
CRAVINGS FOR HUMAN DIGNITY, HUMAN RIGHTS AND SOCIAL EQUALITY DEPICTED IN THE POEM *SYMPATHY* BY PAUL LAURENCE DUNBAR

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Abstract:

*Dignity is a right of every human being, there is a deep-seated feeling in every person to be respected and get acknowledged. When one's existence is valued regardless of social, racial and economic status and is treated with equality on the grounds of humanity, a person is contented being a part of society and a nation. However, when he is denied veneration just for being attached to particular race, class, colour he feels to be attacked by discriminatory attitude and craves for dignity and impartiality. Literature has always been the great medium to express the suppressed emotions and to communicate the anguish of heart to the world. The present paper aims to show literature as a powerful medium to voice inner restlessness due to denied human dignity and social equality with reference to Paul Laurence Dunbar's poem *Sympathy*.*

Keywords: *Dignity, social equality, human rights, discrimination, prejudice.*

Introduction:

Dignity and human rights have been the main source of writing a fiction, drama and poetry for writers for all ages. However, especially postcolonial writers have written about the discrimination practised by the colonisers and its effects on the human dignity and human rights. Chinua Achebe, V. S. Naipaul, Arundhati Roy, Salman Rushdie are some of the prominent postcolonial writers who portrayed the problems of slavery, suppression, identity crisis due to migration, gender discrimination and so on. However, when we look at the consequence of these issues the first and foremost attack is on the feeling of dignity and human rights. Human dignity is the foremost aspect of the happy and fulfilled life of the person, all the other factors i.e., wealth, education becomes secondary if a person do not enjoy human dignity in the society. Dignity has a direct impact on the thinking and behaviour of a person. A person, who is insulted and humiliated continuously, loses his self-respect and becomes either submissive or vindictive.

What is (Human) Dignity?

Dignity is a status of a person which earns respect or honour for him. Cambridge dictionary defines dignity as, "The importance and value that a person has, that make other people respect them or make them respect themselves". However, when we talk about human dignity, there is more emphasis on human equality. Remy Debes in his article writes, "Human dignity denotes a kind of basic worth or status that purportedly belongs to all persons equally,



and which grounds fundamental moral or political duties or rights” (Debes). Human dignity promotes the state of equality for all men and women. “The paradigm of human dignity *stricto sensu* is conceived as a universal, ethical and legal principle stressing that all human being have intrinsic worthiness and inalienable rights by the mere fact of being human (Andorno and Pele). Practice of human dignity plays vital role in cementing social equality, it affirms that every human being has innate value attached with some rights. When these value and rights are denied, person feels suffocated in the existing framework of the society; he starts questioning on the meaning of his life and compares himself with the other objects in the nature to find out his place in the present situation.

Dignity plays a very important role in shaping the personality of a person. It has significance in building national character of a person as well. Rabindranath Tagore in his famous poem *Where the Mind is Without Fear* makes appeal to God that the head of his countrymen should always be held high, according to him mere political freedom is not a complete freedom there should be a feeling of dignity and self-respect among the citizens. If the citizens of the country have low self-esteem, they cannot contribute their efforts in the overall development of the country. In the same way Paul Laurence Dunbar craves for that freedom which allows him to enjoy self-respect and dignity.

Paul Laurence Dunbar was an American-African writer born to the enslaved parents. He achieved acknowledgement as the first professional black American writer. He in a very little span of time became widely known as a poet of extraordinary talent and appreciated by all the blacks and white writers. Joanne Braxton says, “As a black man and the son of former slaves, a survivor of the day today oppression of both the spirit and flesh, Paul Laurence Dunbar speaks from the particular to the universal” (ix). Racism was unbridled in America when he was in his youth, the poem *Sympathy* has become the most powerful account against the racism. This poem was first published in 1899. The poem conveys the ramifications of fierce slavery and intolerance on the basis of race and colour practiced by American people against the African-American community. Paul Dunbar becomes dejected and agitated by this prejudice prevalent in the society of the time; he puts forward his struggle and hardships in a very pathetic and justifiable manner.

