CENTRE AND THE MARGIN: INVESTIGATING THE POLITICS OF POWER IN LITTLE MAGAZINES OF THE 20TH CENTURY AMERICA

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Abstract:

During the 1920s, popularly known as the period of Harlem Renaissance, there was a rift in the society which impacted the entire social fabric poignantly the sufferings of the Afro-Americans in terms of racism, lynching, segregation problematizing the power structures and the societal ideology. Power, from an ideological point of view, can be described as an instrument of controlling the society, influencing people's lives in myriad ways and achieving the intended targets as set by the centre. Power and politics can be viewed conjointly when we critically explore the Little Magazines brought out by the ones in the centre of the power structure and the other- in the periphery. Little Magazines, avant-garde and non-commercial in nature, served as cultural intermediaries, a medium of expression and a literary space mediating between the political, social and literary dimensions. The publication of the Little Magazines periodically by the people in power in the 20th century America, that is, the Whites reflected their domination in the printing industry; Little Magazines published by the Afro-Americans were mostly short-lived for paucity of support, funding and response. These little magazines brought to the surface issues like marginalization, subjugation, alienation, exploitation issues while, those published by the power centre celebrated the literary and artistic writings of the individuals and focused on creating "an alternative form of cultural capital in relation to mainstream magazines", also aiming at expanding nationally and internationally.

The paper attempts to closely look at the theorists Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak, Homi Bhabha, Judith Butler associated with the concept of class and race. This paper addresses the impact of the dynamics of power and its operation on the Afro-Americans in relation to identity and its representation.

Keywords: Afro-American, Class, Identity, Little Magazine, Margin, Power, Race

From the day of its birth, the anomaly of slavery plagued a nation which asserted the equality of all men, and sought to derive powers of government from the consent of the governed. Within sound of the voices of those who said this lived more than half a million black slaves, forming nearly one-fifth of the population of a new nation.

- W. E. B. Du Bois

During the 20th century, there was a major political upheaval between the Whites at the Centre and the Afro-Americans at the Margin due to the discrimination based on color. After World War I, during the Great Migration people, Harlem became 'Mecca of the New Negro' as well as the political, social and cultural destination for the Afro-Americans. The National Association for Advancement of Coloured People (NAACP) fought battles against the Centre against racism, lynching and segregation. The founder of NAACP, W.E. B. Du Bois started the *Crisis Magazine* in the 1920s which dealt with the social and political themes and helped in restoring not only the identity of the Afro-Americans but also the political and economic status of the Afro-Americans in America in the 20th century.

Harlem was considered as the political, cultural and literary centre which gave birth to new ideas and voices. The literary intellectuals, Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, W. E. B. Du Bois and other prominent writers played a vital role in awakening the political, cultural and social consciousness among the marginalized Afro-Americans. Alain Locke, a prominent theorist and a writer of Harlem Renaissance, introduced the concept of the "New Negro" which gave a new sense of identity to the marginalized and voiceless individuals of the 20th century America.

Little Magazine includes poetry, reviews, short stories, essays, dramas, and other various literary writings; often printed as periodicals to focus on the promulgation of the unheard voices. Kirsten MacLeod's article *American Little Magazine of the 1890s and the Rise of the Professional-Managerial Class*, discusses the major magazine revolution during the 1890s in America which led to the emergence of the magazines popularly known as "Fad magazine" or "Fadazines". The commentaries that were present in the little magazines influenced the middle order of American society. She categorizes magazines in three forms: "Aesthetic"

little magazines which primarily focused on the literary and artistic works. "Periodicals of Protest" which focused on the political and social concerns of the American society in a particular movement. "Hybrid" magazine emphasized not only on the literary/artistic works but also on the political and social upheavals of the people.

