

Stereotypical Images of Blacks in American Society: A Study of Paul Beatty's *The Sellout*

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Abstract

Paul Beatty is a man Booker prize-winning novelist who has discussed the stereotypical images of blacks in detail in his novels, especially *The Sellout*. He is the first American author who received this prestigious prize in 2016 for *The Sellout*. In his novels, particularly *The Sellout*, he has delineated the sufferings of Afro-Americans in American society. He has discussed that there is prejudice and animosity against blacks that still prevails in America. The white Americans have used race as a weapon to power and rule over blacks. Through various stereotypical images, blacks in American society are dehumanized and demoralized. Beatty reflects that there are many negative stereotypes against black Americans. The whites use it to undermine the identity of blacks and consider them inferior. The white Americans have created false stereotypes of blacks as evil, dirty, stupid, and weak. In this way, they have been demonized and marginalized. Afro-Americans have confronted this problem for generations, and it creates difficulty in their lives to live a better life. Beatty has presented an accurate picture of black people's experiences in America in his novel. This novel will be analysed from the perspective of Dr Cornell West.

Keywords: Stereotype, prejudice, African-American, blacks, identity

Introduction

Stereotype is a general belief against a group of people through which they are belittled. It is considered true for every person in the group and includes the traits, behaviour, skills, and physical appearance. Stereotype helps the people to categorize themselves in different groups. By stereotyping, we understand that a person has a range of qualities that we think other group members have. It is generally based on race, ethnicity, sex, age, occupation, skin colour, etc. These stereotypes can be positive, like women making fewer complaints about physical pain, or negative, like when the dominant group uses it to empower the subordinate and suggests that the subordinate group is lazy and inept. The stereotype is a generalization in which we treat all the people of a group in the same way, irrespective of their individual differences. African-Americans face this problem from generation to generation, and it creates difficulty in their lives to live a better life. Beatty has presented an accurate picture of blacks' experience in America in his novel. Paul Beatty has shown by excessive use of stereotypes that how nonsensical these are.

Paul Beatty's Man-Booker Prize-winning fourth novel, *The Sellout*, was published in 2015. Beatty, in this novel, discusses the racism and stereotypical images of blacks in America. The story of this novel rotates around the unnamed black narrator. As the novel opens, he is in Supreme Court for trial because he wants to bring Dickens, a city of ghettos, back on the map. He is under the charge of segregation and slavery of his friend Hominy Jenkins. In the prologue, Beatty draws a picture of stereotypes through the narrator when the narrator says,

This may be hard to believe, coming from a black man, but I've never stolen anything. Never cheated on my taxes or at cards. Never snuck into the movies or failed to give back the extra change to a drugstore cashier indifferent to the ways of mercantilism and minimum-wage expectations. I've never burgled a house. Held up a liquor store. Never boarded a crowded bus or subway car, sat in a seat reserved for elderly, pulled out my gigantic penis and masturbated to satisfaction with a perverted, yet somehow crestfallen, look on my face. (3)

These opening lines of the novel introduce it through. The narrator here provides lists of stereotypes that white Americans have for black Americans. The narrator makes the reader to confront the racial stereotypes. For example, it is believed that black persons are criminal. They steal things and continuously engage in mean activities. The reader has been exposed to different stereotypes that the narrator uses here. The narrator believes that those who do not think themselves to be racist hold such beliefs and opinions for blacks.

The narrator tells that every race has a motto, but their ethnicity has no motto. Dr. Cornel West, in his book *Race Matters*, has delineated that there is lack of intellectual leadership in the black community. He criticizes the internal struggle between black communities as a reason for their decline. West talks about the internal and external obstacles facing the black people. African-Americans in America quarrel with one another. Another stereotype is that black person thinks that he is better than other black persons. The narrator has heard it many times. In the prologue, there are discussions on stereotypes about blacks having a large penis and smoking marijuana inside the Supreme Court.

