



DUAL INTERPRETATION OF RACISM IN SELECTIVE NARRATIVES OF THE MARGINALIZED

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Abstract

Cruelty, racial prejudice, and hate are products of distorted will. The past and the present are replete with acts of violence and bigotry towards people of colour. The incidents, decades of suffering, unjustifiable behaviour towards people of colour has found a home in literature more than it has been represented in other academic fields of study. Racially distressed communities have found in fictional writing, a better phenomenology of race relations and the trauma attached to negative attitudes and social patterns. Literature born out of suffering opens readers' eyes to events and lifestyles they wouldn't have experienced and also becomes a voice for those who have suffered. Narratives of racial discrimination represent the dark things that one human would do to another out of fear, hate, greed and ignorance.

This research paper aims at contributing to the same cause and creating some benefit towards the same. This research throws light upon two very different portrayals of racial discrimination along with the difference of approach that the authors and the characters in these literary works depict. The purpose of this research paper is to document the presence and representation of racism in two literary texts and comments on the practice of writing as an expression of artistic aesthetics. The interpretations from the findings of this research are also capable of offering insight to socio-psychological studies of race relations in African-American literature. The two main texts used for this research portray racial discrimination in two different lights. The first literary text is an essay by Zora Neale Hurston - *How it Feels to be Colored Me*, published in 1928, and the second is a short story by Toni Morrison - *Recitatif*, published in 1983. Written and published decades apart, each text is a testament of the events related to those ages.

Keywords: Racial discrimination, African-American Literature, Internalised racism, Harlem Renaissance.

INTRODUCTION

Racial discrimination. The moment this phrase comes to light, a series of unfortunate events, experiences come to the mind and when looked underneath these atrocities, what one finds is difference in skin complexion; something that is

far beyond the control of those who suffer and those who create sufferance. The prejudice shown by anyone or any group of people towards people of another race and acting highly under the influence of such prejudice just on the basis of the fact that the other person belongs to a race or ethnicity different from theirs is not only immoral, but unethical as

well. It is a very prominent world-wide, man-made obstacle which is used to inflict agony and discomfort on other humans. Over the decades, innumerable accounts of racial discrimination have come to light that describe how African-Americans, Asians and South-Americans have faced such obnoxious brunt of Caucasians trying to impose their supremacy over the others on the basis of skin-color and under the pretext of civilizing whom they consider barbarians. This social vice has been pointed out, confronted, talked about, written about and brought out in the open for everyone to witness. Over the years, many direct and indirect sufferers of this brunt have openly addressed this issue and shared their experiences, ideologies, thoughts and history with the world so as to provide a very wide spectrum of information regarding a problem that should have never arisen and have been trying ever since to eradicate as much as possible. The shift in the view of the race issue does not ignore concepts of ethnicity and cultural hegemony but tries to bring bigger issues at the forefront.

In 1975, Toni Morrison gave a speech at Portland State University, touching on the “distracting” nature of racism. She said -

“The very serious function of racism...is distraction. It keeps you from doing your work. It keeps you explaining, over and over again, your reason for being. Somebody says you have no language and so you spend 20 years proving that you do. Somebody says your head isn't shaped properly so you have scientists working on the fact that it is. Somebody says that you have no art so you dredge that up. Somebody says that you have no kingdoms and so you dredge that up. None of that is necessary.”

The book *Racial Formation in the United States* (1986) by Michael Omi and Howard Winant characterizes three distinct stages of the “ethnicity approach”. Starting at pre-1930s USA, the “ethnic-group view” meant a direct challenge to the biological racialists. The second stage can be chronicled in the period from the 1930s to 1965. This time frame centered on assimilation and cultural pluralism. Michael Omi and Howard Winant argue

that the second stage led ethnicity to become a dominant paradigm to understand the issue of “race” in the United States. The authors also refer to Gunnar Nydral's 1944 study; *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy* as the catalyst that further put ethnicity at the forefront to understanding racialism in the U.S. The third stage in the book deals with the United States in a post-1965 scenario. This was the time of neoconservative backlashes against the struggle for ethnic group rights.

