

Tracing Racial History: Mildred D. Taylor's *The Land*

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Abstract: Mildred D. Taylor, a highly acclaimed writer for young adults, narrates her stories by fictionalizing African American history. Invariably she delves into her own family's past to spin tales that would teach young adults about African American history. Black life for her is all about surviving, maintaining self-respect and dignity even when living in a racist cultural context. Winner of numerous awards, including The Coretta Scott King Award, Taylor in her works urges for an understanding and acceptance of the traumatic black history even as her themes encompass real world problems from which her characters emerge lovable and brave. Taylor's stories unveil tales of struggle, racial tension, and tragedy, as well as triumph, pride, and family honour. She puts together highly believable tales and tells them with much humour and insight. Taylor's aim is to shape identity rooted in positivity, racial pride and communal sharing. The paper, in particular, focuses on her *The Land* (2001), considered a prequel book within a series of seven books about several generations of a southern African American family named the Logans. For Taylor "land" becomes a metaphor for examining issues of ownership, entitlement and identity in the face of prevailing racism and marginalization of the blacks in America. Through these stories, Taylor traces racial history for the young adults so that they may have a better perspective on the past. The paper examines how and whether stories tracing such a painful racial history can help young adults forge better race relations in the contemporary times.

Keywords: Racial history, Mildred D. Taylor, *The Land*, African American.

From the very beginning African American writers of young adult literature selected the themes which addressed discrimination, racism and ways of overcoming their impact by obtaining literacy, enacting forms of protest as well as maintaining family and community

solidarity. In African American Young Adult Literature also, these themes were found in a number of genres, most notable among these being August Wilson's history project in theatre. Wanda Brooks in her article "An Author as a Counter-Story teller: Applying Critical Race Theory to a Coretta Scott King Award Book" aptly points out "these accounts recontextualized and often challenged past representations of racism or conveyed alternative depictions of African Americans through the voices of triumphant men and women who surmounted oppression solidarity" (p.34). Such retellings thus aimed to put forward the other points of views which had traditionally been ignored, neglected or negated in mainstream history. By attempting to convey such details to the young, African American young adult literature takes upon itself a very serious and necessary responsibility. In an introduction to Mildred Taylor receiving the Neustadt prize for Children's Literature, literary scholar Dianne Johnson explains:

Every genre has its place and its value. The genre of historical fiction, of which Mildred D. Taylor is a master, will always be important in sadly ahistorical time. The particular era of which much of Taylor's writing is situated--the American Civil Rights Movement in its broadest configuration--seems like ancient times to contemporary children. So work like hers becomes more and more important as time passes. In truth though, Mildred Taylor's writing is timeless; in a most profound way; it is bound neither to date nor place because she writes not only about American civil rights but about human rights and the human spirit. She is the consummate storyteller, and few are her equal as literary artists. (p.1)

Thus Taylor, as also Walter Dean Myers, Sharon Draper, Julius Lester etc., has been contributing handsomely to a reconstruction of the African American image among the young Americans. Currently, the historical fiction genre maintains its place as one of the most published, popular, and awarded of the past decades. With respect to the genre at large, a plethora of historical works continue to be included within language arts, reading and English curriculum. Along with *The Land* (2001), a short list of well-known African American young adult historical fiction that currently stand as favourites includes: *The Watsons Go to Birmingham--1963* (1995) by Christopher Paul Curtis, *Fallen Angels* (1988) by Walter Dean Myers, *Anthony Burns: The Defeat and Triumph of a Fugitive Slave* (1988) by Virginia Hamilton, and *The Glory Field* (1994) by Walter Dean Myers, *Day of Tears* (2005) by Julius Lester, *Copper Sun* (2006) by Sharon Draper and *Elijah of Buxton* (2007) by Christopher Paul Curtis etc.

The Land (2001), Taylor's much acclaimed book, is the first book in her Logan family saga though it was written last. Like other Logan family stories *The Land* too is based on her family's personal history. In a "Note to the Reader" Taylor acknowledges that "All of my books are based on stories told by my family, and on the history of the United States."

As Taylor explains, the tales about the Logans are derived from her own experiences and memories of Mississippi. Included throughout the series of books are pieces of wisdom passed on from her father as also an expression of the love extended to her from family members across generations. As a writer, Taylor chooses to situate her books in a personalized legacy that differs, in part, from non African American and even other African American authors. One aim of the Logan saga includes presenting readers with a rival portrait of African American life. Taylor has "recounted not only the joy of growing up in a large and supportive family," but also her "own feelings of being faced with segregation and bigotry" ("Acceptance" par 3). According to Davis Undiano, Taylor presents herself to readers as "a writer always working fundamentally on behalf of her community" (p.2). Barbara Bader (2002) thus calls the stories of Taylor as representing the seminal family saga of the second half of the twentieth century, one closely paralleling the all American.

