

## Treatment of Race and Class in *Harlem Shuffle* of Colson Whitehead

Mrs. T. Abinaya<sup>1\*</sup>, Dr. S. Ayyappa Raja<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1\*</sup>PhD Research Scholar, Department of English, Annamalai University

<sup>2</sup>Associate Professor of English, Department of English, Annamalai University

### Abstract

This study aims at an analysis of the novel *Harlem Shuffle* of Colson Whitehead so as to bring out his treatment of race and class. When it comes to race, Whitehead is familiar with the mindset of Americans and their conscience. The novel is a kind of crime fiction and it revolves around the protagonist namely Ray Carney, the salesman of furniture who travels on the wrong side of the life track. He dresses professionally and wants to lead a safe and secure life for his family. He desires to prove his worth to his in-laws who always look down at him. In the radio repair shop, he is neglected because of his race and they opt for other White customers. Later, they question him about his overstaying at the shop. When he has tried to explain about the complaint, the workers do not pay attention and he leaves the place. The White supremacists always want to bring the Blacks under their control. Ray Carney is not treated as an equal human being. He is pressurized by his cousin Freddie to commit a crime which reveals his shady lifestyle to others. It begins the inner struggle of him. Though he does not want to be a thief, the White society makes him such one. His father is shot by the White supremacists as he has stolen a cough syrup from pharmacy. Colson Whitehead delineates the riots and violence caused by the brutal killing of a Black Boy by a White Police officer. The biased White Reporters project badly the violent acts of the Black youth. They fail to address the main issue of racism which is prevalent in the American society. Instead, they would like to portray the Blacks as violent mongers. In *Harlem Shuffle*, Colson Whitehead has artistically recreated New York of the early 1960's. Colson Whitehead has brought out effectively the racism of the Whites and the state of subjugation of the Blacks.

**Keywords:** Race, Class, Crime, Power, Violence, Ill-treatment, and Anguish.

Colson Whitehead is a well-known African American fiction writer who has written extensively about racial prejudice and the subjugation of the Blacks in American society. He writes about the struggles of the Africans who suffer in the American soil for their freedom as well as for the better treatment in the society. His famous works are *The Underground Railroad*, *The Nickel Boys*, and *Harlem Shuffle* and he received Pulitzer Prize for his contribution to literature. The paper aims at an analysis of *Harlem Shuffle* so as to bring out Colson Whitehead's treatment of the racial prejudice and class struggle in the American society. African Americans are alienated in the White society in which they are forced to establish their own communities and institutions. The writer reveals the mindset of the Blacks who have felt that they are not treated as equal citizens in the country.

Even after the abolition of slavery, Black people continue to face discrimination in the society. Blacks are placed in a subservient position and they are not treated as equal to Whites. They are forced to live as a marginalized section in the society. There is a divide among the Blacks on the basis of financial position. In addition to Whites, Blacks also have a negative opinion about the poor section of them. Every time when they leave Harlem, they encounter racism from the Whites. During the Great Depression and Great Migration, many African Americans have relocated themselves in Harlem, the hotspot of Blacks' liberation.

*Harlem Shuffle* revolves around the protagonist namely Ray Carney who is an African American and a furniture seller in Harlem. Though, he follows the wrong path, he wants to provide a safe and secure life for his family members. The novelist illustrates how race and class have played important roles in the American society through this character. Colson Whitehead artistically depicts the hardships faced by Ray Carney. The opening part of the book shows the race conflict encountered by the protagonist Ray Carney in outside of Harlem. Once when Ray Carney has gone to repair shop to sell the television, he has been ill-treated by the Whites. Colson Whitehead delineates: "The first time Carney came to the Row on Business, the White clerks pretended not to see him, attending to hobbyists who came in after him. He cleared his throat, he gestured, and remained a black ghost, store after store, accumulating the standard humiliations" (5). This incident demonstrates how Whites have ill-treated the Blacks. The White supremacists never treat Blacks fairly; instead, they always look down on them. They do not consider the Blacks as the fellow human beings. Colson Whitehead exposes the cruelty committed against the Blacks by the Whites in American society. Ray Carney has come to sell his television but he is ill-treated by the Whites. By attending other White clients, the shopkeepers belittle him. This demonstrates the prejudice of the Whites against the Blacks. Wherever the Blacks travel, they face discrimination and humiliation.

