

Quest for identity in Dave Harris's poem, "After Zuko"

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Abstract

Dave Harris is among those writers who write for the rights of blacks, who have been pushed out of social associations and faced instability in their social and economic living and because of that they have to face identity crisis, disgrace, discrimination and dishonor. This paper aims to analyze the Dave Harris's poem "After Zuko" as a quest for black identity. It has been interpreted and analyzed in the light of struggle of black Americans in restoring their honor. In this poem a fictional world character "Zuko" from "Avatar: the last air bender" has been discussed. Dave Harris very realistically created a connection between the story of that character with his own struggle as being a black American. By losing one's own identity, it is very difficult to live in a society where minorities are treated with discriminatory behavior. The study follows the parameters of qualitative research and selected poem has been interpreted to observe the black American's condition and their struggle to restore their identity and honor in white society.

Keywords: *Identity, discrimination, Black Americans, struggle, honor*

Introduction

The United States of America was based on the belief that all men are considered equal. Sadly, for a long time, Blacks who were taken from their homeland and oppressed by whites, experienced segregation and needed to fight for their self-worth. They tried their best to survive under the most difficult conditions. The road to liberation is very

difficult, and countless blacks have suffered countless failures and losses. Throughout their struggle for living their lives peacefully they fought against the discrimination on the basis of race and class, but they have to fight for different reasons like class discrimination (classism), race discrimination (racism), all of which exist in same period. The condition of blacks is

poorer than that of any other race. Many, black writers involved writing as a "weapon" in their battle. Through their works, these writers attempted to reestablish Blacks' actual identity. They express need to represent their image of poorer and dutiful creatures, which is just suitable for tedious housework. They show that blacks are fighting for their identity and sacrificing themselves, including their family and race. Among African-American writers, many have used the power of speaks to express their experiences through their poetic language. Poetry is an important vehicle for self-expression and artistic creation. (Dodhy, 2020)

Dave Harris is a poet, writer and dramatist from West Philly. He writes in favor of Black's rights, discusses racism, blackness, capitalism and black's struggle in restoring their honor in America. He moved on from Yale University with a B.A. in Theater Studies in 2016 and is a candidate for the MFA in Playwriting at UC San Diego. He has gotten partnerships and awards from Cave Canem, Callaloo, Yale University, UC San Diego, The Kennedy Center, New Haven Arts and Humanities Co-Op, and The American Playwriting Foundation. (button poetry, n.d.) His collection of poetry book named "Patricide" discusses the problems of Black Americans. "After Zuko" poem is taken from his poetry collection "Patricide". This is a poem that references a person from a fictional world of Avatar: The Last Air bender. The character of Zuko is from Fire Nation, a spot in this made up world, whose residents can twist and control fire. In this

master piece about an individual, poet showed trouble of black man to struggle with his identity issue and restoring his honor and masculinity, Harris suitably references the well-known fictional show as a way for making sense of his own struggle with being an individual of color in a country that transparently acknowledges white people, yet treats ethnic minorities with disrespect. (singhapac, 2020)

Literature Review

"After Zuko" poem is taken from a collection of poetry book, "Patricide" written by Dave Harris. Since the book is a recent publication, there has not been published any research on "After Zuko". On the other side many writers have covered the discussion on black people who lived among the whites with identical issues. Further different writer's reviews on Dave Harris's poetry are discussed. According to Claire Schwartz (Author of Bound), in Harris's poem the language of severe white supremacy and patriarchy have released. Which shows the effect of difficulties of black Americans because of white capitalism. (schwartz, n.d.). Dave Harris's poems contain those complexities and how it impacts the relations of black boys who wants to become brave in the image of their fathers.

The poetry collection book "Patricide" from which "After Zuko" poem is taken, is about the fear or death, addressed on being black in America. It is about the internal struggle to be the best man with the shadow of "other" or "Blackness". Through poems on misfortune, music, school, and

family difficulty, Harris looks at how time moves and changes, in spite of such a daily routine remaining something similar. Eventually, his poems open itself up to reveal an account of many strings, one that figures out how to integrate in unexpected and cheerful ways. (poetry, n.d.)

