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The Narrative as a Statement of Identity and History in Julie Dash's *Daughters of the Dust*

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The predicament of the African-American people is perhaps unique in world history. Theirs is the story of "internal colonialism," a term that I am using slightly more loosely than scholars of the subaltern. The reason for my using this term rests on the fact that the encounter between the cultures of Africa and the new nation, America, created sociological and historical conditions which resemble colonialism and its aftermath post-colonialism. As post-colonialism, in our day, no longer applies solely to the historic concept of imperialism, the process of alienation and 'othering' in one way or another can be discussed within this context and within this discourse, since colonialism has generally been regarded as the basis for the disempowerment of a people.

History shows us that authority rests on knowledge and power. In the encounter between the Africans and the American whites, plantation owners and other people that used slaves suppressed the African cultures as a part of what they considered their civilizing mission. The most dangerous weapon in the imposition of the so-called valuable knowledge and the creation of the 'other' is the control over language by the hegemonic power. Language enables one to name the world and therefore to 'understand' it. This also entails controlling reality; since it is through language that we come to know reality, that is, have power over it. Another site on which resistance and oppression have been operative in the encounter between the African and the American has been the body, which carries the physical signs of cultural difference. The consciousness of body imposed on the Africans became a negating experience on their part. The colonialist authority, or rather in this case the internal colonialist authority, demanded and produced differentiations, individuations, and identity effects from which it benefited. Bhabha claims that this paradigm is one "through which discriminatory

practices can map out subject populations that are tarred with the visible and transparent mark of power" (34). Dispossession and discrimination as well as disempowerment were the lot of the Africans coming into the new world since they had been brought in as slaves.

The slave trade started in the Western world in the 1560s and by 1700, British trade in Africa had shifted entirely to slaves. Europeans saw Africans only as men in chains, captives without power, and they transferred their impressions to Africa and the states from which these slaves had come (Achebe 28). The mentioned period not only habituated Europeans to the spectacle of Africans as "men in chains," but also presented literature geared to explaining or justifying the spectacle. The narratives produced by the British and the Americans were important because it is the role of the narrative to introduce something new into the world. In Paul Ricoeur's words "[…] what it [narrative] introduces is the synthesis […] then presumably it attaches to the events of the world a form they do not otherwise have. A story re-describes the world, in other words, what it describes is *as if* it were presumably, in fact, it is not. Each narrative brings something new into the world by means of language. Narrative opens us to 'the realm of the 'as if'" (Hinchman 10). This realm of the *as if* in relation to Africans was a site of total disempowerment and denigration.

The early stages of this tradition of narrative owed much to the accounts of English captains who went to Africa. One such captain, John Lok writes:

> A people of beastly living, without a God, Laws, religion. […] whose women are common for they contract no matrimonie, neither have respect or chastity. […] Whose inhabitants dwell in caves and dennes: for these are their houses. […] They have no speech, but rather a grinning and a chattering. There are also people without heads, having their eyes and mouths in their breasts. (qtd. in Achebe 20)

This tradition of writing was continued and maintained, but there was to be a marked change in its tenor. What had previously been reported to be matter-of-fact reports of what voyagers had seen started becoming biased evaluations of the Africans. Vested interest in the slave trade produced a literature of devaluation. The African way of life, African institutions and African people were not only disparaged but also presented as the negation

of all human morality and civility. These narratives had become so successful in creating Ricoeur's paradigm of the *as if* that it became only natural in the minds of some that the slave trade was in fact a mercy to "these poor wretches, who […] would otherwise suffer from the butcher's knife" as one authority claimed (Achebe 22, 23). Thus, the Western world of the time explained or simply justified its action towards the Africans by pinpointing the justifiable reasons for the enslavement and expatriation of thousands of Africans.