In another incident, Colson Whitehead shows the ill-treatment of Blacks in the school where children from both races are combined together to get education. Ray Carney has some dirty spots in his shirt as he has no one to take care of. He himself has to do all the works and as a small boy he does not know much about washing. Still he has tried his best to wash away the stains and stink. His dirt and stink have become laughable matter for the White Students: "Oliver and his group made fun of the spots on his clothes, which did not fit properly and so they made fun of that in addition, they said he smelled like garbage truck" (11). Colson Whitehead depicts the sad state of the Black students in the White dominated school. The White and Black students are combined together and this arrangement instead of reducing the discrimination among them, creates the division further. The crookedness of the Whites persists and they make fun of the Blacks about their dress and smell. Ray Carney could not wear presentable clothes due to his poverty and it is not taken into account instead he is targeted racially. Whites always degrade the Blacks by using abusive language. The critic, David in his article, "Stress and the Mental Health of Populations of Color," observes:

Though discrimination is the most studied aspect of racism, racism can also affect mental health through structural/institutional mechanisms and racism that is deeply embedded in the larger culture. The institutional racism, the assessment of stressful experiences linked to natural or manmade environmental crises, documenting and understanding the health effects of hostility against immigrants and people of color, cataloguing and quantifying protective resources, and enhancing our understanding of the complex association between physical and mental health. (466)

The critic highlights the suffering of the victims of racism. It gives mental agony as well as physical pain. Colson Whitehead adeptly brings out the trauma experienced by the Black school boy who has been made as a laughing stock by his fellow White students. He has undergone the humiliation which cannot be erased from his mind. It shows the cruel and ugly face of racial discrimination.

Colson Whitehead presents the cruelty of the Whites when Ray Carney's father is shot dead by the White Police officer for stealing the Cough syrup from a medical shop. Whoever meets Ray, he or she never fails to mention the brutal killing of his father Mike and it aggravates his sadness further. Colson Whitehead describes the feeling of Ray Carney: "I saw two policemen haul him away Finian's or He was beating this sucker with this lid of a garbage can" (13). This incident depicts the cruel mindset of the Whites. His father has done the petty theft due to poverty. The ugliness of poverty is displayed here by the novelist. The act of stealing the cough syrup itself reveals the sad state of Blacks in the American society. They do not have proper medical treatment to cure their illness. For this petty offence, Ray's father is shot dead. There is no proper medical facility, education, and shelter for the Blacks. Blacks are unable to express their sad state to others. Without any mercy, the Whites have killed Ray Carney's father. These kinds of atrocities are still happening in America. Even after the developments like Abolition of Slavery and Civil Rights Movement not much changes are visible in the psyche of Americans. Through this killing, Colson Whitehead adeptly displays the fact that years may have passed but the behaviour of the Whites towards the Blacks does not change much. His father's minor crime has made Ray Carney to face the terrible consequences. After his father's death, the bad name continues. He has been identified as the son of a thief. He has struggled a lot to remove the tag but it is attached firmly. Ray Carney dedicates his life to become a respectable businessman but people have ill-treated him due to his antecedence.

Ray Carney's wife Elizabeth helps the Blacks to travel freely without any obstacles from the Whites. She expresses her sadness on seeing the suffering of the Black people at the hands of Whites. She observes that even after the abolition of slavery, the Blacks need to go to other parts of the nation secretly. Colson Whitehead makes Elizabeth and Ray to talk about this issue:

America was big and blighted in gamey spots by racial intolerance and violence. Visiting relatives in Georgia? Here are the safe routes around the sundown towns and cracker territories where you might not make it out alive, the towns and counties to be avoided if you valued your life. Best to stay at the Hanson Motor Lodge, fifty miles away, and hit the road by five P.M. to make it back in one piece. (70)

The free movement of the Blacks is curtailed and there is always danger for their life. Though the end of slavery is proclaimed, Blacks still need to go other parts with care and precaution. There is no guarantee for their lives in the White dominated areas. To avoid being apprehended by the Whites when they cross the border, they must conceal themselves in safe locations. Blacks are restricted to move in certain places and they are not allowed to cross the limits. If they move, the Whites capture and kill them. Being an African American, Colson Whitehead brings out the difficulties and cruelties experienced by the Blacks in America. Blacks aspire to live with dignity but the White supremacists trouble them in various ways.

