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Self-actualization: A Study of Wallace Thurman's *The Blacker the Berry*

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Abstract:

Persistent racial discrimination prevails among family, friends and community which have a wide range of other social domains has rehabilitated interest in the probable role of discernment. Today, one of the promising issues prevalent among youngsters is self-actualization. The whole world is in a commotion, nobody gets time to wait, think and proceed. The major problem in an individual is, he fails to understand his capabilities. People give importance to other's view and decision. He blames others and wants to escape from the situation further any problem happens. Wallace Thurman vividly recaptures the era mood and spirit. His portrait of a young woman named Emma Lou Morgan adrift in the city, forms an enduring relevant reflection of the search for racial, sexual, and cultural identity. There were many more people like her, many facing the same problem in modern society. This discrimination not only takes place in the African-American nation but all over the world. Due to this colour prejudice, Emma Lou undergoes a psychological disorder. The novel finds a way beyond the bondage of Blackness in American life to a new meaning of beauty and truth. The paper attempts to study her psychological and sociological problems which she underwent at the end to attain self-actualization and eventually emancipates from social discrimination.

Keywords: Racial, Sexual, Cultural identity, Discrimination, Emancipation, Self-actualization.

Wallace Henry Thurman (1902–1934) was an American novelist prominent during the Harlem Renaissance. He worked as a ghost writer, a publisher, an editor, also wrote novels, plays, articles and literary journals. He is best known for his novel *The Blacker The Berry: A Novel of Negro Life* (1929), which explores the discernment within the black community based on skin colour. Thus, Wallace Thurman openly discourses colour prejudice among black Americans. He who was a lively member of the Harlem Renaissance educes the era mood and

spirit. His representation of a young woman adrift in the city forms an enduring relevant reflection of the search for racial, sexual, and cultural identity.

Emma Lou, the protagonist, is a dark-skinned girl from Boise who is looked down upon by her fairer family members and friends. Emma Lou dark complexion is a source of distress and humiliation not only to herself but to her lighter-skinned family and friends and the white community of Boise, her home town. When she attends school at the University of Southern California in Los Angeles she is scorned, decides to travel to Harlem and believes that she not be disparaged because of her dark colour. She becomes unhappy with her family, friends, work, and her love affairs. In conclusion, her psychological and sociological problems which she underwent made her attain self-actualization.

The term Self-actualization was originally introduced by Kurt Goldstein, a theorist. This impression was later brought into prominence by Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory. This theory helps to comprehend that, there are several problems in human life, those who overcome all the sufferings in their life and reach, their goal, desire and also realize their capability. According to Maslow,

What a man can be, he must be, this need we may call self-actualization... It refers to the desire for self-fulfilment, namely, to the tendency for him to become actualized in what he is potentially. This tendency might be phrased as the desire to become more and more what one is, to become everything that one is capable of becoming. (Komminos)

The study analyses the images of black women as presented in the novel *The Blacker the Berry*. This consideration will include the difference between dark-skinned and light-skinned characters in terms of their interpersonal and social experiences. The novel depicts the tragedy that human beings are judged according to the colour of their skin rather than their intellectual quotient. It becomes poignant when she is judged by the members of her own family and friends who discriminate on the grounds of colour. Wallace Thurman speaking through the character Emma Lou Morgan in the novel, reveals the colour prejudice prevalent among the African-American community.

He portrays very beautifully the characters pain, emotions, feelings and sufferings faced by a dark-skinned girl in the African-American society. In this novel, there are many incidents that Thurman brought out very realistically. At the beginning of the novel, it is quoted that:

She should have been a boy, then the colour of skin wouldn't have mattered so much for her mother always saying that a black boy could get along, but that a black girl would never know anything but sorrow and disappointment. (Thurman 1-2)

The statement of her family members often made towards her that; she is not a boy but a girl. For a boy however his appearance or colour can be that did not matter but for a girl, it matters. There are many instances in which one can feel sympathy for Emma Lou because of the situations in which she is placed and the time in which she lives makes life difficult for her. She was the only odd and noticeable figure on the auditorium platform of the Boise high school, because of which, she would rather have missed receiving her high school diploma. Thurman also portrays Emma Lou as her own worst enemy. She is just a reflection of the times in which, beauty standards of that time, and the inevitable intra-racism that existed during the Harlem Renaissance. "The Tragedy of her life was that she was too black" (Thurman 2). There is a colossal difference between a dark-skinned girl and a dark-skinned boy.