While the stages and the inclusion of ethnicity to the “race” issue seems relevant, Omi and Winant reject the ethnicity paradigm since it reduces the issues related to race to just an element that branches out of ethnicity. They aim to present ‘race’ as a distinct and central category to represent the characteristics of racial minority groups as opposed to defeating its cause by looking at race as a feature of ethnicity. Cultures, traditions, belief are part of everyday lives and mediums that bring people together. The shared meanings and relations we make are based on the fundamentals of culture. The meaning and culture we encounter on a daily basis is not embodied in the signifier. The practice and process of making shared and collective meaning from signifiers of everyday life is what makes culture. To share culture, therefore is to interpret the world and make it meaningful in ways that are recognizable, and similar.

INTRODUCTION TO *RECITATIF*

Recitatif originally is the French word for ‘Recitative’ which, according to Merriam-Webster Dictionary, means a rhythmically free vocal style that imitates the natural inflections of speech and that is used for dialogue and narrative in operas and oratories. Toni Morrison's *Recitatif* is a short story that narrates five major encounters between the two protagonists – Twyla and Roberta. It is very much from Twyla's point of view; hence it can be perceived that it is Twyla's ‘Recitatif’. The main highlight of this literary work is how Morrison describes and calls out racism even without outrightly portraying which character belongs to what race. She has made it clear that one is African-American and one is Caucasian but keeps it utterly

ambiguous as to who is who. Later on, even when asked personally in her interviews regarding her concept behind this literary work and how she has kept the distinction of race in the depiction of the protagonists ambiguous, she declined to reveal whom she had portrayed as African-American and whom she had portrayed as Caucasian. It seems like her motive here was to call out the racism prevalent not only in the society, but also the internal racism in the readers. Her style of writing makes the readers' conscious question their sub-conscious as to why as readers, did we try to judge the two characters as African-American and Caucasian, and whom did we allot either races even for a split-second, on the basis of stereotypical ideas associated with people of both races in terms of dressing, mannerisms, and so on.

Toni Morrison elaborates on the same idea in an interview. She says, "I wrote a story entitled "Recitatif", in which there are two little girls in an orphanage, one white and one black. But the reader doesn't know which is white and which is black. I use class codes, but no racial codes." When asked if it was meant to confuse the readers, she replied, "Well, yes. But to provoke and enlighten. I did that as a lark. What was exciting was to be forced as a writer not to be lazy and reply on obvious codes. Soon as I say, "Black woman..." I can rest on or provoke predictable responses, but if I leave it out then I have to talk about her in a complicated way – as a person." (Mays, 215). The two protagonists – Twyla and Roberta are described as "pepper and salt"(201) and this not only highlights the starking difference who these girls are as individuals, but also give a different perspective of how they complement each other and cannot do without the other. Just like pepperpots and salt shakers, they go hand-in-hand. The depiction of the relationship that they share is quite topsy-turvy.

Twyla and Roberta are introduced to the readers as small girls whose mothers have left them at St. Bonny's orphanage. They primarily relate to each other on the fact that they are the only two girls in the orphanage who have at least one living parent and are yet living in the orphanage. They stick through this bond throughout the story even when there is racial tension prevailing all around them. All

in all, the story jumps from one rendezvous to the other; each signifying where they stand in each other's eye. As small girls, they don't quite understand racism and hence they do not discriminate. This changes drastically when they meet for the second time as youngsters in Howard Johnson's where Twyla used to work and Roberta had come with her friends. Their third encounter, in a supermarket was quite relaxed in terms of their relationship. The fourth encounter again turns quite sour as they were on the opposite sides of the racial radar in the mothers' rallies. The final and the fifth encounter takes place in a diner where they meet co-incidentally and have a sort of closure. The rift created by the racial tension is aggravated even more by a childhood instance that they both remember differently even when they were present there together. This instance concerned the cook, Maggie at the orphanage and how she was bullied by the elder girls. The way Twyla and Roberta have this instance registered says a lot about their perception towards what they saw.

