

CARTOGRAPHY OF THE COLOR BLACK IN LITERATURE AND COMMUNICATION

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Abstract:

Communication is based on verbal and nonverbal components. Verbal communication is built on words and it plays a prominent role in communication. Language and communication are one of the most coveted subjects pursued by research scholars of language and literature. Communication is based on verbal and nonverbal expressions. Study of colors is one of the most enticing arenas for the research scholars to unearth the myriad of meanings pertaining to the psyche of an individual and the subsequent impact on society. Colors play both an active and passive role in communicating a message. Colors play an active role when people use different colors complementing the situation and conform to the religious and cultural sentiments. The role of colors is passive in literature when the imagery of colors is used implicitly as a literary device. But colors play a larger role in the stratification of society. The term *Coloured* generally refers to non-white. Webster's dictionary first used this term in the 14th century referring to other race or ethnicity. But gradually the term was restricted to the people of wholly or partially non-white origin. The term *colored* is the euphemism of the Black but in the 21st century *colored* is generally regarded as an offensive term. The term lives in the *National Association for the Advancement of Colored People*, which is generally called as NAACP. Carla Sims in 2008 opines that the term colored is not derogatory and it is the most positive description commonly used and though it is outdated and antiquated, it is certainly not offensive.

Keywords: Communication, nonverbal, literary device, offensive term,.etc

Communication is based on verbal and nonverbal components. Verbal communication is built on words and it plays a prominent role in communication. Language and communication are one of the most coveted subjects pursued by research scholars of language and literature. Communication is based on verbal and nonverbal expressions. Actions, gestures, body language are important ingredients of nonverbal communication. Among these ingredients, colors occupy a significant place in communication and the color black is juxtaposed between positive and negative conceptions. The paper speculates the role of colors in the socio-cultural environment. Language and communication is an ongoing process and constantly change complementing contemporary society. The culture and practice of every period are reflected in contemporary arts like paintings, literature and also in nonliterary works. Exploring the significance of black color in literature and communication is the motif of the paper. Though different shades of colors are used as a powerful communication tool, black has occupied a major place in language and literature. The paper pegs select works from literature to illuminate the politics of black

Cartography of the Black in literature, Communication, and Society:

Each color has had several figurative meanings from classical times and was related to each other to represent inward passions, virtues, and vices.¹

Study of colors is one of the most enticing arenas for the research scholars to unearth the myriad of meanings pertaining to the psyche of an individual and the subsequent impact on society. Colors play both an active and passive role in communicating a message. Colors play an active role when people use different colors complementing the situation and conforms to the religious and cultural sentiments. The role of colors is passive in literature when the imagery of colors is used implicitly as a literary device. But colors play a larger role in the stratification of society.

Black is the darkest color resulting from the absence of complete absorption of light². Black represents darkness and has a strong impact on literature and communication. Black is used both in approbation and derogation. Literature mirrors contemporary society and tacitly communicates the linguistic temperament of contemporary society. Literature and language are interwoven reflecting the sentiments of people. Representation of colors is a major ingredient both in verbal and nonverbal communication. Literature is the product of verbal communication in which colors are either used as a signifier, symbol or a cliché qualifying the noun.

The symbolism of black in literature:

Black represents authority and control. Nevertheless, this color also signifies evil and death. Literary works of every age mirror the culture and tradition of the society. Hence, the critique of language with reference to linguistic skepticism, linguistic relativism, and cultural relativism are essential tools for interpreting the representation of the color black in a literary context.

Linguistic skepticism attempts to question the contextual relevance of a word. For example Philosophers and researchers from Science and technology consider that literature is twice removed from reality as it fails to appeal to reason and logical thinking. This approach gives rise to skepticism questioning the authenticity of a statement made by a writer. However, scholars of literature extol great works of popular writers accentuating that writers are adept at interpreting and understanding the culture and communication of a society. The readers could unearth the trail of writers' psyche while encountering the imagery of black describing both evil and strength. The paradoxical usage of black creates a strong impact on the readers.

William Shakespeare has used expertly the imagery of black in his play Macbeth in Act.4 when the witches predict the forthcoming evil. The three witches in the play always appear in a semi-dark environment implanting evil thoughts in the mind of Macbeth. These three *black and midnight hags* captivate Macbeth under their spells and prophecies. Through their power of predicting future, they tend to lure humans with unethical thoughts and ruin their future. Darkness is used as agents that predict disaster and chaos, *Good things of day begin to droop and drowse/ whiles night's black agents to their preys do rouse.* (3.2.45). Shakespeare illumines the eerie environment of the night where the night's *black agents* have started to open their evil tentacles to capture the vulnerable, innocent prey. The expert description of the dramatist duly communicates the dreadful situation thereby preparing the audience and the readers to grasp the pulse of the play.

Though great thinkers strive to eliminate the negative inferences of black, literary scholars always used colors as the major poetic device to effuse their thoughts and black is signified in a paradoxical manner indicating both strength and evil. The scholars could surmise that evil is stronger and hence one has to fight to overcome it.

