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Difficulties and Dead Endings in Teaching African American Literature in Indian Universities

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If the rather ambitious title makes the reader expect a discussion of strategies to tackle pedagogical problems concerning the teaching of African American literature in Indian universities, he/she will be disappointed. No Indian university has a chair for African American studies. In the few places where courses in American literature are offered, the African American component is almost non-existent. This essay, then, is less a discussion of proven pedagogical strategies than a description of the academic scene in India regarding the formidable difficulties of inserting African American literature into the college curriculum.

The problems begin with issues not directly related to African American literature per se. Due to neo-national and narrow chauvinistic tendencies, many states in India vie with each other to discourage anything that savors of the English language. The blatant hypocrisy of this attitude (for one can see the pervasive consumption of British and American culture throughout Indian society) is compounded by the fact that there is no consensus on what should be the national language, which much be chosen from among numerous tongues each having a distinctive heritage. English is quite unwelcome in this context, not just as a foreign language but as one identified with a colonial legacy.

Another problem is that teaching English versus teaching literature in English is still an unresolved matter in Indian universities. As a frequent participant of the in-service training programs in the teaching of English at undergraduate and graduate levels, I have witnessed many a skirmish between the language utilitarians and the literature enthusiasts. The efforts of would-be peacemakers who advocate putting a bit of both in new textbooks of the "language through literature" variety are far from effective for the simple reason that the decision-making bodies are loaded with people like Joseph Addison's Sir Roger de Coverley, the country squire who settled disputes by pronouncing,

"Much has to be said on either side." Because of incapacitating non-committal attitudes, no particular textbook or teaching technique is fully tested for its suitability or usefulness. Adhocism is the most easily adopted approach for these academic luminaries motivated mostly by non-academic considerations. They are generally aided and abetted by clever politicians who know how to manipulate the language issue to enrich their vote banks.

Thus far I have been considering English as a compulsory course (which it is not in all the states of India) for students majoring in other subjects. Let me move on to those majoring in literature. American literature was once considered only a minor subdivision of British literature, and while in recent years Indian universities seem to have acknowledged its separate existence, the status of American literature is not much improved. An example from the curriculum at my university may be useful here. The B.A. course is composed of papers in the following categories: 1. History of English literature, 2. Social History of England, 3. Novel, 4. Drama, 5. Poetry, 6. Shakespeare, 7. Prose (no American writers in 3-7) and 8. Optional Paper. The last category consists of a choice from among Indian Writing in English, a Project Report, or American literature. The choice is made by individual colleges, and if American literature is chosen, the syllabus is made up overwhelmingly of nineteenth-century works. Even T.S. Eliot was stiffly resisted as recently as two decades ago. At present, one or two poems of e.e. cummings may also be included.

What is the place of African American literature in all these meanderings? "What is this added confusion?" is the general reaction of my colleagues to such a query. Helping Indian students cross cultural barriers to understand an alien literature is a difficult proposition at best, and the problems seem to multiply regarding African American literature. Let us take up some specific examples.

First, the genre of poetry: though the prescribed syllabus at my institution does not explicitly allow one to teach any African American writers, I get around this by presenting poems under the nomenclature "unknown passages for discussion." Langston Hughes's "Harlem" (*Panther and the Lash* 14)—also entitled "Dream Deferred" (*Montage of a Dream Deferred* 71)—is one of them:

What happens to a dream deferred?

Does it dry up
like a raisin in the sun?
Or fester like a sore—
and then run?
Does it stink like rotten meat?
Or crust and sugar over—

like a syrupy sweet?
 Maybe it just sags
 like a heavy load.

Or does it explode?

