

Race, Beauty and Resistance: A Historical Perspective

- Nagendra Bahadur Bhandari

Abstract

This article surveys of the various forms of racism and their impact upon the notion of beauty in the US. After the abolition of the slavery and racially segregated legal provisions, the African- American people suffer from various forms of racial discriminations. Such racist attitudes based on Whiteman supremacy also shape the discourse and standard of women's beauty in the US. The biological features of the white women are considered as standard of beauty and the black women are stereotyped in terms of their beauty. As a result, the black women suffer emotionally and socially, and feel pressure of changing their biological features to confirm and accommodate with the whites' notion of beauty. However, some black women gradually resist such racist notion of beauty by exploring their cultural root and proposing a counter discourse of beauty.

Keywords: beauty, colour blind racism, laissez-fair racism, resistance, symbolic racism

Background

The notion of race is constructed socially on the basis of the biological features of human beings. Race generally refers to the classification among human beings on the basis of observable biological differences. The biological features which are part of family ancestry and geographical aspects are natural traits that one inherits. However, the classifications among human beings on the basis of those traits are social construct. Racial "classifications generally use inherited biological traits as criteria for classification; nevertheless, how those traits are treated and how they are translated into the categories we call races is defined by social conventions, not by biology" (Wright and Rogers 313). The social practices and power relation give meanings and significances to the inherited biological traits of human being and render classification among them. In this sense, racial divisions are not simply part of biological descent, they "are always constructed through complex historical and cultural processes" (313) rendering division among human beings.

The racial division among human beings which are constructed socially result in social injustice and oppression. In a racial configuration, certain race occupies privileged position, and enjoys better access to economic resources and social opportunities. Conversely, other races are marginalized depriving access to economic resources and opportunities. As a result, the "racial classifications are almost always linked to forms of unjust economic and social inequality, domination, and exclusion, as well as to belief systems that assign superior and inferior statuses and attributes according to race" (314). In this sense, racial

differences assign human beings distinct social and economic positions with unequal access to resources and opportunities. Such social practice is called racism which W. J. Wilson defines as “an ideology of racial domination or exploitation that incorporates beliefs in a particular race's cultural and/or inherent biological inferiority and uses such beliefs to justify and prescribe inferior or unequal treatment for that group” (34). Racism renders socioeconomic inequality and oppression on the basis of racial classification in various forms in different geo-cultural spaces.

Racism in the US

In the US, the racial classifications have been linked with various forms of oppression to different races historically. Examples of such racism can begin “as early as the European colonization of the Americas with the eradication of Native American culture and people, and the era of African slavery” (Torres 364). So, the racially oppressed categories include the racial minorities and the people of African descent. The racist practices negatively affect “the lives of African Americans, Native Americans, Asian Americans, Hispanic Americans, and other racially defined minorities” (Wright and Rogers 314). In fact, racism adversely affects the lives of working- class and poor whites, immigrants and the black who have suffered historical oppression of slavery. Out of them, “from the start, American society was equally founded on brutal forms of domination, inequality, and oppression that involved the absolute denial of freedom for slaves [black people]” (312). The racial inequalities especially to the people of African descent; the blacks have become a recurrent phenomena of the American history.

The racial practices of slavery and its repercussions have caused various forms of racial oppression to African Americans and immigrants of African origin in the US. In the slavery period, which was formally abolished by Abram Lincoln's declaration of emancipation in 1865, millions of people from Africa brought to America to work on plantations. Those black farm workers were enslaved and treated like an animal exemplifying the worst form of racism in the US. Such racism survived even after the abolition of slavery in the era of segregation. Even in the aftermath of the slavery, the whites possess the “racial ideologies of degradation and dehumanization of blacks as intellectually and morally inferior and thus not worthy of treatment as full persons” (Wright and Rogers 321). As a result, the black faced segregated legal and social provisions. In 1960s, the Civil Right Movement led by Martin Luther King, contributed to the abolition of such legal and social segregation and officially made African Americans equal citizens of the US. However, that did not end the social and cultural discrimination to the African American and immigrants of African countries. They experience various forms of racial practices and prejudices in their daily lives.

