

## Traumatic Stories of Humiliation and Ill-Treatment in African American Biographies.

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### Abstract

*The evolution of the racial supremacy of whites against African Americans in US history has spanned over four hundred years. It has been documented in the lives of the innumerable people who participated in the class struggle against whites. The aspect of colour of skin, fragmented the societal norms and culture, had started off when US encouraged the import of Black slaves. This led to the formation of an invisible workforce supporting the nation. Brutality in the form of racial hatred has evolved to the finer nuances of abuse and harassment at every sphere of life in US against African Americans over the years, against men and women across the ages. Incidents of torture, rape, plunder and looting, denial of economic sustenance in the 'land of free' was a sort of mockery. This study will try to throw light on the different perspectives of the impact on African American society, their lives and a profession that has made their lives much different as espoused by the human rights commission. This opens up the debate of group abuse and ill treatment or the wider agenda of a personalized hatred as a result of ego gratification. Different perspectives of ill treatment, torture and humiliation which are hugely race specific was reported earlier. Many forms of these were not reported in the press but documented in biographies which illuminates our knowledge on what used to happen. Biographies reported both the racial discrimination and personal experience pertaining to the issue, that are evidences of how these practices were executed. Legal help in judiciary was formulated as a fallout of relentless revolution against the white to help the African American community. The result led to modifications in the approach of hatred towards African Americans, in a more subtle form. Harassment in different forms evolved to match up the previous records of psychological humiliation inflicted on African Americans under the disguise of civilised societal norms. As the world has evolved through the ages, so has the societal norms and laws to exercise control, but the treatments African Americans underwent was different from what it used to be earlier. The history through biographies tells us now what to expect from an African American and white fallout, so with the legal aspect controlling the outcome, freedom of speech, actions of African Americans is still considered as a cherished dream.*

**Keywords:** African American society, abuse, Blacks, inhuman acts, racism, American domination

### 1. Introduction

Trauma of torture and ill-treatment has been caused from severe pain and suffering. It is either in instigated cause, or solely driven by cultural factors. The human rights commission has reiterated that torture in any form which leads to inhuman practice, while degrading treatment creates psychological and mental suffering. In a white world, the black people in America has been subject to suffering which is has connotations in political, social, economic, historical, physiological and philosophical aspects. Dawn (2007) stated that though colour has no meaning, American history of independence which spanned over 400 years has proved that the humiliation and ill-treatment of African Americans happened at national, city and individual level. It has been defined as class struggle and different biographies in African American literature are a testament to this.

We look at Maya Angelou's famous book 'Caged Bird Sings' published in 1969 which tells about her life experiences of open racism and oppression. She used a metaphor in the book to represent Angelou as a bird, and the central theme is against the injustice of racism and the ways to fight it. She is the leading female writer on black-white relationships and particularly about Black women. The African American books appear stereotypical portraying a culture full of nuances of how humanity had degraded its definition through the colour of racism. The book has created a theme of identity which was established and demonstrated the formation of a distinct identity through the narratives. It created a symbol of women's strength which sailed through the oppression and sufferings through the white supremacy (Grier and Price, 1968). There are three characters in 'Caged bird', Angelou's mother Vivian, her grandmother Annie Henderson,

