

De-stereotyping african americans : a reading of booker t. Washington's *up from slavery and the autobiography of malcolm x*

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Abstract :

This article intends to deconstruct the misrepresentation of African Americans. Its primary concern is to demonstrate that Black community has a high sense of morality contrary to mainstream society's stereotypes. Generally, a lot of Black people's image is associated with criminality and immoral behavior. Deemed as potentially dangerous people, they face up White community's contempt and brutality. Nowadays, scenes of arrests and murders of African Americans spark interracial tensions in the United States. However, Up From Slavery and The Autobiography of Malcolm X depict them as honest and good persons. To explore the works, we use the postcolonial and comparative theories. The qualitative method also enables us to collect and analyze the intra-textual elements. As a result, the analysis of the texts has shown that African Americans are steeped in humanistic values.

Keywords : african americans, de-stereotype, human values, misconceptions, racism.

Résumé :

Cette étude vise à déconstruire la représentation erronée des Afro-Américains. Son premier objectif est de démontrer que la communauté noire a un sens élevé de moralité contrairement aux stéréotypes de la société dominante. Généralement, l'image de nombreux noirs est associée à la criminalité et à des comportements immoraux. Jugés comme des gens potentiellement dangereux, ils sont confrontés au mépris et à la brutalité de la communauté blanche. De nos jours, des scènes d'interpellations et de tueries des afro-américains alimentent les tensions interraciales aux Etats-Unis. Cependant, Up From Slavery et The Autobiography of Malcolm X les dépeignent comme de bonnes et honnêtes personnes. Pour explorer les œuvres, nous convoquons les théories : postcoloniale et comparatiste. Aussi, la méthode qualitative nous permet de recueillir et d'analyser les éléments intra-textuels. Comme résultat, l'analyse des textes a montré que les afro-américains sont pétris de valeurs humanistes.

Mots-clés : afro-américains, dé-stéréotype, humanisme, idées erronées, racisme.

Introduction :

The relationships between Blacks and Whites are in the crux of a lot of social tensions in the history of the United States. African Americans are always perceived negatively in the society. They are thought to be individuals without any humanistic value. In fact, since bondage era till the abolition of slavery, Black people face all kinds of stereotypical judgement. This is why policemen do not hesitate to arrest or kill them during their patrols. For instance, the murder of Georges Floyd is a testimony of rising anti-black sentiment. Dominative racism morphs into contemporary styles of clamp down on Black people. Generally, African Americans are regarded as potential criminals. The racial lynching of black people's image metastasizes in American society. "Discriminatory criminal justice policies and practices have historically and unjustifiably targeted Black people.... This dicrimination continues today in often overt ways...", assume E. Hinton, L. Henderson and C. Reed (2018, p.2). So, the widespread negative opinions against Black community are questionable. According to E. Hinton, L. Henderson and C. Reed : "They are compounded by the racial biases..." (2018, p.2). In fact, *Up From Slavery* and *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* describe Black people as honest and good persons, and they are wrongly targeted as dangerous persons. Generally, a lot of Black people's image is associated with criminality and immoral behavior. Deemed as potentially dangerous people, they face up White community's contempt and brutality. In this perspective, this reflection aims to demonstrate that African Americans are victim of social and institutional stereotypes and amalgam. The study aims to deconstruct the negative perception against Black community. Thus, how are Black people represented in Booker T. Washington's and Malcolm X's works ? Are African Americans victim of racist ideology ? Presumably, assaults against Black people is motivated by racism in the American society. In order to address these questions, the backbone of our analysis is based on postcolonial and comparative theories. The qualitative method also enables to collect, analyze and interpret the textual elements of the narratives. The analysis has revealed that African Americans are also steeped in moral virtues. So,

mindsets underlying that criminality is all African Americans' traits are flaws. In this regard, the reflection is articulated around two parts. Part one sheds light on loyalty and honesty of Black people. Part two deals with the reconsideration of interracial relationships.