INTRODUCTION TO *HOW IT FEELS TO BE COLORED ME*

Zora Neale Hurston's essay – *How it Feels to be Colored Me*, was primarily approached as a publication in *World Tomorrow*, titled - "white journal sympathetic to Harlem Renaissance writers". There have been many debates regarding her position as a Harlem Renaissance writer as her works appeared mainly after the prime time of the Harlem Renaissance. *How It Feels To Be Colored Me* is an essay of indispensable importance as it links the studies of African Literature, Feminist Literature, and African American Studies together and weaves a collective literary work.

Hurston's essay also reveals her perspective of racial segregation through the usage of multiple anecdotes, imagery of experiences, tone and figurative speeches that convey her ideas clearly. She gives a "personal expression to the arena of public discourse without losing the ties to their home cultures and languages" (Heard). In this essay of hers, she describes her experiences of being a person of color, but depicts these experiences in a very diverse light. Hurston depicts how not all

African-Americans experience a sense of double consciousness that DuBois talks about. In fact, some are instilled with the self-confidence required to embrace one's "blackness." First, it may be helpful to define consciousness before attempting to explain the notion of double consciousness. Consciousness is defined as the state of being mentally aware of something: oneself, in this essay. She walks the readers through her journey of discovering her identity and self-pride despite of the fact how racial discrimination tends to tear down people of colour. Being brought up in Eatonville, Florida, she hardly notices racism as the town was densely populated by African-American people and the only Caucasians she ever saw were travelers passing by her town. She used to sit on her porch and pass her time by looking at the travelers passing by as if they are for her entertainment. Very casually she reverses the power dynamic when she shares how she used to consider the "white tourists" (Mays 1036) were for her entertainment, a small black girl.

She further moves on to the part where she shifts to Jacksonville which is more racially diverse than Eatonville and how there is a shift in her experiences as well. She elaborates, "I remember the very day that I became colored. Up to my thirteenth year I lived in the little Negro town of Eatonville, Florida...But changes came in the family when I was thirteen, and I was sent to school in Jacksonville. I left Eatonville, the town of the oleanders, as Zora. When I disembarked from the river-boat at Jacksonville, she was no more." (Mays 1036). From this point onwards, she starts portraying the various instances where she witnesses racism and notices how it comes to light even sub-consciously.

What catches the readers' eyes is how she approaches these experiences and registers them in order to build herself up even stronger than letting these instances ever come in the way of her progress. She considers slavery to be the prize she paid through her ancestors for civilization (Mays 1037). Along with mentioning various instances, she also shows she used them to strengthen her beliefs regarding building herself stronger. Her metaphor of bags as humans and "Great Stuffer of Bags" as God puts forward a very empowering notion for the

readers. Hurston explores the rhetorical boundaries of race, examining what is at stake for subjects who, like Hurston herself, must prove themselves adept at communicating with mainstream audiences without losing the distinctions of their "home cultures." (Heard).

COMPARISON OF PORTRAYAL OF RACISM BY MORRISON AND HURSTON

Morrison and Hurston, both have commenced their literary works with the description of young African-American girls through the racial eye of the time when these were published. They have portrayed the struggles from what seems like trifle matters to huge issues as well. In *Recitatif* it is shown how Twyla initially feels about sharing a room with Roberta. She asserts how "it was one thing to be taken out of your own bed early in the morning – it was something else to be stuck in a strange place with a girl from a whole other race." (Mays 201). Morrison takes care of it through and through that she does not reveal even in the most complicated manner, who belonged to which race; instead, she resorts to showing the discrimination through social classes. She portrays distinction through statements like – "But she was waiting for me and her huge hair was sleek now, smooth around a small, nicely shaped head. Shoes, dress, everything lovely and summery and rich. I was dying to know what happened to her, how she got from Jimi Hendrix to Annandale, a neighborhood full of doctors and IBM executives. Easy, I thought. Everything is so easy for them. They think they own the world." (Mays 207).

