Challenges and Paradoxes of Identity Politics in the Work of Selected African American Writers

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Abstract:

Living in a nation of people who decided that their world view would combine agendas for individual freedom and mechanisms for devastating racial oppression presents a singular landscape for a writer (Morrison's **Playing in the Dark**, XIII Author's Emphasis).

1. Introduction

The United States is undoubtedly a superpower in international politics; as such, it has assumed the role of the "worlds policeman for democracy" after World War II. Being the most powerful nation in the world, it becomes a "melting pot" for diverse peoples and cultures. After century or more these immigrants have become constituent members of the American society. This is why there are ethnic groups like Jewish, Chicano, Arab, Irish, German, Polish and Spanish Americans. These, however, exclude the Native Americans or Indians who were

displaced by the founding fathers of America and the descendants of African slaves who were forcefully uprooted from their ancestry during the era of Slave Trade.

Apart from Native Americans, the people of African descent constitutes the oldest minority group in the United States. But the Emancipation Proclamation seemed to have resolved their dilemma in its affirmation "...all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights...among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness" (DuBois, 72). This notwithstanding, African Americans have retained a history of systematic exploitation which has imposed an outsider status on them despite more than four hundred years investment in the United States.

This was because it adopted a "false racial memory" to use the words of Julianne Malveaux (xvii) towards the African American people. Their status was fixed as inferior; and so, Jim Crow Laws were used to confine them to the periphery of American life. Saunders Redding in the essay, "The Negro Writer and American Literature" intimates that by 1907, all the states in the South had embarked on racial segregation (7). The consequence of this was an intense search for identity which Ralph Ellison describes as "the American theme" in **Shadow and Act** (176). Behind this search was the need to answer the question: who am I? The African American people have continued to occupy the lowest point on the social hierarchy, a situation which marks them out as the step children of American democracy. The result is that they are compelled by circumstance to develop a "double consciousness"(2), which explains why the African

American has for centuries been aspiring to merge his/her different selves "without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of opportunity closed roughly in his face" (DuBois, 39). This is the starting point for the investigation of identify politics in Toomer's **Cane,** Ralph Ellison's **invisible Man,** Alice Walker's **The Color Purple** and Toni Morrison's **Beloved**.

II. Challenges And Paradoxes Of African American Life

American's foremost contribution to world civilization is democracy, but one of it's frailties is the inability to merge liberty and equality for black people. The "promissory note" at the declaration of independence which upheld the absolute equality of all Americans did not give the black man his democratic rights.

Decades after the Emancipation Proclamation, s/he was vehemently haunted by segregation and discrimination; s/he suffered in adverse poverty as an outsider, lynched and afflicted with all forms of injustice. The African American fought for democracy in the First World War, but still remained a "second-class" citizen, especially in the rural south. Therefore the insistence on the social standards of the dominant culture radically isolates the black person from the mainstream of American society. The bases for the justification of his oppression are race, color and descent. Skin pigmentation, as a latitude for measuring human worth condemns him to a subordinate position in the social order.

The failure of America's egalitarian creed, in relation to its black citizens poses two major challenges to the African American people: the first is how to define a

functional identity, the second is how to survive the "fundamental intractable infirmities" in American democracy, to borrow Thorpe Butler's apt description (316). It is the need to prevail on these challenges which propels Jean Toomer to identity with the con man, the rustic, the unsophisticated and the folk in African American life in **Cane**. The resurgence of the folk at the opening decades of the twentieth century was a search for a distinctive black culture; and whatever is "distinctively Negro" Robert Bone observes, "is likely to be of folk if not slave origin" (65). This was a product of the Harlem Renaissance, a period in African American history which introduced the New Negro black culture; and whatever is "distinctively Negro" Robert Bone observes, "is likely to be of folk if not slave origin" (65). This was a product of the Harlem Renaissance, a period in African American history which introduced the New Negro as well as promoting poetry, novel painting and music with a sense of urgency.

The vogue for the validation of the African American's ancestral heritage, the acceptance of black primitivism and the celebration of the beauty of all aspects of blackness was necessitated by the insistence on racial bigotry in white America. The poetry of Claude Mckay, Countee Cullen and Langston Hughes illustrates these most vividly. Tommer's **Cane** unlike Ralph Ellison and the works of other African American males was one of the earliest attempts to interpret African American dilemmas through women character. As Darwin Turner reports on Toomer's comment in **The Liberator**, the experiences in **Cane** are the result of his visit to Georgia in the summer of 1921. Tommer confesses:

> I heard folksongs from the lips of Negro peasants. I saw the rich dusk beauty...And a deep part of my nature, a part that I had repressed, sprang suddenly to life and I responded to them (xvi)

He repressed this aspect of his life because he was a middle class black.