The practice of representing Africa and Africans in a disparaging tone took quite a long time to fade out. In fact one such work, which gained immense popularity as late as the 1950s, was Joyce Cary's novel *Mister Johnson*, which received wide acclaim in England. In the same year that it was published, Time magazine was to do a cover story on Cary and describe *Mister Johnson* as "the best novel ever written about Africa" (Achebe 22). A description of the town where Cary's novel takes place is enough to show us that not much had changed in three hundred and fifty years in the eyes of the white man:

> Poverty and ignorance, the absolute government of jealous savages, conservative as only the savage can be, have kept it at the first frontier of civilization. Its people would not know the change if time jumped back fifty thousand year. They live like mice or rats in a palace floor, all in the magnificence and variety of the arts, the ideas, the learning and the battles of civilization go on over their heads and they do not even imagine them. (Cary 22)

Obviously, Cary believes that the Africans (Nigerians in this case) may no longer require enslavement for their salvation; however, they still need the civilizing influence of British colonialism. These examples show how those who hold the privilege of narrating for their own selves can manipulate the telling of any story. This is the way in which writers of the Western world used absolute power over narrative to arrange stories as they liked in order to secure license for themselves. They supplemented their works and experiences with appropriate stories to accomplish the task of dispossessing and disempowering the Africans they had brought to slavery.

Those who have been disempowered also turn to enabling stories of a certain kind for the repossession of their myth, culture and power as human

beings. There is, of course, a great difference between the first group of accounts that are put out to justify or camouflage and the reconstructive tales told by those who struggle to reclaim their history.

Today, much as the "empire" writes back, the African-Americans, too, write back in order to repossess their history, traditions and humanity. The African-Americans' narratives enable them to absorb the inner story of their experience and make sense of their own baffling dramas. They are written to affect the form of experience and style of action of the group. The narrative is, culturally, both sacred and mundane and shared socially in varying degrees. It is one of the most important symbolic systems that is employed to lend a higher significance to an individual experience and to link man's individual consciousness with the inner lives of those with whom he shares a common ethnic background (Hinchman 40).

In order to achieve a common myth and a shared symbolic system, Julie Dash sets her novel, *Daughters of the Dust*, in one of the Gullah/Geechee speaking communities of the Sea Islands off the coast of Carolina. The population living here are a distinct group of African-Americans who are descendants of enslaved Africans from the Rice Coast of West Africa. These people seem to have retained a strong sense of community and were able to develop a distinct Creole language. They were also able to preserve more of their African cultural tradition than any other community in the United States because of their geographic isolation. The setting allows Dash to construct a world of African-American supremacy. Furthermore, she uses her narrative both on the level of the individual's experience and the sacred story, linking the two to give it ultimate power. Her aim is to debunk the myths that have been constructed about her ethnic group, a point she makes clear at the beginning of her novel. A white professor of anthropology, who is later to be inadvertently instrumental in one of Dash's protagonists' rejoining the Gullah community, claims:

> […] A culture must have a distinct history, artifacts, a language, and identifiable values. […] [This culture] amounts to some kind of crude imitation of the old plantation culture; a patois derived from broken English. […] all of which is the obvious product of European influence. […] Not what would be acceptable in a scientific sense […] it is an established fact accepted by […] colored sociologists, that the colored people, bereft of a history, culture, and traditions, have

> long since adopted the ways of the dominant culture, shedding all ties with the African continent. […] [They] use a dialect resulting in a simpler structure of English. […] "It's never been studied because it is not a language!" It is an ill-formed manner of communicating developed by people for whom proper English is beyond their intellectual capabilities. (289-290)

Daughters of the Dust is a statement to the contrary. The novel, set in the 1920s, is about the Peazant family. There are two protagonists: Elizabeth Peazant, a school teacher who continues to live on Dutwah Island off the shore of Carolina; and her cousin Amelia, who has come from New York to write her graduating thesis on the habits, customs and traditions, and the Geechee language of the island.

