



African American experience in Edward P. Jones and Paul Beatty's selected novels

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Abstract

African-Americans ironic foible of owning the blacks as slaves in Edward P. Jones element for a long time, and to describe the life and death of character, a black slave master is explored in his novel. The characters play an important role to expose the identity and racial problems of the society they survive in, and the community they belong gives them strange experience. He describes the Washington D.C, city and people getting lost in the city as the main issue of novel, all the fourteen stories revolve around the city. The way people survive in given situation and come out of the consequences, are theme of these stories it begins from the youngest to oldest characters. Paul Beatty has explored the protagonist, as identity element in white society and being black how it affects their personality. The concept of Paul Beatty is an example for all the blacks to think about their ability and fight for rights. The characters have successfully survived and sometimes failure too they have faced which leads towards crime. The theme of the novel is being ambitious and creating identity in the society they want to survive. The hip-hop culture is part of Paul Beatty's work and he has given so many variations to the character, and they don't have particular identity but so many different talents through which they become famous.

Keywords: racism, identity, slavery, black and white community, city life and crime

Introduction

Edward P. Jones is an American novelist and short story writer, his first book was *Lost in the City* (1992), which is collection of short stories about the African-American working class in 20th-century Washington, D.C. His second book, *The Known World* (2003) has a protagonist who was a mixed-race and a slave under whites, who latter on was freed and adopted the job of slave owner. His third book, *All Aunt Hagar's Children* (2006), is similar to *Lost in the City*, which had collection of short stories which dealt with African Americans life most of the stories are continuation of the first book.

Jones beings with the native of Washington which includes 14 stories in his first book from the same residents which is too often ignored, and those who don't live in D.C. found on postcards. The Post's Jonathan Yardley wrote that one of Jones's most compelling themes

"The daily struggle of ordinary people against terrible odds."

The stories are related to ordinary people and it begins from young to old, Jones presents us the situation of their lives and the results related to their choice of selection. He also examines the internal struggle with the responsibilities towards the enlightenment of new desired experience. The characters are alerted according to the contradictions, which make the human the way they exist. *Lost in the City* and *All Aunt Hagar's* have similarity in characters and situations as both the novels deal with the suffering of being black in America. They also suffer due to the traditional uproot from the southern part, which is close-knit, and well ordered with

the quality of family focused society.

They are disappointed by the modern world that no longer cherishes the individual and they feel lost in a world where crime and drugs are the custom. The reader is taken beyond the world and introduced to the world of African American men and women who are working against the continuous struggle to maintain a sense of hope. The characters of these stories stave for the loss of family, friends, memories, and at least for self. The stories speak much about the racial warning which is emerged inside, In the opening story, 'The Girl Who Raised Pigeons', a boy named Carleton is repeatedly warned by grandfather's scolding: 'Don't go missing within the city'(p.17).

Similar incident again is seen in 'The Sunday Following the Mother's Day' when Sam William convicted his wife-murder, and recites 'the initial law the actual land', that is, 'Never get lost inside white folks' neighborhood' (p.140), and in another story, 'Lost in The City' Ms. Lydia Walsh who gets a telephone call.

"We are sorry to call at such a time, but your mother died twenty minutes ago" (p.141). After attending the call she recollected all the memories with her mother and then she called a Capitol cab and wanted to get lost in the city and remember the time she spent with her mother in the streets, she spend time. It was difficult to accept the death of her mother; she wanted to run away from the situation and loneliness which she has to accept after her mother's death. "His Mother's House' it's about two friends Santiago and Humphrey, who turn alienated from each other due the relations associated with drug-dealing. Both of them enter the world of crime, but unfortunately Humphrey is addicted to drug and his friend Santiago is successful in life and enjoys all

the pleasure, at the end Humphrey is murdered by Santiago in unspoken infraction.

The stories titled 'An Orange Line Train to Ballston' 'A New Man', and 'A Butterfly on F Street' is regarding relationships and family, in one of the story a divorced lady named Marvell Watkins with two sons and a daughter spends her morning travelling in metro subway, who drops kids to school and then her call centre job. While passing her way she met a man and made her kids to question him and communicate, she starts liking him but he suddenly disappears and she feels again lonely in her life.

In another story we find two women in relation with one man, Mildred's husband who dies due to cancer and the other women in her husband's life is Ann Coleman. They both meet each other unexpectedly in downtown shopping and Ann Coleman feels sorry for the loss. In 'A New Man' parent and children relationship is highlighted, the parents belong to middle class but their daughter named Elaine wanted to lead a different life in the absence of her parents, she use to entertain other men which was disliked by parents. Finally the daughter escapes from the house and never returns back to them, the father complained in police station and they never find her but they still have the hope of her returning and the grandfather of the girl dies after seven years of her missing.

