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Conflagrated Violence in Literature of Diaspora, Wright and Baldwin

Ogunyemi, Christopher Babatunde

Department of English, College of Humanities

Joseph Ayo Babalola University

P. M. B. 5006, Ilesa 233001

Osun State, Nigeria

E-mail: bbcoguns2@yahoo.se

Abstract

This paper visualizes a meta-critical approach in delineating the instrument of violence unleashed on the African people beginning from the plight of the African American. The paper argues the psychological and philosophical currents that arise from this phenomenon. The application of realism with narratology demonstrates the question of man and the need for a new direction of tranquillity for Nigeria and Africa.

Key words: Violence, Literature, African American, Wright, Baldwin and Diaspora

Introduction

Violence has been used by groups seeking power by groups holding power and by groups in the process of losing power. Violence has been pursued in the defence of order

by the privilege in the name of justice by the oppressed and in fear displacement by the threatened (Anifowose, 1).

Remi Anifowose's conception of violence in society is very fundamental because many reasons were advanced for the cause of conflict which literary works of art attempt to show in order to define the intricacies of conflict and counter conflict Africans and, indeed African Americans experience in their encounter with their white folks. Violence is universal phenomenon social scientists explore in their various works in order to portray the causes of conflict and how these conflicts are amicably resolved. Violence is expressed when there is a conflict between a person and the existing system where he belongs. In literary circle, violence occurs when writers attempt to use their literary works, ethos or canons to express the need for a change in the socio-political system they found themselves. Violence is also perpetrated in art when writers use their works to expose various levels of economic stagnation, environmental degradation, and problem of identity among other social and political vices. Our intention in this paper is to attempt a comparative analysis of constitutive elements of sectarian violence in fiction to explain the need for a new direction. Attempt shall be illuminated in examining the models used by writers to channel violence in their attempt to sanitise the ills of society. We shall attempt to examine these literary features and model them to the selected fiction of Wright and Baldwin with passing references to works of other Black writers in America. In doing this; there is close reference to both the analysis of literary texts and critical works. This is a narratological tool which lends axiomatic credence to close reading and critical analysis with realistic feelings portrayed by realism. This sheds more light on Jonathan Crowe's notion of literary analysis, Crewe asserts that:

Literature is an important carrier and constructor of cultural memory; it is a cultural phenomenon that intersects with history. It is strategic because it helps humans make sense of their world, narratives (whether literary, visual or oral form). This is an important resource for restructuring and comprehending experience (Acts of Memory, 1999:123).

Both Wright and Baldwin have used their works within the narratological framework to reconstruct the historical instinct of the American society with a concern for human development across political and social narratives. They attempt to use their works to ascertain a change in the obnoxious system by revising "memory and history". However this memory and history constitute

a great concern for scholars: Pierre Nora in *Les Lieux de Memoire* (1984) opines that “memory and history are fundamental literary elements in underscoring the ethos of the people; it opens the new vistas for the dialectic of remembering and forgetting unconsciousness of its successive deformations in art. It also helps in the architectonic reconstruction of the narrative drive in fiction”

Narrative Heroism in Wright and Baldwin

Heroism in narrative fiction informs violence when the protagonist decides to achieve his aspirations by any means. Writers throughout the literary ages have created one hero or the other to revolt against the existing structure. According to Charles Nnolim, “The Greek ideal of hero was a man who owned it all to himself, his gods and his nation, the development of his talent to the highest possible limits. He is individualistic in his pursuit of honour—either in military glory through great feasts of valour performed in battle or in altruistic hero who puts the good of the state before his own welfare”(Nnolim,190). The hero in a work of art develops fiction by doing everything possible when he concerns himself with issues such as violence, love, hatred, risks etc. This situation evokes sensitive message in the minds of the reader or the audience who is desperate to see the end of such hero. That is why C.M Bowra stresses the deeds of a hero and what makes him heroic. He posits that “a hero differs from other men in his degree of his powers” (Maduka, 8).