1. Denying Whites' Stereotypes

The experience of contempt against Black people in the United States has a strong connection with their past. The proclamation of emancipation fails to put an end to the feeling of superiority between Black and White communities. Regarded as descendants of former slaves, African Americans face racial profiling. Their image is always associated with immorality, delinquency, drug addiction, and murders. Many of them are arrested and imprisoned for any reason. P. Butler (2010, p.1045) writes : "The major race and crime problems of our time are the mass incarceration of African Americans and the extraordinary disparities between blacks and whites in the criminal justice system." In the last decades, police arrest turn to violence and murder. However, African Americans seem to be victim of racism and amalgam. *Up from slavery* offers a testimony describing Black people as righteous and trustworthy persons. Being An I-witness and eye-witness of bondage, Booker T. Washington narrative portrays enslaved people's impressive moral characters before and after the abolition of slavery. Despite the fact that enslavement reduces human being into object and property, many Black enslaved develop a sense of responsibility towards their masters. The ill-treatments inflicted to them are supposed to deprive them of dignity : "I heard whispered conversations among the coloured people of the tortures which the slaves, including, no doubt, my ancestors on my mother's side, suffered in the middle passage of the slave ship while being conveyed from Africa to America" (*Up from slavery*, p. 21). Slaves endure physical and moral pains of slave-owners' wrath. Even if they work in inhuman days and nights, they starve to death. In order to survive hunger, Black slaves just look for food :

One of my earliest recollections is that of my mother cooking a chicken late at night, and awakening her children for the purpose of feeding them. How or where she got it I do not know. I presume, however, it was procured from our owner's farm.

Some people may call this theft. If such a thing were to happen now, I should condemn it as theft myself. But taking place at the time it did, and for the reason that it did, no one could ever make me believe that my mother was guilty of thieving. She was simply a victim of the system of slavery. (*Up from slavery*, p. 23)

As indicated in the abovementioned extract, a slave provides for himself when he is hungry. Like Washington’s mother, a lot of enslaved people just take what they need to survive. They do not sell what they take from their masters for another profit. Notwithstanding the attitude of white people, black slaves do not despise them :

One may get the idea, from what I have said, that there was bitter feeling toward the white people on the part of my race, because of the fact that most of the white population was away fighting in a war which would result in keeping the Negro in slavery if the South was successful. In the case of the slaves on our place this was not true, and it was not true of any large portion of the slave population in the South where the Negro was treated with anything like decency. (*Up from slavery*, p. 30)

Through the extract, one understands that despite the atrocities they experience, Blacks slaves are sympathetic individuals : “During the Civil War one of my young masters was killed, and two were severely wounded. I recall the feeling of sorrow which existed among the slaves when they heard of the death of ‘Mars' Billy.’ It was no sham sorrow, but real” (*Up from slavery*, p.31). The foregoing exemplifies that Black slaves do not hate their white slave –masters. When a misfortune happens to one of them, Black slaves support them. They share their pain : “When the two young masters were brought home wounded, the sympathy of the slaves was shown in many ways. They were just as anxious to assist in the nursing as the family relatives of the wounded. Some of the slaves would even beg for the privilege of sitting up at night to nurse their wounded masters” (*Up from slavery*, p. 31). Black slaves’ sympathetic move evinces their humane character. It shows that they are not only steeped in virtue, but also they are trustworthy. As evidence, Washington writes : “This tenderness and sympathy on the part of those held in bondage was a

result of their kindly and generous nature” (*Up from slavery*, p. 31). So, it is noticeable that by nature, Black people are not wicked beings contrary to the opinion held by white dominant culture against them. Labelled as dangerous persons capable of all wrongdoings in the American society, African Americans do not face a raising anti-black sentiment. That is the reason why, Washington refutes such groundless allegations through the following connotative lines :

In order to defend and protect the women and children who were left on the plantations when the white males went to war, the slaves would have laid down their lives. The slave who was selected to sleep in the “big house” during the absence of the males was considered to have the place of honour. Any one attempting to harm “young Mistress” or “old Mistress” during the night would have had to cross the dead body of the slave to do so. I do not know how many have noticed it, but I think that it will be found to be true that there are few instances, either in slavery or freedom, in which a member of my race has been known to betray a specific trust. (*Up from slavery*, p. 31)

