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HAYDER NAJI SHANBOOJ ALOLAIWI

**METAPHORS OF THE AMERICAN CULTURE:
LIFTING THE VEIL AND PASSING THE
COLOR-LINE OR, THE MULTICULTURAL
DIMENSION OF RACIAL IDENTITY**



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FOREWORD

Research Background

Cultural identity and expression are set to the test in many ways by the phenomenon of globalization. Those who have the opportunity to take an active part in world cultural exchanges often realize that culture is much more a process than a product, and the feeling of their own cultural individuality makes them receptive to others' cultures. But those who cannot afford to participate in exchange or express themselves, feel globalization as a stranger mechanism and expose themselves to the inexorable risk of locking themselves into a narrow conception of cultural identity that rejects diversity. When this negative reaction is exploited politically or exacerbated by other factors, culture quickly becomes part of the conflict.

It is important to remember that the enslaved Africans have largely contributed to the European colonization and development of the Americas. But there was nothing to suggest at the outset that this would be so, and slavery as an institution began to develop slowly, amidst doubts and innumerable controversies. Historical accounts of slavery date back as long as trade itself, and in the middle of the twentieth century researchers focused on the early writings on slavery to illustrate debate on trafficking that had taken place within the European and American abolitionist movements. However, more recent studies have questioned many of the early analyses, although these revised views have not yet benefited from wider dissemination in history books, especially because of the lack of interest in the transatlantic slave trade in history teaching around the world.

Three ideologies, (or movements), roughly covering the nineteenth and twentieth centuries aim to define the American identity: the nineteenth-century assimilationism, the theory of the melting pot (originally developed by St Jean de Crèvecoeur), and multiculturalism. Multiculturalism has always existed in the United States, but it was neither recognized nor admitted. In the nineteenth century, immigrants in their New York or Chicago neighborhoods lived for many years with their original language, their country's food products; however, men

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were gradually becoming English in their work and at school the children learned the language of the majority. The political parties hastened to vote the newcomers, promising them American nationality. The result was a new generation of Americans, at the same time close to their roots and “integrated” in American society with its habits of consumption and entertainment.

However, at the beginning of the twentieth century the dominant ideology “invented” the notion of melting pot, according to which immigrants quickly lost their culture in favor of a process of Americanization. At a time of very strong immigration (about 1 million per year around 1910), the melting pot seemed reassuring, even though it took two or three generations for the majority of immigrants to marry outside their group and integrate into society. The restriction of immigration in 1920 and 1924 resulted in a form of integration, without the pressure of new immigrants. In fact, it was not until 1965 that the immigration law led to the massive return of immigrants, the varied origins of the immigrants being more diverse than before. In his essay “A Multicultural America: Living in a Sea of Diversity”, John A. Garcia focuses on the reality and importance of multiculturalism in modern societies, which he views as “rooted in race and ethnicity” and which he defines as “a sustained effort by racial and ethnic groups to recover, preserve, and achieve recognition for their distinct cultural identities from society at large. [...] a resistance to the cultural amalgamation of the American ‘melting pot,’ which limits the number of pathways leading to successful integration” (Garcia qtd in Harris 1995: 30).

The colonial history of North America was one of conquest and alliance: conquest because it was a question of annexing America to bring out a New Europe, and alliance because, although subordinate to that of the conquest, a dynamic of alliance between Amerindians and Europeans characterizes all the colonial history with modalities, even radical differences between the actors and according to the times. These colonial relations were fraught with tensions, misunderstandings and divergent interpretations between Native Americans and Europeans, especially with regard to the question of sovereignty. These divergences broke out in the light of the signing of treaties involving transfers of territories between European powers and involving Amerindian nations. A striking example of assimilationism pushed to the extreme—almost complete

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dissolution in the American melting pot concerns the Native Americans who are now considered as members of the multicultural American society.

Cultural diversity is a considerable wealth, a resource inherent in the human race, which must be perceived and recognized as such. On the other hand, there is no scale of values between cultures: they are all equal in dignity and in law, whatever the number of people who refer to it or the extent of the territories on which they are based. In essence, our world is a synchrony of cultures whose coexistence and plurality form humanity. It is very urgent to place this flight of cultures at the forefront of our overall response to the march of time, that is, development.

Research Questions

We have approached the American literature, not only the novels, but also drama and movies screenings, to discover a richness of meanings in its apparent simplicity, and determine its unique position in the multicultural context of the American “melting pot”. We have done our best to provide answers to a number of questions:

1. Long ago, a black slave tried to get meaning from the Holy Bible: he did not get it, as the book would not speak to him. The slaves were officially denied any access to the knowledge comprised in the pages of a book. Two centuries later, an African American became the first black President of the United States of America. In between the two moments, the African Americans struggled for the means to voice their specificity and attain universality. If so, what is the degree of acceptance and/or tolerance of the black *Other* by the white majority?
2. Multi-ethnic America is a reality that cannot be denied. Tracts have been and will be written on the cultural impact of the ethnic composition of the American nation on its literature. Under the circumstances, how American is the ‘American’ in ‘American literature’? And where do we stand as researchers of the African American literature?
3. African American writer Richard Wright’s famous statement that “the Negro is America’s metaphor”, and W.E.B. Du Bois’s definition for 20th-century America: “The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line” may be considered emblematic for our

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understanding of the American cultural background. What is the response of the (white) American writers to the challenge of otherness? What is the extent of the traffic across the ‘color line’?

