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Jean Toomer's "Cane" or the Search for Racial Identity

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Abstract

Jim Crow and the continuing supremacist policies that characterized America of the 1920's considered black people as savages, and placed them, accordingly, at the bottom of the social scale, next to apes. White writers of the era, influenced by the segregationist policies adopted by White America, placed African Americans on the periphery in their literary works. Consequently, the African American writers felt a great need to deconstruct the negative images of their people as drawn by their white counterparts, and try, instead, to make a more authentic representation of their people. In the present article, we will analyze the way Jean Toomer has interrogated, in his novel *Cane* (1922), the myth upon which racism and the subjugation of black people in America was built. We will also see how the African American writer has reconstructed history from an African American point of view.

Key words: African American - identity - myth - racism – subjugation

As a black-American man of letters, Jean Toomer was among the important individuals who struggled to come to terms with racial issues that affected his sensibility. He wrote for self-assertion at a time when darkness of skin and African physical features had long been associated by whites with depravity, stupidity, and immorality. Questions of racial identity, and racial prejudice were the core concerns of the young novelist. He grew to understand that the prejudices he suffered were deeply rooted in the social and intellectual soil of western culture. Accordingly, one of his ongoing concerns in his novel *Cane* (1922) had been to define the Black's situation in American society. The search for an identity for the black people necessitated the rediscovery of their heritage. This heritage was to serve as a justification for a new vision of the self. The quest for Negro identity, then, was to find one's roots in the homeland, the South, and acknowledge the painful and traumatic experiences in black history as one's own, without fear or shame. In his novel *Cane*, Jean Toomer confronts and questions the myth upon which racial supremacy is based, wherein the white race is constructed as superior—mentally, morally, and otherwise—, while blacks are constructed as inferior and often condemned to a life of slavery and servitude. In *Cane*, this quest for identity is textualized as the subject of longing, bereavement, and pain. Most compellingly, it is conflated with desires for ancestral communion.

In fact, whites were, for centuries, the exclusive authors of literary narratives concerning the black people in America. These narratives were united by representations of blackness in a stereotypically degrading and dehumanizing way that reinforced the position of African

American people as 'Others' to the whites' identity, social standards and values. These representations were instrumental in defining the identity of the African Americans as essentially different and inferior to the established White norms. They were used as tools to subjugate the black 'Other'. Racial biases developed, as a consequence, and were to remain a prominent influence in the collective imagination of the whites even in the presence of contrary evidence.

These negative connotations and stereotypes affected deeply the African American people. They lasted for centuries and were almost impossible to get rid of. Rather than feeling compelled to accept white values, the writers of the Black Renaissance encouraged fellow blacks to embrace their blackness as a positive affirmation. They also developed an image of essentially black character. As a result, black became, not a derogatory label, but a symbol through which African American people could assert themselves, take pride in and work towards rebuilding the future they envisaged for themselves and their own race. They maintained the division between blacks and whites but reversed the dichotomies as they assigned positive status to all that was black and denounced the white values that had 'Othered' them. New representational techniques were adopted to depict African Americans as subjects of their own discourse. The African American authors employed the narrative form as a tool for asserting themselves and deconstructing white values and norms that have 'Othered' them.

Accordingly, Toomer's *Cane* opens with a call to the land of origins, to the South with its fading black culture. The poem "Song of the Son" appeals to the sense of cultural heritage, and articulates responsibility to that heritage. In the poem, there is a stress laid on the fact that with rapid cultural changes, much of black culture is threatened. Moreover, the essence of authentic black life can easily be corrupted by the influence of a growing industrialism, and the black people would not be able to resist too long the pervasive and seductive influence of the North. That is why the sons have to catch some of the beauty of the Southern black culture while it still exists. However, to be able to understand and appreciate their southern cultural roots, and to become receptive to their past, the sons must first do away with their external symbols of separation mainly attached to the white cultural values that they have assimilated at the expense of the traditional values of black community.

