



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Vol. 3. Issue.4.,2016 (Oct.-Dec.)



INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA

2395-2628(Print):2349-9451(online)

THE GENESIS OF RACISM AND ITS IMPLICATIONS

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ABSTRACT

Racism, like Caste System in India, has great impact on the literature and life of people across the world. The socio-economic and political life of people depends upon the race to which one belongs. It is very difficult to escape from it. It is very difficult to give a simple and lucid definition as it a very complex phenomenon. There are two factors that have driven racism: ideological factors and socio-economic and political factors. The religious texts like bible can be cited to put forth the ideological factor and a text like the Origin of Species by Charles Darwin and the concept of Social Darwinism can be cited for socio-economic and political factors. As the Caste system was innovated in the Indian subcontinent, the concept racism was innovated in order to subjugate people belonging to particular race. The European values are projected as universal values in order to look upon 'the others'. It is very useful to have a thorough knowledge this concept called racism and neo-racism for better understanding of literature and socio-economic and political life people across the world.

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It is very difficult to give a straight, simple and clear definition for racism because it is a very complex phenomenon and any simplification of it will mislead the readers. Racism means: actions, practices or beliefs, or social or political systems which consider different races to be ranked as inherently superior or inferior to each other, based on presumed shared inheritable traits, abilities, or qualities. The Concise Oxford dictionary defines racism as: 'Discriminating against, or antagonism towards other races'.

According to Steven Rose, an eminent British biologist, racism means:

'By racism is meant any claim of the natural superiority of one identifiable human population, group or race over another. By 'scientific racism' is meant the attempt to use the language and some of the techniques of science in support of theories or contentions that particular groups or populations are innately inferior to others in terms of intelligence, 'civilization' or other socially-defined attitudes'.

The idea of race includes two elements:

1. The idea of race includes both biological as well as cultural element such as colour of the skin, religion, and behaviour of a group.
2. Both the biological and cultural elements combine in any definition of a racial group depending on the group and historical period in question.

The human biological characteristics such as skin, color, shape of the nose, type of hair, and the size of the skull were associated with ingrained cultural and behavioral traits established in the western world. It was widely believed that outward appearance of human beings had close nexus with their ability to use reason, capacity for civilization and the arts, and tendencies towards sexual behavior. Wherever the European colonizers went, they saw the culture of the colonized not as they were but as they expected/wanted them to be. It was a prejudiced opinion of the west on the east and Africa.

The concept of racism, like the Caste System in India which is rooted in religion texts like the Vedas, the Dharmashastras, the Manusmriti, the Puranas, the Ramayana, the Mahabharatha et al., is rooted in the Bible, the religious text of Christians. In Genesis chapter 9, verse 25 of the bible, the episode of curse of Noah on Ham's son Canaan, where Canaan cursed to the servitude to his brothers, gives license to the Christians to practice slavery in the later centuries. The middle ages were characterized by certain symbolism. One such symbolism is that 'otherness' was associated with blackness, wildness and monstrous elements. It was bolstered by the stories of the bible. In Christianity there is an association between 'darkness' and evil. Later these stories were often used to support the theories of origin of Africans and justify their enslavement by the Europeans to civilize them. Columbus set out his momentous journey and reached America in 1492, which he thought to be Asia. The picture of it he gives in the journals of his travels shows the western attitude towards the east. The east is associated with uncivilized, irrational, mystical and seductive. "Columbus was a man of his times. He believed in the one-eyed and men with tails, and mermaids. He claimed to have seen the mermaids on his journeys" Racism (P. 21)

The Indians of America had the double disadvantage. If they were human beings, they had to be converted to Christianity and provided with the alternative civilization; if they were not fully human, they were to be enslaved and their indigenous culture was considered worthless and expendable. There was an idea of closeness of American Indians and Africans to wild apes. Even the Indians were thought less civilized and they tried to civilize them by converting them to Christianity but could not do as there was no truth in their claim. R K Narayan, famous Indian novelist, makes a mention of this in his autobiography *My Days* and in *Things Fall Apart* of Chinua Achebe.

It soon became fashionable to have black slaves/ servants in the court and household of the rich people with finely dressed clothes to display their wealth. This resulted in the trade of black people. Black people from the West-Africa brought by European adventurers and sold in European countries. Even queen Elizabeth I had had a number of black servants. The prominent image of blacks and other people was that of brutishness and bestiality. The repressed desires and sexual anxieties of the age were projected on the black people as in Shakespeare's *Othello* in *Othello* and Caliban in *The Tempest* and the Jews as ugly, greedy venomous parasites (Anti-Semitism) in *The Merchant of Venice*.

