Racial Poetics in The Black Atlantic: A STUDY of Nadine Gordimer’s None to Accompany Me and Caryl Phillips’ Cambridge

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ABSTRACT

The perception of the nature and function of race in history is reflected in literature. Race being the source of all structures of feeling and thought gave rise to racism in societies where, because of the cohabitation of races, natives, white settlers and slaves were finally compelled to live together. Consequently, the history of the races gave birth to racial struggle. Evidence of this struggle is the Civil Rights Movement and the Black Lives Matter insurgency in the United States of America and beyond, the anti-Apartheid struggle in South Africa, but also the Black Aesthetics in African American Literature. It is against this backdrop that this study seeks to examine the meaning of blackness in two multiracial societies, one with a history of colonialism and the other with a history of slavery. Through the theoretical lens of new historicism, the paper demonstrates that the Black Atlantic offers the occasion for the exploration of race as a legacy of the clash between the West and the New World in order to reveal not only the commonalities of its racial dynamics but also the complementarities existing between different races. Using Nadine Gordimer’s None to Accompany Me and Caryl Phillips’ Cambridge as corpus, the paper concludes that both authors exemplify and contribute to discourses on race by narrating the complementary histories of black characters.

Keywords: Race, Black Atlantic, black, white

Introduction

The perception of the nature and function of race in history is reflected in literature. Race being the source of all structures of feeling and thought gave rise to racism in societies where, because of the cohabitation of races, natives, white settlers and slaves were finally compelled to live together. Consequently, the history of the races gave birth to racial struggle. Evidence of this struggle is the Civil Rights Movement and the Black Lives Matter protests in the United States of America, the anti-Apartheid struggle in South Africa, but also the Black Aesthetics in African American Literature. It is against this backdrop that this study seeks to examine the meaning of blackness in two multiracial societies, one with a history of colonialism and the other with a history of slavery. Through the theoretical lens of new historicism, the paper demonstrates that the Black Atlantic offers the occasion for the exploration of race as a legacy of the clash between the West and the New World in order to reveal not only the commonalities of its racial dynamics but also the complementarities existing between different races. Using Nadine Gordimer’s None to Accompany Me and Caryl Phillips’ Cambridge as corpus, the paper concludes that both authors exemplify and contribute to discourses on race by narrating the complementary histories of black characters.

The representation of blacks in Western art and literature bore the imprint of their authors and aroused the feelings of the unacceptable otherness. These images often emphasised racial prejudices. Howard Winant in The New Politics of Race: Globalism, Difference, Justice thinks Race is a current issue in contemporary society. As he remarks, after several years of racial politics:

Race is above all a matter of politics. The assignment and acceptance of racial identity, the configuration of racially demarcated groups, the ‘logic of collective action’ as practiced by members of these groups, and the stratification (imposed and opposed) of society along racial lines are but some of the main dimensions of racial politics. (Winant501)

This explains why even in literature, the black person was represented variously as docile, lacking intelligence, to being brutal, arrogant and indecent. It is within this framework that Jean Paul Sartre, Frantz Fanon and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. in their writings have argued in various ways not only for explicit colour-blindness, but also for the restoration of the image of blacks through writing. In this light, Sartre opines that black people can better tackle racism by aligning themselves with the negritude movement. In “Black Orpheus”, he observes that the negritude movement is essential for a new kind of humanism that will free blacks from racist thinking, free them from a world divided by race. He writes that: “The unity which will come eventually, bringing all oppressed peoples together in the same struggle, must be preceded in the
colonies by what I shall call the moment of separation or negativity: this anti-racist racism is the only road that will lead to the abolition of racial differences” (18).

Fanon on the other hand sees the negritude movement as a transition step towards universal humanism. According to him, moving away from racism means seeing each man as only a man, not seeing colour at all. Fanon gestures to a universal humanity which is rational and inquisitive. It is the same point Sonia Kruks highlights in her book, Retrieving Experience: Subjectivity and Recognition in Feminist Politics. She explains that, “in the final chapter of Black Skin, White Masks, Fanon develops his own vision of a transition beyond negritude…an abrupt final shift to a universalizing, abstract rationalism” (98,103).

