Way to Self Identity: Examples from African-American Cultural Writings on Problems of Integration

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Abstract: *The historical background of African-American experience began with their being brought to the colonies as early as 17th century as slaves; cut off from their African heritage, forbidden to form a family, having no access to literacy, they could only be admitted to the codes of so-called 'civilization' of the White majority as long as they remained loyal to the rules imposed on them. They could neither dissociate themselves from the mainstream nor could they be past because of the insignia they bear, the color of their skin. Their adventure of almost two hundred years is eventually marked with revolts, resistances; small gains of freedom marked by lynching and torture all ascribing to an identity found under oppression, dispossessions and fear. Emancipation and proclamation has reluctantly admitted their limited participation in public life, which was taunted with Jim Crow laws- a political threat to keep them obedient. Thus, African-American activists, writers, thinkers and intellectuals have struggled to have rightful place and build respectable identity for their community, by keeping the tragic history in mind, in the American society in which they exist. The purpose of this study is to examine their struggle by means of their cultural writings such as autobiographies, story-telling, and evaluate such struggles of the African-American community in America.*

Keywords: *Cultural writing, African-American, Identity, Integration problem*

Kimlik İnşası Yolunda: Afrikalı-Amerikalı Entegrasyon Sorunu Üzerine Kültürel Yazılardan Örnekler

Öz: *Afrikalıların Amerika'ya getirilerek burada yaşadıkları kölelik deneyimleri tarihsel olarak 17. Yüzyıl Koloni Dönemi'ne dayanır. Afrika'daki köklerinden koparılarak getirilen ve tanımadıkları bu yeni topraklarda aile kurmaları yasaklanan, okuryazarlık gibi en temel haklardan yoksun bırakılan köleler ancak kurallara sadık kaldıkları sürece Beyaz çoğunluğun 'medeniyet' adı altında dayattıkları kodlara bağlı yaşam sürebilmişlerdir. İki yüz yıllık serüvenleri boyunca yaşadıkları korkunç işkenceler, infaz ve linçler pahasına çabaladıkları direniş, başkaldırı ve isyanları kendilerine ancak küçük kazanımlar sağlayabilmiştir. İç Savaş ve sonrası sosyal yaşama katılımları ise Jim Crow*

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kanunları tehditlerine boyun eğdikleri sürece sınırlı gerçekleşebilmiştir. Aslında İç Savaş sonrası politik tehditler sonucu Afrikalı-Amerikalı toplumun ne sosyal yaşam ilkelerinden ayrılmalarına ne de deri rengi nedeniyle bu ilkelere uyum sağlamalarına müsaade edilirdi. Sivil Hak Hareketleri ile eğitim ve sosyal eşitlik için seslerini duyurmaya çalıştıkları 20. Yüzyılın ikinci yarısında bile 'öteki' olarak etiketlenmekten kurtulamazlar. Böylece Afrikalı-Amerikalı aktivist, yazar, düşünür ve entelektüellerin Amerikan toplumunda yer edinme ve kimlik inşası çabaları günümüze dek süregelir. Bu makalenin amacı Afrikalı-Amerikalı aktivist, yazar, düşünür ve entelektüellerin toplumları için hak arayışlarını kendi yaşam öykülerinden yola çıkarak kaleme aldıkları kültürel yazıları incelemek ve değerlendirmektir.

Anahtar Kelimeler*: Kültürel Yazılar, Afrikalı-Amerikalı, Kimlik inşası, Entegrasyon sorunu*

I. Introduction

Integration problems for minorities are mostly related to their relationship to the mainstream culture, "the body, the medium shaped by the people of the same ideas, values in social life that offers positions for individuals assigned to linguistic & phenomenal reality, enclosed by the semiotics of their own" (Eagleton: 15). The most important tenant of mainstream identity is the 'identity thinking,' which according to Adorno, "a covertly paranoid style of rationality which inexorably transmutes the uniqueness of plurality of things into mere simulacrum of itself or expels them beyond its own borders in a panic-attacked act of exclusion" (Adorno: 150). For them, despite the paranoia related to 'identity problem,' there is also hope for reconciliation for the minority groups within the mainstream. This utopic side can only be achieved when both sides agree upon the principles of 'togetherness in diversity' in a genuine multicultural society.

