



## AMERICAN RACIALISM: THE SAGA STILL CONTINUES

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### ABSTRACT

This paper is an attempt to unravel the spine-chilling experiences of the innocent African souls who did not have the least idea about the pirate powers of the world outside their continent of equatorial rains, dense forests and rich grasslands. Arriving into their land, first as 'white ghosts with shoes' and gradually setting their foot and ending up by pulling out millions of the natives and dumping them into the slave-ships to labour endlessly at North or South American plantations, the heartless white American 'masters', even today, seldom feel ashamed of their inhuman activities when a black criminal is killed unknown in a dirty rain-washed American lane by a white's bullet and no department takes pain to identify him or his family. The brutality with which the blacks have been treated since their first arrival in America has shocked many a writers out of apathy. Many prolific writers of America or outside, either black or white, have taken up such issues in their compositions as central themes or sub themes, working tirelessly to awaken their nation to this ill-practice for which they will be unquestionably questioned by the Divine Master.

*Keywords:* Racialism, Atrocities, John Updike, Whites, Africans, Imperialism, Hands.

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### INTRODUCTION

One must have heard and advocated the difference between human beings and animals on the basis of lack and presence of reason, the difference among various religions on the basis of different beliefs and customs, the gender difference on the basis of genetic programming of each respective gender but the most absurd difference echoes when the difference among human beings is estimated on account of skin colour. It is the most deplorable state of our mind when we discriminate among ourselves for being bestowed fair or dark complexion. Around 1400 years back, God, through His messenger of Islam, Prophet Mohammad (P.B.U.H), addressed His reason-gifted Creation, as 'human race', not specifically any 'white' or 'black' race.

In words of Almighty – O mankind! Indeed we have created you from male and female and made you people and tribes that you may know one another. Indeed the most noble of you in the sight of Allah is the most righteous of you. (Surat Al-Hujurat 49:13) Allah's messenger P.B.U.H delivered this divine message and proclaimed that no Arab is superior to a non-Arab and no white is superior to black and superiority is by the righteousness and God-fearing nature.

(ezsoftech.com/stories/anecdotes1.asp)

Islam renounced the practice of slavery some 1400 years ago and laid the foundation of the abolition of slavery and thereby the concept of 'freeman'. According to Islam, granting lifetime freedom to a slave and ceasing his bondage earns loads of blessing to his owner. What Islam managed to eradicate in 600 A.D was revived due to an

obstinate and power-obsessed mind-set of Europeans because the African people had begun to be transported, first to Europe and then the addiction glided over to the English settlers in Philadelphia, Virginia and Jamestown of North America where the ancestral Teutonic spirit was beating its waves against the African shore and claiming its so-called right for mastery. The 'new England' people having carved out a civilization from wilderness exploited the black hands of Africa brutally for the progress of their newly born nation.

Actually, this trait of trespassing, colonisation and imperialism goes back to their adventurous forefathers of Scandinavia. The Teutonic races of Scandinavia which survived the vegetation-less snowy land and tumultuous seas, had learned to exclude 'fear' from their genetic setup. This fearless spirit never left them through their adventures in Europe and their migration to America. Exercise of power and authority became their so-called birth-right. Soon after industrial revolution as well as the Renaissance, the European man's spirit became restless once more and new lands began to be discovered every now and then. Discovery of America, Asia and Australia resulted in long-term struggle and civil disobedience on the part of the natives, followed by a suppressed acceptance for the Englishman as a ruthless ruler. But the results of imperialism in Africa had such an outcome which upturned the fate of the natives as free people. Missionaries were sent on the pretext of civilizing the black 'children of devil'. The blacks were made to realize their inferior self due to their coal-dark complexion and that also in their own land, Africa. The English people colonised areas of the African land, setup their camps and business and made African natives serve them for minimal or no wages at all. At various places in African continent, the native youth were captured, chained and dumped into slave ships and thereafter a journey to North or South American subcontinent which would let loose a series of atrocities and an unimaginable brutality. Many a happy African souls fell victims to horrendous and dejected fate. This was not the end to everything as not less than seven or eight generations and some 250 years were lapsed until a bloody struggle involving personages like Abraham

Lincoln and Martin Luther King won the African slaves their partial rights as human beings and as American nationals. Even after restoration of American Republic and abolition of slavery, white American race still despises the black blood. People of both races, if involved in conjugal relations, are branded with a shameful endeavour to raise a 'brown' race. Not to mention the fact that God has been too merciful with the West or such words like bloodless, yellow or red race would have been at large, according to the complexion of far North Americans including Canada and Texas, Central America and equatorial areas of South America.

