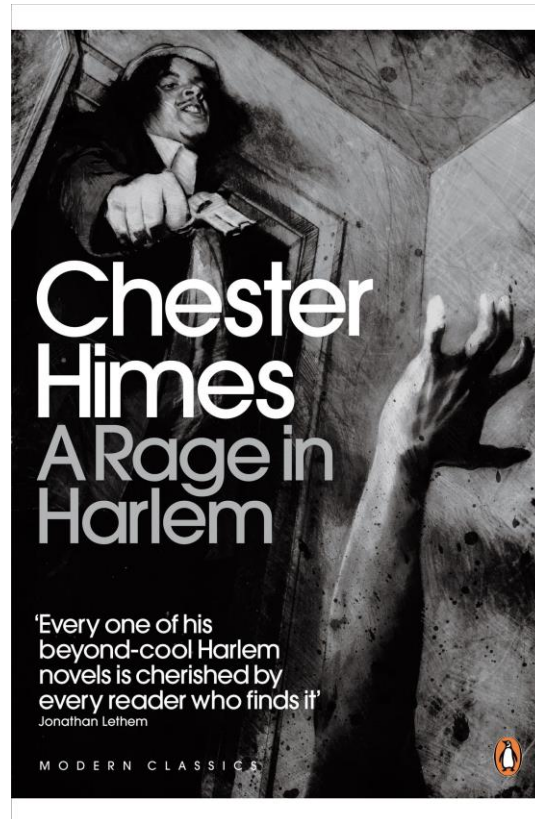


Portrayal of Racism in Chester Himes' *A Rage in Harlem*

K. Elaiyarasi, II Year M.A., R. Lissy, M.A., M.Phil., and Dr. C. Govindaraj



Abstract

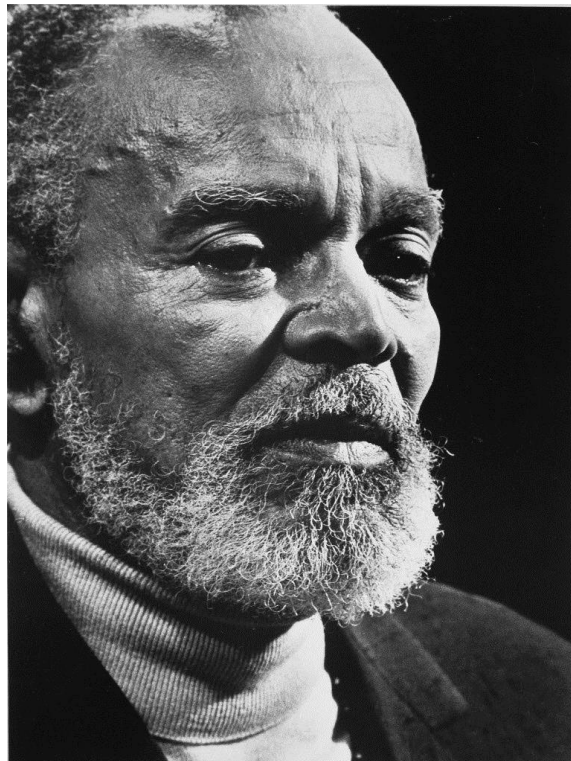
African American literature is created in the United States by writers of the African American race. African American literature earned early high points with slave narratives of the nineteenth century. Thus began the rising status of African American literature. Black authors have shared a common burden over time of representing the African American race. Maintaining the posture of what it means to be black in America has allowed authors to establish an African American identity that transcended the individual. Chester Himes' role as a hard-boiled fiction writer has its roots far removed from the typical pulp and dime novel origins. He is the son of a dark-skinned father and a light-skinned mother, both teachers. The racial tension between his parents and society was palpable, leading to one of Himes' recurring themes: discrimination by

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blacks against blacks. In addition to his childhood in a racially tumultuous household, Himes also experienced certain events in his adulthood that influenced his writings. Like his childhood, Himes' adult life was characterized by multiple racial identities and social tensions. In the novel, *A Rage in Harlem*, Chester Himes portrays the racial discrimination. In this novel, *A Rage in Harlem*, the protagonist Jackson, the "square" who works for the local undertaker loses his money and money that he has "borrowed" from his employer, caught in a confidence game by his not-so-faithful girlfriend Imabelle, her common-law husband Slim, and Slim's cohorts. Jackson appeals to his brother, Goldy, for help after being swindled. Goldy, whose work consists of passing himself off as a Sister of Charity, happens to be an informant for detectives Grave Digger Jones and Coffin Ed Johnson. This novel proves the Negroes' fight for their own rights. It is set in Harlem. It shows the sufferings of the Blacks in the United States. The novel exposes the racial discrimination against Blacks in Harlem in particular and American society in general.

