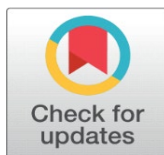


SLAVERY ERA TO SOFTWARE ERA: A GRAPH OF AMERICAN CONDITION IN COLSON WHITEHEAD'S APEX HIDES THE HURT

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ABSTRACT

Contrary to the history books prescribed in school and the well-researched books for public consumption, a great number of people may strongly believe in a different version of the events. People believe so when credit is denied to someone to enhance the role of others. It's not repeating a lie often to make it a truth but leaving out some people's contribution to over glorify somebody else's contribution. This research paper attempts to find how people in power have tweaked the memories of their contemporaries and created a narrative of events that took generations to change.

Keywords: Memory, Lssiterary Truth, Emancipation, Black Lives Matter

1. INTRODUCTION

Shakespeare quips in his *Romeo and Juliet*, "What's in a name? That which we call a rose by any other name would smell just as sweet." (Shakespeare 2.2 45-47) Colson Whitehead's *Apex Hides the Hurt* dwells on one such a theme, whether a name of a town should be changed for better prospects of the town. Unnamed Protagonist - an irony considering that he works for a nomenclature industry, an industry that names products and things - arrives at a town called Winthrop to help the people of the town with a new name

I name things like new detergents and medicines and stuff like that so that they sound catchy, he said. You have some kind of pill to put people to sleep or make them less depressed so they can accept the world. Well you need a reassuring name that will make them believe in the pill. Or you have a new diaper. Now who would want to buy a brand of diaper called Barnacle? No one would buy that. So I think up good names for things. (Whitehead 22)

Mayor of the town Regina Goode, Tech Tycoon Lucky Aberdeen and the erstwhile big entrepreneur Albie Winthrop couldn't be on the same page regarding the name change. The town is already called Winthrop, after Albie's great

grandfather who started a fence making industry and provided an economy to the town. Albie wants to retain the name whereas Regina Goode, a descendant of original founders of the town wants to rename it to its original name. On the other hand, Lucky Aberdeen thinks the name should fit the new century and new businesses. The bar tender that the protagonist meets at his place of stay feels differently, "This is Winthrop. Always will be Winthrop. Shit around here never changes. You can change the name but you can't change the place. It stays the same." (26)

Life was not so easy for the Blacks after the abolition of slavery. Holding on to a piece of land was a life and death situation. Leslie Harris, an Associate Professor of History at Emory University in her essay titled *Subaltern city, subaltern citizens: New Orleans, Urban identity, and people of African descent* writes:

Emancipation of slaves notwithstanding, the 1870s was a difficult time for both those free prior to the Civil War and the recently free – a time when whites were attempting to roll back the gains blacks had made during the Civil War and the relatively brief years of Reconstruction in Louisiana. But Elodie and Leo Robinet were able to hold on to their land, and their descendants still live there today. (Harris 113)

Protagonist digs deep into the history of the town and finds that the original settlers were people who arrived on the place after the abolition of slavery. They had no education, no capital and no equipments to start afresh. Making the land cultivable would have taken decades with the preliminary tools they had. However, they named the town as "Freedom" for it was their dream to be free from slavery. Sterling Winthrop arrives with capital and plans and concludes that setting up an industry in such a place would be easier to transport goods to places through river. He pushes for a name change and the original settlers agree for this man was providing a opportunity to the town. Mayor Regina Goode remarks:

I think the people liked the name Freedom. She said, shrugging. "it sounds corny, but it meant something to them. A couple of years earlier, they'd been slaves. Now they had rights, they were official. They like being citizens, and citizens have a government with rules and whatnot. The way I interpreted it is, Goode and Field wanted to do it right. Do it by the book. Made it a law, made it legal, and then voted to change the name." (96)

Original settlers became industry employees. A great improvement considering they were slaves without any guarantee on anything a few years back. Winthrop took their identity and provided them employment:

He wasn't going to hassle them or lynch them or burn them out or whatever, and at that point you needed a certain number of citizens in order to incorporate and be officially recognized by the state. There was a whole community already here to pump up the numbers. Both sides got something out of it. (96)

Regina Goode became the First Black Mayor of town only after generations, "I don't know about celebrity, but I am a strange creature around here, I'll give you that. First black mayor since we started having mayors in this town. Descended from the first families." (113) Now that she has acquired political power, she wants to right the past wrongs. Conservative Albie cannot even think about having a discussion on name change. Lucky is all about the future and want to use the chance to make hay while the Sun is out. Sterling Winthrop - the first of the Winthrops - commissioned a writer to write the history of the town when they called the shots. That turned out to be a record of events which painted a rosy picture of Winthrop family and their contribution to the town Winthrop.

