Black Americans’ discrimination and Segregation Contextualized: An Exploration of George Schuyler's Black No More

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Abstract: In exploring George Schuyler's Black No More, I have discovered how black American characters are mocked, insulted, humiliated, rejected, and victimized by their white counterparts in the United States because of their blackness. This blackness, the author argues, urges both races to remain separate from each other in public places and in transportation where the front seats are exclusively reserved to Whites. The transgression of these laws by Blacks leads them to a severe punishment. The author's incorporation of such discrimination and segregation into Black No More evidences the historical dimension of this work of fiction.

Keywords: Blacks, Whites, Discrimination, Segregation, Historical dimension.

Introduction

Published in 1931, George Schuyler's Black No More is about a young black man named Max Disher who is rejected by a racist white girl, Helen Givens. Because of his black skin color, Max Disher's demand to dance with Givens is rejected. Then, informed of Dr. Crook man’s “Black-off machine treatment”, Disher relies on it not only to gain Helen’s Givens’t heart, but more generally to integrate the American society. After his bleaching process, he changes his name into Matthew Fisher to avoid suspicions from Whites about his racial belonging. This new identity makes him consider himself as a new-born person in American society. But he is later on disillusioned, because his bleaching process does not meet his expectations. The expressions “discrimination” and “segregation” are, in their essence, linked to black characters’ experience of rejection in the United States. For, the novel portrays how these characters are mocked, insulted, humiliated, and victimized by their white counterparts because of their blackness.

The choice of Black No More for this paper is especially linked to this Blacks’ sorrowful experience of racism on the American soil. Joseph Mills who first scrutinized it argues that “in many ways, Black No More demonstrates satire’s democratic potential. Mockery becomes the great leveler, and by ridiculing all, the novel calls into question racial and class hierarchies” 1. Mill’s description of the “Black No More World’s atmosphere” echoes what Obama calls “the spiral of history” (Obama, quoted by Stein: 2011, 2). For, while Blacks plead for racial reconciliation, Whites challenge it by restricting the fundamental rights of Blacks as human beings, because they are black. Schuyler's reconstruction of this challenge urges me to put the following question: Why are black American characters treated as second zone citizens by their white counterparts in Georges Schuyler's Black No More? The author's reference to their rejection, victimization, and forced separation from white Americans pushes me to hypothesize that they are treated as such just because of their black skin color.

As the text is a historical account of Blacks’ experience in the United States, I find it necessary to resort to the New historicism, for it concerns, as Kar argues, “with the analysis of the relationship between the historical circumstances and our own” (Kar: 1995,76). This means that this approach helps me establish the interplay between fiction and history in Black No More.

Two main points are discussed in this paper. The first deals with the memory of racial discrimination. The second is the reference to racial segregation.

1. The memory of racial discrimination

Racial discrimination is any form of unequal treatment of individuals viewed as inferior because of the color of their skin, or racial origins. This racist view is exactly what George Schuyler portrays in Black No More wherein black characters undergo different forms of mistreatment from their white counterparts. The author’s endeavors to account for such a sorrowful practice are evident when he shows how Whites look at Blacks as weak people,
unable to resist the hard moments of American life. They even state that Whites are the only people to stand firm in the defense of their rights and rejoice from the wealth of the American economy. This means that when Whites claim for their human and civil rights and fight to defend America, Blacks remain inactive, because they are not full American citizens:

He reminded them that they were men and women; that they were free, white and twenty-one; that they were citizens of the United States; that America was their country as well as Rockefeller’s; and they must stand firm in the defense of their Rights as working people (…). He insinuated that even in their midst there probably were some Negroes (…). Such individuals, he insisted, made poor union material because they always showed their Negro characteristics and ran away in crisis (BNM, pp. 94-95).

This passage evokes some characteristics of Blacks’ exclusion from the American society. For, when the author writes that “America was their country as well as Rockefeller and they must stand firm in the defense of their rights as working people”, he simply means that, in the United States, he who wants to be a true American citizen should defend his country. This view is even shared by Willie, a black character in Alex Haley’s Mama Flora’s Family who argues during the Second World War: “I joined the Army to defend my country, and until they let me fight, I ain’t a real American” (Haley: 1999, 238). One notices here that Schuyler’s novel establishes with other texts what Kristeva has characterized as “an absorption of a text by another”. A text, he argues, “is a transformation of another” (Kristeva, quoted by Delacroix and Hallyn: 1994, 115). In fact, there is no evidence that what is written in the novel is history, but the portrayal of events, I think, could happen, and which I refer to as “likeness to truth”.

