

Racial Conventions and the Struggle for Identity in Toomer's "Becky"

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Abstract:

In a short sketch called "Becky," Jean Toomer manages to introduce interracial union as a social problem. This type of union is rejected by the society and makes the involved couple vulnerable for further social consequences. As a white woman, Becky should be kept for a white man. Hence, neither the white community nor the black one does tolerate her behavior. Anyhow, this paper will explore the character of Becky and her search for identity through resisting all the racial conventions represented by the mores and restrictions of her society. Becky violates all mores, crosses all borders, and challenges all racial restrictions by having a union with a black man and having two sons as a result of that relationship. However, this woman is driven by her sexual and personal needs that determine her identity as a woman who longs for running her life as she wants. She has the courage to challenge her opponents, the determination to continue her life, and the patience to resist her oppressors.

Key Words: Toomer, Becky, racism, white & black

الأعراف العرقية والنضال من أجل الهوية

في شخصية "بيكي" للكاتب جين تومر

د/ قاسم حسين دهل

قسم اللغة الإنجليزية وآدابها

كلية اللغات والترجمة

جامعة الإمام محمد بن سعود الإسلامية

المستخلص

في قصة قصيرة تحمل اسم الشخصية الرئيسية "بيكي" أستطاع الكاتب جين تومر أن يقدم التزاوج بين الأعراق كمشكلة اجتماعية. هذا النوع من الزواج يرفضه المجتمع ويجعل الزوجين عرضة لتبعات اجتماعية أخرى. وكامرأة بيضاء، لا بد وأن تتزوج "بيكي" من بني جنسها. ومن هنا لا مجتمعها ولا مجتمع السود يمكنهما أن يتسامحا مع التصرف الذي قامت به.

لقد انتهكت "بيكي" الأعراف، وتجاوزت الحدود المسموح بها، وتحدت كل القيود العرفية

بزواجها من رجل أسود وإنجابها لطفلين منه.

وعلى كل حال، فإن هذه المرأة مدفوعة بميولها الشخصية لازمها التصميم على هويتها كامرأة

تطمح لتعيش حياتها كما تريد وتمتلك الشجاعة والإصرار لأجل استمرار الحياة والصبر على مقارعة مضطهديها.

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وهذه الورقة البحثية ستستكشف شخصية "بيكي" من خلال مقاومتها لجميع القيود العرقية

الموجودة في مجتمعها.

Jean Toomer's "Becky" is a sketch included in his collection, Cane. It was first published in The Liberator 5 in October 1922 (Turner 7). The whole story is composed of seven paragraphs, yet the first one is repeated at the end as a refrain that marks the beginning and the end of this story. The story portrays a white woman named Becky who is forsaken by both the white and black communities for she has a union with a black man that results in two Negro sons. Becky, like other women in Cane, does "act impulsively and spontaneously away from the restrictions imposed by conventional religion or social mores against miscegenation" (Neimneh 65).

Driven by personal needs, Becky confronts the social conventions that embody the Southern mores of the United States. Through her challenge for the racial restrictions, she becomes vulnerable to further consequences. In "Becky," Toomer manages to portray "the South's conspiracy to ignore miscegenation" (Bone 60)—a relation that is inevitable when different races live together. Moreover, Becky's narrative shows how "powerless" she is "to change" her situation "Pellegrini 14).

Becky, as a white woman, is supposed to be saved for a white man, but she violates this restriction and has a union with a "nigger." If such an argument is validated, then "the women [including Becky] in Jean Toomer's Cane are objectified to the point that they become damaged [and] thought of only as sexual objects" (Davis 4). Her relationship appears to be full of passion and truth, rather than, as characterized by the white society, "only as products of black male bestiality and its desire to ravish the purity of white womanhood" (McKay 98). Thus, Becky continues to struggle for the sake of her affair and consequently gives birth to two mulatto children. She is cast out and ignored by both races, which pretend to believe in false social conventions. Yet, they act on the contrary; they help her, build her a cabin, bring food for her, and pray for her—all individually and secretly, as the story tells. The people themselves live in a psychological conflict: publicly they pretend to believe in false values, but privately they behave differently. McKay argues:

The community cast Becky out, but yet it builds her a house and feeds her. Such behavior highlights problems of communal hypocrisy and self-righteousness in a society that practices racial and sexual victimization. In her fallen state, she is important to the community, for, through her, it is able to assert its false concepts of religious and moral superiority. (99)

Publicly emphasizing the issue of race by using the word "white" and rejecting Becky's behavior, both the black and white communities express their opinions in the following excerpt:

God-forsaken, insane white shameless, said the white folks' mouths...Poor Catholic poor-white crazy woman, said the black folks' mouths. (Toomer 7)

Hence, “race amalgamation is no longer a white male sexual crime against black female bodies, but white women commingling with black men (Jones 48).

