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Politics of Racism: A comparative analysis of the movie 'Black Like Me' and poems of Amiri Baraka and Haki Madhubuti.

Dr. Tapan Kumar Panda

Associate Professor,
Radhakrishna Institute of Technology &
Engineering,
Bhubaneswar (Odisha, India)

Rajshekhar Pankaj

Research Scholar,
Radhakrishna Institute of Technology &
Engineering,
Bhubaneswar (Odisha, India)

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Abstract:

The purpose of this study is to analyse the impact of Racism on Blacks during 1960's & 70's in America through Cinema and literature. The arrival of Cinema which is known as film or movies has been an easy interface between Life and Literature. It has a mass appeal that has revolutionized ideas on a large scale. The Movie 'Black like Me' espouses the suppressed Rights of the Black people and their fear of Whites. This movie depicts the suffering and trauma undergone by the Afro-Americans in America. The Protagonist is a White journalist who artificially darkens his skin to experience the torture and brutality inflicted on Blacks by the Whites. Amiri Baraka and Haki Madhubuti have fought for the rights of Black folks in America. They were spear heading the Black Arts movement in America in 1960's. Madhubuti and Baraka have kept the Black vernacular alive in public space. Poems of these poets have connected the hearts of millions of Blacks. Their poems have the influence of Jazz which energizes their commitment towards the Afro-american people. The poetic touch to the Black movement was the turning point in the history of America. This study would explore the impact of Racism in the Whites of America.

Keywords: Afro-American, Black, Racism, Jazz, Black Arts Movement, Racism

Introduction:

The American society in the 1960's was gripped by the Racial discrimination and politics of dominance. This study would delve into the political aspects that terrorized the Blacks. The Movie **Black like Me** is one man's strange journey to the South. He happened to be a White man, who was on a project on Black experience in the White world. The popular poets of Afro-American society that revolutionized the cause of the Black subjugation and exploitation are Amiri Baraka and Haki Madhubuti. They were major exponents of the Black Arts Movement, which fought for the cause of Blacks. Their poems had ruffled feathers and aroused strong sentiments among the Blacks against the Whites. The Jazz reminds of an oppressive and racist society and restrictions on their artistic

visions. These poets have inculcated jazz to give a musical touch to their poems. The poems of these poets not only have a strong conviction to fight Racism but also a desire to unite America under one roof.

Politics:

“Man is by nature a political animal” (Aristotle). Politics is the activity by which people make rules and amend rules under the law where they live. In politics, power is thought of as a relationship. This is rightly expressed in Lord Acton’s aphorism: ‘power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely,’ Politics is linked to conflict and cooperation. Politics is seen as a particular means of resolving conflict through compromise, conciliation and negotiation. Sir Bernard Crick observes that “politics is the activity by which differing interests within a given unit of rule are conciliated by giving them a share in power in proportion to their importance to the welfare and the survival of the whole community”.

Jazz:

Jazz relates to “jasm” which means “pep, energy”. It is a music genre that originated in the African American community of New Orleans, USA in the late 19th century and early 20th century. It is considered by many as America’s classical music. Some Afro- Americans feel that Jazz has put them on focus in the world map whereas others feel that Jazz is a reminder of an oppressive and racist society which put restrictions on freedom. Louis Armstrong, a trumpet player from New Orleans and the Chicago is considered the Father of Modern Jazz. 1950’s saw the emergence of free Jazz. It provided the contemporary Black Voice. Amiri Baraka believes that black music captures the ever changing voice of the black masses in its forms. Jazz poetry like music engulfed a variety of forms, rhythm and sound. Jazz music could be called free music. Similarly, a free verse could be called Jazz poetry. Like free verse, Jazz follows no rules and pays attention to spontaneity of emotions. In 1960, young Black writers were fired by the spirit of both Black Nationalism and Marxism. They wrote for their Race and denounced Racism. Many of the poets wrote homage to specific Jazz artists such as saxophonist John Coltrane, who was the most popular Jazz musician of the time. Amiri Baraka was the leading poet of Jazz poems. He started the study of Black music which had the ingredient of Jazz in it. Haki Madhubuti also contributed to Jazz poetry.

