THE REPRESENTATION OF MARGINALIZATION IN JAMES BALDWIN’S “SONNY’S BLUES” AND JOHN EDGAR WIDEMAN’S “ALL STORIES ARE TRUE”

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ABSTRAK


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1. INTRODUCTION

The Background

James Baldwin’s ‘Sonny’s Blues” and John Edgar Wideman’s “All Stories Are True” voice the oppression of the black community as a minority in the United States. The oppression of the black community as a minority among the dominant culture is represented by Sonny in “Sonny’s Blues” and the narrator’s brother in “All Stories Are True” in which the two characters find themselves tragically marginalized by the whites. Through the narrator and mother’s perspectives in the two stories, the discussion emphasizes on black’s oppression and frustration as well as their struggling to lift their status up among the dominant culture.

The Problem

What does the text of James Baldwin’s “Sonny’s Blues” and John Edgar Wideman’s “All Stories Are True” reveal about the representation of marginalization, including their struggling to lift their status up among the dominant culture?

The Objective

The objective of the study is to describe the representation of marginalization in James Baldwin’s “Sonny’s Blues” and John Edgar Wideman’s “All Stories Are True”, including their struggling to lift their status up among the dominant culture.

2. THE THEORITICAL APPROACH

This Study applies reader response criticism. As a primary concern of theoretical framework, reader response criticism focuses on reader’s responses to literary texts. It is a broad, exciting, evolving domain of literary studies that can help us learn about our own reading process and how they relate to, among other things, specific
elements in texts we read, our life experiences, and the intellectual community of which we are a member. (Tyson 153)

3. METHODOLOGY

In conducting the research, the researchers apply descriptive qualitative method. The study focuses on analyzing and interpreting the information (data) that has been gathered. The actual analysis depends on the data gathering. As mentioned by Berg that “…the overall effort will be to create descriptive accounts based on the information captured by data-collection technologies” (200).

Data, the narrations or texts related to representation of marginalization, are taken from James Baldwin’s “Sonny’s Blues” and John Edgar Wideman’s “All Stories Are True”.

4. DATA ANALYSIS

Implicitly, the mother takes a very important role in shaping the character of Sonny in “Sonny’s Blues.” As a powerful figure in the family, the mother in “Sonny’s Blues,” conceals from her two children the reality of the oppression they encounter in the society especially the oppression of their father. She raises her children in a drug infested and frustrated community, which cannot release itself from the image of marginalization. The mother lets the children discover what happen in their society by themselves instead of telling them the truth. What the narrator sees is the hopeless face of his mother, “The way I always see her is the way she used to be on Sunday afternoon, say, when the old folks were talking after the Sunday dinner. I always see her wearing pale blue” (Baldwin 90). This scene is a continuous atmosphere that brings serious attention to the narrator to realize the truth among his folks and his environment. He discovers the pale blue on his mother’s face represents the oppression of the black community among the whites. Tragic experiences the blacks encounter in the white society make them feel forlorn and bring serious effect to the children. “The child knows that they won’t talk anymore because if he knows too much about what’s happened to them, he’ll know too much too soon, about what’s going to happen to him” (Baldwin 90). They believe something (marginalization) that has existed before is going to appear. Ironically, the blacks’ tendency to deny the marginalization they encounter ends up with a strong image that the marginalization will be there as a shadow for them forever. As a consequence, Sonny grew up in the image of unfairness that influences his insight in handling situations.

