

Discussing Three Racial Debates in Brazil

Analyzing the Race Issues in *Tent of Miracles*

Xiangqi Yang*

School of Culture & Communication, Shandong University, Weihai, 264209, China

*Corresponding author. Email: 201800610037@mail.sdu.edu.cn

ABSTRACT

Brazilian racial issues have always been the center of attention in many sociologists' and anthropologists' studies. Based on different perspectives and data, they came to a dissimilar understanding of racial ideology in Brazil. This paper discusses three heated debates on Brazilian racial ideology and shares the author's opinions on them from a literary point of view. Through reading the Brazilian novel, *Tent of Miracles*, I focus on the race issues mentioned in the text. The first section of the paper concerns cultural integration and segregation. My point is that it seems that cultural integration is something transfigured by some scholars and people see only this side of culture but ignore the cultural segregation in their daily lives. The second section focuses on the conflict that whether the browns and blacks consist of a homogeneous group. For this question, I have come to the conclusion that in most cases, the mixed-race and the blacks can be seen as a group together. The last section discusses the stereotype of colored people. Previous studies have shown that people often associate colored people with negative words. However, after reading the novel, I find that blacks and colored people do not always display negative aspects. To some degree, this paper enriches the previous study on racial ideology in Brazil from a new perspective.

Keywords: *Tent of Miracles*, racial ideology, cultural integration, homogeneous group, negative stereotype.

1. INTRODUCTION

Many scholars are working on Brazilian racial ideology because Brazil is well-known for its unique racial ideology. It used to be colonized by Portugal, a European country, and it had developed a plantation economy and slavery. Many debates on race issues in Brazil seem to be never-ending, and scholars have kept arguing for a long time. Aiming to contribute to these controversies by giving some opinions from a literary point of view, this paper will focus on three general notions about racial ideology in Brazil, and I will show my perspective of these ideas based on a Brazilian novel, *Tent of Miracles* which describes many race issues in Brazil [1]. Three general notions of racial conflicts in Brazil will be argued in this paper: a) cultural integration or segregation? b) homogenous group or not? And c) negative words or positive words towards colored people? From discussing these three debates, this paper enriches previous study on Brazilian racial ideology and provides new ideas from literary perspective. I hope readers can have a deeper

understanding of race issues in Brazil and come up with their own ideas after learning these scholars' opinions.

The first section of this paper will discuss cultural integration and segregation. Many previous studies have suggested that Brazil is a country that has multiple categories of races and is well-known for its widespread miscegenation. Fan's work focused on Brazilian cultural integration and demonstrated that Brazilians identify themselves as mixed race. She said the reasons could be traced back to the Portuguese' history [2]. The research to date has tended to focus on integration rather than segregation. Focusing on the evidence in the novel shows that Brazil has both cultural integration and segregation, and it seems that segregation is closer to the intrinsic quality. The second section is about whether the blacks and the browns consist of a "homogeneous group" in the socio-economic aspect. Telles and Lim discuss this racial conflict in their paper [3]. Degler demonstrates a phenomenon called "mulatto escape hatch", which means that Brazilian distinguished mulattoes from the blacks and afforded them greater social mobility [4]. However, many scholars have

challenged this notion, like scholar Nelson do Valle Silva has concluded that mulattos and negroes constitute a “homogeneous group” [5]. From this perspective, scholars have urged a rethinking of Brazilian racial categories. Some of them suggest that Brazil may be much closer to a biracial model than what has previously been assumed. As for this debate, people cannot reach a unanimous conclusion.

Reading *Tent of Miracles* demonstrates that the browns and the blacks indeed have some differences, but the gap is small compared to the gap between the whites and the colored people. The third section is concerned with the association between colored people and the stereotype. There is a consensus among many scholars that people often associate colored people with negative words, whether white or black. Lamont demonstrates that white workers often have a prejudice against black workers because they consider them lazy people and never devote themselves to working [6]. In 1986, Fanon published a book called *Black Skin, White Masks* in which he suggests that the whites have put the blacks at the genital. As for the self-evaluation of the colored people, Fanon said they have a sense of nonexistence [7], and Sheriff suggests that the colored people themselves do not like the word “negro” because it will remind them of some negative meanings [8]. However, far too little attention has been paid to the positive evaluation for colored people. Amado appreciates the colored people’s work ethic in the literary text, and most of them are intelligent and hard-working. When it comes to sexuality, it shows the tight connection between the colored people and the sexual ability and sexual attraction.