In the field of Magazines, Americans were the first to publish their articles in the form of magazines namely *Yale Review* (1819), the oldest literary journal published by the Wiley-Blackwell which is still in print. The other magazines are *New York Quarterly*, *Poetry: a Magazine of Verse*, *Little Review* etc. The advent of publication by an Afro-American in America began in the year 1827 by Rev. Peter Williams, who is contemplated as the owner of the first Afro-American magazine named *Freedom's Journal*, with a motive to unveil the contemporary issues of slavery and colonization. It is believed that the origin of Newspapers was during the time of crisis, whereas the origin of Afro-American magazines was during the time of economic development for the cultural endorsement and expansion.

Alain Leroy Locke, an American writer, and philosopher, is considered to be the patron of "spiritual coming of age" that is Harlem Renaissance, an age of literary and intellectual prosperity, which was a moment for the Afro-Americans to express their rights and oppose the White's ideology. The period between World War I and Great Depression was an opportunity for many Africans to migrate towards North, specifically Harlem, from the South to reconstruct and establish their identity among the Whites and free themselves from being 'marginalized'. Gradually there was an emergence of Black-owned magazines which included, *The Crisis*, a journal of W.E.B. DuBois which launched the career of Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, and many literary figures; *Opportunity*, *The Messenger*, *Fire!!* and several other magazines which dealt with themes related to racism, segregation, political, identity and similar related themes.

'Identity is formed at an unstable point where the "unspeakable" stories of subjectivity meet the narratives of history, of a culture' quotes Stuart Hall. He constructs the notion of identity in a structuralized manner by positioning it in a negative framework to demonstrate a positive outlook. Identity there by constructs itself through the interaction with the society. He relates identity with race and culture. Identity has two dimensions in terms of social and personal. Social identity refers to a set of characteristics features imbibed in the society by cultural and historical factors which a person marks and distinguishes oneself. The other one is the

personal identity where a person feels privileged and prideful of having features similar to societal features. So consequently, every person in any culture tries to the identity or correlate oneself to the society or culture he is living in as it becomes an important factor for him to feel equivalent to the other people living around him.

The Afro-Americans, who were at the periphery, in their pursuit of being considered equal to the Whites, the ones at the Centre, in all socio-cultural and economic aspects went through an identity crisis on migrating towards the North essentializing among the Afro-Americans a dire need to establish their identity, to place them at the Centre. Margins are "both sites of resistance and sites of repression"

Power in culture plays an important role in the construction of identity. Viewing the 'Other' from the 'Marginal' terms, they are ignored "because with power, position and status" the Centre does not view the 'Others' at the Periphery as important except "within limited economic, political and cultural boundaries." The Power at the Centre represents the 'Others' as the "subaltern". Antonio Gramsci in his *Theory of Hegemony* describes of being influenced by Karl Marx and agrees to the concept of capitalism of Marx but rejects the notion of dominant people being in power due to economic power. Karl Marx talks about class struggle and describes how a society can be analyzed from the economic system existing within society. According to him, everything in society is determined by the capital- where the dominant class forms the rules and regulations and holds power over the working class. For Gramsci, the class struggle relates to ideas and ideology which will create a revolution. Gramsci introduces a new concept which involved ideology which describes the dominant class or the ruling class at the Centre held power as they had the power to introduce their own system of rules and regulations; thereby manipulating and brainwashing the Others at the Periphery.

Louis Althusser, a Marxist philosopher, in his essay *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes Towards an Investigation)*, 1970 talks about ideology and correlates it to Marxist theory. According to him, the ruling or the dominant class reproduce the labor-power and the means of production. In this essay, he talks about RSA (Repressive State Apparatuses) and ISA (Ideological State Apparatuses). In RSA, the ruling class at the Centre, in order to dictate and control the subordinate class or the 'subalterns', uses RSA. The ruling class holds the power of the State, which is at the Centre, in the social, economic, and cultural

field of the society and uses force (violent and non-violent) to dominate the 'Others' at the Periphery. While in the ISA, uses ideological tools such as churches, schools, etc. to influence the minds of the subordinate class through the lens of ideology. The implementation, in the words of Louis Althusser, seeks to reproduce the relations of production and train the young minds to join the labor forces and work for and under the ruling class at the Centre.

