



Plight of Black Americans in the 21st Century

Aftab Nazir

Ph.D. Scholar

Department of English and Modern European Languages

University of Lucknow

Abstract

Racism in America is not new and the black people of America have been facing racism since its foundation. When a particular group of people is marginalized on the basis of colour, race, origin, nationality that is racism. It is an unfair practice because it promotes the ideologies of discrimination and differences between people on the basis of concepts such as caste and race. Most of the black Africans migrated to America either by themselves or were taken as slaves and they were treated as second class citizens since then. They were reminded that this is the country of white people and they are there just to serve them as their slaves. Though the black Americans have contributed a lot for the prosperity of this country but they are still being judged not by their talent but by the colour of their skin. This research paper is aimed to show the plight of black people living in the 21st century America.

Key words: Black people, white people, slaves, discrimination, death, protest.

Racism is a plague that has hit the American society quite badly from the last century or two. The white people always had hatred towards the black people. They were treated badly just because they were black. The white people think of themselves as belonging to a superior class and the black people as inferior. White people consider themselves as more educated, highly civilized, well cultured, having good manners and consider the black people as uncivilized with no culture and having ugly faces. They were discriminated in every sector of life whether that was education, jobs and business, even in religious activities. Various measures have been taken both at the national as well as international level by forming various commissions and institutions to tackle this menace and to lessen the incidents of racial abuse and racial discrimination. But it is very unfortunate that this has become a never ending problem, especially in America and such incidents are happening even today.

The kind of racial discrimination which the black people have been facing is shocking and disturbing one for everyone. They were always made to feel that they are ugly compared to the white people as they consider themselves a beautiful race. As Frantz Fanon in his book *Black Skin, White Masks* writes: “The Negro is an animal, the Negro is bad, the Negro is mean, the Negro is ugly” (80). This was the image in the minds of white people about the black people. This condition of black people improved when the black intellectuals raised their voice for equal rights for black people which the law of nation also granted. The prominent figures among them were Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X, Rosa Parks, John Lewis, Bayard Rustin, James Farmer, Hosea Williams, Whitney Young Jr. Roy Wilkins and many more. It was with their efforts and sacrifices that the black Americans got some rights such as right to vote, right to education, jobs, business, health sector and in political fields as well. Dr. Aidsand in his article “Systematic Racism is Real. Be One Another’s Church” quote’s Camille Busette, Director Race, Prosperity and inclusion initiative as she said, “To be male, poor and African American is to confront, on a daily basis, a deeply held racism that exists in every social institution. No other demographic group has fared so badly, so persistently and for so long” (Web). Over the past few years the condition of black people has improved to a great extent. As Walter Williams in his article “The True Plight of Black Americans” writes:

In 1965, there were no blacks in the United States Senate, nor were there any black governors. And only six members of the House of Representatives were black. As of 2019, there is far greater representations in some areas-52 House Members are black. Nine black Americans have served have served in the Senate, including Edward W Brooks of Massachutes, Caral Moseley Brown and Barack Obama of Illinois, Tim Scott of South Carolina, Cory Booker of New Jersey and Kamala Harris of Carolina. In recent times, there have been black state governors. (Web)

Despite these figures and analysis, racial discrimination towards black people has not ended. Many black writers have raised their voice against the plight of black people who have to suffer a lot at the hands of the white dominated society. Prominent among them were Phillis Wheatley, Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, James Baldwin, Longston Hughes, Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, Maya Angelou, Octavia Butler and many others. Through their works they have showed the picture to the world about the condition of black people of America. Despite having better qualities than a white person, the black person will not be given the preference just because of his skin colour being black. This treatment with black people not only affected their standard of living which was already very poor but also they have to face a mental trauma. Kalonda Mulamba a New York based African writer quotes Malcolm X’s speech in her article titled “Malcolm X speaks: I am not an American...We are nothing but Africans” delivered by him in 1964, where he said:

No, I’m not an American. I’m one of 22 million black people who are the victims of Americanism. One of the 22 million black people who are the victims of democracy, nothing but disguised hypocrisy. So I’m not standing here speaking to you as an American, or a patriot, or a flag-saluter, or a flag-waver- no, not I! I’m speaking as a victim of this American system. I don’t see any American dream; I see an American nightmare! (Web)

No doubt many black Americans have got high positions over the last couple of years. Barack Obama a black person was elected as the 44th U.S. President in the year 2009, and he remained so till 2017. Even today the Vice President of America Kamala Harris is also a black person. The amount of racial discrimination incidents towards the black people in America has shown a decline in number but this trouble is still there. Various commissions have been formed and various conferences were held both at the national as well as at the International level to check the racial abuse and racial discrimination cases in America. In the year 1948, the United Nations General Assembly passed an important resolution called Universal Declaration of Human Rights. This law provides equal rights to all without any discrimination on the basis of colour, caste, race, sex, origin, language. There are thirty Articles in the UDHR but I will be discussing only first two articles.

