

Edward P. Jones Via His Own Words: A Review of His Interviews

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Abstract

This research work reviews the conversations and interviews of Edward P. Jones and through them traces the ways in which Jones's work has evolved and how his ideas on fiction writing, on Washington D.C. as the fictional place, the craft of his fictions and the black lives in America have found shape. Edward P. Jones is the author of two short story collections, *Lost in the City* (1992) and *All Aunt Hagar's Children* (2006) and his 2004 Pulitzer Prize winning novel *The Known World*. Jones has written a few texts but he has been already regarded as one of the major contemporary canonical African-American short story writers because of the portrayal of the new voice of the African-American communities. In all his majority of his interviews Jones emphasises on the need to focus on the kind of unique characters he has created making a symbol out of Washington D.C. His process of imagination and the depiction of the Black life is the eye of these narratives. Edward P. Jones lived in Washington D.C. and in his interviews, he is talking about his experiences at the place and has tried to build a network of his characters and their responses to the place and the city people. He is creating a unique world with the place and the characters making a symbol out of them. While in some of the interviews he talks about the impact of his real-life incidents on these stories, in some he does refute the same. This paper tries to closely read his published interviews and bring significance to the loopholes in order to understand his art and craft and his techniques.

Keywords: African American, Washington D.C, interviews, marginalisation, symbolism

INTRODUCTION

This paper reviews the conversations and interviews of Edward P. Jones and through them traces the ways in which Jones's work has evolved and how his ideas on fiction writing, on Washington D.C. as the fictional location, the craft of his fictions and the black lives in Washington have found shape. Besides his two collections of short stories, *Lost in the City* (1992) and *All Aunt Hagar's Children* (2006) and his 2004 Pulitzer Prize and New York Times Editors' Choice Award winning novel *The Known World* Jones has given many interviews in different magazines, journals and other portals. Jones has written only a few texts but he has been already regarded as one of the major contemporary canonical writers favourably compared to William Faulkner and Toni Morrison because of the range and depth of characterisation, narrative techniques and his unique literary vision which is evident from the fact that he is the recipient of the MacArthur Fellowship award and the PEN/Malamud Award besides being the recipient of many other honours for his significant contributions to the art of short story. All the three works of Jones have been lauded in superlative terms. In the majority of his interviews, Jones

emphasises on the need to focus on his characters and his making of those characters in the context of black experience in Washington D.C. . His process of imagination and its literary execution are worth noting for his readers. Edward P. Jones lived in Washington D.C. and in his interviews, he talks about his experiences at the place and mentions how he has tried to build a network of his characters and their responses to the place in his stories. While in some of the interviews he talks about the impact of his real-life incidents on these stories, in some he clearly does refute the same. This chapter closely reads his published interviews and attempts to plug in the gaps one finds while reading him. Jones's interviews are explanations to the genesis of his works; like most authors and sometimes contradictory to his own ideas of his work, again like many authors of literary works. A writer with powerful stories, beautiful yet simple language and realistic portrayal has emerged, after Hemingway, as the new American voice of profoundness with simplicity of expression. Edward P. Jones says: "I like plain, simple writing. That's the best way of storytelling" while in conversation with Kaitlyn Greenridge. (Greenridge).

Jones's interviews talk a lot about his parents, especially his mother who toiled a lot to raise her children. Jones is the son of an illiterate dishwasher and hotel maid and Jones used to sign on behalf of her in his report cards. With a difficult childhood, separated parents, and continuous struggle with poverty, Jones still managed to be an exceptional student. Jones says that he must have spent more time with any of his interviewers than he has spent with his father, even when his father was living right opposite to his house. In his childhood, Jones's family; Jones, his mother, sister and a brother moved frequently from one place to another. In a span of eighteen years, Jones and his family lived at eighteen different places which "were all located within a nineteen by fifteen block area in Washington, D.C." says Jones in conversation with Sherry Ellis. (Ellis). Jones received an MFA in writing from the University of Virginia in the year of 1981. In the early phase of Jones's career, he used to get his stories published in Callaloo, the Paris Review, and Ploughshares. In his interviews, Jones mentions that he is not a writer who writes every day; rather he goes with the flow of his imagination and waits for them to come. With a very different lifestyle, Jones always preferred to use public transportation rather than a private one. He avoids cell phones, emails and lives a private life where his companion is himself.