Shakespeare's *Othello* deals with a jealous husband and a beautiful fair wife Desdemona. The play opens in the darkness where the villain Iago describes Othello. He describes Othello as a *moor*, a black man married to a fair lady Desdemona. Othello is depicted as a *dark foreigner* threatening to thwart the existing social hierarchy where the fair skin people are projected as good, beautiful, wise and superiors. In the first act of the play, Othello has referred to several disparaging terms, Iago describes Othello as a *Barbary horse*. (Act I, Scene 1, I.120) He has never been referred to by his name but only as a *moor* who has come to usurp their social status. He has been perceived as beast where Iago makes snide comments that Desdemona and Othello *are now making the beast with two backs*. The plot of the play does not deal with racism but critics condemn the degrading terms used in the play while referring to Othello.

Writers are the products of a culture and tradition of contemporary society and the language used in their works are conditioned by *linguistic and cultural relativism*. In the past euphemism was seldom used in society. The language was rather crude and people had no reservations in using disparaging terms. Language and communication constantly evolve complementing socio-political and cultural environment of the contemporary period. Hence the term *handicapped* is now used as *physically challenged*, *eunuchs* as *transgender*, *prostitutes* as *sex workers*, *the black person* as *colored* etc., and William Shakespeare belongs to the period where the writers had no reservations to express their thoughts explicitly.

The term *Coloured* generally refers to non-white. Webster's dictionary first used this term in the 14th century referring to other race or ethnicity. But gradually the term was restricted to the people of wholly or partially non-white origin. Both in U.K. and in the U.S. the term *colored* is used in derogation, not in approbation. The black race is referred to as the term *colored*. In the early 20th century the black entertainer Bert Williams observes, "it's no disgrace to be colored but it is awfully inconvenient". Harvard Professor Henry Louis Gates, Jr. in his book *Coloured People: A Memoir*, vividly narrates the life of the colored people. In all walks of life, the colored people are deprived of their space and rights. In social hierarchy, they are placed in an inferior position. The black is viewed with repulsion. Henry Louis narrates the discrimination of the black in Piedmont, where he is brought up. He recalls how their social space is invaded by the white. In the bar when a white man or lady enters the music will be played to oblige the white. Slowly the colored people will start disbanding realizing the fact that they will be totally marginalized by the white. He observes, *our space is violated when one of them showed up*, (Gates, 9). The book vividly attempts to reveal the discrimination of *ours* and *theirs* that is *the black* and *the white*. Gate reminiscences the social stigma of being black as they were not allowed to try clothes in stores of their choice. They are even prohibited from using the same bathroom, eating in the same restaurants or sleeping in the same hotels. Their colored skin robs their social status and good living condition.

Henry Louis Gates illumines the social status of the white in his book *The Coloured People*,

The rich white people lived on upper East Hampshire street, the Hudsons (insurance, Coca-cola stock) in their Federal home, the Campbells (insurance, real estate) in a gingerbread Victorian, the Drains (a Judge) in their square brick and the Arnolds (insurance) in a curving Queen Anne. (Gates, 6)

But the black community until the 1970s were not allowed to own property. The white would rent their properties. When Gates cousin became the first cheerleader in the local high school, she was not permitted to sit with her teammates. She had to sit separately using paper cups to drink as she was forbidden to use the same glass. The colored community always stayed away from the white. Gates asserts, *before 1955, most white people were only shadowy presences in our world, vague figures of power like remote bosses at the mill or tellers at the*

bank. (Gates, 11). Gates has narrated his experiences in the book. He has used the term *colored* while referring to his black community.

Gates' father observes that no white man has ever called him in his name. He has been always addressed as *George* or by some other name. His boss would always forget his name. According to the white *George* is a common name referring to the black. The body politics of the white is more evident when they deliberately pretend that they do not remember the name of a colored man. The name is the identity of a person and when a person is not addressed by his name, it leads to an identity crisis. The white establishes their superiority while accentuating the inferior status of the black and also implicitly reveals that the names of the colored are not worth remembering.

The term *colored* is the euphemism of the Black but in the 21st century *colored* is generally regarded as an offensive term. The term lives in the *National Association for the Advancement of Colored People*, which is generally called as NAACP. Carla Sims in 2008 opines that the term colored is not derogatory and it is the most positive description commonly used and though it is outdated and antiquated, it is certainly not offensive. Yet it is unknown to scholars and social thinkers the reason for tagging the nonwhites with a particular terminology. All are humans and they can be called by their respective names and using a specific term to a group lucidly affirms discrimination. Throughout the play, Othello has not been called by his name. This practice runs parallel to the experience of Gates' father vividly stating the fact that literature, communication, and society are all interrelated.

Conclusion:

Colors are nature's gift but human psyche perceives colors in varied ways which many a time causes detrimental effects either on an individual or on society. The color black firmly occupies a special place in society. Black not only demonstrates authority and control but also predicts death. Black is the color of mourning in Christianity. Hindus in India refrain from wearing black during auspicious days. This color also symbolizes modesty and plainness. *Man in black* in Oliver Goldsmith's *The Citizen of the world* virtually represents a scholar. Black coat draped by Lawyers and Judges symbolically represents wisdom and power but dark-skinned people are looked down with contempt. All over the world racial discrimination and humiliation are meted out by dark-skinned people. Literature is the mirror of society and critics opine that in the play Othello, the black hero Othello has never been referred to his name similarly Henry Louis Gates while penning his experience as a colored man declares that his father has never been called by his name by white men. This is power politics exercised on the dark-skinned people. The aversion on black should be eliminated and humans should be treated with respect for a harmonious society.

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