no law. I ain't. You listen here." (138)

The argument soon takes a malicious turn as Henry uses the legal composition as justification for his actions. Henry's deflection of the reprehensible thing he has done by insisting that he hasn't done anything illegal is an implication of his emulating mechanism to be successful (white) by implementing the same set of mechanics that the white man utilizes, namely, residing at the top of the capital pyramid through plantocracy. To put it better, it seems that "white could convince black people that they are inferior and only white are right and the tragic part is the fact that some Negros form their self-image on the base of what white racist defined for them" (Esmikhani & Poorgharib; 2016: 25), which is the same thing that Henry does.

Moses is arguably the most alienated character in the world of the novel. As a field slave he is apart from the house slaves and as an overseer he is distanced even from his fellow field slaves. He finds comfort in the wild and Jones repeatedly uses the imagery of nature to convey Moses's sense of isolation in the world. He sets himself apart from his family and finds strength in nature and eating dirt. Indeed, dirt illustrates his strong connection to the only thing he knows the best

in his small world of slavery, the field; "he ate it not only to discover the strengths and weaknesses of the field, but because the eating of it tied him to the only thing in his small world that meant almost as much as his own life" (2). Moses's self-isolation ensues from his disillusionment with the way of the world in Southern plantations. His first crushing blow presented itself in the form of separation from the love of his life, Bessie, at an auction. This incident touches Moses deeply as he realizes that the world of the white man does not intend to treat his race kindly. Furthermore, his slavery to his own race disenchants him further about his position as a black man, "It took Moses more than two weeks to come to understand that someone wasn't fiddling with him and that indeed a black man, two shades darker than himself, owned him and any shadow he made" (8-9).

The world of slavery known by Moses had been formed on the basis of white superiority, but the sight of a black master warps his view of the reality even more than before, verifying that it is indeed the capital that governs everything around him. Accordingly, Moses is disoriented through the novel, unable to form any meaningful relationship with anyone unless for the sake of gaining power. Moses's attempts at winning over Caldonia, Henry's wife, hint at his desire of taking his master's place and ultimately gaining a "new identity beyond contractual constraints"(Boroumand, Safoura; 2022). While this endeavor temporarily beings him closer to a seat of power, he soon realizes that he is in fact more estranged from his fellow slaves than ever before.

**Superior Inferiority**

While explaining about the relations between the white and the black people, Fanon concludes that "the race must be whitened" (2008: 47), which points to the all-important issue of becoming as much white as possible for the black people in order to enjoy the privileges such people have. Further on, he argues that "we understand now why black man cannot take pleasure in his insularity. For him there is only one way out, and it leads to the white world" (ibid. 51). As the

result Fanon believes that no matter how hard and tirelessly a non-white person works and saves, he or she will never be equal to a white person. Therefore since the black cannot defeat the white, the only way is to endeavor to be like them or rather to identify with them or as Anna Freud defined it as "identification with the aggressor" (1966: 116).

Instead of rising against the oppressive prejudice rampant in the South, Henry becomes an accomplice of it. As Bertram Wyatt-Brown explains, this behavior is not "to win favor from masters" but "to raise their own low self-esteem and create a distance between themselves and whites whose own position was equally low" (1992: 137-8). This is aptly captured in Henry's life as he is seeking a position of power to overcome his sense of inferiority and hoist himself up by bringing others down. Purchasing slaves and the way he treats Moses are testimony to this. To Henry, and all other black slave owners, being black does not matter as long as there are other black people of low standing below them. As Katherine Bassard elucidates, this behavior constitutes "a will to (white) power and privilege as a way of mitigating blackness" (2008: 408).

In the world of *The Known World*, there are many black characters who strive to occupy the power seats so as to reduce the prejudice they encounter on a daily basis. However, any forms of assimilation are met with resistance by white culture. Although, being a slave owner creates some distance between Henry and his slaves in terms of class and prestige, the fact of the matter remains that he is still a man of color. This is most sensitively felt in the fact the Henry refuses to visit the slave market in person so as not to put himself out in the open to be recognized as a black man. This perfectly showcases what Fanon calls the white gaze and its debilitating effects. Fanon makes clear that no matter what he does; his appearance is the ultimate determinant of his worth: "I'm not given a second chance. I am over determined from the outside. I am a slave not to the "idea" others have of me, but to my appearance" (95).

