

Depiction of Mixed Race Dilemma in John Agard's "Half-Caste"

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Abstract:

Mixed race is an offspring of two different races. Children of mixed races feel different, almost in a zoo, animal kind of way. People identify them from a different perspective. John Agard exhibits this kind of different feeling in his poem "Half- Caste". The poem is on mixed race people being referred as half-caste. Since Colonization, it is a well known fact that both western and eastern races started to mix. But the mixed or the indigenous people were looked down upon by the pure race. The offspring of the pure race considered the indigenous as inferior. Through the world the half-caste were suppressed and tormented. The poet too has suffered this derogation hence raises his voice for the suppressed and the marginalized. The poet feels that they should never be referred to as halfie , half-caste , coloured or with any other derogatory term.

Key words : Half – Caste , Mixed Race , Racial identity, suppressed, marginalized.

Poet, performer, anthologist, John Agard, as a touring speaker with the Commonwealth Institute, visited nearly 2000 schools promoting Caribbean culture and poetry, and has performed on Television around the world . He was born in Guyana and came to Britain in 1977. There he got angry with people who referred to him as half-caste. In this poem, "Half – Caste", he effectively puts across his true feelings on the subject. The poem is written with a mix of Caribbean dialect and British English.

Poet Laureate, Caron Ann Duffy said: "John Agard has always made people sit up and listen. He has done this with intelligence, humour, and generosity. He has the ability to temper anger with wit and difficult truth with kindness. He levels the ground beneath all our feet,..."(Duffy). The word 'caste' is not only a disturbing term in India but also a disgusting term

all over the world. All over the world, people unthinkingly use this word. They do not mind how far it disturbs the feelings of the other fellow human beings.

If a person wants to show off, the very next thing they do is to snub the other people who try to come up with perseverance and hard work. The word that comes handy for them is caste. The term has become part of the culture itself these days. When studies are done in culture, the first thing that is traced is the origin of a particular tribe. It tells the character of that tribe.

The terms culture and tradition are interrelated. The tradition for a particular tribe comes from its origin. Only when the history of that particular tribe is traced, one can find out the origin of it. Only with the origin, the habits of that particular tribe which form the tradition for them can be deduced.

Each one is proud of their own culture. But when it comes to a person born of two different castes, that particular person identifies himself with the caste that he is proud of. He considers himself of belonging to a particular caste which is given topmost place in the society. People suffer internally due to it.

The question of untouchability is raised not only in India but also in all parts of the world. Untouchability is not fully thwarted. Traces of it could be felt everywhere still. Only the cultured behaviour of human beings could help them to come out of this tendency. As far as the human civilization goes, only people who are uncultured and uncivilized amidst all these cultural developments will give undue importance to caste of a fellow human being.

John Agard starts the poem "Excuse me" (1). From these words, one can understand that he wants to talk to his reader's. He tries to capture their attention, through these two simple words. It implies a personal note on the part of the speaker. The words tell us that the speaker wants to speak his mind and expects it to be listened.

Standing on one leg (2) – These four words state that the speaker stands on one leg. He uses only one leg though he has got two legs. These four words not just mean his standing posture. The meaning goes beyond that. When someone addresses him 'half-caste', that means he is not addressing him to be a whole human being. He addresses only half of him. This is what he tries to explain when he says "standing on one leg". I'm half – caste (3) - These words mean that the speaker is half-caste. He calls himself half-caste. He is so proud in saying so. Though he does not like the term half – caste, he calls himself to be a half – caste, because everyone needs to be

addressed in some way or the other. When others address him half – caste, he is so unhappy about it. Still there is no other go for him other than accepting it.

John Agard asks the readers to explain themselves about half – caste. The term Half – Caste refers to a person who is a mix of two races. It is a derogatory term for a person who is of Mixed race.

