



A Study on the Perspective “Critiquing the Community” in Chester Himes Novels.

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Abstract.: Chester Himes, a prominent detective fiction writer of African American detective fiction and through his detective novels he has not depicted only the crimes stories but simultaneously portraying a vivid picture of the society of African American community. In his novels, he provides us a picturesque presentation of the advantages as well as disadvantages of the people of his community in a white dominated society. By depicting the errors of the people of his community, Himes tried to correct them. In this paper, an attempt has been made to study in the detective fiction of Chester Himes, that how he criticises his own community for their faults.

Keywords : Critiquing the Community; Chester Himes Novels

Introduction.

The aim of this study is to examine how Chester Himes critiques his own community and Harlem’s society and how he presents their follies and foibles in his *A Rage in Harlem*, *Blind Man with a Pistol*, and *Cotton Comes to Harlem*. Chester Himes, in these novels, not only presents the injustice, exploitation and inhuman condition of the Black community, but, simultaneously, he also presents the follies of the Black community. All his novels are centred on the same place, i.e. Harlem. It is a place which is largely inhabited by the blacks and through the life of Harlem Himes tries to show us the picture of the life of entire Black community. It is true that injustice has been done with the blacks by the whites, but, to some extent, they themselves are responsible for their condition.

Objective:

The objectives of this study are to find out the follies of African American community which are presented by Chester Himes in his three novels, chosen for this study. Our study is basically done on the basis of three detective novels of Chester Himes, namely, *A Rage in Harlem*, *Blind Man with a Pistol*, and *Cotton Comes to Harlem*.

Methodology.

To prepare this paper, secondary resources have been used such as texts of the novels and the other referential books written on them or on Chester Himes.

Analysis.

Chester Himes starts critiquing his community by describing his own place, i.e. Harlem. “The people of Harlem are as mad as only the people of Harlem can be.” (*Blind*, 119). In Harlem one could find all the vices in microcosm: sex perversions, lesbians, pederasts, pot smokers, riders of the LSD, street hustlers and their creationistic pimps sleeping in the same bed where they turned their tricks, daisy chains, sex circuses, and caterers to the society trade: wife-swappers, gang-fuckers, seekers of depravity and all the other.

The two coloured detectives, who are indeed the heroes of these novels, have a negative concept about Harlem as well for the people of Harlem. In one conversation Grave Digger says that in Harlem, the time for business is the night, because it is a city of vice and all kinds of sinful acts can be done easily in the darkness of night. Then Coffin Ed. granted that it is indeed, because Harlem is mostly inhabited by the blacks. So we can say that the hidden meaning behind this sentence is that blacks are mostly criminal minded and the darkness of night is the most appropriate time for their acts. He also says that whites of the Harlem also do dirty things but they do their dirt in the day time, because then they’re most invisible. This indicates that the whites also do vulgar acts but they are very expert in hiding their faults. Because people believe in the purity of light in daytime, and the whites take the full opportunity of it. There are only two reasons a white man is killed in Harlem, money and fear. And more blood was shed in Harlem than for any other reason.

The day to day life of Harlem is full with every kind of turmoil. Case of thieves or loots is not a big deal for the police because it seems to be a part and parcel of their life. We can get a better view of Harlem from its newspaper. In *Cotton Comes to Harlem*, Chester Himes gives us a fair idea of the news of Harlem’s Newspaper. Anderson reads the paper:

Man kills his wife with an axe for burning his breakfast pork chop... man shoots another man demonstrating a recent shooting he had witnessed... man stabs another man for spilling beer on his new suit... man kills self



in a bar playing Russian roulette with a .32 revolver... woman stabs man in stomach fourteen times, no reason given... woman scalds neighboring woman with pot of boiling water for speaking to her husband... man arrested for threatening to blow up subway train because he entered wrong station and couldn't get his token back — " He reads, "Man sees stranger wearing his own new suit, slashes him with a razor." he read on. "Man dressed as Cherokee Indian splits white bartender's skull with homemade tomahawk... man arrested on Seventh Avenue for hunting cats with hound dog and shotgun. (Cotton, 9).

