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Collective Memory in P. Everett's Novel "I Am Not Sidney Poitier"

Memoria colectiva en la novela de P. Everett "No soy Sidney Poitier"

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RESUMEN

Este artículo trata de una de las últimas novelas de Percival Everett. En su novela, aborda una imagen de Sydney Poitier, quien fue un ícono de los años 60 del siglo XX, uno de los representantes del movimiento por los derechos de los afroamericanos en los Estados Unidos. Los autores del artículo llegan a la conclusión de que la novela tiene las mismas estructuras argumentales que las películas protagonizadas por Sydney Poitier. El objetivo principal de apelar al patrimonio cinematográfico es presentar los puntos de vista y prejuicios tradicionales de la sociedad estadounidense hacia la discriminación racial y la esclavitud, la identidad y la raza.

Palabras clave: Discriminación racial, esclavitud, Percival Everett, Sidney Poitier.

ABSTRACT

This article deals with one of Percival Everett's latest novels. In his novel, he addresses an image of Sydney Poitier who was an icon of the 60s of the 20th century, one of the representatives of the movement for the rights of African Americans in the USA. The authors of the article conclude that the novel has the same plot structures as movies that Sydney Poitier starred. The main aim of appealing to the film heritage is to present traditional views and prejudices of American society towards racial discrimination and slavery, identity, and race.

Keywords: Percival Everett, racial discrimination, Sidney Poitier, slavery.

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INTRODUCTION

Percival Everett (born 1956) is a contemporary American writer of African American origin, a professor of English at the University of Southern California. He began his literary career in 1983. Like many modern American writers, Percival Everett has created a vast artistic heritage: he is the author of 21 novels, 4 collections of short stories, and 3 collections of poems and a book for children. A substantial number of works determines the diversity of themes. At the beginning of his writing career, Everett addressed traditional American themes like sports, the consequences of the Vietnam War, the problem of Wild West. Among his works, there are interpretations of ancient Greek myths, several westerns, as well as parodies of this genre. In the writer's later works, the African American dominant begins to dominate, which has not been noted earlier.

Everett touches on the traditional themes and conflicts of African-American literature. *I am Not Sidney Poitier*, which was written in 2009, is one of the examples. The novel has become an object of serious literary attention. Most critics agree that this novel is one of the "main voices of modern American literature" (Shchepacheva et al.: 2019). *I am Not Sidney Poitier* is "an irresistible satirical novel by Percival Everett, a storyteller, addressing racial and class issues, American identity issues. The more readers become acquainted with Everett's work, the more they will appreciate the absurdity and sardonic wit of this novel" (Kincaid & Everett: 2005, pp. 377-381).

METHODS

This article continues our research on Everett's novels the first results of which were presented in our essay "Not Black Enough": African American Identity in Percival Everett's Novels. Giving the outline of Everett's creative work here, we give the perspective within the contemporary tendencies and the development of multicultural studies in literature at Kazan University following the methods used by our colleagues and other scholars. We follow the traditional methods of analysis (cultural-historical, comparative bibliographical) that are used in the researches on different segments of contemporary Literary Studies.

RESULTS

The protagonist of the novel is a young African American with a strange name Not Sidney Poitier. It is worth mentioning that the hint is quite obvious to the American reader. Sidney Poitier (born 1927) is a famous actor, director, and screenwriter. His image is a cult for both representatives of African American and American culture. Despite African American roots, Poitiers has gained fame as the best black actor in the United States. In the 60-70s he played with white actors. In 1964, Poitiers became the first African American actor to receive the Oscar for Best Actor in the film *Lilies of the Field* (1963). Sidney Poitier is also known as an active politician and equal rights fighter for African Americans. He deliberately challenges public prejudices captured in the images and film with his participation. Everett explains his choice by saying that "no one in Hollywood could create a story; understand it as Sidney Poitier did" (Kincaid & Everett: 2005, pp. 377-381). Everett adds that "Poitiers is a safe choice for white Americans. He is a handsome, sensual, politically advanced African American" (Kincaid & Everett: 2005, pp. 377-381).

Moreover, the appeal to the image of Sidney Poitier is also connected with the purely African American call-and-answer tradition, in which each African American text appeals to previous African American texts (Gates Jr: 2014; Strizhakova & Coulter: 2019).

The image of Sidney Poitiers becomes central in the novel. In addition to the name of the protagonist, he looks like a famous actor. "I am tall and dark and look for the world like Mr. Sidney Poitier, something my poor disturbed and now deceased mother could not have known when I was born, when she named me Not Sidney

Poitier”[4]. Moreover, the older the protagonist becomes, the more he begins to look like Sidney Poitier, which the author often describes quite ironically. “But seriously, you have to know that you look more like Sidney Poitier than Sidney Poitier ever did” (Everett: 2010). Thus, Everett shows the creation of a postmodern simulacrum where the copy looks more true-to-life than the original.

