

A Study On The Perspective Of 'Conflicting Interest' In The Detective Novels Of Chester Himes

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Abstract: Chester Himes is detective fiction writer of mainly the literary branch of African American detective fiction. Himes in his novels not only confines himself with a detective story but simultaneously, he tries to point the errors of his own community people and also the oppression of blacks done by the whites in a white dominated society. In this research paper, an attempt has been made to examine the perspective of conflicting interest in the novels of Chester Himes, especially in his three novels, *Blind Man With a Pistol*, *Cotton Comes to Harlem* and *A Rage in Harlem*.

I. INTRODUCTION

In this research paper we try to project some of the unique features of both the community whites and blacks, as presented by Chester Himes in his novels. Apart from the direct conflict between the whites and the blacks, they also have a life which we can call as their private or social life. Actually black and whites are two perpetually opposite colour and the human beings who born with that colour, it seems to be bound for them, that they will be the competitor in their upcoming future. But beyond this competition they also have to do something for their community and to get rid of this problem. So, here is the conflict, whether it is white or black, they cannot give up the competition with their competitor and on the other hand they also try to solve this problem by any means. In this chapter we try to present some issues which reflect this conflicting situation of the two communities' at best.

II. OBJECTIVES

The objective of this paper is to examine some conflicting interests of black and white community as seen in the novels of Chester Himes with special reference to the novels- *A Rage in Harlem*, *Blind Man With a Pistol* and *Cotton Comes to Harlem*.

III. METHODOLOGY

To prepare this paper we have used the secondary sources such as books, journals and references.

IV. DISCUSSION

In Himes' novel we see that Negroes have a strong bond among them. They always become the objects of whites' exploitation. So, sometimes they defend themselves against this exploitation as a unit." We are black", this is the common thing that tie them up in one stretch. Even some Negro cops also provide the opportunities to Negro criminals to flee. For instance, in *A Rage in Harlem*, the Marshal caught Jackson red handed in the process of making the money. But instead of arresting him and taking him to the jail he frees Jackson by taking two hundred bucks. The Marshal said that, "And being as you're colored man like myself, I'm going to let you off this time. You give me two hundred bucks, and you are a free man", (*Rage*, 7).

If a white person beats a black person among the blacks, then they take it as a communal insult for them. It can be a strategy for them when they feel trouble in the grip of law and they don't have any other way to escape, some intelligent blacks make the whole case as an insult for the whole black community. Thus they turn the personal trouble into communal. It is common that in this world a man can bears his or her personal insult, but if anyone comments on their

religion, society or on their colour, no one is ready to bear it. And to protest this or to take revenge against this, people are even ready to sacrifice their life. Some black know this trick very well and they make a well use of it to create trouble among the blacks. We have the incidents that if a black is misbehaved or a black is beaten by a white for even their personal quarrel, the other blacks always called it as a racial discrimination of the whites' on the blacks and protest as a group. When they describe such incidents they never tell that X (a black man) is beaten by Y (a white man), but instead of this they always used to tell that "a black is beaten by a white".

In *A Rage in Harlem*, in chapter 9, the cop is investigating in jail and asks question to a black female criminal. But that criminal behaves badly with the cop and so he slapped her. It is natural in any jail of the world, i.e. if a cop is behaved badly by a criminal surely any cop will beat him/her. Surely the cop makes a mistake that he should not beat the female because only the female police have the right to beat a female criminal. By seeing this other criminals shouted as "they's Killin' a colored Woman!", and they began fighting. So this incident shows us, that, blacks have the sentiment among them for their own people and sometimes they protest against the white as a group.

Black people are so much irritated by the laws and policies of white people that they don't want any intervention from the whites in their task. Even when two Negro fights, others don't want the white cops to interfere in it because they think once they fall in the grip of white's law it will make their condition worst. In chapter 14 of *A Rage in Harlem*, Jackson reaches in such a place where a fight was going between two Negroes and others forbid the white cops to stop the fight and shouting that "let them niggers fight".

