

RAGTIME: THE GAZE OF THE OTHER AND THE TRADITION OF THE OPPRESSED



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ABSTRACT

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This article reads Doctorow's novel *Ragtime* through the discourse of cultural materialism. To read it so, the writer's discourse therefore, becomes that of the hysterical discourse which goes against the dominant discourse of the work. Cultural materialism borrows the ideas of many critics in order to study canonical works against the grain. Thus, this article uses cultural materialism in order to read *Ragtime* against the grain. To read it so requires resisting or hystericising the dominant discourse and worldview and shifting sympathy. This article is going to study *Ragtime* by E.L Doctorow through the lens of cultural materialism. The gaze of the other a key concept of cultural materialism is applicable to the novel *Ragtime*. The other in this novel stands for Coalhouse walker. The gaze of Other signifies how psychologically the white society looked at him and how the white society considered him. Other is treated badly by the white society of the time. He is like a fish out of water in the society and wishes to do away with the injustice and violence done to him and his fellow people. Coalhouse character offers perception into race relations in the community of America. 'The tradition of the oppressed' is another key concept of the cultural Materialism which depicts examples of oppression done to the oppressed. Here Coalhouse Walker is an example of the oppressed who is oppressed by his white counterparts.

Contribution/ Originality: This study contributes in the existing literature on Postcolonial theory and criticism by reading a fiction in the light of cultural studies which includes among its branches, racial studies and takes the side of the oppressed people who did not have a voice to express themselves and thus were marginalized.

1. INTRODUCTION

The term gaze is a psychoanalytical phrase made famous by Jacques Lacan. It is used to define the apprehensive state that comes with the consciousness that one can be observed (Lacan, 1978). The psychological impact, Lacan maintains, is that the individual loses a degree of autonomy upon apprehending that he or she is a noticeable object (Lacan, 1978). The gaze of the other in cultural studies is used for people who are viewed or have been viewed as inferior, demented, backward and illogical. Edward Said used the term "post-colonial gaze" to illuminate the connection that colonial powers protracted to societies of colonized countries (Said, 1978) putting the colonized in a

locus of the "other" contributed to forming and creating the colonial's personality as being the authoritative subjugator, and acted as a continuous token of this notion (Said, 1978). The postcolonial gaze "has the function of establishing the subject/object relationship... it indicates at its point of emanation the location of the subject, and at its point of contact the location of the object." (Said, 1978). Basically, this demonstrates that the colonizer/colonized connection generated the foundation for the colonizer's recognizing themselves and their individuality.(Said, 1978). The character of the seizure of power is essential to comprehending how colonizers exerted their influence on the countries that they colonized, and is intensely related to the growth of post-colonial criticism. Making use of postcolonial gaze criticism permits previously colonized societies to sweeping over the socially constructed borders that frequently forbid them from articulating their true national, communal, commercial, and civil rights (Said, 1978).

The present writer focuses on the character of Coalhouse Walker as an example of the oppressed in the novel *Ragtime*. This study, in actual fact, is going to go through the depiction of the character of Coalhouse and his wife Sara who are made as marginalized *others* by the white society of their time and therefore are regarded as margins of the society. To apply the theory of the gaze to them as the oppressed, the present author gives textual evidence of how the character of Coalhouse and his beloved are made *other*. He is oppressed by the society.

2. DISCUSSION

I began with the desire to speak with the dead (Greenblatt, 1990).

This sentence opens Stephen Greenblatt's book *Shakespearean Negotiations* (1988) and captures a great deal of New Historicism and cultural materialism (Wilson, 1995). This sentence shows him establishing a certain familiarity with the dead voices of the past. This has been the job of critics of New Historicism to create a sort of intimacy with the dead voices of the past in their studies of canonical works of literature. The present writer, therefore, wishes to create his own intimacy with the voices of the past in regards with a canonical work called *Ragtime*. This topic will study the gaze of the other and will reiterate the voices of others and the tradition of the oppressed in the novel.