According to a culture Report by Julia Dion Evans, Dave Harris said if he is obsessed with revenge, it is his own obsession, nobody made him to do that. If he keep writing about racism, nobody making him to do that. There are lots of reasons to do that, there is capitalism and social currency of blackness. Much of the manner in which Harris handles race has developed since he originally found his capacity to "be loud" about it. The objective of his work often white institutions and racism and while writing about these things, Harris understood that he had the ability to compose toward something expected or planned, or to compose away from it. (evans, 2019)

There are many other male and female poets who worked on the themes of racism, discrimination, and identity quest. Maya Angelou has the ability with her words, to cut through the race, class divide. She tells of the bondage of the black race, of their need to be free, and to be heard. Angelou has brought up in a world where beauty standard was sets by white people with golden hair, and blue, green eyes. As a child Angelou believes that black is related to ugliness, and she considered herself as the ugliest person among whites. Most of her poetry contains the theme of racism and

discrimination. Her life and work can be described as mirror images because they are accurately reflected. Angelo's poetry and autobiographical literature are a larger canvas, and the symbolic Maya Angelo seems to be the spokesperson of the conscience of African Americans, especially blacks. Women fight for survival against the background of male prejudice and white hatred of blacks. Angelou's real life based autobiography, "I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings" attracted the attention of critics and won the fame and respect for blacks too. (Dodhy, 2020)

Another white writer Doris Lessing have British nationality, who writes in favor of Blacks, said that, cruelties of Whiteman are on the verge of against humanity towards Blacks. Difference of color is not their fault, it was just a wrong concept of imagination to seeing the things according to white's perspective. (Knapp, 2002)

Statement of the study

Dave Harris is one of the most famous Afro-American writer and protester in twenty 1st century who speaks from the side of those people who are suffering or have already suffered from the racist perspective of white people. His work of poetry contains refreshing elements. This study discusses Harris's poem "After Zuko" from identical perspective. In his poem "After Zuko" by using the character of Zuko, the feelings of black Americans in white society has been expressed. This study deals with the concept of being black in white society and also deals with the struggle of Black Americans in regaining their honor. The difficult living

and working condition of black Americans and their realization about self –worth, black identity and their restoration of honor are discussed.

Research Questions

1. How the theme of quest for identity is explored in Dave Harris’s poem “After Zuko”?
2. How the blacks are trying to restore their honor in American society with reference to poem “After Zuko”

Objectives of the study

The objectives of this research paper are:

1. To explore the theme of quest for identity in Dave Harris’s poem “After Zuko”.
2. To find out black’s struggle in restoring their honor in white society with reference to poem “After Zuko”

Methodology

The researcher used the qualitative methodology. A detailed analysis of the selected poem is done through interpretative and analytical approach. Textual analysis and text references have been supported the argument of researcher. The researcher read, interpreted and analyzed the text. Further data is retrieved from articles, journals, and books.

Significance of Study

This research helps us to know about the suffering of the black people lived in white society. It throws light on presentation of their efforts to find out their identity, equal rights and honor. This research provides a base for further researches in the particular field. It is also a helpful contribution to the present literature.

Data Analysis

For Zuko is a poem written by Dave Harris, a new emerging black American writer. Harris gets the character of Zuko to express his feeling as a man who come in a society which does not adopted him. Zuko is an ancient character from a series of “Avatar: The Last Air bender”. He was a skilled and powerful fire bender. He was a prince of fire nation in Royal family. Because of his fiercely disagreement of his father’s war decision, he was banished from Royal family. His father burned the left side of his face and exiled him from his beloved homeland by declaring that his return is only possible if he capture the avatar who disappeared hundred years ago. It was an impossible task but Zuko was clung to that for his only hope of regaining his honor. After exiled he accompanied with his uncle and spent more than two years at sea with a small ship and crew. He felt loneliness, isolated, degraded and spoiled by his father. He was not given his rights of prince. He led the life of misery. The poet used the character of Zuko to express his feeling as a black in white society, where he feels lonely, isolated and degraded. Blacks were not given their rights equally, they were degraded by whites, and they are not given proper jobs. They were given the duties of slaves so they may not make progress in future. Harris in this poem speaks of imaginative world but it understands and also recognizes the language of forefather and their dark faces.

