

AMERICAN DIASPORA: A POST-COLONIAL CRITICISM OF THE TIMBUKTU BY PAUL AUSTER THROUGH THE APPLICATION OF STRUCTURALIST BINARY OPPOSITIONS.

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Abstract: This essay considers how the application of Binary Oppositions of parents/son, ethnicity/hybridity, subject/object, appearance/reality, male/female, humanity/inhumanity, war/peace, man/animal, new generation/old generation to the *Timbuktu* by Paul Auster can represent cultural hybridity, identity crisis, displacement and rootlessness as well as hopelessness in accordance to the Post-Colonial theories of Edward Said, yet, it is further explored how Edward Said's "the east writes back", but by a westerner, functions as a key concept in postcolonial criticism. Moreover; it represents how the narrator's shunting from a human protagonist to that of animal protagonist can reveal the serious problems brought about due to exploitation of his home land (Baltimore as a source of lack of identity and confusion) and in search of peace. Attention must be paid to the fact that usually Diaspora is used for the third-world immigrants to the developed countries, but in this essay it is considered how a westerner feels nostalgic about the never visited East and finds peace there.

Key words: Post-Colonialism, Edward Said, Binary Oppositions, Hybridity, Displacement, Diaspora, Identity.

1. Introduction

Paul Auster's novel *Timbuktu*, his sixth novel written in 1999 representing the American Diaspora of a reversed and exotic spinning from West to East (Baltimore to *Timbuktu*) in a tough contrast with the normalities in novels which represent the vice-versa (from East to West). The novel derives its name from the ancient city of *Timbuktu* located in the north of the African country of Mali and the longest river of there, Niger River. Similar to the dim history of African city "Timbuktu", the occurring phenomena are all twisting around in an ambiguous way. The novel includes a peculiar journey from West to East, opposite to the norm of moving from East to West, accompanying with a dog whose personality traits are more of a man than a mere dog.

The travelers roles both dog and his owner are not much different than the inside and foreign policies which have made a myriad of people either to be immigrated to or emigrated from. The conditions prevailing over the city of Baltimore in New York represents the same harsh conditions of which muting, muzzling, distrust and leaving are derived. Interestingly enough the journey is from the center of progress and economy as well as navigation in Maryland- New York to the international center of Islamic learning and commercial entrepot in North of Africa that was enjoying a being in the 11th century.

1.1. Post-Colonized and Historical Backgrounds of the Novel:

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Timbuktu_ It is a colonised city located on the southern edge of the Sahara invaded by Morocco in 1591. In past, Timbuktu was formerly an international center of Islamic learning. In 11th century, despite, Its popularity and validity in being an educational center, it also had been a market for trading African slaves.

Baltimore_ It is also a colonised city in Maryland having a great historical upheavals and busiest ports of U.S.A. are located there. At the start of the American Civil War (1861-1865), some convulsions and riots were provoked from Baltimore. The rapid growth of the city commenced during the WWI (1914-1918) and WWII (1939-1945) that the city promoted a great industrial growth and Baltimore was the site of race riots and by the mid-1970s the city had a black majority.

1.2. The concept of Binary Oppositions in practice

Before starting taking the above mentioned binary oppositions into practice, it is necessary to elucidate the significance of binary oppositions in Post-Colonial criticism. Binary oppositions are believed to reveal the identity because it is through the differences from others that identity can be defined. As F. Saussure states that binary oppositions are the “means by which the units of language have value or meaning; each unit is defined against what it is not”. Essentially, the concept of the binary opposition is a propensity to organize everything into a hierarchical structure; terms and concepts are related to positives or negatives, i.e. Man/Woman, Black/White, Life/Death, Inside/Outside, Presence/Absence, and so on. Through these differences we can have a bright fact to what one’s reality and characteristics of his/her identity are. These are well asserted in the representation of the characters of Timbuktu who are by far different and well cognizant from the others and as a result they are doomed to suffer the harsh realities around.

2. Discussion:

2.1. Displacement: a very explicit reason of displacement could be those of colonialism as well as inadaptability due to varied customs, traditions, inacquaintance and loneliness resulted in a colonized city like Baltimore. By taking a look at Willy’s condition, undermined health, loneliness in a metropolitan city, lack of adaptation and distrust, the cause of displacing comes out of ambiguity. Such pressures mentioned earlier can make someone to be seeking for a haven where they can have a discovery of his life and tracing of his needs.

Lack or loss of all bonds like family, friends, life in a big city, the heart of navigation as Willy is getting a grip on this feature and starting navigation of his own life, may be a transparent and crystal axiomatic cause of displacement. It is an ill-striving from west to east which is on and off from east to west. Now the question would be that what reasons make a superannuated individual to displace?. Family, country, and sometimes a very puny goal like a trustable friend could be the reason. “Not similarly enough displacement shunts one’s honor in homeland into ashes in the host land” (Kite runner, Khaled Hosseini) but, Willy’s journey is toward gleaning all he wants in a city where trust still lives, where relationships are in affinity and fellowship is not like ruining of his honor, however; he decides to set for Timbuktu where had been so-called the center of Islamic learning.