Much before this, in the beginning of the short story, the readers are shown the initial glimpse of racism. Twyla and Roberta experience racial discrimination for the first time from their mothers' behaviour towards each other. The mothers of both the characters behave very coldly towards the other mother and her daughter, so much so that Twyla and Roberta, who were just eight years old, understood the hard-heartedness that their mothers shared. Through various innuendos, Morrison very precisely depicts the racial issues in five stages of the women's lives. What acts as a major catalyst is the character of Maggie. She is described by Morrison in *Recitatif* as "the kitchen woman with legs like parentheses.

Maggie couldn't talk. I just remember her legs like parentheses and how she rocked when she walked. She wore this really stupid little hat – a kid's hat with ear flaps – and she wasn't taller than we were. A really awful little hat. Even for a mute, it was dumb – dressing like a kid and never saying anything at all.”(Mays 202). This is the primary introduction that the readers receive, it is revealed later on in the short story how this becomes a matter of great concern. In the first part, it is described how the elder girls used to bully Maggie by pushing her on the ground and kicking her. Although, later on in the fourth part, Roberta blurts out angrily how Twyla kicked Maggie on the ground too. She says, “You're the same little state kid who kicked a poor old black lady when she was down on the ground. You kicked a black lady and you have the nerve to call me a bigot.” Twyla shows extreme bewilderment on hearing this as she never thought that Maggie was a black lady. Roberta asserts more by pointing out how they both kicked a black lady who couldn't even scream(Mays 211).

Morrison's technique of using internalized cues about race holds on throughout the story. “Internalized racism negatively impacts people of color intra-culturally and cross-culturally. Because race is a social and political construct that comes out of particular histories of domination and exploitation between Peoples, people of colors' internalized racism often leads to great conflict among and between them as other concepts of power – such as ethnicity, culture, nationality and class – are collapsed in misunderstanding. Just as racism results in the system of structural advantage called white privilege for white people and their communities, internalized racism results in the system of structural disadvantage called internalized racism for peoples and communities of color on inter- and intra-group levels”(Bivens 44). This also results in the self-discrimination that gets highlighted by the outsiders, the society and world at large. This further on brings a product of conditioning of becoming racists who instigate more racist propagandas and make it a ripple effect.

Hurston's portrayal is completely on a different track than this as she very clearly portrays her identity and how she came to terms with it

personally and publicly. The essay – *How it Feels to be Colored Me*, brings forward her individual share of being viewed through the racial eye. She tours through the entire stages of childhood in hometown, schooling in another town, her experiences when she went to college and she concludes with her take on racism and her, what seems like sorted way of dealing with racism. Being an African-American, Hurston won't claim any distant Native-American ancestry to complicate her race while hinting towards an inclination that she suggests African-Americans have in order to curtail or exoticize their racial identities to escape such discrimination or force others to treat them as individuals.(Johnson). In the beginning of her essay itself, she points out - “I remember the very day I became colored.” (Mays 1035). She elaborated, how to her, race is more of a social reinforcement and less of a biological characteristic. Moreover, fairness had been amplified with wealth. She shares an instance from her childhood where she used to sit on the porch in her hometown, Eatonville and observe all the travelers passing by. She sometimes saw few African-Americans stopping but the Caucasians always seemed to just pass-by and go on to better places.

