Short Review Paper

Visibility of 'race' as a social construction: A study on the colour-dilemma of the African- Americans

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Abstract

Since time immemorial, 'race' as a controversial theory has always been contested, debated, refuted as well as reproduced. While some scholars attributes it as an inherited 'biological giving', some other linked as a socially constructed identity. In the paper, effort lies towards explaining this new sociological approach to race, the 'normalised' double consciousness based on body-colour as well as to glimpse on to how racism subtly came to be ascertained in our everyday-ness behaviour. What it is to be a coloured- person in the West? Does racism has any scientific validity or reasoning? How dangerous is the equation of racism with feminism? Perhaps the Black Americans identity struggle towards a more dignified positioning will be broadly looked into.

Keywords: Socially constructed, double consciousness, body-colour, racism, feminism, identity struggle, dignified positioning.

Introduction

Exploring 'contrasts within human' as one of the key areas, the pioneers of anthropology at the earlier times stressed more or less on visible bodily-differences particularly eyeing on human skin colour. Haphazard attempts were laid out to justify these biological differences within the strata without grounded investigation. Therefore 'race' as a notable perception (till early 20th century) was predominantly linked only within the biological genre; as something natural, genetically transmitted, along with the growing prejudicial notion on skin complexions. Ruth Benedict writes:

Race is a classification based on traits which are hereditary… and talking about race, also points on i. heredity and ii. traits transmitted by heredity which characterise all the members of a related group… that race 'is biologically' transmitted[1].

However the late 20th century witnessed a revolutionary turn towards a more socio-scientific origin of race, resulting from the anti-colonial movements in Africa and Asia respectively, the increased demands for democracy in the backward, uncultured, third world nations as well as with increasing mobility of ex-slaves/ peasants from those parts to the Western nations. W.E.B Du Bois a renowned American sociologist, in his' non-conventional', innovative piece critiqued and questioned the convinced biological construction of race. In 'The Philadelphia Negro', Du Bois narrated his observed experiences on the Chicago city and confirmed how the States unique contested dimensions (in almost all major instances) of crime, poverty, 'slums'- gets its affiliation through racial lines.

His study was exceptional in the sense of necessarily breaking the stereotypical biological assertion of race- as inherently given phenomenon. He further clarified it as something 'socially constructed identity' which at the most basic level can be interpreted as a concept that signifies and symbolises the on-going socio-political conflicts and interests, synced with different kinds of human bodies[2].

Construction of racial identity

Tracing back its origin, the racial arrangements and categorisations are often credited as an European concoction and later it's wider diffusion, in Winant's words *'has accelerated to or at least eased the formation of an interlinked socio-political world, a modernised autocracy, structuring of an international economy as well as over time a new exposure to a globalised culture'.* With coming of 'sociology of race' as a practice, the explanation turned towards a more non-hierarchal, impartial outlook; focussing extensively on overcoming prejudices and discriminations[3].

The discourse aftermath World-War II witnessed several social movements and revolutionary upsurges like the Civil Movements in America, the Anti- apartheid mobilisation in South Africa; and so on. With growing social awareness, demands were raised for unbiased 'inclusion' of every kinds and types. Rigid regimes/norms sustaining discriminatory or exclusionist traditions were pressurised to reproduce, reform & innovate.

Henceforth, three main theoretical tendencies came up in response to this growing consciousness and with its gradual enforcement, racial injustices of all sorts became 'visibly less'; at the same time open partialities begun facing indirect stigmatization (although in reality most societies were anyhow left with unanticipated racial dilemmas in possibly everywhere). The theories are categorised into: i. Ethnicity based theories interrogates race within a cultural genre of collective identity and are the most mainstream while moderate at the same time. ii. Class based theories focuses on race into forming group-based hierarchies as well as competing at economic scale. iii. Nation based theories often perceives race on strict geo-political terms; which got established prominently after decolonisation in post-war era. These theories prioritised issues on peoplehood-race union, ethnic- roots, national/global citizenship and irredentism[4].

However the mere introduction of these reforms were not enough since they continued to subordinate the 'race concept' on a more objective level or onto a real social-structure. Winant in his work commenting these theories as ambiguous, critically points on the 'hurdles towards integration' which undoubtedly compromises the key ethnic essence. It will never be desired by racial minorities on their part to give up their socio-economic-cultural roots and assimilate completely into dominant White patterns as well as adopt afresh aspects. The better solution lies on eliminating such ambiguities, Winant believes is the need to assure that the wider approaches shouldn't be limited only on forcefully enacting and declaring inter-racial unions but also responsibly engage on building strategically-conscious programmes, i.e. 'affirmative action-goals' directed towards the minorities and their overall realistic development. A convincing balanced racial-theory committed towards bringing equality and multiculturalism in today's time, must also address dedicatedly the harmful impacts that can possibly be radiated (knowingly/unknowingly) by colour-categorisation and group stratification.