At first I delayed information regarding the poet's identity, but that only made clearer the impossibility of teaching this poem solely through its formal properties. "A dream is a dream," said some of the students, as if the matter ended there. Others, more willing to step inside the poem, asked "What is a deferred dream?" Most, in fact, found the idea of a deferred dream "a bit odd," but what surprised me the most was their lukewarm response after I spoke of the endlessly thwarted aspirations of black folk in America, of the dire necessity of those people to dream in order to make their lives bearable. The notion of "laughing to keep from crying" made a rather feeble impression on my students, and we moved on to discussing some of the poem's formal devices. But once the rhyming and alliteration were quickly noted, questions again arose revealing that the "dream deferred" continued to trouble and elude their understanding. Willy nilly, I launched into a summary of the racial issue in America.

I realise that this particular set of students cannot be blamed for their lack of background knowledge. Their naive questions and comments are part of the malaise all around. When the powers-that-be decide that a course in literature is a "non-utility" course, and do not allow a university in their jurisdiction to have a chair for English, how can one expect students to gather background information on an ethnic group academically thrice removed from their purview? Removed first by listening to those who consider the study of any literature a sheer waste, second by falling into the narrow groove furrowed by those who claim that the King's/Queen's English cannot be learnt through anything written after the Victorian era, and third by meekly accepting the American literary establishment's systematic neglect of African American writers.

My next example is Countee Cullen's "Judas Iscariot," a poem with an apparently blasphemous idea that Judas was Jesus's most beloved friend. This time the audience was academics. There was the usual halfhearted appreciation of Cullen's relatively more effective technical qualities; of course, this was accompanied by the vague and unsubstantiated comment that many things in Cullen's poems were imitations of this or that British or American poet who is white. It is amazing how Indian scholars still retain and reflect the old prejudices of whites. When I tried to point out the revolutionary and yet religious angle of the poet, there was nearly a situation reminiscent of the one

faced by Langston Hughes in the South when he wrote and read the following poem, "Christ in Alabama":

Christ is a nigger,
Beaten and black:
Oh, bare your back!

Mary is His mother:
Mammy of the South,
Silence your mouth.

God is His Father:
White Master above
Grant Him your love

Most holy bastard
Of the bleeding mouth,
Nigger Christ
On the cross
Of the South. (*Panther and the Lash* 37)

Hughes wrote this poem with inspiration drawn from the very thick of excitement in a confrontation with the vilest and deadliest of Jim Crowism. He had been greatly disturbed by the fate of the eight black youths who were accused of raping two white prostitutes in an open car on a freight train travelling through Alabama. In Hughes's imagination, lynching was synonymous with crucifixion. Christ the saviour was not his concern; Christ the innocent victim provided him the parallel. James A. Emanuel quotes the poet in his book *Langston Hughes: "I meant my poem to be a protest against the domination of all stronger peoples over weaker ones"* (97). Hughes accepted an invitation from the students of Chapel Hill and was to read "Christ in Alabama." White folks, especially the religious leaders, were outraged because Christ was called a "bastard." A politician of Chapel Hill is supposed to have blurted out, "It's bad enough to call Christ a bastard, but to call Him a nigger—that's too much!" (*I Wonder as I Wander* 47).

Coming back to Cullen's poem, many in my audience began accusing me of hurting their religious sentiments. But a very curious fact emerged from their pronouncements: "blasphemy" on the part of Countee Cullen would have been "bold" and "refreshingly unusual" if the poem had been written by a white. One scholar went to the extent of loudly shouting, "It is these kinds of quirky ideas which make the Negroes a hated lot in America." I confess that I could not summon up any effective strategy against this stonewalling, built of ignorance and cemented with bigotry. I could appreciate Cullen's famous poem "Yet Do I Marvel" and its last two lines better at that moment:

Yet do I marvel at this curious thing:
To make a poet black, and bid him sing! (3)

Paradoxically, I was itching to quote (even if out of context) Amiri Baraka, who asked for

Assassin poems, Poems that shoot
guns. Poems that wrestle cops into alleys
and take their weapons leaving them dead
with tongues pulled out and sent to Ireland. Knockoff
poems for dope selling wops or slick halfwhite
politicians. (116)

