

## **PORTRAYAL OF KALEIDOSCOPIIC VIOLENCE IN CHESTER HIMES'**

### **CAST THE FIRST STONE**

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#### **ABSTRACT**

*After the Harlem Renaissance of 1935, the African American writers got impetus to openly voice the unending sufferings of the Blacks under the dominant White race. Racial differentiation and physical violence in the forms of beatings, sexual molestation was perpetrated by the Whites on the gullible and suppressed Blacks. The deep-rooted violence of American culture, the absurdity of American racism, sensual lives of petty black criminals and their victims in Harlem and the need for the organized revolution in the struggle for social justice and equality are the major themes of the most of African American writers like Chester Himes. Himes has written more on the Blacks privations basing on his own personal experience. He characteristically emphasizes the racialized conflict in abroad and how this latent racism is then directed towards communities of colour at home. He goes on to criticize the black community by separating those African Americans who are concerned about this latest eruption of racist violence and those who would prefer to ignore it. 'Cast the First Stone' is a highly autobiographical work portraying a white protagonist set entirely in an unidentified jail. Mere physical beatings were insignificant compared to sexual and psychological violence perpetrated by the dominant race over the blacks. Violence was meted out in different forms in the present novel. The present paper aims at portraying the kaleidoscopic violence exhibited in Chester Himes' Cast the First Stone.*

**Key Words: Harlem, Violence, African American, Racism**

## PORTRAYAL OF KALEIDOSCOPIC VIOLENCE IN CHESTER HIMES' *CAST THE FIRST STONE*

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**L**ike the British Literature, American Literature and Commonwealth Literature, the African American Literature has also emerged into a dominant one. Readers have come to understand the horrid times spent by the voiceless slaves in the alien soil. The deep - rooted violence of American culture, the absurdity of American racism, the sensual lives of petty black criminals and their victims in Harlem and the need for organized revolution in the struggle for social justice and equality are the major themes of the African - American writings.

In the early period, they were mere slaves and hardworking laborers. No black writer could artist out of them to record the abuse of their dignity. Everything was mentally stored and over the years emerging black writers started surreptitiously writing and after the Harlem renaissance from 1920 to 1940 a vast mass of African American writing was brought out. To have a deep exploration on the theme of race and violence, Chester Himes' novel *Cast the First Stone* has been chosen for the same.

Chester Bomar Himes was born in Jefferson City, Missouri, but his family moved throughout the south before settling down in Cleveland, Ohio. He was educated mainly by his dominant mother who doted on him. She was a light- skinned black who berated and humiliated her dark- skinned husband and children. From 1947 to 1953, Himes lived in New York City working another series of low-paying job. He became disillusioned at the racism and lack of opportunities in America. Himes has written more on the Negro's privations basing on his own personal experience.

*Cast the First Stone* is a highly autobiographical work portraying a white protagonist set entirely in an unidentified jail. *Cast the First Stone* primarily deals with the prison life. There are many similarities between the protagonist of this novel and the novelist. The novel unfurls the violent image of how repressive system turns volcanic and eventually corrupt. Himes' white searching for the meaning of life through the realities of human experiences and dreams has let out artistically the social relegate of American society for the black slaves. The novel reveals ample evidence of violence, racial segregation and sexuality in different contexts.

*Cast the First Stone* probes the indomitable universal quality of the human spirit to resist oppression and brutalization. He asks, 'can you abuse, enslave, persecute, segregate, and generally oppress a people and have them love you for it?' (156). In *Cast the First Stone*, there is a galaxy of secondary black convicts who remind readers that the race and racism are part of American dilemma in virtually every phase of social and institutional life. Moreover all prisoners, black and white, become part of the constitutive metaphor of the prison as the human dumping ground of capitalist structure.

With a volatile world often verging on tragicomic apocalypse, Munroe in *Cast the First Stone* redeems himself from the nameless chaos of prison life. When the upper hand was with the dominant white people, the subjugated black slaves were violently abused and denied any rights due to them as human beings. Any small offence or negligence would be at once punished physically and mentally.