“..I’m what you call a world-class fuck-up, the king of know-nothings. I walked all the way from New York, apropos of nothing, too many miles with too little gas in the tank. I feel like an old sock. But at least I can die happy now.” (Timbuktu, p.34)

2.2. Identity

In the grimness of Baltimore, it represents a an acrimony of Willy’s disparaging identity as he is suffering from a noxious fainting.. Flashbacking to the first of the novel William Guveritch changes his name to Willy G. Christmas and tattoos the name Santa Claus on his arm in order not to be considered as an unidentified man and Mrs. Swanson just knows him by his tattoo since Willy’s speech and hearing have been deteriorated due to his fainting. Thus, it could be a paradigm of the pathetically horrific crisis of identity, yet by changing his name to Santa Claus; he is not having any common point with it, though.

This could be a paramount explicitly of the fact that in Baltimore identities are not identified. So, sans having a name recognition either told or tattooed, *THE* man is doomed to be omitted. Willy that seems to be

an au courant of the lack identification jeopardy wishes a necklace with the name Mr. Bones written in it to save him at least for a better life. There is a potpourri of fleeting identities and to save one for you, you need it recorded somewhere in order not to forget due to every day hurly burly of strange identities attack “My name is Mr. Bones; please take me to Bea Swanson’s house at 316 Calvert Street”. (p. 89)

2.3. Reality/Dreams

As another post-colonial aspect of the novel, attention must be paid to the fact that it starts with their journey from a side of a street in the Baltimore and ends in the same picture in one of the cities in Brooklyn with total carelessness and frivolity where it was supposed to be in Timbuktu. It heralds that post-colonial forces precluded all freedoms and wills. Hence, real Timbuktu revealed to be in perfection of dreams rather than being placed somewhere, because Willy keeps saying; “Timbuktu is a place of oasis of spirits that is where the map of this world ends; it is where the map of Timbuktu begins” (p.49)

Our character’s confusion and very crystally clear hesitation are suspicious of a matter of suffering from lack of adaptation to the environment around him. Naturalistically talking, the permanent jeopardy and harshnes prevailing over the society, even have shunted the Persons’ minds thinking differently. As Willysays: “Winter had always been the season of poetic labor” (p.34)

In the effect the distortion of dreams by harsh reality and their coming into the factual reality tangibly is portrayal of a post-colonial society where a throw must be constructed if one is caring toward his freedom. In here, dreams stand and play the rule of savior of human kind as it was unconsciously the main path walked by Mr. Bones.

2.4. Humanity/Inhumanity/Animals

Another remarkable and unique theme based on the Binary opposition found in the book could be that of the adjacent relationship of the protagonist Willy to his dog Mr. Bones. The conditions corresponding the society around of Baltimore have made a human being just to trust in a dog – An animal that is told by his prominent trait Faithfulness which society lacks. A dog can be by changing of the letters “G_O_D” for Willy and at the same time can be considered the creepiest of all in the eyes of the others. Here an index could be deviated toward the marring, disgruntling and dismal situation brought about by the duplicity, mockery, turpitude, vituperation and the most important of all distrust that have been even fathomed by the wretch dog. A praiseworthy opposition and contrast is condoned here is that of relationship of the Willy (as his name connotes “an individual wishful about his wishes. Inhumanity and lack of trust to all kind of relatives causes his loathsome nature toward debauched humanity around apprantly stated in his supposition of the philosophy of dog’s life saying:

“You want to know what a dog’s philosophy of life is, pal? I’ll tell you what it is. Just one sentence: ‘If you can’t eat it or screw it, piss on it’”. (p. 36)

The harsh debauchery and inhumanity can act to be a changer of genders as in the novel, Mr. Bones is supposed to be a dog and protects wheras he himself is protected by Willy, that shows the destructive power of identity crisis due to post-colonial forces prevailed over individuals.

2.5. Dog, a post-colonial existence and binary oppositions as well as a religious symbol

The uniqueness of “dog” as a protagonist can be mind-bugling. Dog is a direct mainstream of a post-colonial element of binary opposition. Paul Auster knowingly uses the dog as Willy’s companion to add to the depth of colonial influence. As defined in the Dictionary of Symbols and Images, dog has shared and played a key role since the beginning of human life and literary works like those of Plato who says:”Don’t swear to gods, but to dogs”. Dog also is simultaneously considered as fertility and in contrast as unfavorable characteristics. By fertility it is said that a dog through digging holes by his paws, abuts the resurrection through. In averse to having disgusting features, Shakespeare considers him as the exempt of the best and stymie of exclusiveness, “I am a dog at s.t”. whenever Willy faints due to the pains he is suffering from, Mr. Bones turns around him and digs the soil by which he is getting him in peace through heralding and bringing Willy’s resurrection in his vicinity. In addition as T.S. Eliot used it as a significant role in his “Wasteland”,

dog is the sign of the same sort by digging and scratching the earth with his nails. Elsewhere is anecdotal that dog is companion of dead, in adversary with guardian characteristics of it. Like in Willy's peregrination that he appears an alive-dead and Mr. Bones is his only yokefellow.

