



Focus on Social Status of African Americans in the United States of America

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Abstract— Africans are brought into the United States of America by slave traders and are sold to the white people as slaves. Slave masters used the black people to work in the plantation and to do all sorts of other odd jobs. The black people served the white people for more than three centuries and have gone through different odd situations in their real life. They have historically faced significant socioeconomic disparities. At present a significant number of African Americans attained bourgeois status. Dorothy West, the last leaf of Harlem Renaissance highlighted social status of African Americans in the United States of America. Going through works of Dorothy West highlighted social status of African Americans in this article.



Keywords— African Americans, slavery, social status, stratification, bourgeois status

The term ‘social’ originated from Latin word ‘socialis’ which means allied and from ‘socius’ which means friend. The system of structured social inequality and the structure of mobility in a society are called social stratification. Stratification is concerned with the ranking of people (Kimmel 64). Africans are brought into the United States of America by slave traders and are sold to the white people as slaves. Slave masters used the black people to work in the plantation and to do all sorts of other odd jobs. The black people served the white people for more than three centuries and have gone through different odd situations in their real life. Research reveals that the slavery has begun in the United States of America in the early seventeenth century. The first Africans in the colonial America are brought to Jamestown by a Dutch ship in 1619. Americans bought twenty slaves to work for a certain period of time. At the beginning days of the slavery, Africans are assigned land after their service and are considered as free Negroes. However, their settlement was involuntary. This way, one person has absolute power over the life, fortune, and liberty of another person. The humble beginning of slavery has plagued nearly every part of the United States of America. African slaves

occasionally revolted against their slave masters, and the result was usually severe punishment for the slaves.

Dorothy West, in her second novel, *The Wedding*, projected character named Gram born white and one who has biological relationship with the black people, prays to God like this:

My back is bent with the burden of living colored. Lift it from me in my last

days. Make my great-grand daughter your instrument. She’s marrying a man

true white. Put it in her listening mind to live like white. Put it in her loving

heart to carry me home to die. With all her life before her, she won’t refuse her

poor old Gram with all her life behind her. (West 30)

Gram’s daughter Josephine married a black man named Hannibal, son of Melisse who was formerly enslaved at Xanadu, the family’s plantation. Gram, the born aristocrat, lived surrounded by descendants of slaves. She has no choice but has to die among them, no grave to claim her but the one they put her in. Though Josephine was born in

rich family, incessant diseases in the family and failure in production due to lack of manpower pushed them to utter poverty. In these unavoidable circumstances Josephine decided to marry son of former slave of her family to escape from the terrible genteel poverty. There were no one to marry her in her own race because of poverty and her continued sickness. She thought the men with money were white trash that had robbed the aristocrats of their sovereignty, and would rather marry a colored man who knew he was dirt beneath her feet (*The Wedding* 32). There is racial discrimination in the United States of America, but one cannot separate the black people from the white people in building social relationships among them due to the stay of the black people for three centuries and interracial marriages and biological bonds among them. Dorothy West has projected these issues in her works. The black people have had mixed experiences with the white in their long stay in America and even there formed undivided social and biological bonds among them. However, the discrimination the black facing is not a deep rooted one, but the white people propagating it to their children and this way they are causing to exist it in the American society.

African Americans are striving to achieve equal social status with the white, but it seems, it is still a dream. However, there is a significant change in their social status that can be best illustrated with a brief overview of historical changes. Regarding their present status Dorothy West in her novel *The Wedding* states like this:

They formed a fortress, a bulwark of colored society. Their occupants could

boast that they, or even better their ancestors, had owned a home away from

home since the days when a summer hegira was taken few colored people

above the rank of servant. Though newer comers owned cottages in other

sections of the seaside town. Some very splendid house in neighborhoods

customarily called white, the Ovalites still outranked them. They had been the

vanguard. They were now the old guard. It would sound like sour grapes, "so

what?" (West 2)

There is a steady social and economic progress in the lives of African Americans. Some African Americans have almost reached to equal status of the white people in all aspects. They used education as a weapon to come out of the poverty and poor social living. Now, they have

