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Fatherhood and Changing Patterns in the Roles of Black Fathers

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Abstract

The Afro-American writers of the slavery- era like Harriet Jacobs, Douglass, etc reflect the absence of the black males as fathers of their children. Over the period in the late 19th and early 20th century, the change in this situation can be noticed in the writings of James Weldon and others. In the modern era, the concept of fatherhood has become uniquely important both in the white and black communities. The increased ratio of divorce, birth from unwed mothers, acceptance of cohabitation, has forced many children to live without their fathers. Though the whole country faces the problem of absent fathers, it is acute in the black communities. Concentrating on how the concept of fatherhood is constructed and why it matters so much now, this paper explores the changing roles that the black fathers play in the families. It primarily focuses on whether their role is present or absent in the everyday life affair. It studies why African American fathers are invisible or absent players from behind. It makes a thematic analysis of the selected texts of three different eras: slavery, post-slavery and modern using by using racism, an African American perspective. The study suggests that the black fathers stay in a supportive network of their families in contrast to the stereotypical fathers. Excavating the reasons for the changing modes of the roles of fatherhood in the African American family structure it recommends the necessity of reducing the gap between fathers and children.

Keywords: African American, Father, stereotypical, Absent, Invisible, Present, Changing roles

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Introduction

This project studies the changing patterns in the roles of the Black males as the fathers in some selected texts of three different times: slavery, post-slavery, and the modern period. The study briefly concentrates on some aspects of fatherhood from these texts: Narrative of the Life of Fredrick Douglass: An American Slave (1845) by Fredrick Douglass, The Autobiography of an Ex-Slave (p.1912) written by James Weldon, and Barack Obama's Of Thee I Sing (2010).

The present ontological position of African American fathers is different from the fathers found elsewhere. The non-whites see them as weird. Their family roles always get questioned. The socio-political structure of the US reduces them to just the occasional visitors in the family. They are supposed to have a marginal role in the everyday affairs of their family. They have no less dedication to their children in comparison to the fathers of other family groups. C. Z. Ellerbe (2018) states that Black fathers are more involved than Hispanic dads and share more responsibilities and generally co-parent better than white or Hispanic nonresidential fathers (1158), people suppose them to be inattentive to their siblings and the spouses. Father images of the African Americans are understood quite negatively in the social milieu. But quite recently the patterns of the roles of fathers have dramatically changed. The then US President Barack Obama's series of address in different dates during his tenure and the mention of his own experience of not getting his father's love and care focus on the importance of becoming a father. Addressing the youths, he stressed the need of accepting the roles of responsible and loving fathers.

Despite the realization of change in the patterns of the roles of fathers in the Black communities, an important issue to be discovered is the reason why the negative image of the Black males gets so embedded in the white people's psyche. The reasons lie in many social circumstances. This paper studies the socio-political, economic, racial, and several other reasons of this negative image of the Black males as the fathers in the American family structures. Together, it discusses how these patterns have changed over the times. The study mainly focuses on finding the answers to the following questions:

Primary questions

1. What changes have taken place in the role of African American fatherhood over the times?

- 2. Why do the whites stereotype the black fathers?
- 3. How have the changes occurred?

Secondary questions

1. What keeps the black fathers away from their responsible roles as fathers?

2. Why does the present-day focus on fatherhood matter so much?

This study delves into these questions to get satisfactory answers. It has gathered the information needed by going through the articles conceptually near to the present study.

Objectives of the Study

The axiology of making a research work is to enrich the area with a new finding. It seeks to go to the depth of the myths about the absence of African American fathers. This study is expected to bring out some reasons of the changes in the patterns of the roles of fatherhood in the African American family structure. It assumes the finding it comes with can help the scholars understand the racial, sociopolitical, and other social problems prevalent in the African American setting.

Methodology

This study is a qualitative research that uses secondary data for its analysis. It uses the text books as primary data. It is mainly a thematic analysis of the sources gathered here. It examines the contents put forth in the literature review section and makes a genealogical study of how patterns of fatherhood have changed over time. It is library-based research rather than the field visit which uses the primary data. It embraces the insights of the race theorists and the socio-political thinkers as a theoretical lens to interpret the primary texts it has selected for the study here.

