

DECONSTRUCTING STEREOTYPES: ED BULLINS' *THE TAKING OF MISS JANIE*

ED BULLINS'IN "THE TAKING OF MISS JANIE" ADLI OYUNUNDA KALIPLARIN YIKILMASI

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ABSTRACT : African-American playwright Ed Bullins is one of the most significant figures to emerge from the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s. His 1975 play *The Taking of Miss Janie* is a dramatic portrait of the specific events and ideas that created the 1960s, and their impact on the individual consciousnesses of the characters. The play brings into the foreground many issues related to race and ethnicity in America. Even though the general tone of *The Taking of Miss Janie* is one of violence and gloom, this reading focuses on those moments where love and human affection outshine the sense of destruction predominant in the play.

Key Words: Stereotypes, rape, violence, the sixties, race.

ÖZET: Afro-Amerikan oyun yazarı Ed Bullins, 1960'larda politik görüşleriyle öne çıkmış, önemli bir yazardır. 1974-75 yılları Tiyatro Eleştirmenleri'nin En İyi Oyun Ödülünü kazanan *The Taking of Miss Janie* adlı oyununda, Bullins, bir yandan altmışlı yıllara damgasını vuran çeşitli olay ve düşünceleri dramatize ederken, diğer yandan ırklar arasındaki ilişkileri inceler. Oyunun geneline hakim olan şiddet ve yıkıcılığın yarattığı karamsar havaya rağmen, bu çalışma, oyundaki sevgi ve insanlık adına umut veren anlara dikkat çekecektir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Irkçılık, tecavüz, şiddet, kalıp tipler.

Ed Bullins is considered as one of the most significant figures to emerge from the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s. Apart from his other critically acclaimed plays, *The Taking of Miss Janie* (1975) won him the Drama Critics' Circle Award for Best American Play of 1974-75. As one of the leaders of the Black Arts Movement, the Minister of Culture of the Black Panthers, the playwright in residence and associate director of the New Lafayette Theatre, and the founder and editor of *Black Theatre* magazine, Ed Bullins was artistically and politically involved with the issues of racial discrimination. He worked hard to make black men and women understand what it means to live in white America.

In his book called *The Strands Entwined: A New Direction in American Drama*, Samuel J. Bernstein says that the theater critics' general response to *The Taking of Miss Janie* is dubious. They find the play meaningful and attractive and, confusing and vague at the same time. Bernstein quotes Bullins' response to the play's critical reception: "I don't write to please the audience and reassure everyone that we agree. I don't care how they feel or what they think—whether they agree or disagree—just

so it makes them examine themselves. In a work like this, the truth is open-ended. Like Hemingway said, 'If I wanted to send a message, I'd go to Western Union' ” (Bernstein, 1980: 66).

Although Bullins's political activism in the Black Arts Movement and Black Panthers is well-known, *The Taking of Miss Janie* is not necessarily a message or a propaganda play. The play brings into discussion many issues related to race relationships in America but carefully avoids teaching or preaching. Even though the general tone of the play is bleak beginning with the presentation of rape on stage, this reading will focus on those moments of when hope shines through destruction and violence.

Harold Clurman, in a review of *The Taking of Miss Janie*, points out this ambivalent quality of the play. He says, “The play, despite its disturbing revelations, is neither mournful in tone nor tendentiously raucous. Vigorously humorous, it does not whine, it growls with a savage grin. Without pleading any special cause, it has sinew and muscle. Bold in its courageous objectivity, it is by no means depressing” (Clurman, 1992:329). There is no argument against the fact that Bullins is a courageous writer. He, himself, wants to make this point clear in his non-fiction writing and interviews. Helene Keyssar, in *The Curtain and the Veil*, quotes Bullins's assessment of himself: “To make an open secret more public; in the area of playwrighting, Ed Bullins, at this moment in time, is almost without peer in America—black, white or imported. I admit this, not merely from vanity, but because there is practically no one in America but myself who would dare” (Keyssar, 1981, 172).

The subject of his award-winning play, *The Taking of Miss Janie*, and his treatment of certain stereotypes in the play are proofs of his bold attitude. His non-linear, multi-dimensional use of time coincides with the multi-dimensional treatment of the stereotypes in the play. Although the characters are basically portrayed as types, the emotional depth and the complexity they gain in the development of action allow them to go beyond the limitation of social stereotypes.