In *Cast the First Stone*, Himes almost accounts for the autobiographical experience he underwent in the Penitentiary. Jim Monroe, slightly resembling the author, narrates the horrifying violence meted out to the convicts in the prison. Before being arrested, he wanted to sell just a ring stolen from the robbery to a 'son of bitching pawnbroker' at Chicago, but he was nailed down by the cops and what they did to Jim is described in the following;

I could feel the cops hitting me in the mouth, hanging me by my hand-cuffed feet upside down over a door, beating my ribs with their gun butts; I could feel the blood running down my legs from where the handcuffs pinched them

on the anklebone.... I might have stood in longer if'd lose consciousness. But there had been too much pain and not enough hurt to lose consciousness (17).

Even among the jail staff, there occurred violence and the superiors always maintained their hierarchy by inflicting injuries to the juniors. Munroe narrates:

About nine-thirty I saw Captain Warren came running into the dormitory. He went into the office and got Captain Roe and ran back outside with Roe hobbling along behind him. There was a cut over his left eye and his glasses were gone and blood was running down the left side of his face. He had his pistol out and as Roe went outside he drew his also (32).

Warren had his overalls over his uniform and he could not get out his pistol. He got up and started unbuttoning his overall to get out his pistol and Johnson hit him again. He hit him in the mouth and up beside the eye the first time and knocked off his glasses and they were 'busted all to hell'. Himes writes, 'Even if old Fuss face had got his pistol he could not have seen him to shoot at him' (33).

Jim Monroe, the protagonist of the novel, tells that he has been singled out from the beginning after his homosexual affair with Mal. At one occasion, when he was reluctant to obey the orders of Warren, Captain Warren opened the door of Jim's cell and said, 'Get a shovel that will warm you up' (46). Jim was ready to react immediately and continues, 'Kish came up behind me and held my arms and Warren slapped me twice in the mouth' (49).

Kish held Jim for a moment longer to see if Jim would put up any resistance but Jim did not move but he kept saying to himself, 'so he hit me, he hit me. I am not going to take that. I am damned if I take that' (49). He tasted a little blood on his lips. Thus he was injured by the wardens in the jail. Jim Monroe has his own physical strength. Jim wiped the back of his hand across his mouth. He felt that his lips were swelling. But the other lookers-on giggled.

Apart from the human humiliations and hurts Jim experienced in the Penitentiary, he was shocked by the bug's bite during night time. A truckle of pain crept into his body. He

began at the base of his spine and flowed down his legs, up his back. It came in a rush and the pain, the itching, the biting and the cold were simultaneous. Continual physical beating occurred in the Penitentiary just to scare the disobedient convicts. Guard Warren adopted this approach whenever he noticed some irregularity in their behavior.

Warren didn't heed to Monroe's appeal, rather he hit him. Monroe caught the blow on his arm and backed up. With every fast step he kept braving himself for the blow across the back of the head. Violence breeds violence. Here Monroe decided that if Warren hit him, he would kill him. When Monroe was taken to the jail doctor for the treatment of cramps, he had to witness violent scenes there too. The doctor was very unruly. He could have hit Monroe. The narrator says:

But if he had slapped me that morning there would have been a dead Monroe or a dead doctor. More than likely a dead Monroe. I never saw but two convicts who had killed guards... Both of them had been beaten on the head until they were slap-happy. But they had killed the guards before my time (81).

The nurses were exceptionally rough and impatient on those occasions. It seemed as if they hoped every one they shot would drop dead so they wouldn't be troubled again. On one occasion two of the convicts had stolen guns from the guards but their hands holding the guns began to tremble. The guns dropped to the ground as if the strength had gone out of the hands that held them. Suddenly there came a burly man called Cody, a uniformed guard. He came up to the two convicts who had the guns. He slapped one of them on the side of his head so hard it laid him his full length on the floor.

In the melee, the convict humped aside. He fell on the back of the bench, slid slowly off, and crumpled to the floor between the benches. Himes allows Munroe to describe the death sentence meted out to the convicts:

And there were some who were killed by the due process of the law. They were electrocuted and then the prison doctor ran a long thin needle through their hearts. There had been quite a lot in the newspapers about Doctor

Snodgrass. He was the one who had killed the girl. The newspapers were full of it all during the trial and after the conviction and they got full of it again, shortly before the date of execution (132).

Monroe had bitterness towards the physically disabled convicts. He was getting 'tired of all the death and violence' (196). When the cripples were taken to another part of the jail, Monroe was relieved. Those cripples were a sensitive lot about the surgical jobs on their stumps. Monroe finally felt that he was fed up with the jail life. He was, 'tired of hearing and seeing and feeling and learning of the perfidy and degradation of convicts and of myself, tired of murder and rape and jobs and punks and hacks and monstrosities' (205).