Article 1 says: “All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.”

Article 2 says: “Everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration, without distinction of any kind such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status. Furthermore, no distinction shall be made on the basis of the political, jurisdictional or international status of the country or territory to which a person belongs, whether it be independent, trust, non-self-governing or under any other limitation of sovereignty.” (Web)

Despite these laws passed and various other conventions regarding the rights of black people, many incidents of racial discrimination have been reported in America. In fact these incidents have raised especially during the tenure of Donald Trump as President of United States. As Juliana Menasce Horowitz, et al in their report titled “Race in America 2019” published in the year 2019 write:

Opinions about the current state of race relations-and President Donald Trump’s handling of the issue-are also negative. About six-in-ten Americans (58%) say race relations in the U.S. are bad, and of those, few see them improving. Some 56% think the president has made race relations worse; just 15% say he has improved race relations and another 13% say he has tried but failed to make progress on this issue. In addition, roughly two-thirds say it’s become more common for people to express racist views since Trump became president. (Web)

In April 2021, BBC News published a report with the title “George Floyd: Timeline of Black Deaths and Protests.” In this news report BBC has cited few such incidents where black people have been killed by the police without any genuine reason or explanation. These deaths created havoc in the whole country, especially with the death of George Floyd. Some of the major incidents as reported by BBC News are those of Eric Garner, Michael Brown, Tamir Rice, Walter Scott, Alton Sterling, Philando Castile, Stephon Clark, Breonna Taylor, George Floyd and Daunte White.

On 17th of July 2014, Eric Garner was killed by the police on suspicion of selling cigarettes illegally. The incident of his killing was recorded by a man standing there and it went viral on the social media. In the video Garner was in a very pathetic situation and unable to breathe properly. Before losing his battle of life he is heard saying “I can’t breathe” as many as 11 times. The police officer who was involved in this murder was never held guilty and never prosecuted. Another such incident was reported when Michael Brown was killed on 09th of August 2014 on suspicion of stealing a box of cigars. After a brief scuffle with a police officer Garner was shot dead by the police on mere suspicion basis. After this murder, the Department of Justice lashed out at the police and showed its displeasure on the police department. A heart wrenching incident was recorded on 22 November 2014 when a twelve year old innocent kid was killed over the suspicion of having a gun. The police officer was removed from the job but never held guilty of such heinous crime. Walter Scott was killed on 04th of April 2015, for having a defective light in his car. His murder took a new turn in the Black Lives Matter movement as protestors raise the slogan “No justice no peace”.

Another shocking incident was reported when Alton Sterling was killed on 05th of July 2016 when the police received a report of some ruckus outside a shop. The incident was recorded by the eye witnesses and it went viral like a wild fire and protests erupted throughout the country. Another black man Philando Castile was killed on 06th of July 2016 when he was with his girlfriend. His girlfriend reported this incident live on her Facebook page and protestors came out on roads to show their sympathy with the victim. He was murdered for possessing a weapon without a licence though he was possessing one. Stephon Clark was murdered on 18th of March 2018 after he shot dead by the police when they were investigating a case of theft nearby. After investigation it was reported that he just had a mobile phone with him and nothing else. On 13th March 2020, a 26-year old girl was killed in her rented room when the white police shot her eight times. Her family filed a case against the city authorities and the case was decreed in their favour.

25th of May 2020 will be remembered as one of the darkest day in the history of America because of the death of a former security guard George Floyd. He was arrested by the police after a complaint that Floyd has used a fake bill to buy the cigarettes. The incident was recorded by the bystanders and in the video it was visible how the white police officer had placed his knee on Floyd’s neck and didn’t release him until his death. Floyd was heard telling the officer that he can’t breathe, at least twenty times. The video was shared through social media and protests erupted throughout America. The protest lasted several days and public property also was damaged. Following the death of Floyd, the Black Lives Matter movement became stronger, as this time it gained support from other parts of the world as well. People of many countries showed their sympathy with Floyd and demanded justice for him. The series of these brutal killings didn’t stop here and another killing was reported when Daunte Wright was killed on 11th of April 2021. He was killed for a traffic violation. The police after the incident told that it was an accidental killing.