After the formation of the Royal African Company in the middle of 17 century, the British involvement in the slave trade gained the momentum. The increase in the slave trade reinforced the view that the blacks are sub-human and they are inferior and the institution of slavery firmly established. The slavery generated large amount of wealth for British traders and planters, and this played a very important role in Britain becoming an industrial economy, banking centre, and dominant political and military power in the world. The slave traders and plantation owners had special interest in representing blacks as fit for slavery and no other fate. Edward Long, the son of Jamaican planter, opines that the blacks are separate species and comes to the conclusion that it is slavery that civilizes African people. Hence they must be kept slavery in order to be civilized.

The Slavery Abolition Act-1833 was an 1833 Act of the Parliament of the United Kingdom abolishing slavery throughout the British Empire. This act was a great loss to the slave traders and plantation owners. Therefore, they began to find new ways to bring back the blacks into their clutches in order to revive their profitable business of slave trade and plantation. In order to do that the whites began to cook many things for their economic profit. The important concepts are

1. The Great Chain of Beings
2. Social Darwinism
3. Eugenics
4. Thinkers and writers of Europe

The Great Chain of Being means all the creatures on this earth are created and organized in a hierarchical order from the God to lowest creatures. This theory was applied to the races by Europeans. According to them the four races categorized by Kant and others is organized in the hierarchy and the Whites placed at the top and the blacks at the bottom and they deserved to be enslaved as they are inferior.

Social Darwinism is the application of Charles Darwin's Theory of Evolution: survival of the fittest to the field of sociology and politics. As the strongest/fittest of the animals survived and weaker/inferior suffered and disappeared from the face of the earth; it is also true with the different races of the world. The concept of Social Darwinism was cited to defend genocide in Africa and India during severe famine in the latter half of 19th century.

Eugenics is the belief and practice of improving the genetic quality of the human population and maintaining the purity of blood such as movement of Anti-Semitism in Germany. It also means controlling reproduction of people with less desired and undesired traits. The western world especially America spent lot of money in Germany on research in eugenics and genocide took place to maintain the purity of blood.

The two greatest philosophers of 18th century: Immanuel Kant and David Hume evaluated the moral and intellectual ability of people by the color of their skin. They strongly believed that Negroes and all other species of men are naturally inferior to the whites. It is only country of the whites that is civilized and no other in the world. Hence most of the Europeans of this period believed themselves the most civilized and refined people on the earth. Thomas Carlyle is the high priest of new racism. In his essay *Occasional Discourse on the Negro Question (1849)* appealed for some kind of slavery and opined that inequality is the proper way for one to rule another one. He was supported by great intellectuals of that time like: John Ruskin, William Makepeace Thackeray, Reverend Charles Kingsley, and Charles Dickens.

New scientific racism was pioneered by Robert Knox. In his book *Races of Men*, he says 'race is everything' it is race that determines character, passion, destiny of the people. Superior races pre-dominated the naturally inferior one, and civilization depends on race. Samuel George Morton, Craniologist, started the study of skulls of various races and came to the conclusion that the bigger the skull, the bigger the brain and more chances of getting civilized. He declared that Africans, Tasmanians, and American Indians are not human beings at all as they are incapable of getting civilized due to small size of the brain.

Neo racism/ cultural racism

In many western countries like the United Kingdom, the United States of America and France and other countries there has been a debate on overt or old or classic racism and covert or new or cultural racism. Now, there is no mention of biological issues like color of the skin, shape of the nose, size of brain, and hair style et. al, but more focus is on cultural and ethnicity as most of the democracies in the world passed a legislation abolishing slavery and racial discrimination. The cultural racism is also known as neo-racism. In his book *Racism: A Very Short Introduction* (OUP) Ali Rattansi quotes a statement of Mrs. Thatcher, Leader of the Conservative Party in 1978 to show how the new racism is at work. Here I quote the same statement to explain that the racial discrimination ingrained the psyche of the west and it is almost impossible to root out from there.

'If we went on as we are, then by the end of the century there would be 4 million people of the New Commonwealth...here. Now that is an awful lot and I think it means that people are really rather afraid that

this country might be swamped by people with a different culture. And, you know, the British character has done so much for democracy, for law, and done so much throughout the world, that if there is fear that it might be swamped, people are going to react and be rather hostile to those coming in.'

