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BI-RACIAL IDENTITY PAINS IN LAWRENCE HILL'S, ANY KNOWN BLOOD

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Abstract

Establishing a sense of identity by an immigrant in exile is a hard issue. It becomes harder when an immigrant marries from another race or is born to racially different parents. The colonial practice of bringing people of different races into a certain society has brought about mixed marriages and bi-racial children. This study discusses how mixed marriages and bi-racial children affect the immigrants' sense of their identity. The discussion is based on the novel titled Any Known Blood (1997) which was written by a Canadian author named Lawrence Hill. Hill is born to a Black father and a White mother. Most of his works is dominated by the issues of bi-racial identity. The main objective of study is to discuss how a mixed marriage and bi-racial children spark a sense of identity crisis among the African Canadians. The discussion intends to examine the events and characters in the novel of Any Known Blood (1997) by Lawrence Hill.

Keywords: African Canadian, identity crisis, mixed marriage, bi-racial individual, racial belonging.

Introduction

The presence of Africans in Canada is closely connected with the experience of enslavement in USA. During the period of slavery, Canada remained as a land of freedom where enslavement is not encouraged. The early African immigrants are those who have made their way to Canada with the help of abolitionists via "underground railroad", a network of secret ways that the black fugitives have to walk through. It is the only option for the Africans who do not care to die as a price to get rid of their callous white American masters. If it happens that the African is caught and brought back to the white master, he/she gets a deadly punishment. Men are more ready to take such risky journey. Franca Iacovetta documents that the enslaved Africans who have arrived Canada from USA outnumbered the women (Iacovetta, 1998). As a result, the African community in Canada is suggested to have been established as a male-dominant one. Indeed, things have gone so until 1962 when Canada lifted the racial restrictions on immigration policy. The Africans who are estimated to form less than 3 percent of the total population of Canada, have the highest number of mixed marriages compared to other ethnic groups (Fischer, 2014). This

may help to understand why it becomes a common theme in Canadian writings to see an African man marrying a white woman. The main objective of this study is to discuss how a mixed marriage and bi-racial children spark a sense of identity crisis among the African Canadians. The discussion intends to examine the events and characters in the novel, *Any Known Blood* (1997) by Lawrence Hill.

Bi-racial Identity's Pains in Lawrence Hill's Any Known Blood

Born to a black father and a white mother, Lawrence Hill gives priority to the theme of racial identity in his writings. In his fiction *Any Known Blood* (1997), he illustrates how a son of an interracial marriage has troubles due to his racial identity. However, the critical issues of this study are subtitled into the following:

Signs of Identity Pains

According to the bi-racial author Claudine Chiawei O'Hearn, one of the essential aspects of identity crisis that afflict bi-racial individuals experiences in multiracial societies is that society fabricates stories about his/her identity. In other words, it is the people of

who makes and imposes identity upon bi-racial individuals. This means that a bi-racial individual identification reflects not what he/she wants to appear but what the others want him/her to be (O'Hearn, 1998). However, this vision is manifested in *Any Known Blood* where the bi-racial character Langston Cane V complains that people imposes various identities on him.

In Spain, people have wondered if I was French, In France, hotel manager ask if I was Moroccan. In Canada, I've been—always tentatively—if I was perhaps Peruvian, American, or Jamaican (p. 1).

The above quotation reflects a fact that the identity that is imposed on a bi-racial individual is unfixed; it depends on where he/she lives. Another image is constructed in *Any Known Blood* where the main character Langston Cane V is in Baltimore on USA border with Canada. The protagonist is helping a family in taking their son to the hospital. A black woman from that family surprises Cane V with the nagging question: "Are you black, If I may ask". Cane V answers indecisively "I suppose I am". In an attempt to decide an identity and imposes it on him, the black woman continues to say, "I knew you were one of us. You are about as light as a white man, I could tell you're one of us. Your hair, your nose. Your mouth" (p. 220). The ordeal of a bi-racial character is that he is usually placed in a socially critical position, and he/she has to be ready to accept whatever racial identity that people decide for him/her.

Family Environment and Identity Crisis

Frantz Fanon signifies the role of the family in shaping one's concept of his/her identity. For Fanon, the family is "a workshop in which one is shaped and trained for life in society" (Fanon, 2008, p. 115). When the family is unable to play this role, the bi-racial individual is thrown into confusion. The immigrant's crisis over his/her bi-racial identity originates in the family before it becomes a societal issue. In *Any Known Blood*, Lawrence Hill presents an example of an unhelpful family which does not respond to the aspiration of a bi-racial son in constructing his identity. Langston Cane V is born to a black father and a white mother. Although the parents give their son the right to construct his identity, the father

does not encourage his son to adopt racial considerations. Indeed, the father and son are split over priority of life in Canada. While the son is obsessed with unearthing the roots of his African identity, the father advises his son to focus on materialistic success. The son is advised to "get doctorate, get a job, hold on to your wife, [and] have children" (p. 331). The gap between the father and son widens, and it forces the son to travel to Africa leaving behind Ellen, his pregnant wife in Canada. Upon his return to Canada on emergency, Ellen loses her baby, the son is blamed by his father, "Africa doesn't need you, and you don't need it" (p. 57). Indeed, the father's speech reflects an assumption that, for a young man like Langston Cane V who is born and raised up in Canada to a black father and a white mother, Africa is no more his country of origin.