A similar representation of the hopelessness shown by the mother in “All Stories Are True” appears when she tries to discover the black faces in the Bible. The mother actually tries to deny the oppression she feels as the minority but fails. “I try to change the faces of the people in the Bible. I cannot do it. They still look like the faces I saw in Sunday school, in the little picture books we have to study from. No black faces …” (Wideman 1374). The mother expects to find black faces in the Bible and feels forlorn when she fails. Her denial to internalize the dominant culture makes her more sensitive and easier to feel irritable. “Teasing your fuddle-brained old mother. I know. I know most the time nobody understands what I am talking about. Half the time don’t know my own self” (Wideman 1373). As a displacement of her frustration and anger at the whites, the mother exposes their failure to understand each other. Moreover, she tries to understand her community’s misery by looking at Wade, her neighbor. “And I guess Job surely did have Wade’s face, and Wade’s face, God bless him, surely isn’t white” (Wideman 1374). The mother’s hopelessness makes her show her anger at the whites at many occasions even from a religious aspect. The way she tries to change the fact in the Bible stresses her oppression as a black that is marginalized by the whites.

The mother’s worry about Sonny in “Sonny’s Blues” reaches the climax when she is telling about their father’s experience when his father’s brother was killed by the whites. The mother conceals the secret from Sonny and the narrator as a reaction to their anger and father’s hatred at the whites. “Your Daddy never did really get right again. Till the day he died he weren’t sure but that every white man he saw
was the man that kills his brother” (Baldwin 92). The mother is suffering from the stereotype that they will never assimilate with the whites. Like her husband, she believes the whites will always marginalize the blacks. ‘I ain’t telling you this, She said, “to make you scared or bitter or to make you hate nobody. I’m telling you this cause you got a brother. And the world ain’t changed” (Baldwin 92). The mother pessimism to get better treatment from the whites oppresses her, which is reflected on her blue pale face and fragile personality.

Compare to “Sonny’s Blues,” the mother in “All Stories Are True” encounters the feeling of segregation and degradation by the whites through her perspective on the narrator’s brother’s problem. Her defense on her community shown on behalf of her sympathy on her son’s condition in jail, “… in his heart he hope they would give him a chance, believed he would earn a change, but like you say. He knows they don’t have to answer to anybody. Do what they want to do” (Wideman 1373). The mother is pessimistic that they would never get the same opportunity and treatment as whites. The reality that the practice of marginalization can be found not only in their society, but also in jail increases her oppression. Her worry about the narrator’s brother’s more caused by their race rather than the narrator’s brother’s attitude itself.

The character of mother in the two stories above represents pessimism and oppression experienced by the black community among the whites. The two characters of mother state the blacks will always be marginalized by whites. Time will not change the system or the attitudes of the whites towards them. Although the mothers in the two stories have different ways in expressing their fear and pessimism, they both have the same tone and perspective about the whites: the whites will never accept them as real brothers who have the same right in this world. Their community remains a piece of life, which occupies the dark side of the world where anger, hatred, and hopelessness bind the society.

If the mothers respond to the marginalization by being pessimistic and oppressed, the narrators respond to it by showing positive ways to identify themselves among the whites, to confront the hostile dominant culture as well as to defend themselves as good black Americans.

In Sonny’s Blues,” the narrator faces the same reality as the mother does. He sees his community as a group of people who are trapped on the death road. The darkness and misery of Harlem have filled the young generations of blacks with hopelessness and drug influence. Baldwin writes:

All they (the boys of Sonny’s age) really knew were two darknesses, the darkness of their lives, which was now closing in on them, and the darkness of the movies, which had blinded them to that other darkness, and in which they now, vindictively, dreamed, at once more together that they were at any other time, and more alone. (Baldwin 83)“

