

Haves and Have-nots, Black and White: Dichotomies at Work in Dionne Brand's Fiction

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Abstract

The paper “Haves and Have-nots, Black and White: Dichotomies at Work in Dionne Brand's Fiction” is an attempt to throw light upon the racial and socio-political and economic problems faced by the Blacks citing the life experiences of the characters of Dionne Brand's fiction. The racial and the class-division-imposed life situations and existential crises of identity Dionne Brand's characters confront, their intuitive responses to these verities, and the answers they fail to formulate into arguments of vehemence are investigated by the researcher here.

Keywords

Marxism, Class, Dialectics, Xenophobia, Race.

No phenomenon like the fact of human society being divided into classes has had a more decisive impact for man in determining the course of development of his society and its history. Though history had to wait until the first half of the nineteenth century to wake up to this realisation, the discovery of the truism has made the study of history simpler and clearer, at the same time helped in drawing up a plan for the future devoid of such divisions. Since the consolidation of thoughts and ideas corroborating and explaining the verity of this truth, contradictions stemming from this reality have got sharpened, especially in the realm of ideology. The bulk of ideological treatises and theories produced in support of one camp and against the rivalling thinkers is evidence enough to prove the sharpness of the contrast extant between the major confronting classes which the latter-day society has simplified itself into.

Race is an entity that has deeply scarred modern human civilisation. 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.

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The dichotomies have taken various forms during the course of history and incarnated in various corners of the world in master-slave, lord-vassal, ruler-ruled, and coloniser-colonised binaries. The most exploited, and less sung clan in the world which underwent these binaries is that of the blacks. Right from the inception of colonialism and indentured labour, the always-othered lot has been subject to the means of exploitation in the hand of the haves otherwise called the whites. Literature as tool to explore into the unheard atrocities released upon the blacks has been successful to bring out innumerable episodes to the front of so-called modern society.

Dionne Brand is a Trinidadian born Canadian writer of black experiences. She is a self-proclaimed Marxist and lesbian. She dedicates all her creative activities of only to document the class-oriented and race-ingrained society that was gifted to her clan by the colonisers. Dionne Brand is authoritative in her voices as hers is first hand experiences. According to Charity Becker, Dionne Brand is left with no other choice than portraying the social milieu of Canada as racist and discriminative as her double Caribbean-Canadian experience begets nothing else. In his study “Constructing the Mother Tongue: Language in the Poetry of Dionne Brand, Claire Harris, and Marlene Noubrese Philip” opines that Brand is “forced to deal with the history of slavery and blatant racism in the colonial period, and the subtle racism of postcolonial Canada” (64). But the narratives of Black people’s struggle found in the novels of Dionne Brand are mirror reflections of her personal experiences as well as the experiences of her ancestors. According to Nigel H Thomas, Brand’s literary productions are solely of the Black people—of Black heroines mostly with the values and cares centred on them.

Dionne Brand strikes at the root of the social problem by revealing her philosophy through her works. For her, in the final analysis, the prevalent capitalist social and economic structure of the society and the thoughts and the ideas conducive to that system are at the roots of the social inertias experienced generally in human life. She can be said to function like a teacher of Marxism to her audience. Marxist philosophers, right from Karl Marx himself, have laid bare the secrets of the capitalist system through their works and activities. Capitalist system exists feeding on the contradiction between the owned class and the working class. In the modern civilised society such a system based on the exploitation of the majority of the people by a few capitalists is ignominious and inhuman, a Marxist of Dionne Brand’s stature and education would agree. In the earlier epochs before the modern era it could have been inevitable that contradiction of this kind, divisions to various classes of people, existed. But, in the modern era blessed with the scientific knowledge and technological development, the existence of a divided society is irrational, Dionne Brand exhorts through her works. Such a social system based on exploitation of one class by another can be changed, the author believes as have all the Marxist thinkers done previously. To bring about such a social change, the contradiction between the working class and the capitalist class will have to be resolved through a revolution orchestrated by the working class over the capitalists.

Dionne Brand portrays her characters as always struggling against the inequalities and disparities they face in the society. There is always a dialectics active in every life situations of her characters and that is presented by the author overtly or covertly. At times it is between the haves and the have-nots, and another time between the ruled and the rulers, and some other time, between the colonised and the colonisers.