along with Mrs Flowers. The relationship of three females was typically set in Black culture and out of them, Mrs Flowers helps Angelou to nurture back to normalcy after a brutal rape. She also guides her through the journey of Southern black girlhood. The story unfolds to the lifestyles and life events that happened for Black women in America. It depicted explicitly how the ups and downs of women in society happened at that point of time in history (Soller, 1986). It also established the events of life which are unpredictable due to social conflict and oppression that led to sacrifice at individual and family level. At this point, mother leaves due to social reasons along with her brother to be under the aegis of grandmother. Thus, the survival strategy in biography is more of a deviation of the usual stereotype of Black womanhood. The writers used 'Womanist theories' to depict her character which aimed at creating a healthy self esteem in spite of social oppression. It delineates the breeder and matriarch symbolism of African American mother against the white lifestyle. It also denoted the image of working class struggling to make meaning of livelihood which affected their economic lifestyle (Ksir, 2002). The writers tried to portray the image of Black African American women to be free from the slavery and bondage, while it was hard to find in reality. The theme of family was very important and was central to the character defining structure. It portrayed Black woman taking up different roles of a single mother with a single child or many children, a daughter of a working mother and also a granddaughter. These are defining the relationship of the family and describing the structure in the social setting in America. The motherhood concept kindled the tenets of humanity and discrimination that exudes the hatred for African American community (McGrath, 2006). There were incidents of insults, which are most commonly known to happen in people engaged in conversation. The advantage of power, position and isolation of a Black African American as portrayed always had the tenets of intimidation, that led to the more serious nature of the offences. Moffitt *et al.* (2001) mentioned that humiliation happened when the white inflicted mistreatment on either Black males or females to bully, show physical power, or when whites have socially committed any unacceptable act. Random review of biographies essentially ratify how the society fared in terms of treating Blacks. There were cases of rape across rich, poor at different ages, plundering that took place to take advantage of the power of being the superior race or in sexuality (McPherson, 1990). African American cultures emphasize the views of strong masculinity which added pressure on weaker sex the Black women to cater to the demands of the acts. Victimization, rape, pressure to oblige to white masculinity has led to increased sexual incidents against the Blacks. So the racial and cultural expectations led to rape incidents not being reported where there was white supremacy of power and even denied to have committed, or even document it (Lauret, 1994). Black girls pre and post puberty, adolescence and growing to adulthood in America were seen as objects where the aspect of age, socioeconomic status, race was reduced to power of subjugation. This led the incidents to be reported as hate crimes in African American history where Blacks excelling in any field executed plans to malign them. These were later legally referred to criminal acts where racial crime was related and aimed at individual or group of people of same origin (Bennett, 2006). Hatred led whites to engage in crimes, which led to stark examples of burning houses, plundering, damage to property, offensive graffiti on the walls of the houses and lastly hate-speech leading to physical assault. These were the basic forms of violence that shaped the everyday life of an African American.

The male writers through their viewpoint defined Black struggle as a social institution which created a fragmented, prejudiced and opinionated society (Grinberg *et al.* 1989). The so called 'Land of the free' and the aspect of equality drifted away into oblivion when they landed in America. The literature and the characters are protagonists who depicted the class struggle for Black American men. The evolution of African American society in slavery to blue collar job took more than 400 years of American history and has not been able to wipe out the slate clean. Emergence of Black character and their lifestyles are depicted in novels down the pages of history gradually. Thus, the literature style which depicted the American history did evolve in portraying racial ideology (Tate, 1998). Much of it had to do with the country's political system driving it. Martin Luther King biographical history depicts that racism existed in politics and sometimes in over-powering form while the personal racial comments were aimed to demean the individual self. Thus, racism slowly moved towards a less aggressive oppression which is evident in the literary scene with years rolling by. The backdrop of the discussion of abuse, harassment, torture and oppression which happened was more explicit in the lives of Black men (Rasheed & Rasheed, 1999). As human beings, men are more aggressive and explicit in their moves and intentions. Abuse in many forms from verbal intonations to further advanced types of insults proved that they are targeted against the African American race in general. Male authors depicted economic deprivation as a main issue since earning their livelihood is their primary role in the society. Finkelhor *et al.* (1990) indicated that social abuse in neighbourhood, home being targeted for graffiti, stone pelting, controlling the social participation were some of the softer activities. Increasingly in due course of time, literature revealed that a covert abuse was taking roots slowly which had its intention to marginalize the Black people. The different segmentation of the working class in society led to random discrimination of African American people, which had its base in economic deprivation. They also depicted that race or skin colour was not

an issue in society but underneath they hated the ethnicity at large which led to the formation of laws to prevent its effects. It was a joy for the African American population which limited the emergence of white supremacy in the national positions which always ruled in their favour.

The most common tactic used for abusing was defamation for something which they are not a part of and have not done. Totally false in its course of action, publication of such fallacy led to subjugating and oppressing a race not to emerge as a dominant one. It also affected the family system where the males in the roles of dads, fathers, uncles, have to experience bullying by whites. This is depicted as a standard societal fallout in African American literature even though there were later laws against it. Therefore, being famous as an African American like Muhammad Ali led to a belief that celebrity status in America tends to change the acceptance level of white people. Being famous, as a sportsman and a boxer has changed Muhammad Ali's social acceptance which depicts a change in stance and perception from white people (Rasheed & Rasheed, 1999).