2. THREE DEBATES

2.1. Cultural Integration or Segregation?

Brazil is often considered a country well-known for its cultural integration. Fan demonstrates that mixed-race identity, brought forward by Brazilian scholar Gilberto Freyre, became the mainstream discourse system in the twentieth century. The mixed culture identity was then praised by many Brazilian writers like Amado and spread to the world through some art forms like Samba [9]. In the text *Tent of Miracles*, there is some evidence showing integration on some points of culture.

People in Brazil have a fascination with the Carnival, and they often participate in Afche parade. The Carnival originated in the Middle Ages of Europe, and it was introduced to Brazil after the Portuguese colonists immigrated there. However, unlike the European Carnival, the Carnival in Brazil has its unique traits because it clearly shows the culture of Africa, especially Yoruba culture. The texts describe that many mixed-race people considered the Afche parade magic

and had the power to bring people together. When celebrating Carnival, the parade procession will occupy the streets, and people will wear masks, following the music to upspring warm Samba, which is a symbol of African culture. In addition, it seems that cultural integration is quite a normal thing in Brazilians’ daily life. The main character in the text is Pedro Archanjo, and this name is a combination of African religion and European religion. Fan suggests that when Pedro Archanjo was born, his midwife called him “Exu”, the devil in Candomble religion brought by trafficked slaves from West Africa to Brazil. However, his real name is Pedro Archanjo, of which “Pedro” originated from Saint Peter, one of the twelve disciples of Jesus. “Archanjo” is the Portuguese word “Archangel”. It can be inferred that although Archanjo was influenced by African culture deeply in his life and his spiritual essence was completely African, his “name” still reflects the Christian tradition [2]. The form of Archanjo’s funeral also indicates the mixed culture. Since Archanjo had remarkable achievements, he had the right to set a funeral hall in the church, and people would make funeral prayers, seven-day Mass for him. All of these were rites of Catholicism, the European religion. Besides, some African people participated in this funeral, and the Holy father sang the lament in Yoruba, one of the Niger-Congolese languages [1].

Cultural integration is a result that is certain to happen because of the special historical background of Brazil. After colonization, the demographic structure contributed to the wide miscegenation, and the plantation economy kept both European culture and African traits there. Concerning the demographic reason, Liu demonstrates that before the early twentieth century, colored people outnumbered the white people, and they were the main labor of Brazilian society (p.53)[10]. The factor that accounts for this ratio difference is the different number of white immigrants from Portugal and England. Harris demonstrates that only 150,000 people emigrated from Spain between 1509 and 1790 to New World. When Portugal began their occupation of the New World in the sixteenth century, they were harassed by severe domestic workforce shortages. Only a handful of Portuguese migrated to Brazil. In the seventeenth century, Portugal even carried out a policy restricting emigration to Brazil to ensure they would not be depopulated [11]. Liu also suggests that most of the immigrants from Portugal were males because immigrating to an unknown land where the environment may be harsh keeps the females and kids away. The gender imbalance then led to the situation that Portuguese have difficulty finding white females as their partners (p.53)[10]. The colored-to-white ratio and male-to-female ratio together led to people’s tolerant attitude in marriage in Brazil. As miscegenation became more and more widespread,

people were more likely to accept the notion of mixed culture.

Furthermore, there is also a cultural reason for the integration. Fan demonstrates that Portugal has its unique geographical location, and it used to be occupied by North African Moors for a long time, so actually Portuguese could have been seen as an “unclear crowd between Europe and Africa” (Freire). In this situation, they tended to minimize the racial boundaries. Moreover, as Sergio Buarque de Holland noted in *Raizes do Brasil*, it is less difficult to reach a higher status in Portugal, and it also seems easier for them to accept someone who has foreign ancestry [2].

