

THE RECONSTRUCTION OF ROSA PARKS'S TRAUMATIC CHILDHOOD IN *ROSA PARKS: MY STORY*

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Abstract

This paper is an analysis of Rosa Parks's traumatic childhood in her autobiography entitled *Rosa Parks: My Story*. Her experience of racism and discrimination at early ages, reinforcement of Jim Crow laws, and the Ku Klux Klan's actions in the black communities are shades that have affected Rosa Parks's life. The poor education she receives shows not only her personal position of inferiority as a black child in the United States, but more that of all African American children on the American soil.

Key Words: African American children, Jim Crow laws, Ku Klux Klan, bad education

Introduction

This paper opens with an outstanding evidence that “*only humans are supposed to be able to reflect on who they are and at the same time be obliged to take seriously a questioning of their own identity.[...]Literature is the space in which questions about the nature of personal identity are most provocatively articulated.* (Bennett and Royle: 2004, 125). This fundamental question of one's identity is raised by Rosa Parks in her autobiography, *Rosa Parks: My Story* which is an account of all forms of stereotypes experienced throughout her childhood.

Like in most of autobiographies, Rosa Parks recalls all her efforts devoted to describing what Lejeune has termed: *“la réécriture d’une enfance et d’une histoire que nous remanions tous en récit.”* (Lejeune cité par Bergez et al: 1990, 68). The author reconstructs her own life in order to appear as an illustration, an eye-witness of what happened to African Americans in post emancipation era. Her experience with the Ku Klux Klan in a Jim-crow society has really traumatized her childhood. Parks insists that she and her people were victim of these nightmarish childhood and traumatic facts just because they were black in a white society: *“During my childhood years [...] I was deeply hurt by the hate that some white people, even children, felt toward me and my people because of our skin.”* (p.71). The author’s evocation of her dark childhood is the background of our concern in this paper. The following question helps us conduct this study: Is Rosa Parks’s *Rosa Parks: My Story* a description of the author’s own dark childhood experience?

In this study we refer to the way Rosa Parks is involved in the drastic learning of Jim Crow laws that resulted in encounter with Ku Klux Klan which is one of the most racist and supremacist organization, her denial of equal education with white children by the southern boards of education because of her skin color.

As yet unexplored autobiography, we are unable to provide the reader with the literature review and that we use any source liable to help us exploit and conduct the writing of this paper. We resort then to New Historicism to help analyze the historical contours of Rosa Parks’s childhood which not only her own experience, but also the experience of all children of her time.

1-The Drastic Learning of Jim Crow Laws

Defined by Lejeune as: *“Un récit rétrospectif en prose qu’une personne réelle fait de sa propre existence.”* (Lejeune: 1996, 14), Rosa Parks’s autobiography, too, goes back to her dark past by recalling bygone episodes of her life. The incident with a white child, Franklin first stands as an evidence when she argues:

“I saw Franklin. He threatened to hit me, and I picked up a brick to hit him” she scolded me very severely about how I had to learn about that white folks were white folks and that you just didn’t talk to white folks or act that way around white people. You didn’t retaliate if they did something to you. I got very upset about that. I felt I was very much in my rights to try to defend myself if I could. My grandmother remarked that I was too high-strung and that if I wasn’t careful, I would probably be lynched before I was twenty years old. (pp.22-23).

Rosa Parks’s grandmother’s words are a lesson taught to her beloved granddaughter about the way to behave in a Jim Crow society. What the author dramatizes here is the way African American children are victimized at early ages. That is to say that when white children know peace and enjoy all citizenship rights, black children however know fear and enjoy no rights. It is worth acknowledging that the white supremacists struggle to maintain the status quo by hampering black Americans to enjoy all rights of citizenship. The sentence *“I felt I was very much in my rights to try to defend myself if I could”* is an illustration of Rosa Parks’s involvement in the struggle for civil rights at early ages. This means that her struggle for the black race did not start in the 1960s when all African Americans were engaged in the fight, but dates back in the 1920s.

What we discover in scrutinizing this autobiography is that Rosa Parks has grown up in the fight for full integration. Her strategy of playing with white children, fighting them back when she is first fought have been ways to find a place in the American society and be accepted with her black

color. Unfortunately, these strategies are always rejected by her grandfather who thinks that separation between her grandchildren and white children is the best way to protect them, since the socialization of both is not safe for his beloved grandchildren. His bitterness is the result of fear that such a friendship represents for his offsprings:

My grandfather did not want my brother and me to play with white children. The white overseer of the Hudson plantation had some children just about my age and my brother's age. When we wanted to play with them or when they wanted to play with us, grandfather would be very hostile. He made stay away from them. We wouldn't even have to be close to them. We might be sitting on the ground under a shade of a wagon, playing, and he would yell at us leave around from them. (pp.16-17).

