

An Investigation of the Representation of Racial Prejudice and Discrimination in the American Literature

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Abstract

The research paper is an attempt to investigate about the difference in approaches towards the issues of racial prejudice and discrimination in American literature. Most of the works produced in America, belonging to any genre, contain the discourse surrounding race. This discourse has been shaped by the diversity of genres, authors and eras where it has taken place. The current research is performed by the textual analysis of two impactful literary works separated by almost a century to analyze the evolution in the discourse. Anti-Black racism has seen its worst days in the United States of America in the form of the practice of forced slavery and even after its official abolition, it continues to persist. Racial discrimination and racial prejudice are grim realities of American society that have been internalized as an abhorrent mindset and literature of every era reflects it.

Keywords: Racial prejudice, Racial discrimination, Slavery, American literature

1. Introduction

The history of the United States of America has permanently been stained with racial prejudice in the culture and society. Prejudice against the community of African Americans and racial discrimination has shaped a significant portion of their experience of America (Gutiérrez, 2020). Literature being a projection of life and its realities has become a source of an insight into the environment of racism. American literature spans many decades and the strain of racism has always found its way into it in every era. The fictional works of every era have successfully presented an accurate image of the type of racism that has persisted in this very age. An investigation is aimed at the crucial texts of different literary eras that have been true to the representation of racial discrimination in American society (Bonnert, 2018).

The root of racism is the mindset of discrimination based on skin colour or ethnicity. This discrimination has targeted Black people, the African American community, in the most brutal way possible. The earliest experiences of racial discrimination started with the forced slavery of African Americans who were brought to America to work on plantations owned by landlords (Trawalter, Bart-Plange, & Hoffman, 2020). Slavery was the most severe form of racial discrimination. Even after its abolition due to several human rights and civil rights movements, racial prejudice was never completely wiped out. The representation of this racial prejudice has been a concern for novelists and critics for the longest time. Sterling A. Brown calls it “The Negro Problem” of the United States of America (Gordon-Reed, 2018).

According to Morabia (2019), the problems attendant upon the presence of the Negro in America have engaged the attention of writers from the earliest years of our national literature.

The issue of racism is not just confined to the period of slavery; instead, it persists today. At times, white privilege is the primary factor that makes it go unnoticed in today's world. Racial prejudice might have taken a different form or name but victims still lose their lives in the modern era.

The evolution of anti-Black racism has undoubtedly not been towards a progressive outcome. The literature produced is evidence of this evolution through and through. Therefore, a literature review is produced to formulate the basis of the claim made in the thesis statement. For research, the researcher has selected two of the most important literary works produced on the topic. The choice of the texts has been based on the idea of diversity in approaches in the literature. Mark Twain, one of the authors, is a White individual and his work has been selected to investigate the issue of racial discrimination from the canonical point of view. Maya Angelou, the second author, is a member of the subjugated community of African Americans and her portrait of struggle against racism is a personal point of view. Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is a novel, a fictional narrative that was penned down in the aftermath of the civil war. Maya Angelou's "I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings" is an autobiography that was written around a century later than the first text (Wikman, 2020).

2. Literature review

American literature has been divided into some eras and ages that have produced works under the influence of the political and literary movements of the time. To produce a literature review that encompasses "the negro problem", it is necessary to look upon the literature produced in every era (Napierła, 2021).

The darkest time in the history of African Americans is the period of slavery in northern and southern states. This period has been termed as the Antebellum period that initiated at the start of the nineteenth century and lasted until the breakout of the civil war in 1865. The antebellum period has witnessed pro-slavery, as well as antislavery authors whose works were strong advocates of their ideas and the public's diverse perceptions (Graham, 2021).

In this regard, Brown recounts Richard Hildreth's 1836 novel "The Slave: or Memoir of Archy Moore" as the first work of fiction that can be registered as an antislavery narrative. Hildreth's novel has been said to pave the way for grander works like Harriet Beecher Stowe's 1852 novel, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*". A massively popular novel that adopted an antislavery approach and has been claimed to set the stage for Civil War (1865). Brown delineates that idea of antislavery in these words, "The antislavery literary crusade took its start from people whose sense of human dignity was shocked by the idea of men and women being held as property". The authors who championed the idea of antislavery were sensible enough to realize it as a problem of society. In this sense, the genre of novels and novelists has been the most influential voice of society. Boyd calls the "novelist as the one who functions within a society and who is both contaminated and compromised by that society" (Ganser, 2020).

Potyk and White highlight the issues of racial profiling, lack of opportunity, and prejudice for American citizens based upon their skin color that have been a part of American literature for so long. These notions are novel approaches that the critics of American literature have scavenged out of the

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previously considered harmless narratives. This discovery is a nod to the fact that literature is a lamp that illuminates society's dark corners and a mirror when held up to show its true face (Marable, 2020).

