

Hughes’ “Genius Child” and Albee’s *The Death of Bessie Smith*: Studies on the Fated Lives of the Black Geniuses in the Mid-20th Century America

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Abstract: In the race and class divided American society of the mid-20th century, the black geniuses were usually viewed with suspicion both by the white community and the state. Such individuals were frequently seen to undergo not only social abuses but also state-promoted oppressing actions and harassments. Sometimes the mistreatment was so severe that it became life-threatening or fatal. Literary works relating to the exploitation of the black people, however, are often found to deal mostly with the issues of the masses, and thus, to leave the gifted ones underrepresented. Interestingly, Langston Hughes and Edward Albee, two 20th Century American writers of two different races, are detected to produce two mentionable literary works—“Genius Child” (1947) and *The Death of Bessie Smith* (1960) respectively—that help the readers to have some sort of understanding of the harsh realities that the gifted black persons had to go through in the mid-20th century America. This paper, therefore, presents a detailed analysis of the aforementioned texts with a view to revealing the cruel facts of the fated lives of the black geniuses of the said time.

Introduction: A genius or a gifted person is the asset of not only his/her family and society but also the whole humanity. Though such a person is supposed to be treated with love and respect both at home and abroad, the reality is unfortunately not always like this. When a highly talented person originates from a peripheral group, s/he is often judged with prejudice, and hence, is not only deprived of his/her deserving rights but also abused and harassed both by the society and the state. In the mid-20th century America, the black geniuses also had to face such deprivations and discriminations both at the social and national levels. They were generally viewed with suspicion, and were taken to be threatening for the long-established sociopolitical culture of the country. Consequently, the black geniuses like the black poets and artists were quite frequently harassed and ill-treated by the society along with the state. Sometimes the mistreatment was so severe that it became even life-threatening or fatal for the

victim. In this paper, a poem by a black poet, “Genius Child” (1947) by Langston Hughes, and a play by a white dramatist, *The Death of Bessie Smith* (1960) by Edward Albee, have been selected for a close reading with a view to revealing the discriminating sociopolitical customs of the mid-20th century America which led to the inhuman treatment of the talented black individuals in the hands of the whites. A short description of the relevant social and political facts as well as a close examination of the two selected texts present a dark reality of the mid-20th century America which led the black people to the civil rights movement in the 1960s. Though the paper deals with the marginalization and oppression of the gifted black ones in the mid-20th century, the issue is still contemporary since the black Americans of all classes are facing unfair treatment on different occasions even now.

The Mid-20th Century America and the Black Geniuses: An Overview: The mid-20th century America was a place of shattered dreams for the sensitive and gifted black individuals who, being inspired by the ideas of “the creative movement” of “the Harlem Renaissance”, had been dreaming of having a better and livable life from the early decades of the new century (Zilboorg 29). Being boosted by the thought of asserting “their identity and racial pride”, the talents of Harlem—Langston Hughes, W. E. B. Du Bois, Claude McKay, Countee Cullen, Zora Neale Hurston, Nella Larsen, Aaron Douglas, Jacob Lawrence, Bessie Smith, Louis Armstrong, Paul Robeson, and so forth—began to raise their voices soon after World War I through their literary, artistic and performing works (Poetry Foundation “Harlem” n.pag., see Wintz n.pag.). However, before long they had to face various types of hindrances and harassments caused by the white society surrounding them as well as the state. Most of the white scholars, along with some brainwashed black critics, propagated the works of these black geniuses to be raw or of low-taste. Therefore, the black talents found it much difficult to get any financial and social support to promote their works. Moreover, as they came mostly from struggling/working-class background, they generally had to do different odd jobs to earn their living which hampered their full flourishing in the areas of their talent. The reality was so harsh that many of the minor poets, painters and performers had to struggle for a living let alone focusing on the vocation of their passion. The individuals who somehow managed to achieve some sort of positive recognition, like Langston Hughes, Nella Larsen or Zora Neale Hurston, were seen to be in no less trouble. In fact, the writing career of Langston Hughes lost its previous lively flow in the last two decades of his life since he was under the constant watch of the Federal Bureau of Investigation of the country throughout the 1950s for his radical writings of the 1930s (see Baym 1731). Likewise, the

