

# IDENTITY CRISIS AND ROOTILESSNESS OF THE ARO AMERICANS: A JUXTAPOSITION OF LANGSTON HUGHES AND TONI MORRISON

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The problem of identity has always been a major theme of Black literature. Blacks were severed from their homes and hamlets, people and property and from the ties of blood knotted into all the relationship of communal life. Resultantly the past loomed large in their consciousness. They were uprooted from their ancient lands and were ruthlessly thrown into an alien land whose strangeness frightened them. They were forced to face unaccustomed problems, acquaint themselves with unfamiliar ways, learn alien languages and manage their survival in an entirely foreign environment. The severance of their ties with the past was a traumatic experience to them. They found themselves in a prolonged state of crisis and resultantly remained unsettled. The Blacks found themselves in a strange universe and they could not locate their place. Their loneliness which was awful had two dimensions. It was both unfamiliar and isolating.

The Blacks in America were forced to find new meanings for their old memories. Uprooted as they were, they tried to push new roots in American soil. They had to emerge as new men with a new identity. The fact remains that their importation to America created in them a psychological cleavage. As a result of this conscious effort to forge a new identity, a conglomerated personality was bound to emerge from the agglomerative milieu. At every

phase of American history, they have asked themselves. 'Who are we'? Where have we to go'? 'What is our future'? And their search for answer to these crucial questions is universal and is manifested in American literature. This is their quest for identity. The Blacks were the 'indelible migrants' and their colour obstructed their assimilation into American life. There were other migrants. But they had come to the American shores in search of freedom, equality and prosperity. The Black slaves were brought to the new land against their will. The New world denied them land, freedom and equality. The Blacks were completely stripped off their cultural heritage and kinship with their ancestral land. They were thrown out of the stream of their own history. The essence of American culture, especially the Southern culture, was the superiority of White race. They intentionally mixed up the idea of the "manifest destiny" with the "White man's burden" and discovered a rationalization for the perpetuation of slavery for more than three centuries, though they spoke about liberty and equality eloquently. Jefferson, in the Declaration of Independence, said: "All men are created equal that they are endowed by their creator with certain inalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness" (465).

The White culture segregated and disfranchised the Blacks. It tortured them both physically and psychologically and brought about a racial segregation in American Society. The Blacks were even stereotyped as a subhuman. So some blacks refused to participate in ordinary political activity

under the constitution and denounced it as "as a covenant with death and an agreement with hell" (Parker 324). Some White writers created false and debasing images of the Black people in their novels. Thomas Nelson Page, for example, presented the Black characters as brutes and savages in his novels. It was very difficult for the Whites, especially the Whites in the South to acknowledge the humanity of Blacks and their inalienable human rights.

The Whites in America needed Blacks to be kept below them at the bottom of the society in order to achieve and preserve their identities. The American Black is the “otherness” of America. The Blacks at the bottom of the American social scale carried with them the negative identity which is the sum of all that it must not be. A negative identity of a man does not create in him a sense of being at one with himself as he grows and develops his personality. That is why Douglas stated that “This Fourth of July is yours not mine” (99). It would not also create a sense of affinity with his community being at one with its past and future. People who belong to the lowest layer in the society can hardly experience and realize oneness with their individual selves, their community and the mainstream life of the country. The ‘otherness’ of the individual and the community is maintained scrupulously and justified on some ground.

White America has maintained the Black’s ‘otherness’ in its society, history and civilization and to do it they created new myths and concepts of

race and colour. A new pattern of culture also was created in which the Blacks were given an inferior place which symbolized their dehumanization. The Blacks in America were outsiders. They were offered a negative identity and this led to the creation of the most inhuman system of slavery in the world. The Blacks were segregated and their aspirations for integration with the mainstream life and enjoyment of equal rights were killed. They were even presented as buffoons and brutes in arts and literature of White America. Herein lies the significance of Negro writers like Hughes and Morrison. They were intensely race conscious and did their best to counter negative representations of Black people and promote black consciousness.

Hughes was not blind to the fact that the more truthfully they write about themselves, the more limited their market would be. Even if it meant profit Hughes was not prepared to make ghettos appear happy places, nor would he have transformed the plantations of the Deep South, into places of pastoral loveliness. This had to be done only if a writer was pandering to the craving of the Whites for exoticism. But Hughes always remained firm and never swerved from his determination to serve his people and be their spokesman.

Hughes' people are the lower classes, the urban folk: porters, bell boys, elevator boys, shoe shine boys, cooks, waiters, nurses, maids, gamblers, drunks; piano players, cabaret singers, chores girls, prostitutes, pimps and ordinary decent hard working men and women. His world is the inner city, especially Harlem. The coloured middle class or 'Black bourgeoisie' rarely appear in his works. The 'Black bourgeoisie' and their spokesmen denounced Hughes' work strongly. Benjamin Brawley, a Black critic went to the extent of saying that it would have been just as well, perhaps better, if a novel had never been published by Hughes and that no book ever issued reflected more fully the abandon and vulgarity of its age. Hughes' answer to him and many like him was, he never pretended to be keeping a literacy grazing pasture with

food to suit all breeds of cattle. Even when he was critical of the American Society, he dreamt that things would change in future. In his poem "I Too Sing of America" he says:

I am the darker brother

They send me to eat in the kitchen

When company comes

But then

I will eat with them

When company comes (2008).

Morrison tries to identify herself with the Blacks, She once, said: "If we don't keep in touch with the ancestor..., we are, infact, lost .... when you kill the ancestor you kill yourself" (344). Morrison's novels deal with a type of racism which comes into existence when White ideals, White philosophy and White requirements are forced to become the matrix of existence for the

Black race with its heritage of slavery, abuse, torture, agony and annihilation. Blacks, who had been ground into the dust under White heels, could not accept White patrimony and a White way of life. If such an alien philosophy is accepted and if such a method of survival is adopted, what would it do to the people of America, is the question that Morrison tackles in her novels. Through characters such as Pecola, Milkman, Pilate, Jadin and Son she deals with the rabid influence of covert racism. Her people are Black and to them a passive acceptance of their identity is never easy. Each one questions his or her place in a predominantly White American society. Along with questioning comes a sense of inferiority and inadequacy or even total derangement and death.

Langston Hughes and Toni Morrison are two dominant voices in the history of Afro

American literature. Both knew that even after four hundred years of life in America the Blacks had no major role to play in the scheme of life as designed by their counterparts. They are still alienated and face identity crisis. Hughes and Morrison are Afro American writers belonging to different generations in the history of America but their concern is with identity crisis and rootlessness. Hughes and Morrison were aware of the duties of black writers. They were intensely race conscious. They were also trying to forge a voice and identity out of confrontation with the dominant white American discourses.

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