As mentioned above, despite these people’s conception of Becky, both whites and blacks build a one-room cabin for her and her first baby “on the narrow strip of land between the railroad and the road” (Toomer 7). Such a place “between the railroad and the road” becomes a prison for her; people neither see her nor hear her speak. The segregated place she is forced to live in is intended to seclude her, keep her away from the community, and prevent any intercourse with her. Her displacement “does not come about as a result of Becky’s freedom or choosing but as a form of punishment or ostracism for exercising authority over her body and giving birth to a miscegenous child” (Jones 50).

As readers can see how Becky’s rights are confiscated and her opinion becomes unimportant. All that breaks Becky’s silence is her groan when the cabin falls in upon her at the end. The downfall of her cabin signals that this racial issue is complicated and difficult to handle in any community; racism may lead to the collapse of the community in question. Indeed, the consequences of racism are hard to be mended. In his blog post, Teutsch writes that Becky “exists only as a defiled woman who does not have a place within the white or black community” (par. 3).

Indeed, both communities decide to isolate and marginalize Becky; hence, they build her cabin “between the railroad and the road.” Instead, however she becomes an example for others who wish to confront false conventions, challenge oppression and resist racial victimization. Toomer blames both whites and blacks for ignoring their social responsibilities and conspiring to cast Becky out of their community and forcing her to live in isolation. Thus, “Becky finds herself alienated because she surrenders to her desires” (McClellan 22), and her sons reap the same destiny as well.

Isolating Becky gives Toomer a chance to depict the townspeople’s cruelty, most vividly embodied by John Stone. Even his name, “Stone,” suggests stolidity and fossilization. “John Stone, who owned the lumber and the bricks” (Toomer 7) will shoot the man who has stolen them if he knows him. Becky keeps faithful to her black man and does not tell anything about him. Hence, she suffers most and lives a hard life.

As a matter of fact, nature is the only witness to Becky’s suffering and isolation: “The pines whisper to Jesus” (Toomer 7). Nature becomes full of passion and feels for this woman, while her fellow human beings cast her away with neither mercy nor love. Hence, nature becomes an important factor in this story, and its “whisper” may substitute humanity and indicate a support for the outcast in question.

Indeed, Becky’s beauty lies in her loyalty to her man, and not in her features. According to the story, “her eyes were sunken, her neck stringy, her breast fallen” (Toomer 7). Being marginalized may cause more than these physical signs; they are reflections of the mental and psychological struggle Becky lives. Despite these exterior features, yet her loyalty to her man suggests her determination to continue her struggle and stand up against all false values. According to Ngwoko, “her

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insistence on only the black folks as sexual partners (she never had a white child), shows her rebellion against both the white folk and the restrictions imposed on inter-racial liaison by them" (10).

With regard to public behavior, trainmen and other travelers who have heard about Becky throw food and little slips of paper scribbled with prayers toward her cabin. Richard Eldridge argues, "passengers throw papers inscribed with prayers like pilgrims who attach written prayers to trees surrounding Buddhist temples" (231). The similarity between the townspeople's behavior in the West, represented by Becky's society, and the rituals of a spiritual sect in the Far East, represented here by Buddhist people Eldridge refers to, draws the attention to a more complicated relationship—a relation between the East, where lies the origin of slavery, and the West, where is the land of masters. Becky as a white woman belongs to the land of masters while the black man she creates a contact with originally goes back to the East; the land of slavery. Consequently, people of these different and separate cultures should find a way to live their lives happily. They should avoid racism and oppression and rely on understanding and respect to let life continue. People should not treat each other as superior or inferior as depicted in "Becky," but as different and human. Indeed, the message here is clear; Becky's story is actually a microcosm of the larger issue of cultural relationships at any society.

