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The Oversexualization and Sexual Trauma of the Black Woman in the Social Realist Novel:

An Examination of *The Street* and *Go Tell It On The Mountain*

In Ann Petry's *The Street* and James Baldwin's *Go Tell It On The Mountain*, both authors are trying to raise consciousness about social and cultural forces that the black person faces in America, which they attempt to do by using the literary genre of social realism. Social realism, as defined by the Oxford English Dictionary, is "the realistic depiction of contemporary (esp. working-class) life as a means of social or political comment" ("social realism"). In Petry's novel, she follows a young single mother and the struggles she faces being a black woman in Harlem, New York. Baldwin's novel follows a young man's struggle as he proceeds on a journey of self discovery, and follows members of his family and the struggles that they face growing up. Social realism manifests in both books as the authors portray the everyday struggles of the black person to show how society is oppressing them and incite change. However, in trying to show the plight of the black female, the novels depict black woman as being continually oversexualized and sexually abused, a situation that the black women can never escape. Even though the two authors are writing from different gender positions, they offer the same representation of the black female. In both novels, the only image presented of the black female is one where she is continually oversexualized and sexually abused, which ultimately perpetuate the forces working against black women that the novels are trying to fight against.

The recurrent traumatization of black women through oversexualization and sexual abuse becomes a way in which Petry and Baldwin, in trying to portray the suffering of black females, continue the tradition of trapping the black female in an abused role. Both novels attempt to present the social forces that black women are facing, but they are not successful in doing this in a way that combats these forces. In her discussion of Petry's texts in her book *Writing Through Jane Crow: Race and Gender Politics in African American Literature*, Ayesha Hardison believes, "Petry's works problematize the American Dream for both black and white aspirants by deconstructing racial stereotypes of African Americans" (101). Hardison gives *The Street* as an example of how Petry tries to deconstruct racial stereotypes, saying, "Petry challenges stereotypes of black women's hypersexuality" (101). Though Hardison believes that Petry is deconstructing stereotypes, like black women being hypersexual; in actuality, Petry is perpetuating these stereotypes. This is mainly evident in the protagonist Lutie Johnson, a single mother who moves to Harlem to achieve the American Dream and make a better life for her and her son. Lutie faces oversexualization throughout the entirety of the novel, significantly more than any of the secondary black female characters. Her oversexualization starts at the very beginning of the novel as Lutie describes her job working for a well-off white family, The Chandlers. She reveals that Mrs. Chandler's friends would always sexualize her:

Whenever she entered a room where they were, they stared at her with a queer speculative look. Sometimes she caught snatches of their conversation about her. 'Sure, she's a wonderful cook. But I wouldn't have any good-looking colored wench in my house. Not with John. You know they're always making passes at men.' (Petry 40-41)

Mrs. Chandler's friends work on the assumption that all black women are promiscuous, and Lutie knows that "it was because she was colored" that these women made these assumptions

about her (Petry 41). Mrs. Chandler's friends provide a good starting point in seeing how black women are being perceived by their society. They give what can be seen as a definition of black women as defined by the oppressor. At the core of what these women say is the idea that they are sexual objects who cannot control themselves enough even to stay away from married men. As the book goes on, it becomes evident that many of the characters are viewing Lutie in the same way Mrs. Chandler's friends view her. This becomes one of the ways in which Petry's novel fails to accomplish its goal. Instead of Lutie overcoming these stereotypes, she is met with them over and over again throughout the novel. So, while Petry does attempt to challenge stereotypes, she merely presents stereotypes instead of debunking them.

