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Martin Luther King Jr.'s Leadership and the African American Musicology: A Perspective

*¹Swasti Sharma*¹Assistant Professor, Department of English, University of Delhi, Delhi, India.

Abstract

African American music became an artistic expression of the experiences of slavery before the Civil War. The idiosyncratic music not only unveiled physical and mental harshness to which colored men and women in the deep South (especially) were subjected but also became a tool to counter and subvert oppression. Blues, as genre, emanated from a wide spectrum of folk songs that delineated and underscored numerous hardships faced by plantation workers who were dehumanised recurrently by the 'white man's burden'¹. The harmonic series of symphonies belonging to the African origin were fused with European music styles to lay down the foundation of Jazz and Blues that characterised the period of Civil Rights Movement in the American history. Both became popular forms of race music which revived the interest in African roots. Both genres expressed disenchantment that even after hundred years of Emancipation proclamation² that had guaranteed citizenship rights to all in letter, the rights were not granted in the actual spirit. New Orleans Jazz restored the hymns which were rooted in African tradition during the African American Civil Rights Movement. It bears testimony to the contribution made by Black Americans to the heterogeneous American society. Throughout the movement, artists such as Nina Simone, Billie Holiday and Curtis Mayfield endeavoured to uplift the spirit of fellow men and women of color by spreading the message of solidarity and brotherhood through their unconventional and path breaking music. This essay attempts to examine the contribution of Jazz and Blues to the African American Civil Rights Movement of 1960s, the movement's influence on their evolution and the way in which these forms of black music in their evolved forms such as soul and free jazz and were committed to the realization of Martin Luther King Jr.'s dream.

Keywords: Race music, hymns, emancipation, heterogeneous, black music

Introduction

The legal doctrine that separated African Americans even after boasting of equal status made racial segregation³ a systematic, state sanctioned process. Discrimination on the basis of color of the skin in public places and restaurants was rampant and widespread. Perpetration of physical violence and coercion were also a common routine during the 1960s. Black men and women were beaten up in public areas and there were frequent cases of lynching. Some Black Americans were lynched out of suspicion, others because they were "too loud" in public and some were even put to death because they were allegedly found gambling. Such sightings were rarely corroborated with sound data. Bepop and R&B in the music industry provided a platform to resist such episodes of barbaric violence. Artists such as Louis Armstrong who faced discrimination themselves owing to skin-color, who were not allowed to perform at venues owned by White people, conveyed their anguish through their individual art. With the advent of various forms of Jazz and blues such as rock and roll and funk, greater premium was placed not only on the individual experiences but also the state of the American nation as a whole. The collective consciousness of African Americans was based on the shared values of the past. Black

music industry attempted to revive a sense of community. Billie Holiday, a jazz artist became unwarranted victim of a racist organization's outrage while she was traveling to the Southern states with white Artie Shaw Band because she was determined to perform *Strange Fruit* (1939). An image of a hanged men in the song reminded her of her father's death and therefore interspersed her own lived experience with political outrage.

Strange Fruit (1939) registers its protest against the lynching of African Americans. The repulsive photograph depicting lynching of Thomas Shipp and Abram Smith sent out waves of horror and disgust. They were hanged because the angry mob suspected that they were either robbers or rapists but certainly criminals. The song extensively discusses the vulnerability of black body and the ease with which black people were profiled and became targets of racial atrocities. Billie's satiric tone mocked the "gallant South" which was the epicentre of the racist Jim Crow laws. The reference to "bulging eyes" and "twisted mouth" invoke anger among the listeners against the plight of innocent black people. The atmosphere of horror and panic created by the song actually subverts the authority of white dominated institutions because it proves that an imminent threat to the black body was the

only way by which the dominant white class could implement and establish/exercise hegemonic control. Only by imposing threat to the body could racial hierarchy continue to exist as a status quo. But the revelation of falsehood of claims of 'natural' white superiority through the song undermines the very concept of race. The public spectacle of dead bodies ensured long term subjugation of Black American population because it became a part of their collective memory. This larger conspiracy has been exposed through the song. The design is to transform black men and women as subjects of the racist model of appropriation. The white community is largely concerned with "ghettoisation" of Black people. Marginalization of Black bodies gives advantage to the already existing dynamics of race. Pastoral setting of the song contrasts with the images of men hanging on the trees.

