

# Race: the way of seeing things as we are essay



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The concept of race, prevalent in the human psyche since down the ages, has been responsible, directly or indirectly, for many of history's momentous chapters. History is replete with 'stories' of a superior race always dominating an inferior race. If it was the blue-blooded Aryans in Hitler's Germany sending millions of Jews of an 'adulterated' race to the gas chambers; it was the white-skinned English sahibs who lorded it over the half-naked, brown Indian natives in India of the British Raj. In South Africa, the whites of the Pretoria regime exploited the native blacks and their lands to the hilt. In the United States, the racial distinction between the whites and the blacks laid the foundation for the age of slavery, it was the espoused cause of the great American war of independence, and it still keeps the people largely divided along racial lines.

According to Jock Dovidio, who has researched racism for more than 30 years, 80 per cent of white Americans have racist feelings that they may not even recognize (CNN. com). People have associated race with distinct biological features, they have identified race in the intellectual capabilities of human beings, race has also been used to describe prescribed sets of human characteristics which are deemed to be genetic in nature. Yet, quite inexplicably, much to the utter exasperation of social scientists, the term 'race' has defied any objective or scientific definition. It has not lend itself to biological interpretations in which people of the world could be neatly classified and organized into distinct races on the basis of their biological, physical or even intellectual characteristics. Thus the perception race amongst the scientific community has undergone continuous change, until eventually " since the 1950s, anthropologists have all but abandoned the

concept of race, as well as the belief that other characteristics, such as IQ scores, are associated with apparent physical differences.

" (Shanklin 92-93) Shanklin contends that even though race has been accepted not to be a useful scientific concept, racism is still very prevalent in society and constitutes a major social problem even in the present-day world. Racism is the practical manifestation of the disproved concept of race. Those who believe in race hold the view that physical characteristics are inevitably linked with mental or emotional capacities. It is this attitude that Shanklin terms as racism.

She defines racism as a heightened form of ethnocentrism or the belief that one's own race or way of life is better than all others. Based as it is on the fallacy of race, racism is no less a fallacy, but one that finds practical existence and manifestation in the day-to-day world. Unlike race, racism is a measurable and observable entity in terms of its impact on society.

Throughout history there have been instances in which a particular group of people has taken recourse to racism, or has deliberately perpetuated racism, in order to gain some advantage over others or suppress and dominate others to their own advantage. Shanklin uses the studies of such instances in history as also in the present world as data to prove her hypothesis that race is not a biological fact but a social construct.

The first of such studies refer to the Twelfth Century when Henry II planned to invade Ireland and looked for a plausible reason enough to be able to do so with the Pope's blessings. He sent Giraldus Cambrensis, a Welsh monk, to Ireland to gather evidence that the Irish were heathens, and deserved to be

invaded. Cambrensis obliged. His report is a study in race is construed in the minds of people.

He described the same people whom Charlemagne had invited to his court three hundred years before to teach his courtiers to read and write as white 'savages' and 'human chimpanzees' of degraded character. By the middle of Nineteenth Century, the seeds of racism that Henry II had sowed became one of the principal causes of English domination of Ireland. Henry II's manufactured excuse to serve a political purpose found credence in the mind of the community at large and people came to believe in a different race known as the Irish or Celtic race, a race inferior to the Anglo-Saxons. The social, political and economic ramifications of such a racial prejudice far surpassed its original purpose.

To add to the credence of this racist attitude was the approach of the scientific community who proved to be as susceptible to racist influences as the common man. Even a man of Darwin's stature gave approval to the notion of the Irish or Celtic race in his work *The Descent of Man*. These notions attached to the Irish race finds expression even in America to where the Irish immigrated in large numbers during the later half of the Nineteenth Century and settled particularly in the Boston area. There they came into direct conflict with the ruling group in Boston known as the Boston Brahmins not because of so-called racist characteristics but because of their different political alienations. Though the Boston Brahmins at first did not take recourse to discriminations based on racial prejudices, they too eventually used the racist card effectively in an effort to sideline the Irish and block further Irish immigration to America leading to a full-scale American nativist

movement. The idea of an Irish race became defunct in America only when the politicians realized that the Irish people had come to occupy influential positions of leadership in many labor unions and wielded considerable political clout.

Through these two examples Shanklin effectively demonstrates that the historical antecedents of race and racism can be traced back to social, economic and political factors rather than to biological, intellectual or hereditary factors. The argument is taken a step further with the example of slavery in America where she again contends that it was not race as a biological factor that was the root cause behind the practice of slavery, but the expediency of the situation created by the group of freedmen in Virginia that led to the augmentation of the rights of the Englishmen at the cost of the rights of the Africans. A parallel is also drawn with the situation in England when ideals of freedom and equality were gaining ground simultaneously with the suppression of rights of the Irish. In Seventeenth century America too, the rise of liberty and equality was accompanied with the rise in slavery. The author floats the notion that greater freedom for some members of a society always came at the expense of restriction of freedom for other members of the same society as in the case of the blacks of America, or other societies as in the case of the Irish.

Whether the maintenance of this balance leads to the social construction of notions of race and racism is left to the reader's conjecture, however, it becomes clearly evident it was not race and racism that preceded social, political and economic contingencies but social, political and economic contingencies that preceded race and racism. Once construed, the impact of

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the concepts of race and racism had a rapidly multiplying effect within the human mind resulting in a vicious cycle of spin-offs. To Hitler it was clear that race was non-existent as a physical and scientific entity. Yet he deliberately took advantage of the idea of race to rebuild Germany “ not on historical but racial grounds. ” (Shanklin 100) It finally comes down to how people are influenced by the false notion of racism. The case of the Piltdown man illustrates how even the best of scientific minds are inclined to believe what they want to believe, in this case that the origin of the human race could be traced to Europe.

More often than not scientists are misguided by their own preconceptions even at the face of hard evidence. Similarly, in matters of racial prejudices too, people essentially believe what they want to believe. Shanklin’s hypothesis centers on what she puts in Anais Nin’s words as, “ We don’t see things as they are, we see things as we are. ” (Shanklin 100) The same approach to racial perceptions is evident in the various examples of racism that are found all over the world.

Things work much the same way in Jena, Louisiana even today (Thompson). The white and the black community stay in well-defined separate quarters, aging white women still call grown-up black men ‘ boy’. The only apparent racial distinction is in the color of their skins, but the real racism runs deep in the social milieu. The local ministers from both the communities in Jena are engaged in an effort wipe out the racial hatred from the minds and hearts of the new generation.

Their effort is to make them see things as they are - without the tint of racial prejudice. Similar examples of the social permeability of notions of race and racism are evident poll conducted by CNN. com which found that “ most Americans, white and black, see racism as a lingering problem in the United States, and many say they know people who are racist... But few Americans of either race — about one out of eight — consider themselves racist. ” It is the way racism infiltrates the mind. Shanklin’s on race as a social category and not a biological fact stands well augmented.