Throughout *The Street*, Lutie is repeatedly oversexualized and even sexually assaulted — a situation that she is never allowed to escape. At the beginning of the book we have the account of the white woman's oversexualization of Lutie. In the middle of the novel we see another example of Lutie being sexualized and sexually abused. Jones, the superintendent of the apartment that Lutie moves into, from the very moment he first sees Lutie he sees her as a sexual object. When Jones shows Lutie the apartment that is available, he watches and sexualizes her body as it moves up the stairs. The narrator says that Jones “remembered how her long legs had looked going up the stairs ahead of him. Just watching her like that he had wanted her so badly it was like a pain in his chest. Those long legs walking up and up in front of him, her rump moving from side to side as she walked” (Petry 99). In Jones' account, the reader sees how Lutie is reduced to mere body parts; he separates her as person from the long legs that walk up the stairs in front of him. Lutie becomes less than a person as Jones makes her into object symbolizing sex as he emphasizes her legs and rump. His lust for Lutie continues to grow and fester until, midway into the novel, he tries to act on his lust and rape her, “dragging her toward the cellar

door” as she “writhed and twisted in his arms” (Petry 235). At the end of the novel, Lutie is still facing being oversexualized and sexually assaulted, this time by a character named Boots. Boots, a musician that Lutie sings with in hopes of creating a career out of singing, similarly views Lutie as a sexual object for the taking. In the novel, Boots’ boss Junto, another character that sexualizes Lutie, tells Boots to talk Lutie into sleeping with him (him being Junto). Frustrated with the white man always winning, Boots’ tries to have sex with Lutie first. In a climactic scene at the end of the novel, he tells Lutie that “Junto can get his afterward” and he attempts to rape her (Petry 428). For Boots, Lutie is merely a prize to be had, an object to be conquered. She again becomes reduced to simply being a body that men force sexuality on.

Lutie is never able to escape from being oversexualized and sexually assaulted throughout the novel, which works to perpetuate the abuse of the black woman instead of fighting against it. The novel seems to point out that no matter what Lutie does, these forces will always plague her. Hardison notes that Lutie tries to maintain “. . . a persistent belief in ladyhood and her ability to master the fictions of middle-class white domesticity. Nonetheless her social condition historically dictates the inevitability of her subjugation . . .” (72). Lutie seems to come to this same conclusion as she realizes that she will never truly be able to escape from the street where she faces constant setbacks and sexual abuse. She contemplates moving out of the building where she was almost raped, but she quickly comes to the conclusion that moving will not solve her problems:

Even if she has the necessary funds, any apartment she moved into would be equally as undesirable as the one she moved out of. Except, of course, at a new address she wouldn’t find Mrs. Hedges and the Super. No, but there would be other people who

wouldn't differ too greatly from them. This was as good a time and place as any other for her to get accustomed to the idea of remaining there. (Petry 308)

This scene shows how Lutie will never be able to escape being sexualized and assaulted. When she kills Boots after he attempts to rape and tries to escape to a new city, the reader knows that her escape does not represent freedom. No matter where she goes she is going to face the same problems. Therefore, Petry does not break the cycle of abuse the black woman, in this case Lutie, faces. She continues this cycle by not allowing Lutie to escape from being oversexualized and sexually assaulted. Lutie faces oversexualization and sexual abuse over and over again, and at the end of the novel it can be assumed that she's going to continue facing these issues. In this way, Petry fails to truly liberate the black woman from the forces working against her; instead, she chains the black female to this continual struggle.

While *The Street* focuses mainly on one woman's oversexualization and sexual abuse, *Go Tell It On The Mountain* follows the struggle of multiple black women against these forces. Similar to the *The Street*, throughout *Go To Tell It On The Mountain*, women are overly sexualized or else they face some type of sexual trauma. While the novel focuses mainly on the character John Grimes' spiritual journey, John's family members' lives are explored through a series of flashbacks. These flashbacks serve to show the connection between the family members and how they affect one another's lives. Through these flashbacks, the oversexualization and sexual trauma that black women face are revealed. The first instance of a black woman's sexual trauma happens fairly early in the novel to a character named Deborah, the first wife of Gabriel, John's father. In a flashback described by one of the other characters, Deborah's story of sexual assault unfolds. When Deborah was sixteen years old she was dragged to a field and raped by a group of white men. In his article "The Treacherous Body: Isolation, Confession, and