The contemporary American society is not free from repercussion of the

historical practices of racism. In fact, racism involves treating people differently by virtues of their race. The racial minorities especially the black people suffer such different treatment in their daily lives.

These situations include a wide range of specific practices: employers not hiring or promoting someone on the basis of race, landlords renting only to people from certain racial groups, banks making it more difficult for racial minorities to get loans, salespeople in a store treating African American customers differently from white customers, and so on. (Wright and Rogers 329)

Such discriminatory practices occur informally in interpersonal encounters and institutional setting. Even after the “civil rights legislation abolishing segregation and guaranteeing voting rights for African Americans, racial discrimination is still a reality in the United States” (329) and people of color suffers from such discriminatory practices in their individual lives in various ways.

There are basically three forms of racism; individual, institutional and cultural racism prevalent in the contemporary American society. The individual racism refers to “hostile behaviour or ignorance manifested in contacts with the members of “inferior” racial group” (Rityova 55). The members of the dominant white group manifest such behavior when they face to the people of black community in their personal encounters. Unlike the individual racism, institutional racism includes the discriminatory treatment to the racial minorities in the government, private and social institutional sphere. It “can be observed in police practices, inadequate housing, education programmes, and unequal job opportunities” (55). During the slavery and segregation period “Parks, schools, store entrances, courts, movie theaters, jobs, housing, churches, swimming pools, hospitals, and even cemeteries were racially segregated. Whites had the better facilities; Blacks had the worst” (Bowser 580). The black people experience institutional racism in subtle manner even today. Moreover, “cultural racism is based on the belief that the culture of majority group is more valuable than the culture of minorities” (Rityova 55). The cultural practices of the dominant white community are privileged while relegating the cultural practices of the black to inferiority. These forms of racism: individual, institutional and cultural overlap and reinforce each other. Different racist beliefs and approaches of the dominant white people are responsible for such racism.

Some of the white people believe on the cultural inferiority of the black which known as *laissez-fair* racism. This form of racism blames the black people for their subordinated position. The white people who demonstrate such racism argues that black deserve inferior position because of thier cultural inferiority. Such notion is based on “cultural inferiority of the black” and encourages “racial inequality, discrimination and exploitation” of the black (Bobo 186). In a sense,

they justify and perpetuate the existing racial injustice to the black in the US. This “racial attitudes continue to justify and explain the prevailing system of racial domination, even while a core element of racist ideology in the United States has been changed”(186). In favour of existing power relationship, this attitude resists any effort to abolish racist treatment to the black people.

Being more liberal than laissez-fair racists, some of the white Americans manifest their dual attitudes to the African American and immigrant of African origin. In principle, those people support equality for the black people. They reject the cultural and social residuals of slavery and segregation policy. Publicly, they advocate equality and fraternity for the black and claims the white racism no longer exists in America. However, they do not support efforts to implement these principles (Bowser 576). Such discrepancy between the words and actions is called symbolic racism. In David O. Sears's and P.J. Henry's opinion, this approach believes that the African Americans do not face any racism at present. The lack of success in their lives is the result of their own reluctance for diligence and hard work not because of racism. Moreover, they are demanding too much but they have got more than they deserve. Such attitude to the black promotes racism in subtle and indirect way in modern American.

The white may also express their racial attitude without being aware of about cause and consequences of their action. Such racial biasness is called the unconscious racism which holds the notion that “racial bias exists subconsciously and is the source of discriminatory behavior against people of color in public accommodations, job applications, and court cases” (Bowser 576). John F. Dovidio and Samuel L. Gaertner suggest that “because of a range of normal cognitive, motivational, and sociocultural processes that promote intergroup biases, most whites also develop some negative feelings toward or beliefs about blacks, of which they are unaware or which they try to dissociate from their non-prejudiced self-images” (qtd. in Balton and Jaccard 278). In the process of socialization, the whites internalize racist attitudes of which they may not be aware. This attitudes influence their personal behavior and sometimes, the institutional performance which they are not aware of. In other words, they show racial biasness without being aware of the reasons and repercussions of their racial attitudes. However, there are some whites who believe that racism no longer exists in America.

