

HUMAN VALUES AND AFRO-AMERICAN POETRY

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Abstract

Afro American writings, exhortations are to inspire and guide not only their nation people but also the universe. Most of the intellectual personalities, educationists, thinkers, and teachers whose progressive spirit illuminate self-management values, self-improvement of the people as a technique for all-round development of the body, mind, and spirit of human beings is commendable. It is believed that the self-controlling, self-sufficient and self-evaluation-oriented spirits are source of inspiration for the betterment of the individual and subsequently the society. American literature, which has assumed more importance and relevance to global situation today than ever before. After the Second World War, America has emerged not only a political superpower but also as centre for construction and deconstruction. The Cold War between the two superpowers had deeply affected the intellectual climate of the nation and it suffered from acute internal conflict. This internal conflict resulted in new moment and ideologies. In 1960s and 1970s, America was Stirred socially and intellectually in the same manner in which England was stirred in later half of 19th century. Uprisings like black panthers, civil rights movement, all affected the culture and intellectual climate of the time. apart from these moments a number of other events took place which sent the street into terror. Terror of the assassination of President Kennedy on 22nd November, 1963. The assassination of Malcolm X on 21st February, 1965, assassination of Martin Luther King on 4th April, 1968 and the assassination of Robert Kennedy in 1968.

The society which suffers in this way has always created something new and original. So did America of this time. The much sought after self-reliance was achieved long back and now it came to be questioned by the native themselves. The old cultural notions were subverted and attempts were made to create new notions of class and society, of race and gender, and of intellectual politics. Almost every literary genre is rich with new notions and new ideologies. African American literature of immigrants' experience and of other ethnic groups and actively operating small but significant factors within these broad movements, made American scenario highly appealing. Thus, it is universally acknowledged fact that many the study of Afro-American literature typically began with examining slavery and its meaning to history in the world. Many early writers in the genre strove to forge a new narrative form. The period of reconstruction following the civil war led to literature that was more uplifting and socially

conscious in the past. Walt Whitman was a poet of the American Republic and he celebrated both the freedom of the individual and the man also the community of workers and artisans. When Abraham Lincoln was assassinated after the end of the Civil War, Walt Whitman was thoroughly shaken and he wrote his most popular lyric, 'O Captain, My Captain!' and one of his major poems 'When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloomed'. Thus, this paper is to explore the Afro- American authors latent talent and the values established by them with the help of the black literature among readers.

Keywords: Immigrants, Movements, Lilacs, latent, Assassination, Afro-American

Introduction

It is believed that even in present scenario the exhortations of some of the Afro-American writers are soul stirring, self-controlling, and self-reliance oriented to inspire the readers toward the betterment of the individual and subsequently the society. They write about education with certain aim like Swami Vivekanad- "The education which does not help the common mass of people to equip themselves for the struggle of life, which does not bring out strength of character, a spirit of philanthropy and courage of a lion- is it worth the name?". Values are essentially global beliefs that guide people's behaviour regarding specific objects and situations. Value system determine the relationship of a man in his family, his political and religious activity and the choice among alternatives in selecting goals, in choosing means for reaching them, in resolving conflicts, an individual is influenced by his value system. Values change due to change of information, ideology socio-political change or changes in the economy or technological advancement in general. The teachings to uplifts the mind and the man especially the power of the young boys and girls some of the human values are required to lead a perfect, peaceful and powerful life.

(1) Abstinence (2) Appreciation of Cultural Values of Others (3) Anti- touch ability (4) Citizenship (5) Consideration for Others (6) Concern for Others. (7) Co-operation. (8) Cleanliness. (9) Compassion (10) Common Cause. (11) Common goodness. (12) Courage. (13) Courtesy. (14) Curiosity (15) Democratic decision-making. (16) Devotion (17) Dignity of the individual (18) Dignity of the manual work (19) Duty (20) Discipline (21) Endurance (22) Equality (23) Friendship (24) Faithfulness. (25) Fellow feeling. (26) Freedom. (27) Forward look. (28) Good manner (29) Manliness. (30) Gratitude. (31) Honesty. (32) Helpfulness. (33) Humanism. (34) Hygienic living. (35) Initiative. (36) Integrity (37) Justice (38) Kindness (39) Kindness to animals (40) Loyalty to duty (41) Leadership (42) National unity (43) National consciousness (44) Non-violence (45) National Integration (46) Obedience (47) Peace (48) Proper Utilisation (49) Punctuality (50) Patriotism (51) Purity (52) Quest for knowledge (53) Regularity (54) Respect for others (55) Reverence for old age (56) Sincerity (57) Simple living (58) Social-Justice (59) Self- help (60) Self-respect (61) Self-discipline (62) Self-confidence (63) Self-support (64) Self-study (65) Self-reliance (66) Self-control (67) Self-restraint (68) Social-service (69) Solidarity of mankind (70) Sense of social responsibility (71) Sense of discrimination between good and evil (72) Socialism (73) Sympathy (74) Secularism and respect for all religions (75) Simple living (76) Spirit of enquiry (77) Team- work (78) Team- spirit (79) Truthfulness (80) Tolerance (81) Universal truth (82) Universal love (83) Value for national and