As it can be seen, the reader is introduced to Rosa Parks and her brother's innocence which is visible through their misunderstanding of separation with white playmates imposed on them by their grandfather. They are frustrated by this deprivation because they have no idea of the danger to sympathize with white children. This passage also purports that the Rosa Parks' grandfather's worry with the sentence "leave around from them" is an evidence of his fear of the segregated system. He is thus aware that a dramatic incident with these white playmates can result in his grandchildren's punishment. In fact, a black child who commits a crime whatever his age is sharply punished, because age is an optional factor for the segregated system, as Rosa Parks's aunt corroborates it through the following passage:

Annie Mae and I were picking berries in the lot. There were white homes nearby. A little boy was looking at us and said, "you nigger better leave them berries alone." So she and I started at him, telling him what we would do to him. There was a fence separating us from him, but we said, "If you come over here, we'll give you a good beating." Later we were telling Aunt Fannie about the little boy who got after us about picking berries and what we told him. She said, "You all crazy? You keep your mouths shut. If he'd gone and told somebody, they would have had y' all lynched and all we could do was cry a little bit about it." (p.51).

Aunt Fannie's purpose in this passage is to warn Rosa Parks of the danger that lies before them if only they brutalize white child. She insists on the fact that white Americans can kill a black child who dares hurt a white child, because in America, "killing a nigger didn't really qualify as a murder, you could only accuse somebody of a murder if they killed a human being." (Lester: 1994, 111). The phrase "you all crazy?" is not only a spontaneous reaction which refer to Aunt Fannie's fear, but also a justification of the fact that white racists do not care about black children's lives. The sentence "You keep your mouths shut" is a lesson of Blacks' subjugation to the segregated system taught to Rosa Parks by her aunt whose intention is to protect her from a gruesome murder. The term "lynching" refers them to one of the current punishments that white southerners inflict on African Americans. These punishments, the author argues, are the only way to remind African Americans of their inferior position in the white man's world.

In the southern states, Jim Crow laws reminisce about white supremacy to African Americans. The evocation of words like "white" and "colored" that visibly promote segregation between the two conflicting races in this great nation, urge many black authors like Rosa Parks in this autobiography to question this discrimination. In a sense, Rosa Parks takes the example of water to question the difference that exists between the water drunk by Whites and that drunk by Blacks when she puts:

The public water fountains in Montgomery had signs that said “White” and “Colored.” Like millions of black children, before me and after me, I wondered if “White” water tasted different from “Colored” water. I wanted to know if “White” water was white and if “Colored” water came in different colors. It took me a while to understand that there was no difference in the water. It had the same color and taste. The difference was who got to drink it from which public fountains. (p.46).

This passage sheds light on the perplexity that haunts Rosa Parks’s candid spirit when she first encounters segregation signs “white” and “colored” on public water fountains. One may notice that water taste is invested with an ambiguous understanding in the character’s mind because she is subject to an inner questioning about the true taste of “white” and “colored” water. From “water” the author shows equality that exists between individuals regardless of the color of skin. She means that whether you are black or white, poor or rich, president or ordinary citizen, water we drink has the same color, the same taste, but the difference lies on the people who think to be different from others.

Jim Crow laws actually encrust on black people like parasites, similar to quids which encrusts the body not to bring relief and comfort, but to bring a permanent nuisance. Because of these laws, Rosa Parks learns the truth about being black Americans on the American soil and especially in the South part of the country. As a young black girl, she uncovers that like her black counterparts, she, too, is casted at the lowest level of social ladder by white racists as a subwoman without civil rights and dignity. The latter learns that these unfair laws aim at placing white Americans on pedestal by overestimating and considering them as superior to black Americans. Apart from Jim Crow laws, she also encounters the Ku Klux Klan, the most supremacist organization whose mission is to support white supremacy with brutality and murders of African Americans who dare oppose the segregated system and white supremacy.

2-The Negative Impact of the Ku Klux Klan

Rosa Parks shows that black veterans’ return in Pine Level where she lives increases Klansmen’s activities, because as they served their country and in return, were rewarded with scorn and racism, their presence was more viewed as an uneasiness by the white racists who considered them as vulgar pests. In this context, the Ku Klux Klan finds its role justified and inescapable, as they remind black veterans coming from World War I does not mean that they were equal to Whites:

I was six, I was old enough to realize that we were actually not free. The Ku Klux Klan was riding through the black community, burning churches, beating up people, killing people. At the time I didn’t realize why there was so much Klan activity, but later I learned that it was because African American soldiers were returning from World War I and acting as if they deserved equal rights because they had served their country. The white didn’t like blacks having that kind of attitude, so they started doing all kinds of violent things to black people to remind them that they didn’t have any rights. (p.30).

