

The Role of Multiculturalism in African-American Families as Presented in the Select Novels of Omar Tyree and Ishmael Scott Reed

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Culture is an inevitable part of a nation that represents the life practices and methods. The term may indicate the life style of an ethnic group such as rituals, language, religious practices, social customs, traditions and other methods. It differs from nation to nation according to the ancestral practices of an ethnic group. The real problem arises when there are some multicultural practices that are being introduced or rather enter by different circumstances due to such reasons. The term multiculturalism refers to presence of multicultural ethnic groups live together within a society. Its connection to international relations is multifaceted, woven through political, contextual, and ethnic threads. It aims to creating togetherness among distinct ethnic groups. One of the minority ethnical groups in America is black Americans. They are being addressed as African-Americans on account of their double consciousness. Their state of being holders of two distinct identities often leads to internal crises when American culture dominates over the other. This paper presents the multicultural conflicts and its impacts as presented in the writings of Omar Tyree and Ishmael Scott Reed. Some of their novels are taken into account for this study. Both of them are living African-American novelists. The theories of ethnicity and multiculturalism are being used to explore the issues from the select novels.

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Culture of a society refers to a collection of values and philosophies, social theories and political movements. It may be also considered as a study of human race. In the opinion of some anthropologists, human beings have acquired culture through learning. The inhabitants of a region develop different traditions as they wish. The set of practices and rituals that were formed hundred years ago play a vital role. In the words of Arnold in his *Culture and Anarchy*, culture may be anything that is being followed by the people from past till present. He writes: “culture teaches us to conceive our required authority, of light, - let us, again follow, with this class, this method we have followed with the aristocratic and middle classes, and try to bring before our minds representative man, who may figure to us its virtue and its excess”. (Arnold 85-86)

African American citizens who hold African descent and multicultural heritage supposed to handle complex relationships with regard to their culture, colour, class, identity etc. Their identities being black American citizens of African descent and multicultural heritage are both objects and a process of the complex relationship of their colour, class, ethnicity, age, consciousness, conscience, commitment, culture, sexuality, and choice. America is a multicultural country that welcomes a variety of immigrants from many countries over decades. It is a mystery and unknown fact that these outsiders have a tremendous economic social and political contribution to this country. They might have settled there for such reasons like seeking liberty, job opportunities, and better lifestyles. Their ethnical differences have enriched their multicultural activities, knowledge, and life styles. Some of them show an extreme desire in calling themselves American particularly holding American identity just by erasing their native identity. People of Diaspora anglicise their names and suppress their native accent only with the aim of presenting themselves socially and economically enriched community.

A nation is split in terms of its cultural heterogeneous, multifariousness of traditions, geographical variations so and so. The

term multiculturalism denotes the interconnection between two or more cultures of a country. It is a broad term that refers to the appreciation, acceptance and promotion of various cultures within the nation. It also indicates the wider parts of multiple cultural identities that are seen within a country. All over the world it can be witnessed such differences in terms of nationality, language, ethnicity, race, culture, ritual practices. The fact is that all, in one way or other, are similar and interconnected. It has triangle positions that include cultures on nationality, ethnicity and religion. All these different set of practices are nothing but cultural differentiation. All such cultural identities are just cultural identification.

According to Terence Turner, American anthropologist, the result of multiculturalism is to create identity politics which has ethnic identity as a fundamental concept. His concept of the term tends to create a clear understanding among the scholars. Identity politics leads to various crises. He considered that culture is a property of an ethnic group. The following words of his can ensure the theory: “multiculturalism tends to become a form of identity politics, in which the concept of culture becomes merged with that of ethnic identity. From an anthropological standpoint, this move, at least in its more simplistic ideological forms, is fraught with dangers both theoretical and practical. It risks essentializing the idea of culture as the property of an ethnic group or race; it risks reifying cultures as separate entities by overemphasizing their boundedness and mutual distinctness; it risks overemphasizing the internal homogeneity of cultures in terms that potentially legitimize repressive demands for communal conformity (Turner 1993, 411-12)

When it comes with identity like the words of Turner, it matches with the concept of Bois who coined the term double-consciousness. He strongly recommended to all the non-white Americans to get aware of this double consciousness. This state is indeed peculiar by nature. Bois suggested the significance of being aware of the people’s way of look at them. It is absolutely necessary for every African-American to have a clear consciousness of how he interprets the world and how the world interprets him. In his master piece *Souls of Black Folk*, Bois emphasized the point that African-

Americans hold a powerful mind that supports them strongly not to remain separated from their culture. The following words of Bois from his book explain the dual ethnicity of African-Americans.

It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. (8 Bois)

Omar Tyree's novel *Flyy Girl* is a depiction of a teenage girl Tracy's struggle in a racial society. It illustrates the pity condition of black American young girls who become prey to teenage enticement. Tracy disobeys her parents when they try to control her unwanted actions. She fell in love with many boys; one of them was Charles Webster. He was born to a mixed race parents. He was unaware of his father's family background. His mother was a German born lady who married a white man. Tracy also expressed her attraction towards the African cultural practices that she compared with the whites'. "But mom, I don't know if them white doctors are teaching us the right stuff, 'cause they're still experimenting with different foods and all. Africans mastered what and what not to eat thousands of years ago." (399). From this excerpt it can be ensured clearly that there is always a superior thought exist among non-white Americans. They prefer much importance to African cultural practices that are older than American. At the same time it is impossible to neglect cultural practices of America. In this way multicultural practices are being followed in every African-American family.