Although racial- hybridity and multi-cultural polarization got acknowledged and accepted today in every possible way but still someway or others racial encounters continue. The death in Minneapolis on May 25, 2020 of the 46 year old African-American origin George Floyd at the barbarism of a white police officer is a clear representation of prevalent injustices. What got triggered globally aftermath the incident was a mass awakening against on-going oppression with new trends of protests; more popularised through the social-media networks-has-tag# 'Black Lives Matter'; voicing for a dignified life, bringing on racial justice as well as attempts to eradicate White supremacy! However dilemma/anxieties in minds still remains with lingering questions, if the world (ever) will get reformations (for better) beyond racially stigmatised identities? When 'race' (alongside religion and language) will be recognised as distinguished yet essential part of the human spectrum, overcoming hierarchisation, injustices and inhuman treatments[3]?

Sensitising varied shades of oppression, Zelliot stresses the emerging academic works of the Black Americans; as essentially a self-assertion struggle- a voice for them, by them. Throughout Harlem Renaissance they struggled restlessly in building out separate identities; mostly emancipating them from the white imagination[5]. In Indian context, the fight of the untouchables were somewhat parallel to the Blacks and comparison of both oppressed sections strikes naturally in the sense both ultimately targets toward attaining freedom; even though they originates from different socio-historical backgrounds[6]. Locating both systematic oppressions as psychologically damaging to the oppressors, Ambedkar commented *once a slave always a slave was not the fate of the slave…in untouchability however, once an untouchable always an untouchable*[7]. Left unmotivated, he further adds on how the 'strategic lies' propagated by the majoritarian- privileged strata whether in India or in America gets slowly and steadily internalised in the popular culture, ultimately becoming irresistible part of them[6].

Highlighting the distress positions of the Blacks, Du Bois adds on to the repetitive calculated moves in which Black identities (often tagged as contrivance) get constructed and exploited by the Whites. How can the society evolve with this kind of an injurious psyche, the dual standard mind-sets as well as the duplicity within behavioural and existential realities? Is there still a hope left for disenthralment? When will it be possible for someone to be a proud Negroid and a cultured American at the same time; identities combined without having to compromise or lose something or other due to skin colour or racial features? Perhaps the road towards attaining such liberation both for the Dalits in India as well as the American Blacks; for a matter of fact is not straightforward and they in their life-time gets constant reminders and haunted recalls from past; enacted through religious sanctions, indifferent practices & hierarchical traumas. But both Ambedkar and Du Bois trusted the knowledge discourse and believed receiving education by the oppressed groups will enlighten them, will someday eliminate their fears, vulnerabilities as well as provide them with quintessential confidence towards upliftments[8]. Ambedkar claims caste as a notion, a state of the mind… it is unfortunate, it may provoke to carry on as gross as something called man's inhuman treatments towards other man but providing education to those who wants to shatter the ugly casteist regime will boost the democratic vibes as well as put authority in much safer hands[9]. He distinctly wanted (taking on the path of Du Bois) fellow educated bunch from his community to charge upon themselves responsibilities and advocate on behave of the people, perhaps voicing out in favour and move forward on becoming dignified Dalit-Brahmins[10].

Reproduction of Ideologies

How casual stereotypes/ideologies get firmly reproduced in societies? Perhaps there must sustain an interconnectedness of verbal wordings and human psychological formations.

Robert Staples in his extraordinary experimental work was amused to find out how the often normalised quoting 'white-race is superior' is not only confined within the upper strata of the privileged race but was also strongly believed by the generalised others since as a race-origin they gained overall profits by the Blacks subordinations. In that sense ideological grounding turns out quite useful in exerting and implementing control over the societal forces; which sooner or later works in their favour, helping to hold conspicuously the entire social-system. The inter-linkage between the privileged race and the 'not so-privileged others' requires close interrogations at their socio-politico-economic plots alongside understanding its historical contextualisation. In America, the introduction to slavery as a way of systematic exploitation started with the production of labour intensive tobacco and cotton plantations, because of which a large scale of Black labourers were migrated from Africa to the States. But sooner or later, these labourers started realising their bygone human rights in every sense possible except the core identity of a slave. All these further weakened their familial back-bones and relationships; transforming them into mere 'dependents' at the mercy of the White masters. With sustaining fear all over, the males of the Black community started limiting themselves as only biological-beings involving solely to fulfil biological needs without any attachments to their socio-politico-cultural demands. The conditions of the female Blacks were more pathetic than their male counter-parts. Henceforth it cannot be claimed enough that all these discriminatory-coercive actions towards the Black Americans, the destruction of their familial rooting as well as core values- culture and the disarrangements of their lives in general was solely the consequences of America's extreme drive towards value- profit rationale[11].