John Agard questions the readers about their intended meaning of half-caste. The people who use the term half-caste must be able to give him the explanation for calling him half-caste. “Yu mean when Picasso / mix red and green / is a half – caste canvas?”(7-9). He comes out with the explanation for being called half-caste. He compares the quality of half-caste with the paintings of Picasso. To produce masterpieces, Picasso mixes red and green colours. The poet calls the paintings created with the mix of colours as half-caste canvas. Paintings when mixed with different colours give a wonderful look and looks admirable. That is how mankind also when mixes up different races produce different kinds of people, who are brought up with the intelligence and culture of two different races.

Agard questions the readers as to what they mean by the term half-caste, he repeats the lines “explain yuself/ wha yu mean/ when yu say half- caste” (10-12). He further tries to bring out the implied meaning of the half-casteness when he compares it with the mix of light and shadow in the sky. He asks the readers whether a cloudy sky can be addressed as a half-caste weather. The weather in England will always be called a half-caste weather. He is very angry when he addresses cloudy sky as half-caste. He requests his readers to analyse themselves when they use the term half-caste with him. He then compares half-casteness with the symphony produced by Tchaikovsky. Tchaikovsky mixes black key with a white key to produce his masterpieces. The poet calls such symphonies as half-caste symphonies. With all these comparisons, the poet wants those people, who address him half-caste, to understand the so called masterpieces have been produced with the half-caste quality.

Once again lays emphasis on how well the readers can explain themselves about what they intend to say when they call him half-caste. After this repetition comes the personal description of himself when he is being addressed as half-caste. When people address him half-caste, he listens to them with half of his ear. He says that he looks at such people with half of his eye that means, with one of his eyes. While being introduced to such people, he gives them half- a – hand, that is, one hand. Even while sleeping at night, he closes half – a –eye, that is, one eye. While dreaming,

he dreams half – a – dream. At night, in moonlight, being a half – caste human being, he would cast half – a- shadow only.

After the personal description gets over, he addresses the people who address him half-caste. He asks them to come back to him the very next day with the whole of their eye, the whole of their ear and the whole of their mind. So that he can tell them the other half of his story. He, addresses them to be the whole, makes the readers realize the fact that they are the real half human beings when compared to himself. They use only half of their brain while addressing him a half - caste. Racial identity comes from the birth. The person is in no way responsible for it. Addressing a person with his race is done by a person who will use only half of his mind. John Agard gets angry with such people. Because, they have lesser human qualities.

Caribbean's are in no way responsible for their caste. They were forced to live in the land Where they live now. They were brought to this country as plantation workers. They were working like animals for no benefit of themselves .Starting from birth, they face only difficulties and humiliation. People like John Agard voice out their difficulties in facing this world of harshness.

The very word “half – caste”, how far it makes them feel bitter, is expressed in this poem. The half-caste race is not created out of their own interest. Such half-caste race is created because the people in that country is forced to lead such a life by their colonial masters. Afro-Guyanese left the plantation as early as 1838 and entered Guyana as agricultural laborers. This shows the historical significance of the poem “half-caste”. This poem was included in Agard's 2005 collection of poems called *Half-Caste*. The anthology dealt with issues those of mixed race were facing in the United Kingdom.

In an interview with The Telegraph, John Agard talks about racial prejudices

Well let's put it this way, I've never been arrested by the police, or experienced any physical confrontations, as such”, he says. “But any black person living in England would be deceiving themselves if they said they'd never experienced even just subtle racism- a changing in the tone of someone's voice, for instance....It is healthy and liberating to question those perceptions. (The Telegraph)

Daljit Nagra talks about the poem Half-Caste as follows: “The title ‘Half – caste’ is a bold assertion of a familiar term that became politicized and was seen as pejorative”. So many of Agard's poems hit the mark at exploring how generations of West Indians were invited to Britain to help rebuild the nation, yet they were denied the pride of their own identity and accept the

identity politics of a narrow Britishness. This poem attacks a compound word for its poisoning impact on identity .

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