The play starts and ends with the image of a black man raping a white woman. This disturbing image itself resonates in both racial and sexual stereotypes. Ralph Ellison, in his essay “On Initiation Rites and Power” points out the importance of this sexual stereotype:

...anyone writing from the Negro American point of view with any sort of thoroughness would certainly have had to write about the potential meaning and the effects of the relationship between black women and white men and black men and white women, because this became an essence; and a great part of society was controlled by the taboos built around the fear of white woman and the black man getting together....And so, any novelist who is going to write from the Negro background would certainly have to deal with these particular aspects of our society. They are unpleasant; and yet, it is in the unpleasant, in that which is charged with emotion, with fear, with irrationality that we find great potential for transforming attitudes. (Ellison, 1986: 61-62)

Bullins' treatment of the Black rapist stereotype reflects the Black writer's desire to deal with the "unpleasant" aspects of life in America in order to change racial attitudes.

The Taking of Miss Janie is a dramatic portrait of the specific events and ideas that created the 1960s, and their impact on individual consciousnesses. The reactions to the Vietnam War, student demonstrations, hopes for radical change, and the despair that resonates in the air of the Sixties lead each character in a different direction. The search of each individual after reality—whether sexual or racial—however is key to the understanding of the play.

Leslie Catherine Sanders quotes Bullins' own understanding of "the theatre of reality":

Any theatrical style or method can be used separately or in combination to reach the truth of the play...dramatizing the journey of the character through his own psyche to reach his loss of innocence, self-awareness or illumination. To reach that individually is called reality. The method is not the goal in this theatre; the result must elicit a single response of 'Yes!' (Sanders, 1988: 176)

Janie, the character that gives the play its name, is a good example for the character who undergoes such a journey. A detailed analysis of Janie's character helps us to get at the "truth of the play" (Sanders, 1988:176). Through the character of Janie, there seems to be an attack on American liberalism. She is an all-American white college girl who for the sake of being liberal, wants to join in the black community but ultimately fails to understand them. She is portrayed as a naive person with surprisingly little knowledge of history and politics. She thinks "Black Poetry" is despairing...almost scary" (422). She does not understand Black Nationalist Rick's comments on white people or his dedication to Islam. She frustrates and angers Monty by of her ignorance of the Black world she has entered and by her insistence to keep herself sexually distant from him. Her feelings for Monty and their relationship show that she can be sentimental to the point of banality: "I will be true to Monty. To keep our friendship alive. And perhaps our relationship will mature into the purest of loves one day. An ideal Black/white love. Like sweet grapes change with age and care into a distinctive bouquet upon choice, rare wines" (433).

Yet she also proves that she is honest and capable of having insight. In other words, Janie is not a flat character. In his critical essay, Bernstein refers to "Janie's blend of innocence, awkwardness and selfishness; her sincere but her futile striving for an understanding of the Black ethos; and her presumptuous, teasing, yet paradoxically poignant friendship with Monty" (Bernstein, 1980:83). Throughout the play, we witness Janie's maturation, her passage from innocence to experience. These terms, however, ought to be redefined in relation to Bullins' writing. In this play they lose their romantic connotations. Innocence is no longer something desirable, clean, a childhood-like state, and experience is not the inevitable price that human beings have to pay for becoming adults, the losing of the innocence, and naiveté. In Janie's passage from innocence to experience, innocence represents a failure to understand or a willful attempt not to understand human experience. Her passage from innocence to experience is symbolized in rape.

In his interview with Bullins published in *A Search for a Postmodern Theatre*, John L. Di Gaetani asks the playwright the significance of rape in the play. Bullins' response is explanatory and thought provoking: "Rape is seen of course as the physical, sexual act, but also rape is a mind trip. It's someone who invades someone's mind and that person's psyche" (Di Gaetani, 1991:41). This mental quality is displayed in Monty's rape of Miss Janie, his forcing himself into and invading Janie's mind. In the play, after the party, Janie decides to stay with Monty: "I think I'm gonna stick around a while. Monty's going to tell me the story of his life" (450). Monty does tell her the story of his life, the years of white oppression on Black people and the bottled up rage that shows itself through violence. This indeed is Monty's way of invading Janie's mind, by making her understand his life as a Black man in white America, as someone subject to daily subordination and cultural devaluation. He causes her to allow her mind to be ruled by his.

