



Canadian Multiculturalism and Racialised Psyche: A Critique of Dionne Brand's "Sans Suci and Other Stories"

Afsal P C*

PhD Scholar

Department of English

Annamalai University, Annamalai Nagar

&

Dr. S. Karthik Kumar**

Assistant Professor

Department of English

Annamalai University, Annamalai Nagar

Race is an entity that has deeply scarred modern human civilization. It painfully remains a scourge even in the otherwise most advanced societies. No other criterion of social divide may have been instrumental in cruelty by man against his own kind. Peoples of different eras had to undergo slavery just because they belonged to a race which some other thought to have been inferior to themselves. The atrocious nature of life these people had to lead was sometimes aggravated by their inferior status in terms of their being minority viz-a-viz a religion practised by a majority. This has sometimes been classified as ethnicism. There have been many sub-variations in racial or ethnic conflicts and problems related to them in the modern times. But, to start with they might have involved only the Whites and the Blacks.

In the modern times, the racial issues are inevitably linked with subjects of colonialism and imperialism. The conquest of non-White territories by the European White colonizers has always had a tinge of colour prejudice in them. Even in the historically modern times, the non-Whites were referred to as savages by the masters of the so-called superior race. The people thus branded were not sometimes even accorded human status by the dictatorial White masters.

But, modern historians and ethnographers have brought out theories and facts as to the more than decisive role of the coloured races in the building of modern history. The case of America, which is typically a modern civilisation without a medieval or ancient past, is a glaring example. The involvement of Black Negroes in the nation-building-process of the now United States of America is a heroic chapter in world history. Black writers and poets have in their

works taken pride in this fact. Prior to such historiographical evidences, historical books were prejudicially made up by interested White scholars.

The racism of the western societies maybe juxtaposed with the castiesm of societies of south-east Asia. In India, for example the castiesm is still prevalent although in a different way and is a determinant even in its current politics. Such is the case with racial demarcations of the various identities of the west. America and Canada are the two countries where political eventualities are still determined, overtly or covertly, by racist ideologies.

Dionne Brand's fiction can be taken a whip lash fallen on the back of the racialised Canadian society. Though the country's constitution offers varied Acts to ensure that all the cultures are well accommodated against the mosaic background of Canada, the society's deeply ingrained colour consciousness and prejudices are still beyond reparation. Dionne Brand has incorporated myriads of episodes of events pertaining to the Black race in her works. Her portrayal of such experiences is only seemingly fictitious, but originally historical. Her novels are the mirror reflexions of both her present and past generations' experiences as Blacks in their homeland as well as in alien spaces. Indubiously, Brand's politics to exhume the history of the Blacks during slavery and subsequent colonialism and further now postcolonial and neo-colonial era through her narratives is nothing but to make the current coloured generation and whoever are affected and sympathise with the evil that the remnants of slavery and the exertion of colonial powers still are not extinct entities. In one or another way the fancy concept of belonging to a superior race or master's psyche is not uprooted from most of the minds of Canadian society. The discriminative consciousness based on colour always jumped out of the bag whenever a conducive ambience prevailed. According to Dionne Brand, the Black community of Canada are marginalised and ghettoed. The settlers with their traditional identity suffer all because of the colour-prejudiced mentality of the Canadian-Whites. The Whites consider themselves superior to the non-Whites or the coloured and inflict varied forms of mental and physical trauma on them. Though not in a large scale, the attacks against the Blacks should be of a serious consideration.

Dionne Brand in her collection of short stories entitled "Sans Souci and Other Stories" dovetails the current situation of Black women with that of the previous centuries. There is a visible shift in time and space in her short stories. The collection reminds the readers of the previous plights of the community and thereby they can make comparisons between the current and past situations of them which will make them realize that there has not been effectuated any desirable progress for the betterment of the people. Black women undergo various adverse experiences like rape, early motherhood, child labor, hunger, etc. In the story *Sans Souci* the central character Claudine is a victim to rape at the age of thirteen. She was brutally raped and was made pregnant. Her life afterwards was more miserable. As a young girl, she was at wits end as what to do further: "He had raped her. That is how her first child was born. He had grabbed her and forced into his little room and covered her mouth so that his mother would not hear her screaming" (12). In the story *Train to Montreal*, discrimination based on race is portrayed to be a