A more prominent post-colonial like trait in dog is that of being trained, tractability and malleability in serving a variety of tasks. "The Guardian of Secrets". Surprisingly, Willy sees the dog by the changing of the letter to G-O-D. If symbolically we take this dog as Willy's religion and belief, yet some call him "I don't think I've ever seen a dirtier, scruffier creature than this one." (p. 128). One might call him "Sparky", the other "Cal" and one would like to call him "Tiger" which at the result reveals that westerners are also suffering from not having a unique autonomous religion like Islam and that it further can be inferred that Christianity has been distorted and everyone receives the much he wants from it. And a lost identity of the animal as Willy is used to think to save Mr. Bones by merely giving him a written necklace of his name "My name is Mr. Bones; please take me to Bea Swanson's house at 316 Calvert Street." (p. 89) shows that religion is no more autonomous yet awaits how man manipulates it.

2.6. New Generation/Old Generation

The paramount specialty of presence of dog in the book *Timbuktu* signifies the loss of identity in dramatic quality. A dog that has lost his playfulness during his bouting in the society toward the new generation of people. It seems they have lost for good their past good qualities and teachings. Their understandings of the environment is doomed to be null now, when the roll of the dog is being analyzed, this gets the most axiomatic. A dog that is even afraid of the sounds of children prefers crawling on an edge and awaiting for the night to pass the street instead of being courageous and funny to children or attracting any attention. Second, in fact, children are known by their unique traits of having special amusements, behaviors and more importantly looking and genius talent for scrutinizing the objects around. There in Baltimore children don't have any curiosity for detecting the objects which ends in this logical conclusion that their teachings have become of a whole new game ball. Clearly different children take miscellaneous uptakes of Mr. Bones. One calls him Cal (a bird whose signing is ear-smoothing), another calls him Sparky (a name used for tigers) and so many more varied uptakes gotten by children. Interestingly enough, not only children's looking has become pathetically different, but surely also their wanting is exotic. Dog walking and throw-catch game are very amusing and popular in western countries, whereas surprisingly when Mr. Bones catches the ball a child throws to him in the water, our expectations get razed when the child complains about water tribulation and doesn't enjoy from Mr. Bones's actions. "Dumb dog, what do you want to mess up our water for?" (p.99)

Concluding that wanting and identities are doomed to be in confusion since this abyss gap is molded between the teachings of new generation by older ones strongly because the new generation is exposed to and suppressed by post-colonial existential forces like distorted teachings and aims. Another reason of all these confusions, could be pointed to the existence of different cultures like Chinese restaurant, police every where, as they can be taken symbolically for extension of colonialism spreading all over the world from west to the east, and brainwashing the younger generations.

2.7. Hybridity

Hybridity has been constantly a key point in deviation toward getting a new identity for one who thinks suspiciously disgruntled about his present being. As a very vital matter, the trails of Hybridity in the novel are as axiomatic as differentiating black and white. As novel progresses in the first two chapters we glean to the point that Willy was born of a cross nationality parent.

His mother is Polish where the country is in the central Europe. Communist ruled Poland from 1945 until 1989 when political and economic unrest among Poles resulted in to the collapse of regime and its replacement by a non-communist coalition. And his father is American by blood in which in both places Post-colonialist ideas are taking advantage which drastically affects in his identity ambiguity. So he decides to find himself. He tries to travel to *Timbuktu* where more is his utopia of a city where trust and identity are inborn and no confusion is seen. But his destiny inter-ties in a dog which doubles the jeopardy and insecurity existing around.

2.8. Belief /Disbelief

The climax of the novels is revealed through Willy's misfortune and disbeliefs been in him due to a lot of reasons in Baltimore. All his family and specially his mother whom he calls *Mom-san* (to show his not-much-dependence) is playing a key role in all his wretches. "I was going to be an American, by gum, and this hair meant that I belong, that my parents knew that what was fucking what". (p.54)

The more Willy progresses toward Brooklyn, he mentions his nascent hesitation which deflowers as: "Don't tell me that two and two is four, how do we know that two is two? That's real question." (p.24). The second speculation in detecting Willy's appalling disbelief is his society around which makes him in a such kind of confusion and consequently loosens up his beliefs and hardens up on the fear of distrust to all looks surrounding except Mrs. Swanson, his schoolmaster and the only one that he builds up trust in, not his mom. Actually she is not living in Baltimore any longer, "Willy had written the last sentence he would ever write, and there were no more than a few ticks left in the clock. The words in the locker were all he had to show himself. If the words vanished, it would be as if he had never lived." (P.9)

Somewhere else, through close attention to his behavior, another dichotomy unveils. Some elements which help us gain the understanding of his Identity crisis due to losing his beliefs around, could be his manuscript which he permanently thinks of and all he wants to do is to get them in a hand of a friend.