Thus, the white gaze is a constant reminder of the inferiority associated with black people, regardless of their social status. It is not logical. But it cuts deep nevertheless, for "the white gaze is not only the look; it is the crushing weight unto Blackness" (Sithole 2005: 6). As such, it is understandable why Henry refuses to show up at such events and prefers to keep up the façade of

being a white man to uninformed eyes; even a liberated and slave owner black man could feel inferior by a simple look of the white man. Additionally, there are various instances where the white/black binary instills a sense of inferiority into Henry's life regardless of his position of power. When he becomes ill and the white doctor visits him through Maud's suggestion, the prevailing racial discrimination is apparent:

The white people's doctor had come the morning of the first day, as a favor to Caldonia's mother, who believed in the magic of white people, but that doctor had only pronounced that Moses's master, Henry Townsend, was going through a bad spell and would recover soon. The ailments of white people and black people were different, and a man who specialized in one was not expected to know much about the other, and that was something he believed Caldonia should know without him telling her. (4)

This passage clearly delineates the popularized fact that blacks and whites are presumed to be different even to the extent of their diseases. Their position as land or slave owner does not alter the fact that they are permanently separated from the empowered colonial whites. Thus, Henry's attempts at achieving a superior class position as a means of soothing his inferiority complex is ultimately betrayed by the white culture which does not allow him to escape his pre-defined inferiority. It's quite ironic that for all of Henry's endeavors to reach the top of the class chain, he is still in truth his father's property. The very same law that he used as justification for his actions clearly declares that Augustus legally own him because he "purchased" him from Robbins.

Beside Henry, other characters exhibit the same desire to overcome their sense of inferiority, as well. Maude is an example of a perfectly assimilated person into whiteness. As a free black woman, she own slaves and her sickly obsession with power and slaves whom she calls "legacies" culminates in her wicked act of poisoning her husband, lest he frees the slaves. Her pertinacity on retaining power corresponds with her fear of losing their legitimacy since their family belongs to the inferior race. To her, owning slaves is "the foundation of wealth" and thereby secures a position well above the average black people (180). This ideology is translated to Caldonia, as

well. Presented with the opportunity of freeing the slaves, she instead opts to keep things running as before. She prefers to view life in "rose-tinted glasses" and even though she is a gentle black woman, she is "a part of the chain of discrimination by turning a blind eye to its reality and brutality" (Ayakan 2021: 75). On the other hand, her being a perpetuator of slave-owning is reinforced by the underlying backup of religious thoughts. Caldonia justifies their doing as assuming themselves as the mediator of God; believing her husband to be the "shepherd master God had intended" (180). Caldonia also takes advantage of her position to boost her spirit by having Moses to tell stories and share memories about her deceased husband. This takes a turn of having sexual affair with Moses, in order to further the illusion of having lived in a happy plantation alongside Henry. Just like her husband, she needs to believe that they were in fact noble people, doing the right thing, however, just like her husband's, her vision proves to be based on lies, for Moses "weave[s] the most imaginative story" just to get close to her (273). Moses's ploy of sleeping with Caldonia is directly derived from the desire to replicate Henry's life path, just like Henry had done so before by using Robbins as a role model. That's why Moses thinks that marrying Caldonia could pave the way for him to replace Henry as the head of the Townsend family and become a person of high status. During this development, Moses, who started as a slave himself, becomes ever more cruel and distant to those below.



**Assimilation**

Assimilation is a symptom of an oppressive double consciousness, to borrow W. E. B. DuBois's term, which exists in the psyche of the black people. This means that the black people are always wary of how they are perceived by their white counterparts, and as such, try to do well before the white man's eyes. In contrast, white people "do not even have to realize that they are seen by and as racial others" (Black 2007: 396). This is the prime difference between the two races in the plantocracy of the South, whereby according to Fanon, black people, always feeling as the Other, endeavor tirelessly to follow the footsteps arranged for them by the white culture. According to

DuBois, "this, then, is the end of his striving; to be a co-worker in the kingdom of culture" (2007: 9). *The Known World* is ripe with characters who leave no stones unturned to preserve the cultural structure upheld by white people.

Fern Elston thoroughly represents this attitude in the novel to the point of becoming entangled in paradox. Born to a family that "in four generations, had managed to produce people who could easily pass for white," she is a teacher for the free black community (74). Despite the Elston family enjoying the cultural and social privileges that follow a person of white colour, Fern seemingly repudiates such luxury and refuses to renounce her African blood, going as far as marrying a person of distinct colour. Yet, her light skin provides her with special privileges which she utilizes in her interactions with white people to build herself a strong position as a slaveholder. There Fern's acknowledgment of her roots and indifference toward light skin does not produce in her the desire to change and encourage others to do the same. Instead, she actively reproduces the same mechanisms that white people have put in place, namely, the institution of slavery. Even though she endeavors to act differently and places the slaves "in quarters closer to their masters than any hands at any plantation or farm in Virginia," the pervasive dominant mindset of the South is firmly imprinted on her mind (134).