Her inferiority complex resulted in taking care of her complexion. Emma Lou had decided to bleach her skin as much as possible. She had fallen for many creams and skin measures and had tried to remember the various bleaching aids she had gathered. Emma Lou had obtained some of these arsenic wafers and eaten them, but they had only served to give her pains in the nadir of her stomach. Next, she determined upon a peroxide solution additionally to something which was referred to as in black and white ointment. After using these for about a month, she thought that she could notice some change. But actually, the sole effects were a rise in pimples, irritating rashes, and burning skin. According to Rosenberg,

"The skin bleaching is caused by low self-esteem. A self-esteem is a person overall positive or negative attitude towards himself. A person with high self-esteem thinks that he/she is a person of worth. On the other hand, or dissatisfaction with self" (Charles 97).

There was nobody in her family to console her instead, they kinder her pain, there was only one member in her family who did not speak of her in the wrong manner, and that was her uncle Joe, who was also the only person in the family to whom she felt analogous because he alone never seemed to a pang of conscience, ridicule and mourn for her blackness of skin. He wanted Emma to do her higher studies at the University of Southern California in Los Angeles and reasoned that she would find a substantial and more intelligent social circle. During her stay in Los Angeles, she ascertained that the people in larger cities were ultimately no different from people in smaller cities. Her uncle Joe had been wrong, while her mother and grandmother had been right. "There was no place in the world for a dark skin girl" (Thurman 31).

When Emma goes to Harlem, the humiliation turns to even more forbidding. Emma was in search of some job vacancies. She believed this would help her to come out from the

sorrows which surrounded her. But in all the offices, more than the skill, education and talent, physical appearance plays an important role. In fact, in Emma's point of view, it is one of the extensive qualifications one should retain in their life, this quality Emma lacked and suffered the humiliations. She tried to rent a room from a West Indian Woman. A small girl had come to the door and in response to a voice in the back enquiring. "Who is it, Cora? Had replied, "Monkey chaser wants to see the room you got to rent" (Thurman 70). Through this statement, one can understand the deplorable situation of Emma Lou, she did not react to the little girls' scornful words. According to Socor, "A person's identity is unconsciously influenced by the mental activities of significant others" (Charles 101). In Harlem, Emma met one more guy, who was John, more caring and helping her all the way.

When she was in the Seventh Avenue, the street was busier than ever. There were men standing in group or alone. Black men. Yellow men. Brown men. Emma Lou eyed them and they eyed her. When she across them they made a comment on her. There's a girl for you fats. He replied, Man you know, I don't haul no coal. (Thurman 58)

Finally, Emma found a job for herself, as an attender to the film actress Arline. She became closer to Arline, so wherever she goes, she takes Emma Lou along with her. On a fine day, Arline and her brother took Emma to Cabaret. This was the first time Emma to the cabaret. She doesn't know what is going to happen. Emma Lou sitting alone, somehow or another side she felt frightened. Most of the tables around her were deserted, their tops littered with liquid-filled glasses, and bottles of ginger ale and White Rock. Emma Lou forgot herself. She gaped, giggled and applauded like the rest of the audience. After some time, she came to the reality and she blames herself that "Idiot, she berated herself, just because you've had one drink and seen your first cabaret entertainer, must your mind and body fell all aflame?" (Thurman 65).

Emma Lou looked around and noticed at a near table three young coloured men, all in tuxedos, gazing at her and talking. She averted her glance and turned to watch the dancers. She heard the laughter which they made on her; she turned and never looked at them. Then someone touched her hand, when she turned it was one among the three and asking her in an apologetic voice, "would you care to dance with me?" (Thurman 67). The music had stopped, but there was a promise of an encore. Emma Lou was confused, her mind blankly chaotic. She was expected to push back her chair and get up. She did. And, without saying a word, allowed her to be maneuverer to the dance floor. Alva's friends were really surprised that when he

danced with such a dark girl at the cabaret party. When Alva explained that just for fun, he danced. Braxton said that “Oh, I thought maybe you’d really made a date with the coal scuttle blond you danced with” (Thurman 69).

Meanwhile, she found her thought straying often to the guy she had danced within the cabaret. She decided to search for him, days went on she found herself that this task is waste of time. She was frustrated, one day, tired of walking, she went into a motion picture theatre on the avenue. But unfortunately, she met Alva there, and both exchanged their address, both went off. The next day morning, Emma Lou ringed Alva and he too was glad to talk with her. But Emma was shy and scared that, she might be too bold. Alva helped her out. “When can I see you, Sugar? Sugar!” (Thurman 84). He had called her “sugar” (Thurman 84). This conversation made Emma fly because the first one to call her sugar. Through the telephonic conversation, both became closer and closer. Braxton got more annoyed and he started advising Alva, to stop the relationship with Emma. Alva replied that “The blacker the berry, the sweeter the Juice. The only thing a black woman is good for is to make money for a brown-skin papa” (Thurman 84).