money, enough not only to spend but also to save and to keep servants in their houses. They are college-bred, of good background and they are living graciously. Many of the black people are doctors, great professors, politicians, lawyers, businessmen and their titles made introductions so easy and self-explanatory. Dorothy West's novel, *The Wedding* portrays educational achievements of African Americans. In the novel, the character named Hannibal son-in-law of Gram and husband of Josephine has become the first Negro president of his college, and was the equal of his predecessors, because of his clock-round devotion to duty and his son-in-law Clark was a famous doctor. Clark Coles' father, daughter and his son-in-law were doctors and his mother was a great teacher and a very well known socialist and one who supported and helped poor dying Negroes. Frederick Douglass an African born slave learned to read and write, with the assistance of his master's wife and later he became a great orator and writer (Douglass 1). He has written a book named *Narratives of the Life of Frederick Douglass* and this book brought him name and fame. He was one of the most powerful leaders of the anti-slavery movement. He worked as an advisor to Abraham Lincoln. He became the first African citizen to hold a government position. He quoted on the relationship between progress and struggle, on the universality of sorrow, on the value of education, on the denial of justice, on the measuring injustice, on empowering youth, on moral growth, on the security of a nation, on the need for power, on free speech, on rebellion, on the consequence of slavery, on right versus wrong, on working for what you get, on the power of knowledge, on the necessity of irony, on remaining true to oneself, on the impenetrability of one's soul, on the color of one's character and on using the past to make a better future. He was the most influential African American of the nineteenth century. He spoke and wrote on behalf of a variety of reform causes. He devoted the bulk of his time, immense talent, and boundless energy to end slavery and gaining equal rights for African Americans. W.E.B Du Bois is acknowledged as one of the premier scholars of the twentieth century and a defining intellectual force of the civil rights movement. He has written the book named, *The Souls of Black Folks* and the book consisted insightful essays (Beloved Harlem 24). The veil is a predominant theme throughout the book. In his point of view, this veil separated the black and white populations and made it so that only African-Americans existed within the veil. It is from within this veil that the black population experienced oppression. While it is possible for the Negro to understand life from within the veil and also outside of it, it is not possible for the white people to fully understand the oppression experienced by the black race. The veil, thus, is not only a form of

oppression, but also insight into the experience of the Negro life. He emphasized that as long as the Negro existed, so did the veil. Zora Neale Hurston is another prominent African American writer. Her life and work influenced and inspired present important modern African American writers (Beloved Harlem 111). Her novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* brought a great name to Hurston. This novel is most often celebrated for Hurston's unique use of language, particularly her mastery of rural Southern black dialect. Throughout the novel, Hurston used an interesting narrative structure, splitting the presentation of the story between high literary narration and idiomatic discourse.

The Harlem Renaissance, which is also known as New Negro Movement indicates improved social and cultural standards of African Americans. This movement also helped the black writers to have close relationship with the white writers and to project their coinciding ideas and expressions. The black through intellect and production of art challenged the pervading racism and stereotype to promote progressive or socialist politics and lead to racial and social integration. The research reveals that some white people appreciated the talent of the black people and started to re-examine their false notion that the black people are not improved one intellectually and mentally in various fields. Harold Bloom in his edited work; *The Harlem Renaissance* states that,

The legacy of the Harlem Renaissance is its art, its artists, its ideas. The

reactions they encountered are for our education. The Harlem writers did

not leave any "stone and mortar" institutions, but rather lived on as

"living institutions." What better institution than Arna Bootemps? While

the essence of the Renaissance was captured in the literature, what all this

meant was concretized in the manifestos. Alain Locke's New Negro,

Langston Hughes "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain,"

contemporary issues of *The Crisis* and *Opportunity* magazines, all speak

to the phenomenon that was occurring in Harlem. (Harold Bloom 10)

The research reveals that the forces that created the renaissance are not created in an ethnic vacuum. Africans have their own culture and out of experience they generated art and artists. Certain developments in white

society and even world economics played an essential part in the emergence of the black renaissance. Synchronization of the literary and social revolt in the United States with the economic upswing that followed World War I brought about the mood necessary for black renaissance. The victims of European colonies throughout the world became subjects of concern and empathy. African Americans who settled down in the United States sought identification in the American society. Some prominent white people encouraged the black people to write well and to focus their views on various issues. Even black people also have such intense desire to show forth their literary talent to the white folk of United States of America. Elena Kramer, in his essay, "What was the Harlem Renaissance: What effect did it have on American Culture?," states that, the educated part of the African community was convinced that they could oppose the stereotype by proving their intellectual competence; they hoped that an increased cultural output would work against the American notion of white supremacy and show that blacks are no longer willing to accept their alleged status of an uncivilized people without culture. Many held the opinion that white Americans would not treat them as their equals unless and until the former slaves proved themselves to be talented and equal, so the importance of culture experienced a huge increase during the early 1920s. The topics that prevailed during the Harlem Renaissance reflected feeling of marginality and alienation that African Americans were facing; these themes occurred in literature of that period as well as in arts and music. Still, the Harlem Renaissance was as diverse as a movement as the people that created it. There formed a literary association to give an opportunity to the black people to prove their literary talent. The established association is the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and its founder is Joel E. Spingarn who was a white man. Spingarn being a board member and author of *A History of Literary Criticism in the Renaissance* and *The New Criticism* have very close association with the black people. He encouraged W.E.B Du Bois author of *The Souls of Black Folk* and *The Quest for the Silver Fleece* to write greatly and has given chance to advance in the literary field. Du Bois quickly became most powerful spokesman and editor of the NAACP Organization journal, *The Crisis*.