The dialectics is visible in her works in myriads of ways. During the period of slavery, it was between the slaves and slave masters. There are many characters who are portrayed to belong to this period of persecution. The woman folk of the Blacks is depicted to be suffering the most here. When it comes to colonisation and indenture labour also, these

Black people were at the receiving ends of sufferings. Now, during the postcolonial days, again the same people are being exploited by one or another of capitalist devices in order to mint money for them. Thus, all through the history that Dionne Brand tries to drive into the heads of the readers, the history that has always been ignored, and if presented, only in intrigued ways, we can see mainly two groups of people: the ruled and the ruler, or the colonised and the colonisers. The short story “St. Mary’s Estate” is a note on the sufferings of the Black people on account of having been colonised by the Whites. The deplorable conditions of the Blacks during colonisation have been given description here in the story. The slaves had to stay in the barracks. The memories from the past are nauseating for Jordann. The house that the White people had occupied during her childhood stands now as a symbol of the hardships her ancestors had to undergo. Now, the very sight of the house makes her boiling with anger in the memories of cruelties that were inflicted upon them:

I feel such anger and yet, still, my feet do not move toward it. So angry, I feel nauseous. “Fuckers!” I yell, but the wind and the sound of the sea lift the word and balloon it into a feeble scream. The uselessness of that sound stops me, and I explain to our friend who looks perturbed. “That’s where they used to live.” (48)

In the story “At the Lisbon Plate” also the colonised-coloniser dichotomy is highlighted. The lives of the people who live in the bushes, the Blacks, are portrayed here. Their reaction and protest against being invaded and colonised also have been given description. Beneath the colour consciousness, or beyond the racial discrimination, the struggle is between the two classes. It was the Black people who paid for any mishap that befall the Whites:

One day, in a village there, during the liberation war, two whites were kidnapped and the others, including Rosa’s brother, the priest, went into the village and gunned down a lot of people – women, children, to death, everything. (97)

The dichotomy between the Whites and the Blacks does not cease to be within the boundaries of colour issues. It primarily stems from the dichotomy between the classes. The Black people have been invaded by the Whites not to establish any colour superiority, but for the purpose of establishing European colonies over the Blacks to ply trades. The Europeans usurped and colonised the territories of the less powerful countries all over the world not for their culture to be expanded, but it was only for creating sources of varied resources including man power. Thus, in a close examination of things that factored into the racial issues, the class dichotomy is what always arrived at finally.

Dionne Brand also does not fail to see this dichotomy. She also concludes that it is not their colour or race that creates problems for the Blacks, but it is the capital. She declares capitalist system as the finally targeted enemy and reason for all the issues of the Black people. In her conversation with Christian Olbey, she admits that she is a Marxist, and says: “I guess that all my protagonists in the novels and the short stories at least, have been working class people because, first, that’s who I know, and, second, that’s who I’m interested in” (12).

Dionne Brand with her portrayal of the central character of “Train to Montreal” means to express that a Black woman in Canada has to be vigilant if she happens to walk down the public pavements of Canada or standing for train tickets. The adverse experience the character has to put up with seems to testify brand’s preoccupation: “She was always afraid of white children, meeting them on the street corners” (24). The White children always tried to insult the Black woman with their abusive diction and songs. The character tries to find a place to cover her as the White children started to sing: They were singing,

“Wops and frogs, Montreal is full of frogs” (23) She understood and was less willing to get up from the gray vinyl seat. The wheels 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 didn’t see her yet. She should stand up before they did, before they started singing about “Wops and niggers” (24).

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 starts 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” (28). 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.

In the novel *In Another Place, Not Here*, Dionne Brand documents the struggles taken up by the Black people by portraying the revolutionary characters representational of the heroic figures in the history of the Black race. Elizete represents the suppressed and the persecuted. Her first bitter experience was marked against having been born as a female on the earth. She has been exploited sexually and economically in the sugar cane plantations. Her life was cyclic with no change in her day to day affairs. She has to work in the field from sunrise to sunset. During night hours she succumbs to the carnal desires of Isaiah. Isaiah catches her at junctions to scupper her attempts to run away from the place. Once she gets caught, he inflicts untold atrocities on her. It is not only the case of Elizete. All the slaves of the plantations are subjected to the same tool of persecution if they try to escape from there. Elizete, as a witness and subject to persecution and discrimination fancies running away after having done away with the Oliviere. Her words sear with agitation towards the present system: “I dream every day to break a shovel over his head which he plait in braids for he read in the Bible that he should not cut his hair” (11).

The fictional works of Dionne Brand hold a mirror to the problems faced by the Black society in terms of class and race. The binaries are found prevailing in its strongest forms especially in the promised land of Canada as is revealed through the characters in her fiction. The class-ingrained racial problems faced by the Blacks have uniqueness in relation with those confronted elsewhere in the world as can be made out from Dionne Brand’s works. It can be said that the assimilation process of interracial cultural mixing has been too slow in the characteristic Canadian context which Dionne Brand finds ground for her writing activities. 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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