These are the few stories of *Lost in the City*, it's about the minority members of the society as they are also part of the community. These ordinary people have accepted the challenge to survive among the dominant American culture and make space for being visible in the society.

The novel *The Known World* has multifaceted and conflicting view of slavery and human nature, it consist of many traditional element of slavery. Slavery is common topic in dominated white society, but a black owning a black is the issue with interesting characterisation that transforms with new issues to the reader as an important experience. The protagonist of the novel is Henry Townsend black slave owner, once he was also a slave.

Henry freed himself from the white slaver owner and he had black people as slave under him, it was his choice of becoming a slave master. The reason behind his act was to be against his parent's convention and their inheritance. William Robbins master of Henry was impressed by him due to his hard work and Robbins was more considerable and dictatorial person in his life compared to his parents and as well as more influential too.

He represented the majority of the slaves and they seldom their enslavement as legitimate. Since the overwhelming majority of slaves worked in the fields, they were less accessible to the culture of the slave owners. Furthermore the field hands saw slavery in a very different light than the house servants. For example, the field slaves were forced to till the soil from sunup until sundown, working themselves to a state of exhaustion. Also life in the fields could be quite hellish because the slaves were under close supervision from their overseers or slave drivers and thus subject to beatings. (P.49-50)

The life of slave was horrible, they were divided into three categories, field slaves, house slaves and artisan slaves. Augustus is father of Henry, who worked hard to free his family from the bonds of slavery. The whole family was under

slavery, Augustus firstly freed himself and later on his wife Mildred during this period Henry was taken care by Rita in his parent's absence. Augustus was carpenter along with his wife he was in great danger, as they use to save the life of slave and help them to escape. These were the illegal but heroic and good deed secrets of Henry's parents which were not known by Henry. The people who were free from slavery system had a low economic status and they lived in poor condition and they adopted jobs like barbers, shoemakers, carpenters or blacksmiths leading life was not so easy for them. Henry's parents were against the job of slave master, according to them it was wrong and there are many signs indication about their beliefs. His parents always wanted to share their convictions and feeling regarding the issue of slavery, but they failed to succeed at the end.

Jones has considered the new concept of black owning the black to show that there is no difference between white slaves and black. The concept is shocking and unbelievable, that a black is enslaving his own people after experiencing the same life before being a slave master. Slave owing the slave is not a shocking concept but human owning the human is the cruellest thing on the earth. This is the result submissive acceptance of American history, Henry's parent had never respected the job of slave owner, and they ended up their relationship with their son. Henry's teenage has been spent in problematic way, this age is considered important to create an identity. During this period of teenage he has been without his family, the absence of his father has created a deep effect in the life of Henry.

[i]n spite of spending years in bondage, the freed slaves harbour no ill feelings toward their former masters and showed no signs of a deep hatred for the institution that enslaved them.

The ex-slaves who owned human chattel regarded slavery not as an oppressive institution but as an economic necessity upon which their livelihood depended. (p.31)

The money spinning trade in the South of ante-bellum is to own slave. To gain wealth and own a property, it was important to be free man, its commonly seen issues in both white and black. The intention of Henry owning the slave was to be kind and good master and while he was slave never worked hard in the field instead of it learned shoemaking and was fed with good clothes and actually was considered like house slave. Henry treats the slave one among them, but Robbins teaches him how to be master and change behaviour and act according to it. During his slavery days it was hard to impress William Robbins, but finally he succeeds in doing so. Henry being the house slave was considered as superior to other slaves and his position was favourable so he didn't experience the horrors of slavery like his parents did.

Robbins is dependent on Henry for all his work to be done on time, in the same way Henry is dependent on him as he was fate influencing person in his life. Augustus wanted to unite his family, but it was too late, as the father was powerless and had no control over his child Henry. This is how it is proved that Henry's life is influenced by Robbins, who filled the missing happiness of family and loneliness.

Paul Beatty is an American author and an associate professor of writing at Columbia University, his first novel, *The White Boy Shuffle* (1996), which is a satirical piece of black American life. The second book was *Tuff* (2000), and next was *Slumberland* (2008) about an American DJ, and two books of poetry? *Big Bank Take Little Bank* (1991) and *Joker, Joker, Deuce* (1994). He also edited *Hokum: An Anthology of African-American Humor* (2006) and finally with his recent novel *The Sellout* (2015) is about revitalization of slavery and segregation in a fictional Los Angeles neighborhood. *The White Boy Shuffle* and *Tuff* are part of my article, *The White Boy Shuffle* protagonist is Gunnar Kaufman a black youth, who has grown in Los Angeles at the height of the multicultural movement.

“Young man, try to imagine a future behind bars.”

“What you in for, young buck? (35)

In the novel *The White Boy Shuffle*, the story is related with contravention and hardship to examine the cruelty that racism and identity produces. The black boy Gunnar in racist, white culture and his childhood images are negative representations of producing racism. He is Black but lives among white with his white friends, he enjoys the life among the white.

