

A Gate at the Stairs: Post- 9/11 Racial Tensions

By Caleb Goding

After the events of September 11th, 2001, so much changed in the American psyche that it was hard to keep track. When individuals think of the changes that America has gone through since 9/11, many will most likely cite privacy or security matters. However, 9/11 changed the way that race was treated in the nation, by both the more conservative and liberal contingents of the American population. Lorrie Moore does a fantastic job of summing up this racial tension in post-9/11 America in her book *A Gate at the Stairs*, outlining the failures of both those who are racist as well as those who are purportedly “allies.” Moore uses several different examples of normalized racism in the novel, giving the reader a better feeling of how it really was post-9/11 in regards to race relations, as there was a significant amount of institutionalized racism as well as self-serving liberalism played heavily as a result of the outrage towards these same racial issues.

The novel, *A Gate at the Stairs*, begins with Tassie Keltjin, a college student who goes to the fictional equivalent of University of Wisconsin- Madison, looking for a nanny job. Eventually she tracks down a lead that leads her to work with the soon to adopt couple, Sarah and Edward. As soon as she is hired, Tassie tags along with the couple all over Wisconsin to search for a child for them. Throughout this search, the adoption agencies are quick to bring up the race of the child, putting precedence on the fact that the children were white, or playing down the fact that some were black. At this point Sarah becomes quite frustrated with the process, she expresses her frustration with the fact that only the white babies were advertised positively, while the black babies were more set to the side, thus her reasoning for wanting a black child. Sarah eventually finds a daughter that she is compatible with, and soon adopts her, placing

Tassie as her nanny. Tassie then begins watching Mary Emma full time, taking her with her everywhere she goes. Sarah, after a short time, begins weekly support groups for people of color as well as those who have adopted children of color. During these meetings, as Tassie hears, there is quite a bit of inadvertent and overt racism, leading her to become uncomfortable with said meetings. After a short time, Tassie also becomes involved with an Islamic student, Reynaldo, who after visiting for a short time, Sarah becomes suspicious of due to his religion. While Tassie defends Reynaldo to Sarah, as she believes that she can't "trust his rolodex", he ends up coming forward to Tassie that he is in fact part of a sleeper cell, and that he is moving away from America to Britain. Shortly after this, things begin to fall apart all around Tassie. Sarah's true identity and past come out which forces her to relieve her parental rights of Mary Emma, while Tassie has shocking news back at home. The book ends with Tassie having to go home after her brother was killed in an explosion in Afghanistan, leaving her as an only child. The novel characterizes exactly the feelings and sentiments citizens of the United States had pertaining especially to the military and even more so the racial makeup and tension our country was going through post-9/11.

When most people think of racism in America, most likely they think of overt signs and groups of racism, such as derogatory terms, the Ku Klux Klan, and Nazi imagery. However, Lorrie Moore does an excellent job of making it clear that while these are in fact signs of overt racism, there is much more to it than simply these commonly associated parts. The most egregious of these examples that Moore uses is an instance when Tassie is walking with Mary Emma to Reynaldo's to spend the afternoon. As Tassie pushes Mary Emma along, a car pulls up next to the pair, the window rolls down, and a man screams the word "nigger" as Mary Emma as they speed away. This is an especially strong moment as it takes a word that virtually all of

society takes in an extremely pervasive and offensive way, and screams it out to the reader and the characters alike. With this, Moore grabs the reader, looks them right in the face, and tells them that blatant racism is still a factor, even in our so called “progressive society”. While Tassie does much to circumvent traditional ideals of racism, she also has her moments of racially charged negative thinking. This comes into play when she visits Green Bay with Sarah and Edward still on the hunt for a child. As she notices that the child is black she ruminates: “ I wondered whether the father might be a Green Bay packer.”(pg.80) This assumption basically asserts that because the father is black that he must be a Green Bay Packer, rather than anyone else, because Tassie sees Green Bay as a white city. However, Tassie’s mindset is still in question, as she does not seem to believe that any other people of color live in Green Bay, thus it’s without a doubt a Packers player in her mind. While this thought process was going on, the deliberate racism used during the adoption, where the adoption agent refers to the fact that white babies are more desirable than black ones, and that she really does not advertise the black babies. Besides the fact that this makes human beings into commodities, it also shows that societally, black children are seen as “less cute” and less wanted. This shows an ugly symptom of race relations that something like a baby has no say in, or simply cannot do anything about, even if they are the ones being punished for it. The overt racism that Moore explores in the novel is but only a small sliver of post- 9/11 racial tensions that had many more undertones involved at the time.