African American writers like Wright, Baldwin, and Ellison create heroes and heroines to fight against the existing socio-political situation. They attempt to show their reactions against the economic situation by suggesting various ways through which their actions can effect change. That is why Ralph Ellison’s hero in *Invisible Man* is happy to have discovered his invisibility. As a Black man, the White ghosts haunt him around, but now that he is invisible he could see the realities of life. The hero is fighting a war without allowing his enemies to know that war is in progress. One night the hero accidentally accosts a blonde who sees him “because of the darkness” The blonde calls him an insulting name and he demands for an apology. The White man refuses but continues using more insulting words. The blonde is “mugged” to death by the invisible man who exerts his invisibility in other areas to buttress his heroic deeds. The discovery of his invisibility gives him an advantage over others.

Eva Houseman constantly sits all day reading at the cathedral library without talking to Saul Saunders who cleans the shelves, lockers, tables, chairs and the books. At different occasions their eyes meet but Saul removes his eyes because he does not want to involve himself in any form of trouble with this woman whose grey eyes are seductive and dangerous at the same time. At the close of the work he leaves the Cathedral while the janitor comes around to close the doors. Saul Saunders was perplexed when Eva Houseman broke the silence by calling him to come and clean the ‘under of her chair’. Legs sprawl apart, eyes deep blue and she repeatedly points her fingers under her pants. “come nigger” her tin but deadly voice reverberates the silence in the cathedral hall, “you have not cleaned here” pointing under her pants. Her countenance changed as she desires Saul to come over and complete his “cleaning jobs”. Rather, the heroic Saul feels intimidated and humiliated. He advanced to Eva and launched a slap on her. Eva yells and he moves to stop the shouting because “hearing a woman yells is as good as hearing your death sentence in the court of law”. Saul who is drunk that morning looks for a hard plank to stop this smouldering woman from crying because this continuous yelling is driving hard at his pines. Having used this plank continuously on her head, it seems that she is now quiet. At least the police on patrol would not come and arrest him since she is no longer shouting!

Saul seems not to have known that he has killed a shadow that haunts his life because he did not run away or rape her or disappear into the thin air. He only relocates to the drinking spot to continue to enjoy himself. Not until some minutes before it becomes dawn on him that the woman is dead. He gets the confirmation when the charge on manslaughter is read for him in the court. With a narrative device, Richard Wright tells the story of Saul and the intention to set himself free. Saul’s heroic deeds are further manifested when he kills the shadow without knowing that he has committed murder. He has the effrontery to wait for judgement in the hands of fellow shadows he has been avoiding all these years! James Baldwin’s heroes are dramatic, cunning, non aggressive but fundamental in exposing violence in the African American experience. This attitude is found in some Nigerian leaders and even in some African leaders.

Encouraging the Blacks to shun inferiority complex and to strive for the development of their personal traits, Baldwin’s *Fire Next Time* begins with a thirteen year old boy who is a Christian, a lover of God. But God seems to be far away as he could not help solve the plights of Blacks. When he notices that there are two Gods in America: Gods of the Blacks and Gods of the

Whites, he desires to set himself free from any of the Gods and he warns and cautions that next time, “it gonna be fire”. In the contrary, Wrights’ hero spills fire from the mouth without any prior warning. The same fire of revolution is what corruption in Africa is gradually building!

Ironic Vision as Constitutive Element of Violence in Fiction

Wright and Baldwin use ironies in their narratives to explain the forces in their American society in order to guide the readers in understanding the situations Blacks suffer and the plights of Blacks and Africans all over the world. This confirms the belief of Kafalenos “that narratives guide readers to discern a particular configuration in relation to which to interpret given events. Readers are led to include in a configuration certain revealed events and not others, primarily by the relation between a *sjuzhet* and its *fabula*-a relation that is illuminated by gaps” (Not Yet Knowing, 48). For proper understanding of violence in African American literature, writers have explored the ironic vision in explaining the social framework of our society. According to Maduka,

Irony is a device for revealing, attacking or resolving contradictions plaguing society. The author uses ironic mode to portray the vision of society. This framework is for understanding the process of social transformation (The Intellectuals 210).