Earlier biographies from pre World Wars were full of incidents where there were mass removal of African Americans and directly sending them to prison. Incidents of tarring and feathering, and violent forms of crime that is now banned legally in US, and by human rights existed back then. In fact, there was a time when African Americans occupied the maximum prison cells as per prison literary records (Bennett, 2006). There are biographies post World War II era, which endlessly describe the difference in the culture between African American and whites. The events in history also discusses how the inclusion of African American in some specific jobs has led to a more structured society. Nevertheless, there exists the aspect of sidelining, professional abuse, peer abuse, taunting, teasing in the workplace that has same humiliation intent that are camouflaged with the same feelings that also existed centuries ago. James Baldwin presented gloomier perspectives as there exists a subtle form of hatred which began to be expressed at an individual level than as groups against African American community. These were also reported by many writers of African American race, as protesting against them legally led to systematic abuse which ignored the tenets of human rights (Finkelhor *et al.* 1990). The aspect of the judiciary, police system turning a blind eye and ignoring the human rights issues has been a history of sorts. This evokes the response which reflected unreasonable response and attitude in line of work and societal influence. Antipathy expressed towards African Americans have even been found in excerpts of prisoners where physical abuse dominated the scene. Nella Larsen of Harlem Renaissance sketched the biographies with the plot and the sequence of events which we gather from literary discourses are more of torture where pain prevailed in whatever they could express. Carlson and Donald (2010) stated that abuse from the social setting had become more animalistic in prisons where enhanced interrogation was used against African Americans. They were subjected to special treatments from white police officers who were purposely doing a routine extraction of information and subjected to torture. There were instances and reports of male African American being sodomized which is an advanced form of sexual abuse using a male to male domination (Lisak, 1994). This was a common event observed in prisons. Thus the political direction of exuding nationalist white power from the centre in the US has been directing whites to influence a culture to show dominant white supremacy (Tate, 1998). Therefore, it has now evolved to be a known fact, as both African American and whites know what to expect. So, biographies depicting a personal recount of a life event, now portray more of an ego-gratifying hatred rather than violence which took a form of war (Soller, 1986).

As a result, America offered numerous concessions to the African Americans which was not allowed to be availed as per records. Incidents like these generated bitterness and was clearly indication of social oppression. The American politics though not bipartisan, were partial towards whites and supported the money driven strategies to dominate African Americans. Vote bank from African Americans were used to procure seats in Senates, promising to make lives better (Bennett, 2006). African Americans labelling as potential traitor to a revolutionary class struggle at all levels of society existed for many years and was projected in the media. Therefore the creation of the African American community led to the common objective to liberate themselves from the so called freedom to reach the 'Promised Land' has gained momentum. Influenced over the ages, through the biographies of African American, people had gathered courage to fight against the evils of the fragmented colour doctrine in the US.

Critically viewing the abusive and dominating nature of power, we can conclude that the real motive is superiority of race, so whites dominating African American is driven by power to control others. Ksir (2002) stated that though large the American history has defined racial abuse in different forms and ways, the initial effort to stop a cycle or system of abuse had African American struggling hard for their own sustenance. Alain Locke an African American through his biography critically argue on this point of racial supremacy has been rooted in the fact that whites discovered America and allowed people of African origin much later. The purpose was to keep them as slaves, and make them do work which were menial in nature.

Abuse against African Americans have now spread to hospitals, against patients, schools, in somewhat overt and

covert form (Rasheed & Rasheed, 1999). It has now been actively reported and most of them are more personalized or towards specific individuals. Harming through everyday activities and social behaviour happens through social behaviour which affects the psychological development. It has taken many forms, as disassociating an African American or exploitation through a forced labourer, ignoring human rights has a component of victimization to it. Many of the experiences documented in biography of Jean Toomer related to different forms of atrocities they have experienced as an individual male or female. Though there is a system to counter it through legal channels, the same is expected from a white when they deal with a 'mullato' a mixed breed from a white and a black. Essentially, it proves that African American are still trying to find an identity in the society (Soller, 1986).

Newer literature supports 'social drifting' which corroborates that social life in America is now more open where the mixed marriage is slowly refuting the racial ideology of African American and white differences (McGrath, 2006). Thus the emergence of a modernist approach is looming large which makes the concept stand out. The biographical details of the writer of both genders from the African American community therefore reveal dark aspects of freedom in the land of the free. There were shades of racial solidarity and traces of literary ambiguity in Jean Toomer's biography that was a new throw of light. Carlson & Donald (2010) mentioned that mixed race experiences have emerged in biographies in African American literature have tried to explain the new look of the definitions of the race. The racial composition has evolved with mixed marriages taking place between African American and whites, and reflection of it as a theme for majority of biographies has not yet been a point of obsession to many. So the light skinned African Americans who are in between the black and white colour spectrum are loosening the societal rigidity and ramifications.

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