

LITERATURE AS A MEANS OF FIGHTING AGAINST RACISM AND DISCRIMINATION

by

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From the days of chattel slavery in the U.S., racial ideology continues to affect the Western world even today. But what is racism? As John Arthur suggests, “[r]acism is usually a form of prejudice in just that sense: it is an attitude that is grounded in the beliefs formed on insufficient evidence, or beliefs that are held too firmly without adequate regard for other information that may call these beliefs into question” (29). For example, the early colonization period in American history adopted a negative stance towards the black population with the white European inhabitants exercising their hegemonic power over the blacks brought from Africa, among others. African Americans faced a cruel system that brutalized them, while whites’ negative imaging of blacks during slavery served as a tool to justify their oppression.

Nowadays, racism is expressed in a different way still lurking in most people’s minds. Obama’s election as the president of the U.S clearly proved that there is an air of change concerning this issue and it may even be considered a victory of equality and liberty. However, the statics about blacks’ life (the life of blacks in American society) bring to the surface the truth which reveals that big numbers remain illiterate and pass a part of their life in prison. Thus, racism has not been annihilated, but transformed into a new form. African-Americans have attempted to resist these prejudices and to reposition their place in society through writing either literature or political speeches. By contesting the commonly accepted stereotypes about their race and by presenting the raw violence they have been subjected to, they have tried to comment on the stereotypical black presentation and expose the dynamic of their people. Paul Laurence Dunbar, in *The Lynching of Jube Benson* (1904), explores the white reader’s expectations about “blackness” but, at the same time, inverts these stereotypes of inferiority to shed light on African-American resistance. However, human blindness and society’s inability to recognize racial or ethnic difference as a dynamic force which enriches rather than threatens social stability is not an exclusively American issue. Racism nowadays has been differently perceived by other nations due to cultural as well as historical and socio-political diversity. My reading of Dunbar’s story has encouraged me to re-assess my own views with regard to racism as well as look more closely at how this issue is viewed and understood in my own society.

We always need to bear in mind the different factors that shape mentalities and attitudes in various countries so as to appreciate the various hues a term can take. The U.S. became the country of opportunities for people coming from Europe, building around its name the myth of the American Dream. The dream for a better future was disrupted by the slave institution which, however, did not resemble the former slave trades practiced in the past. White settlers exercised their power over the African slaves emphasizing their supremacy to justify their acts of brutalization. During the twentieth century, segregation laws, known as Jim Crow laws, based on the dogma of “separate but equal” kept blacks and whites separate promoting the belief that African Americans are second class citizens. Also, the geographic position of the U.S. held the country away from the catastrophic consequences of the World Wars. Thus, the country’s economy flourished. While this was the situation in the U.S., Greece had

different issues to deal with. For about four centuries, Greeks had to cope with the Muslim oppressors, thus they tried to preserve their patriotic spirit and national identity. The homogenized country was also at the centre of attention during the World Wars fighting for their freedom, but, at the same time, dealing with the consequences of war.

Literature thus, becomes the vehicle which helps us open up to different perspectives and reconsider certain facts about the history of a nation. Readers have the opportunity to revisit historical facts and question their own reality. Since there is no absolute correspondence between Dunbar's *The Lynching of Jube Benson* and the Greek reality, the reader has the chance to re-evaluate commonly accepted beliefs about the Other, while, at the same time, he/she broadens up his/her horizons to new perspectives.

In Dunbar's *The Lynching of Jube Benson* the white narrator, Dr. Melville, presents the viewpoint of the black character, Jube Benson. The writer highlights the kind of understanding that the whites have about black population. As the narrator points out about Jube, "He was a fellow whom everybody trusted— an apparently steady-going, grinning sort, as we used to call him" (134). This statement suggests that blacks are considered loyal people who are satisfied with their place in society, leading a tranquil and happy life. Dr. Melville further exposes the whites' ideology of supremacy over African Americans by calling him "boy" (134) which sheds light on the racist belief concerning blacks' inferiority. Apart from the racial impact that this word creates, the author suggests the loss of individual identity, since blacks are deprived of a real name and of manhood. This emphasizes Dunbar's comment on the system that prevents African Americans from building an identity except for one in accordance with the dictates of their oppressors. Thus, identity becomes property permitting whites to objectify black life.

The image of African Americans is also constructed according to white conventions promoting the idea that colored people can either be angelic or demonic. The narrator suggests the two-sidedness of Jube presenting him as a "gentle-demon" who plays both the role of the "perfect Cerberus" (134), in order to protect the doctor's beloved Annie from other fellows, and the role of the "nurse" (135), an act which exposes his kindness towards Dr. Melville when he is ill. As a result, Dunbar comments on the cultivation of misconceptions about black people which only result in the victimization of both African Americans and whites due to the acceptance of certain assumptions.

