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ABSTRACT

Richard Wright and Amiri Baraka are prominent authors who addressed the challenges encountered by African Americans in their quest for happiness. This paper aims to elucidate the concept of assimilation and its implications for African Americans. To achieve this objective, a qualitative synthesis approach was utilized to collect pertinent information. The paper incorporates insights on assimilation from a sociological perspective. Through an analysis of the works of Richard Wright and Amiri Baraka, it was determined that African Americans, in their process of assimilation, are often compelled to make numerous compromises to gain acceptance within white society.

Keywords: African American, Amiri Baraka, assimilation, Richard Wright.

INTRODUCTION

Assimilation, in the United States of America, is according to sociologists the withdrawal of ones, migrants, culture and heritage and the absorption of the culture and the history of an established host group. Charles Hirschman has noted that the assimilation is widely seen as one of the dominant fields of sociological research when studying racial and ethnic inequality. If you look for a dictionary definition for the word assimilation you will find that its origin is Latin and it means to make similar.

The work is composed of six parts:

The First Part: comes under the title of race relations. **a-** Order Theories, **b-** Power Theories

The Second Part: it talks about understanding assimilation and precisely the concept of the melting pot.

The Third Part: it talks about the literary contributions of Richard Wright and Amiri Baraka.

The Fourth Part: It talks about theories pertaining to Race relations

The Fifth Part: it deals with the stages of assimilation from the perspective of the researcher Milton Gordon.

The Sixth Part: It deals with the complications associated with assimilation theories.

1. Racial Dynamics:

In the United States, theories regarding racial and ethnic relations have focused on aspects such as migration, adaptation, exploitation, stratification, and conflict. Not all race relations theories fall into the same category; they are divided into two main types based on their primary focus: order theories and power- conflict theories.

a- Order Theories: its goal is to highlight trends of inclusion, such as the integration or assimilation of a particular racial or ethnic group into a prevailing culture or society. In simpler terms, these theories primarily focus on the gradual adaptation to the dominant culture and the maintenance of stable relationships between different groups. (Desoto, 1983)

b. Power conflict theories: They emphasize the importance of migration and conflict, concentrating on genocide and ongoing hierarchies, as well as the persistent inequality in power and resource distribution linked to racial or ethnic subjugation. In the United States, the majority of assimilation theories are based on order theories. (Desoto, 1983)

2. Understanding Assimilation?

Assimilation is a broad term that describes a process that can follow various paths. In the United States, there is a focus on group dynamics. This concept stems from the race relations cycle proposed by Robert Ezra Park, which was further expanded by Edward Franklin Frazier in 1957. The race relations cycle outlines a general sequence of stages in inter-ethnic interactions, starting with contact, moving to competition, then transitioning to a stable period of accommodation, and ultimately culminating in assimilation. (Hirshman.13)

**The Melting Pot Concept:*

One way of understanding assimilation is through the concept of 'the melting pot,' where various groups unite and contribute equally to their cultures, resulting in the creation of a new society. In the context of America, it is thought that minority groups share their cultural influences to shape the nation we recognize today, viewing assimilation as a melting pot process. This perspective highlights the diverse contributions of different individuals in building American society and enriching its culture.(Vitiello, 2017)

The melting pot metaphor portrays assimilation as a smooth and inclusive process focused on sharing and equality. While it offers a strong representation of American society, it does not accurately reflect the experiences of American minority groups in terms of assimilation (Abrahamson.152-154). In fact, many minority groups have been significantly marginalized in the melting pot concept.

It's essential to recognize that the concept of the melting pot was founded on an Anglo-centric perspective. Nibbs noted that "for better or worse, the white Anglo-Saxon Protestant tradition has been, and continues to be, the primary influence on American culture and society for two centuries." (Nibbs.183)

The concept of the melting pot differs significantly from assimilation, particularly in the context of the United States. American society has often been marked by fear and intimidation. While assimilation was intended to involve the equal exchange of cultural elements and a gradual blending of different groups, in practice, it was designed to maintain the dominance of white supremacy.

3. The Literary Contributions of Richard Wright and Amiri Baraka:

During the years leading up to the war, Harlem was a hub for differing ideas such as Black Nationalism, the Black Power movement, and the debates surrounding assimilation versus integration. African Americans faced significant challenges in their efforts to assimilate into white society. The cost of assimilation was steep for them, as they sought to integrate into the predominantly white American culture.

