

Voices in the Mirror: An Authentic Document of Black Consciousness

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Abstract: Black American Autobiographies expose the oppressive condition of the Blacks and the repressive tactics adopted by the whites against them. The protest of the Black Americans against marginalization, discrimination, exploitation, slavery, violence and torture, etc. is reflected in the Slave narratives and Black American autobiographies. *Voices in the Mirror* (1990) is the autobiography of Gordon Parks. An analysis of Park's autobiography shows a continuum of motifs of the Slave narratives and 18 and 19th century Black American autobiographies. This paper is a humble attempt to substantiate how his autobiography is an authentic document of Black consciousness.

Keywords: Slave Narratives, Black American Autobiographies, Discrimination, Protest, Black Consciousness, Activism.

I

Black American writers were far removed from the fringes of life and literacy. Naturally, they had to fight 'against all odds' and overcome all possible sorts of obstacles to evolve as a person, as an individual, and for self-expression. These Black American writers chose a wide variety of genres, forms, and themes to document and record their struggle. Slave narrative or autobiography was a mode of expression widely accepted. Autobiography, as such, was a favorite genre of Americans. Black American autobiographies expose the oppressive condition of the Blacks and the repressive tactics adopted by the whites against them. Even though an autobiography is necessarily the story of an individual, the fact is that the racist structures have made it necessary for the Black American autobiographer to act as the voice of the community or to speak for the collective. Black American autobiographies are the seedlings of Black consciousness. The slave narratives deal with the experiences, thoughts, and feelings of human beings held in chattel slavery and reveal the impact of slavery on Black men, women and children, individually and collectively. The main objective was to awaken the conscience of the nation. Sterling Brown calls these early autobiographies as "literary weapons" (Brown, 27). The Black American autobiographer depicted the realities of Black life in America. The movement of Black American literature traced and kept a track of all social and political crises in the life of Negroes in America.

II

Voices in the Mirror (1990) is the autobiography of Gordon Parks. It traces his journey from teenage and from Minnesota and Washington, D.C., to the glamour of Paris and the ghettos of Rio and Harlem. He worked as a

brothel piano player and later he joined the legions of Black men hunting for a job in Depression-era Harlem. Through sheer grit and determination, he became the first Black photographer at *Vogue* and *Life*, and the first Black Screenwriter and Director in Hollywood, at the helm of such projects as the award-winning *Shaft*. He had plenty of experiences of discrimination in life. Addison Gayle Jr. edited an anthology of articles written by African American writers such as W.E.B. Du Bois, Langston Hughes, and Richard Wright. He wrote, "that the problem of the color line is insoluble, that the idea of an equalitarian America belongs to baskets of history and that the concept of an America melting pot is one to which sane men no longer adhere" (Gayle, 418). The veracity of the above quote is observed in abundance in Slave narratives and Black American autobiographies. Gordon Parks was no exception to the rule. Gordon Parks describes Kansas in his self narrative:

Blacks and whites moved about in deceiving air, seeming to avoid any sort of relationship that might somehow damage their pride. And as they lived, so were they consumed, one race by despair, the other by intolerance. It was a place with an inner music of its own; a tormenting music that provoked our black souls. The grade school was segregated but the high wasn't mainly because the town farmers couldn't scrounge up enough money to build a separate one. But even inside those walls of meager learning, black students had to accommodate themselves on the taste of salt. We were not allowed to participate in sports or attend social function (Parks, 1-2).

The theatre spoke silently with small signs for Blacks pointing towards "buzzard's roost." They could not visit eating places or drink a soda in drugstores. Colored people were not given hotel accommodation. Gordon Parks had become a celebrity musician as he was the first Black to be singing in a white orchestra in Hotel Muehlebach where Blacks were not allowed to enter. When Parks reached the hotel, the doorman told him to go in by the back way. It was very difficult to find a job in Harlem. It was "a prison owned, operated and exploited by whites who lived downtown" (Parks, 52). Parks felt that it was easier to walk on water than to find work there.

