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Racial Bias And Discrimination: A Study Of Omar Tyree's Leslie And Ishmael Scott Reed's The Last Days Of Louisiana Red

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Abstract

Racial politics and discrimination is one of the major threatening issues African-Americans are facing both in the past and present scenario. They are one among the lower class people in the United States. Their forefathers were brought to America during the era of slavery. After eradication of slavery system, the economically weaker community preferred staying in America. After certain names of disrepute the term "Afro-Americans" is fixed to address them. Racism leads to discrimination, a treatment under which a particular group of people are ill-treated or treated badly by upper class people. Racial politics prevents them in getting all the better opportunities (sometimes even a basic opportunity). This can cause a lifetime loss to the minority community.

This paper aims at accentuating the negative results the major issue (Racism) causes. In terms of analyzing the issue of racial discrimination the novels of leading African-American novelists have been taken for this study. They are Ishmael Scott Reed's *The Last Days of Louisiana Red* (2009) and Omar Tyree's *Leslie* (2006). The paper focuses on analyzing this major issue in the views of critics and major theorists.

Key Words: Racism, Racial Politics, African Americans, Voodoo, Discrimination, Western Civilization

INTRODUCTION

Afro-Americans are encountering serious issues in their day to day life in America. One of their ordeals is certainly their issue of racial discrimination. The question of Who they are? What they are?. Discrimination based on one's color, nationality, and ethnicity is racism. It means an unfair treatment of a particular race due to their inferior position in the society. Afro-Americans have become the victims of racism under which they are ill-treated or treated badly by whites. There is no importance given to their

feelings. In short such incidents show that they are not considered as humans. This minority group is left in the lurch by the majority as inferior to them. Like the words of Thomas Jefferson, third president of America had written in one of his notes titled Notes on the States of Virginia. The following words were entered by him “Blacks, whether originally a distinct race, or made distinct by time and circumstances, are inferior to the whites in the endowments both body and mind.” (Jefferson XIV)

This paper focuses on examining and analyzing the issue of racism and racial politics as portrayed in the select novels Leslie by Omar Tyree and Ishmael Scott Reed’s *The Last Days of Louisiana Red*. Like already known writing is the expression and outcome of a writer’s own experience on a particular thing. They prefer to choose their subject either from their personal experience or other’s experience. Similarly many Afro-American writers have expressed their terrible racial encounters in America in the form of their writings. Color discrimination is a political trauma in the well-developed United States. Every Afro-American has to face this coercion which is inevitable.

The most distressing and abominable thing to them is the trend of calling them by different names. They are called as Negroes, Blacks, Nigga and Coloured. The term “nigga” was used in the southern part of the United States. Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary defines the word “nigger” as a very offensive word for a black person. Even in the select novels characters used to call fellow blacks as nigga. Finally the term “African Americans” has been officially decided by people to refer or call them.

Racial bias is the most harmful disease that imposes partiality due to one’s color, ethnicity. It refers to any harsh behaviour or vulgar activities of the majority towards the minority. Colored people become a majority group when it comes with racial politics. They are made as inferior only because of their impoverished background. The contempt countenance of the common people at black people really harms them. It is surely one of their worst experiences. Black feminists and critics have framed their own ideologies and concept to define racism. One of the best outcomes is the introduction of Critical Race Theory (CRT). It helps everyone to understand racism. Derrick Bell, Alan Freeman, Kimberley Williams Crenshaw and Richard Delgado were the early founders of the theory. Derrick Bell is a visiting professor of law at New York University, who is considered as fatherly figure in the CRT movement.

The foundation of the Critical Race Theory is based on four major ideas comprised by the earlier scholars like Derrick Bell. First of all CRT theorists appraise racism as ordinary not aberrational. They mean to say that one cannot avoid racism it is commonly identified in any society. They advocate revisionism, which means an idea of revisiting the history of America. They consider racism and race are the products of a society. Eventually they strongly recommend in describing one’s racial experience through stories. As a result of people’s persistent thought the term ‘racial discrimination’ was coined which refers to the unfair treatment of black people by the superior group. Patricia Hill Collins, in her book defines racial discrimination as follows: “Racism, segregation operates by using race as a visible marker of group membership that enables the state to relate Black people to inferior schools, housing, and jobs. Racial segregation relies on enforced membership in a visible community in which racial discrimination is tolerated.” (Collins 95)

The ill-effects of racial discrimination have changed the life of Afro-Americans including the writers. Most of the Afro-American writers are using their writings as a tool to express and highlight this issue in the form their protagonists and antagonists. A novel is a narration of the past through the characters presented in it. Sometimes it is a record of some real historical events in the past. Novels

authored by African Americans most probably depict the significant role racism plays in their day-to-day lives. In short those novels exactly reveal the influence of racism in their families and how it can change the living style. The novels of the select authors Tyree and Reed portray the negative results racial politics produces. Their protagonists agonize over the pernicious racial discrimination particularly slavery. The same opinion has been recorded by Cheryl Wall in his book titled *Worrying the Line: Black Women Writers, Lineage, and Literary Tradition*. He points out that “Many African American-authored novels contain rich depictions of African American family life, and many of those novels depict the influence of racism on African American family life.” (Wall 8)

