

Inflexible flexibility: William Faulkner's Concern over the Negro Problem

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Abstract:

No American author has been more preoccupied with “Negro Problem” than William Faulkner. All of the tensions in Faulkner’s work reach an extreme in his treatment of Negro character. Complex and ambiguous responses to the Negro are predictable, almost conventional, among sensitive Southern writers; they stem partly from an inheritance of uncertainty and partly from a ripening of heart. But in Faulkner’s fiction, beneath its worried surface of attitude and idea, there is also a remarkable steadiness of feeling toward the Negro.

Key words: Black, Negro, Inflexibility, Race, Sympathy.

I

Despite the deep interest shown in the Negro by white American writers like Harriet Beecher Stowe, T.S. Strikling, Du Bose Heyward, Carl Van Vechten, etc., the black American critics and novelists have been questioning not only their indifference to the Negro but also their humanism. Even Ralph Ellison, the famous American Negro novelist, a great admirer of the art and ideology of Steinbeck and Hemingway, fails to recall “not more than five American Negroes” in their entire work. Nevertheless, in William Faulkner the United States has produced a novelist who is, because of his brooding sympathy and deep love for the Negro, above accusations of Negro critics and artists. Faulkner’s life and work reflect that he treated the Negro as “blood kin and home.” No other white American novelist has observed the Negro so penetratingly and patiently as Faulkner has. Because of his different nature of experience and limited knowledge of the Negro’s real and emotional agony Steinbeck, the singer of the dispossessed and champion of the underdog, did not think it fit to write on the Negro subject, and Hemingway, in his own peculiar way, was not so much interested in America. But Faulkner’s knowledge of the deep South as well as the negro was very intimate. His family had “lived for generations in the one same section of north Mississippi” and “his great- grand-father held slaves and went to Virginia in command of a Mississippi infantry regiment in 1861” Uncle Ned, the Negro, served the house of

Faulkner for three generations, i.e. right from the days of Col Falkner⁵ to Faulkner's own days; Faulkner, own Negro *mammy* aunt Caroline Barr to whom Faulkner dedicated one of his book remained attached with his house for full hundred years; and, his daughter Jill's Negro *mammy* who had been taken by Faulkners to California, when she fell sick was admitted to hospital which cost them \$400. About his intimacy with the Negro, Faulkner told Cantwell that he had grown up with a Negro boy like the boy in *The Unvanquished*. All this knowledge of the Negro Faulkner has employed in his novels.

From 1926 to 1962, Faulkner published eighteen novels and seven collections of short stories. Though references to the Negro are found here and there almost in all novels, yet in the following works – *Soldier's Pay* (1926), *Sartoris* (1929), *The Sound and Fury* (1929), *The Unvanquished* (1930), *Absalom, Absalom*(1936), *Godown, Moses* (1942), *Intruder in the Dust* (1948), and *Requiem for a Nun* (1951), Negro life figures predominantly and in some of them the Negro is assigned the protagonist's role.

Still, the treatment accorded to Negro life by Faulkner has not been adequately understood in the last forty years. Critics differ sharply about the merits and demerits of Faulkner's handling of the Negro theme. If on the one hand there are detractors like Maxwell Geismar who see in Faulkner's portrayal of the negro no sympathy for negro life and declare that to Faulkner the Negro is no better than the destroyer of southern social aristocratic system, there are on the other side idolocors like Robert Penn Warren who extol sky- high Faulkner's sympathy and catholicity toward the Negro. This distressing feature of denunciation and appreciation touching the two extremes has been because critics of the stature of a Geismar and a Warren ignored the basic fact that Faulkner did not have his view about the Negro problem. Even a critic of the caliber of Irving Howe believes that Faulkner lacks in systematic thinking and "has no strictly formulated political position on the Negro problem", and emphasize "as a novelist he is under no obligation to have one." Regardless of this controversial question whether the artist should have the socio economic programme or not, the fact, however, is that Faulkner did have his cogent and clear views about the Negro problem, and he articulated them from time to time in his works especially of the later period – in *Godown Mosses*(1942), *Intruder in the Dust* (1948), etc., - and also in his numerous revealing essays, speeches and letters. In his article it is proposed to examine and analyze Faulkner's specific attitudes to the crucial Negro problem. For an analysis of his views will not only help us in arriving at correct evaluation of his position in relation to the Negro question but will also, lead us in judging afresh his treatment of Negro life.