Implicitly, the extract challenges the mainstream society’s fallacious opinions about African Americans. It shows the commitment and the sacrifice Black people are able to consent to save others. “I do not know how many have noticed it” in the passage points out the necessity to stop misconception about African Americans. Unfortunately, they are victim of amalgam in the society where most people assume that young black males are offenders. This paradigm permeates the American society. Be it explicit or implicit, African Americans are unjustly targeted as social danger in the United States. The American public’s opinion is so blinded by racist ideology as the majority of citizens think that Blackness is synonymous with immorality. Contrary to that opinion, a lot of Black people are humane, for : “As a rule...the members of my race entertain no feelings of bitterness against the whites... there are many instances of Negroes tenderly carrying for their former masters and mistresses...” (*Up from slavery*, p. 32). The foregoing substantiates the Black race’s dispositions of establishing good interracial relationships. In other

words, many African Americans do not bear grudge against white people as the narrative reveals :

I have known of still other cases in which the former slaves have assisted in the education of the descendants of their former owners. I know of a case on a large plantation in the South in which a young white man, the son of the former owner of the estate, has become so reduced in purse and self-control by reason of drink that he is a pitiable creature ; and yet, notwithstanding the poverty of the coloured people themselves on this plantation, they have for years supplied this young white man with the necessities of life. (*Up from slavery*, p. 32)

As abovementioned, Black people's are so kind that they do not hesitate to support white people financially. This may seem paradoxical because most Black men and women work for white communities. The latter is supposed to be wealthier than the former. However, when need be, subjugated Blacks show their kindness and offer assistance to their white masters. As evidence, taking the case of a white man, Washington writes : "Nothing that the coloured people possess is too good for the son of 'old Mars' Tom,' who will perhaps never be permitted to suffer while any remain on the place who knew directly or indirectly of 'old Mars' Tom'" (*Up from slavery*, p. 32). Many African Americans are also honest with their white counterparts. They keep their words despite the fact that they are offended. Even though they are in position that allows them to act freely, they prefer to have humane characters :

One of the best illustrations of this which I know of is in the case of an ex-slave from Virginia whom I met not long ago in a little town in the state of Ohio. I found that this man had made a contract with his master, two or three years previous to the Emancipation Proclamation, to the effect that the slave was to be permitted to buy himself.... Finding that he could secure better wages in Ohio, he went there. When freedom came, he was still in debt to his master some three hundred dollars. Notwithstanding that the Emancipation Proclamation freed him from any obligation to his master, this black man walked the

greater portion of the distance back to where his old master lived in Virginia, and placed the last dollar, with interest, in his hands. (*Up from slavery*, pp. 32-33)

As indicated in the previous passage, a lot of Black people do not breach the agreement between them and White people. The testimony regarding the free man is among many others. In other terms, this demonstrates a highest sense of humanism and dignity African Americans embody. It means that they are not immoral persons or beings deprived of common sense. As an eye witness, Washington relates : “In talking to me about this, the man told me that he knew that he did not have to pay the debt, but that he had given his word to the master, and his word he had never broken. He felt that he could not enjoy his freedom till he had fulfilled his promise” (*Up from slavery*, p.33). The last sentence of the excerpt illustrates the weight of consciouness upon a Black person. In addition, lots of African Americans know how to provide for themselves honestly, for : “When freedom came, the slaves were almost as well fitted to begin life anew as the master, except in the matter of book-learning and ownership of property. The slave owner and his sons had mastered no special industry...” (*Up from slavery*, p. 36). Obviously, all Black people cannot be idlers and thieves because most of them are skillful to start a new life. They already know how to fend for themselves by working hard. Besides, they contribute to the protection of White people’s belongings and valuables. It is a mark of confidence that elevates them to the status of honest and trustworthy humans among their counterpart white persons. As evidence :

In the fear of “Yankee” invasions, the silverware and other valuables were taken from the big “house,” buried in the woods, and guarded by trusted slaves. Woe be to any one who would have attempted to disturb the buried treasure. The slaves would give the Yankee soldiers food, drink, clothing—anything but that which had been specifically intrusted to their care and honour. (*Up from slavery*, p. 37)

This extract implies that white people trust Black people more than other white persons. The subjugated people's loyal attitude towards their masters evinces their atypical moral characters. A. Edwards and M. M. Seck uphold (2018, pp.38-40): "Behaviors are an important manifestation of value... for African American...money and wealth were very important". In spite the fact that Black people like money, African Americans sacrifice themselves by defending the interests of those who make them suffer. However, despite their honesty and commitment, Black people are ill-treated as narrated in *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*.