This likeness to truth is, in a certain way, viewed through black characters’ discrimination in the novel when the author describes them as lower-class individuals, especially black men who cannot approach any white woman in the United States because of their blackness. This conception makes them reject any love relationship with black men, fearing to give birth to “colored children” which is, for Whites, a shame to their race. This means that any attempt of a black man’s love affair with a white woman cannot stand, because based just on financial interests. Schuyler demonstrates such a love through Max Disher, the protagonist, who buys a new outfit and pays the rent on three-room apartment for his white girlfriend, Minnie. But this does not prevent her from showing herself off before her partner because of her white skin color which, she thinks, is superior to the black one:

Women are mighty funny (…) especially yallah women. You could give them the moon and they wouldn’t appreciate it. That was probably the trouble; he’d given Minnie too much. It didn’t pay to spend too much on them. As soon as he’d bought her a new outfit and paid the rent on a three-room apartment, she’d grown uppity. Stuck on her color, that’s what the matter with her (BNM, p. 1).

As it can be seen, what the author describes here is black Americans’ experience of racial discrimination through their love affairs with white women who, far from seeing them as true partners with whom they may form a family, end up rejecting them for the simple reason that they are black. This rejection brings evidence that Blacks are losers in their love adventures with white women who use them as tools to swindle money. This means that the attempt of black men to satisfy their white partners, be it with presents or through sexual intercourse likely brings disillusionment, because white women are not ready to share life with them. For, these white women are, as the novel reads, too needy to the extent that they require Blacks to do a lot for them vainly. What makes them behave as such is the value they give to their white skin which is for them symbol of perfection and admiration.

What is worth knowing is that deserving white women for wives by black men in such circumstances is out of question for all white women, because they never appreciate the beauty of their black counterparts. The desire to have them even as girlfriend’s makes black men work so hard and spend too much money for them as a way to handle them: “But the yellow women they found flighty and fickle. It was so hard to hold them. They were so sought after that one almost required a million dollars to keep them out of the clutches of one’s rivals” (BNM, p. 3). This quotation brings evidence that black men have serious problems to have white women as partners for themselves. They often face challenges from white men who find it a humiliation for the white race when their white sisters fall in love with Blacks. But what the reader should know is that if white American women accept black men as boyfriends, it is because they see them not as true lovers, but as their sources of income. White men are true partners on whom they rely, because they belong to the same race. This means that Blacks’ feelings of deep affection for white women are not reciprocal in comparison to those of their white partners. While a black man considers a white woman as his prospective wife, the latter sees him as a servant who has to work and spend money to keep her beautiful. This is seen as an act of ruining one’s life for the welfare of the white man.
Max Disher’s rejection by a white American woman to dance with him, as she replies to his demand, “I never dance with niggers” (BNM, p. 6), echoes all black men’s rejection in the United States. This rejection in love affair is, in fact, a reference to the miscegenation laws which were laws passed by most states that prohibited interracial marriage and interracial relations in the United States: “The term miscegenation was first used in 1863, during the American civil war by journalists to discredit the abolitionist movement by stirring up debate over the prospect of interracial marriage after the abolition of slavery” (Gaines: 1971, 21).

The reading of Schuyler’s Black No More clearly illustrates that the protagonist’s demand to dance with a white lady in the white neighborhood is not only for his pleasure to have a white lady as a lover, but to ban the miscegenation laws and promote racial reconciliation. This means that Max Disher in the novel embodies all black men who engaged in the struggle against the prohibition of interracial relations in the United States. Then the white woman’s refusal just recalls the resistance of Whites to accept such a mixture of blood. This daily struggle of Blacks for their acceptance is certainly what pushed N’zambi-Mikoulou to argue that “in the United States Blacks did not live better days, but hard times” (N’zambi-Mikoulou, et al.: 2016, 1051).

Racial discrimination between black characters and white ones is so excessive that the author continues to account for it through white Americans who consider Blacks as sons and daughters of “Cain”. They even tell them that their ancestors were monkeys that underwent a corporal-human development in the course of history. This means that their ugliness is a legacy from their fore parents who looked like animals. With this belief, they see Blacks as second zone citizens who have to be beaten mercilessly:

Hank Johnson smiled down at the end of his cigar as he thought back over his rather colorful and hectic career. To think that today he was one of the leading Negroes of the world (...) and yet only ten years before he had been working on a Carolina chain gang. Two years he had been toiled on the roads under the hard eye and ready rifle of a cruel white guard, two years of being beaten, kicked and cursed, of poor food and vermin-infested habitations. Two years for participating in a little crap game (BNM, pp. 31-32).

