

**Astonished not Angered: A Reading of Zora Neale Hurston's
*How it feels to be coloured me***

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Abstract

The present paper attempts a re-visiting of Zora Neale Hurston's autobiographical essay, *How it feels to be coloured me*, deconstructing it as a potent document reflecting the Blacks' existential predicament full of anguish and displacement. The personal essay serves as a lucid gushing forth of the inner recesses of a Black's (woman's) heart, bringing to universal understanding the fire of anxiety, turmoil and melancholy as experienced by not just the author herself but also her Black community as it existed in the United States at that point of time. Through my paper, I not only propose to flick off dust from Hurston's slice of soul as was powerfully rendered by her in the form of her essay but also aim to thereby kindle a ubiquitous flame of sensitization against the evil of racism that still continues to challenge as also stigmatise our so-called progressive and egalitarian social set up.

Keywords: Black, humanity, self, trajectory, assertion.

"I'm so tired of waiting,
Aren't you,
For the world to become good
And beautiful and kind?
Let us take a knife
And cut the world in two-
And see what worms are eating
At the rind."

----- Langston Hughes, *Tired*

To live is to grapple! But also to eventually triumph!

Human existence seems ever ridden with predicaments, struggles and despair. However despite all the perils and sorrows that we encounter I believe there is something luminously enduring in

this existential blob of darkness called life, that replenishes the sagging, the despairing human spirit and prods it to march ahead on this dusty road of life with undying hope and sacred courage.

Of the many existential stigmas/challenges that humanity has faced and struggled against and is still combating, the one of *racism* has been and is horrendous! People in different parts of the world have been and are still being subject to this man-engineered tyranny whereby discrimination is wrecked upon humans on the absurd basis of their skin's colour. Discrimination of any kind, at any level is abominable and unjustified; it's not a crime but a sin against humanity! How can we possibly fathom or disintegrate, analyse and justify concepts like race, colour, creed and cruelly segregate and ill-treat our fellow brethren when humanity itself has been and continues to be a colossally vast and ever-evolving anthropological narrative? Discrimination on any basis and against anyone is an evil, an abysmal facet of human civilization, a deep malady that should be gotten riddance of.

"Black Lives Matter" is the freshest of anti-racism responses to the still-present menace of racism in our modern world, in a progressive society and that too like that of America that boasts itself of being a benevolent, all-assimilating melting pot of cultures and races. The callous and spine-chilling killing of a Black, George Floyd by a white policeman (that triggered the counter-racism movement *Black Lives Matter*) only proceeds to ratify ourselves as a flawed humanity, a highly hypocritical, a cruel, boorish one whose sensibilities lack genuine and basic human sensitivity, thoughtfulness and compassion.

Talking about America, racism is not something new there. Racial discrimination against the Black Americans in the United States can be traced back to the colonial era. Since the very arrival of the first Africans in the early colonial times and after the American Civil war, most Africans were 'made' slaves and those who weren't enslaved were forced to bear atrocities like lynching, acute discrimination, the diligent following of the barbaric *Jim Crow Laws* that enforced racial segregation in the southern United States. The *Civil Rights movement* – a political movement advocating abolishing of institutional segregation of Blacks in America spanning from 1954-1968 under the iconic leadership of Martin Luther King, and the *Harlem renaissance/The New Negro Movement/The New Negro Renaissance* that grew out of the Great Migration of the Blacks from Southern America culminating in a cultural and artistic revival of arts, literature, music in the Harlem neighbourhood of New York city, -- can be conveniently considered as the most potent of the Blacks' collective rebuttal of the white oppression and negation of the Blacks, their bodies, their spirits, their very existence. Through these two aforementioned powerful responses, the Blacks actually initiated a whole new trajectory of both political and cultural affirmation that was to pave a solid way towards their confident and dignified future!

Literature produced by the Harlem renaissance people i.e. the African Americans like Richard Wright, Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston and others coalesced into an organic and powerful discourse of a collective intellectual and emotional expression of the fettered and tortured Black body and spirit. Truly fulfilling the very purpose of literature as an agent, a catalyst for social change, the writings of the aforementioned Black stalwarts and their ilk, did wonders in reviving the devastated and the diminished Black spirit, infusing in them the fundamental force for life and a desire to claim their rightful space in a race-crazy, demonic world.

Zora Neale Hurston (1891-1960) shines on as one of the key figures of Harlem renaissance. A prolific writer, she has left behind a rich, moving and highly efficacious literary legacy of essays, plays and novels. Her essay “*How it feels to be coloured me*” published in *The World Tomorrow: A Journal Looking Towards a Christian World (1918-1934)* in 1928 stands iconic as a poignant autobiographical piece of a Black’s reflections on what it felt and meant to be a Black among whites. The very title of the essay comes to succinctly yet deeply speak volumes about how not just Zora but any Black person would have felt on realizing or rather on being ‘made’ to realize that he/she was not a white but a coloured person/entity. The essay is written in a manner that gives the readers a comparative glimpse of Zora’s life up to thirteen years of age in Eatonville, Florida, and later from the age of thirteen years in Jacksonville. The world is seen from the eyes of Zora, the child and is rendered with all the fluidity of truth and emotion that she experienced then. On reading the essay, it appears that every sight, every vision left its imprint on the impressionable soils of her heart and mind, and wallowing in its elemental force she set out to write a document of discrimination and despair in the most detached, upfront and brave spirit. Observing her environment and her place in it, she courageously muses, “ Even in the helter skelter skirmish that is my life, I have seen that the world is to the strong regardless of a little pigmentation more or less. No I do not weep at the world – I am too busy sharpening my oyster knife..” (Hurston 7)

