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An Apology of a Campaigner in King's "Letter from Birmingham Jail"

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Abstract

This article examines Martin Luther King's letter written in Birmingham jail in 1963 in defense to eight white clergymen's public statement against King's campaign for civil rights. While King as a campaigner is determined to establish just society in America white religious leaders are defending discriminatory practices of segregation as a decree. This letter has been evaluated from the perspective of Life Writing/Narrative, in which King's letter in relation to his life and public issue with focus of common good is debated and discussed. This letter is an apology of King as a campaigner that defends against the indictment of the oppressors. In the letter of King, it can be found the examples of atrocities toward black community as the manifestation of whites' prejudice of rights, which the civilized society cannot imagine and withstand. Black community cannot remain oppressed eternally and King's letter of initiation is crucial to open the eyes of the oppressors and the oppressed that America needs change. This letter responds strongly to the question, 'Why is the action of a campaigner justifiable?'

Keywords: *apology, protest, segregation, social justice, discrimination, direct action, oppression*

Introduction: Apology in Life Writing/Narrative and King's Letter

Life writing/narrative composes the self of an individual in relation to the world and reveals the experiences of the past and present, and projects the future. In any form of life writing/narrative there is the inclusion of social, political, economic, cultural spirit of an author's time. It could suggest that a literary work is an embodiment of a particular time and period that the author lives in and experiences. In this sense, any literary text is associated with lives, actions, contexts, and society of the time and place an author dwells. Life writing/narrative is a literary genre in which different sub-genres like, diaries, journals, letters, memoirs, (auto) biographies etc. are prevalent and one of them is 'Apology.' An apology in literal sense is a condition of saying sorry for the wrong action the speaker has done. *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* defines apology as "a word or statement saying sorry for something that has been done wrong or that causes a problem" (59). This definition is commonly understood by language students and it has been used in this sense in everyday communication.

However, in life writing/narrative apology contrasts the meaning used in the discourse of language. An apology, in life writing/narrative, is "a form of self-presentation as self-defense against the allegations or attacks of others, an apology justifies one's own deeds, beliefs and way of life" (Smith and Watson 183). Apology in literary work defies the indictment imposed upon someone who is working on issues society is going through. In this regard, an author represents his/her society and a literary work cannot be separated from value systems in which people are defined in terms of race, class, sex, gender and ethnicity. Regarding the germination of literary work, Hoyt W. Fuller asserts that "The literature of any people grows organically out of the experiences of that people, informed by imagination and wit-the gift, in short of artistry" (330). Literature of any kind implies the experiences of the people of particular society in various domain. In this regard, the political views of an author are dominant in his creation which help raise political awareness by pointing out the injustice society has practiced. While pointing out the unjust practices in the society the author of the text nullifies the race-based allegations and advocates action against unfairness by proving his actions just and fair.

In life writing/narrative, a literary work entails an author's voice that is the part and parcel of the society they are living in. If the writer is from racial group and his/her experience is on racial issues it develops from the oppressed groups and so the role of the writers who represent oppressed community and are involved in a campaign is to establish social justice. "Justice is a matter of treating everyone equally, where equality is correlative with an equal entitlement to what is one's due" (Boucher and Kelly 6). Just society does not and cannot discriminate people in terms of fabricated race, gender, class etc. When a society practices racism, racial injustice supports social, political, and economic injustices and the oppressed

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group's social, economic and political activities remain stagnant. In terms of America, "Conscious and unconscious white racism is everywhere, inflecting all the vital areas of national life" (Fuller 4). It indicates that racial prejudice and proscription is prevailing the whole nation and has alienated black people from the mainstream life of America. While white racism has engulfed black community and prevented them from their progress, black people are seeking change in their social, political, and economic status. Since nature is changeable and nothing is constant in this world, it is against the law of nature to keep people constant in their activities. Unjust law is responsible to hinder the progress of any community and an immediate action is the need to prevail justice.