Community in James Baldwin,” Peter Kerry Powers claims that “. . . Deborah’s social degradation had accompanied the violation of her body by white men” (800). After this event, the way people interact with Deborah is affected by their knowledge of her rape. As Powers notes, Deborah’s social situation deteriorates because she is forever marked by what happened to her:

That night had robbed her of the right to be considered a woman. No man would approach her in honor because she was a living reproach, to herself and to all black women and to all black men Since she could not be considered a woman, she could only be looked on as a harlot, a source of delight more bestial and mysteries more shaking than any a proper woman could provide. Lust stirred in the eyes of men when they looked at Deborah . . . (Baldwin 79)

Like Lutie, Deborah cannot get away from her sexual trauma; in actuality, she becomes defined by her sexual abuse. She is sexually abused and oversexualized to the point where she is more of a body than an actual human being. She is not even a woman anymore; she is merely a “harlot” and a sexual object that stirs up lust in the eyes of men. In his article “*Go Tell It On The Mountain: Religion as the Indirect Method of Indictment*,” Fred L. Standley describes Baldwin’s novel as being “a sociopolitical novel that subtly but savagely indicts a white controlled society that has radically delimited the lives and hopes of blacks by the pernicious doctrine and damnable practice of black inferiority” (191). Baldwin tries to indict the society that has restricted black people to a life of inferiority; however, Baldwin perpetuates the delimiting of the lives of black women in his novel as he restricts them to a life of inferiority, which is seen in how Deborah becomes less than human because of the abuse she endures. Thus, Baldwin fails to

give black women back their “lives and hopes” because he participates in the practice of restricting the black woman to a life of oversexualization and sexual abuse.

In another flashback scene, Baldwin restricts another black female, Esther, to a life of being oversexualized — further stripping the black woman of a life outside of this image. Esther was the mistress of Gabriel when Gabriel was still married to his first wife. Esther’s story is told in one of Gabriel’s flashbacks, so the only image the reader truly gets of her is filtered through Gabriel’s eyes. Through Gabriel’s eyes, Esther is a sexual object that is available to use. Being a preacher married to a wife who he claims is “wholly undesirable,” Gabriel is at once reproachful and attracted to Esther (Baldwin 135). He associates Esther with “flamelike color” and in his mind he aligns her with the “fiery leaves in the autumn, and the fiery sun going down in the evening over the farthest hill, and with the eternal fires of hell” (Baldwin 132). Flames — and their presumably red color — are commonly associated with passion and desire, in this case, sexual desire. Gabriel associates Esther with flames, and therefore sexual desire. He sees Esther as promiscuous, and because he is a preacher, her sexuality is demonized. When Gabriel eventually gives into his lust for Esther, he attributes the blame of the affair to her, and because of his religiosity, he sees her as being the cause of his fall from grace. In Trudier Harris’ book *Black Women in the Fiction of James Baldwin*, she writes,

It would shatter his image of himself beyond reclamation if he were to admit that he is at fault in the affair with Esther. He must therefore tell himself that he is the superior being who is being tested, who is being tempted by the luscious fare served before him. He is like Jesus in the wilderness confronted by the Devil, and it is a test of his will that he must overcome Esther’s temptations. (46)