When marginalized people gain voice and center their own experiences, things begin changing. And we see this in all kinds of grassroots movements. Janet Mock

In the 1920s the Whites at the Centre held power in America and used both the RSA and ISA to reproduce the labor force dwelling at the Margin- the Afro-Americans. The Afro-Americans wished emancipation from slavery and create an identity for themselves, thereby, they looked forward to voicing their opinions and anguish towards the ruling class, apart from showcasing their literary and artistic skills in the Little Magazines. These Little Magazines were the medium for the Afro-Americans at the periphery, to feel liberated from the Centre and relocate oneself to the Centre of the American society from the Margin.

Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak in her essay, *Can the subaltern speak?* talks about historical and ideological factors that hinder the opportunity of the people from being heard who reside in the periphery. She talks about Deleuze's reference to the workers' struggle, correlating to Marxism and says, "the subject-production of worker and unemployed within national state ideologies [are] in its Centre; the increasing subtraction of the working class in the Periphery from the realization of the surplus-value and thus humanistic training in consumerism; and the large-scale presence of paracapitalist labor as well as the heterogeneous structural status of agriculture in the Periphery." She also refers to the other western critical thinkers like Derrida, Foucault, and Karl Marx to assert and prove that the subaltern cannot speak.

Thinking about the Little Magazines of Harlem Renaissance, the intellectual writers and the Afro-Americans, were mainly the working class; a puppet to the Centre whose voices were unheard. They inhabited the Periphery or at the Margin in social and economic terms. If we look at the history of the publication of the Little Magazines of the Afro-Americans like *Fire!!*, *Opportunity* and others, we would notice that most of them were short-lived for the paucity of the support, funding, and response while on the other hand, the Little Magazines of

the Americans, were *Poetry: a Magazine of Verse*, *Little Review*, *Yale Review*, and others, were long-lived as they were produced by the people at the Centre; they had funding which supported the printing production unlike the Little Magazines of the Afro-Americans.

The core reason the Afro-Americans began publishing the Little Magazines was to reassert their identity in the American socio-cultural fabric and to prove that they were no less in terms of talent and intellect. But the Whites being powerful in the 1920s, controlled the American Society. They made sure that the Little Magazines of the Afro-Americans were not circulated in their society and created an upheaval. Their publications were pushed in the periphery 'othering' their identity.

Amy Helene Kirschke's *DuBois and "The Crisis" Magazine: Imaging Women and Family*, 2005, an article highlights the effort put forth by DuBois for the Women and Children in *The Crisis Magazine* using the magazine as a political tool to raise voice against the issues of suffrage, racism, child-rearing, and sexism within America and their community itself. She also discusses the critics' views on DuBois's life and his attitude towards *The Crisis Magazine*. The research article by Suzanne. W. Churchill *Youth Culture in The Crisis and Fire!!*, 2010 explicates and comments upon the works of the writers in 'The Crisis Magazine' and 'Fire!!' to substantiate how these two magazines are paramount to the evolvment and advancement of the New Negro Youth Culture.

If we look at the publication process back in the 20th century from the lens of Edward Said's and Homi Bhabha's musings, we can relocate that the Little Magazines of the Afro-Americans were deemed to be the "Other" by the ones at the Centre of the American Society. The Centre held power and focused on creating "an alternative form of cultural capital in relation to mainstream magazines", also aiming at expanding nationally and internationally instead of promoting the Little Magazines of the subalterns to support them.

To conclude, the Americans who were at the power Centre subjugated the Afro-Americans socially, politically, spawning pain and hardship in their lives and the White Magazines not only marginalized their Little Magazines marginalized the voices of the Afro-Americans as well.

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