However, *Tent of Miracles* also shows cultural segregation on some points. The text mentions two different churches, one is called Bonfim Church, and the other is called Holy Rosary Cathedral. Bonfim Church is one of the most famous Catholic churches in Salvador, while the Holy Rosary Cathedral used to be the church of black slaves. In addition, it seems that cultural integration to some degree is just a superficial phenomenon. Candomble is often be considered as a signal of mixed culture in Brazil. However, it also shows the separation of the outer and inner. Harris used to analyze the origin of this mixed religion. He said that the African traits could be preserved because the owner of the plantation found that the African music or dance could keep the slaves energetic and help maintain their morale. To make more economic benefits, they permitted the existence of African traditions. In addition, when working in the fields, they can maintain work rate by singing or beating out rhythms. However, the Christian Church may go against these movements because they hope everyone in Brazil believes in Catholicism. In this situation, the slaves often pretend to associate the African pantheon with the Catholic to keep their habits [11]. Cultural integration seemed just like an illusion for the Brazilians because the colored people in the text have a deeper belief in African culture, and the European culture cannot provide them with cultural identity. For example, a famous professor who supports white supremacists is quite angry that the excellent books written in Portuguese have few readers; in contrast, those books ignoring grammar rules and mixing classic and African dialects are quite popular among people (p.47)[1]. Besides, instead of encouraging cultural integration as we think, *Tent of Miracles* demonstrates that Many authorities suppressed African culture and religion. Dr. Petrito, a Bachelor of Law, promised to eliminate all witchcraft, Samba, black culture because he thought that was a good way to sweep away the city of Bahia (p.244)[1]. Furthermore, Dr. Loureiro, an acting director of the police officer, ordered the ban on Afche parade in all forms because it violates family ethics and public interests (p.66)[1].

2.2. Homogenous Group or Not?

There has been a debate on the boundary between the mixed-race and the blacks in Brazil, and the scholars are arguing about whether the browns and the blacks can be seen as a homogeneous group. Degler has raised an idea called “mulatto escape hatch”, which means light-skinned Brazilians of color are permitted to climb the socio-economic ladder while the dark-skinned people may suffer more discrimination in daily life [4]. The separation does not put blacks and browns on an equal footing. While instead, it forms a racial hierarchy where whites are on the top, and the browns are always superior to blacks. This notion may be derived from the “whitening” thought. As for “whitening”, Skidmore has studied prevalent attitudes towards race in Brazil’s multiracial society from 1890 to 1976. He also argues that beginning with the official ideology of “whitening”, the Brazilian elite has developed a consciousness of white superiority and assimilation, making it possible to cover the racial problem with socio-economic stratification [12]. In *Tent of Miracles*, there is some evidence demonstrates this kind of thinking. Dr. Algru deems whites are on the top of the racing pyramid, and mixed-race are second-class. In contrast, the colored people and miscegenation make Brazil a poor and backward country [1].

Furthermore, as for the blacks, he suggests that they could not even be considered human beings and that no civilized country was built by them (p.97)[1]. He distinguishes between the mixed-race and the blacks, which can be implied from his notion that the light-skinned people have a better opportunity to get higher social status than those with dark skin. In addition, Dr. Algru wrote a brochure, which summarizes his views of Brazilian race issues. In this brochure, he said the blacks are rude savages, and the miscegenation should be banned because it is a curse for Brazil (p.287)[1]. The novel also mentions a book called *Mixed Race Record of Bahia Family*, which praised the light-skinned people as a marvelous achievement of mixing while degrading the dark-skinned people by deeming them delusional arrogant (p.142)[1].

There is another notion concerning the boundary between the mixed-race and the blacks. It demonstrates that the browns and blacks in Brazil are equally disadvantaged and hence should be grouped together. Scholars like Silva think that the blacks and the browns suffer similar levels of discrimination, and he considered the browns and blacks to constitute a “homogeneous group” from a socio-economic perspective [5]. In Sheriff’s study, he shows that “researchers have challenged the notion that light-skinned people of color occupy positions of the greater socio-economic advantage than those filled by people with dark skin” [8]. Evidence for this racial ideology can also be traced in the novel *Tent of Miracles*. Dr.

Algru hoped that there could be a law prohibiting interracial marriage. In this situation, white people can only marry whites, but there is no law restricting the blacks from marrying the mixed-race (p.150)[1]. In Dr. Algru's request, he suggests that there are no such strict boundaries between the mixed-race people and the blacks. Furthermore, in the text, there is also an idea that the colored people (both mixed-race and blacks) should only live in the shantytowns (p.246)[1]. From the evidence above, we can tell that this bi-racial notion lets the boundary between the browns and the black's blur.