Nadine Gordimer and Caryl Phillips have tackled the history and legacy of slavery as a site for the imaginative interrogation of questions of race and identity. As such, these novelists can be located within what Paul Gilroy has called a “Black Atlantic” web of diasporic connections and concerns. However, by foregrounding the significance and the impact of slavery in their works, Gordimer and Phillips not only establish the value of cultural memory but they also highlight racial questions as predominantly affecting multiracial societies today. The novels under discussion portray several instances of racial poetics. Analysing the depth and breadth of race and racism as captured by authors of the works under study is a way to explore the poetics of race. Racial poetics can be understood as the discourse on issues of race and the manifestation of racial practices fuelled by an ideology of racial segregation. It is also the exclusion and alienation inherent to a group of people racially segregated and which finds its justification in ideologies based on racial classification. Thus, it is the debasement and treatment black servants receive from white masters. However, Nadine Gordimer and Caryl Phillips, the authors of the texts under discussion, expose vividly in their various novels, the lives and experiences of black characters in a society where white supremacy is strongly felt. In other words, Nadine Gordimer’s None to Accompany Me and Caryl Phillips’ Cambridge exemplify and contribute to discourses on race by narrating the complementary histories of black characters.

Nadine Gordimer in None to Accompany Me projects racial poetics in several instances. She exposes how the South African government set out a system of government (Apartheid) that promoted the interest of the Whites at the detriment of the Blacks. In parliament for example, the government voted a law that denied voting rights to blacks, a strategy that excluded them from politics. Torture and arrest were exercised against any black who attempted to resist. This is also evident in None to Accompany Me as anti-apartheid actors like Didymus and Oupa are constantly on the run trying to avoid arrestation. Furthermore, racism pushes the Whites to send government officials to destroy the houses of Blacks and even torture those who live near white residential areas as the narrator contends:

Government officials commanded the appropriate personnel from the appropriate departments and when off to bulldoze the homes of the blacks. Communities pack their belongings on to trucks drawn like other government equipment from the state’s store and transport them to an area designated by appropriate departments where they were supplied with tin toilets. Communal taps and sometimes there could be drawn from stores departmental tent. (Gordimer12)

Here the narrator describes how white government officials ordered personnel to render homeless the Blacks who live around the white neighbourhood. Their homes were destroyed and their properties carried away in trucks to destinations that had no toilets nor comfort. The narrator also points out that these blacks used tins as toilets. In the course of transporting the properties, the Blacks got mixed up and most of them disappeared. This treatment alienates the Blacks who are regarded as sub-humans and therefore unfit to live in the same neighbourhood with their Whites masters.

In addition, racism in the South African society as reflected in None to Accompany me, is also seen operational when the Apartheid government implements the system of censorship. This brought about alienation and even exile, especially to writers. In the novel, a journalist of an often-banned newspaper paper, who is suspected as a police agent, goes on self-exile because he is afraid of his life. Although the journalist eventually returns to the country and is seeking for employment, he cannot be given a job because Vera fears that he has not been granted permission from the government authorities to stay in the country.

Also, racial discrimination is highlighted through the way exiles who return to South Africa are treated. These people were given asylum in their own fatherland. This is seen through children who were in exile schools and were given asylum to have a school for themselves, thereby separating them from the society and other people. Gordimer asserts in the novel that: “It has been an assignment in Africa where else could that stick have come from. She’d been sent to negotiate the takeover by that country’s government of a
school for exile children. These assets should be handled as a gift to a country that had given asylum” (126-127).

The above quotation shows that South African children returning from exile are taken as refugees and stranger in their own country. This situation is in line with the remark made by Winant in The New Politics of Race of a similar case in America in the following terms: “The racially subordinate were not even recognized as human beings in many cases much less as citizens” (301). They are treated differently from other children who are seen as the real owners of the land. The black and white children studied in separate schools and given different levels of education. As the novel reveals, Apartheid government offered quality education to white children and careless about the quality of education that black children receive. The studying environment of Whites is well constructed and they have qualified teachers unlike black children.

On the other hand, DidymusMagoma goes onself-exile and is “Writing the history of struggling in exile” (23) and we find Dydimus wanting that the university press in the United State should publish and advertise his book in the literary journals. This is because the publishing house in South Africa refuses to publish reports on government crisis in the country. However, if the books were to be published in the country, they would be censored because the government has imposed a ban on any report that presents issues concerning its actions in the country. This explains why Didymus prefers to live on exile to save his live from the torture orchestrated by the Apartheid government.

