

FREEDOM AND IDENTITY IN THE UNITED STATES: A STUDY OF TOOMER'S *CANE* AND BALDWIN'S *THE FIRE NEXT TIME*

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Abstract

The United States is the world's policeman for democracy; but despite her alleged egalitarian policy, racism has been utilized to suppress "the people of color", especially the African American people. This work uses Jean Toomer's *Cane* and James Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time* to examine the concepts of freedom and identify in America; and proposes that true democracy lies on the implementation of racial equality for all citizens of the United States.

Introduction

The United States, more than any other democracy in Europe and America, has espoused freedom for her citizens as a major tenet of state policies. Being the oldest democracy, her affirmation of inalienable rights for humankind despite race and descent has made her the world's policeman for democracy in international politics. But despite this egalitarian creed, there has been an intense search for freedom among the multi-racial groups in the United States because the dominant Anglo-Saxon group arrogates to itself a superior position in the social system while the other ethnic groups are assigned an inferior status.

The insistence on hereditary superiority by the Anglo-Saxon whites and the condemnation of Blacks to the most inferior position on the social hierarchy among the "people of color" marked the genesis of racial discrimination in the United States. According to Article 1 of the United Nation's International Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Racial discrimination, this form of injustice refers to:

... Any distinction, exclusion, restriction or preference based on race, colour, descent or nationality or ethnic origin which has the purpose or effect of nullifying or impairing the recognition, enjoyment or exercise, on an equal footing, of human rights and fundamental freedom in the political, economic, social, cultural or any other field of public life.

The above constitutes the racial mountain which has obstructed the African-American people from aspiring, towards the American dream of possibility for all at the same rate with their Anglo-American counterparts. African-Americans were forcefully uprooted from their ancestral home in Africa and planted in the New World as slaves four centuries ago. At Emancipation, they were not accorded constituent rights as citizens. Rather slavery was institutionalized and as Sir Rupert John reports in the famous Dred Scott Case of 1857, Chief Justice Taney declared that "Negroes were beings of an inferior order ... so far inferior that they had no rights which the white man was bound to respect" (3). The Court of Appeals of Mississippi supported this declaration when in 1859, it ruled that "masters and slaves were subject to different laws

because masters possessed moral standards and slaves did not" (Higginbotham 31-2). This was the beginning of the Black people's dilemma for as W. E. B. Dubois explains, the word "Negro was used for the first time in history to tie color and race to slavery and degradation" (20).

The Jim Crow system, lynching of Blacks by racist groups such as the Ku Klux Klan and the dehumanization of people of African descent in America have been justified by the conferment of an outsider status on them. The preoccupation with racism, Imoh Emenyi, says in "Gender and Culture Dialogue..." has challenged "the American idea of equality and problematises the issue of social advancement" (67). Consequently, racism compels the African-American people to re-examine their future in the United States as they struggle for freedom and identity as well as design or adopt new strategies for contending for their inclusion in mainstream culture on equal status with whites. Here lies the thrust of this work-how America's emphasis on freedom affects the African American people and the tension associated with their search for this dream as revealed in Jean Toomer's *Cane* and James Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time*.

Freedom and Identity in Toomer's *Cane*

Ever since racism and its institutionalization made man "essentially a social problem" (to use the words of Sir Rupert John), the African American has become actively involved with fashioning a functional identity for him/herself in America. The mode usually depends on the realities of the time. Toomer's *Cane* represents an aspect of this search for meaning through the identification of the folk tradition as the panacea for radical racial differentiation in America. The resurgence of folk culture in America at the opening decades of the twentieth century was known as the Harlem Renaissance, a period when artistic creations of Blacks such as poetry, prose, music or painting were promoted with a sense of urgency.

This re-awakening was a search for a distinctive Negro culture and whatever is "distinctively Negro," Robert Bone observes, "is likely to be of slave origin" (65). Toomer's *Cane* is a celebration of the beauty of Blackness with its pains and agonies just before the folk tradition is destroyed by modernism. The search for freedom and identify by the narrator begins in Part One in Georgia and proceeds to Washington D. C. in Part Two before he returns to Georgia in Part Three where he finally resolves the crisis in his identity.