African Americans are considered a threat for the mainstream society in Malcolm X's narrative. Consequently, most of them face contempt and hatred. That is the reason why they have difficulties thriving in the United States of America. As a potential target to be neutralized, they always walk in death rows in their daily life after the emancipation era :

My father's skull, on one side, was crushed in, I was told later. Negroes in Lansing have always whispered that he was attacked, and then laid across some tracks for a streetcar to run over him. His body was cut almost in half. He lived two and a half hours in that condition. Negroes then were stronger than they are now, especially Georgia Negroes. Negroes born in Georgia had to be strong simply to survive. (*Malcolm X*, p. 10)

Obviously, as narrated in the extract, scenes of murders are frequent among African Americans. The unspeakable barbarism they are confronted with oblige them to be resilient or they perish for ever. For their survival, Black people try to reciprocate to protect themselves against indiscriminate killings. The systemic racism opens way of all sort of practices aiming to control and maintain African Americans under the social ladder :

But the monthly Welfare check was [White people] pass. They acted as if they owned us, as if we were their private property.... We couldn't understand why, if the state was willing to give us packages of meat, sacks of potatoes and fruit, and cans of all kinds of things, our mother obviously hated to accept. We really

couldn't understand. What I later understood was that my mother was making a desperate effort to preserve her pride—and ours. (*Malcolm X*, p. 13)

The excerpt points out White people's condescending attitude towards Black people. Behind the so-called assistance provided by the mainstream society, there is an hidden strategy of dominative mindset. Most of the "protective measures" aim to make the Black community more vulnerable. Any kind of assistance offered to African Americans is not for humanitarian purposes. That is the reason why, some African Americans -- like the author's mother -- deem White people's social assistance outrageous and an offense to their dignity. As evidence, the Black community is racially profiled and permanently under White people's surveillance :

I was growing up fast, physically more so than mentally. As I began to be recognized more around the town, I started to become aware of the peculiar attitude of white people toward me. I sensed that it had to do with my father. It was an adult version of what several white children had said at school, in hints, or sometimes in the open, which really expressed what their parents had said—that the Black Legion or the Klan had killed my father, and the insurance company had pulled a fast one in refusing to pay my mother the policy money. (*Malcolm X*, p. 15)

The abovementioned extract shows how African Americans are blacklisted. "legal-cultural customs increasingly targeted black Americans..." E. Hinton and D. Cook (2021, p.263). Children and adults are considered dangerous beings in the American society. So, most of killings are not investigated. The perpetrators, being White people, are not prosecuted. "African Americans report extensive experiences of discrimination... In the context of institutional forms of discrimination, half or more of African Americans ... have personally been discriminated against because they are Black when interacting with police...", observes T. H. Chan (2017, p.1). In these recent years, the rise

of police brutalities against Black community evinces the dysfunctioning of judicial device in the United States. Growing impunity is racially motivated. “The more an African American appear stereotypically ‘Black,’ the more likely that individual was perceived as a criminal”, underlines B. Baldwin (2018, p.435). The inaction of legal authorities against police attitude towards Black community exacerbates racial tensions and the sentiment of hatred as the passage reveals :

Meanwhile, the state Welfare people kept after my mother. By now, she didn’t make it any secret that she hated them, and didn’t want them in her house. But they exerted their right to come, and I have many, many times reflected upon how, talking to us children, they began to plant the seeds of division in our minds. They would ask such things as who was smarter than the other. And they would ask me why I was “so different.” (*Malcolm X*, p. 17)

In order to control African Americans, White supremacists develop strategies which consist in bringing division among the dominated Black community as narrated in the foregoing excerpt. The policy of division may drive African Americans into contempting each other by fueling discord between them. Furthermore, widespread African Americans’ image is always associated with immoral behavior. This racism is based on the stigmatized individual’s moral character. It also focuses on norms that leave subordinate groups prone to stereotypes. Worst, African Americans are considered sexual beasts as described in the narrative :