Maduka examines the portrayal of irony in political change. The network of irony situates a vision of society. He further goes on to present various ironies in fiction as they portray political change which stimulates the interest of writers. He identifies irony of situation, irony of fate, irony of change, irony of life, irony of things, irony of circumstance, irony of events, irony of character, irony of illusion, irony of exclusion and irony of dilemma (139-211). Both Richard Wright and James Baldwin explore the configuration of these ironies in shaping their works. Many instances in their corpus enforce this assertion. The movement and behaviour of Saul Saunders in *The Man Who Killed A shadow* and his personal disposition towards crime typify the ironic drive Maduka enforces. Similarly, James Baldwin’s handling of religious wrangling and the reduction of the Blacks to the background calls the attention of ironic drive in the African American literary spirit. The essence of these ironies is to show the “contradictions” in society. The fate of the down trodden, the essence of violence, therefore

is an incompatibility between what they believe they are and what they are and not what they do to accomplish their objectives as ambitious writers who are aware of the contradictions in every human society (185).

The African American writers employ the ironic twist or the ironic vision to portray levels of violence in their narration. Although most of these narratives are classical because it renders or visualises the plot from the beginning, middle and end. At times, the story starts from the end and ends in the beginning! This ironic vision is in most cases actualised from the dictate of flashback which establishes a relationship between the society and art. Whenever Blacks come in contact with Whites, there is always a million psychological miles between them in speech, reaction, action etc. This is because the existing structure then did not give room for equality, equity and freedom which the races in America now enjoy! That was the reactions Baldwin, Wright and Ellison attempt to explain in their novels. Writers constantly use this instrument of ironic mode to effect a change politically, culturally, socially in America and in Africa. Killens vividly demonstrates the use of ironic mode in situating the plight of the African America in order to fully understand the portrayal of Wright and Baldwin when they satirize both Whites and Blacks in fiction. Killens uses *Cotillon* to ridicule the “Black Niggers” who discriminate against the “culturally deprived”, the light skinned people look down on the dark skinned. Killens’ heroine, the “Black and beautiful Yoruba” rejects inferiority complex. She replies her mother, Daphne who wants to make her White!

“I am so proud of myself mother, I don’t care what White folks think. I know I’m Black” (146). The dream not to live in fear, alienation and psychological humiliation make Blacks to remark that:

We are not fighting to become like you. We respect ourselves too much for that. When we advocate freedom, we mean freedom for us black, or brown, and you to be white and yet live together in a free and equal society. This is the only way that integration can bring dignity to Both of us (The Afro American in Literature, 53).

Irony to these writers combines sarcastic and didactic functions for Blacks and Whites in America and indeed, Africa. It educates Whites and ridicules them for the essence to embark on a change. It educates Blacks and admonishes them against inferiority complex, destructiveness and the need to

embark upon creativity and the instrument of change in Black's world. According to Oguzie, Irony is to enhance Black Nationalism by negating racial perception (Oguzie, 36). To Houston Baker, although Wright uses irony for a purpose, it could be better to classify his narratives from the classical perception through which Baldwin, Ellison and others got inspiration to excel in their narratives from all ramifications.

Symbolism and Characterisation in Wright and Baldwin

To briefly describe Wright's handling of characters in his fiction, Houston Baker basically insists that Wright and other African American writers understand the trends of events and use fiction to express their narratives by portraying the instrumental forces subsequently show that:

Wright's narrative, however, understands that black factory work is merely a way to counter white labour union initiatives. It is always contingent upon a power politics of racial exclusion. Though blacks may work cheaply for Western civilization, says Wright, they are never allowed to live equitably as citizens within Western civilization. Nevertheless, the Great Depression showed black and white workers their common class interests.⁶ The old black "folk consciousness" died an economically-motivated death during the Great Depression. Barriers of race and class were transcended by a beleaguered proletariat. The "Bosses of the Buildings" trembled before a new "communalism," if not an actual progressive Communism. Modernity, for Wright therefore—a Wright whose politics are completely alien to Ellison's philosophizing hibernation—is non-folk, industrial, and interracially proletarian (Houston 2).

Black writers have understood the symbolic nature of character in a work of art. However, they have realised the essence of characters to situate roles in order to effect drastic change. For a change to be experimental, Wright and Baldwin create revolutionary characters that identify the dictates and social framework of the society. These characters come in contact with things they detest and they strive for a drastic change. At a close examination, the behaviour of the character is dualistic: the first category identifies with the problem of the society while the second pretends as if the society is not going through any problem. Those characters that ignore the problem of the

moment are not revolutionary. They are trapped by fear, intimidation and probably lack of vision. That is why one would remark that:

These levels intersect and affect the narrative dimension and the activities of the characters. The level of identity stands for the male nexus in the novel, while the alterity in the novel represents the female nexus (Social Responsibility, 86).