Literature Review

The literature review of this project concerns the critics who have given their thoughts on the position of black fathers in their family. The revisiting of this literature is to trace the historical status of the Black males in family affairs. These reviews provide a ground for setting a new direction for this project by finding a gap from what these critics have already claimed. It revisits the critics who are conceptually similar or near this project.

Fatherhood and its Meaning

The definitions of fatherhood differ across the culture, ethnic groups, and the socio-political consciousness of the ones who define the term. Nease and Austin (2011) remark that definitions of fatherhood have largely been neglected throughout the world and history (p.94). Fatherhood is generally taken as parenthood. Traditionally, the notion of fatherhood suggests that fathers are the providers, protectors, and disciplinary heads rather than the nurturers. However, these concepts are being replaced with a new way of thinking. Clayton et al. (2003) opine that recent discourse on fatherhood reiterates the importance of engaged fathers on the positive outcomes of their children (p.91). Fathers' role in rearing the children is as important as the mothers in every community. Children expect love, care, and support from both. Social structure and expectations also stress the necessity of the active presence of fathers and mothers in growing the children up. A mother takes care of her children in the very early years and then comes the role of fathers to take care of them. Children look at their fathers on how they connect them with the people outside their home. A son follows his father as a role model in maintaining his good relationship with friends and other social members. Similarly, a daughter seeks protection and safety from her father while moving her steps ahead in different fields. A wife also seeks her husband to emotionally and financially support her in her everyday domestic chores. In this sense, the father's role plays a significant effect on children's future.

Black Males' Position as Fathers in the Slavery Era

When we look back at the position of the African American males in the slavery period that spans roughly from1746 to 1865, the white community does not provide them a social acceptance in their role as active and responsible fathers. As a racial minority, Black men are collectively constructed as "dead beat" fathers despite the fact that a certain number of unresponsive fathers exist in every racial group (Randles, 2013, p. 864). The Black males do not live in the family of their own. As they could be sold like animals by their masters, the question of their marriage was beyond imagination. Quite strange to hear, the majority of the babies born from the black women slaves were brought up by the mothers alone as the biological fathers were the white males themselves who could not accept the baby as their own. Such babies were Mama's babies. Papas were uncertain like Hortense Spiller's (1973) essay "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe" depicts. The US is the country where a great

percent of black children are born each year into homes that are headed by single women. This implies that the black fathers are absent from the roles of parenting, too. Such babies later serve as the slaves of the whites. This goes from generation to generation. The blacks are the subject of racial segregation. Their roles as fathers are quite liminal. The Black males do not and cannot define fatherhood; other bodies define it as Julian (2007) asserts that Black fatherhood especially exists within the context and concerning several other social factors that help to define the meaning of fatherhood; it is often defined by other people, namely, the mothers of their children, the courts, and research on divorced white men (p. 595).

This shows that fatherhood in black communities is not defined by the Black males themselves. It gets defined by Black mothers, other communities and institutions.

The Black males in the slavery period often were accused of not becoming the responsible and loving fathers of their babies. This charge was absurd in itself because there are no evidences of Black fathers hating their children. Ellebre's claim above depicts Black fatherhood is one that has always included providing, caring, nurturing, and instructing children according to the social norms of the community. Research tells us, however, that many Black fathers are deeply engaged with their children, and physical separation is not always synonymous with lack of father involvement (Dixon, 2017, p. 3). Fathers who thought they could not financially contribute to their children would make their presence occasional in the family. But it was not true that they were negligent to their children.

The institution of slavery was the reason why the Black males as fathers were stereotyped. Because of racism, the institution of marriage had become weak in the black communities. Clayton et al. (2003) contend that marriage for black people was weakly established and therefore more vulnerable to societal changes (p. 61). This is the reason that concept of black fatherhood is also very weakly formed. Loseke blames that Black father was made weak from the policy level as the institutions dedicated to improve the relationship between fathers and sons had not been able to come out of the imagined narratives of Black males as unsupportive. He claimed that the social constructions of Black fatherhood or "formula stories," i.e. "the imagined characteristics of disembodied types" of Black fathers are produced in the public policy arena. These narratives are consequential in a sense that in these narratives the imagined characteristics of the targets of policy or law are used to justify policy decisions rather than addressing the real problems (Loseke, 2007, pp. 661-662).

