

The Politics of the Label *Ethnic Writing*: A Critique on American Ethnic Literature

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Abstract

The objective of this paper is to problematise the tag of ethnicity with American Ethnic literature. From the very form to the broader thematic concern, American ethnic writing is coloured by socio political and historical concerns. The first and foremost questions regarding the canon is that of the tag of ethnicity attached to it. It is debatable and still being debated within and outside these groups whether it is more just and enlightening to consider these writers simply as part of the American mainstream or to stress the identity of each writer as a participant in an ethnic culture with its distinctive subject matter, themes and formal features. It might be argued that the label of ethnic literature given to it is part of the conspiracy to marginalise the creative expressions of these shadow citizens of united states, already made to confine themselves in the margins of American social life. This argument is justifiable and worth considering because a sense of inaccessibility still accompanies the genres perhaps mainly because of its ethnic dimensions. The period of postmodernism which clamours for a fair and equal representation of the creative voices of all types of minorities -ethnic, gender, racial, religious and even sexual. The genre of American ethnic writing is to be treated with equal regard the debate concerning its unshackling of the tag of ethnicity notwithstanding.

INTRODUCTION

The term ethnicity is a relatively new concept of group association which appears in the 1972 supplement of the oxford English dictionary. It refers to a whole range and frequently a combination of communal characteristics; lingual, ancestral, regional, religious etc... which seems to be the basis of distinctive identity. Ethnic characteristics were at first seen as survivals from preceding generations which would more or less quickly disappeared or else persist as sentimental associations. Ethnicity appears to be a new phenomena and a newly recognised one to nations formed by immigrations. The ideology of the melting pot which atleast in the US was seized upon as a form of assurance that the culture of the old immigrants would not be overwhelmed. Twentieth century nations frequently displayed a mixture of ethnic and social class stratification often with the one serving as a surrogate for the other. Ethnicity, combining interest with effect recurrently proves the stronger attachment and the most volatile source of domestic violence. Ethnic conflict within the soviet empire is likely to prove a major element in the 20th century world politics.

DISCUSSION

For our Eurocentric educational system, "Columbus discovered America", is

historical dogma which our children and teachers are destined to parrot and learn by heart eternally this discovery overlooks the simple but conveniently ignored fact that there lived an innocent community in their traditional socio cultural milieu before Columbus sets foot there and created reverse of blood before exterminating the native race. From this 'humble' start, the history of America and her creative endeavours team with tears and blood of certain silenced groups along with the joys and pleasures the other often at the expense of the miseries of the former.

The native American as well as the afro Americans brought to be enslaved by the whites and the immigrants in the nation - all other than with 'royal blue blood' flowing in their veins are second class citizens in US. American ethnic writing which possess a heritage of centuries, an alien fact to many of us is nothing but the wails, protests, and outcries for justice from the creative potential of these people. For them literature is not a vocation of the idle time, but a means of articulation of their angsts, hopes and protests and keep the whole world informed of their plight.

Among the literature of various ethnic group, that of afro american seems to be the most vibrant and lively. Theirs is unparalleled experience in human history, stripped off their native land, cultural, religious and lingual tradition, they were made to serve as slaves for their white masters in an alien country. The subsequent loss of identity form the major theme of their creative expressions. The history of African Americans stretch from slave markets of medieavel period through untold genocides to negro ghettos of modern America. They were, for white colonisers, a people of stunted intellectual of growth incapable of any creative exercise and teaching of whom would be nothing but futile exercise. Phillis vetley, a female who is the first african American to produce a literary work which had to attach certificates from sympathetic whitemen to convince the world that it is her own creative out put. Her writings held its sway over African American literature for almost a complete century towards the second half of the nineteenth century, Afro-American literature assumed larger meanings and witnessed changes corresponding to changes in socio political spheres. The struggles of this generation were no longer aimed at their recognition as human being by white man. By now, many african american have been emancipated in northern states and the southern states that witnessed movements for the abolition of slavery. the literature of this period is called 'slave narratives'. It unfolds the horrible physical and psychological experiences of the former slaves.