But Toomer's woman in Cane and their search for identity primarily as appendages to men recalls the history of "America's black women [who] have been perceived primarily as sexual beings who have no modesty, virtue or intelligence, and little claim to respect or power" (Alexander,5). Toomer's experimental work combines prose sketches with poetry and a closet drama. "Karintha" which is a celebration of the beauty of the most beautiful woman in Black literature shows a woman by the same name who deteriorates because men cannot detect that "the soul of her was a growing thing ripened too soon" (2). Carma adopts masculine strategies for survival because women are denied independent existence.

But the traumas of African American women assumes a cultural situation in "Fern" whose character is a prototype of the racial, and spiritual ambiguities in the African American Society. Fern's face flows into her eyes in such "a way that whatever your glance may momentarily have rested, it immediately wavered in the direction of her eyes" (34). Richard Eldrige calls her "one of Tommer's poetic untouchables" (201) since she does not reciprocate the appeal she makes to men. But because anatomy is held up as the only destiny for women, Avery takes to prostitution. The dissipation she undergoes is shown in Cloine, the attractive woman in the sketch

"Evening Song" that reflects a woman with mysterious charm but who sleeps and dreams.

Part One of Toomer's Cane unfolds the folk culture just before its disintegration. This is why his women immortalize their suffering through spirituals and blues enacted at dusk. But as the detached narrator moves from the rural South to the industrial North in Part Two which is set in Washington, D.C., he is confronted by the fragmentation in the modern world. The protagonists on Seventh Street are completely surrounded by the "moon" which is a symbol of western civilization as such, they are rootless. The resultant loss of spiritual direction and lack of mutual relationship in the North continued in the closet drama in Part Three in which the narrator returns to the South where he hopes to resolves his identity crisis.

This sense search for identity leads Ellison's protagonist to receive illusions of social mobility from father surrogates unconscious of the fact that he is imperceptible to them. The first deception in advancement through formal education in the Southern College but the status of the college founder shows the "gesture of lifting a veil from the face of a kneeling slave" though he appears to be permanently fixing it. This is suggestive of the pervasive influence of invisibility in his environment which is reflected in the duplicity of Dr Bledsoe, the principal of the college and Mr Norton, a Northern white philanthropist whose support places the institution under racial conditioning.

Since the invisible man fails to realize that advancement is sustained by the spirit of capitalism, he is dismissed from the college. This is because by making Mr

Norton to encounter himself in the Jim Trueblood incest story, he offends the collective conscience of white America. His next illusion is the prospect of economic advancement in the paint factory in New York whose motto is "keep America Clean with Liberty paint" (160). The task assigned to him is to put ten drops of "dead black" substance into each bucket of paint and stir till it changes to "optic white". Russel G. Fisher has remarked that the ten drops represent the percentage of blacks in the United States in 1953 when this novel was published (351).

This factory is a fictional recreation of white America and reflects its insistence on radical isolation of blacks from mainstream life, oblivious of the impossibility of ignoring four centuries of Africanist presence in the United States. Interestingly, this illusion terminates with an amnesiac blow[3] which destroys the narrator's perception of reality. Though he gradually comes to the realization of his humanity through the association with folk culture, when he declares: "I'm what I'm" (215), he adopts the dream of political leadership but sees this as "the most elaborate and comprehensive of the narrator's illusion, such that, it confers a new identity, "a new name and a new problem" on him (326). The Brotherhood which is often associated with the Communist Party is unfortunately used by middle class blacks and their white allies to betray the collective struggle for black liberation/nationalism.

Besides, he sees in the Brotherhood a tendency to confuse "class struggle with ass struggle" (337), may be because the relationship between blacks and white Americans has always thrived on sexual economy. But

despite the moral inconsistencies in the Brotherhood, he chooses to remain, till he eventually comes to the realization that each of the father figures has made attempts to "force his picture of reality upon" him without considering his personality (409). This is why he rebels against the "catalogues of so many names" that were imposed on him. According to Molefi Asante "What changes with the changing of our names is how we perceive ourselves and how others perceiye us...." (34). The narrator's new position is justified by the fact that he has come to be aware of his invisibility.