recurrent happening in Canadian society. The protagonist has been made subject to racial discrimination. Wherever it is, - be in a queue for tickets or on board train – the character is made more and more aware of her belonging and she always feels displaced. Many times she has regrets for being at places where she and her clan are prone to such discriminations. She is publicly molested, teased and jeered at by a White man. Her experience during a train journey is narrated here in the story. All through the journey she felt marooned amidst the White co-passengers. The White children aboard the train also insulted and sang songs to tease her. The songs implied their discomfort to accommodate a non-White, especially a Black, into their public places. The Black woman felt awkward amongst them. She wanted to disappear from there. She was afraid of being conspicuous and so she was searching for a hiding place inside the train:

She was always afraid of the white children, meeting them on the street corners. She asked herself, how can she be afraid of children? Where she grew up it was a sign of insolence to look adults in the eye. These children started blankly and rudely at her. They were singing.” (24).

These lines are indicative of the preoccupied color consciousness of the White people of Canada. Though colonization and subsequent Black slavery came to an end, though the Blacks share equal status in constitution and law, the age-old color consciousness is still prevalent in its primitive form. Though highly educated and “civilized”, the evil consciousness is still watered and nurtured in the minds of them. This colour consciousness and the feeling of belonging to a “superior race” seem to have been imparted to the coming generations also. That is how the colour conscious children also follow the same path of teasing and insulting the coloured whenever they get a chance. The White children aboard the train were singing in normal tone at the beginning, but at the sight of the coloured lady amongst them, they started singing insultingly: “At first their voices sounded like children’s, but then she heard a raucousness, a kind of sneer in the way they sang. Then she understood and was frightened” (24). Even the children of the Whites do not spare a Black figure in public. The character was feeling completely displaced. The songs of the children were growing bigger in her ears:

They were singing “Wops and frogs, Montreal is full of frogs”. She understood and was less willing to get up from the grey vinyl seat. The wheels of the train cackled to the song of the children. She wanted to stand, go to the washroom; but the song frightened her, made her sit still. Maybe they would see her and start singing; maybe they don’t see her yet. She should stand up before they did, before they started singing about “Wops and niggers.” (24)

Dionne Brand gives the picture of how a Black woman is segregated and marginalized from the mainstream Canadian life through the character of *Train to Montreal*. Black women seem to have developed certain sensibilities to discern where they can be apt and where they will feel odd. Their comfortability and free movement are dependent on the number of the White men

around them. The more the White people, the less they are comfortable. The sensibility stems from a kind of sadomasochism also. The Black women themselves feel inferior to the Whites. The sadomasochist feelings are created against their experiences throughout centuries. But, the sensibilities and inferior consciousness can be annihilated in the current “civilised society”. The factor that is still in the way to assimilation of cultures, and eradication of evils like colour prejudice and discrimination is the metaphysic feeling of belonging to a “superior race” or an “inferior race”. Such mental constructs as well as the concepts should be rooted out from the psyche of both the factions.

The so-called civilized society of Canada is not completely out of the superior-inferior consciousness still. The colored woman again becomes the butt of racial discrimination. Her free movement is curbed by the sight of a group of White men in front of her. She slows down the pace her walk so that the crowd of White people will not notice her. She was running to see a way to exit: “Finally, she met the escalator, then “nigger Whore!” a rough voice behind yelled hoarsely. She kept walking, slightly stumbling onto the clicking stairs. “Whore! Niggers! Whore!” (27). The description is not made against the background of slavery or colonization. It is portrayed against the background of the current Canadian society, at a time when the constitution of the state provides equal rights to each cultural minority.

The third story in the collection *Blossom, Priestess of Oya, Goddess of Winds, Storms and Waterfalls* is rather an account of the Black women’s resistance against the gender and racial discrimination. The central character named Blossom is portrayed to be an epitome of resistance against exploitation of varied forms on black women. She stands for the equal status of human beings irrespective of gender, race and colour. Blossom comes to Toronto from Trinidad on a job offered by a man. But, when she landed in Toronto, she knew that she was cheated. Then she takes up the job of a babysitter. Having checked her luck in many affairs, she starts to work in the house of a White doctor. There she is attempted to be raped. Blossom’s protest against the evils start with that incident. Unlike other characters of Dionne Brand, Blossom protests against exploitation of any form. She squeezes the finger of the White doctor until his face become red and then black. Blossom stands resolute even when the police comes for inquiry. She demands her full pay as she quits the job there. She drags the doctor to the swimming pool and tries to drown him. The policemen are shocked at the reactions of the Black lady Blossom. Blossom’s protest against the White master’s exploitative nature was demonstrated the next day. With her companions Peg and Betty, Blossom made a parade with placards that said “Dr. So and So was a rapist”. Three of them were singing, “We Shall Not Be Moved”. They pulled the doctor by the tie and threatened him to cut off his genitals.