This passage evidences Whites’ cruelty over Blacks who are reduced to nothingness because of their blackness viewed as an abomination in all the sphere of the United States. For, the phrase “two years of being beaten, kicked and cursed” attests of white Americans’ will power over Blacks they still see as beasts which have no right to be protected by the law. The fact that they are beaten, kicked, and cursed by people they share the same nation with, shows that they are not equal to the task of citizenship. Then, this position of inferiority still renders their integration difficult. It is exactly with regard to this Whites’ racist attitude towards Blacks that Willie and his wife, Enerstine in Alex Haley’s Mama Flora’s Family, complain about their children’s fate. For, they believe that their children have come to a world that will reject them like their parents because of their blackness: “They were beautiful, those tiny babies, but he wept because the indignities and injustices the color of their skin would bring to them, and from which he could protect them” (Haley: 1999, 256).

George Schuyler’s efforts to tell the reader about racial discrimination endured by African Americans become so evident when he shows how even black children are not given credit by white Americans, because they regard them as future sources of disturbance in American society. For them, black babies are not human beings, but animals. Giving birth to a black baby is, in this regard, a sign of misfortune; a curse as evidenced by Helen whose baby’s arrival in the world is welcomed with the Doctor’s regret at the hospital:

I am very sorry to have to tell you; (...) that something terrible has happened. your son is very dark, very dark. (...). Now I want to know what you want me to do. If you say so I can get rid of this child and it will save everybody concerned a lot of trouble and disgrace (BNM, p. 151).

Here, one discovers that Whites’ racism takes the form of Blacks’ eradication in the United States. Through the Doctor’s utterance “I can get rid of this child and it will save everybody concerned with a lot of trouble and disgrace”, the reader discovers the white man’s willingness to put an end to the existence of the black race in America. What is shocking is to see how this white Doctor who is supposed to save people’s lives, gets involved in infanticide mortality, not perhaps to save the mother’s life, but because the baby is too dark. These forms of cruel acts tell evidence of the white man’s will to leave America totally white. Like the author, Ernest James Gains in The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman also shows how a black man is whipped and killed in the bush by patrols on his way to Ohio to enjoy freedom: “They beat him, he covered up, but they beat him till he was down” (Gaines: 1971, 21). This white Americans’ cruelty is linked to what Martin Luther King calls “a symptom of a far deeper malady within the American spirit” (King: 1967, 41).
One of the racist behaviors demonstrated in George Schuyler’s *Black No More* is Whites’ consideration of Blacks as an ethnic group which possesses an inferior mentality and morality before the white man. But this consideration is also viewed by Blacks as an insult and rejects it through cynical laughing. Blacks even go further by qualifying them as ignorant people who know nothing about their mental and moral capacities:

The unreasoning and illogical color prejudice of most of the people with whom he was forced to associate infuriated him. He often laughed cynically when some coarse, ignorant white man voiced his opinion concerning the inferior mentality and morality of the Negroes (BNM, p. 42).

As it can be seen, the phrase “the inferior mentality and morality of the Negroes” is very significant, for it shows how white Americans still look at Blacks as “brainwashed children” who have nothing to suggest for the development of the American nation. For them, Blacks have animals’ instinct, and as such, are unable to think appropriately.

In the need to account for racial discrimination, George Schuyler also describes how some black characters who live out of the areas reserved to Blacks undergo rental injustices. While the amount of their rent increases daily or monthly, that of their white neighbors remains the same or sometimes decreases, because they are white. This discrimination shocks Blacks but does not astonish them, because they know that, as a general rule, they pay more than white in every public accommodation:

The mechanic of race prejudice has forced them into the congested Harlem area where, at the mercy of white and black real estate sharks, they had been compelled to pay exorbitant rentals because the demand for housing far exceeded the supply. As a general rule the Negroes were paying one-hundred per cent more than white tenants in other parts of the city for a smaller number of rooms and worse service (BNM, p. 37).

This rental injustice places Blacks as foreigners who have come for a while and are supposed to return to their countries. The problem with Blacks in America is that they are less paid than Whites, but their cost of living is twice higher than that of the latter. The sentence “as a general rule, the Negroes were paying one-hundred per cent more than white tenants” is very meaningful, for it shows not only how Blacks are not equal to their white neighbors, but also indicates how laws are made and voted to prevent them from enjoying life as Whites do. This means that Whites’ injustice endured by Blacks is extolled by both white owners of houses and the white authorities.