In Cambridge, set in the Caribbean during the period of slavery, racism is even more vivid. Racial poetics is portrayed through the description Emily gives of both the inhabitants of the island as well as their way of life. She looks at black slaves with disgust and contempt. While still on a carriage on her way to the plantation, Emily comes across “a number of pigs bolted into view, and after them a small parcel of monkeys” (23). She notes that the scene took her by surprise and she “must have jumped some considerable space, for the gentleman took [her] arm as though to steady [her] and prevent [her] falling from the carriage” (23). But what she takes for animals are simply “nothing other than negro children, naked as they were born, parading in a feral manner” (23-24). She constantly likened the black population to animal species and classifies them as subhuman beings. She considers where the houses of slaves as “narrow nests” (67) and the noises they make in their community as a distant “braying” (32).

This othering as effected by Emily is a form of marginalisation based on racial difference. To Emily, however to be black is synonymous with being savage and therefore with lacking humanity. This explains why in her journal, she paints black slaves in superlatives. According to her, anything that relates to blacks whether physiologically or culturally is exaggerated. She finds fault in everything connected to the people.

While observing the leisure blacks offer themselves in a dancing ceremony they organised at dusk, Emily remarks that "their movements appeared to be wholly dictated by the caprice of the moment”(44). When she decides to stay longer on her father's plantation, Emily is invited to assist in night celebration of which she makes some observation on the "congregation of black limbs tumbling and leaping" (87). She also comments on the excessive "perspiration" and the fact that their (blacks) instruments are not played to produce harmonious sounds (87). The eating habits of blacks also attracts Emily's attention as she contends that: " I looked on with revulsion as these cannibals clamoured to indulged themselves with this meat, and I wished that with the growth of civilization in the negro, the gorging of such unacceptable swinish parts might soon cease" (44). Blackness in relation to which Eurocentrism and an imperialist sense of propriety is based, becomes an object void of meaning and interest. Judith Butler in "Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex" thinks that in this specific case, the body is built as the "unconstructed" object, as a formlessness that is not quite a body, a body that matters (that is, a body that is able to signify properly) (4). Alternatively, this black body is interpreted as a body that signifies in excess. For instance, Emily casts a disapproving look upon black people’s passion for wearing extravagant clothes on Sundays and festive occasions. She prefers to see “the negroes, male and female, in their filthy native garb, for in these circumstances they do not violate laws of taste which civilized people have spent many a century to establish” (66). Another illustration concerns the illness which black slaves suffer from. According to Emily:

the greater part of a tropical doctor’s life is squandered on the bizarre imaginary diseases with which the negro claim to be suffering. Monday morning is a great time for the lazy or ill-disposed negroes to gather together at the sick-house, with heads tied up groaning as though in terminal agony, eyes barely open, one leg dragging after the other. (Gordimer34)

In None to Accompany Me human regressions is an aspect of racism which alienated the black man during
Apartheid and Post-Apartheid era and reduced him into slavery. The Blacks do all odd jobs. In line with this, Karl Marx remarks that: “Changes in the fundamental mode of material production effect changes in the class structure of the society establishing. i.e. each era dominant and subordinate classes that engage in a struggle for economic-political and social advantage” (Glossary155).

In addition, the idea that the labor on nature was to satisfy human regression in South African society pushes South Africans into a relationship with each other regardless of their personal preferences because they need to work and take care of their needs. The South Africans tried to create a class labor which enable them to summit to a new form of exploitation (wage labor) in order to survive. This is so because it was the main labor, a commodity sold in market. This idea is seen through Estte, Dhhoma a maid in Bennett house who “comes to wash and iron once a week, dirty clothes in Vera stark’s house” (51) just to be employed. We find Didymus disguised as a church collector and in a flashback tells Vera Stark the type of jobs he was doing in exile as he remarks:

A black man with a scanty pepper corn beard round ups and chin wearing thick glasses and the collar of a clergy…purporting to collect church fund… one week I am a laborer with cement on my shoes and a woolen cap down to my eyes next week, I am a laborer with cement on my shoes and a woolen cap as a soccer in three piece blue with a white cap as a soccer promoter from Tabulanic. (Gordimer40)

The above quotation brings the idea of lost of identity by the Blacks, and caused by the perpetration of racial discrimination against them by the Whites. Didymus has to disguise to work in Moscow in order to survive. At one time, he is dressed like a priest and is seen collecting church funds.At another time he is dressed in a three-piece blue costume with a woollen cap as soccer.

