

**Racism and Identity: A Study of Omar Tyree's *Leslie*****M.A. Mohamed Iqbal Hussain**

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**Abstract**

Racism and Identity are found as common issues among Afro-Americans. They are one of the lower class people in America whose forefathers were brought to America during slavery. After eradication of slavery system the poor Negroes remained staying in America and their generations were given name as Afro Americans. Racism is discrimination, a treatment under which a particular group of people are ill-treated or treated badly by upper class people. Identity is an individual's characteristics by which a person is known or recognized. These two issues are found as major issues among Afro-Americans. They are facing racism in their day-to-day life because of their color. They are also suffering under identity as they do not know about their backgrounds. The study focuses on analyzing these two issues which are pictured by Omar Tyree in one of his novels *Leslie* (2002). It is an attempt of analyzing those issues in the point of view of critics and scholars. Omar Tyree is one of the leading figures in current Afro-American literature. Most of his novels are the portrayal of racial issues in America.

**Key Words:** Racism, Identity, African Americans, Ethnicity, Discrimination

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Afro-Americans are encountering serious issues in their day to day life in America; one of their ordeals is certainly their issue of identity, the question of Who they are? What they are?. Discrimination based on one's color, nationality, and ethnicity is racism, which is an unfair treatment of a particular race due to their inferior position in society. Afro-Americans have become the victims of racism under which they are ill-treated or treated badly by whites. There is no importance given to their feelings in other words they are not considered as humans by whites. They considered black people being inferior to whites. Thomas Jefferson third president of America had written in one of his notes titled *Noted on the States of Virginia* as "Blacks, whether originally a distinct race, or made distinct by time and circumstances, are inferior to the whites in the endowments both body and mind." (Jefferson XIV)

This study focuses on analyzing the issues of racism and identity found in the select novel *Leslie* by Omar Tyree. Since writing is the expression of a writer's own experience on particular thing. Most of the writers have used to compose their writings based on either from their personal experience or other's experience. Likewise many Afro-American writers have expressed their worst racial and identical experiences in America through their writings. They have two difficulties in America one of them is their color and the other one is their identity as they are not considered as real Americans. Every Afro-American has to face these two difficulties in their life. The most hatred thing is they are called by many names distinguishing color. They are called such as Negroes, Blacks, Nigga and Coloreds. The term "nigga" was used

in the southern part of the United States. Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary defines the word "nigger" as a very offensive word for a black person. Even in the select novels characters used to call fellow blacks as nigga. Finally the term "African Americans" has been officially used by people to refer or call them.

Identity describes an individual's characteristics to others. It is important for everyone especially to the person who born to a mixed race parents or the one who have migrated from one country to another country. Identity of a mixed race person is always contradiction by nature. It is not easy to define the exact identity of that person. People are getting their identities from various sources. Everything gives a kind of source to the people as an identity. It can be given based on one's nationality, religion and even language. In an attempt to define identity and its sources Kathryn Woodward tries to give definition to this view in her book titled *Identity and Difference* (1997). She says: "Identities in the contemporary world derive from a multiplicity of sources - from nationality, ethnicity, social class, community, gender, sexuality-sources which may conflict in the construction of identity position and lead to contradictory fragmented identities" (Woodward 1). From this view one can conclude that identity is contradiction by nature and based on the sources it can lead a person to the act of confused.

Discrimination towards people based on color, ethnicity is called racism. It refers to any harsh behavior or vulgar activities which might have been shown towards any kind of people. Most of the time racism affects black people as they are considered being inferior humans due to their color. One of their worst experiences is people's way of glancing at black people. Black feminists and critics used to define racism by their own perspective. They have introduced a new theory by the name as Critical Race Theory (CRT), which helps others to understand racism. Derrick Bell, Alan Freeman, Kimberley Williams Crenshaw and Richard Delgado were the early founders of the theory. Derrick Bell is a visiting professor of law at New York University, who is considered as fatherly figure in the CRT movement.