Key words: Racial discrimination, Blacks against Blacks, Chester Holmes, *A Rage in Harlem*.



Chester Himes

Courtesy:

http://blog.cleveland.com/metro/2011/02/chester_himes_faced_struggle_t.html

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Race as a Factor in Human Relations and Exploitations

The sense of race is a relative one depending on the country one migrates to; the idea of race starts affecting one in the longer run. One may have to face differentiation in the new social set up due to one's race, compared to the already existing or newly arriving immigrant races. Race is primarily determined by birth and color. The color white is naturally the first established, dominant one. The black or brown or yellowish races have to contend with the white race. In the case of the black race in the United States of America, not only is the black color is the unfortunate one, since they had entered the white man's country as slaves. As a consequence the blacks could not get even an iota of equality in all social aspects of life for a long period.

Subjugated Black Race and Literature

The subjugated Black race had to struggle hard to get rid of this social stigma. Their social privation, their long-fought struggles and inhuman treatment at the hands of the superior race are well expressed by the black writers in their works. The Harlem renaissance of 1935 heralded the evolution of American black writing on the abuse of the black race by the whites. The importance of color in American life and in Afro-American life evoked a powerful response in the fiction of the period. In numerous instances, black women and men novelists discuss skin color as a matter separate and distinct from racial identity. Many novels in the period document many ways in which skin color can be the decisive element in a black man or women's life.

Moral Damage Caused by Slavery

The stories written by black women novelists, especially in the 1890s, express the conviction that the nation along with its black citizens had been morally damaged by slavery. Frances E.W. Harper wrote in *Iola Leroy*: "Both races have reacted on each other, fettered the slave and cramped their own souls; denied him knowledge, and darkened their spiritual insight" (11). While men and women of both races need spiritual elevation, the novelist contended, the Afro-American was forced to bear the burden of the white men's sin - a burden of poverty, ignorance, and low estate. The mulatto was an especially visible and galling reminder of the impact of slavery upon the Afro American family and equally of the white man's moral dissipation

A Rage in Harlem

The first novel in the series, *A Rage in Harlem* (1957), was originally called *For Love of Imabelle*, but the alternate title stuck because, as Luc Sante points it out in his excellent introduction. It fully proves his point that the Negroes fight for their rights. It is a tale, set in Harlem that is not wholly imaginary and is the artist's visualization of the sufferings of the Blacks in the United States of America. This racial attitude attests the kind of enveloping and systemic racism that Himes spent most of his writing life protesting. Indeed, the author comments that "The Harlem of my books was never meant to be real; I never called it real; I just wanted to take it away from the white man if only in my books" (3).

Jackson

The opening scene of the novel shows Jackson trying to raise thousands from a hundred dollar bill. Of course, this is a con being perpetrated against him by a gang of criminals and even involving his own woman, Imabelle. However, the scene also reveals the sheer desperation of Jackson, and by implication the wider black community, to try and improve their condition. The scene appears funny, but, 'it was too serious for Jackson to be laughing'. The image is also one of 'black-on-black' crime. Jackson is a desperate man, but so too are the criminal gang, and as such are willing to damage the black community for their own again. Himes had previously had a background in protest writing, and by reveling the deception going on in Harlem he also seems to be highlighting the alienation, isolation and 'ghettoisation' of black people throughout America. Harlem is acting as a microcosm for the social situation of the times, and even in such a small area there is a bundle of problems.