Taylor's *The Land* is the first book in a series of seven about several generations of a southern African American family named the Logans. Through the Logan family Taylor chronicles the time from the late 1800s to the 1960s. So this book may be treated as telling the history of Blacks prior to their getting civil rights in 1964. The novel describes Paul Edward Logan's initial attempts to purchase land once he and his best friend Mitchell leave the former plantation of Paul Edward's white father. Prior to their departure, readers learn about the inception of the Logan family, which includes Paul Edward's multi-racial sister, Cassie, and mother of American Indian and African ancestry named Deborah. As a woman once enslaved and raped, Deborah Logan bore her white master two children. At the same time, she also raised his three white sons. Paul Edward and his older sister grew up largely unaware of the racial tensions persisting outside of their white father's family. They are in many ways treated just like their white sibling counterparts. However, throughout the novel's progression, and primarily when Paul Edward becomes a teenager and then a young man desiring to acquire acres of land, he learns firsthand of bigotry and oppression as well as the racialized life he must lead. Despite being afforded opportunities denied to his recently

emancipated African American peers, such as gaining literacy and apprenticing in a trade, Paul Edward is not able to escape the confines of his ethnicity.

The Land may have the trajectory and several elements of a narrative invested in the tale of a tragic mulatto, but it turns away from this all too familiar vector toward something far less tragic and much more hopeful and empowering. In many respects, “the land” has been used symbolically as a mythical divide along with racial lines. Black people were not to own land or property (along with humanity and dignity); they were supposed to be property and on paper synonymous with the land itself. Through the portrayal of Paul Edward Logan, Taylor disrupts this American mythology and asks readers to reconsider the ambiguity of racial and geographical divides in America.

In America before and after the Civil War, it was vital that people of colour be aware of their place in the racial hierarchy of American society. To overstep racial boundaries of behaviour and privilege, in northern or southern states, could easily equate to severe punishment or death for the blacks, enslaved or free. Thus, in situations where racial boundaries were unclear, it was necessary that the racial identity of children and adults be carefully negotiated. It was the duty of black mothers to tell their biracial or multiracial children of racial practice. Explaining to children why they were not equal to their white father’s white children surely posed some difficulty for black mothers. However, such difficulties must have been overcome by any means necessary if their children were to be safe from crossing any inappropriate boundaries of racial identity and privilege. For a child of a light complexion, as in the case of Paul Edward Logan, it was the responsibility of his parents, particularly his black mother, to teach the rules of racial inequality as an act of love for that child, however harsh or painful.

Although Paul and his sister Cassie are the product of a black and Indian slave mother and a white slave-owning father in East Texas, the children are not allowed to be confused by their racial identities:

Now, I always called my daddy “Mister Edward,” just as Cassie and my mama did....it seemed peculiar to me at first that I called my daddy a formal name while Robert and Hammond and George called him “Daddy.” But my mama had broken both Cassie and me when we were still little from ever calling Edward Logan “Daddy.” She had broken that misspeaking with bottom-warming spankings whenever we did. (*The Land* 41)

Despite the support that Paul received from his black mother, he does go through a relatively brief but difficult stage of learning to navigate the racial boundaries located around his family members. Because Edward Logan insisted that his white sons treat Paul as a brother and not as property, Paul experiences some confusion as he enters adolescence. This disorientation, however, is not to be confused with the condition associated with the tragic or doomed protagonist made famous in Harriet Beecher Stowe's nineteenth century novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852). Paul's experiences in *The Land* are far from those of the tragic Uncle Tom. Rather Paul is a hero who has the ability to understand the gaze of the surrounding world and manipulate that gaze to his advantage.

As an award winning novel under the category of children's literature, *The Land* evokes an unusually critical discussion of the employment and deployment of race and Reconstruction America. The text is unusual for a number of reasons, the most important being the presence of multicultural protagonists at the centre of the narrative. In a survey of multicultural protagonists in children's historical fiction made by Agosto, Hughes-Hassell, & Gilmore-Clough in their article "The All-White World of Middle-School Genre Fiction: Surveying the Field for Multicultural Protagonists" only 447 out of 1605 works featured a protagonist of colour. Furthermore, Taylor's main protagonist is more than African American; Paul Edward Logan is a person who identifies as black, white, and Native American, but more importantly has the ability, if not the desire, to pass as white. Taylor's protagonist represents one of the greatest fears of white America at the turn of the twentieth century, a blurring of the colour line. It appears that Paul's identity might be read as a response to the persona made famous by W.E.B. DuBois in *The Souls of Black Folk*: "It is a peculiar sensation, this double consciousness this sense of always looking at one's self though the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks in amused contempt and pity" (p.11).

Although there is no mention of Du Bois' double consciousness theory in Taylor's novel, Paul develops a fully functional ability to see through the eyes of both the oppressor and the oppressed. Paul Edward Logan has a wisdom that is well beyond his years and experience. For Paul, the concept of manhood is inextricable from his racial identity and the difficult decisions that he is forced to make while still in his childhood.