career of Nella Larsen, a significant female novelist of the late 1920s, was completely destroyed by the false accusation of “plagiarism” since it demoralized her so much that she stopped writing, and went on obscurity (Goodman and Digby 149). Zora Neale Hurston, another significant female novelist of the early 20th century America, had to leave in poverty and neglect throughout her life which led her to face a “penniless” lonely death “in a welfare home” in early “1960” (Puchko n.pag.). Being frustrated with the unbearable “oppression and exploitation”, two other black novelists, Richard Wright and James Baldwin, “left America to live in France” in “1947” and “1948” respectively (Zilboorg 45). Bessie Smith, the most famous blues singer of the Harlem Renaissance, was the worst victim of the state-promoted racial discrimination of the time. This highly promising female singer had to face a tragic death at a young age being denied of any treatment in a racially segregated Mississippi hospital in 1937 after her becoming the victim of a road accident (see “Bessie Smith” n.pag.). Thus, the mid-20th century America was as much a hostile terrain to the black geniuses as it was to the mass black population. In some cases, it was, in fact, even a worse place for the sensitive and creative black individuals than for any other being since such a person had to face psychological harassment and torture quite frequently both from the social and state level settings.

Langston Hughes—the Bard of Harlem: Langston Hughes (1902–1967) emerged as an important literary figure during the Harlem Renaissance—a movement of the “black writers... artists, musicians and actors”, starting in the 1920s and lasting till late 1930s in Harlem, New York (Zilboorg 29). Involving “himself in radical politics as well as” writing faithfully on the “distinctive experiences of Afro-American culture” in diverse literary genres, he “became known in the 1930s as ‘the bard of Harlem’” (Zilboorg 36-38). Hughes “was the first black American to earn his living solely from his writing and public lectures” (Poetry Foundation “Hughes” n.pag.). The wide experience that he gathered through living “in six different American cities” at a very early age and working as “a truck farmer, cook, waiter” as well as a “sailor, and doorman at a nightclub” in America and different other places like “Paris... Mexico, West Africa, the Azores, the Canary Islands, Holland, France, and Italy” helped him to bring “a varied and colorful background to his writing.” (Poetry Foundation “Hughes” n.pag.) In fact, “celebrating their rich cultural heritage and calling for equal opportunity for black citizens”, Hughes “speakers of and for African Americans”, and thus, performs the appropriate “social role” of a conscious “black writer in a racist society.” (Tyson 363, 364)

However, the fate of Hughes as a black individual, and as a black poet, was not that good. When he was a student of the “seventh” grade at “Central School”, Hughes was “expelled” from his school as he protested the discriminating seating arrangements between the black and the white students in his class (Huntington 6). However, “he was readmitted to Central School” since a “prominent African American doctor in Lawrence intervened on young Langston’s behalf” (Huntington 6). Likewise, as a black poet, Hughes was viewed as a suspect for seditious activities, and was called in “1953... to testify before Senator Joseph McCarthy’s committee on subversive activities” in “connection with his 1930s radicalism. The FBI listed him as a security risk until 1959, and during these years, when he could not travel outside the United States, Hughes worked to rehabilitate his reputation as a good American by producing more-patriotic poetry. From 1960 to the end of his life he was again on the international circuit.” (Baym 1731)

Edward Albee—A Social Critic: Edward Albee (1928-2016) appeared as a promising dramatist in the field of American theatre “in 1959” with the production of his short play, *The Zoo Story* (Bigsby 249). In the 1960s, he turned himself into a major American playwright by producing a number of acclaimed plays among which *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (1963) is the most famous. In his life-time, he produced “more than 30 plays”, and earned the prestigious “Pulitzer Prize” three times (Becker 1). All the plays by him are more or less shocking since Albee is “a social critic” who exposes “the bleakness” of human life on earth with the help of his characters and their actions (Bigsby 260). However, he was not utterly an absurdist as he also tried to identify “one area of possible hope, no matter how tenuous it might be.” (Bigsby 260) In fact, the plays by the dramatist were mostly the results of his close observation of the people and the society surrounding him. Being the adopted child of a financially affluent but morally and psychologically barren family, Albee could feel the negative sides of materialism at a quite early age. Hence, he wrote about different prevailing social and institutional problems, such as, class conflict, racial abuse, thirst for power, greed for money, and so on. By using realistic as well as symbolic portrayals of his contemporary people and society, Albee thus established himself as a major dramatist in the mid to late 20th century America.