The whites who believe racism does not exist in present America hold the color-blind racial perspective. This perspective “embodies the view that the United States has moved beyond race and racism and that the color of someone's skin does not matter in today's society” (Nevilie et al. 7) especially after the 2008 election of Barack Obama as president and his reelection in 2012. The logic of this approach is that “the United States could not be racist if a Black man was twice elected into the nation's highest office” (1). Moreover, it asserts that “racism is not a big deal today”

or rather that everyone has the same opportunities to succeed and consequently “any failure to achieve is therefore the fault of people of color themselves” (Frankenberg 14). However, “race and racism persist in the United States, as evidenced by a range of disparities in education, income, health, and incarceration rates between people of color and Whites (Nevillie et al.1). These inequalities counter the argument that race does not matter in U.S. society. Although a few African American have been able to get the highest ranks in political, social and judiciary and earned a very good income, they are simply the exceptions. The reality is that “people of color are disproportionately represented among many indicators of poor quality of life” (9). So, the color-blind approach ignores the socioeconomic condition of the black by overlooking the issue of the race which helps to perpetuate the existing disparities and suppression of the black.

Briefly, the African American and immigrants of African origin suffers discrimination and oppression on the basis of their racial origin and traits in America. Such prejudices and biasness operate in various forms in different level in the contemporary American society. Broadly, the racist attitudes of white supremacy manifest in three levels: cultural, institutional and individual. These different dimensions of racism work in unison reinforcing each other. Cultural racism provides guidelines for the expression of institutional racism. Moreover, cultural racism passes from generation to generation shaping the racist attitudes of the white supremacy. In the same, institutional racism facilitates for the perpetuation of white supremacy and “reinforces cultural racism” (Bowser 581). Both cultural and institutional racism conditions individual’s percept of white supremacy which is expressed as a form of individual racism. The individual perceptions and attitudes also shape institutional functioning and cultural practices. The racist approaches: Laissez-fair racism, symbolic racism, unconscious racism and colour blind racism of the dominant white people are responsible for these three forms of racism. In this way, different forms of racism operate together in the US which in turn contributes in shaping different discourses and practices of the white supremacy.

Racism and Beauty

The standard of beauty has been colonized by the racist perspectives of white supremacy in the US. The racist ideologies commonly “promote the appearance of the dominant group [white] against the purported ugliness of a subordinate group [black]” (Craig 161). Such practices become quite apparent in the beauty standard of physical features such as skin colour, hair, body structure in the discourse of beauty. This discourse considers, “fair white skin, blue eyes, and straight, long, blond hair” of the white women as “the epitome of beauty. Features more akin to the African esthetic are deemed ugly, undesirable, and less feminine” (Awad et al. 2). The dominant discourse of beauty degrades the physical features of the black

in order to dehumanize the race. Ayana B. Bryrd and Lori L. Tharps reveal such racist attitude to the black hair: “African hair was deemed wholly unattractive and inferior by the Europeans [White]. Many White people went so far as to insist that Blacks did not have real hair, preferring to classify it in a derogatory manner as ‘wool’” (14). The association of the hair of the black people with animal fur “wool” reveals the underlying attitude of equating the black with animals. Such attitude even shapes the self-perception of the black immigrants in America. They think themselves as ugly and harbour self-loathing attitudes about their natural features. As a result, Ingrid Banks stresses that “black women are no longer held in submission by chains, nor by segregation, yet images of beauty in U.S society are stacked against them. And they get the message loud and clear” (46).

In this sense, the notion of beauty has been colonized by the racist attitude of white supremacy which imposes the pressure on the black female immigrants to regulate their physical features in America.

The hegemonically defined standard of beauty which is exclusively based on the white women’s physical features marginalizes the black females as deviation from the standard. This creates an unrealistic social pressure on them to go through a series of beauty treatments to conform the white standard. Such social pressure is called as “Lily complex” which is defined as “altering, disguising, and covering up your physical self in order to assimilate, to be accepted as attractive. ...As Black women deal with the constant pressure to meet a beauty standard that is inauthentic and often unattainable, the lily complex can set in” (Jones and Shorter-Gooden 177). For this, they invest their money, time and other resources to chemically alter their physical features. The failure to change their outer appearance to meet the white standard may develop the self-loathing attitude of “Black is not beautiful” (Patton 26). Apparently, the black women suffer physically, emotionally, economically and socially by the racist discourse of beauty in the US. As a result, some of the black women begin to resist such racist discourse of beauty.