Through his understanding and acceptance of his racial identity, Paul learns that race does not have to define and confine his life. Paul is fortunate enough to possess a mirror that reflects very clearly his racial complexity. Paul's father, Edward Logan, made no apologies for his

white privilege and social status, just as his mother made no excuses for her status or her pride in her own Native American father, Kanati, which “means the lucky hunter” (*The Land* 42).

In many respects, Edward Logan disrupts most, if not all, widely accepted performances of white men in postbellum America. Edward Logan makes great efforts to teach Paul the lessons of racism himself before Paul has to learn them from much more dangerous sources. Logan goes as far as whipping Paul on a Christmas Eve in front of some white guests because Paul struck two white males in defence of his horse and himself. Logan tells him, “I’m going to teach you a hard lesson and I’m going to teach it to you right now. You get those clothes off, or I’ll cut right through them....Who said it was about fair?” (*The Land* 83). After the beating, Logan finds Paul in the woods and explains how the whipping was an act of protection more than a brutal punishment:

All your life I’ve protected you. Don’t you know that? But I just can’t protect you in the same way I do Robert, George and Hammond. I know how white men treat colored men, how white folks treat colored folks, and I know maybe I’ve been wrong in not making you understand earlier that the way I treat you is not the way every white man is going to treat you. (*The Land* 85)

Despite the brutality and embarrassment that Paul suffers at the hand of his father, Paul’s mother refuses to provide any words of sympathy. In fact, Paul’s mother seems to be pleased with the lesson and its methodology. “I been telling you and telling you those brothers of yours are white and you ain’t. I been telling you and that the day was gonna come when things wouldn’t be the same between you and them....I been telling you but you ain’t been listening....Now the day’s come. Merry Christmas” (*The Land* 90). Paul’s mother has no illusion about the role that she plays in the life of Edward Logan. She also understands that despite her long-standing liaison with Edward Logan, she is a black mother responsible for the safety and future of her black children. Thus, from her perspective, it was very important that Paul learn he has two families, one black and one white.

Before the conclusion of his narrative, Paul must learn that despite the love he has for “his family’s land,” because he is black he will have no legal right to the land owned by his white father. Because of his racial heritage Paul Edward Logan will not be allowed to share in his father’s land or white privilege. Paul’s plight is ironic because Edward Logan’s land was

stolen from the people of Paul's grandfather, Kanati. In a conversation between white father and black son, the theft of land is discussed without shame or regret.

"This land," I said, "it belonged to his people first."

"That's a fact," my daddy agreed. "Maybe that's where you get part of your love for the land." (*The Land* 42)

Whatever may be the reason, Edward Logan does not answer to the irony of Paul's situation. As a result, Paul must embark on a mission for his own piece of property and racial identity. Education, a trade, and a love of reading assist Paul in the achievement of his goals. He finally finds his way home after a long journey filled with hard-fought battles and daunting tasks. Paul's home thus entails much more than the land that he has successfully procured by the end of the story. Paul's home is a place in the world that he has earned with a great deal of hard work and sacrifice. His home is a group of friends and family who have supported him under the direst of situations, the love and memory of his ancestors and friends populate the soil he will live on. Consequently, Paul Logan's home transcends a deed to a parcel of land or the land itself; the term that becomes the title of Mildred Taylor's novel ultimately evokes the notion of "homeland." A homeland is a location synonymous with notions of family, ancestors, friends, sacrifice, and love. In an epilogue, Paul reminds the reader how much he is aware of the connections between family and land:

I won't deny that I miss the family of my youth. I loved my mama, and Cassie, of course. I loved my daddy, and I loved my brothers too. And I loved Mitchell....there are times I think of my daddy's land and my childhood there. I think on it, but I don't dwell on it, for I know that I have been blessed to have a family now of my own, and I have been blessed to have the land. (*The Land* 369)

For Paul, the land that he is able to obtain symbolizes a rite of passage. With his land, he is able to ascend to a level of masculinity equal to his father's and to gain the admiration and pride of his mother.

The novel thus presents a sensitive portrayal of prevalent racial tensions without letting the story lapse into a clearly divided bipolar world of white and black. Taylor's focus rather is on the blurring of boundaries between black and white, personal and social, good and bad, the real and the ideal. Taylor as such provides a more balanced, different perspective to be considered by young adults, black as well as white. Her work acknowledges the divisions

inherent in the white and black worlds, but she also indicates the possibility of reconciling these divisions and going beyond the conflicts.

Mildred D. Taylor thus successfully revises the slave narrative tradition by way of empowering one of the tradition's most infamous tropes. By refiguring the concept of mulatto and positioning such a character as both heroic and masculine, Taylor has reinvented what it means to be biracial or ambiguously identified. There can be no better location to introduce such an original theme as making the ambiguous acceptable than in a literature targeting young readers. By writing Paul Edward Logan as an identifiable protagonist, Taylor does more than disrupt American mythologies of racial divides; she disrupts the mythology of national and cultural divides. *The Land* does the work of transforming a traditionally African American trope into a universally identifiable image.

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