Richard Wright produced literary works intended for both white and black audiences, urging them to consider the world through his lens. He endeavored to convey powerful messages pertaining to religion, politics, and personal issues. By engaging both demographics, Wright aimed to illuminate the realities of white America for his readers. His objective in addressing these two distinct groups was to underscore common experiences and perspectives, thereby assisting African Americans in preparing for the challenges that lay ahead, starting with their ongoing struggles. (Nibbs, 2021)

In relation to the experiences of White individuals, Wright's African American heritage was essential. To facilitate a deeper understanding of Black history among White readers, it was imperative for him to furnish them with pertinent information that would evoke a distinct response compared to that of Black readers. To achieve this, he aimed to instill a profound sense of discomfort throughout his writings, compelling readers to engage and respond. This approach is what distinguishes his literary contributions. (Tracy, 2011)

In his literary works, Wright explores themes that are rooted in his personal experiences. It is important to note that fiction does not possess the same level of authenticity as autobiography; the nature of artistic expression allows authors to construct and manipulate character archetypes to achieve specific outcomes. Conversely, autobiography holds significant revolutionary value as it presents narratives in their true form, thereby allowing readers to gain a genuine understanding of the challenges faced by African Americans in their efforts to assimilate into the dominant white society. (Hawkins, 2012)

Amiri Baraka, the esteemed poet and playwright who passed away in January 2014 at the age of 79, was recognized for his advocacy of the Black Nationalist perspective that defined his political engagement and much of his literary work over the last fifty years of his life. Throughout this period, he encountered numerous political developments, some of which were complex and convoluted; however, Baraka consistently regarded race as the primary dividing factor within American society. This perspective significantly influenced both his literary and political endeavors, fundamentally shaping the nature of his life and legacy. (Hawkins, 2012)

In the years preceding the widespread civil rights movement, Baraka was perceived as a troubled and marginalized black intellectual. He held a rather reductive view of black cultural assimilation, equating assimilation with acculturation and attributing moral weakness to those individuals who chose to acculturate. Baraka regarded this choice as a moral failing, interpreting it as a conscious decision to distance oneself from the broader black community and a rejection of authentic black culture. In contrast, Jones posited that there is no inherent moral value associated with either the acceptance or rejection of assimilation. (Anderson, 2006)

Amiri Baraka authored a notable work titled *"Blues People,"* which offers a comprehensive analysis and in-depth examination of jazz and its historical context, alongside blues, from the perspective of an African American. *"Blues People: Negro Music in White America"* posits that music serves as a valuable tool for assessing the cultural assimilation of Africans in North America from the early eighteenth century to the twentieth century. Baraka challenges the prevailing notion that slavery obliterated the cultural heritage of black individuals; he asserts that through music, they were able to preserve a significant portion of their cultural identity. (Baraka, 2012)

4. Theories Pertaining to Race Relations:

Robert E. Park, a prominent sociological theorist, posited that European emigration significantly contributed to the reorganization of societies worldwide. He contended that inter-group interactions typically progress through distinct stages within a cyclical framework of race relations. In 1926, Park articulated one of his most impactful observations regarding the process of assimilation, stating, "In race relations, there exists a cycle that tends to repeat itself universally... This cycle, characterized by stages of contact, competition, accommodation, and eventual assimilation, is both progressive and irreversible.

While racial barriers may impede the pace of this movement, they cannot alter its trajectory. The forces that have facilitated the current intermingling of populations are so extensive and irreversible that the resultant transformations take on the nature of a cosmic process."

This theory has faced scrutiny and skepticism from numerous sociologists. Brewton Berry offers a comprehensive and critical examination of the cycle theories proposed by Robert Park and his contemporaries. Amitai Etzioni delivers a methodical critique of Park's perspectives within the framework of his analysis of Louis Wirth's work. Wirth himself argues that there is no inherent justification for viewing assimilation as the unavoidable result of cultural interaction. Furthermore, he contends that Park's theory, due to its lack of specification regarding the temporal duration and the conditions that give rise to each phase, is sufficiently flexible to encompass any observation, thereby rendering it untestable. (Al Otaibi, 2010)

The notion of the melting pot as a representation of American society has been robustly upheld. The theory of the 'triple melting pot' illustrates the diminishing distinctiveness of white immigrant ethnicities within the broader context of American religious pluralism. It is pertinent to reference Park's assertion from 1913 regarding the eventual assimilation of African Americans. He noted that, "In the South... the races appear to be moving towards a bi-racial society, in which the Negro is gradually achieving a degree of limited autonomy" (Park, 219-20).