Ragtime (1975) E.L. Doctorow's novel of historical fiction is primarily set in the New York City area from approximately 1900 till America's entry into World War I in 1917. *Ragtime* is an exceptional alteration of the historical narrative genre with a revolutionary 1970's pitch, it mergers fictional and historical personalities into a context that circles around happenings, characters and concepts significant in American history. *Ragtime* describes the experiences of three families, a poor Jewish immigrant Tateh and his daughter, an upper middle class white family and an unwed black couple Coalhouse Walker Jr and Sarah. Among these three, the focus of this study will be mainly on the last family that is oppressed and made a *marginalized other* by the racial society of America.

Ragtime besides other topics also speaks about the anxieties and apprehensions and sufferings of many oppressed groups, including African Americans. The oppressed African American group in this novel are represented by the character of Coalhouse Walker Jr who is a musician and his beloved wife. Through this family of African-American, the novel inaugurates an observation on race relations during this time in American history.

Doctorow writes: 'one Sunday afternoon the colored man Coalhouse Walker said goodbye to his fiancée and drove off to New York in his Ford' (Doctorow, 1976). Ford is his car and having a car shows that he is given a certain right in the society. But the picture Doctorow gives of Coalhouse Walker in this novel shows that having a car is not that much important and does not offer any chance of assimilation. He goes on and through the choice of words foreshadows what will happen. 'It was about five o'clock in the evening and the shadows of the trees darkened the road. His route took him along Firehouse Lane, past the station house of the Emerald Isle Engine, a company of volunteer firemen known for the dash of their parade uniforms and the liveliness of their outings' (Doctorow, 1976). This gloomy description of the road as darkened by the shade of threes foretells something bad is going to happen: 'in the many times he had gone this way the Emerald Isle volunteers would be standing and

talking outside the firehouse, a two-story clapboard building, and as he drove past they would fall silent and stare at him' (Doctorow, 1976). The writer himself says 'He was not unaware that in his dress and as the owner of a car he was a provocation to many of the white people. He had created himself in the teeth of such feelings' (Doctorow, 1976). But having a car and wearing beautiful dress are the right for everybody. And besides Coalhouse did not create himself in the teeth of such feeling. The way the writer is talking about Coalhouse is as if it were natural for Coalhouse or any other black persons like Coalhouse to be inferior and it was against nature to drive a car and wear good dress. This is simply the construction of society to consider other races as inferior. It is the society which oppresses other groups on the base of race, and colour. Doctorow continues and puts the reader into the picture: 'As the Negro came along a team of three matching gray engine horses cantered out of the firehouse into the road pulling behind them the big steam pumper for which the Emerald Isle was locally renowned. They were immediately reined, causing Coalhouse Walker to brake his car abruptly' (Doctorow, 1976). They stop Coalhouse Walker by force and try to tease him. Others join them to watch the scene and enjoy: 'two of the volunteers came out of the building to join the driver of the pumper who sat up on his box looking at the Negro and yawning ostentatiously' (Doctorow, 1976). The reason for stopping Coalhouse is: 'he was traveling on a private toll road and that he could not drive on without paying of twenty-five dollars or by presenting a pass indicating that he was a resident of the city' (Doctorow, 1976). Coalhouse protests and says: 'this is a public thoroughfare, I've traveled it dozen of times and no one has ever said anything about a toll' (Doctorow, 1976). Coalhouse's reaction to this situation is shown in the following passage: 'he got up behind the wheel... and decided to put the Ford into reverse gear, back[ing] up to the corner and go another way' (Doctorow, 1976). The reaction of the white people to this act of Coalhouse is expressed thus: 'at this moment two of the firemen carrying a twenty-foot ladder between them came into the street behind the car. Two others followed with another ladder and others came out with carts of coiled hose, buckets, axes, hooks, and other fire-fighting equipment, all of which was deposited in the street, the company having chosen this particular moment to sweep out its quarters' (Doctorow, 1976). They do not allow Coalhouse to cross the road, the reason behind this is overt discrimination and racism. Because Coalhouse is a black person and owns a car, the workers of the company who are white do not allow him to pass the road with his Ford car. At this moment the Chief of the company intervenes. Though he was polite to Coalhouse and clarified that although the toll had never before been taken from him it was nonetheless in force, and that if Coalhouse did not give the required money he would not be allowed to pass. With this determination on the part of the pugnacious Chief of the company Coalhouse thought for a little:

the Negro calmly considered the courses of action available to him. The Emerald Isle firehouse looked across the street to an open field that sloped down to a pond. Conceivably he might drive off the road, turn in the field and circumnavigate the ladders and hose cart. But he was wedged in tightly, and even if he could pull the wheel hard enough to clear the horses the severe angle of the turn might tilt the car over on the downhill slope. Apparently it did not occur to him to ingratiate himself in the fashion of his race (Doctorow, 1976).