The narrator cannot escape his mind from the danger of the environment where his brother, Sonny, and he grew up. When the police for drug case caught Sonny, a gulp of sadness and responsibility tortured him until he hardly bore the feeling. “I was scared, scared for Sonny. He became real to me again. A great block of ice got settled in my belly and kept melting there slowly all they long…” (Baldwin 83). However, the narrator does not stereotype all the whites as superiors; instead, he tries hard to improve his economic and social status by getting higher education and becoming a teacher. He wants Sonny to do the same, become somebody beyond the generation in their environment. Sonny’s case has beaten him very hard that he converses sentences opposite to his real feeling. “If I couldn’t believe it: but what I mean by that is that I couldn’t find any room for it anywhere inside me” (Baldwin 83). Ironically, the narrator escapes from his depression by forgetting it. Abruptly, he wants to run away from Sonny’s case, from the dark side of Harlem, which he believes has stolen Sonny’s life and other young generations’. “I told myself that Sonny was wild, but he wasn’t crazy. And he’d always been a good boy, he hadn’t ever turned hard or evil or disrespectful, the way kids can, so quick, especially in Harlem” (Baldwin 83). What the narrator
intends is to lead Sonny into upper level, to push him into an educated man, and leave Harlem and its conflict as well as his dream as a musician behind. You mean, you want to be a drummer?” I somehow had the feeling that being a drummer might be all right for other people but not for my brother Sonny” (Baldwin 93). Being a musician could be the right way for young African-American generations to release themselves from the oppression of marginalization; however the narrator wants Sonny to be “more” far from music and drugs.

In a similar way, the narrator in “All Stories Are True” expresses his awareness about the strong influence of the environment to the children:

…when I heard the sound of Homewood street names playing, transforming a commonplace scene into something else, restoring the invisible omnipresence of time, the enabling medium, what brought you this moment and will carry you away, how things begin and end, always, you about to step out onto your mother’s porch… (Wideman 1371)

The narrator realizes that the sense of belonging to their community make it difficult to step out from their environment. Furthermore, blacks have placed a permanent mark that they are different from the whites like the mother’s perspective, they would never be able to assimilate with the dominant culture. However, the narrator’s responds to their condition more rationally, stating good points to defend their community among the whites. “Anyway, what I started to say is we used those same jive comic books, but the Bible people were white to me. They never had a color, really” (Wideman 1374). The narrator encounters the same reality as the mother does, but responds to it differently. Instead of staying in the darkness of marginalization, he wants his society to look at the positive side of them and take better action. “Little sweat mixed in the cement makes it stronger, last longer. Why do you think the Pyramids been standing all these centuries. Good African blood gluing the stone” (Wideman 1373). If as being slaves they can build a wonder for the world, it is not impossible they do something better when they are not slaves anymore. Moreover, he expects the blacks to look at themselves as parts of the multicultural society who have values like others. “Look at what part of the world we are talking about. Look at them today. Not exactly a matter of color, though. More about culture” (Wideman 1373). The insight of the narrator goes beyond his mother’s who is more pessimistic and oppressed as a minority.

The narrator’s approach towards Sonny’s choice to be a musician creates a better way in confronting the hostile dominant culture. Struggling with this concept and understanding of a good life, finally, the narrator could see music as a media for the oppressed society to free itself from the distress of marginalization. Optimism of the narrator results better solution for Sonny to free himself from the dark side of the drug community even though the music itself initially leads him to his drug friends as well. In fact, Sonny had felt himself living at the bottom of life, being hopeless and paralyzed. “I can never tell you. I was all by myself at the bottom of something, stinking and sweating and crying and shaking, and I smell it, you know?” (Baldwin 102). It is his frustration as well as his ambition to free from the dark life of drugs, which motivates him to leave Harlem. Sonny says, “I couldn’t tell you when mama died - - but the reason I wanted to leave Harlem so bad was to get away from drugs”(Baldwin 103). However, Sonny knows by making music for his life he may come back to drugs again. To anticipate this and to support Sonny, the narrator prepares himself for this possibility, “’All right,’ I said at last. ‘So it can come again, All right’” (Baldwin 102). The ability of the narrator to understand and to accept Sonny’s choice is a triumph for Sonny to get free from his depression.

All I know about music is that not many people ever really hear it… But the man who creates the music is hearing something else, is dealing with the roar rising from the void and imposing order on it as it hits the air. What is evoked in him, the is of another order, more terrible because it has no words, and triumphant, too, for that same reason.
And his triumph, when he triumphs is ours. (Baldwin 104).
Sonny’s way as well as he narrator’s ability to internalize the choice of musician is a positive respond to confront the marginalization they encounter.