Such inhuman acts of racial discrimination scorched the human spirit down to its acumen and its wriggling scripts have penetrated almost every genre of American and European literature with fair amount of shamelessness for indifference on the part of the oppressors. The realm has expanded itself from short-stories, poems, biographies and novels to cinema theatres and schools of criticism and a distinct literature involves writings of African descent or white writers favouring Africans and therefore known as Black Literature. Themes concerning African slaves in America and their generations born and grown in the midst of white masters, brown race segregation, blacks being jailed for petty matters and their unprotected women and so on, are also taken up by prolific American writers, either white or black.

For next few pages, the paper shall be an attempt to analyse some of the American writings portraying the dilemma of the 'rootless' in the 'roots' of American land.

#### **Projection of a crippled American society by John Updike**

As a healthy human being is a nomenclature for an amalgam of many healthy faculties, so is the case of a healthy society to human beings. A healthy society defines itself in terms of fair treatment regarding gender, age, status, colour, caste and creed. Some novels of Updike project the American society with all its pros and cons. Updike laments the excess of ill-treatment of the blacks who get impoverished places to live, poor wages in spite of talent and good intellect, brutal treatment in law suits, low-level jobs, no

intermingling with white families and so on. All this leads to an isolated scope-free world where there is hardly any exchange with external sources without humiliation. Updike's *Roger's Version* (1986) houses a female character, Verna who is despised by almost all her family members because she got involved with a black man, got pregnant and delivered a brown child, Paula. Verna is kicked out of her parents' house and comes down to her half-maternal uncle, Roger Lambert's town to live in a half-black project. There Verna is 'honoured' no more than a prostitute. She is taken for granted by the drunkards of the project who follow her to her apartment and bang at her door calling her indecent names. For them, a white girl who has already made herself accessible to a black man and mothered his progeny, does not require further humiliation because she is already smeared with the worst of its kind:

The race of the father, the fact that the father has copped out. . .the race, of course, was and is dandy. . .I was surprised. . .went ahead and had the baby. . this project she's living in. . .

(*Roger's Version*, 05-07)

The novel also relates, at instances, the dejection of the Black Americans who opt for teaching as a profession. The children show their disapproval for black teachers at school as well as home tuitions. Thus, scarce opportunities for jobs force them to accept low wages even in institutes where whites are handsomely paid:

The teacher is black. . .one of these young black women with some third-rate education that these expensive liberal schools feel they have to hire. I'm all for it in principle, but not when it's making the children stupid.

(*Roger's Version*, 113)

In another novel, *In the Beauty of the Lilies* (1996), Updike takes up this sensitive subject in rather culminating pages of the book where the protagonist, Tudor Wilmot (Teddy) is going for a drive with his grandson, Clark, in a family Chrysler – one of the few luxuries that Wilmot had allowed his Hollywood star daughter, Alma De Mott, Clark's mother, to buy them. Clark, graduating from St.

Andrews, often visits his grandparents at their place and his grandfather, Teddy is the one he loves most. The patience of Teddy in listening to others, his movements and even his silent suffering impressed Clark greatly. Teddy and Clark would drive around Delaware up to Wilmington when Teddy would grow nostalgic about the bygone richness of the place. He would point out to Clark the structures that used to be big movie theatres and institutes of business training. It was the time when Whites ruled over the place and seldom were the things owned by Blacks:

Not their fault everything runs down, they don't have the money for upkeep. . .because they don't have educations. . .because nobody had any use for 'em, once they stopped being slaves. You know this was a slave state, right through the Civil War? They wouldn't ratify the Thirteenth Amendment until 1901. Any black tried to vote, he was in big trouble. We had it all – lynchings, whippings. People are meaner than mules . . . here's the result. American cities are the black man's revenge. They've taken them over. A white man's scared to go into town, after dark.

(*In the Beauty of the Lilies*, 407)

In this way, Updike makes it clear through his protagonist's discourse that every step taken somewhere in history definitely reflects itself sooner or later. Anger and revenge are natural reaction to humiliation and segregation.