Generally black people are illiterate in comparison to whites. They don't have proper education and they do not understand the intelligent tricks played by the indigenous educated blacks. In that society some intelligent blacks targeted the other common illiterate simple blacks to deceive and by some well organized tricks these literate and intelligent blacks always tries to capture their money or wealth. They also know that they can't deceive the whites because they (whites) are more intelligent than them and also white doesn't believe in the blacks. So, they are not ready to learn anything from the blacks. So, these blacks always target the people from their own community and even use their black sentry as a tool of cunningness. In chapter 11 of *A Rage In Harlem*, Gus Parsons is such a man who tempted the common black people to invest their money in their gold mine business (he used to tell that he and his partners have a corporate business of gold) with the hope to make their investments double. Actually they don't have any gold mine or any business of gold; they just make the common people fool. In the process of convincing Jackson to invest his money in their business he told him that, "A colored man discovered it, and a colored man has formed a corporation to operate it, and they're selling stock just to us colored people like you and me. It's a closed corporation. You can't beat that" (*Rage*, 69). He uses their black sentry as a tool of temptation. In his influence, Jackson invests everything and gets deceived by Parsons. So, at first Parsons uses the Black sentry to capture Jackson's mind and later he captures his whole property.

In his novels Himes shows us that, except a few, almost all the Negroes were poor and they always wanted to be rich quickly and to enjoy the same facilities which the whites did. But for that they need money and they don't have that much of money. Though they are hard working and obedient but they are only the workers and not the owner/manager. White owner or manager provides them a very little amount of money which is only

sufficient for the living of a common man's life not a luxurious one. This aspect is also reflected in Jackson's speech when he tells the Marshal that "you are a colored man like me, you ought to understand that. Where are we poor people goin' to get any money from?" (*Rage*, 4). They always feel short of money and want to get rich by some other easy way, that may involve breaking law or indulging in corruption. We have examples of black people looking for rich but in the process of doing that, they violate the law and invite trouble into their live. For example, in *A Rage in Harlem* we find that Hank promises Jackson to turn his hundred and fifty dollar bills into a hundred and fifty hundred dollar bills by doing some tricks. Hank role each bill carefully into a sheet of chemical paper, stick the roll into a cardboard tube shaped like a firecracker, and stack the tubes in the oven of the new gas stove. But unfortunately, a policeman disturbs them and Hank burns all the notes that Jackson supplies. This incident brings all the trouble to Jackson's life; in order to make up his loss Jackson has to steal, has to joined with his gangster brother, and at last he was also involved in a murder. These entire incidents destroy his normal life; he has to run away from police, lost his love. So his desire to earn a heavy amount of money and become rich within a night destroyed his life and his whole reputation.

In Harlem people also use religion as a tool to deceive the law. One such instance we find in chapter 13 of *A Rage in Harlem* when Goldy makes the police fool through his puzzle saying. When Slim and Imabelle try to flee in Goldy's car by throwing acid to the face of Coffin Ed police stop their car in order to check. Because Goldy is in the dress of holy sister cops shows some respect towards him and Goldy takes the full profit of this. When police ask Goldy that if he had seen anybody run in that way he lie that he doesn't saw nobody and made two circles with the gold cross. "The cops stared in fascination; they'd seen many strange religious sects in Harlem, and they respected the colored folk's religion on orders from the commissioner. But this nun looked as though she might be worshipping the devil" (*Rage*, 85). Goldy knows that the best way to confuse a white cop in Harlem was to quote foolishly from Bible; "And I took the little book out of the Angel's hand, and ate it up", (*Rage*, 85) he quoted enigmatically. The cops' eyes stretched, their cheeks puffed and their faces reddened as they tried to control their laughter. They touched their caps respectfully and turned quickly away. They were confused but not suspicious. Another example of deceiving is mentioned in *A Rage in Harlem*, when police finds Jackson drinking driving a car they asked him to walk straight to a post. But Goldy knows that Jackson is not in his sense. So to distract the cops'



attention, Goldy quoted huskily, "And he laid on the dragon-". The cops turned to look at him, "what's that, sister?" "the old serpent", Goldy quoted, "which is the devil, and satan, and bound him a thousand years" (*Rage*, 102-03). By that time Jackson had gotten to the post.

Not only the law but Goldy also deceives the common people by using religion as a tool. We earlier mention his "heaven's ticket" selling activity. This time he uses his religious power to see the heaven from earth. When in chapter 13 he ordered a driver to follow the car of Slim and Imabelle and driver grumbles, Goldy quoted "there were four and twenty elders", giving the driver a prediction for the day's number. Goldy knows that most folks in Harlem believed that holy people could look straight up into heaven and find the number coming out the day any time they wished.