Barbara E. Johnson, in her essay "The Re(a)d and the Black," points to the myth of the black rapist. Many other critics agree with her assessment that "The myth of the black rapist is an inversion of historical fact—the frequent rape of black slave women by their white owners" (Johnson, 1990: 150). This myth of black man with unrestrained sexual power was created by the white men as yet another way of controlling and establishing domination. Hazel Carby, in *Reconstructing Womanhood*, refers to this historical fact as "Black women were the victims of rape by white men who had the power to terrorize black men under the pretense of protection of white womanhood" (Carby, 1987: 111). This does not mean that sexual violence has been and still is white men's territory. Lynne Segal, in her attempt to explain the dynamics underlying black men's violence, emphasizes the predominance of social factors and shows how they exceed the problems embedded in individual psychopathologies. In her book, *Changing Masculinities, Changing Men*, Segal points to the growing numbers of Black men taking part in sexual violence:

In suggesting that the extremely high proportion of Black men in this group means that a larger number of men who resort to violence, including sexual violence, will be Black, it is not suggested that such violence occurs because they are Black. The higher probability of violence here, on the contrary, exists because of the specific structuring of exploitation and oppression in a white-dominated, racist society. (Segal, 1990: 276)

The image of a black man 'taking' a white woman becomes even more complicated when it is used by a Black playwright who is also a political activist. There is no doubt that Bullins was aware of the racial and sexual implications of this stereotype. The very complexity of the image itself can be regarded as a challenge to simple-minded stereotyping.

The desperate attempts of the characters of the play to reach others, and to communicate are also among the issues depicted. In the interview he holds with Di Gaetani, Bullins mentions that his favorite theme is "the breaking down of communication among loved ones. And misunderstanding among good intentions" (Di Gaetani, 1991:41). Bullins tells Di Gaetani that he considers acts of violence such as rape also as a way of communicating: "I've been interested in some of the

ways that these people could touch one another to get to know one another, or even just to move one another. One of those ways is through violence, and that violence can be verbal or physical" (Di Gaetani, 1991:41).

Seen in this light it is possible to look at Monty's rape not only as an act of physical violence but also as a way of communication. This view is presented even more forcefully at the end of the play, with Janie's last words, we see that the innocence, the naiveté, the childlike optimism of Janie "dance away" from her violated body; "She just put the noose over her head and felt her spirit dance away" (451). The last words of the play uttered by Janie display this transformation. They are the most effective and beautiful words in the play. Her language, compared to her earlier banal and overly sentimental language, becomes highly poetic and loaded with significance.

The last words of the play refer to the ultimate fate of Janie in this society. These words portray to us the image of Janie being hung. It is a curious picture because of the associations of rape and lynching in Black history. Lynching and hanging were regarded as suitable punishments for the crime of supposed rape committed by black men. Yet this time it is Janie, the white woman who is being hung—at least psychologically. I think as a symbol of her final identification with Black people, it shows that Janie understands Monty. "The Taking of Miss Janie" is predominantly an extremely sad and violent play yet gives the audience glimpses of optimism through Janie's transformation.

Bullins explains to Di Gaetani that "the erosion of time on precious relationships has been a major concern of [his]" (Di Gaetani, 1991:41). We can see the erosion of time—namely the Sixties—on the relationships of the main characters. I think that Bullins—similar to the character Peggy in the play—is neither being critical of anybody nor is he trying to put the blame on someone in particular. Peggy, in her words of wisdom, gives voice to the frustration of the times:

We all failed. Failed ourselves in that serious time known as the sixties. And by failing ourselves we failed in the test of times. We had so much going for us...so much potential. Do you realize it, man? We were the youth of our times... and we blew it. Blew it completely. Look where it all ended. Look what happened? (They are looking out front at the audience.) We just turned out lookin' like a bunch of punks and freaks and fuck-offs. (447)

In short, even though Bullins portrays the chaos, the turmoil, the loss of potential, and disappointment in the Sixties, he avoids mourning losses. Apart from the character of Rick, the Black Nationalist and Islam fundamentalist, who refuses to acknowledge his part in the commotion, all the characters have their moments of wisdom and insight. Peggy, for example, discovers her sexual identity because of the commotion in her life. At different moments of the play she proves that she is wise and has some insight into human nature. Sharon and Len continue to struggle for their relationship and the future of their son. In spite of Len's loss of political commitment, the possibility of their togetherness is an optimistic note in the play. Theirs is an example of interracial relationship that might possibly work.

Everything about *The Taking of Miss Janie* is complex and invites a change of perspective in the audience. It would not be wrong to say that this play is Ed Bullins' response to a frame of mind that wants to dominate, that refuses to understand the psychology of the oppressed, the outcast. However the play is able to depict basic human experience with all its problems, complexity and contradictions.

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