#### **Disillusion of the 'King' in Bingham and Wallace:**

The gold medal which never left the bosom of Mohammad Ali Clay since 1960 Summer Olympic in Rome and cuddled as a child during its sleep, was finally found only worth being dropped into the depths of river Ohio, along with its red-white-and blue-ribbon. Yes, it was worth it, especially after what he had undergone post the gigantic promise of the Louisville mayor that anything in the town belonged to him (Clay) as any other free-citizen:

He's our own boy, Cassius, our next world champion. Anything you want in town's yours. You hear that. . .If all young people would handle themselves as well as Clay does, we wouldn't have juvenile problems. (Chapter 1, *Clay vs USA*)

The very first chapter, 'Louisville and the Lip' in Howard Bingham and Max Wallace's *Muhammad Ali's Greatest Fight: Cassius Clay vs The United States of America*, relates the heart wrenching humiliation of an 18-year old Negro boxing celebrity, Cassius Clay who all the way from Rome to America, sang praises of the United States of America as 'his' nation, the land where he 'belonged' to. For some time, the enthralled King of Olympics 1960 forgot his own value as a second-class citizen in his own nation. He even tried to veil this shameful nude reality of 'apartheid, in front of a Russian journalist, as 'our problem', making it something personal not meant for the world use. Somewhere deep in his heart Cassius Clay regarded the medal as a source to achieve something more than a mere medal:

To me the gold medal was more than a symbol of what I had achieved for myself and my country; there was something I expected the medal to achieve for me. And during those first days of homecoming it seemed to be doing exactly that.

(Chapter 1, *Clay vs USA*)

But all his desires, dreams and the self-adorned appreciation crumbled like a sand-palace at sea shore when he mistook his medal and talent as a medium to bestow upon him the privilege of a free-citizenship and fulfilment of an American dream. Clay wanted to move about in his place (nation) freely irrespective of time or specification. This is the least that a nation can give to its citizens. But Clay will never forget how he, at the zenith of his zeal was denied a meal (two hamburgers and vanillas) at a 'whites only' local diner. Clay will always remember the evening when the mayor's promise was still working its magic on his mind but Clay was unable to distinguish the hypocrisy in those words – exclusion of 'black' Americans from the concept of 'free-citizen'. He just failed to comprehend the interpretation veiled under the words spoken. The white owner of the diner, at last, when he just shrugged off not caring who he (Clay) is and rebuked the waitress saying that no white diner shall serve 'no niggers', proved that being a white American was itself like being above any political liberalism and that a white man's mindset could never be

shaken or bowed. No doubt, this was Clay's real worth. Had he himself barged into this land of whites? Or his ancestors had once stepped in here out of their free will? Certainly not! Their history of arrival into American land is like an open book:

- How did they come here? Uprooted from their native land and transported in slave ships as mishandled commodities.
- Who brought them here? Whites.
- For what?
- For bonded labour under 'NIL' terms and conditions.
- Did whites not have their own No comments. servants?
- Couldn't they hire American Misers fancy work free-of-cost.
- labour?
- Why blacks were not sent back? Nothing is better than having lifetime slaves.
- Since then, Masters, Owners, Whites.
- Authority, Oppressors?
- The righteous, God's children, Whites.
- torch bearers of enlightenment?
- Manifestos of Human Rights and Whites.
- free-citizens?
- Stripped of Human Rights, Blacks! the 'others'?

The last point above demonstrates the stand of the black Americans as it has descended since their first arrival. Besides downtrodden localities, cheap private business, they don't own any significant share from their national economy and seldom show up in jobs of state or political sector.

The book of Bingham and Wallace is more or less a biography of a specific time in Clay's life which is full of reasoning and questions regarding his own race. Though in Louisville, Clay's birth place, racism, in 1940s and 50s, was observed in one of its mild forms but wafers of its stench always filled the atmosphere – buses, movie-theatres, parks, public swimming pools, water fountains and even public shops. In words of Clay's cousin, Coretta:

We. . .immersed in discrimination. Louisville. . .very segregated town. The whites never let you forget your place. . .afraid to look white folks in the eye. . .a lot of shops. . .we could mop their floors but

we couldn't buy anything. The ones who would take our money still let us know what they thought of us. I remember. . .two water fountains... 'whites only' and coloured only.