Whites’ eagerness to take Blacks for granted because of their blackness even creates confusion between them in the sense that they start suspecting others of being part of the black community. In *Black No More*, the author tells of such a suspicion through Swanson, a white famous worker at the Paradise Mill who becomes totally disappointed to find out that his white kinsmen suspect him of being from the black race. Consequently, he is fired from his job and becomes the enemy of his white counterparts. What is true is that such a suspicion made on him is simply an alibi found by the white Boss of the company to get rid of him at the Mill, because he is the only white worker who often organizes strikes when wages are not payed:

On the street they passed him without speaking and they complained to the foremen at the mill that they didn’t want to work with a niggar. Broken and disheartened after a week of vain effort, Swanson was glad to accept carfare out of the vicinity from one of Matthew’s men who pretended to be sympathetic (BNM, p. 96).

This passage describes the sad atmosphere that prevails between Whites and Blacks in American society. The accusation made on Swanson of being from the black race because of his working talent, is for the white owner of the company a key reason to fire him from his job. For, this reason is welcomed by all white Americans who are supposed to be his professional colleagues. This wrongful attitude of Whites towards Swanson echoes racial conflicts between Blacks and Whites on the American soil, because if Swanson was not seen as a black man, he would not lose his job. It is exactly these forms of racial conflicts that pushed a white pilot during the Second World War to mind the presence of Blacks around his airplane: “*When I fly my airplanes don’t want no Negro round*” (White, J., quoted by Litwack: 2002, 44).

The author’s endeavors to account for Whites’ cruelty over Blacks are nowhere more evident than in the passage where he shows how the people of the Happy Hill use Blacks for sacrifices in their religion. These sacrifices consist in hanging, broiling, and burning them alive. They install a post considered as the landmark of the community through which they sacrifice Blacks. Consequently, Blacks become very rare in the community of the
Happy Hill, because while some of them are killed for Whites’ interest, others have no alternative but to flee far from this community to get rid of the cruelty of the white man:

The offending Ethiopian was either hung or shot and then broiled. Across from the general store and post office was a large iron post about five feet high. On it all blacks were burned. Down one side of it was a long line of nicks made with hammer and chisel. Each nick stood for a Negro dispatched (BNM, p. 166).

This passage attests of Blacks’ victimization by white Americans who see them not as human beings, but as animals. In fact, when the author, for example, writes that “Ethiopian was either hung or shot and then broiled”, he shows the madness of white Americans over Blacks. For, he demonstrates how they are willing to kill a black man because he is black. While some white Americans condemn such an inhuman act, others find it normal to oppress their black counterparts as a way to get rid of them on the American soil: “While the large staff of officials was eager to end all oppressions of the Negro, they were never so happy and excited as when a Negro was barred from a theater or fried to a crisp” (BNM, p. 64). Here, one notices the plight endured by Blacks in the white man’s world because of Whites’ opposition to the conception of mixing races. This opposition is exactly what makes them live in a total separation with their black counterparts, especially in transportations and public places, as shown in the following section.

2. The reference to racial segregation

Viewed as a total and forced separation of people from different races, racial segregation forms a historical core in George Schuyler’s Black No More. In fact, in this novel, black characters are prohibited to live in the white neighborhoods because they are black. While white Americans live in the outstanding parts of the cities of the United States, Blacks are forced to occupy the remote areas of these cities, as a way to remind them of their inferior position in the United States:

He (Max Disher) was moving in the white society now and he could compare with the society he had known has a Negro in Atlanta and Harlem. What a let-down it was from the good breeding, sophistication, refinement and gentle cynicism to which he had become accustomed as a popular young man about town in New York’s Black Belt (BNM, p. 42).