But identity question in the works of women writers begins with self expiation because for them "the personal is political." Since the intensity of racial animosity has affected the foundation of African American family, aggression and mutual mistrust have become major aspects of heterosexual relationship among blacks. This explains why most adult African American men spend their lives in prison; a phenomenon which leaves black families with female heads. The resultant "geometric oppression" exposes black women to diverse problems. According to Calvin Hernton, the racial mountain excludes them from mainstream life while the sexual mountain makes them the subject of exploitation for both black and white men (139).

This provides the background for Alice Walker's controversial work, The Color Purple in which she unravels the tension in the African American family to the anger of her male critics. Walker, like Ntozake Shange moves from the perspective of "a cultural aggressor" because she wants to share aspects of African American life that have hitherto been covered. This is the points

Shange has made in an interview with Claudia Tate when she says:

> ...I write about things that have never been given Full due ... My responsibility is to be as honest as I can to use whatever technical skill I may possess to make these experiences even clearer or sharper, or more devastating or more beautiful. (156)

This readily accounts for the "male insecurity consciousness constructed on .... Fear of women" which Grace Okereke calls "gynophobia" in her essay, "The Three Ideologies of Gender" (19).

It is understandable, therefore, when Walker's protagonist begins her search for identity by writing to God. Although Celie begins to express her experiences as a passive creator, the decision "to speak at all is to assume authority, to attempt to explain with male authority (Herndl, 15) and a challenge to the "patriarchal appropriation of power over the word" in order to reflect new possibilities for women (Bryce-Okunolola,201). Prompted by "the metaphysical dilemma" which surrounds African American female identity, Celie writer as a therapy for transcendence but she does not cultivate an individual viewpoint except when she encounters Shug Avey.

It is the bonding which she develops from the relationship with Shug which culminates in her association of God with "our father" — a reminder of the father (Mr -) who raped her at fourteen and gives her two children. This realization reduces "Dear God" to a mere abstraction represented as "it" and promotes meaningful relationship with Shug and her junior sister, Nettie. Again, this self-

awareness is anchored on personal development and economic advancement because Celie learns how to make pants. Since African American Women lack bodily self determinism, Celie's new identity empowers her to control her sexuality.

The black woman's desire to control her destiny also the subject of Toni Morrison's Beloved where she uses her craft to confront the conscience of American over the 600 million Africans who died during the Middle Passage and in the plantation. Based on a 19th century slave narrative in which a black woman killed her two children rather than leave them in slavery, Beloved shows Sethe's elimination of her baby, as a redeeming but destructive demonstration against the inhumanity of the slave system. There is a tendency to blame Morrison for such a banal waste of human essence, but she allows Sethe to "pay the price for the criminality of her love" as Terry Otten intimates, "whatever sympathy Morrison asks us to feel for Sethe, she never denies the truculence of her deed" (82).

The protagonist's dilemma emanates from the fact that she desires to love her children in a situation where the black families are dismembered. It is through the process of dismembering the African American past that Morrison engages white America in a dialogue which points to black history as an unfinished and unforgettable business. Sethe lives in a haunted present; and so, the challenge she has is to erode this memory. The success of **Beloved** does not just lie in the banality of the evil of slavery; rather, it is the moral responsibility which the paradox of violent love brings to Sethe as she grapples

with the dysfunctional family patterns which impacts on African American life.

This redemptive process comes through the return of Beloved after twenty years of help, Sethe confronts her past in order to re-order the present. This is implied in what Kristin Boudreu sees as the "reification of pain as venom-intended to destroy the woman who had slit her baby girl's throat rather than return her child to the slavery by which she herself had been violated..." (445). But contrary to his view, pain points the way to redemption because of Sethe's pleas that "She had to be safe and I put her where I knew she would be" (200). The paradox is that this evil came from the heart of true love; and so, the act of saving Beloved from Mr Bodwan substitutes for her criminal love as well as restoring Paul D back to her.

The search for identity does end positively for Sethe by emphasizing the paradoxes of human relations and the means of achieving peaceful co-existence. But for Walker the challenges of survival demands that women cultivate their individuality independent of men. This also raises another paradox because the quest for female assertion which completely ignores heterosexual relations tantamount to chaos. This is the point Phyllis Schlafly is making when she asserts that Women Liberation has produced a generation of young women who "have abandoned old commandments, but they can't find any new rules that work" (18). Marriage should not subsume the woman's identity, for despite the crimes that have been committed inside it, it remains the realistic avenue for realizing matured love. This is the reason Americans enter into second and third marriages.

