

AFRO-AMERICAN RACIAL OPPRESSION IN PAUL LAURENCE DUNBAR AND AMIRI BARAKA'S POEMS

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Abstract

This study explores how Afro-American racial oppression is reflected in Black Writers' poems, Paul Laurence Dunbar and Amiri Baraka. Using a descriptive-analytical method, this study analyzed words, phrases, and clauses indicating Afro-American racial oppression in the ten selected poems of Paul Laurence Dunbar and Amiri Baraka. Roland Barthes' semiotic was employed to get the interpretation of the signs used in the poems. These interpretations were strengthened by juxtaposing the meaning with socio-cultural context of the poems using Wellek and Warren's perspective of sociological approach in literature. The result of the study showed that as African American, both Paul Laurence Dunbar and Amiri Baraka portray the experience and feeling of Afro-Americans towards racial oppression in United States of America. Through the use of particular signs in their poems, Dunbar and Baraka speak up about the ill-treatments directed to Afro-Americans as well as the injustice that occurred in United States. Dunbar depicts the life of African American during the Jim-Crow America where the practice of discrimination was spreading like wildfire. Whilst, Baraka portrays the life of Afro-Americans during the 1960s in which Black people remained the target of oppression. The analysis of the ten selected poems showed that despite the fact that Black residents have achieved formal equality through the Civil Right Acts in 1964, significant racial oppression persists. Afro-Americans had to deal with oppression during and after the segregation era. In their poems, Paul Laurence Dunbar and Amiri Baraka also advocate African Americans to establish racial pride within themselves for them have been degraded through racial oppression by White ruling race.

Keywords: poetry, racial oppression, African American, Paul Laurence Dunbar, Amiri Baraka

1. Introduction

United States of America has a long history of racial oppression (Feagin, 2001). This painful and agonizing reality began with slavery and has continued through legal segregation to the present day (Feagin, 2006). Soderlund (2005: 55) says that the White people tendency to exploit Africans as slaves was rooted from ethnocentrism, hierarchical beliefs, and prejudice against blackness. For centuries African-American were treated as something less than human. During the slavery era, Afro-Americans had to face many acts of violence done by the White slaveholders. For more than two centuries, Afro-Americans had been enslaved in order to produce millions of White's wealth (Feagin, 2006: xi). They labored before dawn until dark, with whips and chains, under the Whites' control (Feagin, 2006: 23).

Racial oppression combines prejudice with institutional power which creates a system that discriminates Black Americans as the "target group" and benefits Whites as the "dominant group" (Feagin, 2006). Afro-American was considered as the minority race in America, while the Caucasian dominated the country. Schaefer (2008: 39) states that White colonialism demanded Black Africans perceived White as more superior and intelligent, while Blacks were defined as lazy, unintelligent, and incompetent. Moreover, compare to Afro-American citizens, White have more economic, sociological and political power (Spector, 2014: 126).

Because of this domination in every aspect, White Americans became more powerful, and possessed a sense of superiority. Therefore, they intended to oppress the minority group to maintain the status quo. This resulted in the privilege to the White Americans. Allen (2014) argues that racial oppression is designed to deny, disregard, delegitimize a certain social group, in which makes their status beneath the oppressor group. During the segregation era, for instance, White Americans prevented Blacks from having equal rights, freedom, and access to decent housing, education and employment (Schaefer, 2008). Racial oppression brought nothing but suffering to African-American, both physically and mentally (Feagin, 2006).

Despite the pain that they had to endure, African American continuously showed resistance to racial inequality (Wallenfeld, 2011). Through abolition, rebellion, and Civil Right Movement, Afro-Americans fight for their right as a human being as well as American citizen. Some of the revolts were done using literature (Bay, 2000). Protest literature is one of many practices that African-Americans used with the intention to show inequalities among races and socio-economic groups in America, and to encourage a change within the society that engenders such inequalities (Harris, 2000: 1). One of the literature genres that the oppressed racial group used in order to discuss racial oppression issue is poetry.

