Jay/Jerome Johnson: the Figure of Alterity in the Representation of Black Masculinity in African American Novels

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Abstract

Through the character Jay/Jerome Johnson, Praisesong for the Window (1983) conveys a view of Black masculinity different from the usual picture of blackness associated with manhood. Mostly typified as the embodiment of all vices in the African American community, Marshall's distinct approach to Black manhood imparts the limits of the systemic racism in America. In the latter structure's aim to reinforce White Supremacy, the figure of the patriarch in the Black community is reduced to nothingness. Thus, in representing Jay/ Jerome through facets contradictory to that of the specimen, Marshall highlights how that same structure did not come up to shape a common lot for Black males. That failure is personified through how Jay/Jerome did not cope with stereotypes and wage oppression to better his living conditions.

Keywords: *Alterity, Black masculinity, systemic racism, societal failures, self-made man.*

Introduction

Racial disparities in the United States have much impacted the Black community, particularly men. Structured upon laws such as the Black Code and Jim Crow Laws after the emancipation of slaves, the American system drew social barriers aiming to enforce White Supremacy, disadvantaging colored people. Thus, from slavery to segregation, Black people bear the stigma of inferior race in their living conditions. Apart from intimidation, attacks and killings, they are provided with limited opportunities in terms of education, housing options and occupations which confine them to farming and domestic servitude.

The latter living conditions were not only meant to put the Black community on the lowest scale but also to shape a prototype of a Black male character. As the other of the White male, that form of oppression reinforces the unbalance between the two communities' structures. Unemployed or lower income, the economic insecurity of Black men which could not allow them to provide the standard of living, affects their family. It is, therefore, at the heart of the deterioration of the black family, whose dysfunctional males turn into a matriarchal structured one.

That systematic organization results in negative inscriptions and shapes a stereotypical identity, what the bulk literature representing Black masculine characters, as "endangered species" (Gibbs, 1988) illustrates. However, next to this picture of the Black masculine character coping with stereotypes, a body of work including Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow* (1983) deconstructs how that same system shapes the alter of that Black masculine character. Otherwise, they represent the way some Black males rise from that racial oppression and epitomize self-made men and pride for their community.

Through the character Jay/Jerome Johnson, Paule Marshall counters that picture of Black males as all societal failures typifying another prototype of Black masculinity. The latter, distinct from the criminal and rapist, wage their success out of the racialized society. Thus, this article highlights the other of that caricature, who so far personifies the decay of the Negro society fabric. So, this work first focuses on an overview of alterity, aiming to make explicit its use in that specific context. Then, one centers on the literary portrayal of Black males sustaining the racial system categorization. At last, one emphasizes how through Jay/Jerome Johnson, Paule Marshall represents Black masculine characters as models of social achievement.

1. The theoretical framework of Alterity :

As a concept referring to otherness, alterity is a philosophical term that describes the state of being different or the condition of being other. Regarded as a social construction, alterity is often alluded to in discussions about identity, difference, and the relationship between self and other. Its various references in different fields shape its vibrant theoretical foundation as highlighted by Anthony Muhammad who defines it as "*a concept with an extensive yet elusive histories* " (Muhammad, 2023: 39). The term is so commonly explored in fields such as philosophy, sociology, anthropology, and literary theory.

In this, alterity can involve recognizing cultural, social and individual differences. It emphasizes that understanding and defining oneself often involve distinguishing oneself from others. Its latter facet founds its cruciality in studies of identity, race, gender, and intercultural relations, where recognizing and respecting the other plays a central role in fostering understanding and empathy.

The concept of alterity also lets us consider Levinas, a central figure in the philosophical discussion of alterity. He emphasizes the ethical responsibility of the other and suggests that encountering that "other" is a fundamental aspect of human existence. His view has been influential in the representation of the other in literature, where alterity often explores how characters, cultures, and societies construct and perceive the "other" leading to insights into power dynamics, prejudice, and social structures. Despite Levina's influence, the debate on alterity is regarded as too recent in opposition to identity (Frank Welz, 2000).

