

REFLECTIONS OF RACISM IN PERCIVAL EVERETT'S ERASURE¹

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ABSTRACT

This article focuses on American racism and its impact on writers and publishing processes in the literary world, dealing with Percival Everett's novel Erasure (2001). The novel reveals the thematic restrictions imposed on black writers as a consequence of racism. Of course, the issue of racism has been addressed in hundreds of literary works, but they mostly describe the wounds caused by racist attitudes on the social and individual level. The new and striking point in this work is that racism is openly and unhesitatingly adopted by individuals such as writers, editors, and publishers, who are considered part of an intellectual community. The protagonist/author of the novel is expected to write about the lives and problems of black people because he is also black. When he writes about other subjects, he is disapproved, excluded, and even subjected to pressure to write about the experiences of black people. What Everett wants to show to his readers in his novel is that racism is not unique to an anti-intellectual culture. Whereas in previous times, black people in American society have struggled with discrimination, poverty, and low life standards, they have to struggle with oppression in the intellectual and cultural spheres in the 21st century, additionally. Thus Everett proves in his novel that racism still persists even in the 21st century and even in the intellectual settings. These issues will be analyzed through Afro-American critical method. The contribution the article offers to the literature is that it deals with a novel which tells racism is also prevalent in intellectual environments.

Keywords: Racism, Afro-American criticism, Percival Everett, Erasure, Black people

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Introduction

Unlike the literature of the previous centuries, postmodernist literature includes works written to disturb the traditional structure and give people different perspectives. This literature is more complex, diverse, and experimental. Socio-cultural, historical, economic and intellectual changes that occur with the development of technology affect this literature. In general, 21st century literature carries the effects of postmodernism. Postmodernism emerged in America in the 1960s along with the Civil Rights movement and influenced architecture, plastic arts, and literature. It is used to mean after and beyond modernism and it is a movement that provides intertextual references. It encourages the reader to think and question the perception of reality.

Postmodern works reject adherence and prescriptivism. In postmodern novels, impressions are prominent, and thus there is neither a clear beginning nor a clear ending. The events in the subject are momentary and usually do not lead to any conclusion. The subjects are conveyed in an intertwined manner; moreover, the fiction is too complex. Novels written according to postmodernist principles are often challenging to read and understand since language here serves as a tool rather than a goal. The writers foresee and imply different perspectives in cultural, social, economic, and political fields. Hillary Chute (2011) states in *The Popularity of Postmodernism* that "postmodernism has expanded the range of objects of analysis, and the way we talk about them, so successfully that it has enacted its own critical disappearance" (p. 356). Postmodern writers do not aim to reflect the outside world directly while writing their works. The works often do not have a universal meaning accepted by everyone. Instead, the writers attempt to produce texts where no single real meaning exists because, for them, language generates reality rather than merely reflecting it.

The concept what is called reality can be constantly interpreted and changed. According to these authors, meaning is produced by the reader. Murphy (1987) states that "for reading to have a role to play in shaping the meaning of a text, truth must be understood as only indirectly accessible to persons. Accordingly, if reality is constituted through linguistic acts, a text must always stand in the midst of language" (p. 233). Therefore, there is no single meaning in postmodern works. The truth(s) are multi-layered and subjective, the language is illusionary and slippery, causing the reader to be disoriented and astonished.