Paul Laurence Dunbar and Amiri Baraka are one of the two African American poets whose works portray the secondary status of Black people in United States of America. Being born as Afro-American and experienced the racial oppression, both poets use their poems as a weapon to fight against injustice that befell them. Frederick Douglass – a former slave who gained a political and literary prominence in America called Dunbar as "the most promising young colored man in America (Poetry Foundation, 2014)." Meanwhile, Joyce Pettis in her book praised Baraka's work as an institution building that bridging the gap between the arts and the people, he also managed to use arts as catalysts to arouse the Black cultural pride (2002: 21). The two poets were lived in two different eras. However, their poems commonly talk about the same issue – racial oppression face by Afro-American. Through diction and the use of figurative language in their poems, Dunbar and Baraka portray African American pain and suffering caused by the racial oppression.

By using Roland Barthes' semiotic, the interpretation of the meaning in poetry can be done through the examination of the dictions as well as the figure of speech used in the poem. In Barthes' semiotic theory, the process of signs reading is being broken down and focused on their interpretation by different cultures and societies (Chandler, 2007). This interpretation can be strengthened by juxtaposing the meaning with socio-cultural background of the poems. Wellek and Warren (1993) says that there are three classifications of sociological approach. First, the writer sociology which focuses on the social background of the writer. Second is by looking at the context of their literary works. While the last one focuses on the reader problem and social impact of literary work. Hence, the combination of Roland Barthes' semiotic with sociological approach in literature will give an in-depth analysis of Afro-American racial oppression in Paul Laurence Dunbar and Amiri Baraka's poems.

This researcher aims to analyze Afro-American racial oppression in Paul Laurence Dunbar and Amiri Baraka's poems, and see the difference on how both poets portray the issue. Dunbar and Baraka lived in two distinct periods. Dunbar lived during the 1800s precisely in the post-Reconstruction era where Jim Crow began to govern American society, while Baraka's works mostly written during the 1950s-1960s where Civil Right Movement reach its peak up to the abolition of segregation law. However, their works mostly talk about the same matter – racial oppression towards Afro-American in United States. By choosing both poets who lived years apart, the researcher hopes to provide an in-depth analysis of the topic since racial oppression itself is an ongoing struggle for African American community.

2. Method

This researcher is categorized as qualitative research and employed descriptive analytical interpretative as its method. Creswell (2009: 17) defines qualitative approaches to data collection, analysis, interpretation, and report writing differ from the traditional, quantitative approaches. This article discusses ten poems of Paul Laurence Dunbar and Amiri Baraka. These include *We Wear the Mask*, *Sympathy*, *Ships that Pass in the Night*, *The Haunted Oak*, and *Ode to Ethiopia* by Paul Laurence Dunbar; and Amiri Baraka's *As Agony*, *As Now*, *Notes for A Speech*, *Black Art*, *Black People!*, and *Ka'ba*. Roland Barthes' semiotic is used to get the interpretation of the meaning from Dunbar and Baraka's poems. Afterwards, the meaning obtained will be integrated with the historical background/sociocultural context of the poems by using Rene Wellek & Austin Warren's perspective of sociological approach in literature.

3. Result and Discussions

The result of this study shows that as Black poets, Paul Laurence Dunbar and Amiri Baraka through their poems portray the experience and feeling of Afro-American towards racial oppression in United States. In his five selected poems, Dunbar captures African Americans' lives during the segregation era. Dunbar through *We Wear the Mask* conveys how African American cannot be able to express and be themselves during the segregation era. Published in Dunbar's *Lyric of Lowly Life* (1896), this poem talks about Black Americans who had to put on a "mask" in order to survive in White oppressive system.

*We wear the mask that grins and lies,
It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes,--
This debt we pay to human guile;
With torn and bleeding hearts we smile,
And mouth with myriad subtleties.*

Though this poem, Dunbar portrays the idea of self-concealment done by African Americans for the sake of their safety and in order to live in the White dominated society. "The mask" in the first line connotatively means an intentional lie and one's ability to hide feelings. "The mask" he mentions in this poem can be considered as the way in which Whites wanted him and fellow Black Americans to act during the legal segregation. Blacks needed to behave carefully during that time, there was no good outcome from plainly telling the truth. African Americans cannot be seen as a person with opinion nor complain, otherwise it may result in prejudice and violence towards them. Black Americans also had to pretend like they were pleased with the current horrible situation they were in, even though they were really in pain.