The idea of human regression is furthermore seen through The Harry Ape, where regression during industrialization, had reduced human workers into machines. Blacks are programmed to carry out tasks and are turned on and off. This brings in the idea that although these children have been given asylum, they are still living in exile on their own fatherland.

However, in other sections of Emily’s travel journal in Cambridge, she also finds faults with their “native garb,” “their ability to dress without concern for conventional morality” (21). Their half-nakedness is itself sign and symptom of sexual intemperance as she notes: “Negro relations would appear to have much in common with those practised by animals in the field, for they seem to find nothing unnatural in breeding with whomsoever they should stumble upon” (36), thus like animals which they are so close. Meantime, the exuberance characteristic of blacks is also manifest in their speech. Emily reprimands her black servant Stella for offering a distorted version of English: “I further informed her that I had no desire to hear my mother-tongue mocked by the curious thick utterance of the negro language, so she might abandon her comical jargon and adopt English” (29). She describes Christiana’s shouts as outrageous and speechless because Christiana embodies the language or “non-language” of the abject, simultaneously powerful and powerless. Described as a “coal-black ape-woman” (73), she is figured as “spitting out words whose meaning” (73) is unimaginable, “howling and hurling abuse like some sooty witch from Macbeth” (74). What follows is the description which Emily gives of the language of blacks , a description that presupposes racial bias. Emily says that:

The loquacious tongue of the Creole negro boasts much bad dialect, but that of the African is almost unintelligible and requires abundant patience if it is to be understood …it is so uncouth a jargon to those unaccustomed to it, that it is almost as if they were to speak in one of their diverse native tongues. They talk long, loud and rapidly, but seldom deliver anything of import. (Phillips38-39)

Emily considers the language of the Africans as inferior and unintelligible. She believes that by virtue of their race, whatever the African says is jargon and has no meaning.

In None to Accompany Me however, racial poetics also manifests itself through language. Racism has prompted the Whites to consider their language superior to the language of black South Africans. Blacks are seen to be alienated from their linguistic heritage. Colonial language is viewed as a superior language in South Africa. This is seen through Odendaal, who tells his boy “to warn the people (the squatter) with an harangue in his or her own language” (22).

The South African language is seen as an inferior language because it is a noisy speech. Furthermore, the colonial language has brought in the lack of communication there by alienating the South Africans from their
In *None to Accompany Me*, we find black South Africans struggling to express themselves in English and South African language. In the novel, MphoMagoma speaks the “London English” (48) but cannot even speak the language of the mother “Zulu” or father “Xhosa” (49). She “would open her eyes wide and roll her head appealing to high heaven in exactly gesture of the mother she is arguing” (49). MphoMagoma is instantly taught her own language by the mother as if she is an alien. She is alienated from the society because she cannot communicate with the other young South Africans or classmates in the colonial society. To this effect, Sibongile observes that: “We have been alienated from what is ours” (50). This shows that the South African people have been deprived of their own language. In addition, linguistic alienation is found through the housemaid of Bennett’s father saying: “Mama he’s so happy for his granddaughter coming. I tell you mama. That time she is arriving he’s going to be there, there mama! Mama, I’m going to put a nice suit he will wear” (139).

Linguistic alienation is consequence racial discrimination which in turn leads to lack of communication. At this level, the alienation is also social as the only language MphoMagoma masters, has made her neither English nor South African. This is because she cannot speak both languages perfectly. European language therefore becomes a mark of discrimination since its use by blacks alienates them.

However, in *Cambridge*, as far as the use of language is concerned, Emily also objects to what she sees as a form of mimicry that is too faithful to the original. In her opinion, the slave Cambridge’s “polite English” (112) is “highly fanciful” (92). He seems to be perversely “determined to adopt a lunatic precision in his dealings with our English words, as though [he] imagined himself to be a part of our white race” (120). This however shows that Emily’s marginalisation of black people is less determined by their inability to adopt the “decent behaviour”, perform the tasks and demonstrate common intellectual exercise following Western standards, than their belonging to the black race. In other words, according to Emily, the fact that the slaves belong to the black race is enough to justify the oddness of both their life and everything that relates to them. Consequently, they remain inferior to the white race and any attempt to resemble whites is doomed to failure.