As for the African American, the behaviour of the characters in fiction tends to support violence. The perceived reason for this is predicated on the need to embark on a change of attitude- a change of negative attitude against Blacks. However, if the Whites refuse to change, the Blacks would give it to them in greater dimension. The character disposition of Saul in the novel of Wright is highly ridiculous. He meets other fellow Blacks and drinks hard to forget the “sorrow inflicted upon him by the White folks” He kills Eva without even knowing he has killing someone-a White shadow which has been haunting his generation! He did not escape to a lonely place to hide his face because what he did to Eva “was to make her silence” not “to kill her or to hurt her”. This psychological trend is really terrific and dangerous. Bright’s self character is to reject anything negative. *Fire Next Time* is a quiet warning against depression and intimidation of a thirteen year old boy- a macrocosm of Baldwin himself. Both characters are depressed and violent but in different interpersonal relations. While Saul is dangerous and blood thirsty “I” the thirteen year old boy cum Baldwin’s character is only sending warnings and rejecting the concept of God for self identity. This view is what Ralph Ellison is trying to express when he says: “If you practice violence against me, I mean to give it back to you in kind” (Ellison, 117).

To express bitterness, African American writers create tragic and revolutionary characters that show dangerous inclinations whenever they come in contact with any white racist who insults and abuses. This simply underscores the simple fact that makes blacks to “own the night” and to be “invisible “at the same time. Many activities which the day cannot really accommodate were let loose in the nights. These include: killing, kidnapping etc.

Many other African American writers too imbibe the tradition of violent, symbolism and characterisation in their works. Prominent among them is Toni Morrison. In *Bluest Eye*, Morrison portrays a new character disposition. The characters of children encapsulate the need to survive childhood in the

midst of adversities. This novel x-rays tragic feelings among characters; these feelings demonstrate violence and depression. She opines that:

Pecola's tragedy is indeed a family tragedy, with roots in her parents past. Pauline Breedlove was unable to guide or protect her daughter, with her own attempt to create self respect and a place in the world having led to her to find refuge in another family (60).

Tragic feelings among the characters of African American writers facilitate violence in Black narratives. This situation grossly affects the study of narratives. According to Stenberg, "in literary narratives both the suppression of information and its subsequent disclosure have to be quasi-mimetically accounted for, so as to avoid the reader's indignation at being cheated... (Not Yet Knowing, 54). The constant creation of radical, wicked, influential characters with brutal appearance in black fiction facilitate violence and fear. These tragic feelings, however, portend psychological feelings among young Black generations who quickly resist intervention when accosted. Characters in this regard are accosted with various roles in fiction which symbolises one thing or the other. There is a coherent event which explains why the White audience were constantly gripped with fear so that America will not produce bigger Thomas' everywhere. The various expressions on the characters and their behaviours help in the understanding of the complicated nature of the condition of Blacks in America:

I don't know that I can make a decision as to whether or not Hurston's "How It Feels to Be Colored Me" addresses the "plight of the Negro in America" as, according to Wright, she should. I think that, on the one hand, she expresses the plight of the Negro in America as she has lived it; and on the other hand, she did not really have a "plight" per se. "Sometimes I feel discriminated against," she says, "but it does not make me angry. It merely astonishes me." So, clearly she did experience some of what Wright denominates the "Negro plight," but she openly chooses to not be affected by it. In fact, she goes on to say, "How can any deny themselves the pleasure of my company?" She chooses to be herself, even if it happens to be a "colored" self. Some would argue that, yes, Hurston is

not able to demonstrate the plight of the typical black American (On How it feels to be coloured Me, 1989).

The above expressions of Natalya Delgado Chegwin shows the fear, domination, intimidation blacks and all the coloured people in America and in other areas suffer. Characterisation and symbolism in Wright and Baldwin were to show, reject, destroy this illicit perception, after all, pigmentation does not contribute to intelligence so the writers say.