civic property.(84) *Resourcefulness*”.ⁱ

Besides above-mentioned, there are other values like accuracy, benevolence, cheerfulness, contentment, detachment, flexibility, gentleness, humanity, introversion, lightness, mercy, patience, serenity, simplicity, stability, surrender, sweetness, tirelessness and wisdom. Man provided with the essential tools, which enable one to discover and release what, is eternally present within consciousness. It is a very natural process, which best describes as a living spirituality, one that is appropriate to all ages, cultures and ethical backgrounds.

Aim:- It aims to contribute a few historical and literary drops in the urn of nectar knowledge in stopping the erosion of human values with the help of Afro-American writings. This is an attempt for the noble cause for educator, student, and society are conscious. It aims to encourage, motivate, inspire and influence young minds to read and develop social, moral, cultural and ethical values along with true love for art, culture and literature.

Literature Review: - American literature, which has assumed more importance and relevance to global situation today than ever before. After the Second World War, America has emerged not only a political superpower but also as centre for construction and deconstruction. The Cold War between the two superpowers had deeply affected the intellectual climate of the nation and it suffered from acute internal conflict. This internal conflict resulted in new moment and ideologies. In 1960s and 1970s, America was Stirred socially and intellectually in the same manner in which England was stirred in later half of 19th century. Uprisings like black panthers, civil rights movement, all affected the culture and intellectual climate of the time. apart from these moments a number of other events took place which sent the street into terror. Terror of the assassination of President Kennedy on 22nd November, 1963. The assassination of Malcolm X on 21st February, 1965, assassination of Martin Luther King on 4th April, 1968 and the assassination of Robert Kennedy in 1968.

The society which suffers in this way has always created something new and original. So did America of this time. The much sought after self-reliance was achieved long back and now it came to be questioned by the native themselves. The old cultural notions were subverted and attempts were made to create new notions of class and society, of race and gender, and of intellectual politics. This was more obvious in literature than anywhere else. Almost every literary genre is rich with new notions and new ideologies. African American literature of immigrants' experience and of other ethnic groups and actively operating small but significant factors within these broad movements, made American scenario highly appealing. It appears seething with ideas and ideologies.

Thus, it is universally acknowledged fact that many the study of Afro-American literature typically began with examining slavery and its meaning to history in the world. Many early writers in the genre strove to forge a new narrative form that would not only focus on the overall dehumanisation of individual through slavery in America but also examining and exploring the cultural consciousness that allowed forced migration to occur and proliferate in the first place in the so-called land of free. The period of reconstruction following the civil war led to literature that was more uplifting and socially conscious in the past. Walt Whitman was a poet of the American Republic and he celebrated both the freedom of the individual and the man also the community of workers and artisans. When Abraham Lincoln was assassinated after the end of

the Civil War, Walt Whitman was thoroughly shaken and he wrote his most popular lyric, ‘O Captain, My Captain!’ and one of his major poems ‘When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloomed’. The later one is an unforgettable elegy mourning the martyrdom of Abraham Lincoln. His Leaves of the Grass is highly admiring. Whitman’s Song of myself is also highly admiring. He wrote,

“I celebrate Myself, and sing myself
And what I assume, you shall assume
For every atom belonging to me, as good belongs to you”

This poem reflects Walt Whitman’s youthful exuberance and hope, and poems ‘When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloomed’. ‘Passage to India’ reflect the poet’s more mature vision. His poems are certainly a reflection of the cracks in the edifice of American Republic due to the Civil War (1861-1865) which intensified the North South divide. In his own way the poet wanted to heal the wound of the civil war. His endeavour was to strengthen the bond between man and man, man and women, human beings and the nature. His poems are concerned with the making of a nation. The theme of human brotherhood in the poem, ‘Crossing Brooklyn Ferry’ is predominant. The poem, ‘Passage to India’ celebrates globalisation and space.