Emma comes to the state of realization that wherever she goes, there follows humiliation. To escape from this situation, she goes on changing her friends and the job. The attitude of Emma Lou can be clearly understood in the house rent party. One day Alva took Emma to the midnight show at the Lafayette Theatre. While on the train they began to talk, shouting into one another’s ears, trying to make their voice heard above the roar of the undergoing tube.

She was very much happy that after the entire struggle, she met her companion and she thinks that living together when they moved inside the Lafayette theatre, it was more crowded. The play was all about colour prejudice. When the play begins, she enjoyed as others in the theatre then she realized that all were laughing at the comedy of two black men. The comedy was not on the dialogue they spoke but on the physical appearance of the comedians. Emma Lou was burning up with indignation. She ever felt that all the people nearby her were looking at her and they laugh making fun of her. She remained silent throughout the rest of the performance. She became sensitive to colour discrimination. Where ever she heard anybody talked about colour she behaved very rudely.

Emma Lou made an argument with Alva. From that argument, Emma realizes what kind or sort of characteristic Alva was and she realizes his reality. She tries hard to come to

reality. The conversation expanded between Emma Lou and Alva, who told that he became afraid and advanced slowly, "that you are a trifle too colour conscious" (Thurman 116). Emma Lou flared up "colour-conscious... who wouldn't be colour conscious when everywhere you go people are always talking about colour. It didn't make any difference they wouldn't always be poking fun and laughing and making jokes...." (Thurman 116).

Finally, Alva spoke sharply for the first time, 'you're a damn fool. It's always colour, colour, colour. This conscious state made Emma realize the originality of society. She decided to come out from the darkness which surrounded her. She felt like people turned to stare at her as they passed. They even stopped and looked up into the air trying to see what was attracting her attention and seeing nothing would shrug their shoulders and continue on their way. She had no other go she decided to move back to her home. She was ready at that moment to rush into the office and send a wire to her Uncle Joe, asking for a ticket and thus be able to escape the whole damn mess. But she immediately saw that going home would mean beginning her life all over again; a mean flying from one degree of unhappiness into another probably much more intense and tragic than the present one.

Unsolicited by blacks or whites, both of whom errand blacks with light skin, the protagonist Emma Lou's life is a series of rejections. Her parents' ambivalence toward their darker daughter signals the torment she experiences as a child, a student at the university, and as an adult in Harlem. Having moved to Harlem hoping to find acceptance, even there judged her by dark complexion by other African-Americans. As she grows, the outer rejection turns to inner self-abasement. Eventually, she antagonises her predicament and achieves the challenge through self-actualisation.

Emma Lou faced lots of discrimination from her friends, family and also by the surroundings. Her dream and disillusion and the momentous decision she makes to survive. She gradually started realizing from some of her own life's experiences which supported her to realize the reality. According to Erickson,

Identity development occurs during the period of adolescence when the youth is confronted with the critically important questions of, Who am I? And How do I fit into the adult world? In answering these questions, the youth recognizes his or her early life into a meaningful pattern that links his or her past to the present and the future. This is necessary to achieve purpose and unity in one's life. (Charles 93-94)

On one hand, Emma Lou is the major criminal, on the other hand, society has a major role in one's individual life. As an individual one must realize the feelings of others, there

should be fun and enjoyment, but it should not affect others. Emma Lou's psychological problem caused because of society. The scorn, humiliation, sorrow, disappointment, loneliness, loss of true affection all these things made her suffer psychologically.

Today to come out from this sort of problem, many institutions have organising personality development classes to make an individual gain self-confidence and self-esteem. Emma travelled through sufferings and eventually crossed the threshold. It happened only because of her economic and mental independence which assisted her to come out from the sorority. Once Campbell kitchen had told her that "Economic independence was the solution to almost any problem" (Thurman 130). One should have the courage to face all kinds of problem, only then they will be able to flourish and proudly face the world. Emma Lou after so much humiliation from her childhood days she finally reaches the reality of her life.

Throughout the novel, several incidents portrayed, how racial discrimination affects Emma Lou and how Emma Lou looks at people too. It is because of this reason, Emma Lou started taking things in a more complicated way. After undergoing the psychological agonies, Emma Lou becomes self-actualized. Emma Lou accepts her human nature with all its flaws. Emma started ignoring other people's comment and realized her value. Emma Lou concludes that not give importance to unwanted things in her life. She started living a new life, considering safe, not anxious, accepted, loved, loving and alive, certainly a fulfilling life. Finally, Emma Lou was able to judge things correctly and accepts reality as it was. Emma Lou emancipates from all her problems. Emma Lou emancipates from the clutches of discrimination. Thus, in the novel, *The Blacker The Berry*, Emma Lou attains self-actualization at the end of the novel and eventually emancipates from social discrimination.

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