

THE QUEST FOR AFRICAN RENAISSANCE IN JOHN HENRIK CLARK'S 'THE BOY WHO PAINTED CHRIST BLACK'

Raisun Mathew, Assistant Professor, Department of English, RU College of Management & Technology, Kochi, Kerala Affiliated to Mahatma Gandhi University, Kottayam, Kerala

Abstract:

Exceptionally brilliant in exposing the ethnocentrism of White colonizers who forced their ideology via culture onto the colonized land, the short story by John Henrik Clark opens the window to wide range of possibilities in the Ethnic studies of African-Americans and their quest for a self-reliant identity. An aesthetic attempt which seeks to maintain and highlight traditional African culture and sensibilities is seen in the short story in the way of representing the painting of Jesus Christ in an African ethnic cultural pattern. Traditional White ideology in focusing on a specific Western model is rejected by substituting it with an African model of Christ which provokes the ethnocentric hierarchy. This paper attempts to showcase ethnocentrism, the White ideology against the African-Americans that is expressed in the short story, and the counter reaction utilizing the attitude of countering for an identity on the backdrop of movements like Harlem Renaissance and Négritude. Cultural relativism explains why and how the Christ figure had a different identity to the African Americans. Adjusting and blindly accepting a dominant culture without projecting a self-reliant identity does not help in the progress of any ethnic community, rather the difference has to be sorted out to express their way of representation which helps to find a space among the divergent ideological identities.

Keywords: *Ethnic studies, ethnocentrism, cultural relativism, negritude, harlem renaissance.*

Of historically been decadent from African roots for slavery from 1619 onwards, the race of African Americans had been subjected to intense racial discrimination and subjugation for satisfying the American Dream of wealth for the settlers. Ships from different parts of Africa loaded with an incessant number of African slaves reached the ports of America. The highest number of manpower was dealt with west central Africa. As the northern states of America empowered themselves through urbanization and industrialization, the southern states relied on agriculture which demanded the rise in slavery. The American Civil war from 1861 to 1865 marked the full-fledged fight in the name of slaves and slavery. Though the rights and freedom were granted to the black African-Americans, recognizing them as equal citizens with equal priority along with the White settlers of America, the group of black African Americans is still under threat of racial and ethnic attacks related to their colour and origin. Despite been recognized as equal citizens, the black citizens face discrimination. John Henrik Clark's '*The Boy Who Painted Christ Black*' doesn't end its discussion into its aesthetic pleasure of reading. It points out the past, and the present of a community haunted by their historical background of ethnic origin. Aaron Crawford, the only black-skinned student of Muskogee County School represented as "school-for coloured children. Everybody even remotely connected with the school knew this" (Clark). An informal separation in the difference of skin colour itself initiates the clue for a discrimination hidden in the memory of their past. Published in 1948, John Clark would have not thought out of the box to imagine an African American President for the United States of America that got accomplished with Barack Obama in 2009. If so, "Once I heard her say: If he were white he might, someday, become President" (Clark) reference could have been omitted. These two references show how discriminated was the life of a black skinned African American to live his life

among the dominant White. There are references to his physique to show that it differed entirely from the majority White. A 'Centrality' towards the dominant and powerful part of the binary contrast in case of white/black difference existed in the community and culture in where Aaron studied.

Though black skinned, Aaron was accepted among them for his variety of talent in drawing and painting. The hardworking nature of the African American community for which they were appreciated and had demands reflects in the talent of Aaron who was unique from the other white-skinned students. The community of African Americans had demand for their unique talents which itself ended up in the fate of being a slave in the same way how Aaron, whose talent was appreciated got into troubles with the authorities on the same matter. While presenting the controversial painting of the Christ in black, the teacher asks Aaron about the inspiring history behind the painting. The innocent artist speaks the truth that his uncle who lives in New York who teaches classes in Negro History at the Y.M.C.A, while visiting his home told about many great black folks who have made history. Aaron continued:

“He said black folks were once the most powerful people on earth. When I asked him about Christ, he said no one ever proved whether he was black or white. Somehow a feeling came over me that he was a black man because he was so kind and forgiving, kinder than I have ever seen white people be. So, when I painted his picture I couldn't help but paint it as I thought it was” (Clark).