Frazier E. Franklin was a distinguished American sociologist and author. His doctoral dissertation, completed in 1932 and titled "The Negro Family in Chicago," was subsequently published in 1939 as "The Negro Family in the United States." This work provided a comprehensive analysis of the historical factors that shaped the African-American family from the era of slavery through the mid-1930s. Franklin observed that Robert Park's perspective on race relations remained limited to a bi-racial framework. Consequently, while Park advocated for the eventual assimilation of races in the United States, his observations were predominantly centered on the development of a distinct black 'national consciousness.' (256)

A thorough examination of Richard Wright's seminal work indicates that the author crafted the character of Bigger, the novel's protagonist, as a colonized individual striving for autonomy and self-identity. This portrayal significantly contributes to the discourse on the dichotomy of blackness and whiteness, a theme that will be further explored by Frantz Fanon. Fanon posits that there exists a psychological imperative to engage with the white man on equal footing.

This necessitates the utilization of the instruments of oppression historically employed by the dominant group, as well as the capacity to identify a specific, perceived innocent adversary upon whom the aggression fueled by the oppressive system can be directed. As articulated by Fanon, this behavioral pattern enables individuals of African descent to divert their focus away from the white oppressor, who is the true source of their suffering, and instead to seek out victims within their own community. (essayscam.org/forum/fe/academic-literature)

In this context, the individual of African descent develops a psychological defense mechanism that enables him to fortify his response to the anticipated challenges posed by whiteness. However, paradoxically, the allure of whiteness frequently compels the black individual to gravitate towards it. Consequently, the dynamics of identity politics in the United States are fundamentally rooted in two contrasting forces: assimilation and resistance. (essayscam.org/forum/fe/academic-literature)

Prior to Frantz Fanon's exploration of the dichotomy between blackness and whiteness, as well as resistance and temptation, Richard Wright's "Native Son" had already introduced the character of Bigger Thomas to embody these conflicting tendencies. Wright's male urban protagonists grapple psychologically with the tension between the desire to conform to societal expectations of black masculinity and the urge to submit to the dominant white authority figure, often manifesting in violent fantasies of rebellion against this paternal figure. (essayscam.org/forum/fe/academic-literature)

In their struggle, these characters attempt to counteract their socially conditioned feelings of powerlessness through fantasies of omnipotence, which are shaped by the pervasive logic of American racism and the nationalistic and fascistic ideologies that gained prominence globally during the 1930s. Consequently, the protagonists' approaches to submission, assimilation, and resistance are multifaceted, reflecting the complexities of their national context. In "Native Son," Bigger navigates his sense of impotence through various forms of redirected resistance and assimilation within his Manichean environment, exemplified by the notable rat scene. (essayscam.org/forum/fe/academic-literature)

5. Milton Gordon and the Stages of Assimilation:

Park is recognized as one of the pioneering sociologists who examined race relations, and his assimilationist perspective has been adopted by numerous theorists in the development of their own frameworks. Many of these scholars have diverged from Park's original model, resulting in the production of several significant contributions to the field. A notable figure among them is Milton Gordon, who authored the influential work "Assimilation in American Life" in 1964. In this seminal text, Gordon delineates various initial interactions between racial and ethnic groups, as well as a spectrum of potential assimilation outcomes. He articulates three competing conceptualizations of assimilation: the melting pot, cultural pluralism, and Anglo-conformity, with a particular emphasis on Anglo-conformity as the prevailing descriptive reality. (Kalamu, 2009)

From Gordon's perspective, immigrant groups that have arrived in the United States have significantly forfeited aspects of their cultural heritage, largely adopting the fundamental Anglo-Protestant culture. It is important to note that for theorists such as Gordon, cultural assimilation is a vital measure of intergroup adaptation within the United States. This notion of assimilation emphasizes the imperative for new groups to conform to the prevailing Anglo-Protestant culture. Gordon explicitly asserts that most immigrant groups in the United States have successfully achieved Anglo-conformity, particularly regarding cultural assimilation. Numerous groups that followed the initial wave of English migration have integrated into the foundational Anglo culture. Gordon delineates seven dimensions of adaptation: the first is Cultural Assimilation, wherein immigrants modify their cultural practices to align with the core values of the host society. This is followed by Structural Assimilation, Marital Assimilation, Identification Assimilation, Attitude-Receptional Assimilation, Behavior-Receptional Assimilation, and finally, Civic Assimilation, which is characterized by the absence of value and power conflicts. (Kalamu, 2009)