In-laws of Ray Carney do not respect him due to his father's act. They treat him as a mean creature. They believe that like his father, Ray also may involve in robbery. Whenever they get opportunity, they have taunted him. When Ray has shared his poverty with his in-laws, it becomes an entertainment to them. They ask him to speak about it repeatedly and enjoy his account of sufferings. They are also Blacks but there is no kindness in their heart and it shows vividly the class division even among the Blacks:

His stories were his in-laws' entertainment, a vaudeville act. Yes, there was the story of the time he woke up one Christmas and he and his father had one mealy sweet potato to share between them, they cut it in half and put it on two

plates, and he saw his white breath before him because the heat was out again that frigid morning, and his father took off at noon and didn't return for a week. (71)

He shares many of his life experiences with his in-laws expecting consolation from them but they become an entertainment to them. They have not understood his sufferings, instead they have enjoyed Ray's struggle. He has revealed about his terrible childhood poverty, his mother's death, his father's disappearance and so on. He does not have even proper food, shelter and medication: "Getting bit by rats, deloused by the school nurse, the winters without heat, the time he woke up in Harlem Hospital with pneumonia and had no idea how he got there. He told the stories without self-consciousness; why should he be ashamed to have lived for so long on his own?" (71) Ray does not have any inhibition to share about his poverty to others because he has passed the difficulties and he stood on his own legs. It proves his hard work and fortitude. He is not happy about his in-laws who have not taken his sufferings seriously. He feels isolated in the midst of his family members. Except his wife Elizabeth, there is no one to take care of him. Colson Whitehead portrays effectively the sufferings of the poor Blacks through him. Though America is a well-developed nation, there are people still not having square meals thrice a day. Colson Whitehead highlights that how rich Blacks make fun of the sufferings and struggles of their own men.

Pepper a criminal who is close to Freddie, cousin of Ray Carney, talks about his life and the ill-treatment of the Blacks by the Whites. Out of poverty, he has begun to do odd jobs and he has killed a person for interrupting in his business. Hence, he is sent to the war front where the Blacks are ill-treated without proper food and shelter. Colson Whitehead depicts:

On the way over Pepper and the rest of the colored soldiers ate hardtack and beans in the dingy hull while the white boys chowed down on proper rations above. They showered in seawater, and Pepper cursed the whole time, not suspecting he'd long for such a luxury once he got down in the mud and silt. (75)

This shows vividly the discrimination of the Blacks by the Whites in the war field. Blacks at the battle field are ready to sacrifice their lives for the sake of the country but even there the racial bias exists. Besides the Blacks, people from other ethnic groups like Burmese are also not treated properly. Colson Whitehead brings out the racial bias of the Whites against the Blacks obviously here. The ill-treatment has brought a change in the mindset of Pepper, hence he continues to do robbery and other illegal acts, which make him a terrible criminal later. Poverty makes Blacks to involve in robbery and other illegal deeds. Government fails to give proper care for the under privileged Blacks and other poor sections. Instead of giving proper basic amenities, the White officials just shower the volley of abuse on the Blacks and force them to indulge in illegal acts.

Ray and Elizabeth realize that Black Star Travel has changed a lot in latter's absence. The company has handled booking for the good students and these travellers are taken to excursions. They are shown the hostile areas dominated by the Whites. Colson Whitehead writes:

The stakes were different. One of their mainstay hotels in Mississippi had been firebombed. It was a warning—nobody got hurt. But they could have been. Just last month, the Klan stopped a bus of Freedom Riders in Anniston, Alabama, and tried to burn them alive inside. An undercover cop on the board waved his gun around and scared the mob off before the gas tanks exploded. (119)

These incidents reveal the sad state of African Americans. They could not travel to other places as they like. They get freedom but not in reality. Blacks should not move from the boundary that is demarcated by the Whites. If they cross the border, they may be killed by the racists. To create fear in them, the racists involve in these kinds of acts. The White supremacists always want to impose their superiority over the Blacks and they never allow not even the free movement of the Blacks.

Ray Carney is not permitted to become a member of the Dumas club due to his poor status. It is a club where the rich people used to conduct party, meetings and so on. Ray Carney seeks help from Wilfred Duke, a local business man to become a member of the club. He asks five hundred dollars as a bribe. Later, he cheats Ray Carney by saying that it is not possible to make him as a member of the Dumas club. He rejects Ray Carney: "We're trying to broaden our ranks around here—so it's not the same type. We can only accept few men each year, that what's hard about it" (117).

Another instance illustrates how racism is prevalent in America. Colson Whitehead has written a real incident that happened during the 1960's. A White Cop killed a fifteen year old boy. It had created a strong protest in the country. He states, "What had started it, the mess this week? A White cop shot an unarmed boy three times and killed him. Good old American know-how on display: we do marvels, we do injustice, our hands were always busy" (214). This incident obviously proves the atrocities committed against the Blacks by the White racists in America. Though the slavery is abolished, the residue of it, racism persists in American soil. Blacks are humiliated by the Whites on the basis of their race and colour.