Yes, I too have known fire. And yes, I too have wondered if I come from

a burnt people. A people who have always been ablaze. I have hated my own hands.

The poet symbolizes himself with the character of Zuko by expressing his feelings, and like Zuko he also known about the fire. Fire symbolizes anger, energy and power. Poet knows what it is like to be filled with hate and anger, this represents the fire he feels. Like Zuko poet also wandered about different places in search of his identity which has lost by being a black in white society. His blackness is a sign of his remembrance that he belonged to "burnt" people who have known "ablaze". In white society blacks are considered as slaves, uneducated, fierce etc. even after so much revolution the black experience has fallen victim to different campaigns that shows the darkest parts of African stories by wrapping them in the collective memory of darkest history of black nation. Where they worked as slave nation. White supremacies so negatively impacts the blacks as they forget about their positive abilities. They compel to start hating their own identity as a black nation. Poet compares the black nation with the character of Zuko, who hated himself because of losing his own identity as a fire nation prince. These lines also depicts the historical perspective of Black Africans.

I have been prince to a kingdom of folk and dishonored them. I have worn a white mask.

I have cut my hair to look less like me. I too have sought to be anything other than the ashes

In this stanza Harris expresses Zuko's feeling about his past, when he was the prince of fire nation and have honorable relation to the royal family. But after interference into his father's wrong decision about his army, Zuko was dishonored from the royal kingdom. He wore a white mask, changed his appearance to look less like himself. He wanted to embellish his identity and want to be anything other than his own originality, just because of that sin which he had not done.

Poet resembles the character of Zuko with the situation of blacks in American society. Harris recollects the pathetic memory of his ancestors that lived in their own country freely but after colonization in Africa they were sold into slavery between 1700's and 1850's they were compelled to move to America, Canada and other parts of the world. They were exploited as slaves. They have lost their self-pride, honor and identity. They were brought to a place where being black is a crime. They were engaged into maltreated, humiliated and demoralized as slaves. They have lost their pride, respect and individuality. They made to feel guilty by being black. So many tried to wear "White Mask" just to hide their true identity and to make the white supremacy happy. Even they were punished to the crimes which they were not done.

Fanon in his book "*Black Skin, White Masks*" calls attention to that for the Black man, language has two aspects: "one with his colleagues, the other with the white man. A Negro works diversely with a white man and with another Negro." (Fanon, 2008)

This distinction in behavior is the result of colonialism, which transformed the manner in which one collaborates with the other. According to Hughes (Black Poet) when in 1926 he composed the essay, "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain." The writer saw that many Black artists presented their energy to express themselves not as Blacks, but rather as a sort of American white standardization.

Of another man's sin. I have tried to earn my existence
in a nation that would not claim me. I have scorched
the ones who care most. I have searched the countryside
to find something I always had. And yes,

In 3rd stanza, Zuko is trying to earn a place in a nation which disowned him. He considered himself unlucky who is searching for good fate but world is against him so, he cannot be succeeded. He travelled in search of his lost identity and honor. In search of "Aang" (avatar, bender of four elements) he travelled three temples. Aang was his first and only hope to regain his honor. But it looks impossible because Aang (Avatar) had been disappeared hundred years ago. It was very difficult task but Zuko firmly decided to search for Aang just to restore his honor, respect and integrity.