One of the South's sons who have been seduced by the North's materialism, and who are reluctant to go back to the land of their forefathers is Ralph Kabnis, around whom the action of section three of Toomer's novel revolves. Despite his personal reservations, Kabnis undertakes a spiritual and physical journey from North to South in search of his identity. Kabnis is a Northern Negro with a Southern ancestry but who rejects any connection to his heritage. Western conceptions of individualism and materialism inhibit him from developing a viable sense of black identity. The American environment in the South during the slave era has reinforced in the black Americans feelings of shame and repulsion about their African heritage. Kabnis is fragmented and alienated from his cultural roots; for him, African-American identity is an elusive and ephemeral thing. His sole ideological focal point is a crippling sense of racial inferiority, worsened by the sense of lack of cultural heritage.

Thus, spiritually impoverished and physically alienated from self and community, Kabnis remains throughout the story locked within his private fears, unable to achieve the inner

strength needed to face his internal tensions. Kabnis, in fact, stands for the contemporary black man caught between two worlds. His fragmented soul moves between the post-slavery South and the lure of the industrialized North with no avail. He experiences a sense of inner dividedness which refuses to go away and which causes him to feel as if he is other than himself. In order to attain spiritual life and unity of soul, Kabnis has to break away from the engulfing white culture and accept all the aspects of his race. However, such an acceptance is not an easy move for it must include the pain and suffering of the past along with its beauty. Thus, Kabnis experiences impotence and uncertainty in the land of his forefathers. He is unwilling to embrace the pain and suffering that have become an inseparable part of his heritage.

Kabnis is depicted as a fragmented individual who struggles to give primacy to his mind and spirit over his body, "I've got to get myself together", "Come, Ralph, old man, pull yourself together." (Cane, 85) However, all his efforts are futile since he feels trapped in the South, chained like a slave in prison. He thinks of the place where he is as a "mud-hole" or a "mud-hole trap". He can neither leave nor accept his fate. His psychological situation is one of turmoil and rage. Kabnis's state of mind, in fact, is similar to that of his creator, Jean Toomer when he first visited Georgia. In his later writings, the writer confesses that : "Life had me in a knot, hard and fast. Even in Georgia, I was horribly conflicted, strained and tense... The deep releases caused by my experiences there could not liberate and harmonize the sum of me... In truth, [CANE] was born in an agony of internal tightness, conflict, and chaos"(Kerman& Eldridge, 1987, p.100).In the novel, Kabnis's failure to achieve the self-integration he is seeking is rooted in the culture of dominance that initially produced slavery, and later a racial hierarchy that constructed black people as a race of bodies valued only for their market value in the southern economy. The racist culture that emphasized the representation of the blacks as material bodies deprived them of minds and rational intellects, representing them as "less intelligent, barely human, and incapable of grasping even the most basic concepts of the English language" (Fontenot, 2003, p. 133). Chester J. Fontenot, Jr. in his article, "Du Bois's 'Of the Coming of John', Toomer's 'Kabnis' and the Dilemma of Self-Representation" explains that the mind/ body binary is rooted in Christianity and the European Enlightenment spirit. He states:

This mind/body binary is grounded in Christianity since it first evolved from the Apostle Paul's assertion that Christians must mortify the flesh in order to achieve spiritual purity and was later refined by St. Augustine who, in his Confessions, argues that the body is sinful and must be negated in order to reach spiritual communion with God. This body/spirit binary gives rise to the body/mind paradigm, since the European Enlightenment, heavily influenced by Christianity, held that the intellect endowed Europeans with the ability to deny the body, resist its natural carnal nature, and impose the order of human agency on an object that resists such restrictions. Conversely, the balance of mind and body indicated the inability to control the body as material subject; it was perceived as a sign of intellectual weaknesses, cultural backwardness, and savagery. (Fontenot, 2003, 132)

Kabnis, in the novel, is so overburdened by the dominant culture brought with him from the North that he seems deprived of all the vitality that typifies the people of the South. He is unable to face a history of suffering and an ancestral memory of agony and pain. Unable to surmount the confusion placed in his mind by the fragmented tropes of racist discourse, Kabnis's sense of self-worth is thwarted.