In the literature of this period, the author uses the issues of racism, ethnicity, class and gender issues to draw attention to social problems and injustice. While doing this, he/she raises social awareness and criticism in the reader by covering different characters and stories. Postmodern black literature in this frame generally deals with historical consciousness and identity, often using parody. African-American postmodernism is the product of a memory that has been cultivated for years. It is very important for the people whose history, culture and unique characteristics have been rejected and disregarded for centuries. Following the Civil War, Black intellectuals initiated a revolutionary movement with the objective of examining and illuminating the origins and characteristics of Black culture, namely Frederick Douglass, Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. Du Bois. In the twenties, the Harlem Renaissance writers and intellectuals such as Z. Neale Hurston, Langston Hughes and Countee Cullen have contributed to the development of black existence in American society and exerted efforts to remove stereotypes about the black people. Civil Rights Movement (1954-1968) has witnessed endeavors to achieve social integration. All these exertions have formed and opened the path to the postmodern black literature, with its self-reliance, tradition, originality and sustainability. African-American criticism on the other hand, in search of social equality, finds the racial elements, segregation and white privileges in literary works. It questions the place of African American people in the larger American society and how the nation's claims of freedom and equality fits into the treatment to the black people. It aims at proving that black history and culture are not inferior; on the contrary it is rich with African motifs, music and oral literature. The famous Afro-American critic Henry Louis Gates Jr. (1988) specifies: "My desire has been to allow the black tradition to speak for itself about its nature and various functions, rather than to read it, or analyze it, in terms of literary theories borrowed whole from other traditions, appropriated from without" (p. xix). Gates emphasizes the uniqueness of black literature and the need to a different approach to the works written by or about the blacks. He means that this 'different approach' is Afro-American criticism.

In the postmodern period, the black writers have the opportunity to show themselves, for the feelings of individuality and the problems of black community. There are some important writers and books to show 'Postmodern Blackness', which is also the title of bell hooks' article. First of all, *Signs and Cities* is the first book to consider what it means to speak of a postmodern turn in African-American literature. In the book, Dubey (2003) argues that for African-American studies, postmodernity best names the period, beginning in the early 1970s, marked by acute disenchantment with the promises of urban modernity.

Percival Everett was born in 1956, in Georgia, and he is the oldest of seven children. He is a productive American writer, and in 1998, began to work as a professor at the University of Southern California. According to Stewart (2014):

"The quality, as well as the quantity, of Everett's work continues to be extraordinary, nineteen novels and novellas, three collections of short stories, three volumes of poetry, and a children's book, since 1983, when his first novel, *Suder*, was published. His fiction includes westerns, satires, revisions of classical mythology, and crime dramas, to the extent that his work can be classified generically" (p. 188).

He is a prolific as well as a versatile writer, writing on different genres. He writes satirical books to exploit racism in the U.S; so he puts his finger on the themes of race, identity and the place of blacks in American society in tactful ways. Moreover, he presents the restrictions of racial categorizations and the loads of anticipation placed on black writers. Everett deals with these themes in his book *Erasure*, too:

I would have written to elevate the station of my fellow oppressed. But the irony was beautiful. I was the victim of racism by my failing to acknowledge racial difference and by failing to have my art be defined as an exercise in racial self-expression. So I would not be economically oppressed because of writing a book that fell in line with the very books I deemed racist. And I would have to wear the mask of the person I was expected to be. (p. 212)

This quotation can be regarded as evidence of the burdens of the black writers. They have to come up with the demands of the literature world to remain alive. To be accepted by the literature world, they have been forced to make concessions to their color; for example, in *Erasure*, even if the author is so skillful, he cannot prove himself in his style because the editors expect his works to be written as 'black' enough. The author wants to write about elevated topics such as mythology, but he is forced to produce black issues because of his skin color.

Everett is also a master of wordplay, and he comes forefront with his satires. His masterful use of language improves his witty dialogues and authentic prose. He takes advantage of humor and playfulness to reveal social commentary. In his book *Black Post- Blackness*, Crawford (2017) points out: "Satire and what Ralph Ellison described as the 'extravagance of laughter' is defining twenty-first-century African-American literature and visual art. Writers such as Percival Everett, Paul Beatty, Mat Johnson, and Colson Whitehead are producing as much satire and unexpected, blasphemous laughter ...", (p.137); so he writes humorously and playfully, creates satire, and he aims to get a response by touching the minds of the readers. Everett shows the traces of humor mixed with racism in his novel, *Erasure*. "I had walked as far as New York Avenue and decided to hail a taxi. Three or four empty ones passed me and I thought of the old joke: What do you call two black men trying to get a cab in Washington D.C. ?" (p. 142) This quotation dispatches the reader to interrogate the conditions and attitudes that black people are exposed to in daily life. Also, in *Erasure*, Everett, as a postmodernist makes a wordplay by writing the chapter numbers as they are pronounced; for example, instead of writing 'one' or 'two', he writes 'won' and 'too'. These words can be regarded as the marks of the lack of education of black people because we know that black people have experienced much discrimination in every field. On the other hand, as a master of irony, he employs such usages in order to suit to the postmodernist mode. The themes mostly discussed in the novel are how the media has a sensational effect on African American racism.