The tripartite structure of *Cane* makes it a modernist and experimental work because it contains poetry, sketches and a closet drama. But despite its fragmented physical structure, the literary pieces in the three sections of *Cane* are linked by a set of soil images, especially "cane" and "dusk". The narrator's quest for identity in the South takes him to the cane fields where he explores the lives of seven women-Karintha, Becky, Carma, Esther, Fern, Louisa and Cloine through sketches and poetry enacted at dusk. In "Karintha", a young girl who observes her parents making love in their two-room apartment transfers this

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observation into concrete reality by offering herself to men who are unconscious that "the soul of her was a growing thing ripened too soon" (2).

The situation of Karintha's parents portrays the lives of many African Americans in the ghettos and slums in the South where they languish in poverty in the midst of material prosperity. If, indeed, all men are equal, why should some members of this society live in a Third World situation when they are in a First World country? But since racism is inextricably linked with sexism in America, Carma adopts masculine behaviours, may be, because they are positively valued for survival.

However, the suffering of Karintha and Carma assumes a cultural dimension in "Fern" which shows a black beauty who combines the anguished past of the Jewish and African American people. The dissipation in African American women is also seen in the beautiful Cloine in "Evening Song". She sleeps and dreams in order to escape the realities of African American life. Esther, the middle-class Black girl in "Esther" transcends a similar situation by passing as white. But Becky, the white woman who violates the Southern law on miscegenation by having two sons for a black man lives a buried life. Becky's fears, pains and agonies are shown in the poem, "Face" where the persona's crushed aspirations are reflected on her face. This is why "Song of the Son" "raises a lamentation on the destruction of these enigmatic women who symbolise the African cultural heritage. The spirituals they sing is the music of the departing race that is totally engulfed by the moon which serves as a major symbol of Western civilization in *Cane*.

The narrator's search for freedom and identify in Part One ends with the realisation that the black race has deteriorated from "a departing sun" to the "old tree". This suggests that the past glory of an age has been substituted for a wretched survivor of an epoch. The "bare" structure of the tree signifies the bitter experiences of the black people in America and the constant destruction of their hope for social justice which has continued even in recent times. With this awareness, the detached narrator in Part Two of *Cane* moves to Seventh Avenue, a street in Washington D.C. where he recaptures the tension in African American life through archetypal figures.

The people in Seventh Avenue are rootless and fragmented; and so the character in "Rhobert", for instance, wears a house like a helmet and dies under it. This is a critique of Western capitalism and its emphasis on property ownership. In "Avey", the character loses her ability to react positively to suffering and takes to prostitution as a survival strategy. One attribute slavery imposed on the African American women was the belief that she has an insatiable sexuality, so slavery as Adele Alexander intimates made her "the only women in America for whom virtue was not an ornament and a necessity" (16).

The intensity of racial classification in Washington, D.C. restricts the characters in Part Two of *Cane* from achieving meaningful human relationship. This is why John and Doris cannot cultivate friendship. The same is applicable to Bona and Paul in the sketch that goes by the same name. Again, these failed

relationships provoke a lament which the persona of the poem "Beehive" does through spirituals. Yet though song is the basis for self-expression in this section, it is not an avenue for deliverance as it is in Part One. Song in Part Two produces scorn. Herbert Rice acknowledges this structural development when he says that the change "from evening to night, from dying to decay, from seriousness to sarcasm is the movement of imagery in the first stories in Part Two of *Cane*" (447).

And so, most of the characters in Part Two are completely surrounded by the "moon" as they are soaked in middle class restraints. This is the reason they reject the roots of African American experience in Part Three which has a closet drama named after its protagonist, Kabnis. Kabnis is an African American intellectual, a school teacher from the North but he finds it difficult to accept "the pain and beauty" of African American life in the South. This is why he isolates himself from his ancestral past, represented by Father John.

Therefore, *Cane* is the product of Toomer's search for identity in America and grows out of his experience of folk culture in Georgia during a visit in 1921. Apart from the subject matter, Toomer continues the search for identity through his characters. His women are strange beings, especially Karantha, Fern and Carma whom Richard Elridge calls "poetic untouchables" because they do not reciprocate the appeal they instigate in men" (201). These women blend suffering and beauty so perfectly that each of them is a mystery. Their beauty symbolises Africa as a lost paradise so the characters are ambivalent to the African motif.

Yet Kabnis is the closest character to Toomer in *Cane*. In a letter to Waldo Frank, Toomer says "Kabnis is me" (Faulker 4); and so, Kabnis' rejection of Father John illustrates Toomer's dislocation from the source of folk experience. Kabnis provides the narrative voice which unites the three sections of *Cane*. He opens in Part One as a detached observer and closes in Part Three as an artist which justifies Susan Blake's description of the narrator as "the spectatorial artist" (516). The impulse which created *Cane* was that of a determined race – men but when the subject of the work defined the book as a "Negro" text, "Toomer rejected it, having realised that the freedom available to African Americans can only lead them to the periphery of the American Dream.