II

It is a fact that to a Southern white man no other social problem troubles so deeply as the Negro problem, and William Faulkner, being a southern and a white is no exception to this. The following observation of Faulkner reveals how irritating his obsession is with the social question of the Negro:

All white southerners (all white Americans may be) curse the day when the first Briton or Yankee sailed the first shipload of manacled Negro across the Middle passage and auctioned them into American slavery.

But since what is done cannot be undone, nor in the twentieth century it is possible to land a life of inequality on the basis of out-moded concepts of race or colour, Faulkner, the realist, continues to say:

..... That does not matter now. To live anywhere in the world today and be against equality because of race or color, is like living in Alaska and being against snow. We have already got snow Like the Alaskan, we had better use it.

This, however, does not mean that Faulkner is willing to recognize fully the humanity of the Negro and wants to accord him the same status as to the white. Had it been so, he would not have treated the Supreme Court decision 1954 as a force or violence and the federal Government as “the Negro’s ally”. Nor is Faulkner against the Negro. He is ambivalent:

I was against compulsory segregation. I am just as strongly against compulsory integration. Firstly of course from principle. Secondly because I don’t believe it will work

His position as an enlightened southerner is as complex as the nature of the problem itself. He wants to oppose the forces outside the south which would use legal or police compulsion to eradicate that evil overnight”. To such organization as the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) which stand for immediate and unconditional integration, his advice is: “Go slow now. Stop now for a time, a moment. You have the power now; you can afford to withhold for a moment the use of it as force.” Faulkner is of view that the Northerner, the liberal, does not know the south nor the Negro problem which is “far beyond a mere legal one” and “far beyond the moral one: and the south will go to any length “before it will accept alteration of its racial condition by mere force of law or economic threat” since the problem involves an “emotional condition”, for the time being, argues Faulkner, peace should be preferred to equality and the integration on the south should not be forced by legal process and the southerner should be given “a space in which to get his breath and assimilate that knowledge; to look about and see that (i) Nobody is going to force integration on him from the outside; (ii) That he himself faces an obsolescence in his own land which only he can cure.

All this demonstrates that Faulkner analyses the problem from a gradualist point of view. He knows that segregation is an evil and the Southerner by maintaining it was and is wrong but if the integration is imposed by force the southern social set up which is, at present, not solely based on “racial solidarity”, as some people mistakenly treat it, is likely to be demarcated on that pattern.

Faulkner exhorts the white Southerners, although in the name of the superiority of southern culture, that the Negroes by all their standards – economically, educationally, and politically – are their inferiors and so they should not have “so low an opinion of (their) blood and traditions as to fear that, as soon as the Negro enters (their) house by the front door, he will propose marriage to (their) daughter and she will immediately accept him.”

Just as to the white southerner and to the NAACP, so to the Negro leaders Faulkner’s advice is:

- (i) *If I were a Negro, I would say to my people: let us be always unflaggingly and inflexibly flexible. But always decently, quietly, courteously, with dignity and without violence. And above all with patience.*
- (ii) *We must learn to deserve equality so that we can hold and keep it after we get it.... The right to opportunity to be free and equal, provided one is worthy of it, will work to gain it and then work to keep it.*

In a work, Faulkner, as a thinker, stands for gradualism and not for radicalism. This fact is obvious enough in the very use of his phrases like “unflexibly flexible”, “unflaggingly flexible”, and “unflexible and violent flexibility” etc. Faulkner’s mature counsel Negro, despite its sameness and sympathy for the Negro, incidentally reminds us the advice given by the British colonists to Indians, or for that matter, to some of the other Asian and African countries when Indians or Afro-Asians demanded absolute freedom from their oppressive Yokes. Well, whatever Faulkner says may be right from the point or view of a Southern white gradualist. There is, nevertheless, the other phase of the problem as well, which is expressed by James Baldwin appears to be for more correct than what Faulkner preaches.