It is often professed that race as a concept was unknown to humanity; before the discovery of America in 1492. The colour variation of the labourers strategically came to justify the forced inhuman slavery system introduced at the cost of ruining several generations of Black families[12]. Carmichael and Hamilton came up with delineating systematised white racism in the forms of: *'individual racism'* in which a White person treats indifferently against a Black person and *'institutional racism'* in which the entire White community mal-practices against the community of Blacks. The ways in which the convinced practices of purity-pollution notions against the untouchables legitimises the Hindu caste system, similarly the inappropriate gestures and race-stigmas came out in retrospect to clarify, exaggerate and openly claim the slave system in the West[13]. The prevailed racial treatments were bound to get introduced due to the arising needs of capitalist forces; perhaps surplus labourers at free of cost. Therefore slavery as a social pathology was a by-product of capitalist enterprises[14].

What can be the possible ways of attaining Blacks development? The ideological interpretation of *'bourgeois nationalism'*, believes giving the oppressed Blacks the economic power thereby establishing a Black capitalist force of

job- producing phenomenon, uplifting their conditions and lives. The *cultural nationalists* on the other hand, conscious over forming a Black identity as sign of gaining freedom; emphasises more on issues like natural hairstyles, African dresses-language, scripting Black drama and literature. While the *revolutionary nationalists* strives towards control of the Blacks by the Blacks, necessarily by establishing their own political banners and platforms to contest, gain leadership rather than being dependents on others. Interestingly with pertaining inequalities all around, it cannot be get down on to how much level the American society has in practice turned out colour-blind in today's time-frame[15].

Discriminatory Practices at Work-Spaces

Do the Blacks still face dilemmas, especially in the culture of work? In order to arrive at a detailed understanding, J. R. Feagin in his observational study tried finding out the ground realities of the Black- Americans positioning in the varied work spaces. To his surprise, he found the new innovative ways in which they continued to get discriminated although more indirect, less coercive; from tackling gazes/ avoidance in public spaces to physical judgements based on skin-colour, they have to deal with all in everyday life[16]. In their path-breaking work on racial differentiation, R. Light, V.J. Roscigno and A. Kalev introduced the new cultural fabric of 'merit' in justifying unequal treatments for established exemplification. In industrial settings, the important position holders often explain 'merit-basis' as form of equality, side-lining the inner ascriptive biases within minds and meritocracy in this sense turns vulnerable towards adopting a rhetorical discourse of institutional coverings.

The globalised US dismisses any means of open racial practices as well as state legitimised differentiation today but still there is something in its air mixed with heavy constructional imbalances, hidden within vaults. As a matter of fact, the differentiation of skill-achievements, educational backgrounds and wealth-status often arrives as obstacle for the Black-Americans. Alongside getting equated with their historical affiliations, they too get calculated on the scale of their productivity ratios which nonetheless adds to their structural impediments. What Light, Roscigno and Kalev found was that most Black-Americans working in varied work-place settings confesses of 'discriminations-faced' in some sort or others, compared to attitudes towards White co-workers; be it not getting deserved preferences, unexpected dismissal from work, casual mockeries to humiliation faced. The top authorities however deny all such kinds of accusations and become un-comfortable when asked on the same. Citing an instance, the writers' states in their work on how a deputy clerk of a court eavesdrop whispers and racial commentaries on her; particularly mentioning as 'nigger', which was quite heart-breaking on her part. Covert discriminations in the forms of strategic 'segregation' of an entire racial group from an industrial setting or a residential area have also been quite normalised.

Perhaps it cannot be disagreed that in American conditioning, structural inequalities stays as a lingering tension although it got clarified in official writings[17].

Table-1: Typology of Social Closure and Discrimination by Level and Explicitness[17].

Explicitly Observed	Implicitly Observed
Macro Level: State–sanctioned Discriminatory rules/ norms (e.g., Jim Crow Act)	Macro Level: Structural-Historical Disadvantages (and Relatable Imbalances in Human Capital)
Micro Level: Overtly Racial Discrimination and arising Harassments	Micro Level: Covert Discrimination (e.g., Soft Skill Requirements, False Meritocratic Claims, Differential Rule Application, etc.)