The black and white people build a cabin for Becky, throw out food and prayer-notes, and pray for her individually and secretly, but "no one ever saw her" (Toomer 7). By doing so, she becomes sacred, magic and mysterious. She is like a goddess and her cabin a temple. Accordingly, her sexual relationship transcends what she suffers and signals something divine; this is how to understand the part that the story starts and ends with:

Becky was the white woman who had two Negro sons.
She's dead; they've gone away. The pines whisper to Jesus.
The Bible flaps its leaves with an aimless rustle on her
ground. (Toomer 7, 8)

In "Becky," lays the townspeople's ambivalence. After Becky is driven away from their society, she becomes untouchable, invisible and prayed for. They worship her, although unaware of that worship; they confer on her what should be conferred on their god. At last, after the collapse of her cabin, the mound, like a temple, becomes a mirror that reminds them of their guilt. When the people see the mound, they become scared and retreat, as do the narrator and his companion at the end of the story. So instead of being detached, marginalized, and isolated by these people, Becky becomes attached and connected with them even after her death; they are concerned about what happened to her and her sons.

In this connection, Becky's place becomes holy, which may explain why the pines whisper at the beginning. They whisper for Jesus to help keep this woman and her cabin sacred and saved from the savage and cruel folks. Yet, the cruel and irresponsible deeds of these white and black folks cause the fall of this cabin: "Trains passing shook the ground. The ground

shook the leaning chimney. Nobody noticed it" (Toomer 8). Indeed, it is their guilt and cruelty that cause the fall of this symbol of struggle and worship. A Bible thrown on the mound at the end of the story symbolizes the sacredness of the place as well as the superficial religion of the South. Turner states, "Toomer questioned the harmonies and values of his society...." (134). Indeed, racism "corrupts religion in this narrative. At its worst, it creates the moral blindness that engulfs an entire community and justifies the wanton acts of human tragedy" (McKay 101) that takes place at the end.

Anyhow, Becky's sons add another dimension to the story. After the first one is born, Becky disappears and stays isolated in her cabin. The white and black townspeople try to ignore her existence. Five years later, Hugh Jourdon, a character mentioned in the story, sees the first boy carrying a baby. Hence, the whole town learns that "Becky has another baby" (Toomer 8). The second baby affirms Becky's determination to defy this racial restriction. This second baby signifies an additional threat to these superficial races. Though they try to ignore Becky's existence, the child affirms the truth of her existence and life.

The two boys represent a new American generation resulting from a racial union. They are sullen and cunning; qualities needed to confront a world of injustice and racial restriction. The personified pines pray for these boys in their difficult struggle for survival. Toomer describes and "ultimately cares" about "the conscious and unconscious impact of racism on black men's capacity to live out freer and more pleasurable" (Nagy 14). When the two mulattos leave their mother's one-room cabin, which is too small for three persons, people begin to think that Becky is dead and buried by her sons. So, they stop throwing food. Later on, they discover she is still alive, and her sons should find a way to make a living. They should strive to create "ways of being free from these structures of oppression" (Nagy 126).

Consequently, the new generation continues their mother's struggle and becomes her representatives in a world where a woman is denied even to have a voice. "They [drift] around from job to job" (Toomer 8). They become a danger to those who cast out their mother because of them, and who start to wonder how to accept these two Negroes living among them in their community: "We, who had cast out their mother because of them, could we take them in?" (Toomer 8). The two Negroes express their mother's opinion when they shout, "Godam the white folks, godam the niggers" (Toomer 8). Such circumstances could lead to violence. These two boys answer the white and black folks' questions and denial "by shooting up two men and leaving town" (Toomer 8).

The mulattos struggle to live; they do not hesitate to kill their enemies. They react to the townspeople's denial, oppression and ignorance through violence. They become dangerous and defy this racial community, adopting violence that will lead to new challenges for this community. Then, the sons leave to free themselves from the world of injustice and persecution.

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After the boys' departure, the community finds out that Becky is alive, for "smoke curled up from her chimney" (Toomer 8). The folks resume bringing food for her. Soon they stop because of a new fear: if she is dead, then a ghost is living in her cabin—and if she is alive, then it is a miracle she has lived without food, lost sons, and survived the struggle. Patricia Chase points out that "[Becky's] survival for so long in the face of rejection and scorn proves her strength and the validity of her existence" (394). And both whites and blacks are forced to face their guilt and cruelty, which they do not want to admit.

Finally, Becky is a victim of her society. She is cast away and lives isolated, for she has two Negro sons who have to struggle to demand their right to live in this world. Yet, in the story she stands as a goddess. Although she is despised by the people who try to ignore her existence at the beginning, they become her worshippers later. They build her a cabin, throw her food and pray for her.

Time has proven the folly of the townspeople's reaction to Becky. People have to accept miscegenation; races that coexist should build their relations on the basis of respect and understanding. Racism is a fatal disease that corrupts our lives, values and morals.

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