Freedom and Identity in The Fire Next Time

Born in Harlem during the Negro Renaissance and having witnessed the intense racial bigotry which followed that cultural rebirth, Baldwin's autobiographical essay addressed to his nephew, James, hits the foundations of race conflicts in the United States. This is because America as Toni Morrison reveals is "a nation of people who *decided* that their world view would combine agendas for individual freedom *and* mechanisms for devastating racial oppression" (xiii). This readily explains why the African American's alleged moral and biological inferiority stigmatises him as a man who in Baldwin's words must "make peace with mediocrity" in all aspects of his life (16).

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And so, a vast majority of African Americans adopt negative strategies for survival, some of them become pimps, whores and racketeers; others drink themselves to death; quite a number die in poverty; many contemplate suicide as if it is the cessation of all sorrows, a group make their homes in jail because of their anti – social activities; while the unemployed graduates take to the streets “cursing, fighting, sometimes weeping...” (25). These deplorable situations have made the quest for freedom and identity paramount issues in African American Literature.

For James Baldwin, this search drives him into the church because the pressures from the white society have inculcated a deep sense of insecurity in him as an African American. According to Edward Margolies this institution gives the African American “a socially acceptable outlet for his rage, his terror, and his frustrations in its thinly veiled apocalyptic warnings, its evangelical fervor, and its promises of a better life to come” (103 – 4). This represents an epoch in the African American experience when the deprived masses trusted in divine intervention for deliverance from racial suppression.

The narrator’s plunge into the Christian faith as a minister of the Pentecostal Faith Church at fourteen is an attempt to define himself against the prescriptions of the white society . This is his first act of individual assertion and a repudiation of the influence of his authoritarian step – father, David Baldwin, but despite the initial spiritual satisfaction, his enthusiasm gradually dissipates because of the basic contradictions between white orthodox Christian principles and lived reality in America. The Church is also plagued by the vices in the wider society; it is morally bankrupt; it accommodates racial tension, denominational conflicts and hatred among ministers.

These startling discoveries result in the continuation of the narrator’s search for a functional identity which leads to his rejection of the church at seventeen and the identification with the creative spirit of his High School days. The narrator’s life as an artist begins as an attempt to “save” himself from the despair and tension in his society; but when this fails, he sets out on self – expatriation to Paris in 1948. In *Ethnic Writers in America*, Baldwin confessed why he adopted that strategy as an avenue for evolving a new identity: “I left America because I doubted my ability to survive the fury of the color problem here” (293).

This conscious isolation from African American experience also means an aspiration towards “literary whiteness” which is the subject of Morrison’s discussion in *Playing in the Dark*. In this investigative dissection of U.S. fiction, Morrison dares to ask a very revealing question “What happens to the writerly imagination of a black author who is at some level always conscious of representing one’s own race to, or in spite of, a race of readers that understands itself to be ‘universal’ or race – free?” (xii). The above reflects the pressures that American’s racial politics imposes on the creative vision. But the encounter with racism in France reveals to Baldwin as he states in *The Fire Next Time* that there is no Heaven “in this fearfully troubled world”.

This realisation leads to the acceptance of his black self and the return to American in 1957 in order to reconstruct his vision of reality. Since the collective conscience of America locates the African American people like "a fixed star, as an immovable pillar" "in the ghettos, their survival despite the intensity of racial animosity threatens America's racial memory but propels blacks to adopt a separatist ideology in their pursuit of freedom and identity.

Incidentally, the separatist ideology as advocated by Elijah Mohammed through the Nation of Islam serves as a revolutionary vision that instills fear in white Americans and pride in the African Americans. Its tenets invert the principles that American uses to justify the oppression of her black population and celebrate them. Baldwin's sympathy towards the Black Muslims notwithstanding, he dismisses separatism as an unrealistic medium for achieving freedom because of the bitterness and hatred which inform this vision. Rather than destroy whites, the narrator preaches a humanism which upholds the moral superiority of African Americans above their oppressors as another means of designing an appropriate identity in America.