Gordon concentrated his research on the transformations experienced by various white European immigrant populations and developed a framework that elucidates the generational changes within these groups over time. Notably, significant acculturation, often referred to as cultural assimilation, to the Anglo-Protestant culture is typically observed by the second or third generation of more recent European immigrants. In contrast, African American author Amiri Baraka presents an alternative viewpoint. He created influential works, including one that features Clay, a twenty-year-old middle-class African American man, who is a college-educated intellectual from New Jersey. (Kalamu, 2009)

Clay is portrayed in a three-button Ivy League suit and tie, engaging in the reading of a newspaper. He exudes confidence and a sense of control over his environment, openly discussing sexuality while refraining from addressing issues of race. This dynamic becomes apparent when a white woman boards a subway train and playfully takes a seat next to him. Clay experiences a mix of embarrassment and intrigue in her presence. The woman, Lula, perceives Clay as an assimilated African American who attempts to downplay his racial identity, operating under the belief that individuals can transcend the historical divide between black and white communities. (Kalamu, 2009)

It is essential to note that Gordon acknowledges that racial prejudice and discrimination have retarded structural assimilation, but he proposed that African Americans, particularly those in the middle class, will eventually be absorbed into the dominant culture and society. Concerning African Americans, he argues, in a very positive way, that the United States has changed its mind about the status of blacks in a country that believes in equality and justice. The tremendous progress that he sees that black Americans have made, according to him, has created a policy dilemma for the government whether it should embrace a traditional political liberalism that ignores racial groups or a corporate liberalism that recognizes group rights along racial lines. It is sure that many of white standards do not work for the benefit of the black people. It is also unquestionable that the idea of assimilating blacks and the application of the American belief of equality for blacks will always be debatable. (Kalamu, 2009)

6. Complications Associated with Assimilation Theories:

It is observed that a majority of assimilation theorists consider the experiences of white European groups integrating into white society as the normative framework for ethnic adaptation. However, it is crucial to

acknowledge that European Americans immigrated to the United States voluntarily, rather than under duress. This prompts an inquiry into the positioning of non-European migrants and African Americans, who were brought to the Americas against their will, within this framework. Some scholars of assimilation endeavor to include individuals of color in their theoretical models, despite the complexities that may accompany this integration. (Myrdal, 1995)

Certain sociologists contend that assimilation, whether cultural or structural, is a necessary and anticipated resolution to the racial challenges faced in the United States. Gunnar Myrdal, a distinguished expert in race relations, posited that assimilation is advantageous for African Americans, whom he referred to as Negroes. He advocated for their integration into American culture to cultivate identities that are congruent with those of the dominant white population. Myrdal identified an ethical inconsistency within the United States, highlighting a conflict between the democratic ideals enshrined in the Declaration of Independence and the systemic discrimination experienced by black Americans. He views this as a moral compromise, a dilemma that, while theoretically resolvable, continues to be addressed through an ongoing process of assimilation that may not be fully actualized. (Myrdal, 1995)

Wright and Baraka contend that the personas created and modified to align with American cultural norms may ultimately be detrimental to African Americans. They assert that individuals within the African American community who choose to compromise their identity and cultural heritage for the sake of acceptance by white society are likely to face significant psychological and social difficulties.

Conversely, more optimistic analysts emphasize the value of gradual inclusion, which they believe will eventually afford Black Americans and other marginalized groups full citizenship, both in practice and in principle. As a result, they foresee a reduction in ethnic and racial tensions as various groups achieve complete integration into the dominant culture and society. (Myrdal, 1995)

Sociologists such as Milton Gordon and his contemporaries have examined the classless and egalitarian nature of institutions in the United States, alongside what they interpret as the progressiveliberation of non-European groups. Gordon and his associates have emphasized the gradual and measured assimilation of middle-class African Americans over the course of several decades. They propose that full integration for African Americans appears to be an inevitable outcome, positing that the only viable resolution to the considerable racial tensions is the establishment of a cohesive societal community that grants full membership to all individuals. (Gordon, 2010)

The significance of racial and ethnic stratification is anticipated to diminish as potent, universal societal forces eradicate remnants of past ethnocentric value systems. White immigrants have sought substantial assimilation and have been integrated. A similar process is expected to unfold eventually for non-European groups. (Gordon, 2010)

Theories of assimilation have faced criticism for possessing an intrinsic bias. Numerous Asian American scholars and leaders have vocally opposed the application of the assimilation concept to Asian Americans. They contend that this concept emerged during the period from 1870 to 1925, a time when white Americans initiated significant hostilities against Asian immigrants. Consequently, the term "assimilation" has been compromised from its inception due to its association with the notion that only those minority groups able to adhere to Anglo-conformity were considered deserving of such a designation.