Blood has been extensively recorded and argued as an insidious and ubiquitous metaphor in creating a race in American history. However, our understanding of this metaphor has been essentially limited to its description of genetically defined biological essentialism. *Blood Work: Imagining Race in American Literature, 1890-1940*, by Shawn Salvant, demonstrates that the role of blood in the production of race in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was much broader than this single connotation. Salvant makes a strong case for "bracketing blood's biological links to study the more auxiliary notions through which such language configures racial difference (Charles & Fuentes-Rohwer, 2021).

Throughout history, the issue of racism has been a prevalent feature in most Black writing. As a result, a new genre of literature known as Black American Literature or African American Literature in America emerged. The fundamental purpose of this subgenre of literature is to change the Black man's negative perception and culture (Thomas, 2021).

Black women fought a two-front battle since they were subjected to both racial prejudice and sexual assault by white masters and Black males. Slave women of African descent were depicted as animals and whores. Intersexuality, according to African American scholar, critic, and writer Henry Louis Gates Jr., is "integral to the African American literary heritage." Because writers have a predisposition to read and adapt other writers' work, he emphasizes the similarities of African-American literature, particularly genre forms and language models that fall under these traditions (Ulbrich & Wintermute, 2018).

As a result, repetition, or the thorough analysis of past cultural material, is portrayed in the African American literary tradition's signifying process (Ulbrich & Wintermute, 2018).

3. Research methodology

The current research article is an attempt to investigate the representation of racial discrimination and racial prejudice in American society as reflected through its literature. The research is to be performed through the lens of Social Criticism as the purpose is to identify the presence of racism and associated abominations in society. Two of the most impactful works have been selected as primary texts that have been written almost a century apart and give an accurate account of their time. As the literary analysis has been aimed at American literature, the selection of the texts has been kept diverse. Out of the selected texts, one is a novel, a fictional narrative written by a White male author. The other primary text is an autobiographical narrative that a Black female author has written. Thematic analysis has been aimed at the selected literary works to analyze the recurrent themes of racism in the narratives. A thorough textual analysis has been performed to understand the representation of anti-Black racism in the selected literary works.

4. Textual Analysis

The analysis of American literature is to be performed on famous works that are a great representative of racial prejudice in discrimination, one way or another. The discourse surrounding anti-Black racism has prevailed since the earliest of times. The voices in this perspective might be diverse according to

the literary and political movements of the era. But evolution can surely be observed in the span of a century. Two of the most influential fictional narratives are to be discussed in the current research article.

The analysis shall begin with a classic, somewhat controversial piece of fiction in American literature. "*The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*" was written in 1885, the period of the Civil War in the United States of America. Mark Twain, the author, started writing the novel first in 1876 but halted the project for a few years. This gap in the writing period led to the incorporation of several aspects of the postbellum period, even though the novel's setting features the antebellum period throughout. The United States of America saw a dark period of the practice of slavery, the root of which is racial discrimination. Mark Twain highlighted the brutal and inhumane acts of the practice in its full detail which has made the landmark novel, "*The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*" an offensive work of fiction. Twain has fictionalized the hypocritical act of the Bargain of 1877 which stole the rights of the Black people that they got back by the abolition of slavery back in 1865.

Twain has reflected this part of history in the novel in the sequence where Huck Finn, the protagonist, stays at the Phelps farm. All the while, Jim, his Black companion, is captured at the property. Huck Finn and Tom Sawyer, Twain's character' from another novel, try to rescue Jim from captivity in order to set him free. These attempts force Jim to perform ridiculous acts weaved out of Tom Sawyer's imagination and a desire to create wonder. At the end of this struggle for freedom, the characters involved get to know that Jim has been freed by his former owner, Mrs. Watson, long ago. All the while Jim had to endure the atrocities carried out on him as he is asked to house snakes with him and carve heroic statements into rocks way just antics of children. This sequence in the novel reflects the Bargain of 1877 which was an attempt to snatch back former slaves' newly gained rights due to the Civil War.

"*The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*" indeed is a work of fiction that is not only fixed in the norm of its time but manages to get ahead of them as well. The 13-year-old protagonist, Huckleberry Finn, is an arrogant teen but the wisest man of his time as well. In his journey down the Mississippi River, Huck is accompanied by the runaway slave Jim, which makes Huck question his morality. Huck's ultimate decision to grant Jim his freedom is an act of rebellion not only the laws of slavery but also the biased rules of his religion. As Huck reconciles with his fate due to his bold decision, he pronounces, "*All right, then, I'll go to hell*".

The representation of racial discrimination is accurate to history and the most effective one as the reader, who is aware of the sensibility of Huck, gets to ponder upon the ingrained prejudice in American society. The novel shows the plight of the African American community before the abolitionist movement; later texts reveal that abolition only put an end to the practice of slavery, racial prejudice and discrimination did not leave the society which was conditioned deep into their minds.