Omar Tyree and Ishmael Reed, African-Americans by birth are one of the leading twenty first century novelists whose novels are depiction of black people’s problems in America. Tyree suits as a right person for an overview made by Cheryl Walls, a literary critic on African American literature. She demonstrated in one of her books over Tyree’s writings. She agrees that Tyree indicates the portrayal of his people’s sufferings. Leslie suits fit for this idea which delineates the pity state of Leslie. She was a college girl and faced all the challenges because she was an African-American. Her family became poverty-stricken when her Haitian father’s ambition was destroyed. He dreamt of setting up a restaurant in New Orleans. Unfortunately no white landowners came forward to sell their lands to a black American. In the earlier part of the novel the readers came to know her family members were living in different places after the tragic event happen to her father.

Ishmael Reed is known for his excellent satires whose aim is to introduce new black aesthetic movement. Both the novelists describe about the voodoo practices. The issue of racial politics is a similar challenging problem they prefer mentioning in their novels. His novel *The Last Days of Louisiana Red* depicts the slavery era and black people’s struggle to escape from slavery. The novel’s central character Ed Yelling was trying to find a remedy to cure the disease (racism). He was an American Negro and a fugitive slave who travelled to Berkeley with his strong intention to free all the people from Louisiana Red. He aimed at encouraging the blacks to liberate themselves from the life of bondage, sufferings, disturbances and disorder. Reed believes that racism is an outcome of ignorance and greed. Reed has set Ed as a Voodoo therapist in order to free slaves from this evil disease of slavery. Ed represents the voice of the novelist who composed the following words: Ed wanted to free the worker from Louisiana Red because Louisiana Red was killing the worker. It would be a holy occupation to give Louisiana Red the Business, Ed thought. Ed thought about these things a lot. Ed was a thinker and a worker (7- 8).

Laetitia, Leslie’s sister married a man whom she loved. They have two children afterwards she became aware of her husband’s illegal relationship with a woman. She expressed her extreme worries about her life and longed to get her husband back. She planned to kill the girl whom her husband was being in live with by Voodoo practices. Americans regard Voodoo practices as evil. Since she was an Afro-American she did not hesitate to execute her plan of taking revenge with the support of Voodoo. Once she conveyed her plan to Leslie but she objected the very idea denying that her sister did not know anything about it. Laetitia was very strong in her decision and she went to see the priestess of Voodoo. The hopeless condition of her sister really worried Leslie that she killed the girl by herself.

The protagonist Ed had been blessed with a family of five members including his wife and four children. There was a contradiction within the family that separated them with their principles. Ed’s way of thinking was very broad and wanted to free the people from slavery. On the other hand his wife and

two children did not agree with them. He was satisfied with elder son Wolf and third daughter Sister. Street and Minnie did not travel in the same boat and their ideology was different from their father. The youngest daughter Minnie developed wrong opinion about her father's business Solid Gumbo Works. Nanny Lisa took a vital role in inculcating the opposite opinion. Maxwell, a white man was the antagonist who involved in secret crimes. He symbolized the whites who did not want slavery to be eradicated from the United States.

Some series of serious elements of racial issues Tyree recounts in the novel. The protagonist of the novel Leslie faced this issue that transformed an innocent girl into a murderer. She encountered this serious nuisance wherever she went. She felt afflicted when some boys insulted her while travelling in a bus. They teased her by referring to her skin color. One of them suddenly called her "blacked one", which affected her mind a lot. She was helpless as she did not know how to answer or face them individually. Realizing her weakness she simply kept herself quiet. Broken-hearted she had this thought in her mind that "Calling a girl black in the ghetto was the worst sin in the Bible! The color black had become the most terrible thing in the world for a woman to be" (Tyree 29). The kind of incident made to her to develop abominated thoughts towards others particularly whites.