Critical Race Theory is based on four major ideas given by earlier scholars like Derrick Bell. First of all CRT theorists consider racism as ordinary not aberrational. They mean

to say that one cannot avoid racism it is normal and it can be found in any society. They believe in revisionism, which is an idea of revisiting the history of America. They consider racism and race are the products of a society. Finally they strongly believe in describing one's racial experience through stories. As an effect of people's thought the term 'racial discrimination' existed which refers to the unfair treatment of black people under racial thought. Patricia Hill Collins, in her book defines racial discrimination as follows: "Racism, segregation operates by using race as a visible marker of group membership that enables the state to relate Black people to inferior schools, housing, and jobs. Racial segregation relies on enforced membership in a visible community in which racial discrimination is tolerated." (Collins 95)

The effects of both racism and identical quest have changed the life of Afro-Americans including writers too. Most of the Afro-American writers used their writings to describe these changes as writing is one of the best tools to describe one's view on particular thing or to describe the sufferings of people. A novel is a narration of past through the characters presented in it. Sometimes it can narrate some truthful historical events that happened. Novels written by African Americans mostly depict the role of racism among African American families. They too reveal how racism influenced in their families and change the living style. This was clearly mentioned by Cheryl Wall in his book titled *Worrying the Line: Black Women Writers, Lineage, and Literary Tradition*. He points out that "Many African American-authored novels contain rich depictions of African American family life, and many of those novels depict the influence of racism on African American family life." (Wall 8)

Omar Tyree an Afro-American by born is one of the leading twenty first century novelists whose novels depict the sufferings of Afro-Americans under racism and identity. He is the best of example for Cheryl Walls overview of African American literature. Being an African American Tyree gives the portrayal of his people's sufferings. One of his novels *Leslie* is the best example for this. The novel tells the story of Leslie, an Afro-American college girl facing racism through her life. Poverty took a major part in her family after his Haitian father's ambition was destroyed. In earlier part of the novel the readers came to know her family members were living in different places since the tragic event happen to her father. Her father

Jean Pierre a Haitian born man came to America with the dream of owning a French restaurant. As he was black he was denied in giving opportunities and his dream became failure as no white landowners came forward to sell their lands to him. The result has separated the family his father, mother, brother, and sister went to different places to run their life.

Leslie's and her siblings' identity became doubtful by intermarriage of their parents. Her mother Anne was an Afro-American by born and her father Jean was a Haitian. Their nationality was questioned and doubtful as they have different national backgrounds. They do not know whether they are Americans or Afro-Americans or Africans or Haitians. Often dispute have arisen among the siblings regarding their exact nationality. There was a clash in the family between two different cultures. Clashes have arisen among nationality, religion and language of Leslie and her siblings. They were in a difficult situation to decide about their exact identities. They do not know whether English is their mother tongue or not. Their father's mother tongue was French hence he wanted French to be the central language of the family. They also get confused in following religions. Her mother follows Christianity whereas their father follows Haitian religion of Voodoo. These clashes made Leslie to search for her real identity.

In one of the incidents in the novel Leslie's brother Pierre argues with Leslie about their nationality. He wants to be an American. He did not like his father's way of having dolls and speaking to it (According to Haitian Voodoo religion dead's spirit has power to control). Leslie's mother Anne died of HIV and after the funeral they went to restaurant as a family reunion. Pierre gets annoyed by seeing doll of their mother in his father's hand and he was speaking to it. During their argument Pierre expresses his hatred towards this to Leslie as follow: "Whatever, man. We are American. We ain't never even been to Haiti" (Tyree 129). On the other hand her sister Laetitia considers herself as Haitian. She likes Voodoo religion and has believed it.

Laetitia married a man whom she loved. They have two children later has found her husband had illegal relationship with a woman. She worries about her life and plans to get back her husband. She wants to kill the girl whom her husband loves by Voodoo methods. Americans consider Voodoo as an evil religion, being an Afro-American she too believes that she can take

revenge on the girl with Voodoo. She tells about her plan of killing the girl by Voodoo methods. Leslie objects and asks her whether she knew everything about Voodoo for that she responds to Leslie as follow: “You know.... we are Haitian, Leslie.” But Leslie denies it instead she argues that they are Americans. She replied to Laetitia as follow: We are American, daddy’s Haitian. Ain’t even been three before.” (Tyree 139) From their conversation it is understood that the siblings have different view regarding their background. They are not sure about their exact identities.