The African American community evidently has suffered due to white supremacy. The second selected text, Maya Angelou's "*I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*" (1969) paints an accurate picture of the oppressive situation of the community and their fight against it. Angelou's work has made the readership aware of the kinds of racism persisting in society. A white supremacist society fails to acknowledge everyday racism, which is subtle and often goes unnoticed by those who are not its target. This kind of racism ranges from high school bullying of teenagers to the verbal insults directed at the

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mockery of differences of skin colour. This type of discrimination was justified at that time as *“the Whites’ way to cope with the difficult situation.”*

The setting of the autobiography is between the 1930s to 1950s, the period of The Great Depression. The Great Depression has been the most significant recession for the American economy. Angelou puts forward the impact of the recession on the African American community. A community that was already poverty-stricken due to White owners’ shameful tactics of economic oppression.

Depression, like everything else, was for the whitefolks, so it had nothing to do with them. [...] It was when the owners of cotton fields dropped the payment of ten cents for a pound of cotton to eight, seven and finally five that the Negro community realized that the Depression, at least, did not discriminate (Angelou, 1969).

The blacks' fight against racial prejudice and their struggle for equality has made several appearances in Angelou's account. She brings to attention the internalized ideas of the Whites that Blacks were only meant to serve at lower positions in the society. This type of perspective is a reflection of the pro-slavery mindset of the people of America. This discriminatory mindset can be observed everywhere that endowed the author with a realization about the racial gap. *“The white kids were going to have a chance to become Galileos and Madame Curies and Edisons and Gauguins”*. These impactful professional prospects were only reserved for the White students, and any hint of such ideas was considered *“farcical and presumptuous”* for Black children. The career positions that were deemed suitable for them were *“maids and farmers, handymen and washerwomen”*. Saputri denies any claim of job degradation in Angelou's account of the racial gap, that it *“should not be seen as job degrading, in which some jobs were considered lower than others. Instead, it shows that some racial groups exclusively performed some jobs”*. An informed understanding of this reality helps to identify the phenomenon of racialization, a common aspect of racist behavior that the author has brilliantly highlighted in her work.

Another critical aspect of *“I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings”* that resonates with Twain's work is the representation of racism in all of its actuality without any garb of formality. Twain uses of the word 'nigger' in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* was criticized greatly. Still, the theme and idea of his novel refute the accusation of racist intentions behind its usage. In a similar wake, Angelou freely uses the derogatory word in her account to render authenticity to her memoir. She, too, faced criticism for her racist intentions in the book, but her use of the controversial word is not to spread anti-white hatred but rather to bring attention to the challenges of her race. In great detail, the author has mentioned the role of the extremist, white supremacist and the most racist organization, the Ku Klux Klan. The time in which the narrative is set was the time of the organization's terror activities in full bloom. Angelou's first recollection of racism was due to the extremist group's terror activity in the segregated area of Blacks. She recounts the sheriff's warning to her family,

I heard him say to Momma, “Annie, tell Willie he better lay low tonight. A crazy nigger messed with a white lady today. Some of the boys “ll be coming over here later.” Even after the slow drag of years, I remember the sense of fear which filled my mouth with hot, dry air, and made my body light (Angelou, 1969).

This instance also highlights the irony behind the racialization of African Americans as criminals and savages who cannot be tamed. Instead, the source of fear is a white supremacist group that is the reason for terror and violence. This harmful stereotype has been the cause behind unproven lynching and killings of the African American community members who were accused of crimes against white subjects without any investigation. The sheriff's warning demonstrates America's racism that the Ku Klux Klan was free to exercise violence on the African American community without any accountability. The sheriff's label of boys for terrorists, the author remarks, *the "boys"?* *Those cement faces and eyes of hate that burned the clothes off you if they happened to see you lounging on the main street downtown on Saturday* (Angelou, 1969). The placement of a question mark with the label of boys is an attempt of Angelou, a 13 year old at that time to question the hypocrisy of the sheriff in calling the extremists as boys.

5. Conclusion

The whole discussion can be concluded with the postulation that the notion of race and the associated phenomena of racial discrimination and racial prejudice is the most prominent strain in American literature. This strain has been modelled and shaped by different societal circumstances and political situations of every era. American authors and works influenced by different literary movements have played the most critical role in educating the readership about the discourse of race. The research has been carried out with the help of textual analysis of two of the most important works of famous authors. Both the texts reflect the discourse around discrimination of African American community in its full authenticity. *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* represents the causes and the aftermath of the civil war, the religious justification of slavery and the political acts that snatched the rights of African American community. *"I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings"* is a portrait of the terrorism of white supremacists and everyday racism that can be found everywhere and increases due to specific social conditions. Thus, it is safe to say that prejudice against minority races is a reality of American society and American literature is a reflection of it.

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