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"Not Now!"[1]—On the Contemporary Relevance of Faulkner's Exploration of the Blacks[*]

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The accession of an African-American Obama to the U.S. Presidency in 2008 is an epoch-making event. The thesis focuses on the current situation of the blacks in U.S. to highlight the prophetic nature of Faulkner, the Nobel Prize winning American novelist's exploration of the blacks throughout his career, namely, the miserable living states of the blacks, racial segregation against the blacks in the sphere of education and religion, racial discrimination against the blacks with regard to civil rights, racial persecution against the blacks in legal cases, and the dependency upon the black leadership to salvage the multi-ethnic nation and so on. The paper comes up with the conclusion that Faulkner is accurate in his prophecy that the savior of the nation, the blacks shall suffer and lead.

Keywords: William Faulkner, Barrack Obama, race, the Blacks, human rights

Introduction

The exploration of the blacks comprises a lasting core concern of Faulkner (1897-1962), the celebrated American Southern novelist, representing a remarkable achievement throughout his career. Analogous to the "pebble and ripple effect" (Faulkner, 1986, p. 210) dramatized of the Sutpens in *Absalom, Absalom!*, the blacks are to the white-dominated America the pebble breaking the still waters. The ever-expanding ripples are but the "watering echo" (ibid) thereof. To date, the blacks still rank among the ever-green subjects of the Southern and American literature. In parallel, ethnical issues never cease to be a sensitive and controversial topic. The year 2008 witnesses a remote but most powerful echo, a black man, Obama, makes the greatest stride in American racial history to be the leader of the nation. However, it is far too early and optimistic to claim the coming true of Martin Luther King's dream in a land free of racial problems. As a matter of fact, the situation of the black masses does not see much reformation.

Racial discrimination still runs rampant in recent years, which serves as a good reminder of the sordid destiny of the variegated blacks portrayed in Faulkner's works. One cannot help wondering how far the

[1] A quote from Issac McCaslin in Go Down, Moses(Faulkner, 2004, p. 339), whose response to his younger cousin Roth Edmonds's mistress, a mulatta Beauchamp's (a branch of the McCaslin blacks) claim for a name of herself and the baby reveals his fear for miscegenation. Here it implies it's far too early to talk about racial equality in U.S..

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African-Americans have gone and how far they still need to go to improve or even justify their existence in the so-called land of promise/ry (my coinage).

Highlights of Recent Major Cases of Racial Discrimination in USA

Despite the substantial progress in civil rights and national policies, racial discrimination in America still lingers as a problem which can not be and should not be evaded. Poverty is colored as before and racial disparities continue to result in socioeconomic disadvantages in recent years. Different ethnic groups represent varied socioeconomic standings and the poverty rate masks considerable gaps between racial groups. Black people and other minorities live at the bottom of the American society[2]. A report issued by the U.S. Bureau of Census on August 26, 2008 reveals that the real median income for American households was 50, 233 U.S. dollars in 2007, while the average for the Black households was only 33, 916 U.S. dollars, roughly 60 percent of that of the White households. According to a research result released by the American National Poverty Center in January 2009, the poverty rate for blacks greatly exceeds the national average, namely, 24.7 percent versus 13.2 percent. What is worse, the economic disadvantage of the group, to some extent, exerts adverse influence on other parts of their life.

In the health sector, the African Americans are more likely to be victims. AIDS poses a potential threat to their lives. The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention made the estimation that in the country 1.3 million people were living with HIV at the end of 2011, with nearly 60 percent as blacks, who represented only 12 percent of the general population and had been disproportionately affected (AVERT). AIDS is now one of the leading causes of death in black women, who are nearly 20 times as likely to be infected as White women (Paulsen, 2011). This is partly due to the undeniable fact that the African Americans live in lower income areas with less likelihood to receive proper education on HIV/AIDS and lack access to adequate and quality healthcare.

Though prohibited by Federal laws, racial discrimination in employment is commonplace. According to statistics from the U.S. Labor Department, the jobless rate for Blacks was 10.6 percent, twice as much as that of the Whites (5.3 percent) (U.S. Department of Labor, 2008). The blacks, as a social minority group, are still confronted with great difficulties in job-hunting. A news item released in *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* on April 15, 2010 was about an African American woman named Matthews, who once sought a job in Waukesha County and met the minimum qualifications, but was denied. Evidence indicated that Waukesha County set invidious standards based on race when screening applicants. In July 2009, the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission found there was reasonable cause to believe black applicants as a class were discriminated against when excluded from consideration for hire. However, the U.S. Department of Justice announced that it would not file a civil rights lawsuit on the issue, without stating any reason for its decision. This case, as a miniature of discrimination and inequality manifested in the employment arena, denotes that the African Americans still have a long way to go to win their own rights.