Whenever the violence is created by his friends, the target of the police was always Gunnar as he was regularly questioned and grabbed him alone and warns him. Gunnar grows up in Santa Monica, where he is operated under the white cultural identity, and in Los Angeles he was forced to develop a “black” cultural identity. Gunnar and his sisters were not interested in attending an all-black summer camp because it was a new atmosphere for them. Gunnar has spent lots of time in Santa Monica; he had white friends with whom he made enough mischief. The protagonist shifts between the white and Black world, he is a cultural mulatto and incapable of fitting perfectly in one of the world. White world makes him conscious of his blackness and he is constantly trying to meet the expectation he was placed as messiah, basketball player and representative.

“A bitter taste of her vaunted, “traditional black experience’.”

“Being in a never-ending log-rolling contest”

Gunnar and his sister, when they were relocated in black world it was difficult for them to accept the culture and tradition of their own community as they were not grown up in this society. The period of 1960s, was filled with Civil Rights Movements and it also had other consequent community movements for self-determination which was dark and tremendously with Latino and black. The unique quality in the characters of Gunnar and Scoby was explored, as both represented “the talented Tenth”. They succeeded to go for higher education and acquire a better future, and they also were apparently different from the white community. Scoby was perfect Basketball player never missed a shot, and fully loaded with numinous power of African demon.

Gunnar too was a great Basketball player but not as good as Scoby, the hegemonic ideals of him are viewed by the white and they have never seen him fulfilling the role of being

black. So he is accepted, tolerated and claimed by the whites due to his lack of evident blackness. Besides playing Basketball which made him popular, Gunnar was also interested in poetry writing, poetry writing fascinated him before he really knows how to start writing.

“It occurred to me that maybe poems are like colds.

Maybe I would feel a

Poem coming on. My chest would grow heavier, my eyes watery; my

Body temperature would fluctuate, and a ringing in my ears would herald

The coming of a timeless verse (79)

Gunnar’s unique quality of basketball talent brings him the satisfaction of external and reliant watch of others. The passion of poetry on the other hand is his own inbuilt quality which makes him famous that unexpectedly he becomes a “Leader of the Black Community”. This quality of writing poetry has treated him as exceptional instead of basketball, which he had imagined for originally. The achievement of Gunnar is an example for the black community to follow the path of success, by accepting all the discomforts on the way in the form of challenge.

Tuff is the second novel of Beatty which is set in East Harlem, the protagonist is Winston “Tuffy” Foshay, who is connected with the modern life and to make sense of things he navigates from one character to the next. The people have different opinion about him which is just an assumption, the hero Tuff is first encountered in astonished and possibly bullet-riddled self off the floor of a Brooklyn, N.Y., drug den. Tuffy is 19 year old and a cool 320 pounds, who is part of hip hop and comes across as part Fat Albert with massive legs turned jelly. The protagonist Tuffy is the figure of the inner-city gang-banger, and a black drug dealer who becomes the leading image of minorities in urban America. He is also addicted to drinking, smoking and frank with whatever he does is his attitude towards life and living. Tuffy is married and has a year old son and he is shown as an anti-hero gangster in his life, he dusts himself and steals a fish and a gun from his dead boss. Then meets his best friend Tariq, who is disabled Muslim man who wants to rob banks as his guiding light is an ex-hippie Asian woman who worked for Malcolm X, and his wife he married over the phone although in jail.

After the meet with his friend, he returns back to Spanish Harlem to live with his wife and child. Beatty illustrates the condition of Tuff which is poor and how it means to be black in America. He decides to run for City Council, which is inspired by an offer of financial support from Inez Nomura a Japanese political activist who was once a volunteer speechwriter for Malcolm X. Tuffy realises that the world is filled with unsentimental feelings and it is not bothered about ordinary human being in the society.

Tuffy adopts all the possible ways of struggle to survive in the present world; he is compared to many contemporary African American men who have similar identity. According to Tuff, his life is filled with troubles and the reason behind is the white man who always kept him down. The novel *Tuff* is about how the satirical portrait of fate and selfish involvement of elders can modify the path of a young person’s life. The

portrait of “Tuff” is ultimately a promisingly empty slate; he is someone whose decisions are influenced by unsystematic events and transitory alliances, someone whose intellect might not be his most practical asset and certainly is not all he needs to turn his life around.

In “Tuff” sumo wrestling is for Winston what basketball was for Gunnar through which the race was dynamically more clearly. The novels of Beatty are urban areas topic which is surrounded with multi-ethnic; the problems faced tend to be between minority groups.

It exposes the identity with awkward popular culture constructions of black masculinity and the narrow African American literary tropes used to define black legitimacy. These two novels finally illustrates that it is related with unfortunate end and death of self.

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