Coalhouse did not take for granted what the Chief of the company told him and did not pay the money the Chief of the company asked for and requested. He considered this act of taking and collecting money from him as an act of discrimination and cruelty since no one has ever before has paid up the sum of money requested from him. Instead he decides to do something else, he decides to see to the problem personally. The text informs us that:

Playing down at the edge of the pond were a couple of Negro boys, ten or twelve years. Hey, Coalhouse Walker called to them. Come on up here! The boys came running. They stared at Coalhouse as he switched off the engine, set the break and stepped down to the road. I want you to watch this car, he told them.

When I come back you tell me if anyone touched it (Doctorow (1976).

He leaves his car to the guard of children and heads toward:

the business district. After ten minutes he found a policeman operating a stop-and-go traffic signal. The policeman listened to his complaint and shook his head and spent some time removing his handkerchief from under his frock coat and blowing his nose. Those boys don't mean no harm, he finally said. I know them all. Go on back now, they're probably tired of the sport. Walker may have realized this was probably the maximum support he could expect from a policeman. At the same time he may have wondered if he'd been oversensitive to what was intended as no more than a prank. So he went back to Firehouse Lane (Doctorow, 1976).

Whether the policeman is part of this sport or not is not yet clear. The text refers to this teasing of Coalhouse as a 'sport' and 'prank'. Believing the policeman, Coalhouse comes back to see whether this sport is over and he is allowed to pass or not. When he come back to his car:

The fire engine and horses were withdrawn. The road was empty of volunteers and his car stood off the road in the field. He made his way to the car. It was spattered with mud. There was a six-inch tear in the custom pantasote top. And deposited in the back seat was a mound of fresh human excrement (Doctorow, 1976).

The way the white society gazes Coalhouse is very discriminative and racist. He is treated nastily and unkindly as was the case at that time in history of civilization. His car which has got symbolic overtones in the novel is full of mud. It was damaged in the custom pantasote top and an amount of fresh human dirt is in the back seat. The car is symbolic of Coalhouse himself, it is an association of Coalhouse himself. This is the most outrageous kind of humiliation done to Coalhouse. He has been made 'Other' an *other* who should not have a car and should not dress nicely and handsomely simply because he is black and a negro. Coalhouse goes to firehouse to talk to Chief of the company to tell him there was no toll for the road and wants his car to be cleaned and the damage to be paid up for. In reaction to this request of Coalhouse, he sees that 'The Chief began to laugh and a couple of his men came out to join the fun' (Doctorow, 1976). Making fun of Coalhouse is entirely racial and discriminatory. The police also takes the side of the white people in this situation and says to Coalhouse:

If you don't take your automobile and get along out of here, he said loudly, I'm going to charge you with driving off the road, drunkenness, and making an unsightly nuisance. I do not drink, Coalhouse said. I did not drive my car off the road nor slash the roof nor defecate in it. I want the damage paid for and I want an apology. The policeman looked at the Chief, who was grinning at his discomfiture, so that the issue for him was now his own authority. He said to Coalhouse I'm placing you under arrest. You'll come with me in the wagon (Doctorow, 1976).

The policeman takes the side of the white people and finally arrests Coalhouse. The Otherization of Coalhouse now becomes legal, and political too. The police arrests Coalhouse and his car is left there. The car is the emblematic realm of Coalhouse wishes and desires or it is a connotation of signification which Coalhouse is after. After capturing Coalhouse, the novel informs us what has happened to the Model T in the absence of its owner:

The Model T had been thoroughly vandalized, whether by the volunteers or others it was impossible to determine. It sat with its front end in the tall weeds at the edge of the pond. The wheels were sunk in the mud. The headlamps and the windshield were shattered. The rear tires were flattened, the tufted upholstery had been gutted and the custom pantosote top was slashed to ribbons (Doctorow, 1976).