(Chapter 1, *Clay vs USA*)

Clay grew up in the midst of such discrimination and the anecdotes of injustices suffered by Negroes were the headlines of the family's dinner table-talk when Clay's father, a prolific landscape artist, would grumble that nothing could change a white's mind set. Cassius Sr. was a creative painter but his calibre was put down, not due to his artistic shortcomings but the colour of his hands had much ado with it. Not long after, the five-year old Clay himself was subjected to such humiliation which drew this racial reality home. His mother, Odessa Clay, one hot summer day, took him to shopping and the child Clay was refused a drink of water at Woolworth's Five and Dime where the clerk told them that in lieu of such black welfare he could lose his job.

In this way, racialism may be a term to define a set of social denials for the blacks but it is also a strategy to squeeze out human feelings from those hearts which are not yet full of hatred, to some extent, but bent under the pressure of social and financial norms; the clerk could have respected his human and moral values but he had to refuse a drink of water to a Negro child in order to save himself and his own family from starvation. The five-year thirsty black child was left to cry under the blazing sun.

#### **Updike's Skunk Smells of Racialism:**

*Should Wizard Hit Mummy* by Updike is a fable in a short-story. Overtly it celebrates a typically social issue concerning generation-gap and maturity as well as familial issues concerning parents and their children. Updike's short story is about a Utopian view of the world as perceived by a four-year old child and the moral questions raised by her during bed-time story telling sessions – sometimes as queries and some other times as protest. The child, Jo is put to bed by her father, Jack who tells her a story and uses it as a lullaby to make her go to sleep. Each story is a fable as it has only animal characters and the central character always has a problem which gets resolved in the end. While

narrating the story, Jack seems to identify himself with the problem and the humiliation experienced by Roger – the central character of his every story. In the ongoing story, Roger Skunk smells very bad which resists his friends from coming near him. Roger, at the advice of a wise owl, goes to a wizard who changes his smell to that of 'roses'. But Roger's mother wants her son's natural smell back. This is his birth-right to survive in a way the nature has given him. She hits the wizard on his head with an umbrella and demands her son's natural smell. Gradually, all the animals get used to Roger's stinky smell and accept it as a part of his being. In this way, Updike's fable comes full circle back to Roger's restoring his stinky smell and driving home a message that everything that is not man-made, no matter how appealing or repulsive, is a part of nature and should be respected as it is. Playing with nature is no less than defying divine laws.

Such a story by an American short-story writer and novelist raises several questions in readers' minds. For instance, why Jack seems to identify himself with the desolation of Roger as he is shunned by his friends, surprises us:

. . .there was a tiny little creature. . .Roger Skunk. . .he smelled very bad. . Jack continued with zest, remembering certain humiliations of his own childhood. . .they would run away, and Roger Skunk would stand there all alone, and two little round tears would fall from his eyes. . .

(*Vistas*, 49)

As a matter of fact, being a human, Jack must not be suffering from any stinky smell, then why he attributes himself with Roger's humiliation. Segregation of Roger Skunk and the way Jack feels for him leads us to deduce that Jack is a Negro and has to suffer dejection and isolation at the hands of white Americans. Here 'smell' is symbolic of discrimination or black colour in American society. The forest in which Roger lives symbolises America and Jack, through such stories, tries to recall his own childhood desolation and share it with his daughter. Close analysis of the words in the concluding part of the story leaves us awestruck when Jack's wife, pregnant with her third child, is dragging the furniture to whitewash the house and Jack hates her

being with himself in the 'cage' (house). His house is a restricted and scope-free world of brown or black people where there is no hope of any healthy exchange with the outer world of whites. One reason for hating his pregnant wife could be his guilty feeling for being responsible for her present condition and bringing one more Negro child into this world. This conclusion of Updike once again takes us back to Bingham and Wallace's Cassius Clay who would ask his father about the reason of blacks' perpetual poverty while he saw 'the elegant Louisville whites flaunting their fancy cars and expensive clothes' but the only one reason his father gave him was 'his brown hands'. Really! Is that so? Is the colour of hands that important? Strange. Then, what about that day when the Almighty shall question the so-called Homo Sapiens, the ones who

stand at the top of the food chain, about the morals given in Bible and Quran? Of course, Jesus Christ and Muhammad (P.B.U.H) will not be responsible there for justifying our stand, our attitude of discrimination.

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