These are only a few incidents which have been recorded and came to the knowledge of public either by the social media platforms or by some honest journalism. Black and Asian Americans are also more likely than their white and Hispanic counterparts to say they have been subject to slurs or jokes because of their race or ethnicity. According to a survey released in 2020 by Pew Research Centre:

About four-in-ten black and Asian adults say people have acted as if they were uncomfortable around them because of their race or ethnicity since the beginning of the outbreak of covid-19. And similar shares say they worry that other people might be suspicious of them if they wear a mask when out in public, according to a new Pew Research Centre (Web).

On April 29, 2021 The New York Times published a replica of the speech of US Senator Tim Scott of South Carolina which he delivered in response to US President Joe Biden's address. From Scott's speech I would like to quote few lines related to my research paper:

Nowhere do we need common ground more than in our discussions of race. I have experienced the pain of discrimination. I know what it feels like to be pulled over for no reason. To be followed around a store while I'm shopping. I remember, every morning, at the kitchen table, my grandfather would have the newspaper in his hands. Later, I realised he had never learned to read it. He just wanted to set the right example.

I've also experienced a different kind of intolerance. I get called "Uncle Tom" and the N-word- by 'progressives'! By liberals! Just last week, a national newspaper suggested my family's poverty was actually privilege because a relative owned land generations before my time. Believe me, I know our healing is not finished.

When America comes together, we've made tremendous progress. But powerful forces want to pull us apart. A hundred years ago, kids in classrooms were taught the color of their skin was their most important characteristics- and if they looked a certain way, they were inferior. Today, kids again are being taught that the color of their skin defines them- and if they look a certain way, they're an oppressor.

Our best future won't come from Washington schemes or socialist dreams. It will come from you- the American people. Black, Hispanic, white and Asian. Republican and Democrat. Brave police officers and Black neighbourhoods. We are not adversaries. We are family! We are all in this together. (Web)

Conclusion

To sum up, I would say that a lot has been done to check this threat of racial discrimination towards the black people in America, but a lot more needs to be done. When an innocent black person is killed either by the police or any other white authority, the black people protest seeking justice for the victims. And if justice is delivered in any case that doesn't mean hatred towards black people has stopped. Everyone must come forward and speak against this evil which is deteriorating the image of America in the world today and it must stop. More and more people must be made aware of the fact that racial discrimination troubles not only the black people but also it is matter of shame for the white people as well. As Tim Scott in his speech has said, "We all are in this together". For this everyone has to provoke his/her inner self and shun their hatred for the black people so that the black people too could live their lives peacefully.

Works Cited:

- BBC News. "George Floyd: Timeline of Black Deaths and Protests." BBC, 22 Apr. 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-52905408>
- Fanon, Frantz. *Black Skin, White Masks*. Translated by Charles Lam Markman, Pluto Press, 2008.
- Horowitz, Juliana Menasce, Anna Brown And Kiana Cox. <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2019/04/Race-report-updated-4.29.19.pdf>
- Kirkpatrick, T. J. "Republican Rebuttal To Biden's Speech: TIM Scott's Full Transcript." *The New York Times*, 29 Apr. 2021, <https://nytimes.com/2021/04/29/us/politics/tim-scott-rebuttal-transcript.html>.
- Mulamba, Kalonda. "Malcolm X speaks: "I am not an American...We are nothing but Africans"." Medium, Medium, 9 Feb. 2019 <https://medium.com/@kalondamulamba/malcolm-x-speaks-i-am-not-an-american-we-are-nothing-but-africans-a40741dba1d>
- Ruiz, Neil G., et al. "Many Black, Asian Americans Say They Have Experienced Discrimination Amid Coronavirus." Pew Research Centre's Social & Demographic Trends Projects, Pew Research Centre, 17 Dec. 2020, <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2020/07/01/many-black-and-asain-americans-say-they-have-experienced-discrimination-amid-the-covid-19-outbreak/>.
- United Nations Organisation. "Universal Declaration of Human Rights". UNO, 1948, <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights>
- Wake, Matt. "Swampers Guitarist Talks Classic Aretha Franklin Sessions." Elle, 17 Aug, 2018. <https://bit.ly/2UWckDQ>
- Williams, Walter. "The True Plight of Black Americans." Townhall, 10 June, 2020 <https://townhall.com/columnists/walterwilliams/2020/06/10/the-true-plight-of-black-americans-n2570249>
- Wright-Riggins, Aidsand. "Systematic Racism Is Real. Be One Another's Church." *New Baptist Covenant*, 6 Aug. 2021, <https://newbaptistcovenant.org/be-one-anothers-church/>.