Moreover, their transport used to be dandier than the local African-American and this is crucial information as Eatonville was a completely African-American community town. She also points out how sometimes she used to sing and dance for the passers-by, the Caucasians used to give her some cents or dimes; whereas, the African-Americans never gave her any money, they bestowed true affectionate treatment though. Hurston perceives this as an act of audience versus community. She started recognizing the money giving Caucasians as her audience and the affection showing African-Americans as her community. This was the stepping stone for her to choose and realize whom she belonged with. Through this, Hurston also throws light on another point of view when she started taking the white tourists as her entertainment sources to pass her time while she sits on the porch casually. She successfully changes the power dynamics here by symbolizing white people as a source of passing time for an African-American girl.

Further on, in relation to racism, Hurston portrays a very unique depiction of slavery and civilization. She says, "The terrible struggle that made me an American out of a potential slave said "On the line!". The reconstruction said "Get set!"; and the generation before said "Go!" I am off to a flying start and I must not halt in the stretch to look behind and weep. Slavery is the price I paid for civilization, and the choice was not with me."(Mays 1037).

Moreover, Hurston also includes the aspect of how she felt being on the receiving end of the national scrutiny where the entire community and the racial group at large had to bear the outcome of one person's behaviour and/or conduct. This resulted in harmful discrimination as the entire community felt threatened the moment any African-American person acted even a bit out of line. Hurston opens the window to her ideologies and shares her notions about the relativity of coloredness and her status as a black woman who reinforces her own identity. She embraces the insult of being called less civilized and by doing this removes its sting a little bit. She also notices how she doesn't feel any peculiar or different from others just on the basis of her skin color; to her, skin color isn't even a parameter for her to have a need to differentiate among individuals. She shares her experiences at Barnard College as that does strike as a place where the visible racial difference was highlighted to her in multiple ways. She says that she does not always feel colored. She feels most colored when she is thrown against a sharp white background. She further adds that sometimes it is the other way around. A white person is set down in their midst, but the contrast is just as sharp for her(Mays 1037). She also elaborates on instances where she refuses to have a race and there are other days when she feels being discriminated against.

She shows a different outlook towards these instances and showcases her ideas about dealing with racism. More than taking offense regarding being racially discriminated and insulted, she looks at it as the discriminators' loss as they are depriving themselves from the pleasure of her company(Mays 1038). Hurston concludes her essay with an elaborated metaphorical concept of bags. She expresses how she sees herself as a brown bag of

miscellany propped against a wall in company with other white, red and yellow bags. If you pour out all the contents of the bag in a jumbled heap and mix it all up and the bags can then be refilled at random without altering the contents. She uses this metaphor to depict how what truly matters is the content inside rather than the colored bag on the outside. She explains a mature solution for the racial problem through this method and rhetorically asks that maybe the Great Stuffer of Bags filled the bags in the first place with this intention only.

CONCLUSION

In recapitulation, this paper would like to highlight how racial oppression comes in varied nuances. However, there is a difference between the darkness that is an essential part of life, and imposed darkness that results from prejudice and discrimination. There are innumerable accounts of racial discrimination that have come to light over the decades against people of colour, under the pretext of "cultural civilization". White supremacy and the inflictions they have meted out to people of colour has been spoken about and protested against. Through literature, victims have voiced the atrocities and oppression they and their communities have suffered at the hand of the oppressors. Their experiences, thoughts and history through fictive writings, and personal essays have provided us with information missing from other fields of the academic and research.

Discrimination is internalized and institutionalized by the oppressor and the oppressed in ways that are inexplicable. At its very core, racism is a layered, social poison that encompasses ethnicity, nationality, skin colour, etc. The astounding diversity found on our planet comprises of a plethora of peculiar cultures, traditions, customs, languages, and belief. The beauty of this diversity is often compromised by mistrust, ignorance, bigotry discrimination and hatred. Ignorance, leads to, and promotes racial discrimination, prejudice, and open avenues from extremist institutions to propagate their agenda against people of colour. Morrison and Hurston, both have chosen unconventional techniques to illustrate the same. What really strikes out more is

how they portray a spectrum of instances and experiences of many different kinds and yet they all boil down to the malignance of racism.

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