After a careful examination of Faulkner’s views on desegregations, James Baldwin, the famous American Negro novelist and essayist, states: “After more than two hundred years in slavery and ninety – years of quasi- freedom, it is hard to think very highly of William Faulkner’s advice to ‘go slow’ ‘Go slow’ means a sort of status quo which, in turn, signifies ‘don’t go’. The Negro got emancipation in 1863, and since then the South avoided the question of the place of black man in its system by maintaining the doctrine of “separate but equal” which was discarded by the Supreme Court in 1954. The racial situation which

Faulkner does not want to be change by “mere force of law or economic threat”, argues Baldwin, was imposed precisely by those means. And the tradition which believes in segregation, however unique it may be, is no tradition at all. Faulkner as a Southern white man seems to cling to “two antithetical doctrines, two legends, two histories. “He believes in human dignity and freedom and equality on the one hand and also believe, on the other hand, in such Southern tradition as is based on the concept of racial discrimination. His ambivalence springs from his two beliefs. Like all other Americans, Faulkner subscribes, and is to some extent controlled by the beliefs and the principle expressed in the constitution, at the same time, these beliefs and principles seem determined to destroy the south”. This ambivalence is reflected in his novels and short stories dealing with the Negro

Besides thinking over the problem from a gradualist’s point of view, Faulkner has also studied the Negro dilemma from that of a moralist. He evolved a definite social theory which explains the root cause of Negro problem. Just as Acharya Vinoba Bhave believes that, like air and water, the belongs to God, so William Faulkner holds that the land is not a commodity which could be brought or sold:

Because he told in the Book how he created the earth, made it and looked at and said it was all right, and then he made man He created man to be his overseer on the earth and to hold suzerainty over the earth and the animals on it in his name, not to hold forever, generation after generation but to hold for earth mutual and intact in the communal anonymity of brotherhood, and all the fee he asked was pity and humanity and sufferance and endurance and sweat of his face for bread.

But the white planter by owning and controlling land, and also by making man a slave violated God’s intentions. Slavery went not only against the spirit of “the communal anonymity of brotherhood” but also denied the white man the opportunity of “pity and humility and sufferance and endurance and the sweat of his face for bread”. Therefore, the destruction of the Southerners springs from these twin evils: from man’s attempt to possess land from maintaining slavery for a pretty long period. Faulkner’s prominent families,, as depicted in his novels- Sartoris, Compson, Benbow, Sutpen, Mc Caslin – grow and decline but because of faith in cardinal virtues like pity, humility, sufferance, endurance and sweat the Negro scurvies. Comparing the prospects of the black and the white from a moralist angle, Faulkner feels that a better future awaits the black because:

.....they will endure. They will outlast us because they are.....better than we are. Stronger than we are. Their vices are vices aped from white man or that white man and bondage have

taught them: improvidence and intemperance and evasion not laziness: evasion: of what white man had set them to, not for their aggrandizement of even comfort but his own.

Faulkner also holds that the affect of these twin evils- possession over land and maintenance of slavery has, however, been not very harmful: firstly because, the South has not been completely unaware of them; and secondly because, the South, as a region, possessed of a tradition, i.e., it has been successful in retaining its homogeneity. He hopes that the south must, and well, in time rid itself of these evils and at the same time should not permit federal Government's intervention to correct southern social evils; for, if it is not resisted the homogeneity of the South, which is its main distinction form the rest of America, will go forever. Faulkner's concept of homogeneity is a very comprehensive one. It includes the southern Negro in it. To him Lucas Beauhamp, Sambo- the symbol of the Negro is "a homogeneous man too". Hence Faulkner's ardent desire for

.....we- he- and us – should confederate: swap him the rest of the economic and political and cultural privileges which are his right, for the reversion of his capacity to wait and survive, then we would prevail; together we would dominate the united states; we would present a front not only impregnable but not even to be threatened by a mass of people who no longer have anything in common save a frantic greed for money and a basic fear of a failure of national character which they hide from one another behind a laud lip-service to a flag.

III

To sum up, in the critical evaluation of Faulkner's treatment of the Negro the three facts of vital importance which are to be kept in mind are: first, that in Faulkner there is an obsessive sense of regional consciousness, and as a writer, he draws his creative strength from that consciousness; second, that being aware of the twin evils of the south, as moralist, he struggles with the race ridden social set up of southern America even as he acknowledges and celebrates the homogeneity of this set up; third, because of these two reasons, he thinks over and writes about the Negro from a gradualist's point of view. And yet his gradualism is not in sympathy with the forces of status quo anywhere whether it is race purism or materialism of America. Since he believes in the Southern homogeneity when he says "we- he and us together would prevail and dominate the U.S." Faulkner characterizes imaginative inter-racial consummation of integration. Despite his gradualism and mixed attitude to the

Negro, the black American world found in Faulkner the greatest southern white artist who stood with the Negro and attempted to define the Negro's humanity afresh.

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