Exploring alterity in literature provides profound insights into human identity, cultural interactions, and ethical relationships. By examining how authors and critics address themes of otherness, one can better understand the complexities of identity and the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion in various social contexts. As a powerful medium for reflecting on and challenging perceptions, literary works have through various perspectives given shape to the concept of the other.

Therefore, a literary review of alterity involves examining how the concept of "otherness" has been explored and represented in various literary works and theoretical frameworks. This review can span across different genres, periods, and cultural contexts, highlighting how authors and thinkers have grappled with issues of identity, difference and the relationship between self and others in questions related to gender and sexuality and particularly race.

In that bulk of social issues personified through the figure of the other, Paule Marshall draws another specimen of black manhood in the African American community. Aiming to highlight the way structured racism gives rise to different social gates, *Praisesong For the Widow* (1983) introduces another prototype of Black masculinity, whose socially constructed identity drives to perspectives different from that of the usual character personifying failure.

2. Black and Males in African American Writings: The Embodiment of all Vices

As a reflection of social realities, American literature, in particular, mirrors how racial issues constitute the building block of the structure of American society. Through different figures, the African American one pictures the anomalies of the Black community. The latter, mostly personified through men, shape a specimen of the Black character who, beyond the literary work, influences the regard toward Blackness and masculinity. Based on two seasons of NCB Parenthood, Bella and Harris point out how various means convey images of Black males reinforcing stereotypes: "*Opening a magazine or a book, turning on a television set, watching a film, or looking at photographs in public spaces, we are most likely to see images of Black people that reinforce and reinscribe White supremacy*" (Bella, Harris, 2017:135).

The figure of patriarchy in the Black community is particularly used in literature for different purposes, among which as a means to emphasize the racial structure's social impact or to typify the Black community aiming to fix stereotypes. Focusing on the former in *Native Son* (1940), Richard Wright personifies Black determinism through Bigger Thomas. The latter character enables him to highlight how race shapes the experiences, opportunities and outcomes of colored people's lives. Wright's picture of Bigger sums up a Black man's life itinerary in the United States.

The beginning scene of *Native Son* (1940) outlines Black males' conditions and their fates. The representation of Bigger as a young black living in utter poverty in a room with his sister, mother and brother highlights their responsibility. From shutting off the alarm to killing the rat, Bigger epitomizes manhood in his family. However, such a figure cannot affirm his masculinity in a society where he is shut into a circle of losers. In the same lot as the rat, he relies on the white dominant society which seals his fate. The latter reality is portrayed in the outcomes of Bigger's work at the Dalton's. Aiming to improve his living conditions, his involvement in the accidental death of Mary Dalton draws the specimen of black males whose status hovers between fugitives, killers, man hunted, captured, imprisoned, rapists, murderers etc. The latter figure shapes the identity as oversexed, criminal, aggressive, animalistic, and incompetent, to reflect the social parameters in the black community.

Suppose Wright's picture of Black masculinity aims to point out the impact of the systemic racism in the living conditions of the Black community where the male figure's lot does not allow him

to fully assume his patriarchy, in many female works, those same men epitomize the societal failures. In Gloria Naylor's *Women of Brewster Place* (Naylor, 1983), men embody the weaknesses of the Black Community. They are at the heart of the extinction of links strengthening any community.

Naylor uses various male characters to personify Black people's lot, there she emphasizes their responsibility in the living conditions of their community such as teenage mothers, and fatherless families, to list some. First, the character of Butch Fuller is a significant representation of his influence on Mattie Micheal's personal and family life. Described as a man who moves from one woman to another and leaves before there is any trouble, he symbolizes the sequels of teenage motherhood in African American societies. Butcher's one-time relationship not only impacts Mattie's life because of her pregnancy but also affects the sense of security and consistency in her family life. Her silent father who saw his religious principles violated turns violent, urging her mother Fanny to threaten him to death with a shotgun, Mattie had, therefore, to flee her parents' home. The latter scene highlights how acts from men are at the heart of changes noted in the Black family structures over time. From normal family life to the incident causing the separation of family members, Naylor singles out men's blameworthyness.