Rosa Parks recalls here, a historical occurrence about black veterans whose heroism and commitment to their country involvement in World War I are not given credit. Consequently, one notices the climate of violence prevailing in the black community of Pine Level when the Klansmen struggle against African Americans’ defiance to segregated system. They impose a kind of curfew in all black communities, especially on black veterans with a view to confiscating their civil rights. Because of this violent campaign of the knights of the Ku Klux Klan, the six-year-old Rosa Parks is traumatized by hate crimes perpetrated in her community such as “burning churches”, “beating up people”, and

“killing people.” This permanent terror shows how she is subject to fear, psychosis and trauma, because her inner infantile peace is troubled by these violent acts:

I was young and hadn't done much reading about racism, but I did a lot of listening. I heard a lot about black people being found dead and nobody knew what happened. Other people would just pick them up and bury them. Sometimes I'm asked how I lived with that kind of fear, but that was the only way I knew and Pine Level was the only place I knew. (p.32).

These lines show how violence and racism are rooted in Rosa Parks's community. As a child, Rosa Parks uncovers precociously the true face of the South made of horrors tightly linked to the Ku Klux Klan's hideous activities. Of course, the young girl learns that any African American who dares oppose the segregated system jeopardizes not only his life, but also that of his family because the Klansmen endeavor to defend the white supremacy. The sentence: “*The Klan bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church that killed four beautiful, innocent girls at worship.*” (Carson and Shepard: 2008, 91) is an evidence of the Klu Klux Klan's terror against African Americans in the post emancipation era.

In the same connection, the dramatization of the “night” in accordance with the Klansmen's awful activities has been for Rosa Parks a way to recall straightforwardly how this artifice does not only increase tenfold African Americans' fear in their community, but also compel them to obey what they dictates to them. Her confession, “*I wasn't going to be caught asleep.*” (p.31) is an indication of fear promoted by “night” which worsens her psychosis. Obviously, the Klansmen's terror at “night” recalled by the latter, here, is a historical occurrence recorded in the American history, especially that of the South. For just like her, Benjamin Evayoulou states: “*The physical threat represented by the Ku Klux Klan takes shape in ... when her own house is burnt down by a half-dozen white-sheeted and looted figures.*” (Evayoulou: 2009, 45). The climax of the Ku Klux Klan's terror in the post emancipation urged many Blacks to combat fear and fight back the white man. Rosa Parks shows, for instance, how her grandfather is ready to defend her family against the Klansmen:

At one point the violence was so bad that my grandfather kept his gun – a double-barreled shotgun – close at all time. And I remember we talked about the how just in case the Klansmen broke into our house, we should go to bed with our clothes on so we would be ready to run if we had to. I can remember my grandfather saying, “I don't know how long I would last if they came breaking in here, but I'm getting the first one who comes through the door:” (p.30).

Here, Rosa Parks renders her grandfather's self-defense with the sentence “my grandfather kept his gun – a double-barreled shotgun – close at all time.” This act can be viewed as the survival instinct which leads the author's grandfather to be ready to die with the weapon in his arm. This act intertwines with Malcolm X's viewpoint about the supremacy of the white man when he argues: “*The point I make is that all over the world, the old day of standing in fear and trembling before the almighty white man is gone.*” (Malcolm X: 1963, 26). In this connection, the author's grandfather's self-defense is caused by the anguish to be the next black family targeted by the hooded Ku Klux Klan riders who burst into the black community, brandishing their rifles and shotguns. This decision to fight back the white man is not only a simple defense of his family, but a fight for recognition, respect, and integration of the black American.

As it can be seen, every African American has his or her mind undermined by traumatic experiences that once surfacing trouble inner peace, as it is the case of Rosa Parks in Rosa Parks: My

Story. This dark influence of the Ku Klux Klan is permanent in the life of every black southerner whose communities are often targeted by the Klansmen's attacks. Rosa Parks shows that her encounter with the Ku Klux Klan is made of fear, psychosis, and trauma. Likewise, education is also traumatizing for author who is deprived of good education because of black skin color.