This humanism is a plea for love because American whites have not realised that their fate is intertwined with that of their black brothers. Love is the "force" that shall compel the white brothers "to see themselves as they are, to cease fleeing from reality and begin to change it" (17). Being an autobiographical essay, the narrator is James Baldwin himself. The humanistic vision which produces his attack on Richard Wright for his inability to transcend the bleakness of African American life in *Notes of a Native Son* in 1964 gradually gives way to protest, may be, because he has lived long enough to test his hypothesis. And so, the awareness that the white people control political power in America and use it to intimidate African Americans draws him towards the protest tradition in African American literature.

But though he does not achieve Wright's level of protest, he nevertheless affirms his personal responsibility for freedom in America when he declares: "it is entirely acceptable that I should have no voice in the political affairs of my own country for I am not a ward of America; I am one of the first Americans to arrive on these shores" (83). This change in tone is traceable to the realization that his humanism has done little to improve the status of African American people who came under a more severe racial bigotry in the 1960s, especially with the assassinations of Richard Wright and Martin Luther King, Jr. That Baldwin becomes more polemical towards the end of *The Fire Next Time* shows that "peculiar hazard" which racial classification imposes on the African American writer in his/her quest for freedom and identity in the United States.

Implications of Freedom and Identity for the African Americans in the United State

The four centuries of Africanist presence in America have altered the basis of Western epistemology and enlarged its confines such that it cannot lay claims to accuracy if it ignores the peculiar realities, that Africa's encounter with

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the West has introduced into the literature which developed out of that meeting. And since the African American writer operates in a "wholly racialized society," he/she is grappling with the pressures that society bring on the creative vision. This is why Morrison counsels that the writer should understand how "literary whiteness" and "literary blackness" are constructed and the consequence of both on the creative imagination (xii).

This engagement, as Morrison further explains, is because of the increasing emphasis that "traditional, canonical American literature is free of, uninformed, and unshaped by the four-hundred year-old presence of, first Africans and then African Americans in the United States" (5). In this circumstance, the quest towards universality, especially as represented by Jean Toomer and James Baldwin, marks a distortion of their creative sensibility by Eurocentric conditioning. It has the effects of destroying the creative vision and hampering the development of a writer.

The plunge into universality is the genesis of Toomer's crisis of consciousness for it provides a crack in his artistic vision which the courtship with esoteric religion through Gurdjieffian philosophy eventually explodes. This is evident in his confession to Elizabeth Schultz:

I am an ascetic and a lover, I am an alien; yet to no place do I belong. I am rejected. I am accepted. I live with people in a common existence. I stand alone. I want to leave it. I live it. I suffer. I enjoy. I degenerate and am reborn. I do nothing at all and seem about to fall to pieces (9).

The result of this crisis of consciousness on Toomer's life was his rejection of *Cane* as a "Negro" work. This destroyed his literary future and forced him to disappear from the literary scene from where he claimed seven nationalities—French, Dutch, Welsh, Negro, German, Jewish and Indian.

This same tendency to reject the African American heritage made James Baldwin to die as a rootless man because his self expatriation to Paris in 1948 had built a gulf between him and the root of black experience. The humanism he preached was therefore faulted by his refusal to understand that America, was too "racially articulated and predicated" a world to be accommodated in the heart. This accounted for why his works did not resonate the issues of his time enough to win him the coveted Nobel Prize for literature though he was nominated for the ward alongside with Wole Soyinka in 1987.

Consequently, an African American writer who insists on universality as the primary focus of his/her creative vision will most certainly be lost, first that vision and eventually sacrifice his/her social relevance since literature as I have said in "Social Determinism..." has no meaning independent of the society that produces it (83). This agrees with the assertion by Morrison that the insistence that "literature is not only 'universal' but also 'race-free' risks lobotomizing that literature, and diminishes both the art and the artist" (12).

Conclusion

Freedom and identity are major issues in the United States. From the era of slave trade and slavery in the 16th century to the popularization of democracy

in the 21st century, the United States has continually accommodated racism in her ethnic relations despite her public policy on human rights. It is disturbing that Morrison writing at the turn of the millennium makes a very biting comment about the United States:

...racism is as healthy today as it was during the Enlightenment. It seems that it has a utility far beyond economy, beyond the sequestering of classes from one another, and has assumed a metaphorical life so completely embedded in daily discourse that it is perhaps more necessary and more on display than ever before (63).

It follows that since Toomer's *Cane* and Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time* paint negative pictures of America's racial politics in the 20th century, she could direct the same amount of energies aimed at implementing her foreign policies to the eradication of racism in the United States within this century.

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