The early Afro -American poetry was a mere protest against slavery most of the early poets were immolators. They did not have any style of their own. While writing they did not think of the Black as their readers. They took it for granted that most of the readers would be white. Gradually things begin to change when more and more blacks became literate. Then came the concept of Black readers in the states and that was the beginning of a new kind of writing among the black American writers. One must be always rooted in one’s culture. When one is denied to identify himself with his own culture, he becomes rootless and frustrated. That was really the problem of the Black writers in America. Slowly, they began to be conscious of the racial Pride. They started to realise how much rich their cultural heritage is. In the second half of the 20th century all these things became prominent. The Black came to understand the concept of Black aesthetics. The black experience is really quite complex. Abraham Chapman put it as follows:

*“The Black experience includes the historical roots and beginnings in Africa with its cultures and arts; the involuntary transatlantic crossing the experience of slavery the system of racism, oppression... which deprive Black people of the personalities and lives and develop individual personalities in a dehumanising and depersonalising environment.”*ⁱⁱ

with such a complex background a Black American writer has to take a cautious approach before he steps into the shoes of a responsible literary artist. Thus, came into being a different approach to literature altogether which is stored for the Black people’s own identity. They preferred to describe their own lifestyle, use their own rhythms, images and languages. That perhaps rings the bell to announce comment of an original Black American writing style. When one considered Black American poetry as a different genre, immediately the names of two stalwarts come to one’s mind. They are LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka) and Don. L. Lee (Haki R Madhubuti) LeRoi Jones urges to change the entire style of approach. He puts emphasis on Blackness. In an essay entitled The legacy of Malcolm X, and the coming of the black nation he affirms:

“Because for many Black people, the white man has succeeded in making this hell seeing like heaven. But Black youths are much better off in this regard than their parents. They are the ones who need the least image reversal. The Black artist in this context is desperately needed to

change the images his people identify with by asserting Black feeling, Black mind, Black judgement. ⁱⁱⁱ

While writing about the problems and expectations of particular people one has to make sure that once writing should be relevant to that particular race, both in respect of geography and way of thinking, that in fact is the advice offered by LeRoi Jones. Dudley Randall in *Black Poetry*” means to speak the same:

“Writing for Black audience out of Black experience, the poet seeks to make their work relevant and to direct their audience to Black consciousness, Black unity and Black Power^{iv}.”

Before preparing the writers to stick to a particular set of principles, the emphasis was on the Americanisation of Black. It was a kind of approach to take corrective measures to help them come out of the polluted cultural surrounding. Two diametrically opposite cultures can never co-exist together unless due importance is given to the oppressed class. In *Black Writing of Home Social essays*, LeRoi Jones cautions against such type of miss-information. He Writes:

“Let no one convince any black man that he is an American like anybody else. The Black writer should be deaf to such mis-information especially since he can prove that something different is the case.” ^v

According to LeRoi Jones, the aim of Black literature is to bring an awareness to the Black regarding their enslaved position. Literature must help them gathering energy to face any situation. In an interview with Mel Watkins in 1971 he says:

“As for Black literature, it must function to bring us to and awareness that we are... that is a weak, powerless, enslaved people... or it must give us the energy or the spirit to do something about our situation.” ^{vi}

Thus, he openly advocates that literature has to cater to the needs of the society. It has got to do its duty to the society. Literature should not build its castles around imagination. It must be rooted in the daily problems of the society. Through the help of literature, he advocates to change the static reality of the surroundings. He is not afraid of any violent approach to achieve this. At certain point of time Jones would like to go beyond the text. In comparison to the text, he lays more emphasis on spoken words, when asked whether he is interested in moving away from the idea of the written page. He answers as follows:

“The page does not interest me that much-- not as much the actual spoken word.... I’m much more interested in this spoken word” ^{vii}

While commenting like this, he goes back to the tradition of spoken folk-literature where the spoken words its mood and the scene create an evocative surrounding. Jones is perhaps the first person to declare like a Marxist that art is a weapon: “I see art as a weapon and a weapon of revolution ^{viii}”. Most of his poems are highly revolutionary:

“Come up black dada nihilisms.