3-The Deprivation of a Good Education

Rosa Parks does not escape from the machinations of southern boards of education, aiming at giving a bad education to black children. For, she learns in poor black schools in the South of the United States settled in churches, farmers' cabinets or stores which are places not adequate for acquiring a good education. Her elementary school is located in Mount Zion Church which is a schoolhouse that contains the all six grades in the same room. She illustrates the poor conditions she has been learning in these terms: "*Black schools in the South were small and crowded. Usually there weren't even desks to work on.*" (p. 27). What Rosa Parks emphasizes, here, is the shocking reality of the pernicious doctrine of "separate but equal" which separates white children's education from that of black children. In fact, through the southern boards of education monitoring this wrong separation with a racist connotation, Rosa Parks demonstrates that white schools are supported by the southern boards of education, whereas black schools rely on the black community involvement, as she puts it:

The larger boys would go out and cut the wood and bring it in. Sometimes a parent would load a wagon up with some wood and bring it to the school, and the boys would unload the wagon and bring the wood inside. They didn't have to do this at the white school. The town or county took care of heating at the white school. I remember that when I was very young they built a new school for the white children not very far from where we lived, and of course we had to pass by it. It was a nice brick building, and it still stands there today. I found out later that it was built with public money, including taxes paid by both whites and blacks. Black people had to build and heat their own schools without the help of the town or county or state. (pp.26-27).

This passage demonstrates that the black community has to organize activities for the existence of the black schools, whereas the city, the county, or the state care about the white children's schools. In other words, Rosa Parks is hurt, and her bitterness grows bigger and bigger when she discovers that the city, county or state public money is used to only better white children's schools and learning conditions, while black schools rely on the involvement of black children and their parents. The author insists on the comparison between white children's schools and those of black children with a view to showing how unjust the southern boards of education are towards black children:

Another difference between our school and the white school was that we went for only five months while they went for nine months. Many of the black children were needed by their families to plow and plant in the spring and harvest in the fall. Their families were sharecroppers, like my grandparents' neighbors [...] So they need their children to help. At the time I started school, we went only from late fall to early spring. (pp.27-28).

It is clear that Rosa Parks's intention is to give proofs of injustice inflicted on black children and to draw the readers' attention to the racist implication of these educational institutions. In some ways, one can talk about the influence of "separate but equal" doctrine which reserves exclusively a bad education to black children and a good one to white children. In fact, the sentence "we went for only five months while they went for nine months." is an evidence of the efficiency of the "separate but

equal” doctrine which encourages different realities between black and white schools. When the author compares the duration of the study period in her black school and that of the white schools, she shed light on the inferiority of Blacks in the United States. That is to say that for white Americans, having the same number of months for their children’s education with black ones is, in some ways, declaring their equality. Rosa Parks insists on the contrast between Whites’ and Blacks’ schools in these terms:

I realized that we went to a different school than the white children and that the school we went to was not as good as theirs. Ours didn’t have any glass windows had glass panes. Some of the white children rode a bus to school. There were no school buses for black children. (p.29).

In this passage, Rosa Parks is shocked about the contrast between the black children’s learning conditions and those of white children. When she put emphasis on the sentence: “The school we went to was not as good as their”, she shows her bitterness about these differences, but more denounces these injustices, these wrong practices of the white race which are qualified by many African Americans as evils of the society. In other words, she condemns southern boards of education which have an unflagging interest and endeavor to defend the pernicious doctrine of “separate but equal” which imposes inferior education on black children. The latter thus contend that school has been the place where she has learned more about discrimination, segregation, and racism, because the black skin color means an inferior race in the southern part of the United States: “*I was aware of the big difference between blacks and whites by the time I started school.*” (p.28).

Regarding all these unfair factors that gangrene the black children’s education, the author exposes her physical, moral, and psychological shocks when she discovers that to be a black child is synonym of rejection in the southern educational system.

Conclusion

At the end of this paper, one discovers that the reconstruction of Rosa Parks’s childhood in *Rosa Parks: My Story* is made of dark and nightmarish memories related to the learning of Jim Crow laws. It is clear that all forms of brutalization experienced by African Americans in the South of the United States derive from the white American’s fear to see the oppressed having and rejoicing over their civil rights. Concerning her encounter with the Ku Klux Klan, she is in the throes of fear, psychosis, and trauma caused by Klansmen’s upsurge in the black community where black churches are burned and African Americans oppressed or killed. Finally, under the pernicious doctrine of “separate but equal”, Rosa Parks is shocked to be denied a good education because of her black skin whereas the southern boards of education grant a good education and good learning conditions only to white children. All Blacks’ hideous stereotypes demonstrate that Rosa Parks’s childhood is a reference to traumatic episodes that spoil all black children’s mind in the United States.

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