In this speech of Mrs. Thatcher, there is no direct reference to old racism's biological issues as mentioned above. The speech appears to be a normal statement without any racial reference unlike classical racism. But the close reading of the speech reveals the natural superiority of white people and inferiority of 'colored' or non-white people. The cultural difference and way of life of 'New Commonwealth' (African, Asian, and Latin America people) in Britain has been considered a threat to its development. Here the Old Commonwealth- Australia, New Zealand and Canada- is contrasted with the 'New Commonwealth' of colored people. Covertly Mrs. Thatcher refers to cultural and biological inequality between white and non-white people. The connotation of the statement is that the people of New Commonwealth lack commitment to democratic values and rule of law; the British and white people contributed to democracy and rule of law and other fields profusely; that is to civilization in general. Hence, she claims the natural superiority of white people and natural inferiority of 'colored' people. At the same time she forgets the whites' unacceptable deeds like slavery/slave trade, innumerable massacres, wars, imperialism, racism in their colonies and the use of nuclear bomb in the World War II on Japan, killing millions of people. Even today the people of Japan suffer from that. We can include to that list killing of lakhs of people in Afghanistan in the name of regime change, attack and killing millions of people in Iraq by telling Saddam Hussein possessed the Weapon of Mass Destruction (WMD). Their real purpose of attack was controlling the production and supply of oil by installing pro-American rulers in those countries. It is nothing but neo-colonialism. Even today the racism is working underground and in different guise. The new or cultural racism is working openly in many western countries in the name of national security and job security to the native people. They say restricting the entry of non-white people is not racism but protecting the identity and territory of the native people. It is nothing but Neo-racism, and narrow mindedness as we see in Robert L. Frost's 'The Mending Wall'- 'The good fences make good neighbors'. The west is not ready to accept the east as cultured, civilized, grand, urbane, beautiful and rich; instead they projected east as ugly, savage, uncivilized, poor, and uncultured. That's why when they read about Indian culture, beauty, grandeur, richness in epics like the Ramayana and the Mahabharata which were composed before the Christ and the Bible, they could not digest it and wrote a play (Peter Brook's Mahabharata) and made a film of same title by the same writer to show that they were only tribal stories of savages and do not have none of the above mentioned qualities.

As Edward Said, Palestinian-American critic, exposes in his famous book *Orientalism* (1978), the Eurocentric universalism takes for granted the superiority of what is western and inferiority of what is not western. The west always thought that the east is an inferior 'other' and it is a sort of surrogate and underground self. The very language of the west is tainted as it represents the culture that professed the superiority of the west and inferiority of the 'other' or the east or the orient. The relationship between the west and the east is that of power, of domination and that of varying degree of hegemony. In any given society certain cultural forms are predominate, and privileged over others just as certain ideas are more influential than others. This kind of cultural dominance is called cultural hegemony by Antonio Gramsci. It is an essential concept to understand the cultural life in the western world.

Ferdinand de Saussure in his seminal book *Course in General Linguistics* (1915) states that the language is a system of signs. The nexus between a sign (signifier) and its meaning (signified) is arbitrary. That is the reason one object has different in different languages. This had great influence on French structuralism. But Claude Levi Strauss, a Cultural Anthropologist, differs with this opinion of Saussure. He says nexus between a cultural sign and what it means is not necessarily arbitrary. The evolutionary process in the human history gave us a sort of awareness about our environment. The basic mental operation consists in creating opposites: some things are edible, others are not; some creatures are dangerous, others are not; some people are beautiful, others are not; classification in terms of such opposition in which opposites are related to each other; because they express either the presence or absence of one and the same thing. In other words for Levi

Strauss, the structure of primitive thinking is binary: Light/darkness, silence/noise, clothes/naked, civilized/barbaric, beautiful/ugly etc. In these binary oppositions one is privileged and other is lacks it or marginalized. The west always associated itself with the privileged and good and positive in the process of constructing the language and negative things are associated with what is not western. That is the reason it is said that the language of the west is permanently tainted with discrimination and racist towards the 'other'.

A literary text, read from political perspective, is not a product of an individual author in the first place but a product of much larger culture which speaks through the author and conveys the political messages that the author may be completely unaware of; at the same time this does not give the writer immunity from what he said. Both are responsible for that. I quote here a few lines of *The Death of the Author* by Roland Barthes to prove the above mentioned point that is, the opinion of an individual of a culture/society is also the opinion of the whole group of people of that culture /society.

'We know that a text is not a line of words releasing a single 'theological' meaning(the 'message' of the Author-God) but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash. There is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture... the writer can only imitate a gesture that is always anterior, never original'.

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