The son insists on unearthing his ancestor stories in North America, "it is to know my past. I have to know [it]... I have to get to the end of them" (p. 360). He travels to Baltimore where a great part of that history is buried. He visits his aunt Mill and meets every person who has stories about his grandfathers. By this, Hill inspires the critical ideas of the black American author James Baldwin which suggests that when an immigrant is confused over his/her identity, he/she needs to escape his/her birthplace into another country so as "to form a better sense of his [/her] own identity" (Hill, 2001, p.51). Thus, Cane V's travel into Africa and US represents an attempt to escape his crisis and re-explore his racial identity.

In short, *Any Known Blood* presents an example on how the unresponsive attitudes of the family increase bi-racial children's confusion over their identities.

Bi-racial Character and the Problem of Belonging

The Canadian writings show that a bi-racial individual is usually trapped between people of two races. Indeed, the theorist Sneja Gunew is inspired by the life story of the Canadian poet Fred Wah who is born to a white mother and a Chinese father to establish the following critical idea: when an immigrant is born to parents from two different races, he/she is denied the right to have a space among the people of these two races (Gunew, 2004). This critical idea is well manifested

in the fiction of this study. Cane V is presented as a bi-racial character. He is viewed as a black by the whites and white by the blacks. When he applies for a job at Toronto Human Rights Committee, Cane V is received and interviewed as a nonwhite, and he takes advantage of that reception to claim that he is Algerian, the only way to get the job. The post is designed to a minority individual. In Baltimore, as he is making his way to a church of black people, he is stopped by a young black man who addresses him aggressively "Ain't there enough white churches where you-all come from" (p. 125). Indeed, the speaker reflects a sense that those who are bi-racial by birth have no space among the blacks.

Indeed, the bi-racial immigrant is torn between the rejection of ethnic nonwhite minority and the discrimination of the white majority. The question is, to what extent the minority's rejection and majority's discrimination are different in their effects on a bi-racial individual. Such a question is answered by Lawrence Hill:

For many people with one black and one white parent, it appears to hurt more when we are rejected by the black community than when we are discriminated against in the wider community for being black (Hill, 2001, p. 10).

Negative Attitudes towards Mixed Marriages

In his memoir (2001), Lawrence Hill uses the term of "unborn children" to refer to the children of mixed marriages. This term brings into discussion a vision that people from both relevant races declare the war over the bi-racial children before they are born by refusing the idea of a mixed marriage. The negative stand of these people comes from a sense that the children of such a marriage present a challenge to the 'purity' of these two races. Thus, bi-racial children are born to be hated by people of both races. *Any Known Blood* records negative attitudes towards the mixed marriage and bi-racial offspring from both races, white and nonwhite.

This could be realized through the story of Aberdeen Williams and Evelyn Morris. Aberdeen is a black man who devotes a lot of his time to reading. He meets Evelyn, a white girl who admires his knowledge. They are attracted to each other. When they plan for marriage, their families stand against this marriage.

Evelyn's mother threatens to kill herself and brings racist white gangsters called Ku Klux Klan to kill Aberdeen if the couple goes ahead in their plan for marriage. A similar stand is taken by Renata, Aberdeen's elder sister. Renata blames her brother who takes a shelter in a Reverend's house to escape death at the hands of the racist armed group by saying, "I oughta whip your behind, [for] consorting like that with white trash. Look what you [have] done" (Hill, 1997, p. 323).

A similar image is recognized through the story of Langston Cane IV in *Any Known Blood*. Once he decided to marry a white woman called Dorothy, he is boycotted by his sister Millicent Esmerelda Cane, (referred to as Mill). Such a marriage gives her a sense that she has lost her brother forever. Decades later, when her nephew Cane V pays a visit to his aunt in Baltimore, aunt Mill blames her brother for marrying a white lady. She addresses her nephew by saying, "I had nothing against your mother. I've never even met her. But she is white" (p.386). Indeed, these negative attitudes are attributed to racial disharmony not personal problems.

Mixed Marriages and the Sense of Racial Identity

Frantz Fanon does not sustain the idea of mixed marriages on the ground that when a nonwhite marries a white spouse, he/she loses his/hersense of racial identity (Fanon, 2008). This assumption is realized with the story of Langston Cane IV, a black man who marries a white woman. After long decades of being boycotted by his sister, Cane IV pays unexpected visit to his sister Mill in Baltimore. Upon his arrival, Cane IV is introduced to a group of African friends who are invited for dinner at Mill's house. When Cane IV is introduced as a physician, he is praised by Yoyo, one of the guests. Yoyo praises Cane IV as an example of the African who has made a professional progress in white society. Yoyo, along with the others, is shocked as they listen to the black physician saying, "I am not an African" (p. 248). What Cane IV wants to say that, although he is black in colour, he has no connection to Africa. This comment has sparked an argument among the guests over the concept of African identity.

Conclusion

Any Known Blood is a significant novel. The significance of the novel comes from the fact that it gives a voice to an increasing number of immigrants who are born to racially different parents. The significance of the novel is that it is at odds with the official authority who claims that the diversity in Canadian society has been sufficiently addressed. Canada has an immediate need to set up an umbrella identity that gives representation to all Canadians including those who don't represent a certain race, namely bi-racial immigrants.

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