The narrator says he noticed the picture close and found it different from the one which hung in the wall where he studied his Sunday school. He details much more relatively that the eyes of Christ closely resembled the eyes of Aaron's father, the deacon of the local Baptist Church who had deep-set and sad eyes. It was more like a helpless Negro, pleading silently for mercy. Every emotion of an African American is exposed through the writing, referring to the painting drawn by Aaron. The painting of Aaron was different from the usual and widely accepted paintings of Jesus Christ, the white and fair skinned man for the white people. Aaron had painted the figure of Christ with a dark complexion, which he could relate to his culture and people that he believed through the words of his Uncle. His uncle related Christ to a black man who is kind and forgiving, unlike the Whites who torture them. Aaron related his culture of living and ethnic complexion into the Christ figure finding those identities more suitable to the figure in Christ in black than for the white Christ of the white people. Moreover, he even related the eyes of the Christ to that of his fathers, which certainly ended up being a Negro pleading silently for mercy. The picture of Christ in black reflected the life situation of the black community that Aaron saw around him. He could not relate the kind-hearted Jesus Christ to the White people as they differed entirely according to his experience.

This lack of kindness and forgiving was true according to him when he dealt the issue of the painting of the Christ in black with Professor Daniel, the White supervisor who visited the school. Seeing the painting, Professor Daniel demanded sharply “Who painted this sacrilegious nonsense” (Clark). Efforts to establish an African stand was taken by Aaron and the black Principal of the school, George Du Vault who boldly tried to convince the Professor about the essence of the painting. A space to find their identity before the White Professor was done by the black Principal when he said:

“I encouraged the boy in painting that picture,” he said firmly. “And it was with my permission that he brought the picture into this school. I don't think the boy is so far wrong in painting Christ black. The artists of all other races have painted whatsoever God they worship to resemble themselves. I see no reason why we should be immune from that privilege. After all, Christ was born in that part of the world that had always been predominantly populated by coloured people. There is a strong possibility that he could have been a Negro” (Clark).

The Principal seeks to maintain and uphold traditional African culture and sensibilities like how the writers after 1930s through the Négritude movement tried to highlight the aesthetic importance of the African culture through their works. Négritude is a term coined by Aime Césaire, a French poet and

dramatist from Martinique and the Senegalese poet and politician, L. S Senghor (Cuddon 464). Négritude also claimed a distinctive African view of timespace relationships, ethics, metaphysics, and an aesthetics which separated itself from the supposedly 'universal' values of European taste and style. Wole Soyinka makes precisely this point in his analysis of Négritude in *Myth, Literature and the African World*:

Négritude, having laid its cornerstone on a European intellectual tradition, however bravely it tried to reverse its concepts (leaving its tenets untouched), was a foundling deserving to be drawn into, nay, even considered a case for benign adoption by European ideological interests (qtd. Ashcroft et. al).

A form of Négritude is expressed in the story in explaining to convince the White Professor about the richness and importance of black culture and blacks which has equal or more significance with other cultures in the world. The right of a black boy to represent Christ in black is supported by the black Principal.

Harlem Renaissance has to be remembered along with the Négritude movement as it was the corner stone for generating a conscious need for a recognizable identity for the community. It is the literary and cultural movement among black Americans which flourished from early in the 1920s to the 1930s. It was also called the 'New Negro Movement' or 'Negro Renaissance'. It emphasised the African culture and heritage of American blacks (Cuddon 325). The Black Arts Movement that came in the mid-1960s to the mid-1970s aimed of helping forge an independent black identity of their own distinct from the White model (80).