For Freud, when man is labeled with anti-social instincts and drives, he becomes self-defying, renouncing the mainstream identity. Freud calls this state a permanent state of discontent on the past of minority. If this state is persistent, it leads to dangerous revolts, a "justifiable hostility to the mainstream in which the minority has a meagre shove" (Freud: 337). the minority case is thus, enforced assimilation to cultural hegemony. Freud seems to describe the very peculiar relationship between the African-American minority and White majority in the U.S.A.

For Marxist, mainstream identity is mostly the product of the economic structure of the society, a cumbersome device for economic exploitation, which is socially legitimized by the super-structure, which usually denies equal opportunity for the outsider. According to

Mannheim and Althusser (later Eagleton). however, 'culture' can never be ideologically explained since it is not monolithic but is an ever-changing entity infused with the Dynamics of the social life. If so, then, these have always been interactions among the members of the same multi-cultural community despite the suppression even osterization of the oppressed. In other words, regarding this aspect of culture, possible interpretations on African-American subculture, to diagnose the parameters deciding on transcendental nature of culture is very challenging even for a scholar living within the particular culture; it is for a foreigner even more difficult to make accurate statements.

In spite of advances in civil rights since the 1950s, the African-American community feels alien to mainstream culture and their ambiguous relationship with the culture of which they are both an outsider and an insider. In the second half of the 20th century, when the voice of the Black minority were heard demanding educational integration, acceptance to public buses, equality in public places like lunch counters within the wave of civil rights movement through demonstrations and marches, the African-American community was still labelled as the 'other.' Though the concept of 'other' has always been the main factor to discriminate against African-Americans, it was the theoreticians of late 20th century who coined the word, namely Lacan, on the psychological level, and Bhabba 'in terms of post-colonialist dictum,' whose ideas on subjugation, domination, and displacement- representing residues of social marginality of the 'other' still survived under the incommensurable demands of the colonial consciousness, which holds Western culture superior carrying the bonier of civilization.

II. Cultural links to African-American identity

Cultural links to African-American identity problems are intractable because of lingering. They can only be traced by the minority literature, from slave narratives under colonial oppression to post-colonial renowned autobiographies like Malcolm X's account of his education from a street punk to racial pride social reformist with a religious conviction of a brotherhood of men, prejudices, interracial tensions and related social problems. When approached etymologically, the Latin root of 'culture'   c o m e s from 'colonus', an equivalent of today's 'colonialism' having post-colonial connotative references to mantling authority, affinities with the ideas of occupation and invasion, and even exploitation. According to Terry Eagleton (6) "state owned 'culture' denies politically independent citizenship until its people civilized to exercise responsibilities. Asked to be molded into new selves which so-called societies claimed to be their own, the minority becomes a humane subject to go through a re-modelling according to the demands of civilized and cultured. Quoting from Shiller, Eagleton says that the main objective of the State is to form "a canonical form in which all the diversity of individual subjects strives to unite" (Eagleton: 22).

In the Western thought from Enlightenment onwards, the word 'culture' has two different interpretations: one is culture as a critique of civilization, (civilization)

representing the materialistic side of life, playing down national differences, paradoxically culturally highlighting them. In the highly industrialized countries, who might call themselves civilized, 'culture' becomes a means of incubating people to the state politics- to the 'base structure.' Defined by the German Idealist Herder, 'Culture' is the Eurocenter sense, denies the exoticism of primitive communities, which in post-colonial dictum has its own culture and values (25-28). From the Plurca list, multi-culturalist perspective culture or cultures do not advocate discrete identities for the minorities but multiple ones. Personal identities, in the post-colonial thought, are no longer differentiated altogether from the residues of the colonialist main culture, nor is the main culture exempt from the influences of the minorities. Yet, in the U.S.A, the natural line of progress from colonialism to post-colonialist has not followed the theoretical assumption about culture. As it is known, Enlightenment tended to see culture going hand in hand with the idea of civilization which is something fragmented, mechanistic, utilitarian, related to material progress, holistic, scientific, and hateful of savagery: Eurocentrism of the early American mind has easily labelled the 'other' as savages, to be tamed or rather to be kept as they were under heavy toil in the field of feudal families of the Southern States.

When Romanticism in Europe glorified the 'noble savage' and his primitivism and 'culture' and 'civilization' became no longer identical, and civilization after the industrial revolution gained imperialistic connotations, U.S. mainstream culture still refused to accept African-American culture. On the contrary, the State policy re-modelled African Americans into docile, disengaged, illiterate masses until the late 19th Century, when also colonist and evangelist Christian Whites encouraged African-Americans to express themselves to tell their stories in autobiographies. Frederick Douglas's and Harriet Jacobs's autobiographies are the best examples of this period. Years later, a White post-modernist writer William Styron has written a fictive account of an event in Black History in *The Confessions of Ted Turner* modelled after the early examples of Autobiographies. Nat's confessions to his lawyer as he waits for persecution endited for insurrection to White supremacy, which have been documented by his lawyer, narrated by Styron in the first person singular is done in order to be true to the original.