My opinion on this debate is that I think the browns and blacks do have some differences between them, and sometimes the blacks suffer more discrimination than browns. However, the difference is minor. The boundary between the browns and the blacks is smaller than the white-brown gap. Most of the time, the mixed-race and the blacks can be considered a "homogeneous group."

When it comes to the racial boundary, compared to countries like the United States, it is often said that the racial identity in Brazil is acquired and mutable. It is generally believed in the United States that racial identity is inherited from ancestry, which is innate and unchangeable. A clear-cut color line sharply separates blacks from whites and maintains the ossified ranking where all whites would always be on top, regardless of social status, income, education, occupation, or social refinement, and all blacks at the bottom [13]. Conversely, racial identity in Brazil is acquired and mutable. Brazilians recognize and name many intermediate categories based on a combination of phenotypes [8]. Therefore, a wide range of terms might be applied to a given individual. For instance, a set of nine portrait drawings shown to one hundred Brazilians could elicit forty different racial types (p.58)[11]. In *Tent of Miracles*, Archanjo outright praised that the mixed-race culture is what Brazil has done valuable to enrich world civilization (p.116)[1], and miscegenation blurred boundaries between racial groups. It is often said that it is one's class and not one's race determines the adoption of subordinate and superordinate attitudes between specific individuals in face-to-face relations. Color is one of the criteria of class identity, but it is not the only criterion (p.61)[11]. In the literary text, A good illustration of how class mitigates color is the marriage of Lou Gomez and Tadaui. Lou Gomez is a blonde born in the white, rich Gomez family. Tadaui is a person of mixed blood from a poor background. The girl's family initially rejected the proposal, but Tadaui is a talent who made great achievements both in academic record and career. He worked as an engineer in Rio de Janeiro to build the Brazilian capital into a modern city. Not only did he had a high income, but also valued by superiors and colleagues. With the improvement of Tadaui's social status, Gomez's family finally accepted him. This is evidence of getting rid of racial prejudice through

improving social status. Furthermore, Dr. Naito in this novel said that there are no white people and black people in Brazil, but only the poor and the rich (p.311)[1].

2.3. Words with a Negative or Positive Association with Colored People?

There has been an argument that people often associate colored people with negative words. As for the whites, they consider negroes as savages, and most of them are literate. In Fanon's study, he said that the whites think negro is the link between monkey and man-meaning (p30)[7]. Lamont also demonstrates that white workers consider blacks lazy, entitled, and unambitious people [6]. Those are the stereotype of black people; then how do the black people evaluate themselves? Fanon suggests that the blacks also hold a negative attitude toward themselves because a feeling of nonexistence tortures them. "Sin is Negro as virtue is white" (p.109)[7]. Where does this feeling come from? Why do the blacks degrade themselves? He points out that it is not the negro who made themselves inferior, but others did it. The reason should fall back on the idea of collective catharsis like comic books, magazines. In those kinds of public reading materials, the wolf, the devil, the evil spirit, and the bad man are always symbolized by negroes or Indians, while the victor, the explorer and adventurer are often white boys. In this kind of spiritual edification, as time passes, negative images related to blacks are something most people take for granted (p.145-146)[7]. In Sheriff's study, he suggests that people will avoid calling people negro directly because the word "negro" often reminds people of the history of domination, and it is related to the words "drunkard or boozier, bum, carouser, and thief" [8].

In addition, there is another stereotype of blacks. In terms of sexuality, the whites always bind blacks with strong sexual desire; as Fanon said that "in the case of the Jew, one thinks of money and its cognates. In that of the Negro, one thinks of sex" [7]. He also argued that the civilized white man retains an irrational longing for unusual eras of sexual license, of orgiastic scenes. Projecting his desires onto the Negro, the white man behaves "as if" the negro really had them. The whites suggest that the blacks have tremendous sexual power and low intelligence because, in their mindset, it was widely believed that "every intellectual gain requires a loss in sexual potential". In the Middle Ages, Christians advocated asceticism. Many people suppressed sensual passion for letting the thoughts take precedence over feelings, and the blacks were put on the opposite. They were fixated at the genital.

