

Lynching and Miscegenation in the Select Plays of Georgia Douglas Johnson

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The literature of African American writers, be it poetry, prose, fiction, drama, biography or autobiography, has been fascinating and challenging with a tint of social protest. Their literary history may be scanty but their pain-filled, suffocating and inhuman experiences because of the whites in terms of colour, race, slavery, lynching, miscegenation, rape, exploitation of women and ill-treatment and injustice have been for a long time in the history right from the colonization. Their journey from slavery to self-dignity, suffering to salvation, unknown to establishing self-identity, rampage to restoration and constant struggle to bring about social change with equal opportunities to everyone, has been long but laudable in the literature of African Americans.

Georgia Douglas Johnson is one of the pioneering woman dramatists in the beginning of the twentieth century, who has penned a number of plays and a few volumes of poetry to educate the people of her race to rise against the injustice and fight for equality. She has been a role model to many black writers such as Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen, Alain Locke May Miller, Claude McKay and W. E. B. Du Bois etc. The paper presents a critical study of *Blue Blood*, *Safe*, and

Blue-Eyed Black Boy from historical and social points of view. These plays have been instrumental in educating the uneducated African Americans of late nineteenth and early twentieth century, as they witnessed and relived the horrors of the exploitation at the hands of the whites through the enactment of these plays at the streets or churches or the market place of the blacks. The above mentioned plays can be subjected to thematic reconstruction or critical examination. The paper illustrates the issues of miscegenation, lynching and its cause, powerlessness (loss of black manhood and exploitation of women) and a sense of community living.

Georgia Douglas Camp was born on September 10, 1880 in Atlanta and was educated at Atlanta University, specializing in music. She married Henry Johnson in 1903 who was an influential politician endowed with a sense of social awareness. Georgia Douglas Johnson wrote volumes of poetry and was honoured as a 'lady poet'. Her artistic fame grew gradually as she devoted herself to music, poetry and plays. Her literary identity slowly shifted from "genteel poet" to "revolutionary playwright" (Stephens: 89). She has published several volumes of poetry such as *The Heart of a Woman and Other Poems* (1918), *Bronze* (1922),

An Autumn Love Cycle (1928), and *Share My World* (1962). Some of her published plays include *A Sunday Morning in the South*, *Plumes*, *And Yet They Paused*, *A Bill To Be Passed*, *Blue Blood*, *Safe*, *Blue-Eyed Black Boy* and *Paupaulekejo*. Many of her plays have either been lost or still remain unpublished as critics and scholars believe that she must have written at least 28 plays.

Blue Blood (1926) is a play which revolves around the marriage of two mulattoes May Bush and John Temple. Mrs. Bush and Mrs. Temple the respective mothers of both bride and bridegroom brag about their children and try to project them as superior to one another. Meanwhile, shockingly, both the women learn that their children share a 'common' father. In distress and chaos, they agree to stop the marriage. Shattered and shocked May Bush runs away with Randolph Strong in order to escape the public blame.

Safe (1929) is another shocking play about a young black pregnant woman Liza who after having witnessed the lynching of a black man, Sam Hosea from the window of her home, kills her new born son in order to save him from lynching and oppression in America. *Blue-Eyed Black Boy* (1930) is a unique play that revolves around Jack, a black boy being accused of brushing up against a white woman. As he is jailed and is about to be lynched, his mother's surprise evidence about his father being a governor saves him from lynching. *Blue Blood* and *Blue-Eyed Black Boy*

both manifest miscegenation/ a mixed race/ racial hybridity/ Mulatto which constitute both positive and negative results. Ironically, in *Blue Blood*, May Bush and John Temple at the threshold of marriage happen to share the same white father "Captain Winfield McCallister the biggest banker, who got money invested in banks all over Georgia" (B B: 20). Bride and bridegroom are brother and sister in reality.