.....

Cut the mother's throats^{ix}”.

He does not hesitate to use politics in poetry. According to him, the poet is a part of the society in which leaves. if his identity is endangered, it is obvious that you would write about it in poetry. There should not be any watertight compartment between politics and society. Russell Brooks in *CLA Journal*, 15 September, 1971 puts it as follows:

“Black poetry and the other Black arts are utilized to proclaim the revolution unequivocally and directly and to serve it indirectly as a powerful didactic medium calculated to

prepare the minds of Afro-Americans for the roles that they are expected to play in the coming struggle.^{x9}

In the preface of his book *The LeRoi Jones/ Amiri Baraka* readers, he describes the essence of his writing. Here he gives importance to society, politics, literature, music and language. He is not afraid of using literature as propaganda. That, in fact, is the main aspect of Black American poetics.

Out of the two stalwarts of Black- American poetry and poetics the second one is Don L. Lee. later known as Haki R Madhubati. The two created a new way of thinking and prescribed new norms of Black American writing. Their poetry and comments their rejection of everything white, and their creation of new tools to evaluate Black American writings put them on high esteem. It is to mention that the other writers of 1960 and 1970s followed their footprints. Lee starts from a basic point that in white American everybody teaches the Black not to be Black. Nobody encourages them to feel proud of their rich ancestry. Therefore, begins his task from the grassroots level. He speaks of confidence and optimism which can persuade the Black to achieve what they want. In “A Message All Black people Can Dig he writes:

“We are going to do it.

US: black people, beautiful people;

The sons and daughters of beautiful people.

Bring it back to

US: the un-impossibilities

Now is the time,

the test while there is something to save (other than our lives).^{xi}

Gabriel Okara writes in the poem, ‘The Mystic Drum’ he says,

“The mystic drum in my inside

and fishes danced in the rivers

and men and women danced on land

to the rhythm of my drum”

.....

Then, then I packed my mystic drum

and turned away; never to beat so loud any more.

The drum in African poetry, generally stands for the spiritual pulse of traditional African life. The poet asserts that first, as the drum beat inside him, fishes danced in the rivers and men and women danced on the land to the rhythm of the drum. But standing behind the tree, there stood an outsider who smiled with an air of indifference at the richness of their culture. However, the drum still continued to beat rippling the air with quickened tempo compelling the dead to dance and sing with their shadows. The ancestral glory overpowers other considerations. So powerful is the mystic drum, that it brings back even the dead alive. The rhythm of the drum is the aching for an ideal Nigerian State of harmony.

The outsider still continued to smile at the culture from the distance. The outsider stands for Western Imperialism that has looked down upon anything Eastern, non-Western, alien and therefore, ‘incomprehensible for their own good’ as ‘The Other’. The African culture is so much in tune with nature that the mystic drum invokes the sun, the moon, the river gods and the trees

began to dance. The gap finally gets bridged between humanity and nature, the animal world and human world, the hydrosphere and lithosphere that fishes turned men, and men became fishes. But later as the mystic drum stopped beating, men became men, and fishes became fishes. Life now became dry, logical and mechanical thanks to Western Scientific Imperialism and everything found its place. Leaves started sprouting on the woman; she started to flourish on the land. Gradually her roots struck the ground. Spreading a kind of parched rationalism, smoke issued from her lips and her lips parted in smile. The term 'smoke' is also suggestive of the pollution caused by industrialization, and also the clouding of morals. Ultimately, the speaker was left in 'belching darkness', completely cut off from the heart of his culture, and he packed off the mystic drum not to beat loudly anymore. The 'belching darkness' alludes to the futility and hollowness of the imposed existence.

The outsider, at first, only has an objective role standing behind a tree. Eventually, she intrudes and tries to weave their spiritual life. The 'leaves around her waist' are very much suggestive of Eve who adorned the same after losing her innocence. Leaves stop growing on the trees but only sprout on her head signifying 'deforestation.' The refrain reminds us again and again, that this Eve turns out to be the eve of Nigerian damnation.