“Have you been teaching these children things like that?” he asked the Negro principal sternly (Clark). Ethnocentrism of a White colonial master is expressed through the words of the White Professor. Coined by the American political scientist William G Sumner in 1906, the word denotes the centrality of one's nation or ethnic group to the world by being culturally superior about one self-exhibiting stereotypes, prejudice and hostile attitude towards other nations or ethnic groups (Cuddon 256). The White as well as the European colonial giants has always been ethnocentric in their attitude towards other nations, especially to the ethnic groups they colonize. Forced imposition of western/ White ideologies into a different identity helped them to colonize the “other” culture. Euro centrism is not so far from Ethnocentrism. The assumption that Europe constitutes the centre of the world has played a major role in the perception and construction of other cultures. Edward Said, in his *Orientalism* explains:

European culture could manage and even produce the Orient politically, sociologically, militarily, ideologically, scientifically, and imaginatively during the post-enlightenment period. In the case of Asia, Orientalism can be discussed and analysed as the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient- dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it; in short, Orientalism as a western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient(Said 11).

The Ethnocentric approach in dealing with other cultures is also utilized in valuing the painting of the Christ in black. According to the White Professor, the figure of the Christ must satisfy to the aesthetic pleasure accepted to his culture and representation. To his culture, Christ has to be represented in white and not in black as Aaron represented. He felt it as a blasphemous act of being against the rule of the Church, indirectly the rule of the White dominant society. Though there is no specific picture of Jesus Christ, different ethnic societies represent the figure adaptable to their cultural acceptance. In the story, Cultural relativism is provided as a whole in the case of the picture. Cultural relativism, the principle that a person's beliefs, values, customs, and world view do not possess absolute or universal validity but are shaped by her particular cultural circumstances (Cuddon 175). What is considered morally good and accepted in one culture might be assessed quite differently in another. Implications of cultural relativism may extend into the spheres of epistemology, ethics, morality, linguistics, literature and politics. The cultural difference

influences the emotional and personal beliefs of a person in formulating his view on anything, including interpreting and finding the truth. As no culture can avail what is exactly the truth, every cultural interpretation has to be accepted to be multiple truth of the same. A forced imposition of a foreign culture onto one may harm the repressed in its development. In cultural imperialism, a ruling state or ethnic group will often impose its political ideals, cultural values, and often its own language, upon a subject group. It is not 'the White Man's Burden' (Kipling) to enlighten the black African Americans by forcefully imposing their culture on to the subjects, but it is their right to choose what fits to their culture and how to project it as their own.

“I have been teaching them that their race has produced great kings and queens as well as slaves and serfs,” the principal said. “The time is long overdue when we should let the world know that we erected and enjoyed the benefits of a splendid civilization long before the people of Europe had a written language” (Clark).

Words of the Principal reflect how ancient and significant is the culture of Africa and its people who later was captured by the Whites for their benefit. He spoke back to the power centres about his culture. The after effects of his words were severe. He resigned to join a small school as an art instructor and took Aaron along with him. Was the adamant stand for an identity of their own, a failure? No. It was a success as they had no broken heart when they stepped out. In the last lines of the short story, the narrator says:

I watched them until they were so far down the street that their forms had begun to blur. Even from this distance I could see they were still walking in brisk, dignified strides, like two people who had won some sort of victory (Clark).

The victory of having represented something significant in an African way was seen in their smile. Being an African origin has to be seen as a proud moment and finding relativity to one's own culture than of others has to be the primary step towards enlightenment. Cultural relativism as a whole engulfs the ethnocentric pattern in which the Négritude and counter reactions to represent own identity becomes the primary concern of a culture. Thus, an African model of Renaissance takes birth in the story with the Principal, George Du Vul and Aaron who leaves the colonial imprisonment of their culture by the Whites. They set out to find new space for them to express their thoughts and ideas in their own culture rather than being half-heartedly pointing on to the White ideology.

References

1. Ashcroft, Bill. Griffiths Gareih., Tiffin Helen. “Cutting the Ground”, *The Empire Writes BaCk: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures*. London and New York: Routledge, 2004.
2. Clark, John Henrik. “The Boy Who Painted Christ Black”, *African Negro Short Stories*, Hill and Wang, 1966.
3. Cuddon, J. A. *Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*. London: John Wiley & Sons Ltd, 1991.
4. Gerald D. Jaynes. *Encyclopedia of African American Society*, Volume 1, SAGE Publications Inc., 2005.
5. Kipling, Rudyard. "The White Man's Burden", *The Five Nations*, The Caxton Press, 1903.
6. Said, Edward W. *Orientalism*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1978.