Kabnis wishes to write poetry as he sees that black people in the South are able to transcend adversity and darkness through artistic expression, mainly music. He feels that through poetry he can cope with evil and transcend his painful past. "God, if I could develop that in words...if I, the dream (not what is weak and afraid in me) could become the face of the South. How my lips would sing for it, my songs being the lips of its soul." (Cane, 83-84) He delves into his racial heritage for sources of inspiration but discovers that he cannot write poetry, not yet. In fact, Kabnis is unable to write poetry because he rejects the soul as the core of black identity. He considers that the black people should take direct action against racism instead of being a "preacher-ridden race. Pray and shout. They're in the preacher's hands...And the preacher's hands are in the white man's pockets." (Cane, 90) Kabnis can neither represent himself from the point of view of his own cultural traditions nor free himself from the tropes of the mind/body binaries. To transcend this cultural assault of the black man as a fractured, incomplete, and inauthentic being, Kabnis has first to realize where he is and who he is. In fact, as Todd Lieber expresses it so well in his article, "Design and Movement in Cane", Kabnis's internal conflict is:

[the] conflict between two life-styles and systems of value, that of the South, which Toomer associates with the "soul of slavery" and to which his being responds, and that of the North, the industrial, white culture that threatens to create an unbreachable gap between the black man and his world as it destroys the inherent value of his racial heritage. The two are juxtaposed at virtually every point: the North is cold and passive, the South warm and full of emotion; sexual sterility and perversion are opposed to sexual consummation, cynicism to faith, transience to endurance, and spiritual death to the possibility of spiritual resurrection through an acceptance of self and race. (Lieber, 182)

Although Kabnis has returned to his native soil in the South in search of a communion with the heritage of his racial past, he chooses to resist being affected by racial experience. The pain and suffering of the racial past continue to exist as an immediate reality, and he is not yet ready to face and accept them as part of his heritage. "Denial is his refuge, and throughout the story Kabnis is never able to accept his situation, others, the South, or himself" (Helbling, 1999, p. 142). His position of denial is embodied in his rejection of the emotionalism of the black church. His reaction to the black woman's emotional frenzy in the church indicates his tendency to 'other' his own people. "that stuff gets to me. . . Couldnt stand the shouting, and thats a fact. We dont have that sort of thing up North. We do, but, that is, someone should see to it that they are stopped or put out when they get so bad the preacher has to stop his sermon for them" (Cane, 91). In *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism* (1998), Angela Y. Davis shows the importance that music had in the life of black slaves. The latter used music to evoke conditions and situations too sorrowful for words to articulate. Music was, in reality, the only means left to them to express their deeper feelings and emotions when everything else, from

customs and traditions to religion and language were taken from them. Davis states in this context:

Of all the art forms associated with Afro-American culture, music has played the greatest catalytic role in awakening social consciousness in the community. During the era of slavery, Black people were victims of a conscious strategy of cultural genocide, which proscribed the practice of virtually all African customs with the exception of music. (pp.200-201)

Kabnis's distance from the blues and the songs of the black community becomes the measure of his cultural and spiritual alienation. Kabnis consistently rejects markers of race; even those that others have found empowering. He rejects all that the South has to offer. He rejects African-American worship and music, and he rejects any connections with the southern blacks and with slavery. In fact, Kabnis's position indicates that he privileges his mind over the emotiveness attributed to the black body. As such, he places a psychological and physical distance between himself and the people in the town. "Seems as if they cant control themselves out in th world; they cant control themselves in church." (Cane, 91) Eric Sundquist(2006)states that "those who disdain the spirituals are not those who are "still too close" to the conditions of slavery but rather the post-emancipation generation, those who hope they have escaped the stigma of slavery or who aspire to white middle-class values" (p.2). Through his negative reactions, Kabnis shows that he has interiorized the others' view of himself.