"The first has been to find a new dig for his furry companion. The second was to wrap up his own affairs and make sure that his manuscripts were left in good hands. Perhaps he had lost faith in the US Postal Service and no longer trusted the mail carrier not to scoop inside the letters they delivered." (p.11)

Another very conspicuous disbelief is when Willy says that Santa is by change of the letters a S-A-T-A-N, "Santa is the biggest fake of all" (p. 21), show how far he has lost his creeds to anything.

2.9. Male/Female

Male and female opposition covers the novel from the beginning to the end, although the oppositional facets may not be tangible firstly. Many critics believe these oppositions to reflex the Masculine Paradigm. Based on the tradition of anti-feminism according to which man and woman are called dynamic and static respectively, women are oppressed by the power of the male gender. Men were taken as the dynamic whole that controlled the society and were expected it defend their so called superiority through performing major jobs and in here travelling solely while women were taken as the passive second class citizens unable to take their destiny in their own hands and obeying their husband, because she had to go everywhere her husband was taking her with.

Mrs. Swanson, Willy's schoolmaster, the only trustable one for Willy is pigeonholing place to place like a caged parrot that goes with his owner. She has to go wherever her husband is heading to. This reminds us of vitiating the role of women although their majority has had efficacious impressions in identifying some others like Willy. But unfortunately this novel shows even in American countries that repeatedly scolds Asian and those of African or in general East for not putting the weight of women in gold and eulogizing them, they are still slave-driving women. This proves no matter what position a woman is enjoying in the western societies, she is doomed to be downtrodden by so-called masculine paradigm superiority.

With the American rule over such colonies like Baltimore and even that of Timbuktu, the autonomy given or taken by men reveals the vitiated egalitarianism and, gender and sex inequality as well as the oppression of women, which is a sprawl premise in the transigent governors of these communities. As the novels says also:

"Her husband had been offered a new job in Baltimore, and since Mrs. Swanson was not only a teacher but a wife, what choice did she have but to leave Brooklyn and go where Mr. Swanson went?" (p.10)

This is the substantiation of what was claimed. The presence of Mrs. Swanson and Willy's mother in neighborhood of Baltimore having suffering from oppressions, existential forces and lack of autonomy upon their head exerted by men roots out the ipso facto which although American endogenously starts the hares of

Democracy and equality, which is perceptibly conceived by the open-minded, yet, it's a rotten spoilt gangrene metastasizing thoroughly the body of America.

3. Conclusion:

This novel "Timbuktu" proffers binary opposition which is symbolically an attempt toward the resolution of the narrator's dualistic experience of real versus unreal, death versus life, sensual versus spiritual and more importantly the opposition of tradition against freedom. The narrator, an easternized westerner scorns his own customs and cultural codes but just cannot suit himself to that east as well. The self-denigration of our character toward his regard to the east, a Islamic religious center, reminds us of Edward Said's Orientalism that says "Orient.....participates in its own orientalizing" and the undeniable role of Islam as the attraction centrifugal point of Westerners where "Oasis of spirits" are there.

Thus he proves a nebulous post-colonial figure facing with binary opposition aspects of identity and ideas. The one with a fatal disease that has been described is showing his inability to fit into society, a society both home and torture to him, reminding one of the supposable struggles of Vladimir and Estragon in Samuel Becket "Waiting for Godot", searching in a wasteland in a bereft of hope for Godot to put in an appearance to settle their problems. Based on the facts, it also proves that westerners are suffering from a kind of absurdism mostly stark apparent in striking debate of their new generation's thoughts, teachings and thinking. It shows the coming generations the future takers of the helm of society are distorted in their early starting of their lifetime. They have been exposed to the creed of the post-colonial lax identities that have no not even something power to overcome and know their real being.

It needs not to say that the traditions of each society is inseparable from those belonging to it, exactly the same as it can be observed in Timbuktu. Reality/unreality, humanity/inhumanity and else are not detached from too. The traditions have infiltrated in the heart, mind and even instincts that are sinking down all into a bog where striving results in a faster down like those of Western society where among those much gargantuan identity problems, knowing leads you to the confusion. All elements, both those of west and east must meet each other in order to have a sound life as well as tolerance of the forces of existence.

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