Okara mentions in one of his interviews that "The Mystic Drum" is essentially a love poem: "This was a lady I loved. And she coyly was not responding directly, but I adored her. Her demeanor seemed to mask her true feelings; at a distance, she seemed adoring, however, on coming closer, she was, after all, not what she seemed." This lady may stand as an emblem that represents the lure of Western life; how it seemed appealing at first but later came across as distasteful to the poet. Black poetry became the weapon of social ramification. It rejected the white middle-class values and academic poetic standards. Bernard Bell describes in these words:

"Black art gives evidence of an unprecedented revolutionary fervour and commitment to the concept of art as weapon. In fact, much of the power of contemporary Afro- American poetry is generated by a rejection of white middle class values and academic poetic standards. Looking neither to white critics nor posterity for fame, the poets of the sixties raise their voice in song for black masses."^{xii}

Thus, for the Black literary artist substance became more important than form. The social concern gets the upper edge in comparison with the aesthetic. Lee in particular lays more emphasis on Black beauty, Black identity and Black Revolution. In introduction to 'Crowells Handbook of Contemporary American poetry' he attempts to established the link between politics and black vision:

"Unlike most contemporary white poets are profoundly conscious of forces that ironically protect us from the empty patterns of intellectual gentility and individualism, and at the same time keep our approach fresh. we constantly mean our poems to reach the world."^{xiii}

In this contact Lee has to offer the following advice to all young Black poets: "The only thing I say to most young black writers is, never forget who you are, that you are not a writer who happens to be Black but you are a Black person who writes, I think that is the key."^{xiv}

Another aspect of black poetics is the rejection of white criticism in all aspects. Black critics must be trained and prepared to do justice to Black literature. Gwendolyn Brooks explains this in the following words:

"There are black critics for the curative assessment of black literature. Thoughtful Blacks understand that white critics, even those with the best will strictest objectivity ...cannot

judge black works with the unfastidious intuition and empathy of black intimate with both substance and essence of life involved.^{xv}

Lee wishes to see Black poetry with a completely different taste with regard to form, structure, language, and rhythm. He rejects standard English, its punctuation marks, grammar, etc. He distinguishes Black poetry from white poetry thus:

“Black poetry in its purest form is dramatically opposed to white poetry. whereas black poets deal in the concrete rather than abstract. Black poetry moves to define and legitimize the Negroes reality out of that which they the unpeople consider real.^{xvi}”

Lee is quite critical of the Black who talk black and sleep white. He wants that with white inclination one cannot be Black. Lee goes a step forward in his poetic language setting when he jumbles up words extends, extend a particular word into a long line, divides a word into several broken parts and lengthen a word in sound by adding innumerable a a a a a a... that perhaps reflects the life styles of the black. In addition to that jazz, rhythm plays a prominent part in black poetry as some poems are meant to be sung. While rejecting standard English advocates for black language. It is complained by white critics that Lee’s language is unconventional and non-communicative but Lee clarifies this point as follows:

“By Black language we mean a language which is not recorded in a dictionary--- a language as changeable as a Black who left the South.”^{xvii}

Methodology: The methodology used for this research paper is descriptive and participation method. The main aim of research is to find out the truth which is hidden and which must have been discovered but not well expressed.

Findings: Black poets reveal the spirit of endurance and courage that inspired young minds to dare, to dream even in circumstances that hardly let them survive. Their love for culture, ethnicity, identity, culture self and the nation and devotion for motherland is for the betterment of humanity. The common objects of nature and human life are glorified and coloured in the radiance of romantic imagination endowed with boundless love for liberty, fraternity and equality. Humanists find out spiritual significance in the commonplace activities of life.

Suggestions: Black writings should not be judged only on the the bases of one’s race, region, religion, caste, creed, colour ethnic love and performance but in the spirit of universalism. one should not be termed typically for the region and cultural inclination that becomes a threat for lack of alteration, dynamism, language, innovative ideas, thought provoking ideas, education and spirit to compete and spirit to change.

Conclusion: The Black poets emphasise that there is requirement to courage, to survive, to endure, to fight for survival and the assertion of the ethnic consciousness through literature. One fights to make the society aware of its hidden, dark truths that need to be confronted in order to transform into a better future. We are social animal and interacts with persons of socio-economical-moral-cultural-ethical-religious and behavioural values. Man, the best of all-beautiful creatures, proves his excellence by being humane in his approach to God. In short, rejecting the Afro- American style of writing the Black poetics encourages Black rhythm, Black

language, Black theme, Black treatment of the subject matter and aims at creating consciousness among the Black to stand united against the unpeople and their oppressive tradition.

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