Esther is not only sexualized by Gabriel but she is literally demonized by him for her sexuality. Her and her body are the tempting devil, and her sexuality the downfall of man. When she tells Gabriel later in the novel that she is pregnant, he is completely indignant. He becomes even more indignant as they argue with one another about him taking care of her and the child and whether or not the child is even his. At one point during this argument, Esther claims that he has ruined her to which he replies, “How you going to be ruined? When you been walking through this town just like a harlot, and a-kicking up your heels all over the pasture? How you going to stand there and tell me you been *ruined*? If it hadn’t been me, it sure would have been somebody else” (Baldwin 152). To Gabriel, Esther is nothing more than a loose harlot. He only sees her as a woman with compromised morals whose sexuality tries to drag him down to hell. Esther cannot escape this painful rebuke though she tries. She blackmails Gabriel into giving her money so she can move to another state, but she does not live long after this. Gabriel had evidently broken her spirit from his rebuke of her and her ruinous nature. Baldwin confines Esther to a position in which she is defined by her sexuality, a sexuality that is demonized. He does not offer Esther any salvation, and so the black female must remain in the same position she has been in and, from the message Baldwin’s novel sends, will always be in.

Since Baldwin’s novel focuses heavily on the church and the notion of sin — especially in relation to sexuality — a woman does not have to be like Esther to be oversexualized; in actuality, any hint of fornication, or evidence thereof, would single a woman out as too sexual, and thus sinful. This is evident in the character Elizabeth, Gabriel’s current wife and John’s mother, who is viewed as a sinner because of the son she had out of wedlock. Elizabeth was previously in a relationship with a man named Richard before she married Gabriel, but her and Richard never married because he committed suicide before they could. Up until she became

involved with Gabriel, she was living a life of guilt for the sin she had committed. However, Gabriel offered her salvation, imploring her to give her life to the lord as well as telling her that he would love and take care of her and her son. Elizabeth says that she “believed him when he said that God had sent him to her for a sign. He had said that would cherish her until the grave, and that he would love her nameless son as though he were his own flesh” (Baldwin 207). However, Elizabeth comes to realize that though he has provided for John “the spirit was not there” and that if Gabriel cherished her it was only because she was the mother of his biological son Roy (Baldwin 207). Even knowing this and enduring physical abuse she stays with Gabriel. Harris notes that she “endures all because she can see herself only as wife and mother, and she hopes to be forgiven for her earlier sins” (22). Elizabeth stays in this loveless and abusive relationship as a result of how religion has linked sex and sexuality so closely to sin and guilt, and the proof of her sin follows her in the form of her son. Like the other women in these two social realist novels, Elizabeth is bound to a hopeless life where she faces a non-ending struggle against a society that limits her. With Elizabeth, Baldwin again subjects the black female to the restrictive societal forces that he is supposedly advocating against.

Petry’s and Baldwin’s novel point out an overall problem with the social realist genre and how only portraying the struggle of the black person is not enough. These two novels show the limitations of social realism as way of novel writing. These novels try to show the black female condition and what black women were facing, namely a continual oversexualization of their person as well as sexual assault. The novels are taking a political stance in trying to create outrage as a way to change the current status quo; however, they do not go far enough to offer any solutions to the problems that they are pointing out. It is not enough to simply make the reader aware of a problem; rather, the writers have to give the reader ways in which the problem

can be rectified. What Petry and Baldwin have presented in their novels is an image of the black woman being repeatedly sexualized and abused. They do not offer an image of black women overcoming these forces; in that way, the novels perpetuate black women's oversexualization and sexual trauma instead of fighting against them.

Works Cited

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Grade: A

Comments

- Great, perceptive thesis: social realist novels serve to further oppress black women by means of the representation of their sexuality
- You have a genuine argument
- Query: Does Petry critique the sexualized stereotype by giving us Lutie's view of herself as a balance? Doesn't Petry show Lutie's resistance? Does Lutie ever give in sexually? These considerations would counter your claim that Petry ends up affirming the sexual stereotype about black women.
- Query: Is it Baldwin who limits women in his novel, or the men, like Gabriel, in the book? Doesn't Deborah get some redemption or agency or subjectivity at some point? Are the

women in Baldwin completely constrained by their situations? However, you are right to point to the fact that John is only character to be given full liberation

- You are right when you claim that Baldwin does seem to constrict women more than Petry. He even punishes Esther by killing her off
- Overall, you have a dynamic and persuasive argument that is buttressed by solid research