In the novel, Kabnis is offered three alternative attitudes to adopt toward his past. These attitudes are represented by the three men Kabnis is going to meet during his stay in Georgia. Halsey, Hanby, and Lewis are three Southern people of an older generation than have fixed attitudes and positions towards their race history. Through his interactions with the three men, Kabnis has to choose which attitude of the three men fits best his own convictions. The first alternative presented to Kabnis is the school principal Hanby who asserts his power over black people while bowing to white men "without ever completely humbling himself". Hanby, in fact has been absorbed into the white frame of reference, accepting the position of inferiority in which they have put him. Hanby's main concern is to make black men as "white" as they can by aping the white people's thoughts and behaviour. He tells Kabnis:

The progress of the Negro race is jeopardized whenever the personal habits and examples set by its guides and mentors fall below the acknowledged and hard-won standard of its average member. This institution, of which I am the humble president, was founded, and has been maintained at a cost of great labor and untold sacrifice. Its purpose is to teach our youth to live better, cleaner, more noble lives. To prove to the world that the Negro race can be just like any other race (Cane, 186)

Hanby, in fact, represents the black people's difficulty in countering the negation of their self-worth by the white community that continues to see them through nineteenth century racist discourse. He has internalized the stereotypes that depict his people as inferior and uncivilized, and is ready to accept the role of the racialized other. Because violence is erratic and unpredictable, Hanby has developed a mode of behavior that allows him to avoid violence or at least to minimize its effects. Rather than confront racial issues, Hanby tries to take

advantage of the few opportunities offered to him, even in the midst of oppression and segregation.

Fred Halsey represents a second and more worthy alternative to Kabnis than Hanby. He is a dignified artisan who takes pride in his work and refuses to be humbled by Hanby. But while Halsey is courageous and dignified, he is not above bowing before whites too. In the same way as Hanby, though to a lesser degree, Halsey has been absorbed into the conception of reality put forth by the Southern whites. He embraces black subjecthood, working with his hands and rejecting the idea of higher education for blacks. He appropriates the language of the nineteenth century racist discourse that asserts that higher education is improper for the black people because it disrupts the racial hierarchy that insists on the superiority of whites and servility of blacks. Halsey is convinced that the Whites have made a social construct of the black subject as a brute and savage whatever his class, social status, physical appearance, or intellectual capacities. This belief is reinforced by Layman's remark to Kabnis when the latter implied that the white men would never lynch someone like himself, Layman or Halsey by saying: "Nigger's a nigger down this way, Professor. An only two dividins: good and bad. An even they aint permanent categories. They sometimes mixes um up when it comes tlynchin. I've seen um do it." (Cane, 89)

Halsey is firmly rooted in his place and is satisfied to be there. His thoughts describe well his character, "Give me th work and fair pay an I aintaskinnothin better. Went over-seas an saw France; an I come back. Went t school; but there aint no books whats got th feel t them of them there tools. Nassur. An I'm atellin y." (Cane, 200-201) Halsey's position is, in fact, coupled with a sense of homelessness born out of the feeling of being persecuted in the country where he lives as a victim of the legacy of racism and slavery. Although he is aware of the injustice and segregation perpetuated against his people, he is not willing to take any 'risky' positive action to change the situation. He conforms remorselessly to the white man's racist system simply because he does not believe in any possible improvement for his people.

