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William Faulkner's "That Evening Sun": Multiple Views of Oppression

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ABSTRACT. People throughout the history have been subject to discrimination from three distinct perspectives of class, race, and gender. Those who were richer used the lower class as a tool in their service to have a comfortable life. The white oppressed the black as *the other* who was not similar to him in the color of skin. The male dominated the female as she was different in gender lacking *the Phallus*. The amalgamation of these ideas towards human being has masterly been presented in the story "That Evening Sun," by William Faulkner. The present study, by applying Marxist approach on this story, tends to analyze how human being may be oppressed from different aspects.

1. INTRODUCTION

William Faulkner (1897-1962), a prominent American novelist who was born in New Albany, Mississippi. Not only was he a novelist, but also he was a short story writer. One of his best short stories is "That Evening Sun" in which he discusses the problems of the blacks, on the one hand, and the problems of women and members of lower-class, on the other. The story is about a low class, black family which is oppressed by a high-class white family. The concept of oppression can be traced in this short story from three different perspectives of class, race, and gender.

In the discussion part, by applying Marxist approach about hegemony-, racial studies, and gender studies, the writer traces the subject of oppression in this short story and shows how this oppression leads to the isolation and "otherness" of those who have been oppressed.

The last part is the conclusion of what is discussed in the discussion section.

2. DISCUSSION

Hegemony and Oppression:

Bressler (2007) says, the term, "hegemony," which has been used by Antonio Gramsci, an Italian Marxist,

... is the assumptions, values, and meanings that shape meaning and define reality for the majority of people in a given culture. Because the bourgeoisie actually control the economic base and establish all the elements that comprise the superstructure- music, literature, art, and so forth- they gain the spontaneous accolades of the working class. The working people themselves give their consent to the bourgeoisie and adopt bourgeois values and beliefs. As sustainers of the economic base, the dominant class enjoys the prestige of the masses and controls the ideology- a term often used synonymously with hegemony- that shapes individual consciousness. This shaping of a people's ideologies is, according to Gramsci, a kind of deception whereby the majority of people forget about or abandon their own interests and desires and accept the dominant values and beliefs as their own. (198)

As it is seen, this is the bourgeoisie who defines even life for others. In the story, one can see this process of domination as, "Father told Jesus to stay away from the house," (Crane, 1952: 354)¹ and "Father said for you [Nancy] to go home and lock the door, and you will be all right" (Crane, 1952: 360).

¹ All references to "That Evening Sun" are from Milton Crane's 1952 edition and are abbreviated as (Crane, year of publication: number of the page).

One should bear in mind that this hegemony or ideology is not just a theory, but as David Hawkes (2003) believes, what Gramsci has in mind is "... a form of praxis" (114) by which the dominant class continues its life. In this story, the black family, as a low class, is supposed to work in favor of the white family as a dominant, high-class: "Father says for you to come on and get breakfast" (Crane, 1952: 353). M. H. Abrams (1999) believes that this upper class does not dominate the lower-class "... by direct and overt means, but by succeeding in making its ideological view of society so pervasive that the subordinate classes unwittingly accept and participate in their own oppression;" (151) as it is seen in the story, Nancy herself accepts her valuelessness when she says, "I ain't nothing but a nigger" (Crane, 1952: 355).

Race and Oppression:

For many years, the subject of race has been, as a good pretext, in the hands of power and special dominant races, such as the white, to oppress specially the blacks; that's why William Faulkner shows this custom in his works, as R. P. Warren (1965) maintains, "the actual role of the Negro in Faulkner's fiction is consistently one of pathos or heroism. It is not merely, as has been suggested more than once, that Faulkner condescends to the good and faithful servant, the "white folk's nigger." (121) Nancy, as a Negress, is the main character of the story around whom the story forms. This theme of oppression, against the black, is seen, again and again, in the works of William Faulkner. In another article, R. P. Warren (1966) is eager to elaborate on it, when he mentions,

In Faulkner's work we find, over and over again, this theme of the crime, the curse, for it is clear that for him the Civil War merely transferred the crime against the Negro into a new set of terms. Even in the works treating the post-bellum period, the Negro remains a central figure- one is even tempted to say *the* central figure. (257)

Once upon a time in America, the white thought that they were superior to the black and that was the trigger of what we nowadays call racism. "Racism," as believed by L. L. Snyder (1962),

Assumes inherent racial superiority or the purity and superiority of certain races; also, it donates any doctrine or program of racial domination based on such assumption. Less specifically, it refers to race hatred and discrimination. Racialism assumes similar ideas, but describes especially race hatred and racial prejudice. (10)

It should not be forgotten that those who believe in racial discrimination, not only do they accept the upper class's superiority, but also they believe that the opposite race, by nature, lacks something which makes it subhuman. The superiority and inferiority are quite conspicuous in the story, as one sees "Negro women who still take in white people's washing after the old custom, ...," (Crane, 1952: 352) and "I can't have Negroes sleeping in the bedroom," (Crane, 1952: 359) which shows that the white think the black is subhuman.