Jones always loved reading. In an interview with Hilton Als, published in The Paris Review he talks about how he got interest in reading and further reading in English. Starting from Comic books to Erskine Caldwell and Anne Moody, he set his overarching boundaries in the world of modern American short stories and fictions. During the time Jones was introduced to the world of reading, the comics were called "funny books" in America. "When I started reading black writers, I discovered two books that had a great impact on me: Ethel Waters' His Eye Is on the Sparrow and Richard Wright's Native Son. I felt as if they were talking to me, since both books had people in them that I knew in my own life. I was shocked to learn black people could write such things" says Jones. (Ethelbert). Jones, while reading, enjoyed the feeling that he was able to escape from places and situations through his imagination. He gradually fostered the reading habit and enjoyed the process even when he was just fourteen years old.

He has spoken about his education and early career in several interviews. Jones was a student of Holy Cross College, Worcester, Massachusetts. Even though Jones never took writing seriously as a career, he started writing effectively during his college years. Like his great precursor James Joyce, whom he followed considerably, especially while debuting, Edward P. Jones can also be called a "writer of place". After reading Dubliners, the short story collection by Joyce, Jones considered depicting Washington D.C in his stories creating a symbolic world with multiple layers of meaning. In the interview with Carole Burns for Washington Post , Jones said: "I went away to college and people have a very narrow idea of

what Washington is like. They don't know that it's a place of neighbourhoods, for example, and I set out to give a better picture of what the city is like—the other city" (Burns). Eventually, Jones developed his mastery over short story narration making fiction out of a real world of Washington and in the process the city was presented to the world with its complex dynamics and multiple configurations and algorithms. Washington D.C. got a unique and unprecedented focus in American literature in general and African-American writing in particular. It turned out to be a huge symbol in American literature, perhaps one after Moby Dick.

Jones has talked extensively about his stories in his interviews and how they were conceived and laid down in letters. According to him, during his graduation years, he was simultaneously working at various places to earn livelihood and writing his young tales on racism, oppression and division as he envisioned in Washington D.C. These seemingly realistic portrayals were accomplished in a duration of three years, though the inception of these began much ahead in his thought process. He, as an author, generally takes a long time to give final shape to his stories. "Every major character, and even most minor characters, would be different, so that each story would be distinct from the others," he recalled to Lawrence P. Jackson of African American Review. "I didn't want someone to come along and be able to say that the stories are taken out of the same bag. I suppose that is one of the reasons that it has taken me so long" (Jackson).

Jones generally writes in third person except in the fourth story in *Lost in the City* and corresponding title story "All Aunt Hagar's Children" from the 2006 anthology. Both these stories have been narrated by an unknown male character. The reason behind this choice is not clear but it does look intentional. His tone of narration is very invigorating, engaging and informative as well. His artistic interest of story telling lies in an intimate scale of personal experiences where every locale and character has a certain relevance to reality and the depiction of the south persists in his living memory. "Jones's prose is always exacting in its observation and meticulous in its accounting. The world he invites us to know is scrupulously documented and carefully quantified." (Scott). While writing *Lost in the City*, Edward P. Jones used to leave question marks instead of character names. And, after he finished writing, he would open the telephone book and pick names from the beginning and the end. But later he found it a very difficult task while writing *The Known World*. He sat in front of his computer and decided the names on the spot. The only name he chose consciously was Celeste which he picked up from a dictionary. There were several names and their meanings in the back of the dictionary and Celeste was the most angelic one.

Talking about his narrative technique and his writing of short stories, it is evident that Jones is not a believer of forms or norms. According to him, there is no exact way to define a short story or no technique to build a masterpiece. He believes in letting his imaginative faculty run free and starts putting them on the canvas with letters and colours of his fascination. And, the voices that he uses in most of his writings are the cadence of his mother's voice. His simple structure of language imbibed into the complexities of the action and the abyss of his thought process creates a different kind of literary experience altogether for his readers.

Like many writers of eminence, Jones experiments with the language of his narratives. He believes that the writers should use a certain kind of language which draws complexity and subtlety at the same time. At times, this attribute of Jones's writing makes them look disjointed, episodic and confusing for a general reader. He also uses language with several variations which is considered as a heritage of black American communities. He mostly does it in *Lost in The City*. Though he talks about unpleasant events

in his texts, for instance the massacre of pigeons in the story “The Girl Who Raised Pigeons”, the child hanging from the tree in “In the Blink of God’s Eye” and many other, he stays detached from them, as he says to Edward Guthmann of The San Francisco Chronicle. His detachment helps him to achieve the narrative effects he aims for.