...she started hearing older girls in grade school whispering the hush-hush that “niggers” were such sexual giants and athletes, and she started growing up secretly wanting to try one. Finally, right in her own house, with her family away, she threatened a Negro man who worked for her father that if he didn’t take her she would swear he tried rape. (*Malcolm X*, pp.88-89)

The extract corroborates White people’s stereotypical attitude towards African American males. Victims of sexual abuses incrimi-

nate African American males. The belief that Black males have an uncontrollable sexual lust is overgeneralized in the American society. So, they are wrongly accused with rapes because of their blackness. According to A. J. Davis (2017, p. 178) : “The Commission notes with concern the role of implicit or explicit bias against African Americans in differential arrest rates. The power of police to make stops, searches, and arrests is discretionary, and there is strong evidence that this power is used disproportionately against black men.” However, White people are guilty of many exactions over Black people :

The devil white man cut these black people off from all knowledge of their own kind, and cut them off from any knowledge of their own language, religion, and past culture, until the black man in America was the earth’s only race of people who had absolutely no knowledge of his true identity. In one generation, the black slave women in America had been raped by the slavemaster white man... (*Malcolm X*, p.162)

The abovementioned excerpt underlines White people’s crimes against Black people. The passage remembers that the mainstream society is responsible for barbaristic practices against African Americans’ culture. In R. Tourse, J. Hamilton-Mason and N. Wewiorski’s terms (2018, p. 5) : “*Cultural racism* has been defined as ‘any message or image prevalent in society that promotes the false but constant idea that White is the standard, ideal, normal’”. Since the accouter between White people and Black people, the latter undergo dehumanizing treatment because of their skin color :

Here is a black man caged behind bars, probably for years, put there by the white man. Usually the convict comes from among those bottom-of-the-pile Negroes, the Negroes who through their entire lives have been kicked about, treated like children—Negroes who never have met one white man who didn’t either take something from them or do something to them. (*Malcolm X*, p.183)

Despite the gains of the Civic Rights Movements in the United States, African Americans are prone to all sorts of debasement as described in the excerpt. To quote S. L. Johnson (1996, pp.345-346) : “Reviewing the history and modern scope of the uses of race in credibility decisions, one cannot avoid the conclusion that virtually all of the forbidden inferences have been used to disadvantage Black... the only color of legal truth is (still) white”. However, Black communities and White communities are bound to live together because they belong to the same spatial locations.

2. Rethinking Interracial Paradigm

Racism plagues interracial relationships in the United States. It is a dynamic phenomenon which determines social norms. The emancipation of Black people fails to put an end to racial gap. African Americans lag behind compare to their counterpart White people who enjoy socio-economic privileges. In fact, the systemic racism prevents Black people from competing with the dominant white society. That is the reason why Booker T. Washington writes :

The world should not pass judgment upon the Negro, and especially the Negro youth, too quickly or too harshly. The Negro boy has obstacles, discouragements, and temptations to battle with that are little known to those not situated as he is. When a white boy undertakes a task, it is taken for granted that he will succeed. On the other hand, people are usually surprised if the Negro boy does not fail. In a word, the Negro youth starts out with the presumption against him. (*Up from Slavery*, p. 53)

Blinded by racial contempt and hatred, the mainstream society cannot imagine that Black children can be successful, as indicated in the extract. In White people’s mindset, African Americans’ future is doomed. Social prejudices sparks debates in American society. Racial profiling eclipses discriminated Black people’s intellectual capability. They are automatically classified as delinquent and potential drug dealers. It is a cliché which does not reflect the realistic representation of African Americans, because :

With few exceptions, the Negro youth must work harder and must perform his tasks even better than a white youth in order to secure recognition. But out of the hard and unusual struggle through which he is compelled to pass, he gets a strength, a confidence, that one misses whose pathway is comparatively smooth by reason of birth and race. (*Up From Slavery*, p.57)

