

## THE BURDEN OF COLOUR (Special Reference to the Poetry of Countee Cullen)

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### ABSTRACT

The history of America is filled with the annals of exploitation of Blacks especially the Afro Americans. They were brought in the New World through slave trade which was introduced by the white Europeans who were migrated from Europe to America. Throughout their lives they struggled hard to establish their identity. They strove hard to be accepted in the mainstream of American society dominated by the whites. The pain and suffering, of the Blacks can be observed in the literature written by the Blacks. Countee Cullen in his poems tried to portray the fibers and threads of the contemporary American society where the voices of the Negroes were stifled and the colour of their skin was considered as a burden by the Blacks themselves.

**Key words:** Slavery, Migration, Black Poetry, Black Identity, Afro- Americans, Suicide, Racial Discrimination, Harlem Renaissance, Industrialization.

### INTRODUCTION

“Yet do I marvel at this curious thing;

To make a poet black and bid him sing” (Color, 3)

Racial discrimination is to treat differently a person or a group of people based on their race or origin. The abolition of slavery, after effects of World War I, social and cultural segregation, denial of civil and political rights to African Americans by reactionary white governments of southern states, heavy industrialization, great migration of African Americans to northern cities from south rural areas, uplifted economic status and finally circumstances leading to great depression gave rise to a new mass culture during early 20<sup>th</sup> century in United States. African Americans sought a better standard of living and relief from the institutionalized racism in the South. The migration of Southern Blacks to the North changed the image of the African-American from rural undereducated peasants to one of urban, cosmopolitan sophistication. This new identity led to a greater social consciousness and African-Americans became players on the world stage, expanding intellectual and social contacts internationally. The progress, both symbolic and real during this period, became a point of reference from which the African-American community gained a spirit of self-determination that provided a growing sense of Black identity.

### POETIC DISCUSSION

Countee Cullen is a poet who attains fame during the era known as the New Negro or Harlem Renaissance. Moreover, Cullen is also known as the most popular Black poet and black literary figure.

In a publishing career that spanned over more than twenty years, Cullen produced five volumes of poetry;

Color (1925)  
Copper Sun (1927)  
The Black Christ and other Poems (1929)  
The Medda and Some Poems (1935)  
On These I Stand (1947)

If we analyze his poems closely, it appears that sometimes he is caught between the dilemma of universalism and his desire to portray the racial discrimination marked with injustice, exploitation, suffering, pain, and miseries inflicted on Negroes by the whites. Sometimes, he rejected the idea of negro poetry and he was of the opinion that there can be negro poets but not negro poetry. This sort of idea shows his desire to be a universal poet. Cullen denied that there is such a literary phenomenon as "black poetry." Cullen summarized his denial of "black poetry" in his "Foreword" that pertains:

"I have called this collection An Anthology of Verse by Negro Poets rather than An Anthology of Negro Verse, since this latter designation would be more confusing than accurate. Negro poetry, it seems to me, in the sense that we speak of Russian, French, or Chinese poetry, must emanate from some country other than this in some language other than our own. Moreover, the attempts to corral the outbursts of the ebony muse into some definite mold to which all poetry by Negroes will conform seems altogether futile and aside from the facts. This country's Negro writers may here and there turn some singular facet toward the literary sun, but in the main, since theirs is also the heritage of the English language, their work will not present any serious aberration from the poetic tendencies of their times. The conservatives, the middlemen and the arch heretics will be found among them as among the white poets; and to say that the pulse beat of their verse shows generally such a fever, or the symptoms of such an age, will prove on closer examination merely the moment's exaggeration of a physician anxious to establish a new literary ailment. As heretical as it may sound, there is the probability that Negro poets, dependent as they are on the English language, may have more to gain from the rich background of English and American poetry than from any nebulous atavistic yearnings toward an African inheritance." (An Anthology of Verse by Negro Poets xi-xii)

It cannot be denied that Countee Cullen was aware of racial injustices to Negroes. The truth is that he wanted to liberate the black American poetry from the shackles of the past. He is of the view that blacks in America are aliens and they are facing an exile from beautiful Africa which is their real home. As an alien the blacks are facing all sorts of tortures, injustice and insults. In the recesses of his heart there lies a beautiful and idyllic vision of his ancestral homeland i.e. Africa. It is interesting to note that Cullen knew nothing about Africa, as he never visited the land. Africa to him is not a geographical place but a sort of escape place for Afro-Americans. It is a visionary land which has been described as a larger than life symbol. Negroes in America, feel that Africa is a place where they may

find a place to love. It is a kind of feel of a lost paradise. In “Brown Boy to Brown Girl”, the young man assures his loved one that “these alien skies do not our whole life measure and confine,” but that “once in a land scarlet suns” we find a quiet place to love. (Color 5) Our love cannot be wholly satisfactory here, because we are in despised exiles, but let us take comfort in remembering a happier day for our people.