Similarly, the reliability of Douglas's and Jacobs' accounts are debatable, considering that their writings have been edited by the supporters of abolitionism. Moreover, they may not reflect genuine feelings because of the nature of autobiography writing which in itself carries its own selectiveness. However, they can be regarded as historically important documents on slavery covering a span of time from early 19th century to the end, if judged from Foucault's understanding of history and literature each embodying simulacrum of reality. Nat, Frederick and Harriet, all define their identities in terms of master-slave dichotomy, where they enjoyed limited moments of freedom because of their ability to have access to White culture either through literacy and religious practice, or particularly in Harriet's case, to the master's amorous attachments. Yet, the small blessings endowed by the master have also been their condemnation, since they learned to seek their way to freedom.

III. Ramification of African-American identity

Slave identity was pre-determined by the master's name and title, the priest in his church preaches the virtues of obeying his Lord earthly and heavenly. Even the shades of his color define his identity as 'mulatto'; 'octoron' and so on. Their escape is to self-exile, where they are still at the mercy of white support to survive. The restraint they feel after the emancipation made many of them to serve their former masters; despite the support groups such as Bourbons creating for them job opportunities, illegal organizations especially the Ku Klux Klan in the South, dramatically threatened their existence. In short, no identification is possible for them in regard with jobs, a stable family, and a future. They know that social disintegration would continue in the ingrained myths and prejudices of the past, that they were considered less intelligent, irresponsible and therefore, not reliable in serious professions and social intercourse because of their alleged sexual inclinations.

In *Incidents in a Slave Girl*, Harriet Ann Jacobs' concluding words of her autobiography is emblematic of what awaits an emancipated slave:

> Reader, my story ends with freedom, not in the usual way, with marriage. I and my children are now free! We are free from the power of slaveholders as are the white people of the north; and though that, according to my ideas, is not saying a great deal. The dream of my life is not yet realized. I do not set with my children in a home of my own, however humble. I wish it form my children's sake for more that my own (5).

When the ex-slave defined their identity they defined it in terms of different feelings and reactions than the mainstream. Douglas, on the 76th anniversary of 4th of July Independence Day festivities, of the Declaration of Independence and their faith in freedom from the oppressor (meaning the king of England) he says that "the men in power in his time" are now deaf to the injustices of slavery and he ends his speech with a sarcastic twist stressing how he feels different; "I leave, therefore, the great deeds of your fathers to other gentlemen whose claim to have been regularly descended will less likely to be disputed than mine!" (Heath: 1711).

IV. Autobiographies

Toward the end of 19th century, African Americans tended to write more autobiographies to re-define their place in American life, and asked themselves what it meant to be an outsider. Being marginalized by virtue of race, but at the same time, knowing what it meant to exist inside a particular culture, where he both belongs and does not quite belong made him highly self-conscious of the issues, which may have been taken for granted by the majority. After Douglas and Jacobs there had been a radical difference in the depiction

of a tormented self, pouring out the past miseries. Booker T. Washington with the title he has chosen for autobiographies, *Up from Slavery*, displays an optimistic and realistic portrayal who seems to have no identity problem. For him, his education in the Hampton Institute is his well-earned identity, which, he thinks, is the only way to be qualified to a citizenship in white community. A whole chapter, Chapter III entitled "The Struggle for an Education", is the account of his becoming a noteworthy citizen through education. What seems insincere even disturbing is his total denial of his social being is his total denial of his racial identity as he assumes the Uncle Tom's self-sacrificing role with the use of "bucket" imagery.(8)[1]

Zora Neal Hurston, one of the disciples of Langston Hughes and Cauntee Cullen, the founders of Harlem renaissance, a note-worthy black folklorist, winner of The Saturday Review Award of national relations with her autobiography, *Dust Trucks of The Road*, like Booker T. Washington refuses to dwell on her racial problems. She has found herself on a safer ground by saying that "I realized that I did not have to consider any social group as a whole" (38) in her life story in *Dust Tracks on a Road*, which is not her self-referential according to gender and race nor self-descriptive in the sense she perceives herself. Being influenced by the writing strategies of the Harlem Renaissance, mostly initiated by male Afro-Americans in order to set up a respectable cultural line attempting to attract both white and black audience, she was hesitant whether to give voice to her female identity or to present an ideal transcending the limits of race and gender. Her words about the problems of autobiography writers are very realistic: "I did not know then, as I know now, that people are prone to a build a statue of the kind of person that pleases them to be" (10). She admits that she creates a self-image, she likes to be.