Discussion

Everett (2001) criticizes otherness in *Erasure*, talking about a novel: "It's about a young black man who can't understand why his white-looking mother is ostracized by the black community. She finally kills herself and he realizes that he must attack the culture and so becomes a terrorist, killing blacks and whites who behave as racists" (p. 61). These sentences are written to show how black people are marginalized in society. What Everett only wants to show who is the other according to whom.

This implies that racial identity is not just about outward appearance but also about historical and cultural lineage. Critiques show the persistence of racism by pointing out that while outward appearances and cultural adaptations may change, underlying prejudices and historical legacies often remain unchanged. It suggests that addressing racism requires confronting these deeper cultural and historical roots rather than just focusing on surface-level changes. *Erasure* also implies racism is a heritage from your ancestors. Because it shows us the real essence of the book in the first place. Although racism is the result of prejudices, it is also a legacy from our ancestors.

Everett reveals that racism is a kind of violence subsisting from the past. He employs Ellison as his mouthpiece: "I have dark brown, skin curly hair, a broad nose some of my ancestors were slaves and I have been detained by pasty white policemen in New Hampshire, Arizona, and Georgia and so the society in which I live tells me I am black; that is my race" (p. 3) Of course, in the postmodern period, although racism is not done violently, it is a kind of mental racism. Not including written works is like an assassination of freedom, and this is a torture that has been going on for a long time. That is why this is an evil heritage that comes from a very early period.

A theorist of feminism and race issues, and cultural critic bell hooks (Gloria Jean Watkins) (2002) criticizes the fact that although postmodernist ideas target at siding with the marginalized, the neglected and the invisible in society, postmodern writings still disregard black existence:

Radical postmodernist practice, most powerfully conceptualized as a 'politics of difference,' should incorporate the voices of displaced, marginalized, exploited, and oppressed black people. It is sadly ironic that the contemporary discourse which talks the most about heterogeneity, the decentered subject, declaring breakthroughs that allow recognition of Otherness, still directs its critical voice primarily to a specialized audience that shares a common language rooted in the very master narratives it claims to challenge. (p. 423)

hooks regretfully complains that postmodernist thinking and its practice contradict with each other. She sees that postmodernist literature does not accept and recognize racial existence and difference on a proper level. Again, hooks adds: "Attempts on the part of editors and publishing houses to control and manipulate the representation of black culture, as well as the desire to promote the creation of products that will attract the widest audience, limit in a crippling and stifling way the kind of work many black folks feel we can do and still receive recognition" (pp. 426-27). Here, hooks explicates the situation in the publishing houses and the points of view of the editors. They continually compel the black writers to write what the great part of the audience desire to read; so the black writers are not 'free' to write about the subjects they prefer and choose. They face another type of slavery, to serve to the demands of the publishers' world.

In this context, Eve (2016) states that "a dialectic emerged in which the novel was ironically dependent upon its readers' schooling in literary Theory but seemed, also, to wish its readers to forget this training to liberate themselves from the constraint of such thinking... Everett seems to encourage his readers to discard the ladders of learning once they have been climbed" (p. 160). It is obvious that Everett demands from his readers to forget their familiar habits and attitudes and become identified with the protagonist. The reader should recognize the fact that a black writer can write about everything, including black issues and he/she should understand that it is the reader's duty to construct empathy with the author and the protagonist. According to Farebrother (2015), "To some extent, Everett's backward glance to African American fiction that is marked, in various ways, by the social and political pressures of Jim Crow carries political implications" (p. 117). He employs the sufferings of black people in his fiction as the audience expect from him, but at the same time, he can also talk about a white man's problems as a writer. He draws attention to his talent as a writer not to his race, and requires from his readers that they should be interested in what he writes rather than his skin color: "I learned that words belong to everybody, that I could make my place in this bankrupt society by using my God-given talent with language" (p. 217). He means that God has given every writer the talent of writing without regarding his race. The postmodern techniques employed in *Erasure*, such as fragmentation, wordplay, and intertextual references, serve to amplify the novel's critique of racial dynamics and the pressures exerted on black writers. By drawing attention to the absurdities and ironies within the literary market, Everett challenges readers to confront and question the persistent and insidious nature of racism; for example, there are multiple embedded stories in the book. The narrator is able to apply the postmodern techniques as skillfully as a white writer, Everett tries to prove.