Jones prefers to use census figures and statistics to emphasise the era or the time of the narrative rather than using technology of the time. He not only delves into the history of that place but also the people who are more important to him. Jones never cared for the reactions and responses from the readers. The only reader he was worried about was he, himself. He believed that nobody is going to be shocked after reading his book, there is nothing which is fancy or the world didn’t know about. He wanted to make himself feel happy while reading his texts. “The only thing I cared about was that I didn’t.... I didn’t want to have a sitcom situation. I didn’t want to have characters, even though they were slaves, be entirely powerless”, said Jones in the interview with Sherry Ellis. (Ellis). Ralph Ellison says, “The act of writing requires a constant plunging back into the shadow of the past where time hovers ghostlike” (Ellis). Edward P. Jones followed the African-American literary giant and often took tours of southern cultural history and memory. He learnt about the black slave owners during his college days. And, years later he decided upon it as the subject of his novel, which turned out to be one of the major canonical texts of twentieth century American literature. “My only thought was about writing characters, and it just so happens that some of those characters were black people who owned slaves” says Jones. (Ellis). He never tried to do research on those people hence had nothing to justify and gradually he made them all up.

Edward P. Jones calls himself as the “God of the characters” (Ethelbert) he creates and has magnificently avoided creating stereotypical characters. “Even though the characters are fictional, out of my imagination, it helps a great deal if I can plug in an imaginary character and put that character on a real street. “It helps to tell the story”, said Jones in an interview with Kaitlyn Greenidge (Greenridge). When asked about his process of conception of his stories, characters and plots, he was unsure of his answers. When he was writing his first book *Lost in the City*, he used to keep notes. They might be from a magazine that he was reading and he would note down certain incepts for reference. For *The Known World*, he had begun and worked for ten years but had only six pages of the first chapter and six of the last when he started to write the novel. In the year 1992 he did some reading of history and the yellow pages notes he had and started moving ahead without any further reading, letting his imagination lead him the way.

Jones has a deep sense of humanity which reflects in his characterisation. His characters are representations of the people whom he dedicates his writings. However fictional it may be, there is a large amount of psychological and realistic truths in the lives of the people of the society that Jones has talked about. The symbolic depiction of these characters is an essential feature of Edward P. Jones’s narrative. He was fancied by the thought that he could create a mental picture of the world without reference to any image in his mind of any text so as to produce something fresh. He wanted to do something different which is why he threw out all the conventional notions he had about storytelling. He never wanted his writings to be lost in the general reading public, as he says in an interview with the poet E. Ethelbert Miller on 10th March, 2012.

Every time he finishes a story and starts writing the second one, he would feel like being on the bottom of the mountain. He was convinced that he needs to create brand-new characters, situations and plots, which are very important in order to create something unique or outstanding. His characters have been

portrayed as having resolutions which prevent them from changing decisions and produce an effect of solidarity, like Jones's own. For example, in the story "The Sunday Following Mother's Day", the protagonist's resolution is that he can never be a part of his daughter's life because of what he has done and further the daughter also cannot have her father around her in any possible way. In "The First Day", the resolution is a part of the little girl's realisation of what it means to be illiterate and that her mother wanted a very different kind of life for her. The last line of the story is indicative of her conviction: "hearing all the voices of children all over the world, but hearing her mother's voice above all of that" (Ellis). "I can still hear my mother's footsteps above it all" (Jones 35). A simple statement demonstrates what she has decided, that while she grew up and moved into the world, and learned more and more, that she would never forget what her mother was and what her mother taught her. There are some stories where resolution is a prominent element but in some, they might not be that explicit.

"A 'people' is formed by physical propinquity, a native soil and a shared history that has formed common beliefs and values (i.e., its culture or civilization) and conferred on it an identity. The link between a people and a land is a profound one" (Coles 186). Jones's Washington must be read with a link to his characters to understand the ways through which a place can be tied to identity, narrative and normative ideals. Humanist geographer Yi-Fu Tuan defines place as a "centre of meaning constructed by experience" (Tuan 1). The meanings can be found anchored in the lived experiences or those derived from their symbolic manifestations. Jones' symbolic portrayal of Washington and its connection with the south and his characters come into play on the same platform. The Washington D.C. in Jones's texts are not fictional. Rather, every single street, house and lane is real as per the geographical location of the place. "All the places that I write about are real," Jones said in an interview with Hilton Als in 2013. Every story abounds in specifications about location: the barbershop "on the corner of 3rd and L Streets, Northwest"; "Georgia had always considered the corners of 5th and M as her lucky corners"; "Miss Jenny had come out of Hahn's shoe store, crossed New York Avenue and was going up 7th Street"; the building at 1708 10th Street, "around the corner from the fire station on R Street." These places in the stories are not tourist hideaways, rather they are neighbourhoods or routes taken by resident black people. "Jones's consistent use of street names and neighbourhood references, coupled with his infrequent insertion of physical descriptions of these locations, establishes a sense of inclusion into the narrative and the community that he depicts" (Brown 12).