Justice is concerned with social conflict and social justice movements always keep dignity of people in the center. It nullifies discrimination and oppression of people in any sphere of social structure and calls for unity and harmony. Gladys Loewen asserts that "Striving for dignity is at the core of social justice movements. Activists involved in social justice movement believe that oppressed people have a right to fair treatment and a share of the benefits of society based on their human rights and equality of all people" (5). Living a life of dignity is the right of people and in unjust society human rights are confiscated by the dominant groups having the idea that other people do not deserve it. An individual who is rational regarding the rights of people can lead society to the path of justice. The writers, who are in a campaign of social change, are in dual roles of accomplishing individual creativity and social action. Since their goal is change, these writers are directly involved in moments of conflict. Such writers as a campaigner are alleged by the dominant groups and the justification of their work germinates in the genre like life writing, poems, stories, movies, speeches, manifestos, laws, declarations, letters etcetera, and they use a set of tropes or a particular discourse.

"Letter from Birmingham Jail" is one of the varieties of Life Writing/Narrative in which he annuls the allegations made by eight white Alabama clergymen against King's campaign. Martin Luther King is a campaigner committed to establish rule of justice and reign of freedom for which he campaigns in different parts of the United States. A campaign is an "organized effort to achieve social or political result" (Swan 292). A group of committed people are involved in a campaign and these people have a leader who makes them aware of what they should and shouldn't do. King is a campaigner to establish just society and King's "Letter from Birmingham Jail" is a campaigner's defense against allegation made upon his campaign. The writer of this letter has a goal to bring change in American society which is tormented by racism and racial discrimination. King is directly involved in action to break the shackles of injustices, and so the oppressors have incarcerated him in Birmingham jail. King's stay in jail is a matter of celebration for oppressors who assume the campaigner as an agent of violence, anarchy and discordance. The oppressors' act of keeping a campaigner in a jail, for a just society, is the extreme of injustice and prejudice.

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King uses injustice as a trope in the letter and this trope has a political outlook. King is in a campaign of establishing rule of justice and reign of freedom, which have been outside the reach of black community. Black community has been politically oppressed, economically exploited and socially degraded in American society for a long time and white people are not prepared to treat them equal. David Boucher and Paul Kelly observe that "Certain classes or groups monopolize money and civil rights, which leaves other groups deprived and therefore unequal. The task of social justice becomes one of breaking these monopolies (10). America is a vast land of progress and opportunities which has been under the grip of whites and it is urgent to break the grip of discrimination and share equality. As long as white people monopolize all the resources of the nation, black people are sure to come across hardships in their lives. King is committed to liberate his people from the hard times by taking action and he is ready to bear any adverse situation if needed. But King's action and commitment are unwise and irrelevant for the oppressors.

King's series of activities are pivotal in drawing attention of the white and the world that justice for black is urgent. He is confirmed that injustices divide society and cause conflict and chaos in a society. Such conflict and chaos hinder the material and social progress of the nation. Racial discrimination has caused irreparable loss to the nation since "Discrimination is a brake on the material and social progress of the country as a whole, and while not an absolute bar to the progress of minorities it prevents success on equal terms or in proportionate numbers to that of the white majority" (Modood 204). Discrimination has impacted black community directly and its impact upon whites is tacit; and as a whole the nation has not been able to be flourished as it could be. From the division of people, in any society, the nation loses its strength and the progress stagnates.

In this regard, King's letter evolves from conflict that is demanding justice, rights, and equality. In the campaign of establishing justice, King visits Alabama in April 1963 to participate in a parade and sit-in programs organized by Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights (ACMHR) and king's Southern Leadership Conference (SLC). However, the political activities of King were restricted and he was sent to prison. From the prison King responds eight clergymen's public statement "A Call for Unity," which was published in a newspaper against King's campaign for civil rights and this newspaper was smuggled in the jail cell.