The protagonist/narrator in *Erasure* Thelonious Monk Ellison is named as the same name as a famous black jazz musician in the 20th century. Everett chooses this name, Thelonious Monk for his narrator because the musician was a special kind of artist; he reflected his individuality, ingenuity and innovative character in his music. His surname Ellison is again associated with Ralph Ellison, a famous black writer. Both of them are artists, and Everett emphasizes that his narrator has artistic talents. According to Ellison (the narrator),

Juanita Mae Jenkins has written a masterpiece of African-American literature. Who can hear the voices of her people as they make their way through the experience which is and can only be Black America. The story begins with Sharonda Frinda Johnson who lives the typical Black life in an unnamed ghetto in America. Sharonda is fifteen and pregnant with her third child, by a third father. She lives with her drug-addicted mother and her mentally deficient, basketball-playing brother June boy. When June boy is killed in a drive-by rival gang, the bullet passing through his cherished Michael Jordan autographed Basketball, Sharonda watches her mother's wailing grief and decides she must have some voice in the culture. Sharonda becomes a hooker to make enough money to take dance classes at the community center. In tap class, her athletic prowess is noticed by the producer of a Broadway show and she is discovered. She rises to the top and buys her mother a house, but her limitations catch up with her and she comes plummeting back to earth. The twists and turns of the novel are fascinating, but the real strength of the... (p. 39)

The main purpose of talking about Juanita Mae Jenkins, who is a black author in the novel, is to further exemplify racism and to reveal that it is a mechanism of violence that continues in the 21st century. That is why these stories in the book have a purpose. She is also an African American writer who was exposed to black racism

in literature like Thelonious Ellison and she feels obliged to write in the same vein with what the white audience desires to read; in fact because of her financial needs. She produces ordinary works to satisfy her readers. She, for this reason cannot make a place for herself as an original and universal writer. Everett gives her as an example of how black writers are restricted and oppressed both by the reading public and the publishers.

In order to show how much racism affects the sense of identity throughout the novel, Everett shows that the author cannot take part in the field of publishing, media and literary world in his own identity. At this point, it is obvious that white people suppress black people, finding them that they are not 'black enough'. Even in the 21st century, black people are still exposed to racism in both literary world and society. Therefore, the protagonist Ellison puts aside his own identity and starts publishing his books under the pseudonym of Stagg R. Leigh in "My Paphology" section; this transformation clearly shows that black identity still cannot gain a place even in the 21st century media in America. In the novel, this racism is expressed by Monk with the following words: "I did notice that. But I'm the one who has to try to sell it, with my name. I have to work in this town" (p. 132). This identity conflict and change clearly show how much African American racism affects them, because as Dischinger (2015) said in his article:

"The novel tells the story of Thelonious Monk Ellison, a black writer who, after being told by editors that his writing is not 'black enough' writes a blistering satire of stereotypical black life" (p. 415). As can be understood, black people have been oppressed by the white society for centuries, they cannot express themselves sufficiently neither in literary world nor in society. The fact that they cannot be 'black enough' causes them to lose their true identities. In fact, the pseudonym Leigh is adopted by Ellison so that white people will not oppress them further. Ellison comes from an educated family; his grandfather, father, brother and sister are doctors, but his identity of being black outweighs. No matter how educated his family and he, his skin color as identity is stuck on him.