From the very beginning of racial discrimination and slavery as its consequence, the minor races, specially the blacks were aware of the process of the exploitation, as V. Ware (1996) states, "in talking about the social construction of whiteness it is also important to acknowledge that it has certainly not been invisible to those identified as black;" (143) this awareness of the black can be seen in this story too, when Jesus says,

I can't hang around white man's kitchen. But white man can hang around mine. White man can come in my house, but I can't stop him. When white man want to come in my house, I ain't got no house. I can't stop him, but he can't kick me outen it. He can't do that (Crane, 1952: 354).

One can notice here how Jesus, as a black man, is aware of the domination of the white in the society he lives.

The crisis of race and racial discrimination in *one specific race dominated* society causes the minority to be repressed and rejected so far as C. E. Silberman (1954) mentions,

Negroes are taught to despise themselves almost from the first moments of consciousness; even without any direct experience with discrimination, they learn in earliest childhood of the stigma attached to color in the United States: "if you're white,

you're right," a Negro folk saying goes: "if you're brown, stick around; if you're black, stay back." And they do stay back. (11)

As it is seen in the story, Jesus despises himself because he cannot do anything to keep the whites away from his house, and elsewhere Nancy mentions, "I ain't nothing but a nigger" (Crane, 1952: 355).

In a white dominated society, the blacks were not able to do or possess whatever they wanted, but according to W. J. Wilson (1973) "... the status and behavior of the minority group are defined and redefined with respect to the dominant group," (35) as it is seen in the story, when Father tells Jesus to get away from the house, he disappears. It is the Father who says whether or not Nancy should come to get the breakfast and when to leave. On the other hand, the behavior of white people affects the behavior or viewpoints of their children to learn how to behave while confronting the blacks; as R. Redfield (1958) believes,

For the small children there is, characteristically, no significance in race. There is surely no instinct of racial prejudice or of racial recognition. Children brought up in societies where there are racial prejudices ordinarily begin to share them- or perhaps to rebel against them- at the age when self-consciousness begins;" (69)

This prejudice in the story is shown when Jason begins to understand what 'nigger' means by saying "Jesus is a nigger... Dilsey is a nigger too... I ain't a nigger" (Crane, 1952: 358).

Having done all the blacks can do for the whites, no longer would the whites pay attention to the blacks when they face with a problem, as William Faulkner himself mentions, "the point I was making [with "That Evening Sun"] ... was that this Negro woman who had given devotion to the white family knew that when the crisis of her need came, the white family wouldn't be there" (qtd. in Barnwell 71).

Gender and Oppression:

In the process of history, the subject of gender has always been in the hands of power, and men too, to oppress and humiliate women. As it is believed,

... gender discrimination is referred to a treatment or act, which based on the individuals gender is seeking to humiliate, reject, belittle, and stereotype them. And in a more extensive concept, gender discrimination is the tendency in which to glorify a sex, one belittles the opposite one; ((ODV), 2001: 32)

And elsewhere A. Lorde (2004) states, "sexism, the belief in the inherent superiority of one sex over the other and thereby the right to dominance" (855). This spirit of rejection and dominance is clear in the story as one sees the Father leaves his wife alone to take Nancy home, which shows Father's conscious or unconscious act of rejection towards his wife although his wife protests against this action of her husband. Elsewhere in the story one notices the domination of Jesus over his wife because his wife scares of him after being pregnant by a white: "if Jesus is hid there, he can see us, can t he?" (Crane, 1952: 366).

Moreover, L. Goodman (1996) believes that "women of color were long excluded from higher education, from learning and teaching about creative writing, by a double or even triple oppression: race, class, and gender" (153). Nancy, as a woman and a low class Negress, is the most proper sample of this oppression. The language she speaks shows that she is an uneducated person, for example when she says, "who says I is?" (Crane, 1952: 353).

3. CONCLUSION

The subjects of class, race, and gender have been and are in the hands of dominated group to oppress others. This problem has been shown by many writers in their works of art. One of these writers is William Faulkner who in his short story "That Evening Sun" shows that how one group or family by using the subjects of class, race, and gender causes another group to be oppressed. This oppression causes the oppressed group to be isolated from other groups and leads them to be an "other" compare with the dominated social group. This sense of "otherness" day by day causes them to lose their sense of humanity and to consider themselves as an object in the hands of other dominant group; as it is seen about Nancy and Jesus as a sample of this "other" group.

After all, it should not be forgotten that, according to A. Amoko (2006) "in the practice of everyday life, race continues to be one of the principal ways by which we identify each other- and ourselves;" (129) so, it should not be a subject for superiority of one group, race, or gender over other.

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