Naivety

Jackson's naivety is set up within the first chapter, and Himes is also keen to undermine religious authority; "whenever he was in trouble he crossed himself just to be on the safe side" (6). There is an obvious irony here as God is not going to intervene in his fate. The only people who will have an effect upon Jackson are those who will use or abuse him, trick him out of money or arrest him. This damning of organized religion is a theme continued elsewhere in the novel. As Jackson becomes more desperate to regain his lost woman and money, he is tricked out of, he searches for his brother Goldy.

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Lighter versus Darker Complexion

Racism is ingrained so deeply, that those with a lighter complexion become the other and are prejudiced against the darker ones. 'Racism completely controls their lives' and as such the absurd nature of it is revealed through the fact that those prejudiced against become perpetrators themselves. Himes' view of women is slightly different from Goodis'. Goodis' seemed to believe in two types of woman; Lena being relatively strong and independent and Harriet being deceptively vulnerable. However, Himes sees them as one-dimensional. If they are keeping anything hidden, it is because they are carrying out some kind of 'con'. It would be unfair to simply decry Himes as a misogynist because his novels share with most of 'hard-boiled' fiction their 'uneven handling of gender'. What this suspicion of women does reveal is the wider suspicion symptomatic of the black community, because in the majority of their dealings they have been both internally and externally traitorous.

Detective Figures

Unlike the Goodis novel, *A Rage in Harlem* has detective figures, the legendary coffin Ed Johnson and Gravedigger Jones: 'they had to be tough to work in Harlem. Colored folks did not respect colored cops'. Himes makes his detective figures more complex, because they are black people policing black people. There is an element of double consciousness here, and an awareness of the irony and absurdity of their position, not fully respected and trusted by their white superiors, only given grudging respect by blacks, because they manage to keep some kind of peace. Himes is confronting the 'contradictory role of his two detective black cops working for the state'. The irony is that these two are entrusted to enforce the dominant white authority that is often thinly veiled racism. Often what they are there to do is not protect the black citizens of Harlem, but "to protect white people who are often the prey of black con artists"(7).

In *A Rage in Harlem*, Jackson, the central character, on the verge of escape after a harrowing flight from the police, suddenly realizes that he has left Harlem and is "down in the white world with no place to go.....no place to hide himself" (74). He turns back to face certain capture rather than go on. He himself does more than simply affirm the

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existence of the border, however, he explores its meaning as an ideological marking of the exercise of white hegemony. In doing so he offers a conception of crime never more than tentatively articulated in European American detective novels, by acknowledging an underworld that is catering to the essential needs of the people. Perhaps it is not in ideal fashion but in a manner necessitated by the character of the socioeconomic system.

Aligning with the Powers

As police detectives, on the other hand, Chester Himes's Grave Digger Jones and Coffin Ed Johnson align themselves explicitly with the existing power structure, while nevertheless enacting a tactical resistance within that system. These solutions satisfy the white legal establishment, but also work to rid Harlem of committed criminals while sparing others, often "squares" who have gotten involved in crime through a desperate need for money, and offering them incentives to avoid further crime. Usually these are the fortunate survivors like Jackson and Imabelle in *A Rage in Harlem*.

Minor Black Women Characters

Himes's Female characters challenge notions of black female characters as pathological and pitiable. Minor characters like Billie from *A Rage in Harlem* (1957) appear in all of the novels in the series:

She was a brown-skinned woman in her middle forties, with a compact husky body filling a red gabardine dress. With a man's haircut and a smooth, thick, silky mustache her face resembled that of a handsome man. But her body was a cross. The top two buttons of the dress were open, and between her two immense uplifted breasts was a thick growth of satiny black hair. (211)

This woman is a prosperous madam in Harlem whorehouse. The members of her community not only accept her, she is considered a successful business person who is known for having "disciplined" her cheating lover by tossing him out of a window and shooting him through the heart as he was falling toward the ground. In the logic of the community's ethical

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standards, she was justified and even grudgingly admired for her refusal to take any blatant disrespect from a man. And, on the other hand, because she loved him with so much fidelity that she could not allow her feelings to be disrespected. Himes' main purpose of exposing the racial tensions arising out of the discriminations imposed by the dominant white society has been well expounded in *A Rage in Harlem*. In his novels, he gives a full portrayal of the sufferings his race has undergone in the United States of America.

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