Hughes’ “Genius Child”—A Cry over the Neglect and Ill-treatment of the (Black) Geniuses: “Genius Child” was written at a matured stage of Hughes’ literary career. It was published in 1947 when the black Americans were struggling to abolish the discriminatory

system of segregation. But the poem is apparently about neither segregation nor racism. It appears to speak about the hostility of the human social system to the genius children in general. However, the poem can definitely be read as an expression of the poet's personal anguish over the maltreatment that he had to undergo for his being a black genius, and thus, also as a cry over the neglect and harassment of any gifted black person.

Calling the poem a song, the speaker, in the beginning, urges the readers to sing it very softly since "the song is wild", and so, it might "get out of hand" (2, 4). The first stanza, consisting of four lines, thus, sets the sad and gloomy mood of the poem. Persisting with the same mood, in the single-line second stanza of the poem, the speaker pronounces, "*Nobody loves a genius child*" (5). This italicized solitary line deserves special attention as the same line recurs after the third stanza. Interestingly, the listeners-cum-readers are asked some questions in the third stanza the answers to which are found to be embedded in the questions themselves:

Can you love an eagle,
Tame or wild?
Can you love an eagle,
Wild or tame?
Can you love a monster
Of frightening name? (6-11)

A genius child, like an eagle or a monster, is usually taken as a fearsome one by all, and so, is not loved and cared by anybody. The talented individual's having the latent capability of understanding the wrongs of the prevailing socio-political system as well as his/her having the possibility of raising voice against those socio-political injustices can be understood to be the basic reasons for this fear and hatred. The question of the role of the mass people—the regularly marginalized ones—in this regard, i.e. fearing and avoiding the geniuses, may definitely be raised here. The logical answer may be that the mass people generally fail to connect them with the talented ones, and hence, remain indifferent about the issue. The others, who are in power, definitely feel afraid of the geniuses since they do not want any change to happen to the long-established social and ruling system which is providing much benefit to them. As a result, the genius individuals get no kind of support from any side. Rather, they often face much trouble from different sides which gradually stain their lives with intolerable pains. Hence, they often live a sort of life which is no better than death. So, the poet-speaker ends the poem by advising the cruel (white) world to kill the (black) genius,

“*Kill him*—and let his soul run wild!” since the teaching of his life as a gifted black poet can provide him no hope for a healthy future for a genius child (13).

The poem, at a personal level, is thus the expression of the utter hopelessness of himself as a talented black poet in the racially discriminating American society of his time. At a broader level, it is a sensitive poet’s reaction to the any kind of inequity and marginalization that bars the normal growth of a talented individual of any race, class, creed or gender.

Albee’s *The Death of Bessie Smith*—A Tragic Portrayal of the Waste of a Promising Black Life: *The Death of Bessie Smith*, a short one-act tragedy, is one of the less anthologized and underrated dramatic works by the absurd dramatist, Edward Albee. This play was written by the playwright in response to his knowing, from the cover of a record, the tragic incident of the famous blues singer Bessie Smith’s death (see Bigsby 261). As mentioned earlier, this promising female singer died just at the age of 43 being denied of any treatment in a racially segregated Mississippi hospital in 1937 after her becoming the victim of a road accident (see “Bessie Smith” n.pag.). It is, thus, a play of “social protest” that was published with two other relatively less significant dramatic works by Albee in 1960 (Roudane 17). The most remarkable matter about the drama is it is a white dramatist’s response to the inhuman treatment of a black genius in the race and class-divided American society of the mid-20th century. In general, the play can also be taken as a critique of the decaying moral values and inhumanity of the contemporary western world.