Justification of King's Campaign for Urgent Change

King's letter sincerely opposes the indictment made in the public statement that King is an "outsider coming in" (594), and King's response to this remark is that he is the president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and citizen of the nation and he has right to move in any part of the nation where his organization convenes political activities to end injustices in the society. His presence in Birmingham is the demand of the situation that there

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is injustice and black community does not have any alternative except coming in action that is nonviolent. He argues that there are four steps of nonviolent campaign: "collection of the facts to determine whether injustices exists; negotiation; self-purification; and direct action"

(593). King's participation in Birmingham is the implementation of the final step of nonviolent campaign- direct action, while the previous ones have failed in gaining justice and equality. King is determined to achieve the goal of justice and this commitment does not let him have rest while his people are helpless and hopeless to the situation created by racial injustice. America has witnessed black community in trouble as this nation follows racial laws and practices.

King has a lot of evidences of racial atrocity which he presents as facts of injustice and discrimination. These facts have agitated black community and negotiated with whites but whites are not faithful to their words of implementing freedom and justice to black population. Black people have been distressed by the condition of the society they are living in and so they are in action. "Black revolutionaries do not drop from the moon. We are created by our conditions. Shaped by our oppression. We are being manufactured in the droves, in the ghetto streets, places like attica, san quentin, Bedford hills, leavenworth, and sing sing" (Shakur 75). The hate and scorn black people have got in racial society has escalated hatred in black population and it has taken the form of storm. White people try to control it but their method of controlling them has fueled the anger of blacks and compelled them to get involved in the campaign. The peaceful campaign of King has got an acknowledgement of the world as its means and ends are pro-social and humanistic.

King justifies his campaign in Birmingham that he is aware of the situation of black community all over the nation and he cannot ignore the events and practices in Birmingham, Atlanta. He is mindful that "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere" (594). Injustice in America is interconnected to all black communities and injustice in one place may permeate to another place. King has organizational tie all over America and now he is in Birmingham to unearth the injustices inflicted upon the black people of Atlanta. Black community has been oppressed in the land of democracy for a long time and such predicament should be ended soon because "Oppressed people cannot remain oppressed forever" (601). The law of nature is change and change in the conditions of black community is inevitable. Black leaders, with dedication to human dignity, are working on ending the pathetic condition of their brethren. Black civil rights movements have lots of evidences of oppression and they have worked a lot to mitigate the problem but the oppressors have retracted from negotiation. King, as a leader of nonviolent civil rights movement, inculcates his people to proceed their action until justice and equality is guaranteed to all.

Black people are mindful that they have been demonized by the whites so it makes them easier to oppress them. The awareness of them is the rationality prevailed in the

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community that white people have projected blacks for their crimes. The black leaders or any member of the community are alert from the oppressors and explain:

They call us thieves and bandits. They say we steal. But it is not we who stole millions of Black people from the continent of Africa. We were robbed of our language, of our Gods, of our culture, of our human dignity, of our labor, and of our lives. They call us thieves, yet it is not we who rip off billions of dollars every year through tax evasions, illegal price fixing, embezzlement, consumer fraud, bribes, kickbacks, and swindles. (Shakur 73)

The labelling of the blacks in offensive manner is disgracing them. Black leaders have boomeranged ill behaviors to whites that have been projected to them. White people do not know to give but they have grasped everything from blacks. They have been made naked by trespassing blacks' values and about these they are in action. The evil actions of white have propelled the blacks to action with commitment.

King, in this letter, puts the events and evidences of segregation, brutality of police, unjust treatment in courts, bombings of Negro homes and churches in Birmingham and their attempts to end this situation and these evidences support him prove that he is not wrong in taking action against race based brutality. Black people, as a direct action, involve in economic withdrawal program by renouncing shopping during Easter. King believes that this action helps merchants know the need of change in American society. King observes that "Nonviolent direct action seek to create such a crisis and foster such tension that a community which has constantly refused to negotiate is forced to confront the issue. It seeks so to dramatize the issue that it can no longer be ignored" (596). Nonviolent direct action produces pressure to the group which has ignored the demand of agitators. Such kind of resistance provides with an opportunity to table the problem.