Skin Notions: through the feminist lenses

Some time back, I came across an interesting piece wherein Bollywood actor Priyanka Chopra Jonas herself expressed on encountering 'in-different attitudes'. It so happen that in one of her flights to the States, an air attendant abruptly interrogated her to take the economy class-loo at the back, when asked. Looking surprised when Jonas intervened 'Pardon me', the attendant recognising her (later) asked for an apology and directed towards the business class. What become important at this juncture are the still established notions of Black versus White versus Brown; all sealed safely and deeply in minds. Even Dr. Shashi Tharoor admits of facing unequal treatments, back in his Geneva days when he participated in a drama and was supposedly offered a wicked old man's role obviously for his skin irrespective of talent. It is no surprise that the perception of 'superiority' even in today's era remains synonymous with lighter shades.

Anne Anlin Cheng after noting the contagious 'beauty regulations' in most cultures, penned how these valued-standards have a long-standing dangerous effect on women's health as well the overall growth of societies. At the verse of facing most vulnerability, stands the woman of colour; for whom their skins turn into great worries of scrutinies/ judgements often citing as 'exotic'. Desired notion in that sense comes across as politico-socio-cultural construction favouring privileged few. Tag-lining 'Black is Beautiful' often exposes and injures the mainstream privileges, attacking their utmost core values[18]. With the advent of televisions and other forms of mass communications/social medias, women of colour often gets intimidated by the repetitive lime-lightings of 'lighter tone' as a route towards achievements, success and happiness. No wonder it sensitise their role-positioning and sooner or later they too aspires to be into the dominant beauty race. Feminists often questions how this conception of dark shade interwined with 'bad' or 'ugly' got established tacitly as well as got contagiously spread in the South? Most importantly how conspicuously non-white or dark shade came to be linked as a taboo? Even in Indian context, we cannot overlook the skin colour scaling of a bride when it comes onto forming affinal bonds.

In an interesting psychologically induced doll test carried out by Kenneth and Mamie Clark, they observed that most African-American children pointed the brown dolls as bad while preferring the white one instead. This study highly puts a black hole on the often claimed value-neutral socialisation process in the Western nations, opening further debates and discussions on the same[19]. As a mode of fetish, beauty has often been constructed as per the dominant perceptions and gets reproduced over ages in order to fix its viewers stunned. Often this same beauty too becomes a nightmare and cause of judgement for the ethnic-based, racially featured women. The concept of a balanced- neutral beauty standard is hard to crack at the zest of an all-ideological rooting of 'fair & confident' or 'white & bright'. Being beautiful is still acknowledged as a culturally valued, wonderful emotion, hiding within itself varied aspects of objectifications, experimentations, judgments as well as evaluations[18].

Conclusion

With the varied connotations on evolutionary processes and growing prejudices on white-skin, ideas like *'social Darwinism'*, Spencer's *'survival of the fittest'* and *'manifestdestiny'* became more or less dominant in societies[20]. With further investigations on the racial-categories around late 20th century; however an approach towards a scientific lens took its formative ways. Crediting this to Franz Boas's conceptualisations alongside his pupils, they strongly made it a point of non- existence of correlation within race, language and culture[21]. It was revolutionary in the sense taking inspiration from Boas's theory, many anthropologists too started approaching race from a new dimension; demanding more justifiable categorisations of the varied beings, someway realigning their kinship-relations and lineages[22].

Reacting to these changed approaches, were held several talks/ discussions/ seminars both at the local-global platforms and one such powerful symposium was of the *American Association for the Advancement of Science in 1966*, advocating the newer socio- anthropological positioning on race-identity and rejecting the previous biological linkage. Henceforth, the journey of race as an identity saw its 'definition' developing; from cultural-traits to skin tones to body build ups to facial identities to cephalic index.

After a lot of deliberations, the term today arrived at a more socio-philosophical ranking rather the earlier biologically linked. But it cannot be neglected that race is still a pertaining phenomenon in the West, more so in the States; where the White- Americans always have had a sense of ignorance, pity, inferior vibes for their fellow Blacks.

However no experiments or valid evidences are yet found supporting the 'intellectually-inferior' connotations as expressed by the Whites[20]. The vulnerabilities/ dilemmas/ harassments of the Black-Americans stay amidst strict state sanctions[23]. In their report, the Human Rights Watch stated the on-going discriminations against the Black-communities, the Arabs and Muslims as well as anti- Semitism and unequal treatments against the Roma, gypsies and the migrant labourers as a serious global concern[24]. Perhaps the last hope of an equalised-dignified epoch remains only when race as a doctrine is looked upon as a practical, normal trait rather a marginalising mechanism.

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