Before coming out on parole, Monroe got vexed with life. He almost made up his mind to kill himself but he didn't know how to do it. He narrates:

My mind quickly turned over a number of ways I could kill myself. I could borrow a knife and cut my throat but his picture of the coloured convict who had gotten his throat cut years ago in the 5-6 dormitory came to my mind and I discarded it. I couldn't hear the thought of all that blood slavering from my mouth and nostrils. I thought of cutting my wrists with a safety – razor blade but I was afraid somebody would see me and try to save me before I died... Hanging would be the best, I thought. But I couldn't think of where I could get enough rope (243).

When he finally understood that he could not kill himself, he gave up the idea.

The convicts in *Cast the First Stone* often get into fight while playing the poker game. Starrett went after a knife and his rival Dido was also given a knife. It was in all shapes a knife fight. Monroe felt like vomiting on noticing this scene of violence. That much scenes of violence have horrified even sturdy and strong characters like Jimmy Monroe. Himes, in the select novel, has brought to the fore the element of violence which ravaged the lives of African American Negroes. Life was not a bed of roses for them. They had to carry on their days with the pecking problems of violence thrown at them.

Chester Himes uses the theme of violence, in *Cast the First Stone* to project the absurd nature of the American society. This theme is so predominate the essence of his fictional work as to bring out the hard – boiled life led by the early slaves and later day American black citizens. The protagonist of the novel becomes inescapable victims of violence. The characters in the novel are therefore forced to lead marginalized lives without any strength, physical or moral, to voice their protest. For them survival alone, amidst the horrifying atmosphere, is the sole purpose in living.

Himes has theorized the blacks' religious or militant movements as large scale scams. He says that they are merely secondary attributes of racism. As he states in his autobiography, violent action, not language, is the sole and viable response to a discourse that is already controlled by the enemy;

Every black person in America knows how to fight racism, whether he will do it or not, whether he will admit to this knowledge or not. Whether he is willing to risk his life for quality or not, deep in the heart of every American black person is the knowledge that the only way to fight racism is with a gun (Absurdity 27).

Violence is to be regarded as a response to violence, but also to a generic confusion emanating from questions of identity, nationality and cultural affiliation. Violence occurs at an individual level but is meant to dramatize the predicament of thinking black people in a racist society, epitomized by Himes himself.

In *Cast the First Stone*, Himes lets the readers have a firsthand experience of the prison life with all its racial abuse, violence and the umpteen illegal activities going on either with the connivance of the warders or with their ignorance. More than racism, violence took the upper hand in the convicts' lives. Himes scars of oppression experienced in the jail have come out through the narration of James Monroe, the white convict. His main focus has been on revealing the oppressive forms of experience that remain within the prison system of America.

James Monroe, like Chester Himes, was terribly beaten to death to make confession of his crimes by the police. He experienced a lot of physical pain and moral hurts both at the police station as well as inside the Penitentiary, 'a potentially annihilative American institution'.

A primitive form of barter capitalism existed there with the permission of the prison hierarchy. The prison's political structure is animated by the pure application of power from the warden to his deputies to the guards. Not only had that even amount the prisoners there existed power games but within shifting patterns of class, case and race they managed to establish and sustain a paradoxically viable community. A coal detail is a job which was previously handled by black convicts. But Jim, being white, was given this tough work as a special punishment. Moreover, from his first entrance into the prison dormitory he is sized up by veteran convicts in largely sexually or homoerotic terms.

Monroe's early experience revolves round the violence of prison life as a new prisoner. Jackson beats up a guard. Thus Himes percolates into the problems of race gender and class as they are reflected in curiously involutes forms within the power structures of prison life. For outside majority culture and the prison are inside culture. He has aptly used is explanation to reveal an unknown community for the white establishment. By turning critical gaze on the convict community, Monroe manages his condition while avoiding the grosser manifestations of violence, degradation and dissolution afflicting most of the rest of prisoner population.

Towards the summation, when Monroe was taken to prison farm, he was conscious that the hideous and absurd features of the Penitentiary have not destroyed him. American racism invalidates justice, humanity and the possibility of love between men and women by means of violent measures. It provides absurd strategies for rationalizing racial and sexual cruelty. Thus, the interconnections of race and violence in the United States of America has been brought to light with reference to Chester Himes' *Cast the First Stone*.

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