In the same way Reed highlights the flaw of blacks that remained as a challenge and prevented them to get liberated from slavery. The major issue was riots within the community black-on-black crime. The disunity and competition among them averted the growth. Novels of Reed show his clear concern for a cold war within the community rather than to insist cultural and religious warfare. Papa LaBas, a black professor was the victim of racial discrimination. He was dishonoured by the white students in many occasions. LaBas asked a question to a white student for which he did not answer and simply went away from the class. This attitude shows the pathetic condition of African Americans. In short Papa LaBas stood as representative who reflected the situations of the black teachers in the Western schools: LaBas pushed a piece of paper with the lines in question written on it through the bars (Reed 38) As rightly pointed out by Masoud Jamali, a Professor of Social Policy in his book *Racial Discrimination* popularized the term 'institutional agentic discrimination'. His definition of discrimination helps to take conclusion how the institutional division policy categorize the groups. He recorded his observation as follows:

"Discrimination is a process of noting, perceiving, constructing a difference or distinction between members of an in-group ('Us') and members of an out-group ('Them') and deciding that these differences should qualify for differential treatment and justify the exclusion of the out-groups." (Jamali 244)

Leslie became a misanthropist by her continuous bitter racial encounters. She openly express her hatred thoughts and tried to find fault with everyone. In one such occasion a college girl Kaiyah Jefferson came to meet her. She was asked to collect data about black people by her professor. She wanted to have a personal interview with Leslie and her roommates. Jefferson was able to interview everyone except Leslie. She narrated this to her professor and he wanted her to interview Leslie. Again and again she came and approached Leslie once she grew upset and shouted at her. She blamed her and compared poor black people to Frankenstein, a novel by Mary Shelley. She registered her words as follows:

"Do you realize how white people look at us when we're poor? They don't look at us as human anymore. We become..... Frankenstein or something. Then they act as if something's special about us being smart, and knowing what's going on in the world. As

if we're not supposed to have brains and feelings anymore. And now you're just supposed to take whatever the hell they give you. (Tyree 222)

The racist Maxwell is a symbol of enemies of the president Lincoln who remains as a strong political figure in demolishing the inhumane system. He wanted bring back Street to America not as a slave but to control him. Rather he forced him to make a revisit to America. He did not consider his words of satisfaction being there in his country Africa.

The lowered community mostly involve themselves in doubting the acts of whites. This is because of the negative complex they develop as a result of their pity state in the United States. They blindly conclude that each and every activity of the whites has racist thoughts. It seems they aim at finding fault with all the whites, (including the supporters) concluding strongly that there will be a racist influence in their activities. In the novel *Leslie*; her roommates Yula and Ayanna once had a dispute over the topic of slavery and reparations while returning to home. They entered in with a serious discussion on the topic. By seeing them arguing seriously Leslie interfered and wanted to know what they were discussing about. When they let her know the hot topic she grew upset and reacted very seriously. Her response surely expressed her bitter experience of racism. She replied to them as following:

“it is racist. Everything America does is racist. When they hire you for a job, its racist. When they fire you, its racist. When they deny you a loan, its racist. When they give a loan, its racist. And when they lock you up, its racist. Even when they let you go, its racist. You know why? because America always wants to know if you're black or if you're white. And that's racist, a preference or a prejudice for a particular race. And they damn sure have one on everything that they do!. (Tyree 268)

As a result of her inferior thoughts Leslie was forced to involve in some horror acts. Such circumstances made her to imagine herself as a priestess in voodoo religion that she can perform some magic. She started killing some of the characters. The turn began with a girl who had illegal relationship with her sister Laetitia's husband followed by a general. At last the police force arrested her while she was fighting with her roommates. Gilbert, a black policeman was appointed to enquire the case of Leslie. His appointment was made as a result of the general opinion. According to the idea it would be a bit easy for the officers to get the fact with the appointment of a black officer.

They believed that Gilbert was a right person to deal her. They hoped that Leslie would narrate everything to him since he was also an Afro-American. His enquiry was indeed unfeigned; still it was questioned by the officials. They doubted his sincerity however he tried to maintain everything genuinely. Some of the officers shared their opinion that he was trying to save her because she belonged to his community. He was emotionally hurt when he accidentally listened to his officials' talk. He had the following thought in his mind when his officials questioned his honesty, “No matter how much I prove myself, they still feel a need to test me. And I'm not saying that I'm a perfect investigator by any stretch of the imagination, but neither are they”. (363)

In contrary to their judgment he was a man of irreproachable whose genuineness should never be questioned. The reality was; Leslie blamed him when he was making his enquiry seriously. She compared him to the protagonist Uncle Tom in Harriet's novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. She got exasperated when he pointed out that she was a suspected murderer and responded to him with the following expression: “And

you're an Uncle Tom here to capture a runaway slave for your master". (Tyree 373). Hence Tyree concludes the novel with the punishment given to Leslie for her crimes. The altruistic efforts (to save her from punishment) of her sister and her father became futile. Like the popular saying under law everyone is equal, Leslie cannot escape from the retribution. As of the law she had committed a mistake and had to accept the punishment. Moreover she was from one of the minority groups that never permit her to getaway from law.

It is finally doubtless that racism and racial politics can put down the life of its victims. The only way to avoid these issues is when we human beings change our mind and accept the reality that everyone is equal under the view of God. Once people's view changes the world will be the happiest place for Afro-Americans and all the other minorities.

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