[2] During the summer vacation in 2006, on a train from Yangzhou (a city in Jiangsu Province, China) to Beijing, I came across Jonathan Lowet (a white man), a Senior Programme Officer on the National Committee on United States-China Relations. At my repeated request for truth concerning the welfare of the blacks in America, he acknowledged that "it is very difficult" for a black in his country.

If racial equality were a compulsory course, a number of U.S. school systems would get a failing grade. Despite decades of successful civil rights advocacy, discrimination and segregation in the education sector persist[3]. *The State of Black America* issued by the National Urban League in 2008 said African Americans' high school graduation rate and college entry rate still lingered at the level of the Whites two or three decades ago. Less African American students get college degrees than the Whites. A research result shows that the black student college graduation rate remains dismally low, at a level of 45 percent, about 20 percentage points lower than that of the whites (*The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*). Racial segregation in schools still remains as a headache. The NEA reports that of all public school students today, nearly half are from families near or below the poverty line and more than 40 percent are students of color, and both populations are concentrated in segregated schools. What is worse, African-American and Latino children are two to three times more likely to be poor than their white counterparts (Zalan, 2014). As a place for cultivation, schools should be a forum that gives full play to "freedom". Therefore, more efforts need to be made in order to abrogate segregation and achieve educational equality and equity.

Racial discrimination in the judicial system is appalling. The U.S. Department of Justice said on June 5, 2008 that jailed Black men were six times as many as the Whites by July 30, 2007. Nearly 11 percent of the Black men between 30 and 34 were in prison. The New York-based *Human Rights Watch* said in a report released in February 2008 that African American youth arrested for murder are at least three times more likely than their white peers to receive life imprisonment without the possibility of parole. *The New York Times* carried a report on May 6, 2008, saying that although most drug offenders are white, 54 percent of the drug offenders sent to prison are black. In 16 states, African Americans are sent to prison for drug offenses at rates between 10 and 42 times greater than the rate for whites. In recent years, some shooting incidents have attracted considerable attention in the U.S. and abroad and sparked vigorous debates about law enforcement's relationship with African-Americans. For example, on August 9, 2014, Michael Brown, an 18-year-old black man, was fatally shot by Darren Wilson, a white Ferguson police officer. It is said that Brown was surrendering; however, Wilson still fired a total of 12 bullets, striking Brown in the front. Though a subsequent federal investigation found that the local police routinely stereotyped and discriminated against African Americans, after long deliberation, a grand jury decided not to indict Wilson for any criminal charges in relation to the incident. The shooting is not an isolated case. Similar incidents include the George Zimmerman case on July 13, 2013, the chokehold death of Eric Garner on July 17, 2014, the shooting of John Crawford III on August 5, 2014, the police shooting of Akai Gurley on November 20, 2014, the shooting of the twelve-year-old Tamir Rice on November 22, 2014. These incidents have received international coverage and touched off heated discussions on police reform, judicial justice, and racial tensions. The recurrent shooting cases indicate that the legacy of historic racial hostility continues to weigh on the present. A FBI report released on October 27, 2008 showed that among the 7,624 hate crime incidents reported in the United States in 2007, 50.8 percent were motivated by racial bias and 62.9 percent of the known offenders were white. Respect and tolerance for cultural and racial diversity are quite necessary. It is important to make joint efforts to dispel racist myths and counter bigoted views.

[3] This reminds me of Dr. Bernard W. Bell. The famous African-American critic indignantly denounced the extant racial discrimination in U.S. in his speech at the 2004 International Symposium on William Faulkner held in Chongqing, China. "Some public institutions, schools in particular in the U.S.", he said, "are more segregated than ever before".

Facts speak louder than words. The aforementioned statistics and cases indicate that America still remains burdened by a racial chasm. Racial disparities in realms such as economy, employment, and education are pervasive. It is high time to courageously face the facts and consequences of *racial discrimination* in the U.S. society in order to fully realize the eternal truths codified centuries ago: "that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness" (United States Declaration of Independence).

Highlights of Faulkner's Blacks[4]

The astounding number of cases of discrimination offers us insights into the core nature of America, the pot in which people mix but are divided. The Blacks are severely maltreated as the marginalized, an undesirable extension of the life of the "Negroes" in Faulkner's works.