Although many scholars have argued that people are likely to associate blacks with negative words, the evidence in *Tent of Miracles* suggests another kind of

relation. Many texts describe and appreciate the colored people's work ethic. In the eyes of whites in this novel, for example, Nilo Argolo's fellow professor, Oswaldo Fontes, "... thought mulattos a despicable subhuman breed... Negros were monkeys who somehow had the gift of speech..." [1]. Hoeg argued that Archanjo's ruling class opponents insist on seeing social traits as heritable, those of non-whites being atavistic. However, Tadaui, representative of high intelligent mixed-race, is astonished by his great success for the project in city proper. The new Rio de Janeiro was established by Tadaui. The blacks and colored people in the texts leave an indelible impression for readers because of their positive attitude toward life, high intelligence, and excellent performance at work. After analyzing these cases, a conclusion was made that blacks and colored people do not always display negative aspects, whereas they have something shining on them the same as a white.

When it comes to the association between colored people and sexuality, the novel shows us that the males have powerful sexual abilities and the females have a sexual attraction that seems the same as many scholars' words. However, it is not exactly that case. In many previous studies, scholars combine sexual ability with negative words; like Fanon said, whites consider blacks as people with high libido but low intelligence [7]. Although in the tent of Miracles, people associate strong sexuality with colored people, they talk about it positively in most of the contexts. Amado describes the beauty of mixed races in the text, especially for the appearance and body of women. Rosa, a gorgeous woman deeply loved by Archanjo, is a black woman who deserves appreciation from the poet who plays the lyre. The granddaughter of Rosa, who shows perfectly on appearance because of the fusion of multiple elements, is also a great beauty with blue eyes, brown skin, and a slender figure. Comparing to white people's sexual stereotype toward blacks in many scholars' studies, lots of evidence in this Brazilian novel which in terms of sexuality has certified colored people, is relative to positive description to a large extent. As for the male, it is said that Archanjo has an enviable sexual experience. Yaba is described as the most charming female, and she wants to challenge Archanjo's prestige by seducing him and discarding him. However, her dream did not come true because Archajo really had the power to conquer women using his powerful sexual ability [1]. When it comes to the sexuality of the colored people, Harris said it might have something to do with the colonizers. He suggests that "other colonizers were not as successful as the Portuguese because their libidos were more conservative" [11].

3. LIMITATION

A limitation of this study is that novels may have limitations. The literary text is inevitably subjective because it is the creation of the writer. Although the author tried to demonstrate the race reality in Brazil, the processed literary works cannot fully reflect social reality. Amado built a tent of miracles, and he appreciates the mixed culture in Brazil. That may be because he was a mixed-race person himself, and what he wanted was to promote the status of mixed race and ask for the equality of races. It gives future research space to go beyond novels and incorporate more documentary materials to verify racial ideology in different times.

4. CONCLUSION

This paper has shown many scholars' opinions on three hot-button issues of race ideology in Brazil by tracing back to their research and then giving out the author's own idea regarding the questions. Through reading the literary text *Tent of Miracles*, I develop my own understanding of those questions. A Brazilian author wrote *tent of Miracles*, and he showed us different races' different lives in Brazil, which let us think deeply about the race ideology in Brazil. The three hot-button debates and my opinion go as following. The first argument is about the degree of cultural integration in Brazil. Brazil is always considered as a country famous for its cultural integration. What I found from the novel is that although Brazil has integration in many cultural points, they still have segregation. The second debate is whether the browns and blacks can be considered a "homogeneous group". This question is quite controversial and many scholars gave different answers to it. According to the text, people often put them together and call them "the colored people", but sometimes, somebody may emphasize that the mixed-race are superior to the blacks. My point is that the browns and blacks do have some differences between them, but the boundary between the them is much smaller than the white-brown gap. Most of the time, the mixed-race and the blacks can be considered a "homogeneous group." The last discussion is about the association between colored people and stereotypes like work ethic and sexuality. Previous studies have suggested that colored people are often considered lazy people who rely on government subsidies, and their libido is always out of control. People often combine negative words with them. However, I find that much evidence in the text demonstrates the connection between positive words and colored people. This study discusses the debates of race ideology in Brazil and adds some new thoughts to those questions. To some degree, this paper provides a new perspective on understanding racial ideology in Brazil. Previous study mainly focus

on social surveys and this paper enriches the discussion based on a Brazilian novel.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

I collected previous scholars' points of view focusing on racial ideology in Brazil and demonstrated their arguments and counter-arguments in this paper. After reading the literary text, *Tent of Miracles*, I showed my opinions on the three general debates from a new literary perspective.

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