Further, Dubois (1903) in his book *The Souls of Black Folk* put forwards a concept of "double consciousness" among Afro-Americans as a result of living under an oppressive society. This term refers to the inherent and inquire duality within Afro-Americans' self-awareness. It covers the ability to see themselves clearly, and the ability to be able to see that very same individuals reflected in the world of White supremacy.

Dunbar depicts Afro-Americans marginalization in the White dominated nation in *Sympathy*. First published in his collection *Lyrics of the Hearthside* (1899), Dunbar uses a caged bird as a symbol of Afro-Americans struggle during the segregation period in which their freedoms were taken away from them.

*I know why the caged bird beats his wing
Till its blood is red on the cruel bars;
For he must fly back to his perch and cling
When he fain would be on the bough a-swing;
And a pain still throbs in the old, old scars
And they pulse again with a keener sting--
I know why he beats his wing!*

The "caged bird" in the opening line of this poem denotes the flying animal that is in the confinement. "Caged bird" is an association for African Americans marginalization during the segregation period. The legal underpinning of United States system of racial segregation was the doctrine "separate but equal", however Blacks never attained the equal treatments promised in the slogan (Schaefer, 2008). During the segregation era, African Americans not only had to deal with a large scale of discrimination in policing and the economy such as working as sharecroppers, laborers, and domestic workers, but also experienced a severe restriction on having access to education, housing, political participation, health care, and public accommodation (Feagin, 2006). African Americans were subordinated in society and considered as second class citizens, making them feel as if they were being put in a cage.

Dunbar through *Sympathy* mentions African Americans' lack of freedom during the official segregation period. The era where the practice of exclusion and discrimination were legal in America. It can be seen from this poem that oppression makes those who are considered inferior feel confined and less than the others (Feagin, 2006). This system prevents African Americans from realizing their full inclusion in the community as well as their talent, potential, and psychological well-being. For centuries, racial oppression prevents African Americans from doing what they need as well as desire to do for themselves including their families (Feagin, 2006). In *Sympathy*, Dunbar gives a sense on how it feels like when one's freedom is taken away from them. As depicted in the poem, nature is where a bird should be. African American should also have their right as human being as well as American citizens to be able

to take control over their own life. Just like the bird in the poem that desires to be free, African Americans also strive to get their freedom from oppression.

Dunbar captures how hard it was for African American to get the chance in life during the legal segregation in *Ships that Pass in the Night*. Written in 1899, Dunbar uses a ship as a symbol for hope and opportunity.

*My tearful eyes my soul's deep hurt are glassing;
For I would hail and check that ship of ships.
I stretch my hands imploring, cry aloud,
My voice falls dead a foot from mine own lips,
And but its ghost doth reach that vessel, passing, passing.*

The denotative meaning of the word “*ship*” is a vessel larger than a boat for transporting people or goods by sea. While “*passing*” denotes go past or across, leaving behind or on one side in proceeding. The words “*the ship*” in this line connotatively means hope and opportunity, and “*gone*” is a connotative meaning of the word “*passing*”. “*The ship*” in this poem is associated with hope and opportunity that African Americans looked for in their entire lives. As the ship pass by the speaker, the opportunity was gone, indicating that it was very hard for African Americans to get a change in life during the official segregation.

This “*ship*” is expected to provide a route for Afro-Americans to be able to get of the oppression. However, the ship as portrayed in the poem is passing, indicating their everlasting misery, sorrow, and pain caused by oppression. As can be seen in the poem, opportunities were hard to obtain for those who become the subject of oppression. In fact, racial oppression made it hard for African Americans to acquire access to significant economic, educational, and other social resources (Feagin, 2006). During the official segregation, Black families were forced into segregated schools, workplaces, and residential areas (Schaefer, 2008). This segregation evidently keeps Afro-American families from gaining the resources that were needed in order to survive and successfully compete with White people.

In his other poem – *The Haunted Oak* which was written in 1900 and first published in Dunbar collection *Lyrics of Love and Laughter*, Dunbar conveys about the unjust persecution of African Americans as well as the lynching during the Jim Crow era.