Senator Tom Cotton once said, "Washington is a city full of bureaucrats and other white-collar professionals." But, the Washington D.C of Edward P. Jones has a different portrayal. Jones's people are marginalised, oppressed and harassed. The Beautiful Things that Heaven Bears by Dinaw Mengestu also presents the lives of marginalised communities living in a capital city. These residents of capital cities, living in the space of poverty or sidelined seem far away from power brokers, historic monuments and politicians. They articulate experiences that oppose the dominant constructions of African- American identity. Jones not only presents Washington D.C. as a symbol, but as a "real and complex city in which new forms of knowledge, identity and memory are produced" (Brown 2). The collective effect of this kind of portrayal and the ample load of verifiable information makes Jones a realistic writer and provides immense credibility to his texts. The people living in Washington District are residents of the capital but the sense of poverty is deeply imbibed into the psyche, which is similar to the kind of life Edward P. Jones had himself. One of the reasons behind using geo-tagging or maps is that Jones resists himself from getting lost in his own imagination. He thinks that these texts might have some historical values in his narration of African- American writing. But he is not quite sure of what it is. He relies on

his own imagination rather than talking about his own life and the people around him. He believes that, when he closes his eyes, he is reading stories in his mind, but he cannot wait to see those stories physically. As Ray Bradbury says, “You see what you write” (Bradbury). This suggests that Jones skilfully lays the stories down which are not far from his imagination.

Edward P. Jones paints his characters from the inspirations of the people who have moved from south to the capital city of Washington D.C. as a process of upward mobility. But, in spite of their living in the capital for several generations they haven’t been able to do away with their memory and other elements of the south. Those are an integral part of their identity and existence, their irresistible urge for recognition. The journey from the South to the North is more of a symbolic journey that they underwent to claim lives of their own. Slavery and racial discrimination have been considered as a natural process to them. “Jones focuses on the fundamental decency and the sense of community that African-American descendants of slaves brought with them when they moved towards North. Stories set in the first half of the 20th century are filled with neighbours who look out for one another...” (McAlpin). Thus, Jones raises questions about what freedom is and what it means to be truly free. Depicting the south in his texts, Jones has created a world out of his imaginations which is very much like the south painted by his mother to him. Even a character like Henry Townsend who managed to be a slave owner escaping the status of being a slave is trapped in an identity crisis. He gained wealth and power by becoming a slave owner of the county, but in a broader perspective and in the eye of the law he was still a black slave from the south.

In the very first page of the *Lost in the City*, in the story “The Girl Who Raised Pigeons”, it says, “The barber lived in a gingerbread brown house...” The movement from the south to the north was never really accepted but these people for their prosperity made the physical, emotional and cultural trips. They believed that big cities like Washington offer money, prosperity and opportunities. Miss Jenny in “The Girl who Raised Pigeons” says, “the city people can help out with this” (Jones 12). But cities can make them lost or obscure. They are rather asked not to get lost in the city. Carleton’s grandfather always used to tell him, “Don’t get lost in the city” (Jones 14).

African- American narratives took quite a long time to be recognised by American society. And, now it has been an integral part of American history and literature. The writings of the African-American writers who were born in the North and the writers who were brought up in the South, but wrote about the North are very different from each other. While the earlier wrote in a more spiritual tone, the later always fought for themselves and their community who were never really accepted. The little girl in the story “The First Day” in *Lost in The City* is a prime example to face the barrier at an early age. Her mother had a lot of aspirations for her. But she was informed that she was looking at the wrong school and there was a different school for their kind. Another such instance can be found in the first story of *All Aunt Hagar’s Children*.