During the time that Tassie is watching Mary Emma at Sarah’s home, Sarah begins a series of “support groups” (three in all) that are to be utilized specifically for those who have adopted children of color or for those who are people of color in general. During these meetings, Tassie is watching the children upstairs; however she hears portions of what they’re talking

about, and she listens and ruminates upon what is said. Immediately she is skeptical and taken aback by what is said in these meetings; rather than being open and respectful of all people, these meetings devolve into slowly talking poorly upon many different races and other perceived “differences” the participants acknowledge about others. The most egregious and outspoken of these critics during these meetings is unsurprising, that of the man who consistently states: “Don’t get me started on Islam”, or other versions of this statement. This sums up a large part of post-9/11 racism, as most citizens of the United States immediately went to blaming Islamic people for the crimes of the few who enacted the terroristic attacks on September 11th. The Pluralism Project, a Harvard subsidiary characterized the post-9/11 hate the best with the quote:

Anti-Muslim hate crimes rose by more than 50 percent between 2003 to 2004; while 93 anti-Muslim hate crimes were recorded in 2003, 141 hate crimes were recorded in 2004. The study cites 1,552 cases of anti-Muslim occurrences including violence, discrimination, and harassment. Approximately 225 of these cases involved religious discrimination, such as a city's opposition to a mosque. 196 cases involved discrimination in the workplace and 190 cases cited verbal harassment. (Pluralism Project)

This group of statistics handily sums up that the “Don’t get me started on Islam” man was not alone during the time, and that he may even have been one of the more moderate on the topic. Along with these overtly Islamophobic views, the support groups also touch heavily on various topics dealing with African Americans other than their own children. One example of this is when one mother declares that she does not want her son hanging out with these “thugs” that he does, instead finding some nice, presumably white, friends. Moore uses these support groups to not only display the casual racism rampant during the post-9/11 days, but also the self-serving liberalism that those who opposed this racism took on. While being open to helping those

of color on the outside, these support groups on the inside are just as racist as those that they condemn. This shows the cognitive dissonance that many felt at the time, wanting to help with racial tensions and the people who were affected by them, while at the same time also having the exact dispositions against these people that they were fighting against. Another aspect of these groups that stands out strongly, is the selective racism that they express to races that are not represented within the group. One part of racism that many overlook is inter-minority racism, something that Lorrie Moore shows with great success through these meetings. Inter-minority racism is the phenomenon in which one ethnic minority exhibits a racist attitude towards a separate ethnic minority, and several times during the conversations it seems to turn to these lengths by the participants. One particular member, an African American man, even begins to speak on Hispanics, devolving the conversation once again into a racist tirade, branching far from what they were trying to accomplish with the discussion.

Lorrie Moore also explores the idea of “colorblindness”, especially relating to the Caucasian community focusing on the black community as a whole. In Zamudio and Rios’ paper “From Traditional to Liberal Racism: Living Racism in the Everyday,” they describe colorblind racism:

This official break with blatant racism has allowed white America to disconnect itself with this country’s racial history; for them, history no longer matters, and in a colorblind

America, individuals rise and fall on their merit. (Zamudio)

This could not be truer in terms of the character Sarah Brinks. Sarah adamantly states that she is “colorblind” thus leading others to believe that in no way is she truly racist, instead that she views no one based on their skin color or pigmentation. This notion simply eliminates hundreds

of years of demoralizing disrespect and attacks upon minorities as a whole, thus weakening the stance that they have towards the racism they deal with on a daily basis. On top of this, colorblindness is simply a way for other ethnicities to ignore the disadvantages of minorities, as they simply refuse their existence. This is true with Sarah, as she states that she believed Troy was a town without racism, and that it was a progressive city, ignoring the fact that any city in the world could act that way. This leads to a sense of denial that Sarah has, that she does not believe in any way that something like “this” could happen in her own pocket of the world, instead of realizing that just because she “doesn’t see race” doesn’t mean that racism doesn’t happen daily. This colorblindness also works to undermine further the attempts by minorities to work towards more legal and political rights, as “colorblindness” leads to the idea of a “post-racial” America. By being “post-racial” the proponents of this colorblindness assume that it simply does not matter that certain laws are passed or certain ideas are formed, as they are deemed unnecessary. This is a very dangerous line of thinking for these minority communities, as they are then less able to have leverage towards making a better community and life for themselves.