V. Stories and Story-tellers

Like the trickster character (11)[2] of Afro American folk-culture, she speaks with a double tongue, sometimes evasive sometimes bold, as she remembers her previous life in the early decades of a 20th century black town in Florida, her excursions to Mississippi to collect folk tales. Her memories, no matter to be claimed highly personnel, and unique, her commentaries on collective experience of the Black women have been unavoidably present in the form of digressions on contemporary politics and racial relations. The new writing technique is embellishment that raises doubt in the authenticity of her narrative tactics. For example, beginning with the date of her birth, other details about her childhood are

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1) In the middle of his speech, he reports his autobiography, he tells a story of wisdom in showing good intention even in the expense of being exploited. He addresses the Black audience and says that if they want to establish good relationships with the Whites, they must "cast down [their] buckets where they are" (48) meaning that they should wait for the white's mercy and aid.

2) Trickster whose origin goes back to Yoruba mythology from Nigeria and Benin. He is many faced story teller whose stories are about magic, full of ironic references to authority; and they are open-ended.

veiled, even mysteriously recorded, to give them mythic dimensions. Her aunt's account of her mother's giving birth under unusual conditions with the help of a white man has been in fashion with Southern story tellers. In fact, for her "Truth" is a matter that can easily be distorted by the feelings of the writer. She draws parallelism between writing an autobiography the many of Negro singers improvise in the chapter called "Research": "… Once they got started the 'lies', test rolled and story-tellers fought for chance to talk… The one thing to be guarded against, in the untied of truth, was over-enthusiasm" (197-98). Also, her revelations about her feelings especially toward men are ambiguous in the sense that she has portrayed herself as a woman loved and treated well, but she herself never loved a man, and there is no hint of a better experience, or disappointment. In other words, her autobiography, unlike the later black women's autobiographies, cannot be evaluated as a personal testimony to oppression where political or critical pieties are firmly stated, it is, however, from the historical point of view, an experience of a black woman in a specific society at a specific moment, in an era under the threat of the Ku Klux Klan. A black woman's role limited to school teaching, she was the best African-American woman writer, whose heritage would be re-discovered almost twenty years after her miserable end.

When Richard Wright's autobiographical novel, *Black Boy* was published in 1945, a discernable new trend in black literature was observed with Wright's refusal of segregation, the economic and political policies that have subdued the African-Americans. The book was the account of the first twenty years of his poverty-stricken life in Mississippi, Arkansas, and Tennessee, his immigration to Chicago to live in the outskirts of the city, where he worked in menial jobs assigned for the African-Americans; and how he was forced to leave school at the age of sixteen. Wright, while writing the story of a self-made man, drew his portrait as a boy who was resolved not to be entrapped with the hardships of an underprivileged and under clan boy like him. He redefines his position as he steps forward into a writing career which would enable him to give voice to the evils of racial discrimination as in the following example, which is about his decisiveness to find a "path of humanity between the Whites and himself as a writer." He finds "the whites as miserable as their black victims," who can be reached as he hurls words into darkness and waits for an echo. (*Black Boy*, *Literary Classics of the United States*, New York, 1991, p. 365)[3]

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3) Beginning with 1950s extending to 1960s, when Civil Rights Movement gained momentum in securing integration in the public schools and transportation, civil rights morals helped affect complete racial equality in all walks of life, there emerged resistance groups to accelerate the rhythm of progress into black nationalism, "Black Power" became a term indicating Black supremacy by turning to African heritage with their hair style, believing in the motto; 'black is beautiful.' Black activists like Black Muslims and Black Panthers encouraged upheavals in the ghettos. Black Muslim movement under the leadership of Elijah Mohammed, who assumed to role of a Messenger has captured an important counter-culture strategy by converting to masses to Islam, an alternative to Christianity, the religion of the mainstream culture.