As the fathers' position was an absent one from the roles of parenting, the concept of growing the children up however was not so weak. There was the practice of community involvement in rearing children successfully. Though the way of entire responsibility of taking care of babies was not as per the understanding of the dynamics of nuclear families, it was traditionally an inclusive one. It was an extended network of the family that also included grandparents or the elderly citizens who took responsibilities of taking care of babies. Grandparents parented 5.4% of the Black children and 1.3% were in foster care (Bureau of the Census, Children's Defense Fund, 1997). And to be the father, it does not necessarily mean to be a husband living together with the family. This shows that the idea of communal or social fathering was quite prevalent in African tradition.

Morrell and Richter (2004) also opine that even if the child does not reside with his/her father or if s/he rarely sees his/her father, that does not erase the biological father (pp. 36-44). It implies that there was the provision of communal responsibility of child-rearing anyway. In the black communities, there are other male members like grandfathers, stepfathers, foster fathers, older brothers, cousins or family friends who fulfill the physical roles of fathers. Black communities have collective responsibilities to look after their children and each person should take an active role in being a parent, regardless of biological connections.

Particularly in traditional Yoruban community, even in the biological fathers' failure to provide its family with financial help, the family would make provisions to ensure the welfare of the children despite the absence of the fathers (Nease and Austin, 2011, p. 94). This is how the black children were made safe. This kind of societal provision has undoubtedly given a big advantage to black children.

Jennifer Hamer (2001) assumes that slavery system created the context of live-away fatherhood that was negotiated by "social, economic, and political institutions that were guided by systems attempting to sustain black people as a chief labor source (p. 61). As the socio-politics of the United States had pushed the Black males to the exclusion from the familial roles, the mere stereotyping them as indifferent fathers is unjustifiable. The obvious reason for their marginalization was related to the white people's psyche of perpetuating the institution of slavery as long as they could. This is further justified by Hamer as he says that marriage between the slaves was not often protected by the state, but it was encouraged between the enslaved people as it produced cheap steady labor for the slave owners (p. 91).

Men could be sold away or otherwise separated from their children to take them to work farther. In this way, they were pushed to a situation where they could not protect their children or assist them financially.

There are also other reasons for African American fathers in being away from their children. Not only unemployment but the imprisonment, high death rates, and imbalance of the male-female ratio were also the reasons.

As the Black society faced intolerable physical punishment and captivity for their minor breach of the white codes, many of the Black males' lives ended in prisons. Similarly, the life expectancy of the Black people was lower in comparison to the Whites. All these factors pushed them away from their children.

Some children were born to older women who do not expect to marry the fathers of their children. This is also the reason why the black fathers were forced to be absent from their family roles. Their absence from the home does not justify that they did not love their children or were irresponsible towards their family roles. They were bound to accept the communal parenting of their children when they were away from home. This event of children being taken away from Black males eased their burden of taking care of their children.

The community parenting practice was misinterpreted as the fundamental traits of black males by the white people. It was later stereotyped by the same community of slave owners. All of these considered together, it can be said that the institution of slavery was the root cause of the backwardness of the Black people and the black families have not completely recovered from it yet. Even Daniel Patrick Moynihan's report The Negro Family: A Case for National Action concluded in 1965 that black families were in a tangle of pathology because of a high number of female-headed homes. Moynihan's claim that the Black matriarchy plagued the Black families has been severely criticized by the Black scholars later. Murray claims that the Moynihan report had no interest to address the problems of the Black people's actual backwardness but it served as a tool to justify white supremacy and maintain the status quo (p. 96). Moynihan's report seems to have turned a blind eye towards the phenomena of out-of-wedlock births, increased divorce, and liberal laws to cohabitations that all families were experiencing all the time. This phenomenon

has also kept the father's position as absent in all ethnic or native communities.

Hortense Spillers claims that Moynihan Report is by no means unprecedented in its conclusions; it belongs rather to a class of symbolic paradigms that inscribe "ethnicity" as a scene of negation and confirm the human body as a metonymic figure (p, 258). Moynihan's report does not seem to have made a genuine analysis of the problems of the reasons for the backwardness of the black community. It can be said that this report had a lot of pieces of evidence of color biasness.

Changes have taken place in the family structures and the roles of the black fathers in the period following slavery. There has been a great increase in black men and women entering into marriage and producing children who lived with both parents (Hamer, 45). Later as the economic shift began to emerge in the 1970s, the black men were in a position of joblessness, but the women were employed in domesticity. Though the marriage was rare again, it did not decrease the number of birth. The black fathers still lived with their children despite their degrading economic condition.