Perspicaciously she talks about the difference in class among the ‘whites’ themselves when in the very beginning of the essay she delineates how the southern whites seemed less privileged than the northern ones as the former rode horses and the latter cars while crossing their Negro town. The attitude of her Black townspeople was also polarised as they “never stopped cane chewing” when the southerners passed, while when the northerners passed they were “peered at cautiously from behind the curtain by the timid.” (2). Zora recounts how she would greet the whites passing by and “sing pieces” for them for which she’d be given some coins. To me, her initiatives in greeting and singing for the whites who passed by is emblematic of her pure, free and highly individualistic nature/being that could not be cowed down by the faintest attempts of ridicule or constriction. She loved who she was and lived uninhibitedly. To me, Hurston in her nascent too, was an amazing blend of deep intelligence, inner emancipation and bravery.

The fact that she was coloured hit her only when she landed in Jacksonville, a whites' place, a place unlike her all-Negro town where everyone was coloured. However a tremendous amount of self-assurance and aplomb come to the fore when after mentioning how in Jacksonville despite "someone is always at my elbow reminding me that I'm the granddaughter of slaves", she hastens to dismiss slavery as an obsolete reality, a cultural snag that doesn't bother her anymore, and retorts, "The operation was successful and the patient is doing well, thank you." (7)

She embraces her past, her Black pedigree with utmost warmth and openness. She doesn't feel ashamed of it, nor is weakened by it in any way. Only at times, while traversing her life's pathway with the whites co-existing by her side, she is led to feel her '*colouredness*', her *coloured otherness*: she utters "Among the thousand white persons, I'm a dark rock surged upon, and overswept, but through it all I remain myself.." (10) As such we see that the lurking presence of her *colouredness* never seems to actually abandon her and she tends to feel it too, even if in a very fleeting, tenuous way. Though not explicitly explained, but may be her *colouredness*, the whole barrage of the racial trauma embedded so painfully in the collective consciousness of her African American brethren's beings, of her being, is perhaps that something that she wants to slaughter "... give pain, give death to what, I do not know.." The black and white dichotomy of her existence seems omnipresent to her reminding her of her *colouredness*. A musical night experience where she sat apart from her white counterpart makes her deeply feel the colour-chasm separating the two souls as if they were two continents set apart by an ocean, "He is so pale with his whiteness then and I am so coloured.." (13)

Hurston quite philosophically and poetically expatiates on race and on beingness. She thinks of herself as nothing but as a human-being, affirming that only " the cosmic Zora emerges. I belong to no race nor time.." Her talk meanders to spirituality, to God when she expresses that she finds herself as a mere "...fragment of the Great Soul that surges within the boundaries.." (15). This understanding, an affirmation in the only *One* that dwells in all who inhabit this Earth resonates with the idea of equality of all beings and negates any man-made/constructed paradigm aimed to subvert humanity. Addressing God as the "Great Stuffer of Bags", and herself as one brown bag juxtaposed with a white bag, a red bag, Hurston efficaciously brings home the idea of unification of all beings who are quintessentially the same. The 'jumble' inside all the bags – brown, red, white, yellow remains the same, the colour of the bags might differ: but is the colour so important after all? In the same vein, what's inside of us humans is what matters, not what's on the outside (white, black, brown)! At another level, the 'jumble' inside a given bag could refer to what makes up this entire world --- a mosaic of everything, all colours, and Hurston sagaciously reflects, "...a bit of coloured glass more or less would not matter. Perhaps that is how the Great Stuffer of Bags filled them in the first place – who knows?.." (17).

The whole trajectory of Hurston's life as limned by her in her essay bears testimony to herself as the warrior, fighting and braving the battle of her existence so ruefully defined by the *other* on the superficial and saddening basis of her skin's colour which was *black*. Through her dynamic

outlook on life and the society she inhabited, she actually comes to represent herself as the existential hero(ine) of her life grinning away the absurdity that enshrouds her and sometimes jolts her. The tapestry of trauma and absurdity about and around her sort of adorn her placement in the quagmire of life, and lend her the halo of a crusader determined to triumph. Her life thus becomes majestic, and her revolt most splendid, “..That revolt gives life its value. Spread out over the whole length of a life, it restores its majesty to that life..”(Camus 55)

Conclusively, I feel that the essay is by no means an abject monologue in self-denial or self-pity by a Black female writer lamenting herself, and her fellow Blacks’ helpless condition, instead it comes across as an enduring rhapsody establishing itself as a rather beaming and dignified portrait of self-knowledge, self-assertion and a heart-warming self-confidence of a little Black girl who celebrated her Black identity back then when she was a child, and much later too when she reflected upon her intriguing past!

Works cited

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2. Hurston, Zora Neale. *How it feels to be coloured me*. Applewood Books, Massachusetts, 2015.