This vandalism of the car is ruining the world of Coalhouse. It is his own life and property. Coalhouse tries to 'bring suit against the Fire Chief and men of the Emerald isle Engine'. He went to see three different lawyers. The three lawyers refused to represent him. He is humiliated by the law system too because it works for the benefit of the white people and against the interests of the black people. No one is going to represent Coalhouse not even black lawyers. It becomes a duty of cultural materialist to represent him in his effort to bring justice for every member of society. In one way, this article attempts to bring suit against the Fire Chief and men of the Emerald isle Engine and takes the side of Coalhouse and his representatives.

Doctorow could not go against the current of America's discrimination. The novel reinforced the dominant discourses and stereotypes which work against the black people like Coalhouse. Few of Doctorow's characters are more hotly debated than Coalhouse. Although he has a relatively small part, this multifaceted and influential character governs the novel and his multidimensional nature complicates the work significantly. The novel depicts him as a cruel, crafty and wicked black person just as Americans of that time would demand. Doctorow takes the stereotype character presented to him and makes it more complex, but he does not leave its black qualities untouched. *Ragtime* represents and reinforces the dominant discourses of law, religion and nationality that support the patriotism and work against immigrants. It made the audience identify with the winners of the scene. Therefore, nothing remains of the resisting voices and what is heard more often and more powerfully is the dominant discourse of the time voiced by the white people who did not allow Coalhouse to pass the road to success and assimilation. In the case of Coalhouse Walker J. Doctorow makes a clear distinction between 'self' and 'other', does whatever at his disposal to defeat people of whom Coalhouse is a representative, deprives them of genuine identity and represents a homogenized community where no resisting voice could be heard except that of Mother's younger brother. Mother's younger brother, a white character helps Coalhouse. He is against discrimination and patriotism. It is significant that the novel starts with patriotism:

It occurred to Father one day that Coalhouse Walker Jr. didn't know he was a Negro. The more he thought about this the more true it seemed. Walker didn't act or talk like a colored man. He seemed to be able to transform the customary deferences practiced by his race so that they reflected to his own dignity rather than the recipient's (Doctorow, 1976).

The text tells us the view of the character called father about Coalhouse Walker. According to the narrator "Father has what he considers an important revelation: he believes that Coalhouse has no awareness of his race, or of his place in society" (Doctorow, 1976). If we take the father as the representative of society, thus his discourse becomes the symbolic mandate of the society in which he lives as a member. Thus Coalhouse Walker Jr. according to the father of the narrator *should* (emphasis is mine) know he is a Negro, and *should* act or talk like a colored man.

Almost all main characters in the novel are racist in regards with the character of Coalhouse Walker jr. The text tells us the view of the characters of the novel on Coalhouse Walker, the most important of whom is the father as the head of the family. When the head of the family has racist ideas about Coalhouse and Coalhouse's race, what do we expect from other members of the family and this tells us a lot about the kinds of societies in which fathers are racist. Father wants Coalhouse to know his place as a Negro in the society and not behave like a white person, father wants him to have a cognizance of his race, or of his position in society. As mentioned above he has a revelation as to the elegant behavior of Coalhouse. This revelation on the part of the father is a kind of revelation into the nature of the father too. This revelation reveals that first of all the father is racist like many other white American people and second of all, he wishes Coalhouse to accept his inferiority and the father's superiority in terms of race. The narrator of the story is racist. In the very opening lines of the novel the narrator says 'There were no Negroes. There were no immigrants' (Doctorow, 1976) this shows his subconscious wish that there were no Negroes and no immigrants in America. This is reinforced when he tries to describe his father's job and tries to relate the basis of his father's income as follows: "the best part of Father's income was derived from the manufacture of flags and bunting and other accoutrements of patriotism, including fireworks. Patriotism was a reliable sentiment in the early 1990's (Doctorow, 1976). Zinn remarks that patriotism was always a means to drown class resentment (Zinn, 1997). This was specifically the case with the early twentieth century:

... this year is going to be a year of patriotism and devotion to country. I am glad to know that people in every part of the country mean to be devoted to one flag, the glorious Stars and Stripes; that the people of this country mean to maintain the financial honor of the country as sacredly as they maintain the honor of the flag (Doctorow, 1976).

Patriotism is what the narrator advocates to from the very beginning of the novel. The source of his happiness is his devotion to flag.