In the writer's first novel, *Soldiers' Pay*, Faulkner intimates the hidden reality of Negro life with his portrayal of Southern caste system. In Chapter 4, for instance, he looks into the workers' life:

> The air was sweet with fresh-sawed lumber and they walked through a pale yellow city of symmetrical stacked planks. A continuous line of Negroes carried boards up a cleated incline like a chicken run into a freight car and flung them clashing to the floor, under the eye of an informally clad white man who reclined easily upon a lumber pile, chewing indolent tobacco". (SP 30)

The blacks here represent an object of exploitation. In addition, the Negro "cabins" and "shabby church" (SP 260, 266), though compared favorably to the white mansion and the skeptical rector's church, reveal the blacks' precarious economic situation.

In *Flags in the Dust*, the lost Bayard III seeks refuge with a rural black family in a storm. His arrival coincides with Christmas, which he spends sharing the hesitant generosity of the poor. Even though he is acutely conscious of their "Negro" odour, shabby appearances, meager, unsanitary food, and ramshackle shelter, Bayard experiences the warmth of a family surviving together:

> The stale, airtight room dulled him; the warmth was insidious to his bones wearied and stiff after the chill night. The negroes moved about in the single room, the woman busy at the hearth with her cooking, the pickaninnies with their frugal and sorry gewgaws and filthy candy. Bayard […] dozed the morning away. Not asleep, but time was lost in a timeless region where he lingered unawake and into which he realized after a long while that something was trying to penetrate; watched the vain attempts with peaceful detachment. (FID 393)

Whereas the blacks' positive attitude toward existence is admirable, their frugal living conditions are equally notable.

A similar case occurs in *The Sound and the Fury*. Juxtaposed to the white Compson family are the Gibsons. As "faithful retainers" they represent the Negro in the early years of the South's transition to modernity. In the fictional present, the black line is on the decline too. Males are either dead or gone away, leaving only the 14-year-old Luster, Frony's son prematurely burdened with a mentally-retarded white adult. Dilsey's husband, the superstitious and rheumatic Roskus is dead. Versh and T. P., the two Gibson sons who used to be in charge of the family business have left, one for Memphis and the other rarely seen in the family. Frony, the daughter, helps her mother with the housework and of her husband, we know virtually nothing. Dilsey, commonly acknowledged

[4] Hereafter quotes from Faulkner's works shall be marked with title abbreviations and page number.

to be modeled on the writer's own mammy Caroline Barr, represents a strong emotional and moral force that manages to hold the doomed, decaying white family together. She is kind, self-assured, faithful, courageous and generous but senile.

Through the 14-year-old Luster, we obtain glimpses of the black reality as well. Child as he is, for instance, Luster is saddled with a man-size job beyond his years and that rightfully in the eyes of both the whites and some of the blacks (his grandma, at least). The following dialogue is evidence enough:

> "I got to go to that show, Benjy or no Benjy." Luster said. "I aint going to follow him around day and night both."
> "You going to do just what he want you to, nigger boy." Dilsey said. "You hear me."
> "Aint I always done it." Luster said. "Dont I always does what he wants. Dont I, Benjy."
> "Then you keep it up." Dilsey said. (S&F 68)

What's worse, Luster receives no due pay for his drudgery. His obsession with the lost quarter and the resulting desperate search suggests the difficulty of obtaining another one in spite of his childish boast that "Plenty more where that one comes from" (S&F 16). Jason's offer to sell and then burning two tickets under the painful gaze of Luster reveals the continued enslavement relationship between the two families. For Jason, Luster is an object for exploitation economically and emotionally. The idea of payment to a black boy (the family slave, despite emancipation) is completely foreign to him. Neither does it ever occur to Jason that he should be ashamed of his blatant disrespect for the feeling of (or dehumanizing treatment of) his brother's full-time attendant. The same holds true for the whole black family who shoulder virtually all the responsibilities within and without the family, but who suffer dehumanizing treatment at the hands of their masters.

Nancy in "That Evening Sun" represents a victim of sexual as well as economic exploitation. In the short story, Nancy works "day and night" for "pay," which points up the wretched economic condition of the blacks. We have no way of telling how the Compsons pay Nancy as a laundress and occasional cook, but textual evidence suggests that she is eking out a marginalized livelihood. Her sad, sunken face, her smelly home, and person, make her even more vulnerable to white man's advance for sexual favors. The black Sister Carrie or Jennie Gerhardt, consequentially, had to "remain an unvoiced subject, most often to be found prone, legs spread, lurking in the shadow of a bedroom" (Busia, 1987, p. 3) like the Negro girl in *Light in August*. John Dollard has tersely commented on the financial motive beneath the image: "If the Negro women cannot live on their wages as cooks or maids, they will be more accessible to sexual approaches for money" (Dollard, 1957, p. 152). As a seminal figure, Nancy is not isolated, she prefigures the "womanshenegro" in *Light in August* (Faulkner, 1985, p. 514), Carothers McCaslin's "concubines"—Eunice and Tomasina and Tennie's Jim's granddaughter in *Go Down, Moses*.