While in college I was a member of the Black Panther Party, defunct as it was, mainly because I felt I had to prove I was black enough. Some people in the society in which I live, described as being black, tell me I am not black enough. Some people whom the society calls white tell me the same thing. I have heard this mainly about my novels, from editors who have rejected me and reviewers whom I have apparently confused..." (p. 2)

Not being black enough causes Ellison to be denied a place in the media and publishing world as a writer. It is an act thought out by Ellison for rejecting and escaping from American racism. In fact, Ellison is, in a way, a version of Everett's real thoughts translated into fiction. Ellison expresses with these words that he does not believe races, that this is only expressed by people as a social construct and how it hurts people's dignity. By not being able to write what he chooses, a writer's potential and identity are damaged. In the case of a black writer, this is closely related to racism and with her/his black identity, he cannot live or hold on anywhere. That is the way white people try to oppress black writers.

Even after Ellison becomes a famous writer, the problem endures:

I went to Literature and did not see me. I went to Contemporary Fiction and did not find me, but when I fell back a couple of steps I found a section called African-American Studies and there, arranged alphabetically and neatly, read *undisturbed*, were four of my books including my *Persians* of which the only thing ostensibly African-American was my jacket photograph. I became quickly irate, my pulse speeding up, my brow furrowing. Someone interested in African-American Studies would have little interest in my books and would be confused by their presence in the section. Someone looking for an obscure reworking of a Greek tragedy would not consider looking in that section any more than the gardening section. The result in either case, no sale. That fucking store was taking food from my table (p. 28).

In the bookstore he feels unimportant, because the publishers' world and the ignorance of the reading public prevent him from settling on a secure place as a free writer. The writers like him are denied of gaining an identity in the American literary canon and in the black American literature properly.

Apart from suffering from the limitations in the literary world, he suffers from financial problems, too. Because his profession is a source of income for Ellison, these restrictions and injustice to his work mean stealing food from his table. Instead of treating Monk's artwork as true human art, it is often labeled 'black' art, and immediately the audience changes from universal to particular.

One of the main reasons for American racism stems from the fact that even after the abolition of slavery (1865), the separation between black and white society continued. Black people were constantly humiliated and treated as second-class citizens by the white people. According to their beliefs, black people were worthless and lower in status. In addition, the fact that white people are considered superior and noble prevents the end of discrimination between these two groups. According to the doctrine 'separate but equal', both races would be given equal rights, but this doctrine, despite promising legal equality for blacks, leads to injustice and

discrimination. In general, we see this racism in almost many areas, including housing, health, education, transportation and literature. In terms of housing, it is known that black people are not allowed to live in the same area with white people at that time. In addition, when we look at this racial discrimination in terms of health, we see that black Americans did not receive any service or received the lowest and poorest quality service. In *Erasure*, Monk also draws attention to the inequalities in every field:

The hard *gritty* truth of the matter is that I hardly ever think about race. Those times when I did think about it a lot I did so because of my guilt for not thinking about it. I don't believe in race. I believe there are people who will shoot me or hang me or cheat me and try to stop me because they do believe in race, because of my brown skin, curly hair, wide nose and slave ancestors (p. 2)

As he states in the paragraph, he does not believe in race, he does not want to be exposed to racism, but only because of his skin, hair and nose, he will be exposed to racism, unfortunately. Also, he is aware that they will try to prevent him no matter what he does, so racism, a pervasive societal issue, infiltrates every field, from education and healthcare to the workplace and the justice system. This discrimination hurts the author deeply, and these systematic injustices contribute to a cycle of disadvantage and marginalization, limiting the potential of individuals and communities of color.