Reed's novel *Japanese by Spring* recounts the story of Puttbutt, a black Professor at Jack London College. He was a figure who was showed as a negative reflection against multiculturalism. He tried to gain tenure at the white campus. His other novel *Mumbo Jumbo* is a best example of multiculturalism. He makes reference to various elements particularly Egyptian mythology and Old Testament of Bible. The previous novel has many satirical elements in which

Reed attempts to criticize the disunity among the coloured people in America. The novel is also called – The Culture Wars. Reed examines the various positions that are being preferred by black Americans. He presents their opinions that they express through research about the study of race.

The issue of ethnical crisis needs extreme strenuous to understand. It becomes a challenging threat to the black community and offers faltering state to them. The intermarriage between black and white Americans questions their exact identity and often results in conflicts. The very idea is presented by an Indian economist and philosopher Amartya Sen. He authored a book titled *Identity and Violence*, where he projected his theory. He specifies clearly of the role of individual identity. He addressed an American woman writer as follows: “an American citizen, of Caribbean origin, with African ancestry, a Christian, a liberal, a woman, a vegetarian, a long distance runner, a historian, a novelist, a feminist..... to all of which this person simultaneously belongs and gives her a particular identity.” (Sen xiii)

Reed emphasizes how white domination deceives African Americans to forget their own identities. Prof PuttButt remains careful in not playing with emotions of the whites. It best suits with the words of Italian Marxist theorist Antonio Gramsci who remarks in Prison notes. He stated that “Hegemony is a sort of deception in which the oppressed forget their own conditions and accept the dominant values of the oppressor as their own” (795). The novel’s protagonist considers whites’ cultural rituals as genuine and respects it. Reed shares his point of view that African Americans are easily deceived by the whites into subservience as they think highly of it.

It seems the novelist favours multiculturalism like issue of language. One of the well-known critics of Reed, Daryl Dickson has authored a book that carries a critical study of his novels. He agrees that Reed deals particularly deals the concept of multi-culture. Carr’s words from his book can make it clear: “Japanese by Spring represents Ishmael Reed’s concatenation of the intensely fierce debates over the meaning of multiculturalism in U.S. academia in the late 1980s and early 1990s, offering in novel form Reed’s vision of what a productive, transcendent multiculturalism should be, as opposed to

what it has become in the face of American cynicism(196-97). These words can best express the real motto of Reed who targets to point out the negative ideology framed against the blacks. He uses the term just opposite to American cynicism that brands the black Americans like inferiors, horrible creatures.

It can be considered that Reed presents multiculturalism as novel's protagonist PuttButt. Reed likes to present him as ghost than a moral centre. He includes himself in the novel who is a pro-multicultural poet and novelist whereas PuttButt is presented as an anti-multicultural critic. The central action of the novel deals with the conflict between mono and multiculturalism. The African American professor PutButt, after being thrown into the second position in Jack London College, recommended multicultural study in the campus. Thus Reed rightly handled the theme of power and control to disclose the condition of minor cultures in the United States.

Reed employs the term Culture Wars as a metaphor to delineate the process of linguistic and cultural dissimilarity that becomes a major Jack London College. He was more interested in gaining tenure at the college rather than keeping his background safe. He had dilemmas in his mind that can be considered as examples of cultural crises. Those dilemmas express the other side of multiculturalism. Reed tries to present his characters like ideological types. He shows the protagonist PutButt was overwhelmed with a strong-minded desire. It was all about gaining tenure and higher positions at white campus. As a part of reaching his target he was ready to accept the racist ill-treatment of white students. He did not hesitate to shift the blame towards black students. At one point of the novel he showed great enthusiasm in learning Japanese language. He calculated that the wide knowledge and fluency of Japanese would help him in many ways to his future. The novelist encourages the ideologies of David Palumbo on critical multiculturalism, who is a Professor of comparative literature. The following words from his book would explain clearly the role of multiculturalism. He said, "Critical multiculturalism explores the fissures, tensions, and sometimes contradictory demands of multiple cultures, rather than (only) celebrating the plurality of cultures by passing through them appreciatively. (2)

The novel is a campus novel, Jack London College. It locates in California, since it is a state that holds a significant position for cultural wars. The state is well-known for its educational policies in the culture wars. The concept of multiculturalism in educational institutions shall create such problems. With the support of Reed's examples of multi-ethnic groups, it can be elucidated that all multiculturalism are not set up equal. His novels interrogate relations between ethnic groups which are not specially considered by uncritical multiculturalists. They desire to acknowledge the existence of ethnic groups. David Palumbo-Liu, a professor at Stanford, has given his views on critical multiculturalism. He believed that it explores the relations between ethnic groups. He authenticates that multiculturalism finds out the fissures, tensions and opposite demands of multiple cultures. The black professor Chappie did not gain the expected power even after the college came under the control of Dr. Yamato. In order to impress the Japanese management he learned Japanese but all his efforts became vain.

At one point of the novel, Chappie found himself with recollections of the past. He blamed himself for having made such mistakes just for the sake of tenure at white campus. He recalled his mistakes how he shared his view on the origin of blacks. His mind revived the idea of blacks that argue Egyptian civilization was the looniest thing ever. He also had criticized the black writers imitated the Victorians. He agreed his pity state that he had been badly deceived by wrong ideas. He scolded himself for having done that and said, "But he was badly deceived" (70). Thus Reed demonstrates his ideas and obligations to ethnic multiplicity. He tries to make a tie up between black Japanese American dynamic. Though their splendid methods the novelists have kept themselves connected with multiculturalism, which is one of the significant identity and speciality of African-Americans.

Thus it is concluded that multiculturalism can be seen as a unique term. It helps to conceptualize the political and moral claims of an ethnic group. The term is also closely connected with identity politics. This kind of politics prefers differentiating a particular ethnic group. It leads to make different perceptions among the people that make them

to form groups like age, sexual, class, economic, religious, educational statuses. Each group might be interested to formulate a unique culture.

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