Help-wanted ads in the newspapers were explicit in terms of who was to apply for jobs. Bus drivers, taxicab drivers, doormen, bell hops, receptionists, musicians, waiters, garbage men, street cleaners, sign painters, hospital attendants, clerks and plumbers were all needed-providing they were white. The Hotel Park Central, where I had hopes of performing with Larry Funk's orchestra, needed cooks and dishwashers, but they wanted white cooks and dishwashers. A plumber needed a helper, but a white one. A limousine service was hiring drivers providing they were white. The ads said so. Only the rich part of the town offered jobs to blacks, but those were for maids and nannies- women, not men or boys (Parks, 52-53).

Gordon Parks' family was dismally poor. His wardrobe was pitifully meager. Cold, hunger and desolation were his constant enemies. He worked in a brothel playing piano and washed a million dirty dishes in a

greasy eatery to earn money. For most of the Blacks in Harlem the struggle to survive was savage. Poverty coiled around them with merciless fingers. He tried to capture the poverty of the people around him. They swarmed all around him and tormented his mind. He adds,

I've never lost my fierce grudge against poverty. It is the most savage of all human afflictions, claiming victims who can't mobilize their efforts against it, who often lack strength to digest what little food they scrounge up to survive. It keeps growing, multiplying, spreading like a cancer. In my wanderings I attack it wherever I can - in barrios, slums and favelas (Parks, 180).

This autobiography paints a grim picture of the poverty of Flavio da Silva and his debilitating health. Flavio got a new lease of life due to the efforts of Gordon Parks and help poured in from all corners for his medical treatment. In addition to these motifs, violence plays a major role in the text. There are many scenes of violence and lynching. His mother, who was the backbone of the family, developed militant spirit in him. Parks has painted a grim picture of lives of Black women and their sexual oppression and exploitation. The motif of always being on the move, shifting from one place to another and expatriation is also noteworthy. Existentialist predicament of Parks, his fear and anxiety, and loneliness too are highlighted. The psychological dimension of leading a marginalized, peripheral life with all its attendant horrors is seen in the terrible dreams of Gordon Parks. In the *Prologue of Voices in the Mirror* he writes,

The sharp pain knifed up my left side, sliced across my heart and, as I screamed, my chest seemed to blow apart. I bolted up from the bed feeling that I had been shot. And there, standing in the shadows, for the third time in a week, was a black-robed figure pointing a bony finger at me. It was death. Howling with anger, I lunged at death's throat, "I've got you this time, you bastard! I've got —!..." (Parks, XI)

His doctor was more bothered about his dream rather the pain. On another night, he floated into the Deep South, not in a particular city or town, and one by one, large white houses began bursting up through the earth. He felt trapped. He saw through windows enlarged body parts. A toothless Black head with blood dripping from the eyes sent him running, searching for an escape route. One night he dreamt that he was white, his skin seemed flabby and loose. He tried to put it in shape by pulling it - trying to make it fit. Parks comments on the fear of Richard Wright in his text and says, "Psychologically, Wright was obsessed with fear, fascinated with it. It had been the thread weaving through his most forceful works" (Parks, 146).

III

The literature of the Black Americans is known as protest literature. The protest of the Black Americans against marginalization, discrimination, exploitation, slavery, violence and torture, etc. is reflected in the Slave narratives and Black American autobiographies. These writers have employed words as weapons and written protest literature. All Black-American autobiographers have voiced their individual as well as collective protest in their *oeuvres*. Gordon Parks' way of protesting was