While presenting these stereotypes, Dunbar attempts to subvert them by pointing out the oversimplification of these attitudes and attempting to reformulate the white American perspective about "blackness." Before dying, Annie responds to the doctor's question about her murderer "[t]hat black—" (138), allowing whites to assume that the murderer is a black man: Jube. This incident reveals the power that stereotypical black images have on the white population, since they are based on assumptions and not on evidence. The author exposes the narrator's understanding of his trickery by the culturally constructed ideas which are passed through education only after the lynching of Jube takes place. Dr. Melville calls himself "a young fool of a hypocrite" (134) marking his prejudice towards a person who considers his friend. The limited ideas that whites have about blacks are perpetuated through education and, as Dr. Melville points out the moment they capture Jube for being the murderer, "I saw his black face glooming there in the half light, and I could only think of him as a monster. It's tradition. At first I was told that the black man would catch me, and when I got over that, they taught me that the devil was black" (140). His statement offers an account of the origins of racism depicting the black man as the monster, which corresponds to the black rapist model

prevalent in white society. To emphasize this false ideology the narrator presents as a motivation for his actions “the false education” (143). Thus, both whites and blacks are victimized by the educational system, due to the fallacies that circulated about colored people.

The author constructs the narrative in such a way so as to underline the irony which surrounds it. Even though the characters who discuss this event are white and educated, they are “illiterate” concerning blacks’ true identity. The apocalyptic end of the story unveils the white criminal offering Dunbar’s rebellion against the white expectations. In the final scene, the doctor examines evidence found in Annie’s body and underlines that, “I examined it under a powerful glass, and read my own doom. It was the skin of a white man, and in it were embedded strands of short brown hair or beard” (142). This statement illuminates the writer’s effort to expose the perpetuation of injustices and fight against human tyranny. This image of Dr. Melville examining the white skin further parodies white obsession with black skin. The glass that the doctor looks through serves as a mirror which reflects the real monster which is the white man is. As a consequence, the author’s narrative strategy highlights his effort to unfold to his readers the need for a change in the way they perceive African Americans and to voice his resistance to imposed labels.

The Lynching of Jube Benson sheds light on the stereotypical representations of African Americans without containing any true knowledge about them and further explores the black people’s resistance to these ideas. In the stories, the white perspective is trapped in conventions and falsely circulated ideas about African Americans. Stereotypes aim to present colored people as an inferior population and to keep them under white bondage. However, Dunbar rebels against this imposed social structure and challenges the kind of thinking about black people that originated during the time of slavery. The narrative unveils a different aspect of black personality focusing on the superficiality of such ideology by attempting to restore a sense of pride to blacks through their resistance. Literature, thus, for Dunbar becomes a remedy to cultural suppression and a tool to expose African-American struggle against the system.

But racial discrimination is not an all-American issue. Twenty years ago, when the Greek government decided to open the national borders, big numbers of people, mainly from Balkan countries, arrived in Greece seeking for a better future. Back then, fear for the different, the other, the alien, was one of the first emotions that filled the conservative body of Greek society. Most citizens associated immigrants with criminals and murderers creating stereotypical images of them. As in most cases, immigrants were considered children of a lesser God. Many times, if a clever immigrant child managed to be the best student of his/her school, parents, teachers, church and media would react against such a possibility. According to them he/she is the Other. Also, let us not forget the recent brutal murder of the 12 year old Albanian Alex by his fellow students which, as it was revealed, happened with the help of adults. When children, the personification of purity and innocence, reach such a point, this makes evident society’s intolerance of the other, compelling its members to internalize practices long ago condemned.

But it is not only society that oppresses immigrants but also the inability of the political system to tackle the problems these people face. Even though there are many who have lived in Greece for over 15 years, the country did not allow them to have any political rights. Ironically enough, the same people that did not have the right to vote, had to pay the taxes that the government imposed. It was only until two years ago that the Greek government

decided to give immigrants, under specific conditions, the Greek citizenship. As in most cases, however, many reacted against the possibility of immigrants to vote pointing out that they are not Greeks.

In addition, the economic crisis of the last couple of years has led a huge number of populations coming from the Middle East to leave their countries. Greece, as the frontier Europe with Asia, became for many the path that would lead to a better future. Among them, many were illegal immigrants who were trapped in the Greek borders due to the country's political agreement with the European Union. According to this, all illegal immigrants who are found in a European country must be returned to the first European country they have travelled through. In most cases, this country is Greece, thus they return here. However, the Greek system is unprepared to deal with all those immigrants and many, even though they want to return to their homelands they cannot. As a result, the system's inability to control such issues leads to further problems since people are forced to survive in a country which is not so hospitable towards them.

Consequently, both society and the political system eternalize specific ideas about immigrants without regarding that, after all, we are all humans who seek a better future. Dunbar's work brings to the center of attention the need for a shift in American society's thinking as far as racial discrimination is concerned. The author questions hierarchical structures and unequal power relations, highlighting the negative impact that they have on the individual. Although the events of the novel take place at the time of chattel slavery, now more than ever in our contemporary world both individuals and society must realize the need for a reorientation of values and the elimination of racism. Literature thus, becomes a bridge that connects the past with the present emphasizing the diachronic value of certain texts, and at the same time helping us reconsider our priorities and firm beliefs by emphasizing unity rather than division. After all, there is no Other but only Us.

Works Cited

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