In Regina's case she only has record of events that has been handed down to her from the memory of her grandparents and great grandparents. They had no wealth to find someone to write for them or they weren't educated enough to write everything down. The memory of the past helps her to keep up the fight:

I wish I could ask them, Regina said wistfully. "I wish I had been there when they first arrived and looked around and said, 'This is the place.' It must have been beautiful. It was Abraham that came up with Freedom, did you know that? Field was of his own mind, of course, with some cockeyed idea, but the people decided to go with Freedom. (207)

Parallel to this narrative is the past of the protagonist. He was successful in his career and had his own office. The products he had named became so successful that he won awards consecutively. He took a Sabbath to recover from injury and received the assignment of naming a town during his recuperation. He wanted to try it and arrives at Winthrop. Of all the products he had named, a band aid he named as "Apex" was hugely successful. When he stubbed his toe against a table, he used the Apex to cover the surface wound. His not caring enough and ignoring to take anti-biotic injection infects the wound critically which results in the amputation of the injured toe. It left him with a limp.

This subtle imagery with band aid could be interpreted as the short-term solutions that the African American people were receiving since the abolition of the slavery. It never solved the problem but aggravated it. He happened to name a toy set as "Ehko Village" and he explained it as, "We are too easily unmoored these days, he said, and the name will keep

us tethered. Ehko Village said values were constant, that times had changed but an idea of ourselves still remained. There is a way of life we have forgotten that is still important.” (123) A child could buy the toy set and rename it when he starts to play with it whereas if he gets to rename Winthrop it cannot be changed easily without a long winding course of the law.

Albie Winthrop, Regina Goode and Lucky Aberdeen along with the Protagonist converge at a point of changing times. It's a century and half since the industrial revolution. 21st Century is more into high technology and tech driven growth. It is going to send more people to their homes instead of taking more people in for employment. The new economic model has given up on industrialization. The great industries of the 20th century America have given way to new tech companies like Apple, Microsoft, facebook, Netflix, Google, Nvidia and numerous others of this ilk.

At this juncture a person like Lucky Aberdeen definitely wields more power than the aging patriarch figure Albie Winthrop. Lucky could easily turn the people against Regina Goode for objecting to a name change. He could manipulate and interpret her move as against the best interest of the town and that she has become a person standing in the way of the progress.

Economic progress is projected by the politicians as the elixir to cure all the illness in society. However, in a capitalist model, a person with capital and information alone can make advantage of the situation. Winthrop's were able to set up the industry because they had the capital; Lucky is having a clout because he is highly successful in business. Whereas Regina Goode is only a Mayor who may fall out of favour in the next election and loose her chair. Leslie Harris in her essay also talks about how the political presence of blacks in the city mayoralty had altered the power balance and increased the thirst for power among whites in other areas:

The city's first black mayor, Ernest Morial, was elected in 1978; blacks have dominated the mayoralty of the city for three decades since. But the city council and the school board became a battleground between a growing proportion of blacks and a shrinking number of whites in a war fuelled by the paradox of white flight and the continuing desire by whites for control of the city. (Harris 119)

People with economic power soon might acquire political power or buy politicians by sponsoring their election campaigns. Lucky organized a festival to promote the business and real estate of the place. There is no black person among the prospective home buyers or businessmen. They all are predominantly white. Except Mayor Regina most of the black characters are blue collar employees of Winthrop. Protagonist as a black person is aware of this and he thinks:

Ones that will get to the heart of this mess. The sick swollen heart of this land. They will say: I was born in Struggle. I live in Struggle and come from Struggle. I work in Struggle. We crossed the border into Struggle. Before I came to Struggle. We found ourselves in Struggle. I will never leave Struggle. I will die in Struggle. (211)

Whitehead's *Apex Hides the Hurt* is an allegorical and a scathing satire on 21st century America. He places the lives of black people in different contexts and times in his works and let the story unfold organically. Racism persists in one way or another in all of them. The intensity of it might have gone down but it persists in various forms. The skewed growth of African Americans in all aspects of life runs as an undercurrent in his works. The emancipation of slaves is yet to fructify. Majority of them are still living in dire straits without any authority on anything. The new century and technology are helping to spread the issues faced by them to the people all around the world. Perhaps the awareness of their condition to themselves and the rest of the world might turn around things for them in the coming decades.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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