Blossom stands different from the other Black female characters of Dionne Brand. Whereas the character of *Train to Montreal* let her agitation and protest expressed only to some hushed up words like, “I should have answered, cursed, smashed his mouth”, Blossom practically did them all. Blossom is not affected by any moulded or conditioned sensibilities and

consciousness. She does not seem to care about her belonging as others do. She knows that all are equal on the earth. According to her whoever does wrong shall be punished. That rigid consciousness of Blossom frightened even the policemen. Later, blossom enters another phase of her life. She turns to be an 'obeah woman' and people on Vaughan road considered her an epitome of revolution. Blossom now stands for the protection of the Black people who are suffering.

Picturising Blossom as an obeah woman, Dionne Brand aims at reviving the Black traditions and legends to impart confidence and power to resist against discrimination and exploitation. Blossom was inspired by the words of Oya, the Goddess of winds, storms and waterfalls. The goddess appeared in her dreams and exhorted her to see the deplorable conditions of the Black people all over the world:

One night, Oya hold Blossom and bring she through the most terrifying dream in she life. In the dream, Oya make Blossom look at Black people suffering was so old and hoary that Blossom nearly dead. And is so she vomit. She skin wither under Suffering look; and she feel hungry and thirsty as nobody ever feel before. (40)

Brand makes Blossom a symbolic figure to conjure in the history of the Blacks which was notoriously of suffering. The phrase "the face of Black people Suffering was so old and hoary" invite the reader to the museum of long suffering of the Black people. It also solicits the reader to see if the situation is different now. Thus the obeah woman Blossom is an inspiring symbol against exploitative and discriminative consciousness of the general.

The story *St. Mary's Estate* is a carriage to take the readers to the past scenarios the Black people were stuck in. The author has adapted a flashback mode here. The story speaks of slavery and colonization and the resultant impacts on the Black people. It throws light upon how the coloured slaves led their lives during those periods. Though it was the homeland of the Blacks, they were warded off from the places where foreigners were living. The estate and the house in it are the remnants of the period of colonization and slavery to remind the reader of the plight of the clan. The colored have been suffering right from the onset of colonization. They were dominated and bossed around in their homeland. The author emphatically accounts of the pain and suffering she had to put up with in her childhood. She reiterates:

This is where I was born. This is the White people's house. This is the overseer's shack. Those are the estate worker's barracks. This is where I was born. That is the white people's house this is overseer's shack those are the slave barracks. That is the slave owner's house this is the overseer's shack those are the slave barracks. (49)

Dionne Brand wants to show the pain of sighting such monuments of history if that stands to remind only of adversities. Here the author seems to be oblivious of the rules of language, or may be deliberately in order to effectuate the real feelings of such experiences.

Though a span of thirty six years has passed, as she stands near the house now, the warning of her father is reverberated in her ears: “Do not go near the house. It is the White people’s house. It is their place and we are niggers” (49).

Brand incorporates the recent political issues pertaining to the Black people and their existence under the White dominated and racial discriminative society of Canada in the story *At the Lisbon Plate*. The media and the general people are much concerned with if anything adverse befalls a White person in Canada, whereas they keep mum against the carnages on the Blacks:

One polish priest had been killed and the press was going wild. At the same time, I don’t know how many African labourers got killed and, besides that, fell to their deaths from third-floor plice detention rooms in Johannesburg; and all that scribes talked was about how moderate the Broder bond is. (106)

Conclusively, the racial problems faced by Blacks in Canada have uniqueness in relation with those confronted elsewhere in the world as can be made out from Dionne Brand’s works. This is mainly because the assimilation process of interracial cultural mixing has been too slow in the characteristic Canadian context. Hopefully, this process will gain better momentum towards fixing the incongruities created by racial divisions and prejudices spawning in a conducive cultural environment.

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