

Critical Analysis of Gender Oppression And Individual Struggles in John A. Williams' Selected Novels

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Abstract - In the course of the 20th century, the world saw the rise of the African American population's fight for equal rights in the nation. During this period, there awakened a sense of brotherhood and common struggle that symbolized the movements of the earlier decades. Literature and music from this era carries a lot of the feelings that were commonplace among the people at the time. John A. Williams is a prolific writer whose works during this period were riddled with personal experience and physical realism that leaves a lot to be desired and learnt from his works. Two such books, namely *Sissie* (1963) and *The Man Who Cried I Am* (1967) are the embodiment of the African American spirit of the time. These two books cover the struggles and differences that afflicted African American families at the time. They brings to light their effects on the populace as a whole, while at the same time displaying the internal and external struggles that individuals had to face when creating their identities in the African American community. This paper aims at the critical analysis of oppression and individual struggles in John A. William's *Sissie* and *The Man Who Cried I Am*.

Keywords – African-American, Gender Oppression, Individual Struggle, Black American.

I. INTRODUCTION

In the course of the 20th century, the world saw the rise of the African American population's fight for equal rights in the nation. During this period, there awakened a sense of brotherhood and common struggle that symbolized the movements of the earlier decades.

The African American writers dealt with the themes of freedom, equality, culture, slavery, racism, and religion. The writers dealt with the lives of people who have been critically affected by racism, sexism and classism. The American society compartmentalize its various ethnic groups by the racist, sexist and classist structure, and defame the colored as inferior and characterizes males as center and females as marginal. The groups of blacks are relegated to an underclass by virtue of their race. Black women are relegated to a separate caste by virtue of their sex. The greatest source of oppression of blacks in America is not only the racist and sexist assumption but also the class exploitations, which are the reason of victimization of black women. Sexism paralyzed the minds of African-American women, defiled their sexual beings and

scarred them psychologically. Thus, black women suffered from the twin disadvantages of racial discrimination and gender bias. Black women suffer not only because they are Black and female but also because of their poor background. In American society, the ideal concept of woman is not just racist and sexist but essentially classist. The black poor women, who could hardly approximate the norm are discriminated, dehumanized which took away their morale developing self-hatred. The great efforts to overcome odds became a part of their struggle.

II. JOHN A. WILLIAMS AS AN AFRICAN-AMERICAN WRITER

Literature and music from this era carries a lot of the feelings that were commonplace among the people at the time. John A. Williams is a prolific writer whose works during this period were riddled with personal experience and physical realism that leaves a lot to be desired and learnt from his works. Two such books, namely *Sissie* (1963) and *The Man Who Cried I Am* (1967) are the embodiment of the African American spirit of the time. These two books cover the gender struggles and differences that afflicted African American families at the time. They brings to light their effects on the populace as a whole, while at the same time displaying the internal and external struggles that individuals had to face when creating their identities in the African American community.

The entirety of history is full of examples of philosophy from the Caucasian circles but little is documented of the thoughts and struggles of the black man and few documents from the time are attributed to American authors, with Europe producing the likes of Pierre-Aristide Desdunes (Kress, 2007). According to Bruce, (2001) "It is only until the late nineteenth century, there was little that imprinted their culture upon the world and gave them a sense of common tradition and history other than oppression". As a result, a lot of the writings and commentary of the 20th century involved calls to arise, which in turn were oppressed by assassinations and other covert and destructive acts that were aimed at eradicating or minimizing the impact that these voices had. The appropriate response in literary circles was a call for increased awareness of the reality of the environment

that the black individual was faced with living in on a day-to-day basis. Such a voice is found in the character of Max in *The Man Who Cried I Am*, “When he becomes aware of the illusionary nature of the world around him and arises to destroy the said illusions” (Williams, 1967).

The gender struggles that African Americans had to go through on the pathway to equality are more complex than most people acknowledge. Each generation brings up their young in accordance with the past’s influence but dependent on the circumstances that they themselves have had to deal with on their path to maturity. As a result, post-civil war veterans who faced excessive racism during service for ‘their’ country passed their embittered spirit to the next generation who were not faced with the same environment (Kane, 2006). The result was a generation that was regaled with the horrors of the past and strove to establish their individualism to avoid a repetition of the same. This is evident in the works of prolific individuals such as Malcolm X who urged those of African descent to rise up and ensure that their white peers did not mistreat them. Ralph is thus the embodiment of such a mentality; “He ends up killing a white man who was acting out” (Williams, 1963). According to Kane’s records of previous experiences in the Civil War, the issue of racism traverses the brotherhood of military service and was not rectified over time, leading to the recurrence that Ralph had to deal with (2006). The event, however, leaves him in a state of mental imbalance and he requires a lot of help to reconcile himself with his actions and humanity.