multifaceted. He used writing, photography and media (as a journalist and movie-director) to protest against the inhuman, oppressive conditions in which his community lived. His *Prologue of Voices in the Mirror* has a mention of Birmingham racial tumults (1960s) and records how the protestors were ill-treated there. In yet another incident, he describes how his cousin, Martin Brown, had murdered people who called him “dirty nigger” and spat in his face. Parks felt that to call what he did an act of rebellion was to beg the question. The fight that took place over his cousin Princetta proved to be a turning point in his life. He admits, “Slowly the frustration was boiling into anger, pushing me to the edge of violence, creating one emotional crisis after another. Why, I was beginning to wonder, had God made same people black and others white?” (Parks, 5) He objected to white underwear too and regretted that “Nobody sold black underwear” (Parks, 5). He confesses, “So in a black and white world anything whiter than I became my enemy. At fourteen I began to strike out-suddenly, quickly and at times without reason” (Parks, 5). His body shook with rage when Big John called him a ‘black bastard’. He attacked three white men who had kicked him in the ribs. In the jail, they abused him and one of them urinated through the bar on his floor. When his anger became uncontrollable, he hurled his cot and slammed it against the bars. At Camp Dix, Mr. Jones allotted latrine duty to Parks and Hunters. They complained about it to the Captain by way of protest and as a result, were relieved from it. On one occasion, Parks with his friends took seats in a bus behind the driver. The driver demanded that they go to back of the bus and refused to move the bus if they did not go back. They refused to do so. How children react to discrimination and humiliation has been borne out by Parks' daughter Toni's behavior. Park narrates,

Toni came home from school one Wednesday in a snit saying she wasn't going back because of a book that a teacher assigned her class to read. When I read the passage that offended her I agreed. Published in England, it referred to American blacks as “darkies” and “pickaninnies.” I confronted the headmaster and explained why David nor Toni was at school. He expressed shock and immediately banned the book from class. It had never occurred to me that Toni would express such rage; and I was proud of her reaction when bigotry touched her small universe (Parks, 144).

The development of Black consciousness of Toni resulted in her protest. Parks also comments about the Black movements in his times and its effect. With Elijah Muhammed, Martin Luther King, the Muslims, the NAACP, the Urban League and Malcolm, the Black rebellion had come alive and had all been swept into a vortex of common protest. Gordon Parks' autobiography was published in 1990. Yet it shows that the condition of the Blacks had not improved till then and the protest of the Black Americans had become more intense and vociferous. Gordon Parks' protest was the fruition of his Black consciousness. Racial consciousness is also known as “Black consciousness.” The decade 1960-1970 is known as the decade of Black Consciousness. Gordon Parks' *Voices in the Mirror* mentions that in Deep South, “Blacks and whites

moved about in deceiving air, seeming to avoid any sort of relationship that might somehow damage their pride. And as they lived, so were they consumed, one race by despair, the other by intolerance" (Parks, 1). The words "nigger", "darky", and "shine", etc. aroused anger and humiliation. His frustration boiled into anger and pushed him to the edge of violence and created one emotional crisis after another for him. He had to digest daily anguish of racism. The whites of Kansas acted as if Negroes were just galaxies of negligible black flesh, swirling in and out of their orbit to serve them. The brutality of the white man nudged him into a hatred of the whites. He felt a permanent anger and became "more sensitive to any situation that revealed a white man's attitude" (Parks, 47). The injuries he had received became symbolic of failure, making all the efforts of the last years meaningless. He confesses,

I was suffering with others now - those imprisoned in slave ships from Africa hundreds of years before, those strung up by their necks in hatred - filled Delta bottoms, those gunned to death for "looking the wrong way" at some Southern white lady, those bent, gnarled and burned to black crispness under the white-hot sun, in the white man's field, so that the white man might live a white man's life on a white man's land (Parks, 47-48).

His personal experiences and social life helped him develop an insight into racism. Says he,

I have one formidable, overwhelming and justifiable hatred, and that is for racists. Thorn-weilding is their occupation and I can attest to their proficiency. Throughout my childhood they kept their eyes glued to my tenderest parts, striking me, impalling me, leaving me bloodied and confused - without my knowing what had provoked their hostility. I came at last to think of them as beasts with cold hearts; of lost souls impassioned with hatred, slithering about in misery, their feelings severed of all humanness and spreading over the universe like prickly cloth...(Parks, 80-81).

Gradually Parks became acquainted with the agonies and complexities of Black people. Racial calamity had besieged the Blacks in Deep South. School segregation was declared unjust in 1954. Martin Luther King's "dream" heralded "freedom summers". The "Prophets of Rage" had become active to alter the country's conduct towards Black people. Gordon Parks confesses about his 'double consciousnesses on being reminded of Muhammad's words.