*"From those who ride fast on our heels
With mind to do him wrong;
They have no care for his innocence,
And the rope they bear is long."*

The word “*rope*” in the line above denotatively means a length of strong cord made by twisting together strands of natural or artificial fibers. “*Rope*” here connotatively refers to the lynching during official segregation. During this era, there were two criminal justice systems: one for White people, and another for Black Americans, and if Black was suspected of committing a crime, they were automatically assured guilty (Schaefer, 2008). Thus, Blacks were often punished for the crime they did not commit, while Whites on the other hand were seldom arrested for assaults or even murders involving Black victims (Schaefer, 2008). Since justice was not well performed during the Jim Crow America, lynching became a regular occurrence. In many cases, Black trials were dismissed altogether, and the Black suspects be given to “a lynch mob” instead (Schaefer, 2008). Therefore, the assaults, killing, and lynching of Black people without litigation were easily found during the Jim Crow America.

Narrated from the perspective of an oak tree, Dunbar through *the Haunted Oak* criticizes the unfair justice system in America during the legal segregation. This period was considered as the era where the role of violence and intimidation were important to maintain the White supremacy regime (Schaefer, 2008). This lynching was one of the forms of violence that Whites used in order to spread terror and control Black people into submission. NAACP – the National Association for Advancement of Colored People (2020) notes that from 1882 to 1968, there were 3,446 Blacks had been lynched, however not all the lynching were recorded in this number. This lynching was one of the forms of violence that Whites used in order to spread terror and control Black people into submission, forcing them into the lowest inferior racial caste in America.

Regardless the pain and suffering that he and African American had to bear, Dunbar conveys his belief of a brighter future for African American in *Ode to Ethiopia*.

*Be proud, my Race, in mind and soul;
Thy name is writ on Glory's scroll*

*In characters of fire.
High 'mid the clouds of Fame's bright sky
Thy banner's blazoned folds now fly,
And truth shall lift them higher.*

“Move or be hurled quickly through the air” is denotative meaning of “fly.” The word “lift” denotatively means raise to a higher position or level, and “of great vertical extent” is denotative meaning of “higher.” These words are used to represent racial pride and a new hope among African Americans. The truth of their struggles as well as their perseverance in facing all adversities has turned them into an honorable human being. Afro-American will be able to show their courageous nature which for so long has been repressed as the result of living in an oppressive society. In this poem, Dunbar suggests that since they have been degraded and manipulated by White ruling race and their culture has been obliterated through racial oppression (Feagin, 2006), African Americans need to establish their own sense of identity. In *Ode to Ethiopia*, Dunbar also argues that embracing Black culture as well as Black identity is the way to celebrate the past glory of Ethiopia. In order to know who they really are, Afro-Americans need to cling to their own roots and feel proud of their perseverance in overcoming struggle.

Similarly, Amiri Baraka in his five selected poems depicts the life of Afro-Americans during the 1960s where Blacks remained the target of oppression. In one of his poem – *As Agony. As Now*, Baraka portrays the consequence of being born as Black in United States. This poem tells about the battle within African Americans selves, between the selves they wanted and were trying to be, and the selves they were made to be by the circumstances.

*I am inside someone
who hates me. I look
out from his eyes. Smell
what fouled tunes come in
to his breath. Love his
wretched women.*

Slits in the metal, for sun. ...

As depicted in the poem, Afro-Americans felt like there was a rift between their body and their soul. The word “metal” here connotes the body in which Afro-Americans were trapped into; it felt foreign, lifeless, and mechanical. Baraka uses “metal” to represent Whites desires that were imposed on African Americans. In other words, White Americans forced Blacks to live inside a confinement made out of “metal.” Thus, Afro-Americans felt something foreign and unfamiliar about their own bodies. African American could not be able to express and be themselves. During the legal segregation era for instance, they had to follow certain set of rules made by Whites, and be what Whites wanted them to be.

In addition, as portrayed in the poem, the impact of racial oppression for African Americans is not only involved the less access to social and economic resources, but they also had to endure the consciousness that grows out and reflects on oppressive condition (Feagin, 2006). Simply put, African Americans had to endure the pain to live in the “black” body resulted from the system of oppression. Therefore, racism was not only planted in the society but embedded in the body itself. It created an ongoing distress and suffering for African Americans just like what Baraka writes in *As Agony. As Now*.

Baraka asserts his separation from African culture in *Notes for a Speech*. Written in 1961, this poem can be found in Baraka’s first poem collection – *Preface to a Twenty Volume Suicide Note*.