Whenever a Negro sees another Negro in problem, especially with the whites, they always help each other. Even these black people have some secret codes among them which indicate the other that he is in need of some help. In chapter 14 of *A Rage in Harlem* one such code was mentioned, that is, "ah seed him" and Himes' said about this code "it was the code of Harlem for one another lie to white cops". When a black man sees that Jackson was questioning by a white cop he felt that Jackson was in need of some help and so by this code he tells lie to white cop and saved Jackson from that unpleasant condition. Then winking was another secret code for the Blacks which hint them to help in escape from the hands of whites. In this case, Himes comments that, "Colored Folks in Harlem didn't want to get caught whether they had done anything or not" (*Rage*, 94).

From the earliest times, Negroes are hated by the whites and not considered as equal human being. They are not considered as the same human being of flesh and blood created by gods. Earlier black people are not conscious about their lives. They are just happy to serve the Whites and earn a little to run their families. Chester Himes gives a description of this unconsciousness in Chapter 19 of *Blind Man with a Pistol*, where he describes the condition of Harlem's people before thirty years of the setting of the novel. It had been an open city then. White people had come in droves to see the happy, exotic blacks, to hear the happy jazz from New Orleans, to see the happy dances from the cotton fields.

Negroes had aimed to please. They worked in the white folks' kitchens, grinning happily all the time; they changed the white folks' luck and accepted the resulting half-white offspring without protest or embarrassment. They made the best of their rat ridden slums, their gingham dresses and blue denim overalls, their stewed chitterlings and pork bones, their ignorance and Jesus.

While the White sees the black as the lower class people, the Negroes view them as smart but thief and oppressors. The Negroes think that these whites become smarter only by stealing their creation or their resources. This is reflected in chapter 5 of *Blind Man with a Pistol*, when Mister Sam told Doctor Mubuta, "Yeh! And you've been trying to out-Tom the white folks, and you're surprised to find the white folks is stealing your talent, like they has stole everything you has invented." Negroes also invent some solution to get rid of this problem. Doctor Mubuta exclaimed that he has a solution for this problem and that is the only one and final;

We're gonna outlive the white folks. While they has been concentrating on ways of death, I has been concentrating on how to extend life. While they'll be dying, we'll be living forever, and Mister Sam here, the oldest of us all, will be alive to see the day when the black man is the majority on this earth, and the white man his slave (*Blind*, 22)

Gradually blacks realize their power. They discover that they have to be united if they want to fight against the whites. Whites take the opportunity of their disunity so they have to unite all the black and have to stand against the white power as a whole. They call this united power as the black power. In *Blind Man with a Pistol*, the speaker of the march for brotherhood says, "BLACK POWER! DANGEROUS AS THE DARK! MYSTERIOUS AS THE NIGHT! Our heritage! Our birthright! Unchain us in the big cor-ral!" (28)

Time is changing rapidly in Harlem and with the change of time mindsets of the people is also changing. The young Black generation of Harlem is educated and they are quite irritated with the exploitation, poverty and injustice of their race. They wanted to change the condition instantly and that's why they use revolution cum riot as the major weapon to do this. They want to destroy everything and desire to form a society where they will also have the equal rights as the whites. But in this party, there are not only the educated young but also the children from the middle class Negro family, who didn't face the racial problems but join in the march just in order to enjoy it and just for fun. And these children have done the most condemnable part of the march. Now the question arise that What made them riot and taunt the white police on one hand, and compose poetry and dreams complex enough to understand for a common man? All of it couldn't be blamed on broken homes, lack of opportunities, inequalities, poverty, discrimination — or genius either.

It is said that, the original homeland of Negro people is Africa. As the whites become aware of the Blacks they used to go to Africa and began the business of slavery. They bring the blacks to their country and begin to use them as their servant. The whites of other parts of the world never accept the Blacks as their equal human being. These people began to exploit them, humiliate them and put them in the lower strata of their social system. For the hundreds of years these black people have been working as their slaves and bear the injustice.

Though they bear all the injustice but they always have a mind that one day they will return to their native land and again will live a prosperous life, without any interference of the whites.

The land of Africa always fascinated them. Harlem or the other cities of America occupied by Blacks, is a city of the homeless. These people had deserted the South because it could never be considered their home. Many had been sent north by the white southerners in revenge for the desegregation ruling. Others had fled, thinking the North was better. But they do not find a home in the North. They do not find a home in America. So they look across the sea to Africa, where other black people are both the ruled and the rulers. Africa to them is a big free land which they can proudly call home, for there were buried the bones of their ancestors, there laid the roots of their families, and it was inhabited by the descendants of those same ancestors — which made them related by both blood and race. Everyone has to believe in something; and the white people of America had left them nothing to believe in.