Textual Analysis

This part of the paper shows how the role of Black fathers is changing over time. It analyses some textbooks representing three different periods: slavery, postslavery, and the modern period.

The first primary text this study concern is The Narrative of The Life of Fredrick Douglass: An American Slave (1854). It is a memoir written by a former slave Fredrick Douglass in 1845, a period when the Blacks were still languishing behind due to slavery. This book describes the author's experience with slavery and his desire for freedom. It depicts how the institution of slavery has spoiled the lives of slaves. In the text, Douglass talks about his absent father.

My father was a white man. He was admitted to be such by all I ever heard speak of my parentage. The opinion was also whispered that my master was my father; but of the correctness of this opinion, I know nothing; the means of knowing was withheld from me. My mother and I were separated when I was but an infant-before I knew her as my mother. It is a common custom, in the part of Maryland from which I ran away, to part children from their mothers at a very early age (p.7).

When he grew adolescent, he shows his dissatisfaction at his uncertainty of the date of birth. Based on what he hears from his elders and the master he guesses he was born around 1818. He comes to know that he was separated from his mother just after his birth and could see her only occasionally. It was the destiny of most of the slave's children then. He is informed that his mother Harriet dies when he is only seven. Douglass thinks that his father is a white man. The people around told him that his father is his master himself. The American law said that mixed-race children also had to be the slaves like their mothers. The slaveholders were benefitted by the birth of such children. This inspired them to rape their slave girls.

The purpose here is to claim that the stereotyping of black males as irresponsible fathers is so absurd in itself. The masters themselves were the forces to weaken the marriage institution in the black communities. They drove the males to seclusion and again charged them with being absent from their duty of parenting their children. They developed stereotypes to continue dominations over the blacks. Oliver (2003) says that the media also plays a role in perpetuating stereotypes of African-American males as violent criminals. Reality-based TV shows demonstrate that White police officers are more likely to employ force against Black and Latino suspects than toward White suspects (pp. 3-18). Douglass's memoir discloses the truth that he had been deprived of his father's care and affection due to the stereotyping of black males and the social-cultural structure of the then America. Not only the father, but he was also deprived of his mother's care and love even in his infancy. The book depicts how black males were forced to be absent from their children at the beginning of the 19th century.

The role of the black father slowly goes changing in the post slavery period. It can be seen in the text like The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man written by James Weldon Johnson. This text was written in 1912 after the end of slavery. In this book, the narrator has a very faint memory of his father, a well-dressed gentleman who visited his home frequently.

I have a dim recollection of several people who moved in and about this little house, but I have a distinct mental image of only two: one, my The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man by James Weldon Johnson 4 mother; and the other, a tall man with a small, dark mustache. I remember that his shoes or boots were always shiny, and that he wore a gold chain and a great gold watch with which he was always willing to let me play. My admiration was almost equally divided between the watch and chain and the shoes. He used to come to the house evenings, perhaps two or three times a week (Johnson, 4-5).

He remembers his exclusion from his classmates just because he is non-white despite light skin color. He later takes music class from a violinist who turns out to be his father. The narrator remembers his father giving him a piece of gold coin in his childhood. He puts it around his neck throughout his life. What his text reveals is the shift in the pattern in the roles of Black fathers in the post-slavery era. In contrast to the black father's absence in the slavery period, this period shows some shifts being felt. The father is at least an occasional visitor in the home. The children have some memory of seeing their fathers though they still were non-residential fathers supporting their children from behind the scenes. After his mother tells him to play some game with his father, the narrator plays Chopin with him. He asks his father if he would stay with him now, then the father replies he would soon go to New York and would see him again. He reveals that he met his father only once more after that.

In the text, the narrator only realizes the brutality of slavery but still cannot speak against it. He remembers a scene of a lynching of a black by an angry white mob and is filled with shame and humiliation rather than sympathy after seeing the event. A revolt wrestles within him against slavery. He feels how racism has affected the psyche and the behavior of the black communities in America. He hates the lynching and realizes the pettiness of the white community, but cannot revolt against it in public.