Jones says, “When I was a child, I had a childhood friend was a girl named Bessie Ann, she was stutter, then and everyone in the neighbourhood picked on her” (Ethelbert). When he started to write “The Girl Who Raised Pigeons”, he wanted to make a strong character of the little girl who could have been like Bessie Ann if the world would have been better. There are a lot of references to horses, dogs and mules in *The Known World*. When asked about this, Jones says, the use of these animals, even though it came out of his subconscious, shows the lives of the people who have come from the south and lived in a closed proximity with these animals.

In *The Known World* slave owners in the town thought of these people or the slaves as no more than

these animals. "At times when he weaves the narratives with these symbols," Edward P. Jones "is not conscious of having already used them... he feels like it fits there and that's what he does. It's like a sort of majestic omniscient character of Edward P. Jones in his own stories and it probably has to do with his mother" (Temple). The other significant symbol of the south is of the missing of God, to which he might refute. Yet, when he creates the Manchester County with graphs and leaves out the people and writes through the character Alex Knight, "this is what God sees when he looks down on Manchester." Jones believed there were a lot of people whose eyes are raised up to the heavens in the novel "who passionately believed in God, but God was always absent." The character Stephane says, "I never believed in the same God, and so he had never questioned the world, what colour people could be the owners of slaves and if that moment in the dark he would have sprouted wings, would you have questioned that either" (Ethelbert). Religion and God are two integral parts in *The Known World*. When a slave named Moses, wonders about God's presence, Jones writes,

"It took Moses more than two weeks to come to understand that someone wasn't fiddling with him and that, indeed, a black man two shades darker than himself, owned him and any shadow he made. Moses thought that it was already a strange world that made him a slave to a white. But God had indeed set it twirling and twisting every which way when he put black people to owning their own. Was God even up there tending to business anymore?" (Jones 10).

Even though Edward P. Jones calls himself a non-believer in the existence of God, he knew that his characters in the novel believe. So, he had to inject every possible element he could to create real life humans.

Edward P. Jones never really had an agenda for his writings. He had situations, endings, climaxes and characters which he weaved to make short stories or the novel for us. The way he has moved from one place to another repeatedly throughout his life, his imagination also is deprived of a destination. He sculpted with the raw clays of his mind to what we read as *Lost in the City*, *All Aunt Hagar's Children* and *The Known World*. He writes to give endings to the ideas that he nurtured in his mind. He says "I don't see any reason to go with the story unless I have an ending... So, I don't have any sort of motivation for me. Motivation means that you have a kind of agenda that you want to get across, and I have no agenda" (Greenridge). He has presented us with a wide canvas of stories and I believe he wants us to feel these narratives rather than just reading or trying to understand. John Vernon, in his New York Times book review of *The Known World* wrote "Jones has an ear for speech now buried in the past, though its echoes remain. His own narrative style is doggedly declarative, slow, persistent, imperturbable and patient..." (Vernon). Jones never believed himself to be a writer of such descriptions or rather adjectives to say. He is not someone who loves to use a lot of emotions which he calls "neon-lighting" as there are already a lot of inherent emotions embedded in the subjects that he is writing about. "I just wanted to state the facts," says Jones in a conversation with Sherry Ellis. He further goes saying that, "People can look at you and say things about you that you never think about your own self, because you are in your own skin. So, you don't go around saying that I'm this, I'm that, I'm the other, because you are it" (Ellis).

Jones in his interviews talks extensively about his writings, but it can be said that he also chose to keep certain questions unanswered. It can also be said that he himself is not ready to open up. As vivid his narration is, his view point in some instances refutes what he presents. In Spite of the realistic narration, he says he doesn't like to take situations from his life or his friend's or their lives. A writer like Edward P. Jones has changed the art of story-telling. A black slave owner like Henry Townsend or a girl like

Betsy Ann, he has created some memorable characters in his writings. He has presented a novel which is about the little-known fact that there were black slave owners also in the Antebellum South. And the cornucopia of characters is of a different multitude altogether. A student of creative writing and a person from the black community with first-hand experience has written commendable masterpieces which not only share a lot of information about their side of the world, but also touches that cord of genuine emotions through the narrative and the portrayal. This talks about the broad idea of past, present and future in a story teller.

Edward P. Jones's interviews provide significant insights into his life and his writing process and also the philosophy behind his writings. He talks about the influence of his life, his troubled childhood and his mother who is the inspiration behind his writings. It can be said that, Jones takes great interest in navigating through his own stories and is also interested to know the judgements and perceptions of them so they exist for a longer period in the literary history. His writings are not of sympathy rather of empathy.

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