Language and Aesthetics in African American Literatures

Language is an instrument which writers use to portray their thematic preoccupations. Narratologists value the essence of language because it enables them to visualise various interpretations in the narratives. Channels of communications were made possible because of language and its recurring aesthetics. In this situation many writers employ various approaches in delineating their worldview in the essence situating one theme or the other. According to Arnold Berleant, language is the performance through which aesthetics are realised in literature. He opines that language is the total realisation of the effect of literature through the use of words, speech abstract features and other phenomena. He submits that:

There emerges from this discussion of language, literature, and literary art a matter basic to the argument which it is now time to face directly. If literature is a mode of speech, and speech is that activation of literature we call performance, we must identify more exactly what this performance involves and what it does not. In my comments earlier on language and literature, I found language to be a material from which literature draws, but a material that we usually regard in the mode of the written word, where it has an objectivity and an impersonality that make it admirably suited to the function of formulating facts, executing analyses, and in general serving as the instrument of cognitive meaning. Yet our exploration of performance in poetry, drama, and the novel has revealed how the transformation of language in literature leaves it quite removed from its usual cognitive function. Since we are unaccustomed to envisioning language by any other than a cognitive model, it seems strange and difficult to cut it clear of such connotations. Yet this is the particular

hardship the aesthetics of literature must endure, and its only hope of success lies in recognizing and overcoming the handicap of anti-aesthetic pressures. (The Verbal Presence, Aesthetics of Literary Performance, 340-346).

African American writers knowing fully the social ills in the society they found themselves choose the appropriate language in exploiting the various ills through metaphor, language of analytical and perceptual were frequently illuminated. According to John Wideman, the African American is unique in this aspect language and architectonic construct in analytical and perceptual. In his expressions he states that:

Afro American must communicate in a written language which in varying degrees is foreign to our oral traditions. You learn the language of power, learn it well enough to read and write, but its forms and logic cut off, separate you from the primal authenticity of your experience, experience whose meaning resides in the first language you speak(18).

Consequently, Wright and Baldwin use language to delineate the aesthetics of the American landscape but in different perceptions. Both writers use language to visualize violence using different methods in their analytical and perceptual analysis. Wright use of language is more violent than Baldwin. The reason is that the extent of racism in the 1920s when Wright is a youth is enormous than during the time of Baldwin. Wright employs linguistic praxis to x-ray “the natural resistance of a slave, balkiness, fear, suspicion, hatred and intimidation” This informs his creation of Saul in *The Man Who Killed A Shadow* and *Bigger* Thomas in *Black Boy*. Baldwin’s use of language is to further put caution that racism would be vigorously resisted through any form of violence..

Most Black writers use the first person point of view to narrate their fiction and to explain the forces of the society they found themselves. ‘This is because the voice of the writer is the voice of the protagonist in any autobiographical writing’ (Ogunyemi, 2011). However, it is also prominent to use this devise because it situates involvement and knowledge of the existing scenario. Richard Wright uses the first person in this narrative to explain the involvement of “I”. Wright is the extradiegetic narrator who creates Saul Saunders as an intradiegetic narrator that sees the ills in his society, and then tells the audience who responds through the “audience response approach” because of the complex nature of the situation. Similarly

James Baldwin writes his autobiography in *Fire Next Time*. He speaks through his intradiegetic narrator who narrates the ordeals of the Africans in Diaspora. This narrator did not detach himself from the society as some narrators do. He involves himself practically in the church activities, street activities and women activities “in the South were they keep living” The narrator begins to narrate his ugly ordeals from the age of thirteen till he becomes a man matured enough to stop following his Christian parents “in worshipping the white God.”

Conclusion

This study examines violence in African American literature. It visualises a comparative analysis of Wright and Baldwin narratives in analysis with passing references on other African American writers. The narratological motif of Jonathan Crewe is enforced here because I combine narrative context, content with critical analysis. Using the narratological tool with realism, I examined Heroism, Ironic vision, Symbolism, Language application and aesthetic configuration to analyse the theme of violence in the canon of Wright and Baldwin with other narratives and critical works in analysis. This research shows the various reactions black writers demonstrate in their works. The writers are of the opinion that various phenomena shape literature of their dispensation, they express this with various types of metaphors, riddles, axioms which are both conventional and particular to the American landscape. This work is not intended to apologise racism or propagate it. It is within the academic angle of criticising and evaluating the various trends that shape violence and Black literature in America. The need to subscribe to peace and tranquillity inform the research. Both Wright and Baldwin leave an indelible landmark in literature in their attempt to have a lasting legacy in literature.

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