*African blues
does not know me. Their steps, in sands
of their own
land. A country
in black & white, newspapers
blown down pavements
of the world. Does
not feel
what I am.*

For Baraka and presumably African American in general, racial oppression has made Africa seemed utterly alien for them. When African slaves were taken and brought by force to America, Whites immediately erased their culture by imposing White beliefs and values to them (Feagin, 2006). “*Black*” denotatively means a very darkest color owing to the absence of light, while “*white*” denotes the color of milk or fresh snow, due to the reflection of visible light. “*Black & white*” is used by Baraka to represents a clear binary contrast. Everything seemed to be simpler and easier in Africa. That country was not as complicated as the place where Baraka and fellow Black people currently lived in with all the injustice, discrimination, and oppression that they had to deal with throughout their lives.

Since the beginning of Black lives in America, White had always been forcing their culture, belief, and value on them (Feagin, 2006). Thus, they could not be able to connect with the land of origin, Africa. Though *Notes for a Speech*, Baraka expresses as well what he thinks it means to be American. For Baraka, being American means being rootless because he or any other African Americans would not be able to look back to their ancestor homeland – Africa (Epstein, 2006). Therefore, as portrayed in the poem, living in America means living in a state of uncertainty which may result in one’s misery and confusion of “who they are.”

After the assassination of Malcolm X – a human rights activist and prominent figure during the Civil Rights Movement, Baraka wrote a poem – *Black Art*. This poem was considered as a turning point in Baraka’s writing, from previously talking about Black marginalization in White oppressive society into advocating a revolutionary vision expressing a solid solidarity with Black culture (Grundy, 2019).

*Poems are bullshit unless they are
Teeth or trees or lemons piled
On a step.
...
we want "poems that kill."
Assassin poems, Poems that shoot
Guns. Poems that wrestle cops into alleys*

Baraka opens *Black Art* by stating that poems are useless if they talk about “non-essential things” which represented by the word “*teeth*,” “*trees*,” and “*lemon*.” Baraka in this poem criticizes poems that are not useful or considered as inadequate representation of Blacks struggle. He encourages Black artists to make meaning in their arts. Baraka argues that they need to create works that defend their blackness, and completely liberate themselves from White influence. Instead of talking about un-necessary subjects, Black poets need to use their poems as a weapon to fight the injustice that befell them.

“*Kill*” in the line above denotatively means cause the death of a person or other living thing. “A murderer of an important person” is denotative meaning of “*assassin*.” “*Shoot*” denotatively means kill or wound with a bullet. A weapon incorporating a metal tube from which bullets are propelled is denotative meaning of “*guns*.” These words are used by Baraka to describe what he thinks the purpose of a poem should be. “*Kill*,” “*assassin*,” “*shoot*,” “*guns*,” connotatively means powerful poems that could destroy White supremacy. White Americans are the group which possess the highest privileges and power as the result of racialization (Feagin, 2006), therefore Baraka and fellow African Americans desire for social and political revenge. As portrayed in this poem, African Americans wanted to reverse the existing power relation in which Blacks always disadvantaged from. He also believes that African Americans have to do whatever it takes to end their oppression, even if they had to indulge in violence.

Through his other poem – *Black People!* Baraka tries to bring the readers’ attention to the chaos during the urban uprising in a lot of Black ghettos in America during the 1960s. This poem was written in 1966 and used as one of the evidences in Baraka’s sentencing for weapon possession in January 1968. Leon W. Kapp – the judge during Baraka’s trial said that what Baraka wrote in his poem was “misleading” Black people (Grundy, 2019).

*no money down, no money never,
money don't grow on trees no way, only whitey's got it, make it with a machine,
to control you.
...
Up against the wall mother fucker
this is a stick up! Or: Smash the window at night (these
are magic actions) smash the windows daytime, anytime, together,*

let's smash the window drag the shit from in there.

The word “*machine*” denotatively means an apparatus using or applying mechanical power with a definite function performing a particular task, while connotes the idea of how easy it is for White to gain income. In this poem Barak mentions the unequal distribution of wealth between Blacks and Whites in United States. Black people in a lot of urban cities in United States still had to live in such a terrible socioeconomic condition in the post-segregated America. Although official segregation was formally end in 1964, Black people were still facing the same issues. These include inadequate educational and recreation facilities, poor housing, high prices, police brutality, as well as high rate of unemployment (Wallenfeldt, 2011).