Of the three propositions presented to Kabnis, Lewis is the only one who has rejected black subjecthood and retained the pride and dignity of his manhood. "ain't bowed t none of them. Nassur. T nairy a one of them nairy an inch nairy a time. An only mixed when he was good an ready." (Cane, 98) Lewis is unwilling, even unable to behave according to the rules and disciplines dictated by the white majority in the South. He alone has a sense of the importance and value of race consciousness and of the black heritage. Like Kabnis, Lewis is a Northern black intellectual who has come South. But unlike Kabnis, Lewis has forged a strengthened sense of identity by confronting the pain and suffering of the past. Described on several occasions as Christ-like, Lewis is proud of his black heritage. In fact, the three different characters, Hanby, Halsey and Lewis present different views on the African American dilemma, whether to accept the white supremacist values or preserve one's African heritage. Through these three characters, Toomer exposes the complexity of the choice proposed to Kabnis, whether to cherish his ancestral roots or submit to the white values. At another level, Hanby, Halsey and Lewis's attitudes towards their past are exemplified in the novel in their attitudes and reactions to Old Father John, an old black man who lives in a cellar below Halsey's workshop. Father John stands as a link between past and present, a living illustration of the past and a prophetic warning of the difficulties of the future. Father John's haunting

presence is representative of the black man in his contemporary state, caught between two worlds. The old man, a bridge from past to present, passes judgement on the condition of black people in a world that has systematically denied them access to a decent life and that perpetrates the myth to exclude them. He reveals a fundamental truth about American culture through his lamentation that white people have made the Bible lie.

According to Father John, the great sin of the whites was in their distorted interpretation of the Bible that was made in order to secure slavery to the whites and exclusion to the blacks¹. Because of this 'lie', black people accept an inferior role, and lose the ability to make poetry of living. Delia Jarrett-Macauley explains this exclusion of black people from 'humanity' by stating that from the middle of the sixteenth century the African's skin colour was seen in a negative way. "The concept of Blackness was equated with sin and flirtatiousness. Indeed Blackness was the antithesis of 'whiteness'. 'Whiteness' symbolized purity, virginity, virtue, beauty, beneficence and God. In contrast Blackness connoted filthiness, sin, baseness, ugliness, evil and the devil"(Macauley, 1996, p.6). Kabnis himself is an example of what can happen when a black man is filled with self-doubt and cannot accept the ambiguity and complexity of his race's history. By negating Christianity, considering it as a religious system that has failed to generate social justice and serve the interests of black people in their attempt to represent themselves through the tropes of sacred discourse, Kabnis loses contact with the positive aspects of his own culture.

Father John deconstructs the white people's myth by stressing the fact that black people were enslaved not because they were savages and lacking civilization but rather because the white people were greedy. By reinterpreting the origins of slavery, Father John seeks to reverse the sins of the past and turn the young people from fragmented beings in search of themselves and their origins into strong people powerfully resisting white oppression. Through his interpretation of the past, Old father John aims at reconstructing and redirecting the black people's faith in their spirituality. According to him, the past should be visited and accepted in order to forge a future. Through the interpretation of Father John, there is no idealization or romanticising of the past as such actions are akin to denying reality. Rather, there is a legacy of oppression, violence and subjugation that should be confronted so that a pathway to the future could be forged.

Both Hanby and Halsey are unaware of the significance of the old man. The two men's inability to assert their identity as upwardly mobile black subjects leads them to view him simply as an unpleasant memory that is best kept buried and concealed and discussed as little as possible. Lewis, on the other hand, is aware of the importance of Father John. Of the three men, Lewis is the only one who has a full sense of communion with him.

Lewis, seated now so that his eyes rest upon the old man, merges with his source and lets the pain and beauty of the South meet him there. White faces, pain-pollen, settle downward through a canesweet mist and touch the ovaries of yellow flowers. Cotton-bolls bloom, droop. Black roots twist in a parched red soil beneath a blazing sky. Magnolias, fragrant, a trifle futile, lovely, far off...His eyelids close. A force begins to heave and rise (Cane, 214 -15).

Lewis draws strength and sustenance from the old man. Father John, in fact, empowers Lewis by providing a sense of pride that could pierce the myths and lies that had grown around the

antebellum period. Thanks to Father John, Lewis comes to the realisation that the problem with African-American culture and identity is not African-America's lack of heritage, but rather the refusal of white America to acknowledge the validity of that heritage. It is through this old, blind prophet that Lewis receives spiritual enlightenment and renewal.