In eighteenth, nineteenth and early twentieth century miscegenation was considered a crime in America. It was perhaps to maintain the purity of the white race, or its supremacy was given priority because of the fear that a mix race may outnumber the actual population of whites in America in the long run. In contrast, the Spanish, the Dutch, and the French colonies were responsible for the cause of miscegenation to a large extent in America. However, the white race was against it as Carter G. Woodson in his article *The Beginnings of the Miscegenation of the Whites and Blacks* states about the increase in miscegenation of blacks and whites in the North.

Massachusetts enacted in 1705, that a Negro or Mulatto man committing fornication with an English woman or a woman of any other Christian nation should be sold out of the province. An English man or man of any other Christian Nation committing fornication with a negro or Mulatto

woman, should be whipped and the woman should be sold out of province (Woodson: 346).

In any case the victim is to be either a black man or a black woman. Georgia Douglas Johnson's plays *Blue Blood* and *Blue-Eyed Black Boy* portray mixing up of two races and she relives the history answering as what makes the black women to keep the secret or hide the truth for a long time about their relationship to white men. In *Blue-Eyed Black Boy* Pauline's fear of her son Jack's lynching makes her reveal the truth finally that Jack's father is governor Tinkham. This clears the doubts of Rebecca, the younger daughter of Pauline, as why her brother's eyes are blue. Pauline wastes no time in sending Dr. Thomas Grey, Rebecca's fiancé to reach the governor with a ring as a sign to remind him of the past and to save his son from lynching.

Pauline: (*Feverishly tossing out the odd bits of jewellery in the box, finally coming up with a small ring, she turns to Dr. Grey*) Here, Tom, take this. Run, jump on your horse and buggy and fly over to governor Tinkham's house and don't you let nobody- nobody- stop you. Just give him this ring and say, "Pauline sent this. She says they going to lynch her son born 21 years ago. Mind you say 21 years ago. Then say, listen close. "Look in his eyes and you will save him. (B B B: 36)

The mixing up of two races here proves to be positive as innocent Jack is saved from the lynching. Pauline's buried secret reveals her vulnerability and fear of being abandoned by her black husband. It is a "cursed blood" that white Americans condemned Africans with slavery first, they condemned them further with racial terrorism in the form of lynching. (O'Brien: 571).

The next point to be discussed is lynching. Georgia Douglas Johnson is often known for anti-lynching plays as considered as the forerunner of the lynching drama of 1920s a new kind of genre in American literature. What is lynching then? And why has lynching become the subject matter of the dramatists? The word lynching could be explained in the context of the plays as the murder of individuals, primarily black men by the white mobs ignited with racial motives without any repercussions for the perpetrators. The lynching could be done in many ways as hanging, burning alive, beaten to death, stabbed to death, or shot dead publicly. They would be tortured and castrated by the mob before they kill them. This kind of lynching sprang up after the Reconstruction period and existed till 1950s. Lynching was a social construct, a myth, a kind of "rite of exorcism" (Stephens: 656).

Lynching was once considered as the national crime of America. Henry E. Barber in his article states that there were 4, 761 lynchings between 1882 and 1930. A little of 71 percent of these involved the Negroes. (Barber: 378)

Even after the Great Depression of 1929 lynchings took place every now and then. Georgia Douglas Johnson's *Safe* and *Blue-Eyed Black Boy* reveal the horror and impact of lynching on black women and black men. Even *Blue Blood* has indirect reference to the lynching. *Safe* explores the crime of infanticide a black pregnant woman commits after having witnessed the lynching of a young black boy Sam Hosea in the public. The innocent victim's last words echo in her mind. (*then a voice rises above the men outside shouting, "don't hang me, don't hang me. I don't want to die! Mother! Mother!"*) (S: 29). Liza Pettigrew wants to deliver a girl child. She fears if the baby is a boy then he too would meet the fate of lynching. Unfortunately only a boy is born and she kills him thereby saving him from the lynching mob of future. Dr. Jenkins narrates the action:

... and then I turned my back a minute to wash my hands in the basin. When I looked around again she had her hands about the baby's throat choking it. I tried to stop her but its little tongue was already hanging from its mouth. It was dead. Then she began, she kept muttering and muttering over and over again, "Now he's safe- safe from the Lynchers! Safe! (S: 32)

In *Blue-Eyed Black Boy*, Jack is arrested for being accused of "brushing against the white woman on the street" (B B B: 35) and would be lynched in the night. After the abolition of slavery lynching grew rapidly. The main purpose was to

reduce the population of black men. Lynching has had a strong impact on 'black life' and their activities. It has been an ironic situation for the African American women to accept the forced accusation on the black men while they fought for the country in the World War I and elsewhere and back home they were lynched publicly at home. "Lynching can be seen as one of the strongest indications of the black-white racial divide in the 1920s. For Black Americans, lynching reinforced social boundaries that became quite literally, a matter of life and death" (Stephens: 658). Lynching continued to keep the racial discrimination alive as it became an excuse for the protection of the white women in the South but "statistics refuted the myth that black men were raping white women" (Stephens: 332). The black men remain helpless and restricted and controlled.

The practice of lynching by the whites resulted in the powerlessness of the black men and women. It generated unwanted fears about their men being jailed without proper reason and killed affecting black women psychologically. They often remain silent and submissive. In *Blue Blood* Mrs. Bush and Mrs. Temple once having realized the truth about a common father of their children, are afraid of letting the truth known to John Temple as out of rage he would kill his white father and later he himself would be murdered by the white mob. Mrs. Bush rightly tells Mrs. Temple not to tell her son John Temple. "Mrs. Bush: Keep it from him, it is the black women

that have got to protect their men from the white men by not telling on 'em" (B B: 24). The fear of the black women reveals that black men are unsafe and insecure against illegal practice of lynching by the white mobs. It is not only the racial hatred but the acute physical power and virility of black men that the white men felt jealous of, which has resulted in destroying them completely.

In *Safe* John's portrayal appears to be less important and weak. It is perhaps John's inability to persuade Liza to bring up a boy child and to face the world. Johnson does not give a chance to John's character to have a look at the new born baby. The helplessness and powerlessness of black men signify the impact of lynching and racial hybridity.

Georgia Douglas Johnson's depiction of a sense of community living of black life is noteworthy to be discussed. *Blue Blood*, *Safe* and *Blue-Eyed Black Boy* being one act plays also manifest the importance of minor characters. All constitute the togetherness and unity of the nature of African Americans. They render the timely support and give required information for the welfare of the fellow being. Randolph Strong in *Blue Blood* becomes a saviour of family shame of racial hybridity and runs away with May Bush protecting her from the insult from the society. In *Safe* Hannah

Wiggins a neighbour, comes to visit ailing pregnant Liza and cautions them about another possible lynching on the street. She also fetches a doctor at a time when the white mob is violent. In *Blue-Eyed Black Boy* Hester Grant Pauline's best friend gives first hand information about the arrest of her son Jack and virtually cautions Pauline to rescue him from lynching. The black life, therefore, seems to be of a community living where they share joy and sorrow equally. It is "the roots of African American culture that value community and interpersonal relations as measures of success" (O'Brien: 577). The sense of togetherness is remarkable in the three plays as they live in commune fighting against the whole of white race.

The racial hybridity seem to be growing now but it has both negative as well as positive effects. The anti-lynching plays of Georgia Douglas Johnson are direct reflections of social and historical facts of American society. Her plays "touches the heart and both angers and pains modern readers" (Brown-Guillory: 7). The plays expose lynching as violent crime and a pervasive influence on daily life. They manifest a cry of social protest and justice, and equal rights. Her contribution to the lynching drama deserves greater recognition and they fetch the attention for cultural studies, women of pre and post Harlem renaissance.

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