Action taken against injustice in any form cannot be unwise and untimely that the clergymen have charged King. King's letter manifests painful experiences of black community because of the maintenance of status quo of American society by segregationists. Deeply embedded status quo is not easy to erase from the society and so King, being a leader of nonviolent movement, advocates constructive, nonviolent tension in society that will help people rise from racism and prejudice to the moment of fraternity. World events have proved that the oppressed should come in agitation to get freedom from the grip of oppressors. King is convinced with the need of action against oppressor that "We know through painful experience that freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed" (596). King's faith on action emphasizes the nonviolent direct action which will compel the oppressor to give or negotiate with the agitator. Direct action for King is a conclusive move which will make the oppressor thoughtful about giving freedom to the oppressed.

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Black community can, no more, see their brethren lynched, cannot withstand more police brutality and whites' treatment at whims, and cannot get suffocated by poverty where affluence is everywhere. Racial discrimination and segregation is all pervasive which has made it more difficult to sooth the inquisitiveness of black children why they cannot be together with white children. Such unjust has been inflicted upon black people and this law has created a chasm in the society. Regarding such discriminatory laws, King points out that "All segregation statutes are unjust because segregation distorts the soul and damages the personality. It gives the segregator a false sense of superiority and the segregated a false sense of inferiority"

(598). Whites' unjust law has relegated black people to the status of animals and things, and has created a demarcation between black and white. "To be white was to be pure, good, universal, and beautiful; to be black was to be impure, evil, parochial, and ugly" (Gayle 40). Such kind of labelling of people and the relegation of blacks has helped the oppressors to be superior and King's campaign opposes such partial attitude of whites towards the children of God.

King finds himself disappointed in Birmingham though he comes there with hope of materializing his dream of social change. He has been made hopeless by the white religious

leaders who call his move "unwise and untimely" (594). His assumption is that such type of leaders should become the mediator to bring both groups together and show deep moral concern to the causes of black community. King finds contradiction between what he has heard and what he has desired about the Southern religious leaders. King explains this contradiction that "I have heard numerous southern religious leaders admonish their worshippers to comply with a desegregation decision because it is the law, but I have longed to hear white ministers declare: "Follow this decree because integration is morally right and because the Negro is your brother" (603). Religion is concerned with strengthening moral values and maintaining peace and harmony in the society, but unfortunately, King finds the role of white religious leaders in the South in perpetuating unjust law and dividing people of the same community.

However, King is optimistic with the situation that the perverse behavior of white people and white religious leader will stop and the solidarity of brotherhood will stand. "Let us all hope that the dark clouds of racial prejudice will soon pass away and the deep fog of misunderstanding will be lifted from our fear-drenched communities, and in some not too distant tomorrow the radiant stars of love and brotherhood will shine over our great nation with all their scintillating beauty" (607). King, regarding the perverse situation of American society, is mindful that every dark cloud has it silver lining. Attainment of justice and freedom in black community is sure though the path to them may be long and painful.

Conclusion: King's Letter as an Apologia against the Allegations of Oppressors

King's letter "Letter from Birmingham Jail" is connected with King's personal life, black community and the oppressor's allegation upon his action for social justice. This letter is a self-presentation as defense and manifests facts of social evils that lead society to get divided and spread anarchy in each and all walks of black life. Black life in America has been in a turmoil because of the white oppressors who know well about justice, a means of eliminating all gruesome social practices. It is an irony that white people think themselves the cognizant of human values and the natural rights and yet they create chasm in society in terms of race. This letter, in response to public statement, reveals weaknesses in religious leaders and defends his campaign for civil rights. Unjust practices end in action with commitment to make oppressors realize their atrocities and immediate need of change. When democratic values of justice and equality are kept from one aspect of society, another aspect cannot imagine the society with peace, without violence. The progress of the nation is possible with peace and peace is inherent in that society where there is rule of justice and rein of freedom. America cannot become peaceful country until black people are arrayed with justice, rights and equal opportunities. So long as a part of population (black) survives injustice, agitation of the oppressed remains justifiable and this letter reiterates his action without malice to anyone.

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