His soft-spoken words kept flowing back. And I began to wonder whether or not my achievements in the world called white had cost me a certain objectivity. True, I had stepped a great distance from the mainstream of black life, not by intention but by circumstance. In fulfilling my artistic and professional ambitions in the "white man's" world, I had to become completely involved in it. In a way I missed the easy laughter of Harlem and the security of black friends about me. Although en route to my home in Westchester I occasionally drove through Harlem, there was hardly enough time to become a physical part of it again. But if I had to bridge two worlds to escape the misery of one, that was the

price to pay, and it seemed the price was small. (Parks, 220-221).

This quotation refers to the ability of African-Americans to define themselves both from the European American and African American perspective. Du Bois was the first to mention this concept of Double consciousness. In his principles, Parks was not on the side of Elijah Muhammad and would not have followed him into a black state had such a complete separation taken place. He had worked hard to carve a niche for himself in the society. Yet he admits, "I know that if civil racial violence did erupt, this same circumstance would place me beside them. Although I would not have allowed them to be my keeper, I was, inherently, their brother" (Parks, 231). This was due to the "Black Power" movement of Stokely Carmichael and leaders like Eldridge Cleaver and Bobby Seale of Black Panther. He quotes Stokely's words to say,

Whatever happens, we've stirred the conscience of black people. We've got the community on the path to complete liberation. I suppose it's pride, more than colour, that binds me to my race. Blackness is necessary but the concern has to go further than that to reach anyone who needs it. Mississippi taught me that one's life isn't too much to give to help rid a nation of fascists... (Parks, 240).

IV

"All literature is protest." Gordon Parks was a versatile African-American writer, poet, novelist, journalist, musician, photographer, film director, and activist. He used the visual media for his activism in an effective manner. He wrote profusely and his works include *The Learning Tree* (1963), *A Choice of Weapons* (1967), *Born Black* (1970), *To Smile in Autumn* (1979), *Shannon* (1981), *Voices in the Mirror* (1990), and *A Hungry Heart* (2005), etc. Like all Black American autobiographers, Gordon Parks pleaded in the cause of humanity and aimed at the transformation and rejuvenation of the oppressed society. He fought against racism and racial segregation through his writing, photos, and documentaries. In 1948, he wrote a photo essay on a Harlem young gang leader to show how destructive gang wars were. He exposed the poverty of Blacks through a photo essay on poverty. He prepared a film on Muslim members and in this context had frequent meetings with Elijah Muhammad and Malcolm X. He sketched the portraits of many famous Black leaders. An analysis of Park's autobiography shows a continuum of motifs of the Slave Narratives and 18 and 19th century Black American autobiographies. Gordon Parks had protested against oppressors and the power equation prevalent in the society which made their life miserable. This protest included negation, rejection and violence. He wanted freedom, equality, and justice which would result in the creation of a new egalitarian society. Like all these Black American autobiographers, he too was aware of injustice but he was not revolting against the system but protesting against the inefficient operation of the system. This Black-American autobiography documents Black consciousness. The emerging, developing consciousness is a product of traumatized life and agony. Wole Soyinka in *Myth, Literature and the*

African World describes an artist who builds a bridge over the abyss of chaos and destruction to bring the group across. Through his personal sacrifice, the group is brought to a higher plane of consciousness (Wole, 150-55). Gordon Parks too pleaded for a cause. This self narrative was a weapon to fight against institutionalized racism, and segregation. It performed the twin functions of art: beauty and utility and to effect a social change. Langston Hughes in 'The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain' urged fellow artists to create works that would establish their identity. Gordon Parks used his life experiences as raw material to arouse and awaken the society and in the process became a name to be reckoned with.

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You Alone are not in Pain

Rajkamal Shiromani

It was a night of a strange dream.
My own room, my own big bed
but surrounded with heaps and heaps of
dust-laden, cow-webbed, glass-broken old photo-frames

The whole room was full of them
but how strange, dust-allergic I wasn't sneezing.
I wondered whether I was drowned or floating
trying to wipe the dust and clean the cow-webs.

I failed to recognize any of the faded faces
or the surrounding or the lane.
Felt sort of breath but got a message whispering,
You alone are not in pain.