Optimism and sympathy of the narrator in “All Stories Are True” defends his community as a minority among the whites, which is reflected by his rational response to his mother and his brother. The narrator believes that kindness and wisdom can come from anybody regardless his race or social status. “You know, Mom, people look at you and what you’ve had to deal with and you’re just as much as a miracle to them as you say Wade is to you” (Wideman 1374). The narrator implicitly suggests that his mother’s attention and care for her society is a victory as a human being. He shows a similar attitude to his brother in jail: to encourage him, depicting a motivation for their society as a minority to think of better ways to improve their lives and feelings instead of staying in the image of marginalization. Even though he understands his brother’s inferior feeling, he gives him a rational response instead of emotional one. The narrator says that the treatment from the officers towards blacks become more nonracial and neutral. When they talk about “parole,” the narrator says: “Maybe you ought to arrange a little vacation for yourself before you apply next time.” (Wideman 1378). Although it sounds ironic this quotation shows an optimistic support for his brother to keep trying to get his parole board.

The mothers’ perspectives and narrators’ about marginalization they encounter differ distinctly as shown by the pessimism of the mothers and the optimism of the narrators to have better treatment from the dominant culture (the whites). The pessimism of the mothers in the two stories is reflected by the stereotype of the whites that each white would never accept them equally in right as the citizens of the United States. As an important figure in the family, the mothers affect the insights of their children. Greater impact on the children is shown by Sonny in “Sonny’s Blues” and the narrator’s brother in “All Stories Are True” in which the two characters become pessimistic and distressed. The marginalizations they encounter make t

He two characters confront their oppressed feeling by breaking the law. On the other hand, the narrators see their existence more rationally. Although they face the same reality as the mothers do, they feel less marginalized by trying to lift up and defend their community and seek good points they have contributed to the world to the world or to their environment. The narrator in “All Stories Are True,” uses example such as black’s building of the ancient pyramids and the faces in the Bible (no color), while in “Sonny’s Blues,” the narrator understands Sonny’s choice to be a musician.

The different insight of the mothers and the narrators in the two stories are caused by their differences in generation and experience they encounter in society. The mothers experience more tragic marginalization than the narrators,’ and this results in the mothers’ more extreme attitudes than the narrators’. Regardless the oppression of Sonny and the narrator’s brother, the younger the generations, amount to less marginalization. The mothers in the two stories are still affected by their parents’ and great – great grandparents’ experiences concerning racial tension and slavery. For examples, the narrator explains that his mother in “All Stories Are True,” felt “the presence of other souls as palpable as light playing in the edges of her robe. Her mother and father and children. Her brother and her sisters Grands and great grands” (Baldwin 92). In “Sonny’s Blues,” the mother tells the narrator about his father’s oppression after some drunken whites killed his brother for fun. ‘He never mentions it,’ she said, ‘because I never let him mention it before you children. Your daddy was like a crazy man that night and for many a night thereafter” (Baldwin 92). The narrators do not experience this “fear,” the fear to tell their children of their parents’ tragic experiences someday. They are more open to discuss their problems and to find the solution. These facts lead me to believe that the generations after the narrators may experience less marginalization than the older generations.
5. CONCLUSION

The African-American’s oppression as minority in the stories is represented in racial discrimination they encounter and the memory of history of slavery. The mothers in the two stories feel more marginalized than the narrators. This impacts the mothers’ insight towards their community and the way they handle their oppressed feeling. The mothers become more pessimistic than the narrators that for the mothers, the marginalization will never change; thus it is impossible for them to assimilate the dominant culture. On the other hand, the narrators defend their community by looking at some good points they have contributed to the world in general and to their community in particular, and the decrease the oppression of their community by showing their understanding of the blacks’ choice to be musicians or to show support and empathy for their problems.

REFERENCES


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