BLACK LIKE ME (movie):

The Movie *Black Like Me* is directed by Carl Lerner in May 1964. This movie is an adaptation from the original book *Black Like Me* written by John Howard Griffin, who espouses the suppressed Rights of the Black people and their fear of Whites. This movie depicts the suffering and trauma undergone by the Afro-Americans in America. The Protagonist is a White journalist who artificially darkens his skin to experience the torture and brutality inflicted on Blacks by the Whites. The protagonist says “What it is like to be a Negro in the South?”, which is the plot of the movie. has

no control?” The main character, James Horton, is a middle-aged white man living in Mansfield, Texas in 1959. He is committed to the cause of racial justice and frustrated by his inability as a white man to understand the black experience. Horton decides to undergo medical treatment to change the colour of his skin and temporarily become a black man. After, getting the support of his wife and the editor of a black-oriented magazine called *Sepia* which would find his experience in return for an article about it. Horton sets out for New Orleans to begin his life as a black man. He finds a contact in the black community, a soft-spoken, articulate shoe-shiner named Sterling Williams, and shares his predicament to learn and live as a Black in South. Finally, Horton sets out to explore the black community. Horton knew that he would have to face many hardships and insults. The word ‘nigger’ echoed him everywhere. He struggled to find a job or a rest room to rest. He was frustrated. After several traumatic weeks in New Orleans, Horton decides to travel into the Deep South of Mississippi and Alabama, which were reputed to be even worse for blacks. In Mississippi, a jury had just refused to indict a lynch mob that murdered a black man before he could stand trial. In Mississippi, he is disheartened and exhausted, so he calls a white friend named P.D. East, a newspaperman who is ferociously opposed to racism. He discusses with him about the Racist slurs that have made the Blacks more black. He observes that the faces of these people display defeat and hopelessness. Sterling Williams, the shoe-shiner told Horton that he had to live like a Black and not as a White in this place. He cannot walk in any place and ask for a drink or use the rest room. This is evident from the following lines:

“Hey, nigger, you can’t go in there, you can’t drink there. We don’t serve niggers...”

James Horton reached Atlanta where he was surprised at the unity of the Blacks for their brethren. They had a newspaper named *Atlanta Constitution* which vouched for their grievances and rights. He saw a silver lining or light at the end of the tunnel. He moved further to Montgomery, the capital of Alabama. Here the Blacks were brutally harassed and undermined as any place in south. He was forced to change himself to White to survive the onslaught of Blacks. The blacks that John met were afraid that one of their own might commit an act of violence that would jeopardize their existence. The protagonist advocates Unity among Blacks to withstand against the Whites.

Poems of Amiri Baraka:

Amiri Baraka is one of the exponents of Black Arts movement in USA in 1960’s. His public image was that of an angry man and a Black artist who resorted to violence. The Black Arts movement was launched in 1964 with writers, artists and activists coming together on the same platform. Just after the assassination of Malcolm X on February 22, 1965. Baraka had set the clarion call to establish the Harlem Black Arts Repertory Theatre/School (BARTS).

Black Art is a poem that speaks in a distinctive voice of Afro –Americans and its culture. This poem amalgates music and poetry. Amiri Baraka opines.

Conclusion:

It is rightly said that “Man is a Social animal”. But it has lost its Social tag by undermining fellow brethren. Discrimination has divided Man not only on religion but also on colour. James Horton says in the Movie *Black Like Me*: When you are blind, there is no colour difference.” This “Solitude” of being Black makes Man “Scream” like an Animal. Finally, Man has turned into an Animal. Does not it seem reclusive? We are Black in our Mind & Hearts to display our high-handedness on others. Man needs to whitewash the black in him and pave way for a society free from racial prejudice.

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