I was aware that the learned professor who was the moderator would not allow the discussion to deteriorate into a minor brawl. He intervened just in time to shake the others out of their smugness and me from my feeling of helplessness. He asked the gathering certain pertinent questions. Are Indian universities equipped to offer courses such as Black Literature? If we give more importance to the language, should we not bother more about the literary merit of anything that is in English? As if to echo my thoughts, he said that it was not an easy task to hold on to the tensions between the immense polarities in African American life and literature. I recalled W.E.B. Dubois's eloquent words: "One ever feels his twoness—an American, a Negro: two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder (17). Throughout the proceedings, I found myself continually pulled towards square one, my mind crowded with thoughts of the literary establishment's partial treatment of black writers and of Indian scholars merely reiterating the pontification of white critics. Finally, before further heat was produced by the clash between literary merit and racial concerns, the moderator closed the discussion by saying, "Your comments can be glorifying, contemptuous, angry or sad, but you cannot ignore the Afro-American writer any more."

Presuming that Indian teachers adopt this viewpoint wholeheartedly, there is still the job of devising the right critical apparatus, at least at the post-graduate and research degree levels. Towards this goal not many significant steps have been taken. Only in recent times, here and there, one finds examples of the flowering of intellectual independence. In the field of criticism of African American literature, excepting a few scholars like Amritjit Singh, one does not encounter many worthy personages.

Not unexpectedly, scholars initiated into the realm of African American literature begin by reading the existing available critical material along with the literature itself. What is available, of course, is far from

adequate, despite American Center Libraries and American Studies Research Centers. The financial crunch in many Indian universities is such that it is too much to expect even the most progressive ones to spend money on specialized fields such as African American literature. Then, presuming that one has gathered the necessary background material, look at the bewildering contradictions one is led to. Having taken up Langston Hughes's poetry for my own research project, I will cite his criticism as examples, including some of the poet's own pronouncements on life and literature.

Hughes could proudly proclaim:

I am a Negro:

Black as the night is black,
Black like the depths of my Africa. (*Selected Poems* 8)

He could also mourn thus:

My old man's a white old man
And my old mother's black.
If ever I cursed my white old man
I take my curses back.

If ever I cursed my black old mother
And wished she were in hell,
I'm sorry for that evil wish
And now I wish her well.

My old man died in a fine big house
My ma died in a shack.
I wonder where I'm gonna die,
Being neither white nor black? (*Selected Poems* 158)

He can speak of hope in glowing terms such as, "We have tomorrow / Bright before us / Like a flame" (*The Dream Keeper* 77). He can also be filled with apprehension and impatience, thus:

I tire of hearing people say,
Let things take their own course.
Tomorrow is another day.
I do not need my freedom when I'm dead.
I cannot live on tomorrow's bread. (*One Way Ticket* 87)

Elsewhere he cautions us, "I am like that old mule—/Black and don't give a damn./You got to take me/Like I am" (*Shakespeare in Harlem* 29).

I must hasten to add here that I have no quarrel with a poet's several moods. You have got to take him as he is. I am only pointing out the

hurdles for Indian students being introduced to African American literature.

By the time one decides what the poet's "I am" is, the critics seem to conspire in pushing us to further confusion. If Saunders Redding could imagine "desperation" behind Hughes's joyous songs such as "Negro Dancers" (Gibson 26), James Baldwin, Onwuchekwa Jemie tells us, "was perturbed by Hughes's impersonality" (*Langston Hughes: An Introduction to the Poetry* 188). While Edward Margolies expressed difficulty in arriving at "a proper assessment of Hughes's work because so much of its effect depends on an oral tradition" (*Native Sons* 37), Nathan Huggins opined that "Langston Hughes avoided the Scylla of formalism only to founder in the Charybdis of folk art" (*Voices from the Harlem Renaissance* 227). While James A. Emanuel consoles himself with "the larger reality that he [Hughes] has created a score of [the critic's emphasis] poems worth the intimate study and respect of our best critical minds" (*Langston Hughes* 173), Onwuchekwa Jemie argues that "it is quite possible to be a good or even a great poet without any 'really singular' poems" (192). While Arthur P. Davis quotes Leopold Senghor to suggest that Hughes's poetry shows the greatest evidence of Negritude (O'Daniel 25), Therman P. O'Daniel cites Maloff on the younger generation's anger against Hughes for not being "black" enough (15).