Concerning the plot of the novel, it is almost entirely based on the writer’s appeal to the actor’s filmography. In almost every chapter of the novel, you can see similar scenes from the films of Sidney Poitier. For example, in the second chapter of the book, as in the film *The Defiant Ones* (1957), as a result of a road accident, Not Sidney and Patrick, an ardent and implacable white racist, flee from the guards of the prison convoy. Their goal is to get to a secluded place. The difficulty lies in the fact that they are constrained by one chain, and to survive, they are forced to cooperate in their actions, despite the mutual hatred and racist views of the white prisoner.

As in the film, the theme of racial discrimination becomes one of the main themes in the novel. In the film, liberation from chains is a symbol of the fact that heroes are freed from their racial prejudice. Having rethought their preconceptions, the main characters begin to respect and listen to each other, and at the end of the film, they are already connected by a strong friendship. The white hero sees in black a nobleman. This was consonant with the ideas of the 60s of the 20th century, the time of the active struggle of African Americans for equal rights and recognition of equality in American society. In the novel, Everett shows the modern white hero far from the ideals of the 60s. He is “small”, vile, unable to resist racism, and his skin color is considered a sign of superiority. He perceives the black hero as a second-rate person.

The theme of racial discrimination has been developing throughout the novel. The following example is events that resonate with the plot of the film *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner?* which appeared on the screen in 1967. Like in the film, the main character ends up in his girlfriend’s house, where he expects to meet her parents. The girl’s parents are surprised by the skin color of the protagonist and his strange name, “from a silly ghetto” (Everett: 2010). In both cases, the protagonist is not liked by the girl’s parents, and the cause of this conflict is the race of the protagonist. But in the film, he is an African American who faces a white family. In the novel, Not Sidney is too black for this family, whose members are also of African American origin, but with a lighter shade of skin.

“You and I are pretty much the same color, I said.

- No, we’re not. I am milk chocolate and you’re dark cocoa, dark as Satan” (Everett: 2010).

Everett presents to the reader a situation of racial intolerance at the beginning of the 21st century. Harassment of African Americans is observed not from the white population, but, conversely, from the black population of the United States. African Americans begin to divide into “black” and “too black”, into “blacks” and “not black enough”. “Too black” representatives of African American culture feel oppressed by “ordinary black”. Not Sidney does not understand that Maggie has invited him to a family holiday to anger her parents. The color of his skin would cause a scandal in the family.

In this case, in the image of Not Sidney, one can see an element of the autobiography of Percival Everett himself. Many critics and readers speak of P. Everett as the most “not black” of all the black representatives of modern African American literature. The theme of racial discrimination is also associated with the detective line of the novel, the basis for which is the film *In the Heat of the Night* (1967). Now, this film is considered a classic of the detective genre, which tells about the murder in a small town based on racial discrimination. A similar situation occurs in the novel, but first, the writer describes in detail the racial prejudices that are characteristic of Southerners. Here in Alabama, the wealth of the protagonist makes him suspicious rather than attractive. In small towns, the Ku Klux Klan organization still thrives, and its representatives hunt for blacks. Like in the film, Not Sidney is detained by the police because he is black and accused of killing a black man. The white sheriff is not going to look for the killer because they killed the black one. It soon turns out that a black man who looked like Not Sidney was killed by mistake, instead of the main character. Here, Everett plays with the widespread myth that for white all blacks look the same.

It is worth noting that the main character travels several times in the novel, and each time he goes to the south of the country, which has long been slaveholding. According to the theory of R. Stepto, African American literature is divided into two types: literature of ascent and literature of immersion (Stepto: 1979, pp. 8-24). The literature of the ascent describes a real or symbolic journey to the North, where a person gains freedom but loses touch with the community. In the immersion literature, heroes, on the contrary, move south, where their freedom is limited, but at the same time, they find something more important as community values. The South usually represents the historical homeland, countryside, patriarchal way of life, community life, while the North is an environment alien to African Americans, disunity of people, urban isolation, and mass of faceless individuals.

Taking a real trip to the southern states, Not Sidney is arrested, and like his distant ancestors during the time of slavery, he loses his freedom. Therefore, it is not surprising that one of the topics that the writer touches on in the novel is the theme of slavery and its consequences. Events related to the historical past of African Americans are presented as dreams of the protagonist and stand apart from the main storyline. The first dream that Not Sidney sees has similarities to the movie *A Band of Angels* (1957). He dreams that he is a slave named Raz-ru. The action takes place in New Orleans, around 1861. Everett describes the usual picture of the time as an auction of slaves, where the most expensive lot is an adult Negro. "The auctioneer barked out his attributes, said he was as strong as an ox, could lift and run all day and didn't mind the heat or the humidity" (Everett: 2010). But the main subject of the auction is a mulatto named Samantha. The fact is that Samantha was brought up as a white girl. She does not feel like a slave. Raz-ru hates her for "inability to accept herself, for the refusal of her blackness" (Everett: 2010). Samantha is in love with her master and considers him a good man for teaching slaves to read and write and not applying physical punishment to them. This outrages Raz-ru, who realizes that no matter how humane the master is, slavery is a system of exploitation of people and slaves are master's wealth. The dream ends with the beginning of the Civil War between the North and the South.

