



Racism, Identity Crisis and Compulsion to Speak: Emergence of Afro-American Writers

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ABSTRACT

The Blacks in America who had been suffering racial discrimination for more than four hundred years were legally free from the middle of the nineteenth century. But this period had so many 'ands', 'ifs' and 'buts' that one cannot accept it as freedom at all. One has to see it as legal fiction. The Blacks in America have been exploited and oppressed racially, culturally, socially, economically and politically. Their culture has been ruined, their languages have been extinguished and they have been ruthlessly confined to subhuman conditions of life for about four centuries. They were completely stripped off their heritage and history, all on account of racial difference. In course of time, many Black writers emerged to defend their race, protest against racial discrimination and glorify their culture and tradition.

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In the earlier decades of the 20th century and also in the sixties and seventies one could see the White mob lynching the Blacks and drowning them at whim: one could also see the hate filled policeman cursing, kicking and even killing Black men and women. The majority of the thirty million Blacks were smothering in an air tight cage of poverty in the midst of an affluent society.

The Blacks in America are subjected to racial discrimination even in the present century. A news item in *The Hindu* dated 21-5-07 reads:

In the cool and beflagged small court room in Jena, Louisiana, three black school boys – Robert Bailey, Theodore Show and Mychall Bell are about to go on trial for a playground fight that could see them jailed for between 30 and 50 years. (Manglod 11) The Blacks in America are believed to have been exploited and oppressed racially, culturally, socially, economically and politically. Their culture has been ruined, their languages have been extinguished and they have been ruthlessly confined to subhuman conditions of life for about four centuries. They were completely stripped off their heritage and history, all on account of racial difference.

Racism is a man made, man enforced phenomenon... may be defined as all of the learned behaviours and learned emotions on the part of a group of people towards another group whose physical characteristics are dissimilar to the formal group; behaviour and emotions that compel one group to conceive of and treat the other on the basis of physical characteristics alone, as if it did not belong to the human race. (Herton 175)

Joel Kovel in his critically penetrating analysis of racism goes a step further and explains at length the theory whereby Whites quantified Blacks into wholly new equa-

tions wherein they existed not as people but as things. He says that the White slave owner first reduced the human self of his black slave to a body and then reduced the body to a *thing*; he dehumanized his slave, made him quantifiable and thereby absorbed him into a rising world market of productive exchange ...Thus in the new culture of the West, the black human was reduced to a black thing, virtually the same in certain key respects as the rest of non-human nature all of which could become property. (1984: 18)

The Whites were thus the masters who owned the Blacks who were reduced to the stature of sub normal group. They were a form of property and could be sold, bartered and even used as an obedient form of currency. The reduction of the human self of the Black to non-human condition was the first step towards racism.

The Whites resorted to different devices to dehumanize the Blacks in America. Indoctrination is such a device used to control and condition the minds of the oppressed. Accordingly, the Whites foisted their culture with definitive paradigm of physical beauty and appearance on to that of the Blacks which had a completely different criterion of beauty. According to the Western philosophy of beauty, to be worthy of love one has to be white. This concept of beauty was thrust upon the Blacks as a necessary requirement for survival in America. "The basic myth of racism is that white skin colour brings with it superiority – that the white is more intelligent, more virtuous, more sexually controlled 'by the mere fact' of being white"(Clark:108). Kovel who is keenly aware of this aspect of colour problem observes:

Racism abstracts the colour of the living body into non-colours of extreme value, black and white: within this organization black represents the shade of evil, the devil's aspect, night, separation, loneliness, sin, dirt, excrement, the inside of the body : and white represents, the mark of good, the token of innocence, purity, cleanliness, spiritual-ity, virtue and hope. (1984: 232)

This extremely subtle but very corrosive facet of racism had its birth in American history and its maturity in modern American thought. Throughout history the Whites have created institutions by which the Blacks were forced to

live in a certain way which in turn fostered many unworthy traits in them. This covert form of racism which was subtle and deadly in its methodical progress was doubly injurious to the Black race in that not much notice was taken of its invisibly corrosive nature.

When the negroes' mind has been brought under the control of his oppressor, the problem of holding the Negro down is easily solved. When you control a man's thinking, you do not have to tell him not to stand here, or go yonder. He will find his *proper place* and will stay in it. You do not need to send him to the back door. He will go without being told. In fact if there is no back door, he will cut one for his special benefit. His education makes it necessary. (Carter 1969:XXXIII)

Repression is yet another method by which a person is made to suppress the thoughts and ideas natural to him and makes him give mute submission to the dictates of the master. Internalisation of the ideology of the dominant group and the repression of one's own self leads to self contempt on the part of the oppressed. Thus the effect of internalisation was devastating and debilitating on the psychic wholeness of the individual as a result of which the Black person renounced his cultural or racial self and adopted the masters' mandates. American Black accepted the culture which rejected him and rejected the culture which accepted him. The person thus remained in a "cultural limbo" (Levin 1977:53). The person experienced nothingness of existence. Mary Daly is of the opinion that internalisation of this sort is much more dangerous than the external manifestation of the victim's responses to the distortion caused by racism and sexism. Internalisation of hatred leads to psychic and cultural death of the person and the person feels alienated. (17)

Thus one understands that racism whether covert or overt is the root cause of the suffering agony and isolation of the Blacks in America. They were urgently in need of visionaries, seers and prophets who could speak and write for them, through whose speech and writing they could give expression to their inner feelings and emotions. Writers who were visionaries of varying degrees of importance arose down the centuries. But the Whites were not ready to recognize them. They pretended to believe that the Blacks were not capable of formal speech or literature.

Since the beginning of the seventeenth century, Europeans had wondered aloud, whether or not the 'African species of men' as they most commonly put it, could ever create formal literature, could ever master 'the arts and science'. If they could, the argument ran, then the African variety of humanity and the European variety were fundamentally related. If not, then it seemed clear that the African was destined by nature to be slave. (Gates 1985:8)

Thus racism has been a tangible presence for the Black writer from the beginning. Hugh M. Gloster in his "Race and the Negro Writer" observes:

From the very beginning of his active authorship in this country the Negro writer has been preoccupied with racial issues and materials. This obsession with race is not hard to explain because the tragic plight of the coloured population of the United States has forced the Negro writer to stand with his people and voice their sufferings, reverses, triumphs and aspirations. The inhumanities of slavery, the restrictions of segregation, the frustrations of prejudice and injustice, the debasements of concubinage and bastardy, the ravages of persecution and lynching... these have constituted the bitter experience of American folk and it is only natural that the Negro writer has focussed up on the themes of racial defence, protest and glorification. (65)

In course of time, out of compulsion many Black writers emerged to defend their race, protest against racial discrimination and glorify their culture and tradition. Langston Hughes one of the most prominent among them in his "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain" says: "But to my mind, it is the duty of the Negro artist, if he accepts any duties at all from outsiders, to change through the force of his art that old whispering 'I want to be white' hidden in the aspiration of his people, to 'Why should I want to be white? I am a Negro... and beautiful'... An artist must be free to choose what he does, certainly, but he must also never be afraid to do what he might choose." (1970:262)

The Black writer in America very rarely feels this freedom to be his self because the dominant white culture is not ready to accept his separate individual identity. But he wrote with singlemindedness for his people. He wanted to record and interpret the lives of the common Black folk, their thoughts, habits and dreams, their struggle for political freedom and economic well being. He wanted to do this using their own forms of expression, their language, humour, music and folk verse.

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