Conclusion

Percival Everett tries to express how racism is an issue that has not been resolved for centuries and, he shows that it still continues even in the 21st century. Overthrowing racism is not simple because it is very difficult to ignore a concept that has been ingrained in people's mentality for centuries. Even the people of all professions, regardless of their intellectual backgrounds may be racists. Everett tries to subvert African American racism by using literature. That is why he writes *Erasure* by introducing a black writer, Thelonious Monk Ellison. He shows how difficult it is to gain an identity for a black person, how marginalized black intellectuals are and how selfish white people are; but the important message is that people should be respected regardless of their race and skin color. The oppression of the capitalist and racist order/system affects the identity of black people and black writers as well. Like many other books that are written in the postmodern period and deal with racism, Everett's novel offers a profound critique of racism within both literary and societal contexts, illustrating how entrenched racial prejudices continue to shape and limit the opportunities available to black writers in the 21st century. Through its satirical and postmodern lens, *Erasure* exposes the inherent contradictions and biases within the literary world, where racial expectations and stereotypes constrain the creative freedom of black authors. In essence, the protagonist reveals how much racism he is still exposed to while trying to gain a place in the so-called democratic literary community. At this point, this article is about how 21st century literary world including the press, publishing and reading public are the fields that make it difficult for black writers. It reveals the psychological and intellectual, not the physical obstacles imposed by society upon the black people. Everett's purpose in *Erasure* comes into open at this point; because the work poignantly demonstrates that racism is not merely a relic of the past but a pervasive issue that infiltrates intellectual and cultural spaces.

Everett underlines the fact that black authors are marginalized not only in mainstream culture but also within academic and literary circles. He critiques the expectations placed upon black writers which often restrict their ability to explore diverse themes and narratives. They experience contradiction between their ideals and the necessities as writers. Everett aims to break the prejudices for black people within a literary context because literature is a reasonable device for leading or manipulating society. Through the novel, he challenges readers to reconsider their perceptions of race and art, and advocates for a literary culture that respects and values diverse voices and experiences. Ultimately, *Erasure* serves as both a critique and a call to action. Thus, Everett conveys the message through his novel and calls on society, literature, and publishing world to rectify racism. Therefore, racial dynamics are hard to overcome, but not impossible.

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PERCIVAL EVERETT'İN ERASURE ADLI ROMANINDA IRKÇILIĞIN YANSIMALARI

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ABSTRACT

Bu makale Amerikan ırkçılığına ve bu ırkçılığın edebiyat dünyasındaki yazar ve yayın süreçleri üzerindeki tesirine odaklanmakta ve Percival Everett'in *Erasure* (2001) adlı romanını ele almaktadır. Roman siyahi yazarların eserlerini yazarken karşı karşıya kaldıkları ve ırkçılığın bir sonucu olarak getirilen konu kısıtlamasını göz önüne sermektedir. Elbette ki ırkçılık meselesi yüzlerce edebi eserde ele alınmıştır, fakat bunlar çoğunlukla toplumsal ve bireysel düzlemde ırkçı tutumların açtığı yaraları anlatmaktadır. Seçilen eserde ise yeni, çarpıcı ve ilginç olan nokta, entelektüel bir camia olduğu düşünülen ve kabul gören yazar, editör, yayıncı gibi mesleklere sahip olan kişilerin bile ırkçı tavır edinmiş olmaları ve bunu çekinmeden uygulamalarıdır. Eserdeki başkahramandan/yazardan, kendisi de siyahi olduğu için daima siyahilerin yaşadığı olay ve sıkıntıları anlatması beklenmektedir. Başka konularla ilgili yazdığında ise onaylanmamakta, dışlanmakta ve hatta siyahilerin deneyimlerini yazması için baskıya maruz kalmaktadır. Zaten Everett'in romanında okurlarına göstermek istediği şey ırkçılığın, anti-entelektüel bir kültüre has olmadığıdır. Geçmişte, Amerikan toplumundaki siyahi insanlar ayrımcılık, yoksulluk ve düşük yaşam standartları ile mücadele ederken, 21. yüzyılda entelektüel ve kültürel alanlardaki baskıyla da mücadele etmek zorunda kalmışlardır. Böylece Everett, romanında ırkçılığın 21. yüzyılda bile, entelektüel ortamlarda dahi, hâlâ var olduğunu kanıtlamaktadır. Bu konular, Afro-Amerikan eleştiri yöntemiyle açıklanacaktır. Makalenin alana sağladığı katkı, ırkçılığın entelektüel çevrede de yaygın olduğunu anlatan bir romanı konu almasıdır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Irkçılık, Afro-Amerikan eleştiri, Percival Everett, *Erasure*, siyahiler