African Americans do not have freedom in the real sense and everywhere they face bias. They are simply killed without any reasons or for minor mistakes. This incident has created spontaneous protest and riots. It is said that the Black boy has a knife in his hand but the truth is unknown. The White reporters under the influence of the supremacists write against the Blacks as if they are creating nuisance to the public. They have failed to address the main reason for the

protests and riots. They spread rumours about the protests of the Blacks. They portray the Blacks as riot mongers. This type of killing by the law enforcement officials still continues in the American soil.

Colson Whitehead has brought out artistically the sufferings of Black people at the hands of Whites and the ill-treatment of poor by the rich men. The author has captured realistically the challenges, the agonies, and the genuine aspirations of the Blacks in America. Ray Carney's persona makes readers understand the psyche of Black people and their reactions to the ill-treatment and exclusion of the mainstream society. Blacks are ill-treated nonchalantly and contemptuously by the racists. Blacks are killed for minor reasons and the murderers offer lame excuses for their unlawful deeds. Ray Carney's father is killed for stealing the cough syrup and it is not a heinous crime. He has been killed because of his race. This trend continues in America even now. This shows how race has played a vital role in America. Blacks protest and bring awareness about their marginalized state to the world. Though America is developed economically, section of people suffers in all counts. The White supremacists do not accept the Blacks as equal to them. In the case of rich Blacks, they look down on their own poor ones. Being a Black writer, Colson Whitehead has brought out obviously the sufferings of the Blacks at the hands of racists in the American society and the ill-treatment of the poor Blacks by the rich men of their own clan.

### References

1. Alter, Alexandra. "Colson Whitehead Reinvents Himself, Again." *The New York Times*, 8 Sept. 2021, [www.nytimes.com/2021/09/08/books/colson-whitehead-harlem-shuffle.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2021/09/08/books/colson-whitehead-harlem-shuffle.html).
2. *Black Liberation & The Class Struggle*, 1990, [www.bolshevik.org/1917/no8/no08blck.html](http://www.bolshevik.org/1917/no8/no08blck.html).
3. Charles, Ron. "Review with *Harlem Shuffle*, Colson Whitehead Proves Once Again That He's A Master of Reinvention." *The Washington Post*, WP Company, 14 Sept. 2021.
4. "Fair Use and the Circulation of Racialized Texts." *University of Michigan Press*, 2009, pp. 99–138. JSTOR, [www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv65sx2s.9](http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv65sx2s.9).
5. Hochschild, Jennifer L. "American Racial and Ethnic Politics in the 21st Century: A Cautious Look Ahead." *Brookings*, 1 Mar. 1998.
6. Jenkins, Craig. "How Colson Whitehead Pulled It Off." *Vulture*, 9 Sept. 2021, [www.vulture.com/article/colson-whitehead-harlem-shuffle-interview.html](http://www.vulture.com/article/colson-whitehead-harlem-shuffle-interview.html).
7. Maslin, Janet. "In Colson Whitehead's New Novel, a Crime Grows in Harlem." *The New York Times*, 10 Sept. 2021, [www.nytimes.com/2021/09/10/books/colson-whitehead-harlem-shuffle.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2021/09/10/books/colson-whitehead-harlem-shuffle.html).
8. Saldívar, Ramón. "The Second Elevation of the Novel: Race, Form, and the Posttrace Aesthetic in Contemporary Narrative." *Narrative*, vol. 21, no. 1, 2013, pp. 1–18. JSTOR, [www.jstor.org/stable/23321834](http://www.jstor.org/stable/23321834).
9. Straubel, Caroline. Review of *Harlem Shuffle Continues the Incredible Storytelling of Colson Whitehead, The Seahawk*, 28 Sept. 2021.
10. Williams, David R. "Stress and the Mental Health of Populations of Color: Advancing Our Understanding of Race-related Stressors." *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*, vol. 59, no. 4, 28 Nov. 2018, pp. 466–485., doi: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022146518814251>.
11. Wilson, Jennifer. "What Is Crime in a Country Built on It?" *The Atlantic*, Atlantic Media Company, 10 Sept. 2021, [www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2021/10/colson-whitehead-harlem-shuffle/619821/](http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2021/10/colson-whitehead-harlem-shuffle/619821/).
12. Whitehead, Colson. *Harlem Shuffle*. Fleet, 2022.