By showing the critical condition of Zuko, Dave Harris expresses Black Americans feelings. Black Americans tried their best to get honor in white society. They started to understand the worth of their own identity. Different movements like, "Black

Power Movement", "Black Lives Matter", "Civil Right movement", started to realize that there is no need to live for the whites but for themselves. They realized their dream of freedom from white supremacy. They started to found pride in their own identity and race. Martin Luther King Jr., Harriet Tubman, Malcolm X, Rosa Parks, and Frederick Douglass might be the first names that come to mind when the issue of African American struggles discussed. But there are thousands and thousands of daring men and women who have fought against racial domination in US history. They have fought for restoring their freedom, equal rights, dignity and their identity.

I have been unworthy of my mother's love. I have known the right thing to do and done otherwise. I too have been an exile and a product
of my tribe. Yes, I am still running.

In these lines Zuko is shown to feel himself unworthy of his mother love. His goal was returning home and gaining his identity and honor as a fire nation prince back. This prospect motivated him towards his journey. Afterward he displayed an optimistic attitude towards life in realizing his own will to make situations better. But he also realized that he was exiled from his homeland and still he was running to pursue his own identity which he had lost. A lot of resemblance with black Americans is presented in these lines. Both are searching to find their honor and identity. Both are shown in struggle to regain their honor and dignity. Mother's love can be related to

one's own homeland. The racial pride and optimism in these lines creates enthusiasm. After realizing their own identity, and multiplicity of depths in their nation, they started different movement of equal rights in white society. The lives of blacks working class in America is portrayed as full of struggle. These lines reveals that Harris wanted to identify himself with his race. He emphasized on the theme of "black is beautiful". Many movements which are started for the rights of blacks have been taken the attention of the world towards the discrimination which blacks were facing. Different writers like Toni Morrison, Langston Hughes, Richard Wright, James Baldwin, Zora Neale, Maya Angelou, Gwendolyn Brooks and many more fearlessly observed their social stigmas, presented very close detail about their life problems and created extraordinary literature. They presented literature in which the oppression, torture and difficulties of blacks are portrayed.

I too am afraid of being a good man. I too have been beaten by water. Nearly drowned. Emerged.

And still, I would burn a forest down just to feel the warmth against my skin (Harris, 2019)

When Zuko realized his true worth, he had truly changed, but he was so conflicted about his choices. He has the ability of fire blast by bending the fire, but he was defeated by another character of this series "Katara" who was a water bender. He faced many hardships with his uncle and

crew during his two years journey. By burning a forest down he wants to feel the warmth of his own self. It means he wanted to get his own original identity of being a fire bender. Through the representation of Zuko's positive aspects the poet believes that time will come when he was appreciated by the white society and his search for identity will be completed. Same case is done with afro Americans who wants to get their own origin of being black. They faced many hardships, oppression, torture, discrimination and prejudice. They struggled for their rights from a long time in US, but their position in society is not changed and still they are not given their rights. But still they are searching for their true identity. Martese Johnson, Haile Thomas, Jerome Foster, Anya Dillard and many other activists protest, organize marches and many others with the help of art and writing, motivate others to take action. These young Black activists and writers are having significant effects in their communities. Their personal experiences and stories have urged them to take action and it is necessary that all over the world their voices and stories should be listen. It is never too late or too early to use voice and make a difference. (Calazans, 2022)

Conclusion

The present study concludes that "After Zuko" by Dave Harris is not just a story of struggling of Zuko but also of an individual striving to overcome racial barriers to success. Through this poem Harris shows the sufferings of being African American in the United States. The painful dilemma of

identity is recounted through this poem. During the journey of identity exploration African American have recourse to different means of resistance to overcome those forces of biased behavior. . In dominant white society in the United States, generations of blacks have been fighting against oppression and injustice. Overall “After Zuko” is a discussion about the quest for identity and a struggle of regaining the lost dignity and honor. Through the Zuko’s experiences poet shows that there is a tie between the resistance and realization of self and identity. The present study may be a contribution to understand the problems of black identity, ignorance, hated, discrimination and biased behavior and black’s struggle of fight for gaining their self-esteem, dignity and respect in society.

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