VI. Construction of Identity

In speaking of the minority identity alongside the dialects of anti-racial sensations as to represent a collective attitude and the private self-recording of their memoirs, another axis of referentiality must be taken into consideration. This is the religious choice of the minority group they belong to. From the early days of slavery, African-Americans have been taught to become a good Christian on the level of his master's religious choice. Malcolm X's *Autobiography* (1965) as told to Alex Haley is the manifestation of a Black man's search for identity through the stages of a street punk to a disciple of Elijah Mohammed, in his imprisonment where his self-education taught him the codes of an antithetical to main-stream Christianity, when he thinks, he not only discriminates whites from the Blacks but also the people within the same race according to their material successes. Moreover, after an enlightening pilgrimage to Mecca, he has adopted an understanding of Islam devoid any discriminatory beliefs. He says. "I am not racist in any form whatsoever. I don't believe any form of racism. I don't believe in any form of discrimination or segregation. I believe in Islam" (216). His peaceful interpretation of the Black Muslim movement and his later split from it prepared his end; because opposing groups' rhetorics of enmity and fight and fight for superiority would be proved to be empty slogans, on the integrated selfhood. One can easily draw his radical turn from the militant Islam to a peacemaker in his words about Elijah Mohammed whom he speaks about as Honorable Mohammed and for whom he could have sacrificed his life: "I believe so strongly in Mohammed that I would have hurled myself between him and an assassin" (286). Later, in speaking of him he says "I believed he had no human weaknesses or faults, and that he would make no mistakes and that he could do no wrong. …I realized how dangerous it is for people to hold any human being in such esteem…" (965).

Among the most recent autobiographies, Amiri Baraka's (LeRoi Jones). published in 1984, which tells more of an integrated but still underprivileged and under-clan Black individual's story from the early years of education to his writing career. Name changing in Baraka's life is indicative of his constant search for authenticity and meaningful existence that an African-American intellectual could attain in literature, art, public life and education. It is a search for identity through perfecting his personality in accordance with his beliefs and conventions.

Born to a middle-class family in Newark, New Jersey in 1934 with a Christian name Le Roy Jones, he graduated from an integrated high school with honors, Baraka changed his middle name from Roy to Roi while attending Harvard University. After serving in the U. S Air force, he joined the Boat group in Greenwich Village and associated with Charles Olson, Frank O'Hara and Allen Ginsberg on his way to becoming a renowned poet and dramatist. In these days his Black identity was sharpened as to establish Totem Press and Black Art Repertory Theatre which would in later years be known as BAM including other branches of art. After Malcolm X's assassination, which had deeply affected him, he

left behind his Christian identity, his name altogether and became Imamu Amiri Baraka with the omission of 'Imam' signifying a class distinction which was contrary to his newly adopted Marxist conviction. As it is seen, Amiri Baraka's original middle class Christian Black identity has undergone various changes as his social and religious choices have changed and his intellectual and professional (he has been a university professor since 1960s) interests made him popular.

In the 1950s, his schooling at Barringer High School for mostly white students were the years he began to question his identity. His memoirs of the school can be summarized in one word: He was an 'outsider.' He says "At Barringer it was the amazingly dull process of being an outsider that I was involved with" (Baraka 49). It was a "foreign place" for him. The feeling of belonging nowhere is very explicit in the following lines: "So in my hometown, I swung with two bloods and in my other classes two white intellectuals…I just felt drugged being isolated and alienated and surrounded by such bullshit in white Barringer" (Baraka 49). For the whites are equally alienated, despite their living together with blacks for years; his observations are very striking. In speaking of integration with Whites he says: "I did not like it… and it was a drag at both ends" (Baraka: 118).

VII. Conclusion

Patrieva Gaines-Carter, a black newspaper reporter in her letter to her daughter reminds her of the past, the 1960s, before the civil rights and Affirmative Action, before integration (which she thinks somewhat nullified the cause her generations fought for) and draws parallelism between their understanding of the African-American cause and her daughter's ignorance of the hardships they had gone through: "See at 35, I came from a generation of marches. I do not understand inaction. In fact, it frightens me. I do not trust it. You think my distrust is paranoia; I understand it. It is because you have not seen what I have seen" (243). Beginning with the years of segregation at schools, she describes the forgotten Black cultural movement represented by the soul music and how they supported Martin Luther King, how they were proud to see that Black leader, Jessie Jackson, who spoke at the Democratic National Convention. Perhaps the title of her letter, "Is My Post- Integration' Daughter Black Enough?" tells more about anxieties of the earlier generations who are conscious of the discrepancy between the engagement of their generations with the black identity problem and the relaxed manner of youngsters, taking what has been gained for granted, refusing social and political instruments.

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