Racial prejudice in legal cases gets classic representations in *Light in August* and *Intruder in the Dust*. In both cases, the uniform association of the Negro with inherent criminality well reveals the volatile prejudice whites hold against blacks. To the collective white mind, the psycho-historical connotation of a Negro male is synonymous with murderer and rapist combined. So in the former, soon after the murder is discovered by a countryman, people begin to gather:

> Among them the casual Yankees and the poor whites and even the southerners who had lived for a while in the north, who believed aloud that it was an anonymous negro crime committed not by a negro but by Negro and who knew, believed, and hoped that she had been ravished too: at least once before her throat was cut and at least once afterward.

(LIA 611)

Similarly, when Brown reports on Joe's being a "part nigger" to clear himself of suspicion and to get the reward money, he is also exploiting the officers' prejudice against the blacks. It works miraculously. The shocked sheriff responds with uttering "Nigger?" twice (LIA 470), although on first arrival at the spot, he, as leader and agent of community opinion has cried out almost instinctually, "get me a nigger" (LIA 613-15), beating the one found at hand in an attempt to elicit information about the murder. The marshal reacts more revealingly: "'You better be careful what you are saying, if it is a white man you are talking about,' the marshal says. 'I dont care if he is murderer or not'" (LIA 470). Obviously, he cares less about the crime itself than the possibility of Brown falsely accusing a white man of being black. But very soon, finding the suspect candidate so fitting to the case in point, he jumps to his conclusion: "'A nigger," 'I always thought there was something funny about that fellow'" (LIA 471). Wittenburg thus ironically comments: "In almost parodic fashion, race proves more important than murder and hearsay is quickly accepted as fact" (Wittenburg, 1995, p. 159).

In *Intruder in the Dust*, only after overcoming the titanic difficulty of "growing up in the South" was the child Chick Mallison able to recognize the black man Lucas' humanity and realize the scapegoat nature of the murder case: Lucas may die ""by shameful violence […] not because he was a murderer but because his skin was black"(IID 71). And all this occurs after his intuitive faculties manage to take precedence over his uncle's logic and he begins to inspect "the whole white foundation of the country" (IID 47). The boy rightfully feels indignant at the townspeople who, with their "facelessness," are "fools," and who "wouldn't have to say aloud" that they were wrong for their inveterate prejudice against blacks" (IID 82, 133-34). So Lucas' narrow escape depends on a child's accidental growth, spiritual as well as moral.

Granted, a large number of Faulkner's blacks and the bulk of them serve as servants of long-standing white families. As "faithful retainers" of plantation days, they do not seem to be well aware of their own civil rights, and some are even burdened with their "freedom" with the proclamation of emancipation. This stereotyping tendency on the part of the novelist has provoked critical voices in such critics as Margaret Walker, Darwin T. Turner, James Baldwin, and Alice Walker and so on. They emphasize Faulkner's mixed motives in his characterization of the Blacks. Indeed, few writers have sweated that much over the fiercely conflicting bi-racial society.

Herein lies Faulkner's greatness. He never hesitates to make efforts at breakthroughs, and in his works there are many such precious piercing attempts. As Craig Werner has observed:

> Even when he (Faulkner) fails to comprehend fully the nature of Afro-American signifying—to use a term common in both black folklore and critical theory— Faulkner provides images capable of deconstructing the binary oppositions on which racial privilege depends. Among the most powerful of these images are Sutpen's fights with the slaves, Chick Mallison's initiation in *Intruder in the Dust*, and eloquent silence of Lucas Beauchamp's gold toothpick in *Go Down, Moses*. (Fowler & Abadie, 1986, p. 40)

Indeed, it is characteristic of Faulkner to juxtapose the white and the black in his works. Significantly, the latter often takes the ascendency over the former, a telling indicator of the writer's efforts to subvert the traditional racial views. This shall be the focus of Part III.