Though most of the blacks are the same Christian as the white folks but the church does not provide the same opportunity and right to black man. This is the reason that forced the black people to think about a separate black god. They think that the god of the whites deceived the blacks and he didn't listen to them. So, they create some new religious ethics and also a new concept of black god, which will listen to them. These concepts are explained by reverend Sam in the very 1st chapter of *Blind Man with a Pistol*, which puzzles the white cops, because they come across with such concepts within the Christian religion. When the cops ask him that how he can accept the nuns as his wives while nuns had made sacred vows to live of chastity. He says this question is especially for white nuns and not for the black, because there are some difference between the white nuns and black nuns. Then they ask what that difference is, and Sam answered that "the church provide the shelter and food for the white nuns, and his black nuns had to hustle for themselves" (*Blind*, 4).

Whenever a man or woman of Harlem finds himself/herself in danger, they most commonly use the religion as a tool to come out from it. Because the white cops don't understand the rituals of black it is easy to deceive them and if the man is a Christian than also these cops had great respect for a Christian. So most of the times, it is effective for the people of Harlem to use religion as a saving tool from danger. One such incident is described *Cotton Comes to Harlem*. Where the detectives caught a whore and ask her about Deke, the gangster, she immediately pretends to be a simple girl and church lady and knows nothing about Deke. She says that she has nothing to do with that man and she is there to mind her own business and it is the detectives who go there and start messing with her. She says, "I ain't no criminal, I'm a church lady" (*Cotton*, 25).

In Harlem, the condition of women was not so good. Though they have the right to work like man and to walk alone in the night but it is always not safe for. In that society one interesting thing about woman is that they can choose their partner and if they are disappointed with their husband they can live with another without divorce. But they cannot officially marry another person without their previous marriage has not been officially broken. In *A Rage In Harlem*, we see that Imabelle lives with Johnson without giving divorce to her previous husband but they are not a married couple.

In the society of Harlem there are hypocrites, who always see woman as sexual object. They think that they can buy a woman through money. One such incident was narrated in chapter 19 of *A Rage in Harlem*, where a so called gentleman of that society was cut by Imabelle due to his crude behaviour with her. When she was running from the gang, a middle aged church going man, good husband and father of three school age daughters, on his way to work, dressed in clean, starched overalls and an army jumper heard the tapping of her heels on the pavement when he stepped from his ground floor tenement. When he sees her "A mighty light-footed whore," he mumbled to himself. He tries to seduce her and asked her how much she wants. Feeling outraged by this humiliation, Imabelle tells him that she is not a whore. Then the gentle looking man tried to rape her and in the process of saving herself Imabelle cuts his cheeks. When she escapes from his grip he chases her. When police come he put all the blames on her and police also without investigating the case arrest her and take her to jail. Because he was church going white man his life was more valuable for the Harlem administration than the life or self-respect of a black woman. And the audience also, instead of saving her, passes some humorous comments and makes fun of her. On that occasion, one man says that

Black gal make a freight train jump de track.

But a yellow gal make a preacher Ball de Jack (*Rage*, 132).

Thus Chester Himes presents the Black race and society of Harlem in his novels and points out their follies and foibles. He does not deny that Blacks are the subject of domination and the oppression of the whites but he is not ready to let the things continue. By showing their follies he urges them to correct themselves and thereby to bring changes in their condition.

Conclusion.

Chester Himes' detective novels are different from other novels. The detective novel is structured in such a way that the end of the novel coincides with



the mission of discovery of the criminal and the resolution of a moral or social dilemma. In Himes' the genre changes radically as the novelist is not interested in this aspect of the detective novel. Instead the novelist is interested in presenting and analyzing a social and economic condition of the black people especially in Harlem.

The social condition of Harlem exposes a double consciousness that is, at once explicit and implicit. On the one hand the black people populate Harlem and in a certain sense dominate Harlem physically;

on the other hand, the economical power structure of Harlem is controlled by whites or whites in collusion with blacks. In fact, the Harlem Renaissance, seen from outside, appears to have addressed all the major problems of the African American community, in reality, the recognition of the problems is not simple, and does not always guarantee feasible solution. But Himes not only restricted himself in discussing the disadvantages of his community in a white dominated society rather he wanted to correct his people by showing their faults through his detective novels.

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