Another aspect that Lorrie Moore delves into dealing with racial theory is the overt racism perpetuated in the adoption process in both Wisconsin, as well as nationally. In the novel, while Sarah is searching for a child to adopt, multiple times the adoption agency tries to tell her that the good babies are the white babies, even going so far as to guarantee it. When Sarah makes it clear that she wants a baby that is not of her own race, the adoption agent is taken aback, but relents and leads her to a baby that she would be more inclined to. Even after they’ve met the baby and talked some logistics, the adoption agent makes an off-handed remark about how the baby’s father may be in jail. This amalgamation of scenes depicting the adoption process

illustrates the reality of race when it comes to adoption, that is, that white children are seen as more desirable than those of color. This depiction is a damning view of the realities of the adoption process, that the babies are treated as commodities where white babies are valued higher than minority babies. By doing this, the adoption agencies lessen the “worth” of these minority babies, making them seem as if they are less desirable, and instead making sure to advertise the “superior” white babies.

While Moore does much throughout the novel, there is one significant area where even Moore herself loses some clarity on the area of race. This comes with the introduction of the character Reynaldo in the plot. Reynaldo first appears in the story sitting next to Tassie in her intro to Sufism class, cracking jokes with her about the class and just generally being a friend for her in class. Over time, their relationship blossoms, and they begin seeing each other separate from class. When this begins, Tassie brings Mary Emma with her during the day, to take pictures and generally just be with both Reynaldo and Tassie. During these times Reynaldo and Tassie have deep conversations, eventually leading to him telling the story of him running a courier service, and the post 9/11 racism that disallowed him from continuing with that job in New York. However, when presented with one of the pictures that Reynaldo had taken, that included a prayer rug, Sarah becomes very suspicious of not only Reynaldo, but his “rolodex”. At this point, the reader is most likely on Tassie’s side, feeling empathetic towards her plight with Sarah in terms of Sara’s unsubstantiated distrust in Reynaldo due to his religious and racial persuasion. Not long after, however, Tassie visits Reynaldo where he reveals that he is indeed part of a sleeper cell, and that he would be leaving Troy for Europe to join them. After the reveal, Tassie and Reynaldo have a short discussion on how Reynaldo believes that she is going to hell due to her beliefs and actions and he will see salvation, thus giving him a sense of bullheadedness. This

whole sequence does not feel very cohesive with the racial and ethnic message throughout the rest of the novel. Moore seems to turn around and make what could have been a great lesson in that racism and stereotypes are not true, but instead plays right into it. It seems odd coming from Moore, as she states in an interview with Tin House that: “Writers would be fools to turn their backs on that (racism).” (Blog) Throughout the novel, Moore expels certain stereotypes and even the people who purvey them, however it feels as if she has fallen into this trap herself, feeding directly into the post 9/11 fears that most Muslims were terrorists. To Moore’s benefit, the way that she describes Reynaldo’s backstory with the courier business and the discrimination towards Reynaldo in Manhattan, can most likely be corroborated with many who saw these symptoms in their everyday lives at the time. While Moore deserves credit there, it feels as if she still falls into the same trappings as a lot of the Islamophobes that she tries to demonize also do, that is, that if he is Muslim in post 9/11 America, he must be part of a sleeper cell or some sort of terrorist organization.

In conclusion, Lorrie Moore’s novel, *A Gate at the Stairs*, is an enjoyable as well as in depth look at racial and ethnic tensions immediately following the September 11th terrorist attacks. By looking at the overt, as well as the not so overt symptoms of racism at the time, Moore is able to paint a picture of the tensions and strife for both ends of the racial spectrum. While there are a few stumbling blocks along the way for Moore, she makes a strong case that not only the Midwest, but the whole nation was on edge during the time.

Works Cited

- Giroux, Susan Searls. "Playing in the Dark: Racial Repression and the New Campus Crusade for Diversity." *College Literature* (2006): 93-112. Print.
- Maio, Angelina. "The Paradox of Intersectionality: How a Contemporary Novel Brings To Light Racial Tensions in Post 9/11 America." 2014 Hawaii University International Conferences Arts, Humanities & Social Sciences (2014). Print.
- Zamudio, Margaret M., and Francisco Rios. "From Traditional To Liberal Racism: Living Racism In The Everyday." *Sociological Perspectives* 49.4 (2006): 483-501. Print.
- "The Pluralism Project at Harvard University." Research Report. Harvard University, 1 Jan. 2005. Web. 30 Nov. 2014. <<http://pluralism.org/reports/view/104>>.
- "Blog." Tin House An Interview with Lorrie Moore Comments. Tin House, 29 Sept. 2011. Web. 10 Dec. 2014. <<http://www.tinhouse.com/blog/9357/from-the-vault-a-conversation-with-lorrie-moore.html>>.
- Moore, Lorrie. *A Gate at the Stairs: A Novel*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2009. Print.