Resistance of the Black

The resistance of the black to the racist standard of beauty deconstructs the intersection of the race, intellectual power and beauty. The connection between them is the product and process of colonial enterprise. Claiming racial superiority, the whites attempt to rationalize their historical injustice of colonial exploitation to the non-white. In colonial discourse, the whites are presented as rational, intellectual and civilized sharply in contrast with the blacks who are depicted as savage, primitive and barbaric. Consequently, the blacks are considered as intellectually inferior and aesthetically unattractive. However, German biologist Johann Friedrich Blumenbach asserts that the differences between in skin colour and body type do not influence individual intellectual capacity and supremacy. He

believed that “all the races have attained or acquired a level of cultural development that permits them to reach a near perfectibility of form and so are able to produce offspring that can be described beautiful in every sense of the word” (qtd. in Dasi 148). In this sense, there is no relation between biological features of race, standard of aesthetics and intellectual power. Moreover, the values and norms of aesthetics is simply a cultural product. So, it is not justifiable to measure the beauty of the black against the white standard of beauty. Such theoretical insights increase the self-confidence of the black that changes their attitude to their natural features.

The black involves in (re)glamourizing their own natural features in order to assert their counter discourse of beauty. Some of the black public figures take pride on their own natural features instead of submitting to the white standard. For instance, Lupita Nyong'o, a famous actress of Kenya strongly reacts when *Grazia*, a magazine of UK edits her photograph:

Lupita Nyong'o, the Kenyan born Oscar winning actress, who curiously is the first dark-skinned woman to be termed “beautiful”, protests against the fact that the *Grazia* UK magazine edited out and smoothed her mass of curly black hair, holding it in a thick pony tail, in order to make it fit within the precepts of beauty according to western standards. Nyong'o's protest, with the harsh tag “don't touch my hair”. (Dasi 150)

The strong protest of Lupita shows the changing subjectivities of the black women who do not feel traumatized for their failure on complying with white standard of beauty. They overcome the psychological sense of insecurity and internalized sense of racial inferiority. Such changing subjectivities enable them to challenge the domination of white aesthetics norms by revalorizing their own hair.

In the resistance process, many black activists encourage to develop their own aesthetic values and norms on the basis of their natural features. In early twentieth century, Marcus Garvey implored all the black “to take down the pictures of whitewomen from your walls. Elevate your own women to that place of honor” (Craig 162). Appreciating the racial pride, Garvey requested the black people to appreciate the beauty of the black women which emphasizes the need of an alternative discourse of beauty. In the same way, Michele Wallace encourages the black female to reject the white standard of beauty by creatively exploring their own standard of beauty. For Wallace, “creativity in hairstyling can be a challenge to assimilationist notions of beauty because it can challenge perceived expectations” (Patton 27). Wallace appeals the black women not to straighten their hair by subscribing the white standard of beauty for employment and social mobility. Apparently, the definition of beauty vary among cultures and historical epoches and the the imposition of the white standard of beauty on the black people triggers resistance of various forms.

Conclusion

Racism operates in various forms influencing social and cultural practices in the US. Such racist practice has its origin in the historical practices of the black slavery. The racist attitudes of the slavery epoch have undergone substantial changes due to several social, cultural and political struggles and movements for social justice and racial equality. However, the residuals of such historical practices operate in implicit and explicit manner. One of the areas influenced by such racism is the discourses and practices of the beauty. The notion of the beauty has been shaped by racist attitudes of white supremacy. The biological features of the white women are considered as standard of beauty and the black women are negatively contrasted. As a result, the black women suffer emotionally and socially and feel pressure of changing their biological features to conform the white notion of beauty. However, some black women gradually resist such racist notion of beauty by exploring their cultural root and glamourizing the physical features of the black. They involve in developing own aesthetics values and norms by deconstructing the homogenized and racist notion of white beauty.

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