Not Sidney's next dream logically continues the previous one, but the film *Buck and the Preacher* (1972) becomes the basis for it. The film takes place immediately after the Civil War when black slaves gained freedom and the right to own their land. Here, Everett completely borrows the plot of the film, where the main character is committed to leading former slaves through dangerous territories controlled by white racists to the coveted lands. They suffer bullying, cruel torture, murder, which is a kind of act of demonstrating the power of whites over blacks. This dream, like the previous one, demonstrates the individual stages of slavery and the cruel relationship between whites and blacks (Fahrutdinova: 2016, pp. 1185-1193).

The central problem of the novel is the internal conflict of the protagonist. Throughout the novel, Not Sidney tries on different roles of a famous actor: the main character finds different social statuses and different social classes, tries to find himself and his place in it. But none of the proposed roles corresponds to the internal state of the protagonist and does not allow him to resolve the conflict within himself. Ultimately, Not Sidney even plays the role of "a pleasant African American, an icon of the 60s or 70s" (Kincaid & Everett: 2005, pp. 377-381). He realizes that the resemblance is becoming increasingly apparent. "No matter how they scrubbed they looked nothing like Sidney Poitier, but I looked just like him and so they stared. They stared at Sidney Poitier's face in the mirror and I starred at it, too. The face was smooth, brown, older than I remembered, handsome. The face in the mirror smiled and I had to smile back" (Everett: 2010). Living like Sidney Poitier, the protagonist is increasingly turning into him. Turning to Lacan's "mirror stage", in this situation, Not Sidney loses himself in the world of illusions and discovers two personalities in him. He is forced to abandon himself, which brings him doubts, anxieties, and conflict with himself.

In the final scene, the main character is awarded the Oscar. However, the hero receives this Oscar only by mistake, instead of the real actor and director Sidney Poitier. Thus he does not gain but loses his own "I", turning from Not Sidney Poitier to Sidney Poitier.

DISCUSSION

The internal conflict of the main character is also associated with his strange name. The problem of the name, and often the play with it goes through the entire African American literary tradition and becomes dominant in the issue of self-identification. This can be explained by the fact that upon the arrival of the Africans in America, the white masters gave them new names that were more convenient for pronunciation. Losing their name, the slaves lost touch with their native land and thus ceased to feel their integrity. As the famous American sociologist, Orlando Patterson writes: "The name is the second most important characteristic in the ritual of enslavement ... the significance of the name is that the name is a verbal sign of all identity" (Mitchell & Vander: 2013; Goryunova et al.: 2018). Thus, changing the name of the slave became a way of humiliation and destruction of personality. For Black Americans, choosing a name is not only one of the central issues, but also a way of expressing, both politically and metaphysically. As for the main character, in his name, there is a clear motive for denying himself through the "not" particle, which once again emphasizes the search for himself.

The question of the name is closely connected with the motive of the absence of the father (Du Bois: 2008). Slavery led to the separation of families, the separation of children from the family. The whites raped their slaves and then abandoned the black children. Subsequently, the impossibility of knowledge about parents became a defining feature of slavery, and one of the main characteristics of the African American tradition. In the novel, the main character is completely deprived of his family, cut off from his roots. Not Sidney does not know anything about his father and his strange name is only a figment of his mother's imagination, and he has nothing to do with the famous actor Sidney Poitier. Then Not Sidney makes several attempts to find a potential father, one of which is Ted Turner, a famous American media tycoon. After the death of his mother, Not Sidney settles in his house, but immediately Turner denies the possibility of becoming the protagonist's father. "To T. Turner's credit even he was not comfortable with the scenario of the rich do-gooding white man taking in the poor little black child" (Everett: 2010). Not Sidney meets the third potential father in college in the person of Professor Everett (here the writer plays with readers and deliberately introduces a character named Percival Everett into the novel), who strongly supports Not Sidney, but categorically refuses the role of his father.

CONCLUSION

To summarize, the novel I am not Sidney Poitier occupies a significant place in the writer's creativity. It is diverse and it presents itself a combination of new and traditional approaches to African American literature (Shevchenko & Nesmelova: 2015, pp. 421-425). An appeal to the image of a famous actor involves the inclusion of a cultural layer of African American culture and history. The writer reproduces some stages of slavery, raises the topic of racial discrimination and prejudice, which was also reflected in the films of S. Poitiers. But in his work, Everett goes further. He depicts a modern African American who is already facing other problems. He is indifferent to the racist prejudices of whites because today he feels oppression by the same African Americans. On that point, we can conclude that Percival Everett may be considered a black writer who plays with mass cultural clichés, the structure and the composition of the works by creating fragmental narration, which, like a puzzle, compose finally a complete image for the reader (Borisovna et al.: 2014). Moreover, the development of the own culture layers is important to preserve cultural self-identification (Khabibulina: 2014, pp. 248-251) which is risen in the analyzed novel. He cannot find himself in modern society, and most social roles do not correspond to his internal state.

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