

BEING BLACK IN AMERICA

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Abstract

The paper analyses how racism acts as a type of interior colonization and how it rationalizes the orders of difference it identifies as laws of nature, imparting fixity to social relations. The paper also focuses on how race intersects with other modes of group identity like class, gender and nationality.

Racism refers to the marginalisation and segregation of Black people or visible minorities by the Whites. It is an ethnocentric discrimination and is built on the theory that there is a link between the inherited physical characteristics of personality and culture. Calvin C Henton proposed that racism is a man made and a man enforced phenomena. He further defines racism as:

All the learned behaviour and learned emotions on the part of a group of people towards another group; whose physical characteristics are dissimilar to the former group, behaviour and emotions that compel one group to conceive of and to treat the other on the basis of its physical characteristics alone as if it did not belong to the human race. (175)

He asserts that racism is based on the ideology of cultural subordination and supremacy in which the predominant race exercises cultural hegemony over the inferior race.

Race refers to the anthropological clustering within the human species. Racism, as an ideology is unconsciously assimilated in the literature of the racists and their victims. The writer's stance to racism is part of his ideology and is reflected in his writings. The word race appeared in the English language at the beginning of the sixteenth century. Race is a social construct and cannot be seen as a biological category that has anything to do with science or genetics.

Racism is structurally akin to imperialism, capitalism, exploitation and servitude. According to Fanon, "racism is the shameless exploitation of one group of men by another which reached a higher stage of technical development" (308). Tunisian writer Albert Memmi defines racism as "the generalised and final assigning of values to real or imaginary differences, to the accuser's benefit and his victim's expense, in order to justify the former's own privilege or aggression" (186). He stresses how racism acts as a tool for imperialism in his text *The Coloniser*

and Colonized. He says “racism appears...not as an identical detail, but as consubstantial part of colonialism. It is the highest expression of the colonial system and one of the most significant features of the colonialist” (313). Thus he emphasizes the inevitable link between colonialism and racism.

In the nineteenth century the idea of “race” came to denote typological classification of human species, asserting the fact that people’s biological traits are signs of their psychological and cultural characteristics. Not only the Black people but also the Jewish and Irish people have also been the object of racist ideology, as they have been negatively evaluated and treated. Racism is more than the contempt and terror of an individual of another group defined by culture and biology. Racism and sexism are connected to the economic system of a community. Racial discrimination is originally the exercise of power to transform cultural prejudices into the reality of everyday experiences. Racism denotes the complex of factors that create racial discrimination.

The idea of race as a means of differentiating groups of people has existed in some form since time immemorial. Joseph M. Flora and Lucinda H. Mackethan comment in *The Companion to Southern Literature*:

Race refers to genetically determined differences among groups of people. These differences are most evident in physical features such as skin colour, physiognomy, and hair texture, but these are often taken as signs of less-evident distinctions, including intelligence, morality, reasoning skills, physical skills, propensity to crime and violence, personality and cultural preferences. (705)

Racism is a type of interior colonization and it rationalizes the orders of difference it identifies as laws of nature, imparting fixity to social relations. Race intersects with other modes of group identity like class, gender and nationality.

In the seventeenth century systematic theories about racial difference emerged. Francois Bernier analyses four groups of people based on physical appearances. David Hume and Baron Montesquieu by the late eighteenth century undertook an intensive inquiry on how the influence of climate could bring physical differences along with intellectual and moral differences. In 1775, Johnson Blumenback brought out five categories like Caucasian, Mangolian, Ethiopian, American and Malay, which later became the standard division. Though personalities like Blumenback rejected the notion of inferiority or superiority, Thomas Jefferson upheld the view that African Americans were inferior to the whites. The economic reality of slavery promulgated an unfree labour force and racial theory that justified the exploitation of Africans and their descendants. African Americans were seen as a racial group, naturally and permanently inferior to the whites and violence towards them increased.

The nineteenth century witnessed the emergence of several theories to justify economic necessity of racial subordination. Regarding the question of racial difference, Joseph M. Flora and Lucinda H Mackethan comment in *The Companion to Southern Literature*:

Evolution presented a new intellectual opportunity for defining racial hierarchies. If racial groups could be understood as representing stages in the progress of humanity, then a common humanity could be maintained while preserving notions of inferiority and superiority. Much of nineteenth century anthropological research was devoted to identifying such differences. Unfortunately for advocates of racism, the greater precision of scientific method complicated efforts to generate clear categories. Whether the method involved skin colour, cranial

shape, brain capacity, or hair texture, the results tended to show the virtual impossibility of drawing precise lines between races. (700)

The impossibility of the hard and fast division of races is further stressed here.

The difference between the theory and practice of race results in the creation of bipolarity wherein, black is constructed the other of white. In a culturally dissimilar nation like United States ethnicity is another factor which plays a significant role in everyday life. In his work *Culture and Truth The Remaking of Social Analysis* Renato Rosaldo remarks: “Critics throughout the world today increasingly include minorities defined by race, ethnicity, language, class, religion, and sexual orientation. Encounter with “difference” now pervade modern everyday life in the urban settings” (28). So ethnicity can be seen as a kind of shared heritage.

Institutionalised racism means the amalgamation of the racist policies and practices in a community, in the institutions like government, law, health care, education etc. It is only when racism become institutionalised the methodical practice of racial discrimination can happen. Internalised racism indicates the psychological brainwashing and indoctrinating of the people of colour with the credence in White supremacy. Those who are the victims of internalised racism will feel themselves worthless, incompetent, inferior and unfit in the society.