Relation between Human Dignity and Human Rights:

Human dignity and human rights have close association, human dignity is a foundation of human rights. As human dignity has nothing to do with the class, race, or any man-made social status of the person, dignity is not earned by efforts rather it is a natural aspect attached to his birth as a human being. It is really very painful when you are told that you do not have right to take part in election, to vote, to get education, to go to the public places just because you are attached with some particular religion, race or colour. Hence human dignity itself suggest that every person on the earth should get equal treatment therefore, human dignity is a base for every right.

Paul Dunbar’s Cravings for Human Dignity and Equality:

Paul Dunbar in his poem titled, *Sympathy*, compares himself in particular and his



community in general to a caged bird. All human beings are born free and the God has made no distinction while creating his supreme creation i.e., humans. However, human civilisation divided communities on the basis of various factors like religion, class, creed, race and colour. It is a birth right of every human to be treated equally, however man puts some barriers to divide a man from another. Paul Dunbar portrays the mental state of Black Americans who are disconsolate and discouraged due to the barriers placed against them by the American society. He uses the metaphor of a caged bird to present the plight of his men and to show the value of freedom in one's life. Poem explains how the caged bird feels when it is denied of all the pleasures which the God has bestowed upon all. The bird feels more distressed and exasperated watching other birds freely roaming into the sky in the cheery and soothing ambience.

It becomes very painful for Paul when he sees other people enjoying the fruits of freedom without any type of restraints, however, on the other hand another group is not allowed to have its taste just because of their being different from the group which is in the power. Paul Dunbar and his community is deprived of this pleasure to which they are unquestionably entitled. He pathetically expresses his inner feeling how he feels looking at this discriminatory treatment towards his community. This inner conflict of frustration and disappointment leads him to protest against it. The bird knocks its wings on the bars, the colour of the bars turns red with blood; its wound takes a form of scar, in spite of all these protest and efforts the bird is not set free. The bird's efforts and longing for freedom is neglected by the society, its protest goes unnoticed and gives him nothing but so many wounds in return. A person having no human dignity has no right to raise his voice against the tyranny, his voice is subjugated and made him convinced that he is born to be enslaved. It suggests that when the worth of a person is not considered on the grounds of humanity, his natural rights are infringed and he becomes the puppet in the hands of oppressor.

Paul further depicts his plight as;

And a pain still throbs in the old, old scars
And they pulse again with a keener sting-
I know why he beats his wing!

These lines suggest Paul's suffocating experience while dwelling in the cage. Old scars indicate that it is not the first instance that the bird is beating its wings against the bars of the cage, it has been fighting against this injustice continuously for long. So, this pain is recurring and whenever the bird beats its wings, the old pain becomes fresh and intensifies its desire to be free. In its efforts to be free it is helpless and sings the songs of predicament, these songs are outcome of the its persistent pain. Apparently, these songs appear to be joyous, however, they are not songs at all, they are the ardent prayer or entreaty to Almighty to make it free so that it could soar high into the sky carving its own path based on its own will. Paul argues that these American oppressors don't pay attention to the cries of his community, they take pleasure in his men's screams as if they appear enjoyable for them, their screams are like songs for them because tyrants always take pleasures in the pains of the unfortunate people.

Throughout the poem the bird continuously tries to come out of the cage and wish to enjoy true freedom based on equality but fails every time. Paul Dunbar wishes to present the



never-ending misery and appalling condition of the African American community. They are deprived of their fundamental rights, although they are not in prison still their condition is like captives while living their normal life. They find no meaning in living such life where they cannot breathe freely. The cage is a symbol of bondage and the innocent bird is a victim of it. Paul Laurence Dunbar deeply feels the anguish of his community and their intense struggle to get the freedom because he himself is a victim of racial disparity practised by the American society.

Conclusion:

The poem *Sympathy* expresses the approach of rampant discrimination against the African-American people by the American authorities and the longing of victims to be free from this tyrannical situation. All these acts of discrimination take place due to the lack of practicing the principle of human dignity. Human dignity validates human rights, when people are not treated on equal grounds on the basis of humanity, discrimination begins. Privileges given on the basis of race, colour or on any other man-made categories creates favourable ground to suppress and reject the rights of underprivileged. This poem in an excellent manner portrays the situation of despotism in the absence of human dignity. In this way analysing the poem *Sympathy* it can be said that human dignity is the base of human rights and establishment of social equality.

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