Another significant development in Afro american literature is that which emerged centering Harlem in New York city from 1919-1929. It is created by the large scale migration of the freed slaves of southern states to northern states and is inspired by the thoughts of W.E.B Dubois.

Black arts movement and black arts Reportary Theatre school are products of 1960s. Many of the educated blacks who examine their ancestral roots found to their dismay that they need to return to their african and islamic roots. Malcom X was a great hero of African Americans even before his embracing of islam in its true spirit and his subsequent parting from Elija Muhammed and his 'Nation of Islam'. His influence is

very powerful in the realm of art, literature and the silver screen of Afro Americans. Many literary figures came under the magic spell of his personality and thoughts , the most important one being Le Roi Jhons, influenced by Malcom 'X and embraced Islam and therefore came to be known as Amiri Baraka. Malcom X's autobiography by Alex Haley, a best seller, a classic, continues to be a source of inspiration for the epic struggle of black americans.

Informal historical criticism plus close textual analysis will give more clarity to our understanding of African American literature and the intensity of its social meaning. Afro American literature is reputed for linguistics and rhetorical innovations. The major concern of the genre are migration , racial confrontation, adjustment and the struggle for human and civil rights. Richard Wright, Ralph Elison, Tony Morrison, Alice Walker and James Baldwin includewell-known black American novelists. Well known poets of the genres are Langston Hughs and Amiri Baraka.

Although it was the first American literature to be created, Native American literature has been the last to be recognised and to some extent is still waiting for full recognition. Beginning with its first thousand years of oral tradition and continuing to the present time with writers in all the genres of literature, Native American , otherwise called American Indian, is an important element in the literary tradition of this country. Only recently it is thought of as appropriate to English Literature Departments. As late as the first half of this century Native American literature were more likely to be studied by cultural anthropologists, ethnographers and museum curators rather than English professors. The issues of identity and cultural alienation forms the matrix of thematic preoccupations of this group of writings. Scott Momaday and Lesie Silko include the distinguished writers of this group.

Hispanic American Literature comprises the literature of all those people of America whose native countries were once part of Spanish Empire. These mainly include Latin American countries. They were treated apart from blacks and whites and are often exposed to racism, hatred and violence just like any other ethnic minority. Just as African-Americans were described as 'niggers',Hispanic American were labelled with crude words such as "wet-black" and "spic". Many Spanish parents raise their children in American ways just to evade discrimination . All Hispanic communities share in common the need for cultural survival .This is a real issue for any Hispanic merican writer since it deals with the question of assimilation ; how much of culture should Hispanic American be willing to lose or supress inorder to participate in the main stream society. The answers to this question vary, yet this is an issue that all Hispanic American tackle either directly or in more subtle ways.

Asian - Americans who form five percentage of American society face with two stereotypical assumptions about them by the main stream. Firstly they are thought of as sharing similar beliefs and customs. Secondly, it is assumed that all of them are foreigners ignoring the fact that many Asian families have been living as US citizens for generations.These assumptions result in prejudice and discrimination in many forms and they are being denied the same same rights that other US citizens enjoy.

CONCLUSION

The label American Ethnic writing is very problematic. As the extensive literature on the theory of ethnicity proves, the concept is hard to define and Ethnic cultural practices are even more elusive constantly inflects what is worth highlighting here is subjective nature of belonging to an Ethnic group. In this sense, ethnicity is less a matter of identity than of identification with others who are perceived to share the same plight. Ethnic fiction could be defined as the literature of "cultural difference". Ethnicity as a "collective fiction" has gained great currency in recent years. It is helpful to be aware of the changing contents of the cultural difference. Ethnic group respond and seeks to shape new historical and political conditions. Too much stress on ethnicity as a collective fiction obscures its political dimensions. Ethnic American Literature focuses on the groundedness in particular cultural and historical experiences.

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