Nina Simone in *Mississippi Goddam* (1963) celebrates the courage of Black community which was at loggerheads with systematic racial discrimination for centuries. The song was written in protest against the murder of Medgar Evers in June 1963 by the Klansman Byron De La Beckwith. In the composition, Nina Simone talks about the troubles faced by the African American community in carrying out day-to-day chores for sustenance. The social conditioning of Black men and women is deliberated upon in the song. The norms laid down by the white community are imbibed by the Black people. Movements and gestures depend upon the gaze of white skinned community. The "plain rotten" is a reference to the Black body which is deemed inferior due to the color of the skin. Rottenness results from the stereotypes associated with the black body which is considered as lazy and sluggish. The song highlights how the government and society resisted any change in the status quo for their own benefit. The very instruction "do it slow" shows that the dominant white race wielded power over every action and engaged in social surveillance of the Black community during the mid-twentieth century. Any deviation from the expected behaviour could cost life. It was either through coercion or hegemony (consent to rule) that status quo could be maintained. Institutions of authority implemented both methods. While the police assault took care of one aspect, education and social conditioning ensured the other. Billie Holiday performed 'Strange Fruit' in Cafe society and Nina Simone performed at Carnegie Hall. Both were racially integrated places that accommodated diversity. Such venues provided a chance for white community to hear black experiences which further strengthened the protest.

Theoretical Interventions

Ta Nehisi Coates correctly contemplated in his book *Between the world and Me* (July 2015) that The American Dream is actually "the dream of living white" (8). The American dream is based on the idea that all human beings are created by God equally, without bias and therefore, they must possess an equal right to liberty and pursuit of happiness. However, the reference to "the sudden smell of burning flesh" in Billie Holiday's *Strange Fruit* ruptures the myth. Racial discrimination is essential part of the American heritage. The institutions of power (such as police) controlled by white men have the right to destroy the black body and there is also an attempt to invisibilise the black body. Police acted as "repressive state apparatus". The process did not stop with culmination of the movement. Many artists acknowledged the fact that complete annihilation marks the beginning of civilization in American society. The American experience of

black community, which the music of Civil Rights Movement reflects is not in sync with the American dream.

Rock music and soul (improved forms of blues) forged the soundtrack of 1960s. Soul promoted Black consciousness through the lyrics of compositions by Ray Charles and Sam Cooke who upheld the idea of nationwide Black unity. New jazz reverberated intense frustration and anger. It assumed a fervent nationalist identity. Rhythm and Blues strived to "achieve racial integration". Civil Rights movement provided a platform where even the sympathetic white audience was inspired. Complexity of relationships with the outside world has been expressed through music. Soul form is a collection of Black experiences and through use of gospel hymns and R&B in a secular fashion, soul came into existence.

The plight to gain actual citizenship is reflected in the music of this period. Jazz musicians themselves vowed to promote social equality and racial justice. White singers like Pete Seeger and Bob Dylan raised the issue of racial discrimination and how it mocked upright America's democratic ideals. Bob Dylan's *Oxford Town* (1962) criticized the fatal riots which occurred at the University of Mississippi after the enrolment of a black student James Meredith. The genre of Jazz and blues marked the beginning of civil disobedience in the music industry. Jazz and blues associate themselves with that form of art which regards individual talent above skin color. Tyranny of dominant white cultural expectations became the cause of criticism during the period and black aesthetic provided a substitute. Henry David Thoreau in his article *On the Duty of Civil Disobedience* (1849) admits that state derives its power from an individual and by refusing allegiance to the state, one refuses consent to be governed.

During Berlin Jazz Festival (1964), Martin Luther King Jr. said, "Jazz speaks for life...The blues tell the story of life's difficulties-and, if you think for a moment, you realize they take the hardest realities of life and put them into music, only to come out with some new hope or sense of triumph. This is "triumphant music". The hope expressed by the jazz was an assertion of King's own dream. He said "'I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character. I have a dream today!" (I have a Dream, 1963). He found a gap between the American Dream and the American reality. The challenge thrown to the status quo by jazz and blues was based on the criticism of American dream which reiterates that American society is basically just and the inequality happened due to difference between characteristics and talents of various individuals. Jazz and King's dream both vehemently denounce the idea of the American dream for not taking into account the injustice employed by structural institutions that curbed African Americans from exercising their power as free individuals. Both jazz and King's dream expressed hope that the democratic principles on which the country was built would be brought into effect and "content of character" would be of greater importance than skin color. Equality of opportunity could only happen in true sense if the racial bias ended.