Old Father John might bring about the spiritual healing of Kabnis too, but he is scorned and rejected by the young man. To Kabnis, Old Father John "like a bust in black walnut", is merely a "tongue-tied shadow of the old", a symbol of the hell he wants to forget and disown. In her analysis of the relationship between Kabnis and the old man, Susan L. Blake comes to the conclusion that, "Kabnis is both fascinated by and abusive of Father John because the mute old man represents all that he both needs and fears. Father John is the incarnation of the silence of the universe that torments a man who cannot depend on himself"(in *Critical Evaluation* , p. 209). However, for Kabnis, the possibility remains of resurrection through an acceptance of the past that is represented by the old man. The choice that Kabnis must make is put to him explicitly by Lewis. Referring to the old man, he says to Kabnis: "Black Vulcan? I wouldnt say so. That forehead. Great woolly beard.

Those eyes. A mute John the Baptist of a new religion – or a tongue-tied shadow of an old." (Cane,211) Lewis, in fact, is giving Kabnis the choice between accepting his racial heritage, and thus reawakening the sustaining, spiritual force of the racial past, or rejecting it and letting the black people's heritage die an impotent and meaningless death.

The main difficulty for Kabnis about the truth stated by Old father John lies not in recognition but acceptance of the past with all its suffering and degradation. In fact, Kabnis lacks the necessary strength for such an acceptance. Lewis reaches out spiritually toward him, encouraging him, but Kabnis decisively rejects him.

There is a swift intuitive interchange of consciousness. Kabnis has a sudden need to rush into the arms of this man. His eyes call, "Brother." And then a savage, cynical twistabout within him mocks his impulse and strengthens him to repulse Lewis. His lips curl cruelly. His eyes laugh. (Cane, 191 -92)

Kabnis refuses to accept the old man as anything but an 'old black fakir'. He does not even want to admit that his blood is related to Old Father John's, a former slave's: "he reminds me of that black cockroach over yonder. An besides, he aint my past. My ancestors were Southern blue bloods." (Cane, 217). In his desire to distinguish and differentiate himself from Old Father John and from lower class blacks, Kabnis insists that his ancestors were southern blue-blooded upper-class blacks who could have passed for whites. But Lewis mocks Kabnis's denial stating that there is no much difference between blue and black especially for the white people.

In the final part of the novel, Kabnis comes closest to confronting the truth made up of distortions which both black and white people have accepted. Although he remains till the end contemptuous of Father John and unwilling to hear him, Kabnis slowly comes to realize the beauty of a culture from which he had earlier hoped to dissociate himself. As the novel closes, there is a clear sign of hope for healing, and a full, positive self-acceptance in the future.

Kabnis wears the old robe which hangs on the wall, an object that suggests the dignity of the past and also the possibility of deliverance. It may also suggest an ability to write poetry for Kabnis. Indeed, as he leaves the cellar where he spent the previous night, "Light streaks through the iron-barred cellar window [...] the sun rises. Gold-glowing child, it steps into the sky and sends a birth song slanting down dust streets and sleepy windows of the southern town. (Cane, 239) By embracing the aspects of race and historicity, Kabnis holds a promise of liberation from the entrapments of the past.

As has been argued, Jean Toomer, through his novel *Cane*, tries to bring to life a history of the black people that has been buried under centuries of dust and neglect, hidden in the murky corners of History. By bringing it to light, he emphasizes that black culture is strong enough to surmount temporary degradation, and that imprisonment or denial cannot suppress the strength of Black Americans. The rising of a new sun at the end of the novel symbolizes the rebirth and resurrection of the Negro spirit.

Notes:

(1) One of the nineteenth-century ideas that justified American slavery was the Biblical allusion to Noah's cursed son, Ham, who was said to be the forefather of Africans.

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