The clause “*smash the window at night*” and “*drag the shut from in there*” gives an image of a looting. The numerous riots that happens in lots of urban cities in America during the 1960s often involved the looting and burning of mostly properties owned by White people in Black neighborhood (Wallenfeldt, 2011). The property destroyed during these riots worth up to tens of millions of dollars, not to mention hundreds of lives that were lost in this outbreaks of violence (Wallenfeldt, 2011). The era where rebellion takes place was described as the time when people who usually respected the law only because they were forced to do so had a change to be free and act upon the law as they thought it should be (Grundy, 2019). For Baraka these incident – the chaos, destruction, and the murders of Afro-Americans during the rebellion were sufficient reason for Black people to indulge in violence against Whites.

Baraka mentions African American pride of Black culture as well as having African ancestry in *Ka’Ba*. Written in 1969, this poem was meant to destroy the negative image of Blacks, and to reinforce the unification within Blacks community.

*We are beautiful people
With African imaginations
full of masks and dances and swelling chants
with African eyes, and noses, and arms
though we sprawl in gray chains in a place
full of winters, when what we want is sun.*

In this poem, Baraka urges Black people to raise from the racial oppression. The phrase “*grey chain*” is associated with the enslavement that African American ancestor went through in the past, where it was used to break their spirit and made them felt less than a human (Feagin, 2006). “*Winter*” means adversity, while “*sun*” refers to freedom. These two contradictory words indicates that African Americans’ lives were always filled with hardship and struggle, when what they want was freedom and equality. It is stated in the poem that although African Americans are suffering and sometimes fail to fight for their rights, they still worthy and valuable, and that nothing could bring them down.

“*Mask*” denotatively means a covering for all or part of the face, “*dance*” means move rhythmically to music, and “*chant*” denotes say or shout repeatedly in a singsong tone. “*Mask*,” “*dance*,” and “*chant*” are associated to African American culture. These words reflect the idea that African Americans have a rich culture and tradition influenced by their ancestry from the land of greatness – Africa. Through *Ka’Ba* Baraka mentions as well that Afro-Americans need to be proud of having African ancestry within themselves. Africa has made them become a distinctive human being. This part of the poem was meant to destroy the stereotypes of Black people who often said to be inferior race, lazy, unintelligent, and incompetent (Schafer, 2008). Through this poem Baraka states that African Americans have their own uniqueness as they own a very rich culture. Thus, they must be proud of their own race as well as have a sense of belonging to African culture.

4. Conclusion

Even though both poets lived years apart from one another, Dunbar and Baraka as African American dealt with the same issue – racial oppression. Through the use of particular signs in their poems, Dunbar and Baraka speak up about the ill-treatments directed to Afro-Americans as well as the injustice that occurred in United States. Dunbar in his poems, uses other entities such as “*mask*,” “*caged bird*,” “*cruel bars*,” “*ship*,” and “*rope*” to imply the meaning in his poem and to draw people’s attentions to the oppression that happened toward Blacks during the Post-Reconstruction era or when Jim-Crow first governed American society. While Baraka on the other hands, uses a relatively direct diction to capture the miserable condition of Afro-Americans in the mid-twentieth century – during

the raising of Civil Right Movement up to the post-segregated America. These include the mentioning of specific names and geographical references, words related to Afro-American like “Africa,” “Black,” “White,” not to mention the use of slang words as well as derogatory terms to address White oppressor such as “shit,” “bullshit,” “mother fucker,” and “whitey.”

Moreover, the analysis of the selected poems indicates that despite the fact that Black residents have achieved formal equality through the Civil Right Acts in 1964, significant racial oppression persists. Afro-Americans had to deal with oppression during and after the segregation era. The fact that both poets still talking about the same matter indicates the long-term impact of racial oppression. Therefore, racial oppression is considered as an ongoing struggle throughout African American lives. Through their poems, Paul Laurence Dunbar and Amiri Baraka also encourage African Americans to establish racial pride within themselves for they have been degraded through racial oppression by White ruling race.

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