

Racism in breath, eyes, memory

[Experience](#), [Memories](#)



The focal point of this paper is to evaluate and analyze the aspects of racism and racial discrimination in Edwidge Danticat's *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, published by Vintage in May 18, 1998. This is the story of discrimination that details the life of a black immigrant girl. It would be narrated and discussed in the paper the basic aspects of racism and the elements that are investigated and represented in the text by the author. Thus it becomes mandatory to understand the different aspects of racial discrimination in view of the story and beyond.

It can be stated that in this text the Haitian culture is narrated in a sensitive and insightful new voice where the narrator Sophie mentions that " I come from a place where breath, eyes and memory are one, a place where you carry your past like the hair on your head". (Danticat, 34) The parameters of life are well developed with the arrival into a new land, the US. Here in the story we find the author's view of this new culture is realized and exhaled in the alignment of the existing menace of racial discrimination.

This is also a story where a girl under difficult circumstances moves into adulthood to distinguish between freedom and discrimination. It can well be stated that a completely color blind society is what that is most welcomed in a democratic form of government but despite every sort of constitutional rights and social enigma the curse of racism continues to dominate even the most developed and civilized states of the world. This racism is not only confined within the socio- economically backward section of the population but has crept into various strata of the society and institutions, no matter private or public, are no exceptions.

The parameters of racism states that humans are separated into various groups in the belief that some people are superior because they belong to a particular ethnic or national group. It could be summarized that racism is the result of having negative judgments, beliefs, and feelings towards certain identifiable groups. (Bell, 271-3) This is clearly seen in the text time and again. However, the book starts off with a wonderful solace and tranquility where we find Sophie in a calm environment where “ a flattened and drying daffodil was dangling off the little card that I had made my aunt Atie for Mother's Day”.

(Danticat, 3) But soon it was found that as soon as the motherless child moved to US to live with her mother after 12 years she found that life was much different and her skin color was to be blamed for that. Sexual abuse and rape came as an evident menace of the community and hardships were all along the line. Economic invalidity was a fact that each member of the community lived and this was more unbearable with the oppressed community being discriminated in the social context.

If we look closely enough, we would find that during the 19th and the early part of 20th century it was the times of building, developing and sustaining a huge empire, later known as colonies, by the major players of the European politics. It should also be noted that this period, the 19th and the early part of 20th century, was also the fallout period of the essence of industrial revolution. Industrial revolution freed the entrepreneurs from the usual bondage of traditional economy and for the general it was the time for a new social bondage free from the earlier pseudo- feudal economic system.

But all these developments also brought in new learning and new ideologies where ideas of human rights occupied a major role and were easy to come by with its influence. In this context and social structure it would have been very hard to digest the ideals of imperial expansions through the method of brutal strength. (Dollard, 116-7) This hard pill of 'colonialism with brutality' needed some spooning with sweetness to become a favorable aromatic digestible element for the general people of the imperial states.

As a result this phrase 'white man's burden' came into existence as a remedy to the enlightens of the industrial revolution and people were ready to buy this theory as this theory easily softened the guilt feeling of the educated class and apparently justified the brutal acts and decisions taken to control and cover the colonial agitations. It is not that the leaders of men and the men of their leaders never knew what was really going wrong in these colonies but kept both eyes blind towards these acts.

This is because all of them and all the way they knew everything they did and everything they knew about the colonies were either immoral or tampered to the extent of fallacy but could never digest the fact as it was too decadent for their psyche. (Border, 375) As for in the sector of employment it has been seen time and again that there is a system working as an open secret that discriminate colored or immigrants with job opportunity and salary. This discrimination is based on not only color or political distinction but also is depended upon other factors like class, creed, cast, religion, sex and even ideology.

The sufferings of Sophie as a part of this backward class were the result of all these culminations. But hope lived on as ever. This aspect of hope is well

placed in the story in the metaphor of lottery tickets that Sophie's aunt use to buy without ever gaining anything. According to Sophie " She said that lottery was like love. Providence was not with her but she was patient. " (Danticat, 6) However, it should be mentioned that all the sufferings and everything that has been stated above is a part of an ideology that the racist believe to be of ultimate truth.

Of course, people acting as a racist never consider themselves a racist as this idea of racism generally stands as a contrast with the idea of democracy but deep inside each of these individuals know that racism exists. All these members of the society, a cross section of every class and morality, exist in the most democratic format of state and a member of the state they contribute their portion of racist feeling to the society and the white characters in the story hardly feels anything special about their deed or any special essence that they were actually doing any wrong.

It was more like their system. (Brundage, 145-7) This goes through a snowball effect of which the ultimate result comes out as a cumulative act of racist behavior. This is the prime reason of Institutional Racism and the above stated facts are its impact on education, employment and health. It should be remembered that no one person could be treated or marked as a racist but the society, or better say sociological impacts, shape each of them to this finishing line. It must be stated in this context that the greatest racist in history Adolph Hitler did exactly that.

He incorporated racism within the cross section of the German mass against the Jews through various methods like using media to his benefit and through overwhelming oratory. His views as a racist seeped into the general German

mass that ultimately helped him to perform the notorious genocide killing 5 million Jews. The idea of racial discrimination through methodical racial institutionalization of education, employment and health was put into the ultimate practice with fearful results. (Cunningham, 24-5)

Like Sophie's aunt, and the essence of the story, we are also part of a dream of the cohesive community that exhibits some basic features. Firstly, such a community has a common aspiration, which is shared by all the citizens of the community. As a result, each member feels as much a part of it as the other. Secondly, despite the common vision a cohesive community continues to respect the unique character of all the sub-communities and each individual member. Thirdly, a cohesive community allows equal opportunities to everybody.

Lastly, it should be mentioned that in a cohesive community strong interpersonal bonds are formed, even between individuals with dissimilar backgrounds, in social settings such as the neighbourhood, schools, colleges and offices. For long, people have dreamt of a society that contains no bar on the basis of being different from the main stream. But ultimately, it has been found that a dream like this is no more than a fallacy and this dream of a colorblind society has been proved to be a patch of utopia. (Dos, 47-48)

Works Cited: Danticat, Edwidge; *Breath, Eyes, Memory*; New York: Vintage; May 18, 1998

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