Indian scholars are generally uncomfortable, to say the least, with these multiple viewpoints. When a critic assumes that "the occasion and substance of most Negro writing in America is still the undeclared war in which all Americans are, by definition, involved" (Littlejohn 4), Indian scholars too easily presume a "no man's land." When another critic belligerently declares, "Black writers do not write for white people and refuse to be judged by them" (Henderson 65), Indian scholars naturally wonder, "Are browns allowed to assess the literature of blacks?" By the time Indian scholars come to terms with Arthur P. Davis's identification of black writers as those who stress an anti-mainstream stance, they come across Henry L. Gates, Jr., attacking the notion of African American literature as a kind of social realism, or Toni Morrison arguing that an African presence is inevitably involved in the origin of the creations of many a white writer. The aftermath can be perplexity.

Perhaps I am inching back to generalities once again. Therefore, let me turn to a specific textbook of African American themes and its suitability for Indian students—Francis E. Kearns's *Black Identity, A Thematic Reader*. This particular book is suggested mainly because of the non-availability of comparable ones in India. Its ample three-hundred sixty pages of selections, covering different genres and including cues for discussion all in one handy-sized volume, is a rare

thing in India. The United States Information Service supplied the copies of this book free of cost a few years ago.

One of the merits of *Black Identity* is that it is made up of literary creations by both whites and blacks, with more by the latter. If one were to ask in India, as Addison Gayle, Jr., did in his college in order to introduce black literature (*Black Expression* iii), "Would you like to hear about blacks also from whites?" the answer would be a big "yes." Considering the large amount of material in the book, it could be used throughout the six semesters in which a Bachelor of Arts course is completed in India. In fact, it could be put to use even at the Master of Arts degree level. There are "Topics for General Discussions and Written Reports" provided by the editor. These topics by themselves are interesting and appropriate to the texts.

However, most Indian students would find the assignments in *Black Identity* beyond their reach. For instance, far from adequate information is possessed by students at the undergraduate level to complete assignments such as, "Discuss the relationship between Christianity and slavery as it appears in these selections." It must be understood that the percentage of Christian students in classes is negligible, and even these few students are not well educated in their faith. This assertion holds as well for the followers of other religions; the British colonial legacy in this regard is more or less nullified by Indian neo-nationalist aspirations. The students are poorly equipped not only in background knowledge but also in powers of expression and literary discrimination. Another assignment—"Write an essay in which you discuss the question of whether mask-wearing is a unique racial problem or whether it reflects some universal problems of the human condition"—would be even more difficult a proposition for Indian students, because their training is in a highly examination-oriented set-up in which the scope for acquiring general knowledge, literary tastes and awareness of the human condition is very limited. "Discuss the element of violence" is yet another problematic assignment. One can anticipate many teachers asking in exasperation, "Isn't there enough violence already through cinema, TV and video; do you want to aggravate the situation through textbooks?" Certainly, India in the recent past has become what in Hamletian terms might be described as a "garden gone to seed" or "a foul and pestilent congregation of vapours."

In trying to sum up the obstacles in the teaching of African American literature in Indian universities—which are riddled with financial constraints, feckless and corrupt management, and fanaticism of religion and language—and in assessing a multi-genre textbook for pedagogical purposes, I seem to be arriving at an anticlimactic point. Having come to the end of this hurried excursion into the tiresome

terrain of Indian universities, it is clear that I have been weighing more of the extrinsic factors than the intrinsic value of African American literature. However, I do not see this as a fruitless excursion, for my belief is that breaking barriers and not succumbing to "dead ends" is, after all, the business of literature.

I gratefully acknowledge the fact that the title of this paper is adapted from Susanna Pavlovska's article "Dead Endings in Teaching Afro-American Literature" (Review of English Literature [Kyoto University] 58 (1988): 26-33).

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