The two girls come from totally different backgrounds, though they both have college educations and are related. Amelia is the granddaughter of Hagaar, one of the three matriarchs in the novel. Hagaar is the perfect figure of the mimic who perceives of herself not as part of her own culture but as the 'other' to a certain extent. She is the hybrid subject of post-internal colonialism, filled with the "idiom of dubiety" (Suleri 119). As any hybrid she strives to detach herself as well as others in her ethnic group from their past enslavement and consequently their future freedom. She has coerced her daughter's family into moving with her to New York where her daughter, Myown, having been severed from her roots, has receded into her own world. Hagaar's aim is to enter colored cliques that most successfully emulate white culture. Everything in her life revolves around her wish to enter circles where people have lighter skins and talk with proper accents. Hagaar has internalized the discriminatory and disempowering discourse of white power and has done everything to obliterate her roots; consequently, she is shocked when Amelia wants to go back to the island even if it is only to do research. Amelia, herself, approaches her task with a certain degree of misgiving, prejudice and curiosity about this "backward" place and people.

Elizabeth Peazant, Amelia's counterpart, has only been away from the island to go to college. Her education and her life outside the island during her school years have made no difference in her approach to her past history and the ways of her people. In fact, she is considered by the inhabitants of Dutwah to be one of the chosen women, one in the mold of the previous matriarchs Nana, and Miss Julia both of whom were adept at

making charms and telling the lie, or the myths of their people. She has heard from Miss Emma Julia of the beginnings of their people. Miss Julia tells the children who have come to her begging to hear a lie:

> Dis lie begin at de beginning of dis world fore we know it. It begin fore the Bible […] Dis was the time when dere were nuttin but land as far as you could see […] Only time water come is with de rain, and den you got to catch it real fast […] Dere was one old lady live way off in de woods by sheself. She aint hab no people, no husband, no children. Her all by sheself […] Her was so lonesome. Her work so hard, just try to get a bit to eat. One day her discourage and her sit down, begin to holler, 'I so lonely! I so hungry! I so tired!' (12)

This myth of creation, or lie as it is called, ends with an elephant coming to the woman's assistance and teaching her how to produce kin with the help of the hickory tree, adding that kin may be fine, "but kin can be trouble" (13). And, kin do cause trouble, fighting among themselves and ultimately leaving her to go to different places. The story ends with the woman waiting at the edge of the water for her children to stop fighting and to come back to her. Emma Julia ends her story with: "She still wait. […] Across the big water. She wait […] she wait for me […] for you […]" (15). The matriarch is instilling the ancient knowledge of her people in the new generations. They are being made aware that their stories existed even before the Bible, and that the world as it stands for them is bound to change, the fighting and fragmentation is bound to end.

Having grown up with these stories, Elizabeth had been taught the magic and charms both by her great-grandmother, Nana, and by Miss Emma Julia. When Nana crosses over, as they term death, Emma Julia takes on her whole education. Elizabeth has learned of the roots "that could make a man stay true, cure a child of meanness, or free a woman of carnal restraint" (22). She has watched closely as members of both the black and white communities, sometimes openly, sometimes furtively, have come to Emma Julia for her vials, hoping to overcome their problems with the help of her charms and magic. She understands that she must not only teach her students rudimentary arithmetic and reading but also instruct them in the making of traditional charms and the importance of the roots and plants that surround them. She seems to have been chosen as the nurturer. She was allowed to leave the island for her education because of the very special person she is. Her father says of her:

> First time I lay eyes on you, I knew you was different. I could see in your eyes dat you been here longer dan we ever know. Sometime it scare me, you looking at me wit de eyes of de elders like you knowed what I was thinking, feelin. It aint never scared your mama. Her was all right wit you from de first time you move in she. I was de one filled wit doubt and rage. (308)

Here we find the author pointing to the importance of the African myth and ways. Elizabeth is given both educations: a college degree from the American educational system, and an African knowledge of plants and charms. Her father not only admits her supremacy, but also the preeminence of women in his society. Julie Dash's account is a woman's account and places women in the forefront as nurturers and media of the ancient knowledge. The matriarch, Nana, is the reference point of the Peazant family and the community. Emma Julia seems to be the reference point for both the community and those whites that have the wisdom to believe in her magic and charms.

