

RACISM AND ETHNICITY IN THE FICTIONAL WORKS OF SELECTED WRITERS

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Abstract

English literature deals with various issues, provides information, knowledge, and makes people aware about the ways of living in and with the flow of universe. Literature is a tool which supplies knowledge, thus educates the people and the desired end is to transform Adam to a human being. Racism is a socially constructed idea, which happens to be the source of inequitable treatment of humans in the society and family structure. A perception, which says that a group of people who have same physical features, such as their skin, color and facial characteristics can match, can be called a race. When this idea is used to discriminate people of a particular group such a concept can be racism. Racism is more prevalent in Afro-American literature, but same kind of characteristics have been perceived in untouchability or caste system in India. Ethnicity can be a group or a subgroup, which shares common cultural basis. These two concepts will be described in detail during the course of this research paper.

Keywords: Racism, race, ethnicity, cultural clash etc.

Introduction

“Since you are black, don’t stick around.

Food is gone, the rent is due,

Curse and cry then jump two” (The Poetry of Maya Angelou, A Spoken Word Collection 1).

Race is a concept, which we often see in Black Literature. Africans are the pure and poignant victims of race or racism. It is an idea that discriminates people based on colour or physical features. Maya Angelou discussed this problem in her poetry and this was the ghost that always haunted her, her civilization and culture. She is the pure black voice; her literature is called literature of racism, as a postcolonial writer she wants black race to prosper after a big attack of racism and slavery.

Untouchability is a behavioural trend that looks indignantly on humans of lower caste seen in the works of Mulk Raj Anand. The above mentioned, concepts in the title can be perceived in ethnic groups in India and the world. Caste system has been a very big problem especially in the Indian society. It hampers national progress and development. National integration suffers a big setback with this notion in vogue.

Objectives:

Literature exposes life in all colours.

Caste and race are detrimental to dignity of man.

Focus of this paper is literary concepts of racism and caste.

Review of Literature

In American and African literature, whites and blacks are frequently seen fighting. White superiority is over and over again the trademark that is the sign of inhuman treatment of blacks as creatures in this world. Being blacks, Africans had worked on plantations, served their masters, black women had satisfied whites physically and worked on the orders as do computers on the commands. They still work like animals. They had lost their

lives and it is believed that more than 12.5 million people vanished to the slavery. This is directly linked to racial fights that occurred in USA and Africa. Being black means a commodity and can be utilized for any purpose, this gave way to reaction, and reaction launched the displacement drive.

Toni Morrison's women characters are repeatedly seen as victims of race and colour. Sethe (the major figure in *Beloved*) works as a slave because she was a black woman, Pecola was never accepted by the society, and reason was her age and colour. Whites rape black women and they did not get punished, this sort of treatment gave rise to gender and race. Racism can be seen in Imperialism also as Europeans treated Asians and Africans as inferiors which led to the racial conflicts, thus theories of Orientalism and Subalternity came into the domain of literature. "The novel addresses the social forces that drive understanding and definition of cultural constructs such as beauty, normalcy, family, and sexuality. These constructs are a particular issues for African-American communities that are often excluded from representation" (Gillespie, 2008, 46). Racism is a social disease, which cannot be found in gene but an idea that gets birth through different relations and associations which result in disaster. It excludes a particular community from the society on the basis of religion, caste, language, political agenda etc. These types can be seen in the literature of America and Africa and black literature of Toni Morrison. Maya Angelou's art is abundant in these aspects. "We were so beautiful when we stood astride her ugliness" (*The Bluest Eye* 205). Morrison stresses on racism, she not only explains the exploitation of blacks by white supremacists but separation and discrimination of light blacks by dark blacks in *Paradise* and other works like *A Mercy* and *God help The Child*.

These things can be perceived in Indian English literature, say Vikram Seth's *A Suitable Boy*, which speaks of caste system, and segregates the lower level sect from the rest of the society. Ethnic groups are the group of people having common cultural background; they can have different religions, speak various languages, and belong to diverse sects. Ethnicity can be understood from three different features as demand of autonomy, secessionism and reaction against outsiders. "Ethnicity refers to the identification of a group based on a perceived cultural distinctiveness that makes the group into a people. This distinctiveness is believed to be expressed in language, music, values, art, styles, literature, family life, religion, ritual, food" (www.britannica.com/topic/ethnicity, retrieved on 25/1/23 at 11:21 pm). Morrison did try to show black people as a group who are distinct by the way of their physical appearance, language, religion and many other aspects. Her blacks are thrown from the society and they struggle to retain their ethnic identity. In the works of Vikram Seth and Arundhati Roy, we see how lower classes or Shudras are treated with contempt and are disgraced. Kaccheru was never allowed to mix with Brahmins, Brahmins did not eat in the houses of the Muslims this creates a sense of superiority in them and lower class people were segregated, which is directly linked to caste and is a response to ethnicity. It needs purification and society must share equality leading to harmony, which is the need of the day. India is a land where people suffer social alienation and this trend is seen in Hindu Culture. Literature is helpful to remove all these social evils and literary figures have tried a lot to spread awareness among the people about effects of caste and race.

Morrison's blacks have been excluded from the society, they want to create their own paradise, their desire was pure autonomy which they achieved, but they further divided their race into two races where dark blacks have no place to live and light blacks act as superiors. "Ethnic study, concerns itself generally with art and literature produced by identifiable ethnic groups either marginalized or in a subordinate position to a dominant culture" (www.iep.utm.edu > literary, retrieved on 26/1/23 at 12:35 am). At the present when world has become a small village, these concepts of race and caste must vanish, but still people have time to discuss, act on these ideas, maybe because of political anatomy and ignorance they suffer from or it is their arrogance.

Morrison, Maya Angelou, Vikram Seth, Arundhati Roy, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie are the prominent writers of racism, caste and ethnicity. According to a report published in 2020, impacts of caste, race and ethnicity are grievous on both physical health and mental health, this can be seen in the characters, like Pecola who went mad, because her mother didn't look at her, children call her dirty black girl and society never allowed her to associate with the people. Blacks are always a marginalized sect; Shudras also are dominated and even excluded from the ethnicity. Blacks are a race, Shudras or untouchables like Bakha and characters of Arundhati Roy are ethnic groups who suffer either at the hands of whites or powerful.

Novels of Mulk Raj Anand are full of vigour with his enthusiasm for the downtrodden groups in Indian society. He talks of the group of people, who are tormented for their lower status and they receive inhuman treatment in society. Coolie and Untouchable are the finest examples of ethnic groups, in which suffering of the racial or ethnic torture is not opaque. Bakha as a sweeper boy cleans the toilets and people treat him as an untouchable, his sister suffers the trauma of rape and she cannot tell it publicly because the rapist was the priest related with Brahmin sect. It is because of the caste that racism destroys the structure of the society. Though there are many laws in favour of downtrodden but still they cannot pray in temples, Anand works as a messiah for them as Arundhati Roy does in her *The God of Small Things* and Vikram Seth tried in his *A Suitable Boy* where he talks about lower caste people, their conditions and approach of the government towards them.

Conclusion

Racism and ethnicity are two most important themes of English literature, which help a writer to discuss about the marginalization and otherness and through these issues writers aim at humanism as we see in the works of Maya Angelou, Morrison, Roy, Mulk Raj Anand and many others.

Reference

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