Besides Butcher, Eugene is another prototype who embodies social destructive effects despite his position as a patriarch. Worse than Butcher, he figures fatality in Luciela's life. Having abandoned Luciela with a month-old baby, his return, Ciel regarded as her dream to have a complete family materialized, left her wiped out. After terminating her pregnancy to save their relationship, Ciel loses her unique daughter Serena because of neglect when taken in a conflict with Eugene. On her side, she was left without any intention to live.

In addition, Naylor paints the process of a matriarchal structured society and its impacts on the life story of Cora Lee. The latter traces women's options for singlehood and its impacts on society such as child neglect, behavior difficulties at home and school, to list some. Cora's experience first links the single-parent system particularly women-headed ones to men's demands and violence personified through Maybelline and Sammy's father's attitudes: "*A pot of burnt rice would mean a fractured jaw, or a wet bathroom floor a loose tooth*" (Naylor,1983:102). Then Brucie's father highlights the patriarchal figure's carelessness of their responsibilities toward their children, which Naylor links to the desertion of male characters exemplified through Brucie's father "*who went out for a carton of milk and never came back*" (Naylor,1983 :102). Such a reality in the African American community is also confirmed in the way the nurse emphasized Black men's usefulness just when it comes to procreate : "*You can find him to have it, but can't find him to take care of it*" *(Naylor, 1983 : 85).*

Furthermore, the shadows mark the turn from patriarchy to a female head figure. Cora Lee's shadow men embody Black men's passivity as far as children and family care are concerned. As figures in the dark, they epitomize the absent patriarch, causing chaos and disorders in families as exemplified through Cora Lee's children whose behavior at home, in the neighbourhood and at school indexes parents' failure.

Men's socially destructive power which causes chaos in the African communities is also painted by Morisson's *The Bluest Eye*

(2007). In the latter, Morisson's representation of Cholly wraps the black masculine character with all evils, which she highlights in equaling Cholly Breedlove's behavior to bestiality. For the author of *The Bluest Eye*, Cholly "*had catapulted himself beyond the reaches of human consideration. He had joined the animals; was, indeed, an old dog, a snake, a ratty nigger* " (Morisson, 2007:33).

Cholly's behavior associates many living conditions in the African American community with men. The consequences of his drunken attitude draw a typical black family. First, they are devoided of social peace because of quarrels. Then it also justifies delinquency through the fugitive tendency of Sammy. At fourteen, he has run away twenty-five times. However, the consequence of Cholly's incest points out Black males as the main causes of misfortune and catastrophes while linking Pecola's condition to the disappearance of any sign of hope, liveliness and abundance. "*What is clear now is that of all of that hope (...) love, and grief, nothing remains but Pecola and the unyielding earth. (...) The seeds shriveled and died* " (Morrison, 2007 : 21).

In African American writings, the representation of men particularly conveys the imagery of the figure personifying the chaos that exists in the African American community. The latter picture is either used as a means to reflect the way systematic racism affects black patriarchy or a means for Black women to denounce their living conditions which men's lack of proper sense of responsibility hardens. However, even if such a portrayal influences one's regard toward blackness and masculinity, other novelists in the example of Paule Marshall draw a prototype of Black patriarchy distinct in character and social role to counter fixed stereotypes as far as the Black character's self-definition is concerned.

3. Jay/ Jerome Johnson: The Epitome of Black Self-Made Man and Communal Pride

In *Praisesong for the Widow* (1983), the character Jay/Jerome Johnson imparts a view of Black Masculinity not usual in African American novels. Mostly pictured as the embodiment of all evils, Marshall's Jerome Johnson epitomizes a distinct figure despite being Black and male. In this, the novelist calls for another view of the patriarch, to depart from the almost generalized perception of Black heads as societal failures. In this, Jerome stands for the archetype who wages his way to success in the racially structured society.