Other female characters in the novel are also strong women who carry on the ancient ways of the community. There are initiation ceremonies for boys and for girls. Aside from learning the rites and rituals of their families and community, the children are exposed to a minimum of education due to the scarcity of books and income, and to the policies of the white education board. An inspector, sent to check on Elizabeth's teaching, is shocked when one of the students gets up to recite from Lincoln's famous speech "Four score and seven years ago [...]" the words he claims of the Great Traitor. The children, according to the Beaufort School Board, are only to have a rudimentary education. Dr. Buckley, another hybrid like Hagaar, who has embraced the code of white authority, explains:

> Those children live out there on that island don't need to learn anything other than to read and write their name and figure a little bit! That's all they need for that cropping [...] They can't learn much more than that anyhow. [...] It's real simple. If you want that school to stay open, you gonna teach what they want! It won't hurt those white folk one bit to shut down a colored school, especially one out there on those islands! (274)

The Beaufort Educational Board is in accordance with white policies that neither recognize the culture of these people nor help them assimilate the culture of the white authority properly.

Not all relations between the African-American and the white American are so strained, however. Dash formulates a meeting ground for the two races outside the United States: in Paris it is possible for the two races to meet and mingle. Miss Evangeline, Elizabeth's employer, has met and married a Gullah man, Trent, in Paris; later she realizes her mistake and flees to her home in the South to remain a "spinster" in the eyes of her community while Trent becomes the madman of Dutwah.

At the end of the novel, Amelia decides to return to the island and to her roots, while Elizabeth is to move to Paris with Miss Evangeline and Miss Genevieve, partly to accompany them and partly to join and perhaps work with a French woman who has used Elizabeth's charms as accessories to decorate the dresses of French women.

Dash seems to place the resolution to the unease between the two communities outside their geography, in a foreign country. However, as the solution to the identity crisis of the Dutwah inhabitants, she points to a balancing, a harmonious coexistence symbolizing a unit, a wholeness toward which her protagonists are constantly progressing and which they must achieve if they are to mature fully. The wholeness is possible in Dutwah because it is a world rooted in African myth and tradition, an island that is pastoral in its innocence of the political reality of the United States. Dutwah is a place of ancient myth and history. Here it is important that the African-Americans achieve an authentic and sincere identity as African-Americans in an African-American setting, Dutwah.

The issue, here, of authenticity or identity, is closely tied to that of sincerity, which can be achieved only through the growth of self and social awareness, and both of Dash's protagonists, Elizabeth and Amelia, are able to achieve some measure of both. The importance of mythical and mystical African tradition is absolute. Dash uses mythification because it is through the use of myth that some measure of an authentic African-American past can be recreated. Dash's protagonists do not solely choose to respond to the call of social or familial duty or to the demands and pressures of "real" life. Elizabeth chooses to retreat from the pressures of social living into a world of mysticism and myth—in other words, her choice is against the realistic mode so as to achieve authenticity and wisdom within the mode of myth.

She later opts to return to the realistic life outside. Amelia, on the other hand, represents the evolving consciousness beginning in isolation and confusion and ending in wholeness. The wholeness she achieves is an indication of spiritual maturity that does not deny the demands of life. In her the demands of the mythic and the realist modes coalesce and the protagonist accomplishes a balance of both. Thus, Amelia changes from an egocentric individualist with modern, that is hybridized, notions of life and daughterhood to become a fairly well-adjusted and authentic member of her social community with some sense of duty to family and adherence to age-old customs and mythic beliefs.

Dash seems to resolve an inherently confusing situation in which any African-American writer might find herself by balancing the real world with the small community, the nucleus Gullah community. To reach this aim she uses narrative, which can be culturally both sacred and mundane and shared socially in varying degrees. The narrative, as a symbolic system, lends a higher significance to the individual experience and links the individual consciousness with the inner lives of others from the same ethnic background resulting in the freedom to be empowered and proud.

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