As it can be noticed, the comparison of society the author makes through Max Disher moving within the white city, shows the contrast between Blacks’ living conditions and those of Whites in American society. He uses the words “good breeding, sophistication, refinement, and gentle cynicism” to show the friendly and peaceful atmosphere in the white society. Whereas the expression “Black Belt” is an illustration of the poor Blacks’ living conditions. For, it is associated with the notions of “hell” and “pain” endured by Blacks in a nation ruled by Whites. What is incredible in this matter of segregation is the fact that while Whites are allowed to go to the black society, Blacks are, however, forbidden to be seen in white one. The transgression of such a law by a black American always results in a severe punishment or killing. But, as this injustice is the cause of many riots between Blacks and Whites in the United States, the “Jim Crow Law system” is banned for whitened Blacks who are now allowed to go to places which were of limit: “No more Jim Crow. No more insults, as a white man he could go anywhere, be anything he wanted to be, do anything he wanted to do, be free at last (BNM, p. 8). The author’s mention of “Jim Crow” is a way not only to account for racial segregation, but to recall the historical dimension of the novel. For, one knows that the “Jim Crow” is grounded in the history of the United States. This system which is, in fact, “equal but separate” doctrine is illustrated by the historian Franklin who draws the reader back to the moment of the Second World War when black soldiers were not allowed to board buses before white soldiers: “Black Americans were frequently forced to wait until buses had been loaded with white soldiers before they were permitted to board them” (Franklin: 1947, 396). This quotation evidences that Schuyler was inspired by the history of the United States when writing his novel.

The need to account for historical truth inhabits the author’s spirit to the extent that he continues to evidence racial segregation in public places and transportations. In cinemas, buses, and trains, for example, Blacks are not allowed to share the same seats with Whites. They are prohibited to board trains before Whites. The seats at the bottom of trains and buses are those reserved to them, and those in the front are for Whites. But what one may find more shocking is the fact that Blacks are sometimes forced to give up their seats to Whites when there is no longer room in a public means of transport. Here is how the author presents the shocks from this white Americans’ wrongful attitude towards their black counterparts in American society:
It was better to leave things as they were than to take a chance of being led by some nigger. If a colored gentry couldn’t sit in the movies and ride in the trains with white folks, it wasn’t right for them to be organizing and leading white folks (BNM, p. 96).

The rejection of Blacks in movies and trains as it is portrayed in this passage, recalls racism and segregation that still call into question the American democracy. It is no longer the land of freedom and the pursuit of happiness as proclaimed by the Founding Fathers of the United States, but the land where hatred and other blemishes are promoted. Instead of peace, Whites prefer violence to subjugate Blacks. Schuyler is not alone to denounce this Blacks’ segregation in transportation. For, like him, Killens, too, in And Then We Heard the Thunder, describes it in these terms: “That’s the colored line, the driver said. They get on last. That’s the law” (Killens: 1963, 119). This quotation evidences that racial segregation denounced by Schuyler is not his own invention, but a true fact of the American history. Even though fiction is not history, the portrayal of this incident that may happen in a given society, is a record of a historical fact.

Another form of racial segregation experienced by black characters in the novel is the prohibition made to them to enroll their children in schools exclusively reserved to Whites. While these schools are well built, equipped with didactic materials and crammed with skillful teachers, those reserved to Blacks are traditional and have a lot of untrained teachers whose skills are challenged by Whites. The presence of untrained teachers in Blacks’ schools makes Whites consider their own education as superior to that of Blacks in American society. It is indeed with regard to this consideration that white Americans do not accept to share schools with their black counterparts viewed as inferior individuals not only because of their blackness, but because of the quality of education they receive. This non-acceptance indicates that even though a school belonging to Whites is near a black man’s home, the latter cannot be allowed to enroll his children in it, but has to go miles away where schools are built for them. For, enrolling a black child in a white school means accepting Blacks as equal citizens to Whites. The consequence of the poor Blacks’ learning is that they are not really accepted as educated people, able to hold a suitable occupation in American society: “Shacks and dry goods boxes that had once sufficed as schools for Negro children had now to be condemned and abandoned as unsuitable for occupation by white youth” (BNM, p. 103). “Shacks” and “dry goods boxes” here stand for the way Blacks’ schools are built. They are incomparable to those of Whites which are modern and attractive.

As it can be seen, this segregation establishes an interplay between history and fiction in Schuyler’s novel. For, one sees how the author draws the reader back to some historical facts of segregation in facilities, services, and opportunities in the United States.

Conclusion

At the term of this exploration, one understands that discrimination and segregation form a historical core in George Schuyler’s Black No More. For, the author draws the reader back to Blacks’ experience of rejections, victimizations, and segregation in facilities, services, and opportunities. The white man’s opposition to Blacks’ struggle against miscegenation laws and their oppression over the latter, are illustrations of the nothingness of the black race. The incorporation of the Jim Crow Laws, for example, into this narrative shows how the author has been inspired by the history of Blacks in the United States. This inspiration leads any reader to confess that Black No More is a historiography, that is a discourse on history. George Schuyler has, in this regard, succeeded in fulfilling one of the novelist’s tasks which consists in showing how a work of fiction is inhabited by history.

References