The play is set in the small southern town of Memphis in Tennessee on 26 September 1937—the day of Bessie Smith’s fatal accident. Apart from Bessie Smith, there are Jack—Bessie’s Manager, a Nurse and her Father, an Orderly, an Intern and a Second Nurse in the play. Interestingly, the two characters that have names are both black which highlight the human features of the black persons. The other characters comprising both white and black individuals are named by their professional or familial roles since they mostly comply with their socially-established and state-fixed racial roles. The first few scenes of the short play prepare the readers for the two culminating ones in which Jack, Bessie Smith’s Manager, is seen to run from one hospital to another to manage some sort of treatment for the severely injured Bessie Smith who was on her way to New York to make a record. The Second Nurse and Jack are found to have the following conversation:

JACK: There has been an accident, ma’am... I got an injured woman outside in my car...

SECOND NURSE: Yeah? Is that so? Well, you sit down and wait... You go over there and sit down and wait a while.

JACK: This is an emergency! There has been an accident!

SECOND NURSE: YOU WAIT! You just sit down and wait!

JACK: This woman is badly hurt...

SECOND NURSE: YOU COOL YOUR HEELS!

JACK: Ma'am... I got Bessie Smith out in that car there...

SECOND NURSE: I DON'T CARE WHO YOU GOT OUT THERE, NIGGER.

YOU COOL YOUR HEELS! (64-65)

As Bessie is denied admission there, Jack takes her to another hospital. However, here also they get the same treatment from the hospital workers:

JACK: ... I got someone outside...

NURSE: You stop that yelling. This is a white hospital, you.

ORDERLY (*Nearer the Nurse*): That's right. She's right. This is a private hospital... a semiprivate hospital. If you go on... into the city...

JACK (*Shakes his head*): No...

NURSE: Now you listen to me, and you get this straight... (*Pauses just perceptibly, then says the word, but with no special emphasis*) ... nigger... this is a semiprivate white hospital...

JACK (*Defiant*): I don't care! (72)

...

NURSE (*Her attention on the door*): You don't have sense enough to do what you're told...you make trouble for yourself... you make trouble for other people. (75)

Here, a number of things might be noticed. First, Jack shows respect to the white nurses in both the hospitals and addresses them as "Ma'am" though they call him a "nigger" and misbehave with him. The Orderly and the Intern, in the second hospital, do not come forward to help the injured black singer though both of them are black. The deep-rooted racial teaching seems to make them behave this way. Interestingly, out of his feeling for the singer, the Intern goes out of the hospital to help the patient after a little delay. He has to ignore the threat of the Nurse to do so. But unfortunately, it is too late, and Bessie is no more. Returning to the hospital, the Intern asks Jack whether he knows that the patient is dead. Jack replies positively, and leaves the place. The Intern, then, asks himself what he was supposed to do in such a situation. In answer to it, the Nurse sarcastically suggests that Jack might have expected something miraculous to have been done by the great white doctor. She laughingly

claims that she can sing like the “dead nigger lady”, and then starts singing. Feeling angry, the Intern slaps her in the face, and turns towards the door. The play, thus, ends with a sign of resistance shown by the Intern, a struggling light-skinned black youth, which indicates both the necessity and the capability of the black people’s fighting back.

Conclusion: “Genius Child” (1947) and *The Death of Bessie Smith* (1960), in sum, are works of protest. While the short poem by Langston Hughes, i.e. “Genius Child”, voices the poet’s contempt of the neglects and harassments of the gifted (black) persons in general, the short drama by Edward Albee, i.e. *The Death of Bessie Smith*, critiques the inhuman treatment of the mid-20th century American society of one of its highly talented black individuals which took away her life. Thus, a side by side reading of the two selected texts, in conjunction with other supporting literature, can help the readers to have a kind of overall understanding of the fated lives of the black geniuses in the race and class-divided American society of the mid-20th century. Such a reading, though apparently may seem out of date because of its dealing with the past, is quite relevant to the present-day lives of both the talented and common black Americans since they face unfair treatment on different occasions and from different levels still now.

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