



'I, TOO, AM AMERICA': THE PROTESTORS' SELF-CONCEPTION IN AFRICAN-AMERICAN LITERATURE

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ABSTRACT:

African-American literature deals with the experiences of African-Americans who migrated in search of a better life. Protest is a major theme in a number of works by African-American writers. Protest Literature refers to works that address real-life socio-cultural, political issues and also express revolt or objection against them. It is also concerned with the sufferings of African-Americans due to various forms of oppression such as racial segregation and class-based divisions. After World War II many African-American writers raised their voices against the inhumanity of slavery and racial discrimination. During the war they responded to these atrocities through several forms of protest writing. Their works provide us an insight into the self-conception of the "Protestor".

This paper focuses on protest in the fiction of Richard Wright, Zora Neale Hurston in addition to the poems of Langston Hughes, Gwendolyn Brooks and Claude McKay.

KEYWORDS: African-American, protest, racial.

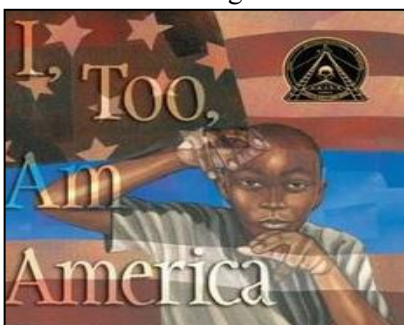
INTRODUCTION:-

As literature is basically product of social, political and economical forces, a writer always tries to depict his experiences in his writing. The history of black people who migrated to America has been a history of cruelty, slavery, racism and oppression. So through African-American literature, black writers raised voices of protest against white people. In these works we find a lot of violence which is used as a weapon of protest. The first two decades of the 20th century, rampant racial injustices, led by Grisly Lynching, gave a strong impetus to protest writing. By the time the United States entered World War I in 1917, Harlem was well on its way to becoming a historical place and poets like Langston Hughes, Gwendolyn Brooks and Claude MacKay and novelists like Richard Wright and Zora Neale Hurston etc. shouldered the Afro-American cause.

A protest novel is defined as the effects of social problems, such as race and class, that are dramatized by the characters in a story. ("American Protest Literature." American Protest Literature - Zoe Trodd | Harvard University Press)

Richard Wright's *Native son* (1940) is considered as the first novel in the history of African American literature which deals with social realism. James Baldwin denounced Richard Wright's novel *Native Son* as a protest novel. Bigger Thomas, the protagonist of the novel, cannot transcend blackness and his blackness is as ugly and debased thing as ever. Bigger Thomas is a rapist and a murderer motivated only by fear and hate. He is the black apewho reigns supreme in the white imagination.

There are some other examples in which elements of protest novel are used in Richard Wright's short story called "The Man Who Was Almost a Man". In the story, the main character named Dave, who



is an African-American child working on a plantation during the 1930s in the rural South, buys a gun with borrowed money from his mother and hides it from her so he can practice shooting. Dave produces a thought in his mind, "Could kill a man with a gun like this. Kill anybody, black or white" (Wright 6).

Dave protests against the adults by running away on a train that will take him to a place, probably a city, where he can become a "man" by living on his own and by supporting himself.

Zora Neal Hurston was an impressive novelist. Her best-known work, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, was published in 1937. Written after a failed love affair, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* focuses on a middle class and middle-aged woman's quest for fulfillment in an oppressive society. The novel depicts an African-American woman's struggle to assert herself in rural Florida in the early 20th century. Janie Crawford, the female protagonist faces three marriages in her life and her experience with her three husbands gives Janie the maturity to lead her life independently without the company of a man."

PROTEST IN LANGSTON HUGHES POEMS:-

Greatest poet among African American poet is Langston Hughes. Admiring his predecessors and contemporaries, Hughes carved out a distinctive place for himself. He replaced MacKay's formalism for the free verse of Walt Whitman and Carl Sandburg. He also found ways to write in an Afro-American street vernacular that registers a much wider and deeper spectrum of mood and experiences than Dunbar was able to represent in his poetry. As against Cullen's traditional forms and lyricism informed by the work of John Keats, Hughes embraced the rank and file of black America and proudly identified himself with his race and antecedents.

The invocation of America is important, for Hughes is expressing his belief that African-Americans are a valuable part of the country's population and that he foresees a racially equal society in the near future. Langston Hughes inherited cultural and ethnic qualities of the black community and gave, with pride and gusto, an effective expression to those inherited tendencies of black community in his art. He believed in the black race and affirmed it in the United States through inherited blues, and jazz and spirituals. Inspired by the articulation of freedom and equality along with brotherhood by the earlier black writers, Hughes shaped his sensibility under their influence. He is one of the rungs of that ladder of writers which voiced protest against slavery and dehumanization of blacks in the United States. He is one of those pioneers who reflected the Afro-Americans suppressed feelings, impressions and urges through literature. He expressed the black Americans' aspirations to be free, to get equality, to get recognition for black art and culture, black aesthetic, etc.