The African-Americans have to suffer a lot due to stereotypes they face everywhere. The novel is set in the background of the Presidency of Barack Obama. The narrator recalls the incident when he is at a zoo and listens to a woman calling her many friends money. She uses this stereotype for blacks and makes the narrator laugh. The narrator is before the Supreme Court and takes marijuana. He thinks that he will not be charged more because he has committed a serious crime of slaveholding. The narrator remembers that the problem with the black community is that they do not have a good enough motto. Black Americans have individual mottos. In the court, a black woman tries to make the narrator feel guilty, but the narrator says that

I understand now that the only time black people don't feel guilty is when we have actually done something wrong, because that relieves us of the cognitive dissonance of being black and innocent, in a way the prospect of going to jail becomes a relief. (Beatty 18)

In these lines, the narrator says that a black woman slaps him and wants to make him feel guilty. He says that he does not feel guilty because he is charged with a terrible crime and is in Supreme Court. It relieves him of the cognitive dissonance created by being both black and innocent in the face of a racist society that criminalizes black society.

Moreover, the stereotypical word 'nigger' that is used for blacks, is mentioned by Beatty in the novel. At Dum Dum Intellectuals Meeting, the narrator reveals his intention to bring back the Dickens, but he is mocked and called The Sellout by Foy. Foy Cheshire, a cofounder of the Dum Dum Donut Intellectuals, declares that he has rewritten the book of Mark Twain, in which he has replaced the word nigger. The narrator does not agree with it and wants the children to know about the history of blacks. "This is serious. Brother Mark Twain uses the 'n-word' 219 times. That's. 68 'n-words' per page in toto (Beatty 97)." Through the narrator, Beatty displays that people like Foy should not blame Twain. Instead, they should let the children know the word 'nigger' that means a contemptuous person of black skin. In their lives, children will one day listen to this word. So he wants the children to design accordingly using stereotypes.

The most extreme type of stereotype is when the narrator visits Mississippi, the deepest white America, with his father to experience direct racism. They visit to a gas station, and then the narrator's father engages himself in 'reckless eyeballing,' which the narrator understands and says

Thanks to years of my father's black vernacular pop quizzes and an Ishmael Reed book he kept on top of the toilet for years, I knew that "reckless eyeballing" was the act of black male deigning to look at Southern white female. (Beatty 176)

In these lines, we are told about reckless eyeballing. It is used for black males when they look towards a white woman in a lecherous way. The narrator's father asks the narrator to blow whistle at the white woman. When the narrator fails to do so, his father gets irritated and says, "You are supposed to wolf whistle! Like this....." Being black the narrator is expected to blow the whistle like a wolf. This is the moment when Beatty has used stereotypes to the most extreme degree.

The narrator once is hanging around Marpessa's house. He makes Marpessa taste the Satsuma fruit. When they start loving each other, the narrator accepts himself as a frigid person. This word is stereotypically used for women. Marpessa, the beloved of the narrator, wants him to make her laugh by jokes. She reveals the three stereotypical qualities attributed to a black man.

Every black male, I don't care what shade or political persuasion he is, secretly thinks he can do one of three things better than anyone in the world: play basketball, rap, or tell jokes.

Beatty, in these lines, shows other stereotypical images of blacks. It is assumed that every black male is able to play basketball. They are considered as a perfect person in this game. Blacks are known for having knowledge and playing rap music. West accepts that rap music helps the blacks to be united and relieve their pain from oppression. Marpessa, too believes that blacks are well enough to tell jokes and asks to the narrator to make him laugh and have sex with her.

Conclusion

In short, we can say that the novel discusses in detail about stereotypes against blacks. They not only make the reader laugh but carry the harmful effects with them. The best way to fight stereotypes is not to avoid them, as was done by Foy in the novel. In America, the whites always use a small number of stereotypes to damage the reality of different races, limit their culture and ignore the diversity in the group. The white Europeans tend to consider themselves superior to blacks. They constructed these stereotypes at the time of slavery. The impact of these stereotypes causes problems and difficulty for African-Americans. Beatty shows that erasing stereotypes is not a solution to the problem of racism. The problem will exist if we pretend these not to have existed. Paul Beatty uses satire, irony to show how ridiculous these stereotypes really are. Beatty reveals that these stereotypes are still affecting black Americans.

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