However Laetitia was adamant in her decision and she went to see the priestess of Voodoo to take revenge on the girl. Once she enters and sits near to the priestess whose eyes are closed. On seeing Laetitia the priestess told her that she was an outsider. She said pointing Laetitia as follow: “You are an outsider.” Laetitia reveals her real purpose of visiting the priestess and later answers for her comments she answers to the priestess as follow: “And then... like you said, I was an outsider, because my father was Haitian and he wanted us to speak French. But...” (Tyree 307)

Thus the novel *Leslie* also has serious racial issues which put the characters in suffering. It mostly affects the protagonist Leslie and other major characters. Leslie often gets acquaint with racism whenever she travels in bus. She has to face the boys who are sitting in back side of the bus. They used to tease her by referring her color. Once when she goes to her sister’s home suddenly one among the boys called her as **blackened one**, which affects her mind a lot. She does not know how to answer or face them individually. Realizing her weakness she simply keeps her mouth shut and blames them in her mind. She thought that “Calling a girl black in the ghetto was the worst sin in the Bible! The color black had become the most terrible thing in the world for a woman to be” (Tyree 29). This kind of incident gives her hatred feelings towards everyone. By the way she begins to hate others due to her worst experience in racism and poverty.

In one of the events in the novel Leslie’s hatred feelings have shown a college girl Kaiyah Jefferson. She was asked to collect data about black people by her professor. In order to interview black people she came to the house where Leslie lives with her other roommates.

Jefferson interviews everyone except Leslie. She told this to her professor and he wanted her to interview Leslie. Again and again she came to meet Leslie to take her life as a documentary finally she gets angry with Kaiyah Jefferson. Leslie blames her and expresses her hatred being a poor black girl. She compares poor black people to Frankenstein, a novel by Mary Shelley. She says:

“Do you realize how white people look at us when we’re poor? They don’t look at us as human anymore. We become..... Frankenstein or something. Then they act as if something’s special about us being smart, and knowing what’s going on in the world. As if we’re not supposed to have brains and feelings anymore. And now you’re just supposed to take whatever the hell they give you. (Tyree 222)

Most of the Afro-Americans doubt that each and every activity of whites have racist thoughts. They strongly believed definitely racism will be there on their every action towards them. In the novel *Leslie*; Leslie’s roommates Yula and Ayanna are arguing about slavery and reparations while returning to home. They entered in the house by having some serious discussion. Leslie finds them with that serious discussion and she asks them what they are talking about? They told her about their discussion and too demand response from her. The response given by Leslie was powerful in thought and have full of truthful ideas. She replied to them as following:

“it is racist. Everything America does is racist. When they hire you for a job, its racist. When they fire you, its racist. When they deny you a loan, its racist. When they give a loan, its racist. And when they lock you up, its racist. Even when they let you go, its racist. You know why? because America always wants to know if you’re black or if you’re white. And that’s racist, a preference or a prejudice for a particular race. And they damn sure have one on everything that they do!. (Tyree 268)

The feelings of abomination make Leslie to involve in some horror activities. She was made to believe that she has a power of a priestess in voodoo religion. She begins to kill some

characters; at first she has killed a girl who has illegal relationship with her sister Laetitia's husband and then a general. Finally she was arrested while fighting with her roommates. A black policeman namely Gilbert was appointed to enquire the case of Leslie. They consider that Gilbert was a right person to enquire her; she would narrate everything to him as he is also an afro American. During the enquiry process was liberal in his investigation however his higher officials doubted his sincerity. They started doubting that he was trying to save her as she belongs to his community. He feels hurt when his officials talk to him doubtfully. He says himself about it, "No matter how much I prove myself, they still feel a need to test me. And I'm not saying that I'm a perfect investigator by any stretch of the imagination, but neither are they". (363) Indeed he was very sincere in his work; even Leslie blamed him when he enquired her seriously. She compared him to the protagonist Uncle Tom in Harriet's novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. When he called her she was a suspected murderer she replied him as follows: "And you're an Uncle Tom here to capture a runaway slave for your master". (Tyree 373). Hence the novel ends with the punishment given to Leslie. Her sister and father have tried their best to save her life but they cannot because of racism since she was an Afro-American.

Thus racism and identity issues can put down the life of its victims. The only way to avoid these issues first of all we human beings should change our mind as everyone is equal under the view of God. Once people's view has changed the world will be the happiest place for Afro-Americans.

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