Curtis Mayfield incorporated the black consciousness into Rhythm and Blues. His group *The Impressions* performed *Keep on Pushing* (1964) to boost the morale of the Civil Rights Movement. It became the unofficial anthem of the movement. The phrases "keep on pushing", "move up a little higher" and "I've got my strength" were meant to inspire the followers and the composition itself had drawn inspiration from King's "March on Washington". The higher goal is achievement of equality in true sense. The wall of

discrimination has been demolished by the artist. The inculcation of Black pride is the chief aim of the composition which was popular among students who sang it during their protests and marched to jail. *People Get Ready (1965)* and *We're A Winner (1967)* inspired courage which even Martin Luther recognized. The songs emphasize upon releasing the baggage of norms which the white society imposed and struggling for upward social movement. The fear of losing life has replaced with faith in life. Mayfield blended relevant social problems with lyrics and melodies to depict new-found freedom of thought and expression. The manifestation of Black pride imparted motivation to the movement. His songs were banned from radio stations. Mayfield's lyrics acted as a solid commentary on the condition of ghettos and he projected the compulsion to fall prey to drug abuse and dependence on the dealers that became the reality.

Meghan Sullivan in her article *African-American Music as Rebellion: From Slave song to Hip-Hop* writes:

African American musicians sought autonomy over their recordings to resist corporate control and circumvent corrupt reporting of sales figures. As the Civil Rights Movement was intensifying, African American artists began acting against the constraints of the European-American music business by establishing individual recording labels" (34).

Artists did not receive recognition or money which they deserved but the movement provided a chance to seek equal opportunity. Individual recordings promised sovereignty. Some white recording companies denied the black origin of jazz and blues and endorsed racial prejudice through privileging of white bands.

The music of Civil Rights Movement did not portray blacks as meek or submissive. It was a powerful parlance of language through which activists interacted. Most songs revolted against the ideological construction of blackness, bereft of self-determination. Jazz and Blues reminded the audience that Black does not refer to the appearance and physical characteristics of one individual but entire genealogical ancestral heritage of the whole community of which an individual experience is a part. Musician-activists believed that the advancement of social status could be earned through rootedness in the African heritage. The shared "racial memory" from the time of slavery builds collective consciousness or black identity which was presented through the black music. Shared values and shared past added fuel to the revolution stirred by jazz and blues.

Ideology of racism cannot exist in an isolated space. It perpetuates through the members of Black community itself. It is guided by an intricate network of beliefs that form an inevitable part of the larger outlook. The racial stereotype that Blacks have low intelligence is further linked with entire new sphere of stereotypes pertaining to athletic talent and sexual prowess. Most jazz musicians and bands composed songs about how Black skin created boundaries between the self and the other.

The Black music established that race is a "false consciousness" enclosing a variety of stereotypes and social codes. The false illusion that race was natural and not cultural influences relationship between the races. Ideology is social consciousness and it assumes that certain false perceptions are true. Relations of domination cease to exist when it is realized that race is an illusion. Absence of black defined as white. Existence of 'white' depends on the presence of 'black'.

The process of "racial segregation" for a long time rendered racial difference reasonable and scientific. That white culture was an epitome of creative achievement and black art was

inferior is undermined by the advent of jazz and blues. The artists like Curtis Mayfield tried to detach the feeling of helplessness and resignation from the minds of African Americans who were subjected to racial violence for a long period of time. Black performers defied the custom of straightening hair before performances to form Black aesthetic which was adopted by the colored audience. This challenged "legitimation" of racial difference in the music industry to a great extent. From social perspective, the African Americans who were the subjects and victims of racist mindset began to question the concept of race itself.

In Retrospect

This the paper has established how music of Civil Rights Movement in the form of popular Jazz and Blues contributed to the cause of racial justice. The musicians defied race as a construct. Players invested in the dream of Martin Luther King Jr. and some of them even aided the movement financially. Though the dream is still far away from realization, their works have been inspiring pieces of radical revolution. The Movement ended with Civil Rights Act of 1964 which made provisions against any form of racial segregation.

Conclusion

1. "The White Man's Burden" was poem by Rudyard Kipling based on the imperialistic expansion by the United States in the Philippines. The term refers to ideological and mental subjugation of the native people in colonized countries under the garb of 'civilizing project.'
2. Emancipation proclamation was issued in 1863 by Abraham Lincoln which stated "that all persons held as slaves" within the rebellious states "are, and henceforward shall be free."
3. Racial segregation was a discriminatory practice to physically outcast Black Americans.

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