Dorothy West met the great literary persons at Harlem at an early age and has close association with them and she is considered as a last leaf of Harlem Renaissance. She was aware of all the incidents happened from the beginning of the Harlem Renaissance and to the end of the Harlem Renaissance. She has focused on these developments and social stratification of African

Americans in her works. The magazine established by her, *The New Challenge* was the first publication to bring together black art and politics, and other magazines would follow its example. Former American President John Kennedy's wife Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis met Dorothy West to encourage her to finish the novel, *The Wedding* which focused on improved social living conditions of African Americans. Dorothy West helped to influence the direction and form of African American writing during the Harlem Renaissance. She was considered a little sister by Zora Neale Hurston and other writers and poets such as Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen, and Wallace Thurman. She wrote about unsatisfied people who always feel trapped by their environment, or by racism, or because they are black female. Dorothy is a keen and sharp observer of things happening around her and she has focused on social and economical condition of African Americans and how they have been denied equal status with the dominating white race. However, there also was a debt by the definition of the Renaissance as a point in the Afro-American literary tradition. The assimilation goals and literature of the middle class provided the Harlem artists with a focus from which to bounce off or more specially a factor in the dialectical process. Most of the literature was written in the romanticist tradition, saturated with Victorian ideals, and consisted of appeals to white America to consider them equal or at least better than common blacks. Their black experience was considered a plague from which they wished to escape. Having ignored the depth of their own experience, they wrote escapist literature that was usually shallow and artificial (Harold Bloom 7). Whites were neither all bad nor all good; they are the people with whom the black people have to deal. The relationship would be based on their behavior, for the moral adventure was the black man's. There was a commitment for a better understanding and adjustment. This is a key factor in the eventual collaboration with the white artist and the larger white society. Alain Locke spoke rehabilitating the race in world esteem and the reevaluation of the race due to cultural recognition, which he felt would precede or accompany any considerable further betterment of race relationships. Locke did not labor under any illusion that if the Negro was better known he would be better liked or better treated, he merely felt that mutual understanding is the basis for any subsequent cooperation and adjustment.

American writer Zora Neale Hurston states that it is necessary for Negroes to show forth their talent to the world to come out of all kinds of prejudice. In her book, *Dust Tracks on a Road* she states like this:

I do not share the gloomy thought that Negroes in America are doomed to be stomped

out bodacious, nor even shocked to the bottom of things. Of course some of them will

be tromped out, and some will always be at the bottom, keeping company with other

bottom folks. It would be against all nature for all the Negroes to be either at the

bottom, top, or in between. It has never happened with anybody else, so why with us?

No, we will go where the internal drive carries us like everybody else. It is up to the

individual. If you haven't got it, you cannot show it. If you have got it, you cannot

hide it. That is one of the strongest laws God ever made. (Hurston 192)

Hurston believes that the eternal God created all the human beings equal. It is up to the individual to prove his or her talent to the world and come out of state of low social living. If anyone won't strive, he or she will be in the same social state forever. Careful study of history shows forth that relentless efforts of human beings and aspiration to achieve something that made them great in the real life. One has to aspire for upliftment of his or her social status. After getting redemption from the slavery some Negroes started the business and became great entrepreneurs. Sharon L Jones in her work, *Reading the Harlem Renaissance: Race, Class, and Gender in the Fiction of Jessie Fauset, Zora Neale Hurston, and Dorothy West*, projects plight of many black families from South to North early to mid twentieth century, including Dorothy West's father to become successful entrepreneurs and in the real life they became great businessmen. West's father was a successful entrepreneur and fruit wholesaler dubbed as the black banana king of Boston (p 139). Dorothy West in her novel, *The Living Is Easy* portrays a character named Bart Judson who aspires to become a good businessman and his wife Cleo Judson who desires to attain at least middle class status in the real life. They achieved it. Dorothy West's short story, "The Richer, The Poorer" which is extracted from her work, *The Richer, The Poorer: Stories, Sketches, and Reminiscences* focuses on how a woman named Lottie could work hard and earned money and attained a middle class status. She was conscious of the money troubles her family suffered and that made her determined to have enough money to be able to afford whatever she wanted. She worked hard up to the age of sixty and retired from the work and enjoyed rest of her life giving sustenance and moral support to her sister named Bess who was married and lost her husband and was in need of financial support.

The African Americans settled in the United States of America doing their level best to attain bourgeois status in the society. Their continuous efforts made them at least a significant number of African Americans to attain middle class status.

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