One of the elements of the novel is that characters have no name, they are called father and mother and brother. This signifies intimacy among some people who are a family and those who have names are in fact foreigners and aliens. The narrator wants to put emphasis on the fact that family is very important to Americans and those who are not members of the family are not in fact, members of America as a family, they are immigrants from around the world. The family here stands for America itself whose members should be all white and American only as the text might suggest. The narrator places a great deal of emphasis on nationalism. This is reinforced when we see that the opening lines of the novel are all about patriotism and nationality. The concept of family here is an American family only. This patriotism is against assimilation of other races into American society. The racism on the part of American people in the novel is very obvious and evident. The way they look at Coalhouse and his family is nasty and discriminatory. Coalhouse, in order to live in the society, wants to be respected and wants nothing else. He wants to live like any other members of the society in which he lives, but this society marginalizes him and has no respect for him and for his family. He is oppressed in the society. This oppression comes from every member of the society. Not only is Coalhouse marginalized but also his love Sarah is also marginalized. He and Sarah are lovers and want to have a family of their own. They are represented as vagabonds and homeless. The text says about Sarah 'Nobody knew Sarah's last name or thought to ask. Where had she been born, and where had she lived,' (Doctorow, 1976). This sentence says a lot about her marginalization and her otherization. Nothing is clear about her. She is an *other*, another example of the oppressed. When her husband is in the police station because of the racist treatment on the part of American white people towards Coalhouse and his model T car, and the fact that no one is going to represent Coalhouse, she decides to go to the president of the United States on behalf of Coalhouse. Sarah calls out to Jim Sherman impulsively, having taken him for the President. A guard man smashes her hard in the chest with the barrel of his gun and a Secret Service man jumps on top of her. At the hospital, Sarah grows rapidly sick. Within a week Coalhouse's love and world contracts pneumonia and passes away. This is the most tragic thing which happens in the novel. The white police kills Sarah certainly because of her skin color. She was going to petition the United State government on behalf of her love in order to rescue him and her own family but instead they lose their family and all their hope and life. She dies tragically and heroically while trying to save her family from destruction. But the racist white society does everything to ruin her hope, her love, and her family. This racist white society in the novel targets this black family only. As mentioned before there are three families in the novel; two families are white and one is black. The two white families at the end of the novel integrate and this black family is destroyed and ruined simply because of skin colour and discrimination. This family is made *other* and alien. To avenge the death of Sarah and the death of his wishes, Coalhouse walker turns a rebel and does several things in the novel to end this way of looking at him and his representatives who have been made others and have had no society and hope and no comfortable life. whether the actions of Coalhouse Walker is not justifiable or not is left to the readers to decide. For sure the white society is not justifiable in being racist against other races. Among the white society there is one who recognizes the bad treatment of his white people towards Coalhouse and what Coalhouse symbolized. This one was the character called mother's Younger Brother. When Coalhouse turns a rebel, mother's younger brother helps Coalhouse and provides him with explosive materials. The text informs us that 'Younger Brother was totally integrated in their community. He was one of them. He awoke every day into a state of solemn joy' (Doctorow, 1976).

3. CONCLUSION

Having read the Novel *Ragtime* by E. L. Doctorow, we come to this conclusion that the society of the novel is based on the binary relation of self and other and this society has no regards for the *Other*. The Other is not respected and regarded. He/she is treated in a nasty way. In the case of Coalhouse Walker and his family Sarah,

they are both eradicated and annihilated by the society, their family is ruined, their hope has been destroyed, their work, their income, their car, and their lives were mattered nothing to the racist white society in which they lived. The white society wants Coalhouse to accept his own *otherness* and inferiority and to come into terms with it. This is shown in the words of the father. Father believes that Coalhouse didn't know he was a Negro. According to father Walker didn't behave nor speak like a colored man, implying that Coalhouse should be an inferior and an *other*. Father observes that whenever Coalhouse arrived at the back door he gave it a brave blow and whenever admitted would seriously welcome everyone and somehow transport to them the idea that they were Sarah's family, and that his civilities to them merely measured the esteem and deference and admiration he held for her. Father believes that this kind of behavior on the part of Coalhouse will have certain dangers in him. To the knowledge of the father there was something thoughtless about him. This observation of the father is the observation of the white society which does want to marginalize the black races more and more.

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