The lack of a definitive sense of culture is one of the afflictions that came down upon the black populace after the civil war and consequent emancipation. According to Salazar, “They could not identify themselves with the people that they left in Africa as they were undergoing a different struggle for independence and could not gain a foothold in the white dominated society of the 18th and 19th centuries” (2012). A sense of brotherhood in the absence of nationalism was therefore a strong influence in the creation of a sense of identity for the black community and is evident in the wave of allegiance-promoting literature of the 20th century onwards (Salazar, 2012). The calls made during that time did not call for the formation of a country away from their former enslavers, but rather the creation of their own identity amongst their new countrymen and the evolution of that identity to a status of respect from their white peers. This led to the rise of the age of African American artistry that embedded their identity in the white dominated society. One such example in Williams’ works is “The prowess that Iris displays and the respect that she has gained in a white-dominated European landscape” (1963). It also shines a ray of hope for the new generation prevailing where the old one built a foundation for the equal treatment of individuals in society and the appreciation of art and talent where due.

The path to social equality has not been a fair one and at one time in history, even white women were

looked down upon in their own society and were denied the privileges and rights afforded to their male counterparts. In any case, “They have only recently gained an equal foothold in society in terms of opportunities and positions that they qualify for, which is a struggle that has gone side-by-side with the fight for gender equality and the subsequent voice it marshalled on the global scale” (Scruggs, 2008). Perhaps the African in Max was awakened to this fact and resulted in the equal treatment that he conferred upon passing judgment and coming to terms with his relationships with Lillian and Margrit. Perhaps the writer also displays his sense of individual understanding of the basis of equality when he analyzes the struggles that each woman faces individually as they try to establish their niches in life. Lillian must come to terms with her fear that marriage to Max will result in a ‘broke’ lifestyle while she wants to live in the glamor and lights that embody the fabulous life lived by the higher classes. Margrit, on the other hand, is white and must contend with being in an inter-racial relationship that is viewed as a betrayal by some members of the community at the time (Williams, 1967).

The Man Who Cried I Am is an embodiment of the black struggle that was sweeping across the literature of the time, with parallels being all too real when compared to the events that were occurring in the world at the time. These works are therefore the artist’s act of committing the acts to history through their medium of expression while invigorating the imagination of the reader, thereby invoking their sense of self by associating with the events that their forefathers experienced (Fleming, 2003). The reality is that some of the characters in the book are embodiments of real-world individuals, such as Minister Q displaying a character and similar mindset with Malcolm X, who was himself a leader of the black movement and who was similarly taken out due to his radical views on political and social matters (Williams, 1967). This bitterness also rises in Max Reddick when he realizes the reality of the words that he has been hearing from the black leaders that he has met during his life’s journey, all the time he spent furthering the agenda of those who aimed only to use him and the eventuality of his and every life. He comes to terms with his own mortality and the irony; “The curtain before his eyes lifted so late in his life, driving his will to commit one last act of valor before his demise” (Williams, 1967).

Reality is one of the literary tools employed by every great writer to root their story in the normal lives of the readers. Williams achieves this in his depiction of the situations that the characters, such as Big Ralph, have to deal with in a society that continually emancipates their manhood and dominance (Williams, 1963). The effects are well documented in the violence that these individuals display in the home and the mental mindsets that their children grow up in are testament to this fact (Dawahare, 2003). Ralph develops into an adult who is mentally and physically able to handle life in the navy and protect himself when the time comes. Iris, on the other hand,

matures into a singer who is more prominent than some of her white compatriots. The main argument here is the fact that she is both black and female, two factors that could lead to her talent and prominence being undermined in the male dominated societies. However, "She shines and displays surprising mental fortitude" (Williams, 1963). Whether this is a result of her alienation from her mother and thus a lack of contact with the influences of the older and embittered generation which defined itself with the words struggle and defiance remains in question. We cannot, however, discount the rationale of hope for a generation that is reaping the benefits of a freedom that they did not have to struggle for and not understanding the struggle that the older generation actually endured. Eventually, both books end with a self-awareness and sense of fulfilment and internal peace in the heroes and heroines that are presented to us.

CONCLUSION

The 20th century was a period for the reformation of the social scale in terms of equality regardless of race and any other distinctions other than the fact that we are all human beings. This was supported by the writers and political leaders that arose to awaken society to the inequalities that existed and the hope that they could effect changes so that the next generation would not have to suffer the same fate. Max Reddick in *The man Who Cried I Am* and Sissie Joplin, the dying heroine of her self-titled novel, embody this spirit and go through hardships to the point of death (in the case of Max). Williams' literary genius is brought out in the life that Max lives and the hero becomes a character who we can look upon to strengthen ourselves in the face of insurmountable odds, considering the situations that he encountered and to some lengths, conquered. Although the works that we have analyzed are fictional, there are lessons to be drawn from the characters' struggles. The message, though grim with the eventualities that the heroes and heroines have to go through, displays a hope of the creation of a society without the conspiracies and bigotry that afflicted the older generation. Williams therefore does an excellent job of depicting the current state, hopes and dreams of an entire generation and provides invaluable insight into the factors that harbor the generational gaps and how we can learn from these past mistakes to create a better present and future.

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