Suppose Paule Marshall's characterization conveys a different regard of Black masculinity, other works mark that sharp turn from the figure who bends over his lot in the racially divided society to the self-reliant, accountable and patriarch in the true sense. In Griffith & Cornish (2016) " What Defines a Man", despite acknowledging the way manhood is shaped by factors among which racial ones, data from their interviews provide other attributes of Black masculinity. The latter is reflected through how they portray that character whose key traits reside in his ability to support his family. That particular feature which consists of the main contrast with the Black specimen not only defines manhood but also is used to draw barriers between societal failures and self-made men, which a participant highlights during his interview mentioning the case of one of his friends.

> I have a friend of mine who comes about once, twice a week, he sleeps on my couch. I do not consider him to be

man, because he's not self-supportive. He is an old dude that has let life beat him down. So what he got fired from [local institution], but he has not tried since to find a better job or to get up off the ground basically. (Griffith & Cornish, 2016: 6).

That step from a victim to a social reference is what Marshall personifies through Jerome Johnson. As a Black man, Jerome Johnson goes over every barrier established to keep the man Black on the lowest scale. In this, Marshall underlines the particular impact of education on their self-affirmation. The various steps he staggered to his way to success demonstrate how self-determination and education can reverse that stigma the dominant community has long associated with the Black male.

Through his character, Marshall makes Black men's awareness of their condition in the United States the way out of such a dilemma in how Jerome made his difficulties a life lesson to come up with his expectations in the professional field particularly despite his challenges. However, such a step derives from his consciousness of the extent to which the dominant power holds Black share in American society: "*it was their companies, their firms, their offices, their country, and therefore, theirs the power to give or deny, to say yes or no* " (Marshall, 1983: 135).

That consciousness of having different gates among which social failure gives way to self-reliance as epitomized by Jerome Johnson in *Praisesong for the Widow*. While making education and self-determination the building block of Jerome Johnson's character, Marshall paints an "other" of the Black man and reflects his otherness in how he adopts a lifestyle far from bars, sexuality and the White society's command to escape the common lot.

Thus, suppose his mentality constitutes a step forth "*we need to work and build our own, to have our own. Our own! Our own!*" (Marshall, 1983: 131), Jerome Johnson's lifestyle enables him to shape the dynamics of the constructed identity based on gender and race. From correspondence courses to reading books on career building, personality improvement, selling techniques and business activities, Jerome and his family moved from the South to the North, otherwise he escapes the prison the white community built to become a company leader personifying the responsible patriarch. So, his movement from Halsey Street to North White Plain symbolizes his way out of the common lot of black men unable to satisfy their patriarchal duties.

Besides the representation through Jerome, the alternative picture of Jay reverses the specimen of black families evolving in conflict. In contrast to the latter, Jay personifies a communal pride. Not only does he care for his family assuming his role as a father and husband, he also attaches great importance to passing on African American values to his progeny in a setting where every trait of blackness is reduced to nothingness because of norms. While inculcating values through poetry, music and rituals, Jay discards the figure causing chaos, loss of values and neglect as typified by Cholly.

Furthermore, Jay's reactions to his wife's jealousy and his intimacy with Avey are also representative of his distinctiveness from the womanizer Butcher in *The Women of Brewster Place* (1983). His view of this role in the racial society is summed up in caring for the family. He reasons Avey when needed, brings joy and as well values women. *The Jay who emerged from the music of an evening, the self that would never be seen down at the store, was open, witty, playful, even outrageous at times* (…) *affectionate* (…)

passionate a lover who knew how to talk to a woman in bed (Marshall, 1983: 95).

Conclusion

In *Praisesong for the Widow* (1983), Paule Marshall represents Jay/Jerome Johnson with features contrasting with the Black figures so far pictured in novels. Distinct from the criminal, violent and rapist, Jay/Jerome Johnson typifies another perspective of African American men's lot in the United States. Evolving in a society which structure disqualifies success for Black men, Marshall's work typifies the antisystem through how Jay/Jerome Johnson escapes from the common lot. Thus, he standq for the figure of alterity, the other of societal failures. In this, Paule Marshall highlights black men's feat in her portrayal of the other of the usual figure of Black masculinity, the challengers of the system. As products of the same system, the social conditions shaping delinquents and drunkards also give rise to responsible patriarchs.

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