In “The Black Christ”, the Negro's former royal qualities are played up in many ways. Jim the handsome hero of “Black Christ”, is described as being of imperial breed, the dark heroine in “The Ballad of the Brown Girl”, comes of kings and her dagger had once been used by a dusky queen in a far away dusky dream lit land.

The two longest poems in Color are the most revealing examples of Cullen's use of the African theme. The first of these, “The Shroud of Color,” shows Cullen's racial attitude at the time. Weighed down with the burden of color, the protagonist of this dramatic monologue cries out in misery:

“ Lord, being dark, fore willed to that despair  
My color shrouds me in, I am as dirt  
Beneath my brother's heel...” ( Color 2)

The burden of the color and race is made all the more intolerable when he remembers the happiness that was once atavistically his, as he bathed a free man in the “sun dabbled streams” of his native Africa. In his despair he wishes to die; there is no purpose in struggling against such hopeless odds as modern living imposes upon him. But when he is convinced in a vision that there was struggling and suffering even in his beloved Africa, he is reconciled to living:

“Lord, I will live persuaded by my own.  
I cannot play the recreant to these...” (Color,34)

Cullen strongly believes that Whites consider Negroes of America a burden to the American society. They have lost all hopes along with their home land. Even in Christianity Negroes cannot find an answer to the questions of their dark and dejected hearts. He learns that Christianity is hypocritical, rejecting the Negroes. In “Pagan Prayer” he says;

“Our father, God: our Brother, Christ,  
Or are we bastard kin'  
That to our complaints your ears are closed,  
Your doors barred from within?” (Color, 21)

He wishes God were dark so that he could have some “precedent of pain” to understand the anguish of the Black man.

In several of his poems, Cullen arouses pity for himself and for his children. In the “Threnody for a Brown Girl”, he writes;

“We alone are children lost,

Crying in the dark” (Copper Sun, 3)

Cullen, unlike the other Negro poets does not glorify the black complexion but expresses a kind of distinction with implied inferiority;

“For only the rose and the rose should mate,  
Oh, never the hare and the hound,  
And the wine he poured for her crimson mouth  
She poured upon the ground” (Color, 179)

His identity as a “Nigger” remains a thorn forever in the breast since the time he was eight. At Baltimore where he stayed for six months one simple incident created in his mind lasting prejudice;

“And he was no white bigger,  
And so I smiled, but he poked out,  
His tongue, and called me “Nigger” (On These I Stand, 9)

Solution to this kind of insult and humiliation in seeking escape into death is the dominant feature of his poetry. In “The Shroud of Color” one of his major poems, Cullen prefers death to the wretched existence of blackness. He says;

“Lord, being dark”, I said, “I cannot bear  
The further touch of earth, the scented air;  
My color shrouds me in, I am as dirt  
Beneath my brother's heel...” (Color, 26)

Suicide emerges a means of release when the burden of the color becomes too hard to bear, and we are not surprised to note how many of Cullen's poems are concerned with the theme of suicide. “The Wise”, “Suicide Chant”, “the Shroud of Color”, “Harsh World That Lashes Me”, and “Mood” are some the best poems that deal with suicide. In “Mood” Cullen is very specific in his comment:

“I think an impulse stronger than my mind  
May some day grasp a knife, unloose a vial,  
Or with a little leaden ball unbind  
The cords that tie me to the rank and file...  
The meek are promised much in a book I know  
But one grows weary turning cheek to blow.” (Copper Sun, 27)

Death too, is a way of escape, bringing not only rest for the weary Negro but also an explanation of his suffering. The poor Negro girl at last knows:

“Why fevered blisters  
Made her dark hands run  
Neither wrought nor spun...” (Copper Sun, 5)

Because Lord Death is not prejudiced there is also a certain acceptance in death for the brown girl- an acceptance denied to her in this hostile world;

“With two roses on her breasts  
White candles at head and feet  
Dark Madonna of the grave she rests:  
Lord Death has found her sweet.” (Color, 6)

## CONCLUSION

Depressed by the treatment meted out to the Negroes Cullen articulates a sense of burden of color in his poetry. He submits to death not as a helpless creature but as a martyr who barter every tear he sheds to death. His surrender to death contains a seed of challenge to the white world of “Uncle Jim” (Color, 9) he resents the platitude of the racial superiority of the white who rips and blasts “the life of some poor wretch” (On These I Stand, 111) later on he is not prepared to bear the cross of oppression on his back only “Because my skin is black.” (On These I Stand, 8)

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