In the modern period, the roles of black fathers have completely changed. The need of revolt to change the situation of black father was largely felt. The narratives expressed by the movements surrounding the predicament of Black men in the U.S. suggest, there is a dire need to disrupt the cultural formula stories defining Black men, and especially Black fathers, as irresponsible and largely absent from Black families (Johnson and Young, 2016, p.5). After the end of slavery, these changes were beginning to be felt. Now the black males do not stay away from their families. The White society has socially accepted them as the citizens of their country. They are enjoying the same socio-political rights as the whites. The constitution of the United States of America guarantees equality to all, of whatever color or ethnic group. Barack Obama's accession to the presidency is evidence of this. During the Father's Day in 2009, Obama uses his father-in-law to give voice to this kind of father in a town hall program: "And one good example is Michelle's father, Frasier Robinson, who was a shining example of loving, responsible fatherhood. Here is a man who was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis when he was 30 years old, but he still got up every day, went to a blue collar job. By the time I knew him, he was using two crutches to get around, but he was always able to get to every dance recital, every ballgame of Michelle's brother. He was there constantly and helped to shape extraordinary success for his children". (Obama, June 2009)

In 2008, talking about the historical and modern barriers for Black fathers Obama made a speech at the National Constitution Center in Philadelphia:

"A lack of economic opportunity among Black men, and the shame and frustration that came from not being able to provide for one's family, contributed to the erosion of Black families – a problem that welfare policies for many years have worsened". (Obama, June 2008)

Obama's address to the youth in 2012 is targeted to motivate them to play a role of a responsible father in contrast to the stereotyping of the Blacks as weird fathers. In his book To Thee I Sing, a 2010 publication, he addresses his two daughters describing them about the great American heroes who contributed significantly to shape America as a nation. Obama remembers his own experience of not getting his father's care and love in his childhood days. He claims that America is made up of all different and skillful people who have added something great to make it what it is now. He appeals to the youth that they have no excuses to escape from the roles of a supportive and caring father. Obama, giving his example of how deeply he is attached to his children, encourages future fathers to play a vital role in the life of their children. Obama tells his daughters that they can climb the ladder of success if they develop a unique trait in them, He encourages the daughters and the readers that they should also try to please their father as he tries to make them happy and content. His words provide the readers with enough clues about how devoted he is towards his daughters and how inwardly he hopes they to maintain a good relationship with fathers. So the situation now has just improved

Quite recently, it is not only the black community that is facing the problem of father's absence; all societies, ethnic groups, and communities are having trouble with this problem. Because of legal acceptance of cohabitation, increased divorce rates, imprisonment of the Black males matrimonial structure is becoming dense. Even the White community is also affected by this worldwide problem. There are several babies born outside marriages. Soaring is the number of babies whose fathers have left them and their mothers. The over-emphasis on individualism, the liberal social-political ways of lives and legal provisions have helped the growth of children living away from their fathers. It has certainly affected the children psychologically. Mothers are also taking financial responsibility signally. This has degraded their economic status. Now the fatherhood has become a serious problem for all states. The state therefore should take some initiatives to settle the case before it gets worse.

Conclusion

The present study suggests that the concept of fatherhood in the African American setting is a socio-political construct. The White hegemony defines and determines what and how fatherhood should be. It is White men dominated power structure that has shaped the consciousness of the Black community. The Black people have never defined it so far in the way they want. As the dominant culture always imposes its ideology of the social structure over the weaker ones, the Whites had the privilege to stereotype the Black as typical. Stereotypes are deeply embedded in U.S. culture and they often influence acts of prejudice and systemic racism that have contributed to the inequalities of African-American males (Taylor et al., 225). For the Blacks, fatherhood is not something different from other social groups. They also have the same dreams of providing financial, emotional, and social support to their children. They do not like to stay away from their offspring. The reason for their absence from the roles of good fathers should be searched in the socio-politics of the period.

This study also depicts that changes have taken place in the traditional way of father's roles. The Black fathers have assimilated themselves in the national stream. They are enjoying the political/ legal rights given to them by the constitution of their countries. They have started to play an active role model for the proper development of their children. Even if the parents do not live with their children, they are bearing the educational expenses of their children. They show their love and support to the children by visiting them time and again in their schools and colleges to encourage them. Looking back to the slavery period, the father position did not exist; it came to be visible but non-residential in the post-slavery era and now in the modern time the Black fathers are quite responsible, supportive, and caring to their children. If there are still some tendencies to push the situation back, the state should work out to reduce the gap between the fathers and their children. Promoting responsible fatherhood should be the focus of the state, academicians, and all institutions.

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