The extract corroborates challenges discriminated Black people are confronted with. They do efforts to overcome difficulties in their daily life. However, they suffer the lack of credibility because of their Blackness. By complaining about the racist plight, Washington says: “From any point of view, I had rather be what I am, a member of the Negro race, than be able to claim membership with the most favoured of any other race” (*Up From Slavery*, p.57). Belonging to the Black community equates with the loss of social privileges. In reaction to this racist disposition against African Americans, R. Paynter, S. Hautaniemi, and N. Muller (1994, p. 285) put it : “Racial prejudice arose out of and was buoyed initially by the ideological structures entangled with plantation production needs and the robust economic structure that was fueled by the Atlantic slave trade as well as racial policing”. Racial policing is detrimental to equality and justice. The American people, regardless of race, should be rewarded on the basis of their intrinsic values. As evidence, Washington relates :

I have always been made sad when I have heard members of any race claiming rights or privileges, or certain badge of distinction, on the ground simply that they were members of this or that race, regardless of their own individual worth or attainments. I have been made to feel sad for such persons because I am conscious of the fact that mere connection with what is known as a superior race will not permanently carry an individual forward unless he has individual worth, and mere connection with what is regarded as an inferior race will not finally hold an individual back if he possesses intrinsic, individual merit. (*Up From Slavery*, p.58)

As indicated in the last passage of the excerpt, individual merit should be emphasized rather than considerations based on race. In the same vein, Washington proceeds by writing :

Every persecuted individual and race should get much consolation out of the great human law, which is universal and eternal, that merit, no matter under what skin found, is, in the long run, recognized and rewarded. This I have said here, not to call attention to myself as an individual, but to the race to which I am proud to belong. (*Up From Slavery*, p.58)

The passage implies that one of the major problems of the American society is the non-recognition of Black people’s achievements. In other words the lack of social justice undermines interracial relationships in the United States. According to H. A. Thompson (2019, p. 235) : “...justice system...from this nation’s origins, [has] always been racially defined as well as determined.” Therefore, racist contempt creates frustration among African Americans like in *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. Malcolm X does not hide his anti-white sentiment. Like him many Black people try to find alternatives by (re)defining their identity. A typical instance is to rename oneself. By doing so, most of them attempt to reject the mainstream society’s culture as Malcolm X reveals : “The Muslim’s : ‘X’ symbolized the true African family name that [my father] never could know. For me, my ‘X’ replaced the white slave-master name of ‘Little’ which some blue-eyed devil named Little had imposed upon my paternal forebears” (*Malcolm X*, p.199). Racial divide cannot but fuel wariness between Black and White communities even though they live in the same spatial indications. To quote E. Bonilla-Silva’s terms (2018, p.23) : “‘Racial contacts’ do not mean substantive integration...”. The iron curtain between African Americans and White people is an interracial blockade. Social gap threatens togetherness as long as : “...blacks and whites remain mostly separate and disturbingly unequal... The black poor, in particular, suffer the greatest degree of ‘hypersegregation’ from the rest of America,” observes E. Bonilla-Silva (2018, p.23). So, there is an urgent need to reconsider racial paradigm because the simmering racial upheaval is expressed as follows :

I hate every drop of the : rapist’s blood that’s in me !

“And it’s not just me, it’s *all* of us ! During slavery, *think* of it, it was a *rare* one of our black grandmothers, our greatgrandmothers and our great-great-grandmothers who escaped the white rapist slavemaster. That rapist slavemaster who emasculated the black man . . . with threats, with fear . . . until even today the black man lives with fear of the white man in his heart ! Lives even today still under the heel of the white man ! (*Malcolm X*, p. 202)

Malcolm X’s message is a harbinger of revolt and discontent. According to R. Tourse, J. Hamilton-Mason and N. Wewiorski (2018, p. 19) : “Discrimination... results in behaviors that invade and infuse social and societal structures whereas oppression helps to build, solidify, and maintain discrimination within these structures.” Riots in the American society are the consequences of racial profiling.

Conclusion :

This study aimed to show that Washington’s and Malcolm X’s narratives de-stereotype the image of Black people in the American society. It is articulated around two main sections. Section one dealt with the denial of Whites’ stereotypical attitude against Black people. Section two shed light on the necessity to rethink interracial paradigm. The cliché which characterizes all Black people as potential criminals is biased. Racial profiling is discriminatory and threatens togetherness because it is source of interracial contempt, hatred and violence. The analysis has revealed that African Americans are also steeped in moral virtues. So, mindsets underlying that criminality is all African Americans’ traits are flaws.

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