Racism is a distinct phenomenon of the American political and social scene and can be traced back to the period of history wherein the Africans were brought to America as cheap labourers. Having brought to America in slave ships under inhuman conditions, they were ill treated by the Whites and this corrupted the soul of the blacks that was placid, malleable, docile and noble in the beginning. Brutal methods of subjugation were employed to reshape the culture, psyche and physiology of these blacks. Racism is extended to an ideology of domination, cultural and anthropological. Joel Kovel states “racism anecdotes the notion of race, indeed it generates the races” (75)

African Americans occupy a peculiar position within United States, historically, socially and politically. Having forcefully ousted from their native land, they created a culture in United States amalgamating the indigenous cultures of the past with the harsh reality of life in racially secluded America. Writers like W.E.B Du Bois, Carter G Woodson and John Hope Franklin in their work emphasizes the holistic experience and complex life of people caught in a cultural chasm. African American culture was moulded by the African past and the cruel vicissitudes of slavery. African American church is central to any analysis of the people’s social reality and remains a purveyor of the spiritual and cultural cornerstone of the community.

The enslaved Africans used the cultural and social backgrounds and experiences to create family life in America. The economic, geographic and public policy changes affected the progression of family life. Group specific tradition is maintained by majority of the ethnic populations in America. The ethnic aspect is a dynamic process and is expressed in contemporary music, Black English and other expressive forms. Ethnic identity for them is the combination of social realities and cultural tradition. Culture and ethnicity become the framework through which one perceives the social reality. Ethnicity includes a sense of historical continuity, religious beliefs and practice, language, and common ancestry. Ethnicity and culture differ from race that belongs to biological category.

The most shameful example of racism by the West was slavery, especially the enslavement of the Africans, based on the assumption that Black Africans and their progeny were inferior to that of the White Europeans and their lineage. The potent European powers settled in Africa, established their colonies, plundered the continent and with force took out the African people to work as slave labourers. Without any inclination most of the Africans were

willing to sell other Africans to Europeans as they believed that as dark people, they are all kinsmen and should be servile to the Whites.

African American fictions depict the saga of racial struggle and oppression faced by the Blacks in the United States. The covert form of racism is subtle, invisible, slow and fatal in its methodological progress and is doubly detrimental to the Black race. Black writers like Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison portrayed the cruelty, rape, bestiality and lynching that marked traditional racism. Race has had a distinct cultural meaning in American society where the Blacks have been oppressed and marginalised in such a manner as to perpetuate their inferiority. Racism is built on the notion that the inherent inferiority of one race is in relation to another. Racism often justifies and dictates the deeds and actions of the dominant group, and thereby adversely affecting the target group. The marginalised and subordinated position of the African Americans, in the class perspective, emerges out of the structured class divisions between the powerful Whites and the subservient Blacks. African American literature is an attempt to combat the racial prejudices inflicted upon them by the Whites and to fight against the negative stereotypes about their race. In the twentieth century America became the cynosure of Europe, constructing its name around the myth of American dreams. But for Blacks, the American dream remained illusive and allusive.

Blacks were deprived of their fundamental rights and bestial treatment was meted out to them sans human dignity. The sexual trafficking practiced by the Whites to the American slaves resulted in the origin of Mulatto babies who were offsprings of White man and Black women. Through the mulattos the white father instilled resentment on the race of their mother thereby spreading the prejudice and hatred on the people of African lineage also. In the American society the practice of race continued without any protest for a considerable long period of time.

The American society was divided into two classes like the ‘master’, which was monopolated by the Whites and ‘slaves’ which was dominated by the marginal Blacks. Walter Rodney observes that the Africans were exploited because the Whites wanted to exploit their labour power. He says: “the enslavement of the Africans had everything to do with the cheapness of labour and nothing with the labourer’s skin. Racial differences made it easier to justify and rationalize negro slavery” (15). The Whites played upon the psyche of the Blacks by convincing them about their inferiority thereby maintaining a control over the mind of the Blacks. The Americans were utilizing the natural resources as well as man power. In this regard William Chancellor observes:

Perhaps the most astonishing aspect of Caucasian racism in Africa was how Whites were able to use it to maintain their absolute dominance over the continent and its people. The White man used their offsprings as a wedge in order to keep it weak. (21)

Racism emerged as an ideological support for slavery. Racism has always been part of human nature from time immemorial. Karl Marx in *Capital* points out the affinity between capitalism and slavery: “The discovery of gold and silver in America, the extirpation, enslavement, and entombment in mines of the indigenous population of the continent, the beginnings of the conquest and plunder of India and the conversion of Africa into a preserve for the commercial hunting of Black skins are all things that characterize the dawn of the era of capitalist production” (915). He attributes that the rise of capitalism is the major factor behind the African slave trade. Marx also explains how the social and economic factors of the capitalism force the Blacks into slavery.

The sentence “He only becomes a slave in certain relations, (28) explicates the dominant ideology which associates Africans to be slaves. Marxist explains that slavery is the product of capitalism.

William Julius Wilson notes in *The Declining Significance of Race* that it is not an easy task to sketch the enduring existence of the racial inequality to an articulated ideology of racism. Those who emphasize race in the modern era verbalise covert racism and employ as evidence racial disparities in income, housing and jobs.

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