The suggestion is that human beings have the rational potential to impose meaning on chaos. It is not surprising therefore, that Ellison's narrator refused to adopt the image of Ras the Exhorter nor the vision of Rhinehart because both embody chaos. But since he has never been "seen," he takes an interlude from the realities of life which Floyd R Horowitz describes as a "self-imposed exile" which shows the narrator's "escape from responsibility" (33). That is not the issue, identity has taken twenty years of deception which ends in the discovery that he is "an invisible man." Thus, the hibernation becomes a symbolic death of the old self that will enable him to fight of democratic rights in America. Louis Mitchell sees this as an attempt to create "meaning out of chaos, possibility out of meaningless anarchy" (38) while the narrator describes it as "a covert preparation for a more overt action" (15).

The paradox of identity politics demands that despite the agents of racial conditioning, an individual assumes personal moral responsibility over life, but for Jean Toomer, the paradox of identity results in the crisis of consciousness that destroys the prospect of the literary future **Cane** guaranteed. Just like Kabnis who rejects the African American past symbolized by Father John, Toomer abandons the root of black experience. The rejection of his past without an adequate replacement introduces him to tension as his confession to Elizabeth Schultz shows:

> I am an ascetic and 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 go back. I die in it. I live in it. I suffer. I enjoy. I degenerate and am reborn. I do nothing at all and seem about to fall to pieces (9).

The contradictory voices of Toomer's narrative personae portray the crises in his private life.

Consequently, Toomer who began his creative life as a "race man" latter regarded himself "naturally and inevitably" as an American and "strived for a spiritual fusion analogous to the fact of racial intermingling" (Turner, xvi). The paradox of identity in Toomer's **Cane** plunges him into racelessness because he claims seven nationalities: French, Dutch, Welsh, Negro, German, Jewish and Indian. As a symbol of the universal man, he creates a special race called the "New American." Mabel M. Dillard's reference to his comment in Essentials reveals the paradox of Toomer's search for a functional identity when he declares: "I am of no race, I am of the human race" (473).

III Conclusion

The challenges and paradoxes of identity politics in the United States are occasioned by the absence of an equal playing ground between African Americans and others groups on the racial divide. This, as Jamaica Kincaid observes, is traceable to the fact that "color is the national religion of America" so the boundary is "I am not black" (72). Contemporary African American literature is enriched by the impacts just like the confines of African American literature and other ethnic literatures in the United States are expanded.

The four novelists in this study reflect the responses of the sensitive black spirit to cultural

denigration, racial classification and group isolation in the United States. These factors have combined to entrench poverty in the lives of successive generations of African Americans, having been denied equality. Therefore, it has almost become impossible for them to aspire to the American Dream of possibility for all at the same level with other ethnic minorities.

NOTES

1. Harlem Renaissance promoted pride in African American life but it also accepted and inverted stereotypes which whites held about blacks. Perhaps this was why the movement did not last because most of its works emphasized black primitivism.

2. The Founder refers to Booker T. Washington, the first eminent African American educator and spokesman. He is commonly presented as an assimilationist in his public life. He was a statesman of great wisdom and diplomacy and the first principal of Tuskegee Institute in Alabama. Though he had the strategy and vision to influence the whites; yet his educational policy eventually mandated the Negro to a life of servitude. By stating in the Atlanta Exposition Speech that: "In all things that are purely social we can be separate as the fingers, yet one as the hand in all things essential to mutual progress" (221 – 222), he compromised equality, civil and political rights for the sake of industrial education. This is why the period between the "Atlanta Exposition Speech"

and his death in 1915 co-incided with the lowest status of African Americans after the American Civil War. (See DuBois' *The Souls of Black Folk*, 1997).

3. The amnesiac blow is Walcott's term for eliminating Africa as a source of psychological solace in the Caribbean man's search for identity. This is because the journey through the Middle Passage resulted in a terrible explosion which destroyed Africa from the mentality of the slaves.

4. The Racial Mountain represents the gulf between whites and African Americans due to racial attitudes. White people assume authority over them and rigorously maintain themselves as the superior group while blacks are condemned to servitude because their skin pigmentation signifies an innate inferiority. The attempt to cross this valley is the genesis of most of the tensions in African American society.

5. The Sexual Mountain is a reference to the oppression of the African American woman because of gender. Her life is presumed to be determined by men because she is subjected to various forms of exploitation. In literature, she was relatively obscure before the 1970s because African American experience was always recreated through male conflicts. But women writers such as Hurston, Shange, Walker, Paule Marshall, Maya Angelou, Sonia Sanchez, Nikki Giovanni, and Margaret Walker among many others have changed the scene.

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