4. If passing for white was possible due to natural physical traits—the result of miscegenation—the reverse was also made possible by artistic means. How did minstrelsy contribute to the image of the black American?
5. Our study is devoted to two defining metaphors: the metaphor of the veil and the metaphor of passing; in defining the two, I will cover a range of authors and writings, since the African American slave narratives to the Harlem Renaissance and such mainstream writers as Mark Twain and William Faulkner. What is, then, the present-day perception of the color line?
6. Last but not least, one separate chapter will be devoted to the metaphor of the veil as found in the writings of selected Arab American writers.

Limitations of my approach

Even if the African American novels of passing are the starting point and the core of our thesis, the neo-slave narratives of the late twentieth century are only alluded to, just as the possible connections to the literature of other ethnic groups of multicultural America. On the other hand, although the syntagm “American” in the title justifies our expanding of the discussion to include other American writers such as Fitzgerald and Faulkner, we had to limit the discussion to one title for each writer only, while the theoretical and technical references to other genres—musical, drama, movie—were restricted by limitations imposed by the main topic.

Method and Corpus

As a basic approach for our discussion of the multicultural dimensions of racial diversity in the United States, I have chosen the tools of comparative literature that searches for anything that transcends the boundaries of a singular literary text. This opens up a vast field of research which, in fact, has no bounded boundaries. We are aware that it will only be possible to explore certain tracks of this field. We will content ourselves with three aspects: intertextuality—transtextuality—intermediality. Our critical discourse is based on the assumption that comparative literature is a methodical approach, seeking links of analogy,

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kinship and influence, bringing literature closer to other areas of expression or knowledge, or literary facts and texts, distant or not in time or space, provided they belong to several languages or several cultures, if they are part of the same tradition, in order to better describe, understand and enjoy them. I have also worked along the directions outlined by such authorities in the field of comparative literature as Djelal Kadir, Steven Tötösi de Zepetnek, and Susan Bassnett among others.

As regards the structure of the dissertation I decided upon an almost symmetrical approach in which the two parts equally cover the two main topics suggested by the title: *Metaphors of the American Culture: from the Talking Book to the Color-line—or, the Multicultural Dimensions of Racial Identity*. The study is preceded by a Foreword, an Introduction, and each of the two parts is divided into four and five chapters respectively, followed by final Conclusions and a Bibliography.

The purpose of the Introduction: *The legacy of W.E.B. Du Bois—historical and social background* is to provide an overall image of the historical and social conditions during the slavery and post-slavery years that triggered a wealth of reactions from the African Americans—slaves or descendants of the former slaves—both at the level of concrete protest actions against oppression and discrimination in the Southern states and, a literary level, as seen in the great number of slave autobiographies, passing narratives and, in the twentieth century, in the presence of similar themes in the works of American writers, playwrights, and script writers. The often cited contributions of the African Americans heritage to the American identity as formulated by W.E.B. Du Bois—“the gift of story and song”, “the gift of sweat and brawn”, and “the gift of the Spirit”—are carefully considered and correlated with what Cornel West called “the three basic challenges—the intellectual, the existential, and the political.” All these “gifts” and “challenges” gave shape and definition to the position that the African Americans held in a country that was called either a “melting pot” or a multicultural society.

Under the circumstances, many African American intellectuals and leaders, such as Du Bois, refused to accept social and legal distinctions based on race, and they initiated the Niagara Movement (later expanded into the

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NAACP—National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) that dedicated itself to the promotion of racial equality, by seeking justice for those affected by racially motivated violence and by all kinds of discrimination, and challenging the legality of segregation, voicing the evils of a blind society. They openly denounced the hypocrisy of the American Dream, starting with the speeches of Frederick Douglass and W.E.B. Du Bois, up to the emblematic “I Had a Dream” speech of Martin Luther King Junior.

Not surprisingly, the African American people soon grew tired of racial discrimination, private and mass racist acts of violence, voter suppression, segregated economic life and education, and determined to challenge and change the racist institutions and beliefs in a peaceful way. The Civil Rights Movement had favorable results, and the activists intensified their efforts to assert African American identity, which made possible the birth of the Black Power Movement and the Affirmative Action. On the other hand, the significance of one’s being black in a predominantly white society, and the nature of blackness also preoccupied the black women activists who were eager to demonstrate that such issues as gender and female sexuality should be included on the list of radical claims. We considered it significant to mention the positions taken by such critics and analysts as Devon Carbado, Mahassen Mgadmi, or Missy Dehn Kubitschek, and concluded with the remark that the present problems and the oppressive reality are a proof to the actuality and importance of the subjects in this selection of novels and to the necessity of writing and analyzing such issues as slavery, racism, sexism.

PART ONE: *From a Ship Captain’s Talking Book to Being Black in White America* is introduced by an Argument and develops around four key words: “talking book”, “color line”, “double-consciousness”, and the “veil” and covers a number of concepts, such as multiculturalism, race and racism, the Middle Passage and “passing”, essential to the understanding of the complexity of the African American literature. What is significant is that the collective experiences of discrimination and the memory of resistance and oppression have given rise in the heart of the African American community to some group strategies and critical perspectives that aim at the “acquisition of autonomy and power” by the blacks. We found it necessary to define multiculturalism as a