From time to time these Black people try to get into the Africa. One such attempt is described in Chester Himes' novel, *Cotton Comes to Harlem*. A leader arranged a trip that he calls "BACK TO AFRICA – LAST CHNCE". For that trip he takes a thousand dollars and in return he promises to provide some facilities in Africa for their livelihood. The novel *Cotton Comes to Harlem* begins by describing such a trip. The very first paragraph of the first chapter of this novel is, "the voice from the sound truck said: "Each family, no matter how big it is, will be asked to put up one thousand dollars. You will get your transportation free, five acres of fertile land in Africa, a mule and a plow and all the seed you need, free. Cows, pigs and chickens cost extra, but at the minimum. No profit on this deal." A sea of dark faces wavered before the speaker's long table, rapturous and intent. "Ain't it wonderful, honey?" said a big black woman with eyes like stars. "We're going back to Africa." Her tall lean husband shook his head in awe. "After all these four hundred years." As the trip of back to Africa announced lots of people gathered with the hopes that these time they will reach their homeland. But the sits are limited and they have to pay to reserve it. So the leader selects the people and there is only a few who got the chance to go. The others who didn't get the chance to go were very sad.

Deke says, "Africa is our native land and we are going back. No more picking cotton for the white folks and living on fatback and corn pone..." (*Cotton*, 2). He talks about the reality. Once he said, "These damn southern white folks have worked us like dogs for four hundred years and when we ask them to pay off, they ship us up to the North, and these damn northern white folks don't want us-" (*Cotton*, 4). This reflects the unsettled condition of the Blacks in the North and South of America.

Actually, in Africa also, there is nothing that can provide them a luxurious life. It is only the trick of some more advanced black folks who want to earn some money by using the Blacks' weakness for Africa. Blacks do not have any permanent place in this world which they can call as their own. First they are taken from Africa; where whites have already dominate their land, culture and administration, and now they are in America, where they are directly place under

the dictatorship of white people. So, Deke, in the novel, *Cotton Comes to Harlem*, uses the Black's desire to get back to Africa as bait to earn some money. When his money, which he collected for his "BACK TO AFRICA" movement, was stolen, he went to a Colonel and this Colonel's speech shows us the real picture. He says:

But I'm sorry for those misguided people, even though their misfortune might turn out to be a blessing in disguise. I'm ashamed of you, my boy, an honest-looking American nigra like you, leading your people astray. If you knew what we know, you wouldn't dream of sending your poor people to Africa. Only pestilence and starvation await them there, in those foreign lands. The South is the place for them, the good old reliable Southland. We love and take care of our darkies (*Cotton*, 43).

The condition of Blacks in the south is worst than anywhere else, and we all know that. But the colonel tries to take them to the south and it hints that he also turns the Black race into a thing of business and wants to earn some profit by using them. The very next dialogue of Deke tells us that he is also aware of that, the blacks are get bored by the same kind of life in same place. So he urged the Colonel to take them to anywhere, even it is the terrible south, as he likes. Deke says, "Well, you see, sir, that's what I want to talk to you about. These poor people have got ready to go somewhere, and now since they can't go back to Africa it might be best they go back south." (*Cotton*, 43)

The Blacks are the victims of obsession with skin colour. If there was no color of the skin then they, probably, would not have to bear all the injustice and exploitation. In the novel, *Cotton Comes to Harlem*, Chester Himes also describes such a woman who has the desire for a white man as her man and to show the superiority over white woman. She is Mrs. Hill, who lived uptown in the Riverton Apartments near the Harlem River north of 135th Street. She was young, thought herself good-looking with the defensive conceit with which they convinced themselves they were more beautiful than all white women; ambitious to get ahead and subconsciously desired white men, hating them at the same time because they frustrated her attempts to get ahead and refused to recognize her innate superiority over white women.

V. CONCLUSION

Thus from the above discussion, it is apparent that, in Chester Himes' detective fictions, apart from dealing with the crimes, he also portrays the various issues regarding the relationship of blacks and whites, communal disharmony and the social issues at the heart of the conflict between blacks and whites in America. Almost in every field of society, religious, economical, political, and linguistic- reflects on social division, if only to suggest that the black people have been at the receiving end.

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