The Contemporary Relevance of Faulkner's Blacks

In the majority of Faulkner's works, the blacks form an entity contrapuntal to the whites, a thematic as well

as structural designing. Primarily, blacks make their appearance in the background of the central action and function either in response to the needs of major figures, or in contrast to their vision of life. The fact that the Negroes find themselves invariably in subservient roles establishes the first point. More significantly, they contrast favorably with the whites and in most cases dominate the bi-racial life.

In the climactic Chapter 5 of *Soldiers' Pay*, a dance party unites the elements of the novel and interconnects the characters, effecting a miniature version of the alienated post-war world. More revealingly, a black cornetist and his "indefatigable pack" (SP 174) exercise absolute control over the rhythm and are depicted as launching one invasion after another onto the white dancers.

From *Flags in the Dust* on, the counterpointing of a black and a white family is present in virtually all of Faulkner's fictions. Especially in *The Sound and the Fury*, for instance, by presenting the Gibsons as vital, enduring, faithful, and dominating in symmetrical contrast with the desperate, helpless, faithless, deteriorating Compsons, the writer has learned to make effective use of the Negro in Southern divisive system as an indigenous symbol to highlight his major concern, the disintegration of a family, of a tradition and of a culture. More significantly, the creation of such a strong figure as Dilsey, whom Faulkner described as "much more brave and honest than me"(Meriwether & Millgate, 1968, p. 245) and who manages to keep the disintegrating white family together does convey an implicit message: the suffering subservient blacks shall dominate and lead the whites out of their trouble. At the University of Virginia, the novelist himself observes:

> Quentin's mother wasn't much good and he had an idiot brother, and yet in that whole family there was Dilsey that held the whole thing together and would continue to hold the whole thing together for no reward, that the will of man to prevail will even take the nether channel of the black man, black race, before it will relinquish, be defeated. (Gwyn & Blotner, 1965, p. 5)

Similar attempts appear in *Requiem for a Nun*, where Nancy, the ex-dope, fiend-prostitute-negress is assigned the mission of salvaging the degenerating whites.

Indeed, many of his representative works end with the hope for a future placed in blacks. Only the black line seems to be able to carry on the Compson Saga in *The Sound and the Fury* since the white males are either dead or unable to sire new heirs. In *Go Down, Moses*, the product of miscegenation has the greatest potential of taking over the McCaslin-Edmonds line, since in the fictional present the white line seems to be broken. The same holds true for the Sutpens in *Absalom, Absalom!* At the very end, only the mulatto Jim Bond outlives the demolishing fire on "Sutpen's Hundred" to be the last one in the unnamed wilderness.

In "An Introduction to *The Sound and the Fury*," Faulkner specifically states, "There was Dilsey to be the future, to stand above the fallen ruins of the family like a ruined chimney, gaunt, patient and indomitable" (Faulkner, 1973, p. 414). The life of Faulkner as a citizen represents an extension of his literary exploration of blacks. Though consistently inconsistent, on many a occasion he would declare that the blacks are "better than white men" (Meriwether & Millgate, 1968, p. 210) with their generosity and endurance, and should therefore be entrusted with the future of America and even the world.

Conclusion

To sum up, whatever Faulkner's motive, his claim and his dramatization of the blacks in his many works are highly relevant today. And they do display his fore-sightedness. The United States of America is now under the

leadership of its first black President Obama, who is making great and effective efforts to lead the depressed citizens out of financial recession. One hundred and fifty years ago, the President-in-office's idol Lincoln proclaimed that "this nation cannot endure half slave and half free […]. A house divided cannot stand" (Sundquist, 1983, p. 104). On February 20, 1958, in his "A Word to Virginians," Faulkner claimed that "this nation cannot endure containing a minority as large as ten percent held second class in citizenship by the accident of physical appearance" (Gwyn, 1965, p. 209). Half a century passed, the accident lasts. The black people are still exposed to various forms of racial discrimination. We cannot help wondering how long it will take the nation to live up to Faulkner's wish that "for peaceful coexistence, all must be one thing: either all first-class citizens or all second-class citizens; either all people or all horses; either all cats or all dogs"(ibid). Five hundred years or as Ike McCaslin cried in *Go Down, Moses*, "Maybe in a thousand or two thousand years in America. But not now! Not now!" (GDM 344). So true to Faulkner's prophecy, the blacks shall suffer but lead. President Obama does not get rest of either body or mind owing to great impediments in carrying out his financial as well as medical reforms in addition to the many racial conflict affairs. We seem to visualize a he-Dilsey standing above the fallen ruins of the biracial family like a ruined chimney, gaunt, patient, and indomitable.

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