In his literary work, Richard Wright articulates that the challenges faced by African Americans commenced once they transcended specific constraints imposed by the 'Negro's movements' and overcame certain psychological obstacles. This process was not solely aimed at facilitating white individuals' understanding of African Americans; rather, it was primarily intended for African Americans to gain a deeper understanding of themselves. Wright posits that not all African Americans are cognizant of this issue, although they are likely to recognize it over time. The fundamental challenge will become apparent when they attain their purported rights. Furthermore, Wright raises the question of whether African Americans can withstand the daily adversities of white society or if they will persist in feeling like outsiders. (Gordon, 1964)

Amiri Baraka was famous for his fatal poems; he wrote to shock and shake the souls of his people and everyone that reads his poetry. In the 1956, he presented 'Black Art' manifesto or as called the poems that kill. Baraka wrote, 'Assassin poems' in which expressed his anger, and frustration from what was happening with his people. Poems that shoot guns/Poems that wrestle cops into alleys/and take their

weapons leaving them dead/with tongues pulled out and sent to Ireland.' (Gordon, 1964)

In essence, Wright and Baraka endeavored, through their literary contributions, to highlight the significance of self-awareness and the active pursuit of identity among African Americans. They advocated for the assertion of rights that would allow Black individuals to exercise their autonomy, rather than conforming to the expectations imposed by white society. In the 1990s, various scholars identified an additional assumption inherent in traditional assimilationist perspectives: the belief that new immigrants should and do assimilate to the dominant culture in a linear, one-directional fashion. This perspective posits that immigrants gradually become Americans, driven by the necessity to transcend the perceived inferiority of their original languages, cultures, and societies. Such an ethnocentric viewpoint fails to acknowledge the potential adverse effects of the assimilation process.

Ruben Rumbaut is a distinguished scholar specializing in immigration and refugee dynamics, generational experiences, and the transition to adulthood. With over thirty years of experience, he has conducted pioneering comparative empirical research on the adaptation processes of immigrants and refugees in the United States. Rumbaut emphasizes the adverse effects of assimilation, noting that recent studies suggest that, in certain respects, the physical and mental health of immigrant populations may decline even as they achieve economic advancement and greater integration into the prevailing culture.

Over time, numerous immigrants encounter various familial and social pressures, while a significant number of adolescents may experience depression or suicidal ideation as they strive to integrate into mainstream American society. The process of transitioning from their culture of origin to the predominant American culture should not be perceived as a movement from an inferior culture to a superior one, as is often assumed by many native-born Americans. This transition is poignantly illustrated in the works of Amiri Baraka, particularly through the characterization of his protagonists.

Robert Park's research is characterized by its substantial emphasis on the historical and global contexts of migration, distinguishing it from numerous contemporary assimilation theorists who frequently overlook a comprehensive analysis of the historical background and development of particular racial or ethnic groups within both national and international contexts. Recently, a new concept referred to as transnationalism has gained traction among scholars. Similar to traditional assimilation studies, transnationalism highlights the idea that individual migrants do not embark on their journeys in isolation; instead, they often migrate collectively, typically accompanied by family members or friends.

Conclusion:

The experience of feeling like an outsider, both in terms of personal sentiment and external treatment, compelled Richard Wright to sever his connections with the Communist Party and Amiri Baraka to distance himself from the Beat Movement. They recognized that, despite their prominence within these organizations, little progress had been made. Both individuals experienced feelings of isolation, mistreatment, and a persistent sense of being misunderstood. Wright and Baraka successfully navigated their vulnerabilities and the estrangement from both their own communities and white society, redirecting their efforts towards illuminating the true nature of assimilation for the Black community. Drawing upon their personal experiences and challenges, they presented to the world an authentic representation of the African American experience, confronting numerous obstacles imposed by White America in their quest for assimilation. They illustrated that, irrespective of one's educational background or degree of assimilation, a Black intellectual in America will invariably be perceived as a subordinate figure, often regarded as a "black boy," who is expected to conform to the limitations and expectations imposed upon them.

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