In his poem "I Too Sing America",
 Tomorrow,
 I'll be at the table
 When company comes.
 Nobody'll dare
 Say to me,
 "Eat in the kitchen,"
 Then.
 Besides,
 They'll see how beautiful I am
 And be ashamed—
 I, too, am America. (Hughes, Langston. *Selected Poems of Langston Hughes*. Vintage.)

The speaker does not languish in despair. He proclaims that "tomorrow he will join the others at the table and no one will dare send him back to the kitchen. Not only that, but the "others" will see "how beautiful" (Hughes, Langston, et al. "Langston Hughes: Poems 'I, Too' Summary and Analysis." *GradeSaver: Getting You the Grade*, www.gradesaver.com/langston-hughes-poems/study-guide/summary-i-too.) the speaker is and will therefore feel ashamed. This statement is extremely hopeful and optimistic. The speaker demonstrates a heightened sense of self and proclaims his ambition to assert his legitimacy as an American citizen and as a man.

In "Aunt Sue's Stories" Hughes has sympathetically portrayed the skin color issue of racism against Black slaves Working in the hot sun,

And black slaves
Walking in the dewy night,
And black slaves
Singing sorrow songs on the banks of a mighty rive
Mingle themselves softly."(Hughes, Langston. *Selected Poems of Langston Hughes*. Vintage.)

The notable thing in this poem the photographic portrayal of the pathetic Negro slaves "Working in the hot sun", "Walking in the dewy night", "Singing sorrow songs" of their misery. Not only have they been bearing the suffering and pain of their slavery, their soul has also been wounded. It is all because of their black skin that the White Americans have tried to enslave them. Here, Hughes portrays the sense of loneliness, helplessness and desolation of the poor slaves.

Claude McKay, who was born in Jamaica in 1889, wrote about social and political concerns from his perspective as a black man in the United States. "If we must die" is a political protest against racial oppression, ironically constructed in the form of a Shakespearian love sonnet. If we must die is a political protest against the racial oppression stimulated by a series of violent and blood racial conflicts producing rioting and police brutality, "If we must die" defiantly urges oppressed black people to stand up and fight against the white oppressors. Beneath the call for rebellion is a reminder of cherished values insurrection in America against those that would deny freedom and undermine one's self respect.

Gwendolyn Brooks was the first Afro-American to win the Pulitzer Prize for poetry and one of the nation's most prolific poets. She has always addressed a range of social problems of America.

Gwendolyn Brooks' "The Ballad of chocolate Mabbie" approaches the problem of Mabbie who was seven years old. Mabbie was standing near the grammar school gates, for Willie Boone who is a white man to whom she proposes her love. Mabbie got away from the chocolate bar and envisaged her life to be heaven. Mabbie is a black girl who visualizes the gates of the grammar school to be pearly gates. Due to the rejection of Willie Boone, she was disappointed and felt desertion and loneliness. Her infantile love makes her cool and happy even in the History class. "It was Mabbie without the grammar school gates

Waiting for Willie Boone.
Half hour after the closing bell!
He would surely be coming soon.
Oh! Warm is the waiting for joy, my dears!

And it cannot be too long."(Brooks, Gwendolyn. *Selected Poems of Gwendolyn Brooks*. Harper & Row, 1963)

The long wait even after the school bell was enjoyable since she awaits his arrival. Mabbie was crushed aside by color discrimination, which results in the failure of love. She had been living with white people from childhood leading to disillusion. Gwendolyn Brooks empathizes with Mabbie, which ignites the shock value. The poet perceives her pain and radiates the shock value to the community. The poet has the thirst to rectify the social problems.

Another poem, "Jessie Mitchell's Mother" (The Bean Easter) is an unusual treatment of the black-tan-theme, which depicts an unnatural hatred between a mother and daughter spawned by color differences. The most morbid of these poems, is to suggest the abysmal depths to which color feeling can influence a human soul. Jessie, who is dark, peeks at her dying mother and considers bitterly.

"My Mother is jelly-hearted and she has a brain of Jelly:
Sweet, quiver-soft, irrelevant, not essential.
Only a habit would cry if she should die". (Brooks, Gwendolyn. *Selected Poems of Gwendolyn Brooks*. Harper & Row, 1963 P.85)

Jessy grizzles for her mother's death, as a habit. It is highly unimaginable to view the mental frame of Jessie about her mother's attitude in her grown up stage. Even an orphan daughter may feel for her unseen mother. However, no filial bondage connects these two. She reciprocates not even as a third person. Jessy suffers a lot because of her mother's feeling about the black. Jessy's life may be meaningless even with the presence of her mother. The poet concocts empathy over Mabbie and tries to give shock value to the nation.

CONCLUSION

Through the works of given African-American writers , we can see how they tried to, depict the daily struggle of people with the white forces, protest writing were able to show the world the realm of the oppression that they live in. The protest literature came to rescue the voices of many oppressed, to protest against the tyranny. Some end with an eventual hope for the future, others with complete surrender of the black people to their own fate.

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