In *None to Accompany Me*, racial poetics is also symbolised in arts through paintings and sculpture. Painting and sculpture are psychological processes which unconsciously show what has been repressed in the mind of the artists. As a result, they cannot overtly say things in public but they present them unconsciously in the painting and carving, these artistic inclinations urge them to go on self-exile. This is seen through the cultural workers during and after the Apartheid period. They are forced to drop their occupations (artistic creativity) due to the idea of the racial segregation from which artists like sculptors, painters and wood disassociated themselves (73). The painters dropped the art because the white collectors reminded them sculpture is a painless way to prove the absence of the racial prejudice. The reason for which the white collectors convince the artists is to destroy the black people artistic imagination and creativity since they are seen as masters of their own product. Moreover, the Blacks are doing painting because they want to reveal ills of the society and the injustice present in the South African society. Another reason is that the convention does not permit one to exercise their artistic power. This brings the fact that their artistic work is unwelcome in that society. The only solution they adopt as a last resort is to take change job in order to distant themselves from the hostile environment. Allan Stillite’s Dru contends to this effect that:

> I have no allocation place in the world, thing I do not belong to Beldover (East wood) nor to Nottingham nor to England nor to this world, but then none of them exist. I am trammeled and entangled in them but they are all unreal. I must break out of it like a nut from its shell which as an unreality. (Gordimer42)

This quotation reveals the reason why Bennett drops sculpture and takes a new business as a market research consultant and is bankrupt. He tries to avoid the disgrace by discussing his visit to Ivan in London.

Another area where racial poetics reveals itself in *None to Accompany Me* is land management policies. Tertius Odendaal owns three farms, one of which was inherited from his father, one from his wife’s dowry and the other one which he bought during the agricultural boom. He underlooks and hates the Blacks. He has categorically refused them from occupying the land in Odensville because he claims it belongs to him. He has promised to destroy their houses and send them away despite the attempt of Vera Stark to plead that he should allow the Blacks occupy Odensville. However, farm ownership is important in South Africa as it symbolizes wealth, materialism, but also murder and violence. As the change in government cabinet is announced, Odendaal only thinks about the future of his land. And as the government starts dumping blacks near the land occupied by white settlers so is he affected as some of these blacks have encroached on his land. And as the narrator explains, he tries to “apply to the provincial administration for permission. He
would convert the farm into cash as a landlord, he would divide it into plots for rent, to blacks. He is going to turn their invasion to profit” (22). Odendaal’s materialistic tendency pushes him to rent out the plot at very high rate to the squatters who all belong to the black community. He intends to make money despite their precarity but also to harass them whenever he desires. It is Odendaal’s belief in racial discrimination that pushes him to maltreat the Blacks.

In addition, Odendaal’s racial tendency ushers him turn a deaf hear to Vera Stark when she comes to intervene on behalf of the Blacks who are on the verge of being thrown out of Odensville. He is determined to send them away as the narrator remarks:

> All these people are trespassers and the only thing I’m going to get them run off my land I’m going to burn down their rubbish and you can go back yourself and tell them. I’m just talking. I’m not talking at all to you. I’ve got the men to do it with me, we know to get it done all right, and if they want to get in the wax, that going to be their funeral. Running to won’t help them. They are no Odenville ‘people’ so you can forget about calling them that. They’re nothing. (Gordimer25)

In Odendaal’s opinion the land belongs to him and any opposition from the Blacks exposes them to an eventual eviction. The use of the pronoun “I” therefore, shows the possessive nature and attitude of the white man in South Africa. He represses the Blacks and wants the land to belong to him only.

**Conclusion**

Racial poetics in both novels manifest itself through several instances of discrimination. And as the paper has demonstrated, the language of race is the same in societies that are under colonial/white domination, as well as those in which chattel slavery is still practised. Although the mode of functioning of the political system determines the degree of segregation to which both societies are subdued, what remains clear is the alienation, the debasement black people suffer from as they only live to survive and survive only to live under the hardship the white administration has imposed on them. From this perspective therefore, Nadine Gordimer’s *None to Accompany Me* and Caryl Phillips’ *Cambridge* exemplify and contribute to discourses on race by narrating the complementary histories of black characters.

**Works Cited**