Such moral shortcomings in the face virtue signaling by black people, as David Ikard maintains, "it demonstrates that their claims to higher moral and ethical grounds on the basis of their status as former slaves and/or victims of white supremacist domination are but an extension of white supremacist slavery ideology" (2011: 79). Fern's duality and later internal conflicts are delineated in her interactions with Jebediah, one of her slaves, whom she initially purchased with the intention of emancipating him. However, Fern's philanthropic aims take a back seat once Jebediah impudently makes a sexual remark about her and she assumes the traditional position of a slave owner who needs to put their slave back in his place: "Fern never like[d] to flog slaves; for every whip mark on one slave's back, she estimated that his value came down $5. But, there were some unforgivable matters in the world" (259). This encounter showcases how Fern has

unwittingly assimilated the dominant mindset of slavery and regards her slaves as owned property whose price could be reduced by bodily harm.

Such assimilation has taken place in the case of Calvin, too. He is considered to be an outsider in the free black community on account of his abolitionist thinking. He endeavors to convince his mother into freeing their slaves and her sister into giving up the legacies and the slave-holding business, but to no avail. His family's complete absorption in the Southern culture and their imitation of white people makes him realize very soon that his efforts would be fruitless. As he does not approve of his family's deeds, he carries a burden of guilt inside him because he is nonetheless a part of the slave owning family. He has lived in her mother's house "which was run by slaves. Ate the food they prepared. Slept in a bed they made. Wore clothes they cleaned" (186). In a conversation about the civil war and abolitionism, Calvin confirms that he would be on the slaves' side:

"You wouldn't help out the precious slaves?" Louis said.

"Well, now that you say it, now that you put the matter out there, I think I would."

Caldonia laughed. "Do you think Mama would let you take up arms against her?" In their minds they all saw Maude—arms folded, foot tapping in an exasperated manner—and laughed." (290)

Again, Maude's formidable thoughts in relation to the system is highlighted which implies the inevitable fact that if he really wants to stick to his beliefs by taking action, he must stand against his own mother. But Calvin is a kind-hearted person who loves his mother despite the chasm between them. His commitment in conjunction to his caring spirit makes him to be by his family's side in his social representation. He is the only character who is sophisticated enough to vividly discern the heinousness of the slavery system but he can do little to root it out.

**Conclusion**

One of the rare books to feature a black slave owner, Edward P. Jones's *The Known World* brings a vast array of topics while preserving the central motif of blacks wanting to turn white. Aided by

Fanon, this paper examined the three most important aspects of the neurosis that result from this desire to turn white, namely alienation, inferiority, and assimilation. Left on their own and subject to the white structure of power, Henry and Moses try to replicate that structure, which leads to their alienation from both black folks and white people. The inferiority felt by Henry and Moses prompts them to strive for positions of higher power as a means of veiling their sense of inferiority. However, such positions, either as the master or the overseer, do not exempt them from being subjected to the white gaze, which degrades black people on the spot on account of their skin color. Maud and Caldonia also demonstrate a fascination with retaining their position of power in order to avoid sinking below the threshold of being respectable people. In Caldonia's case, she also uses her position to sexually manipulate Moses into fabricating stories that would directly feed into her fantasies of their livelihood. Lastly, this paper investigated the assimilation of white culture by the black folk. Fern Elston and Calvin are prime examples of this assimilation. Conscious of their position as racial beings, they cannot act against the system they so vehemently repudiate, despite their good intentions. As such, *The Known World* traces different reactions to the insecurities caused by a difference in skin color.

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*The International Journal of Humanities* (2023) Vol. 30 (4): (78-93)

The International Journal of Humanities

# بیگانگی ، حس حقارت و ادغام شدگی در دنیای آشنا اثر ادوارد پی جونز

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## چکیده

در مکتب پسااستعماری غالباً قدرت تأثیرگذار هژمونی مسلط بر نتایج رویارویی فرهنگی بین استعمارگر و استعمارشده تحت بررسی است. فرانتس فانون یک چهره تأثیرگذار در شکل‌دهی این چهارچوب نظری ست، کسی که کارهایش مملو از موضوعات و فرضیات در ارتباط با عواقب استعمارگری و نژادپرستی بر هویت–حس تجربی و روان رنگین پوستان است. با بهره‌بری از ایده‌های فانون، این مطالعه تلاش دارد که ابعاد مختلفی از تجربیات زندگی سیاه‌پوستان را مانند بیگانگی–حس حقارت و ادغام شدگی در رمان برنده جایزه پولیتزر ادوارد پی جونز به نام دنیای آشنا تحلیل کند. در این رمان اعمال کارکترهای سیاه پوست آزاد یا برده در سیستم برده‌داری بازتابی از فرهنگ سفیدپوستی است و ایده‌های فانون برای بررسی ریشه و علت و عواقب و پیامدهای احتمالی این‌گونه رفتارها به کار گرفته شده‌اند.

**واژه‌های کلیدی:** پسااستعمار، نگاه سفید، دوگانگی ذهن، استعمارگرایی، نژادپرستی، هویت.