

**Accolades of Tragic Past and Glimpses of Glorious Future – Reflections
on the Works of Virginia Hamilton**

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Abstract:

In the words of Virginia Hamilton herself, "I see my books and the language. I use in them as empowering me to give utterance to the dreams, the wishes of African Americans. I see the imaginative use of language and ideas as a way to illuminate a human condition ... I've attempted to mark the history and tradition of African Americans, a parallel culture people, through my writing". (Virginia Hamilton's homepage). Her realistic novels depicted vital social issues as well as manners and morals. They envisioned the past through the lens of a turbulent present. The paper highlights the reflections of tragic past in a lucid way in her works.

Keywords: Hamilton, culture, African-American, social issues, morals

Introduction:

Ethos has been defined as the characteristic spirit, prevalent tone of sentiment of a people or community (Oxford Dictionary). Ethos does not focus on individualism, but on the expression of society's values through the individual. Against this backdrop, we view Virginia Hamilton, the Afro- American writer. In her creations we do not see the prevalence of the personal opinion of the author, we see only a faithful portrayal of the ethos of a community, a community which was enslaved, bonded, sold and even left to die- a community that revolted against the injustice through escape, revolt or suicide. This is a reflection of the ethos of a people that faced subjugation for decades before being released, accepted as equals and has now been elevated to the highest office in that same society.

A history of suffering has left an indelible mark in the psyche of the Afro-American, which is reflected in their writings. Slavery has left a legacy of attitudes long after the institution of slavery itself has been destroyed. "One of the most important legacies is an insight into human race, the terrible consequences of unbridled power as well as the inherent limitations of power as a means of accomplishing goals at any cost. Perhaps the most important moral legacy is a keener appreciation of freedom" (Sowell, 223).

The growth of American writing in the post war period has been affected by sharply depicted polarizations. Post War US culture has forged dynamic new fusions and combinations. The works produced reflect a feisty engagement with American life. The ensuing new fusions have produced cross-disciplinary approaches to art and literature. The writers have become more involved in black consciousness, folk traditions and an African heritage. Afro- American writing has emerged as a diverse art fluent over a variety of literary forms. Its writers have claimed through mastery of narrative form a place and voice in world literature, a role underscored by the awarding of the 1993 Nobel Prize for literature to Toni Morrison. We see a marked emphasis on nationalism, hopes of a regional federation, feelings of anti-colonialism, and an interest in local culture.

Hamilton was named after the place where she was born so that she never forgot her roots. This in itself is proof of the deep rooted love for tradition and culture that her family stood for and the love for the land that they called as their own. Hamilton grew up listening to stories of freedom and hard work. The experiences she had while growing up on a farm influenced what she would write about years later. Hamilton says that she has incorporated life as it was described to her by those around her- her close family and the African- American families of the area. Black families were put to a lot of hardship during and immediately after the slavery period. They had to share the little that was available and poverty was a way of life. This is a recurring motif in most of Hamilton's novels. In the Bells of Christmas each family member is seen contributing their share to the family. Other themes are inclusion and exclusion- wherein we see the African American as a full fledged citizen of the country but who still feels strangely an outsider in some ways- a throwback to the slavery times. Hamilton has boldly experimented with themes such as environmental issues (M.C. Higgins The Great). Race and gender issues are portrayed in works like Zeely and The Magical Adventures of Pretty Pearl.

She has several firsts to her credit. "She was the first to write of a modern African American trickster in Jahdu books (1969) the first African American myth of ancestral origins as seen in The Magical Adventures of Pretty Pearl, the first to write an African- American children's novel based on slave history The house of Dies Drear (1970) the first to capture the homelessness in African American children's novels in The Planet of Junior (1974) and the first author to examine inter racial dating among teenagers in A White Romance (1987)." (Maisha Johnson, 2002)

In the All Jahdu Story book (1991), the hero is not based on any particular tradition but is a typical trickster one meets in all traditional lore. There is a juxtaposition of the traditional and the modern. Hamilton sees the third generation Afro-American as one such person- one who still takes pride in all that is part of their native African culture and at the same time dreaming the great American dream.

Many stories are reminiscences of the stories told by her parents who were great story tellers. Her Mr. Titman is similar to Rumpel stilt skin and there is her story of a girl who spun gold similar to Hans Anderson's story of the same theme. Her language is not wholly American especially in the dialogues of the characters - her characters sometimes speak with a distinct West Indian accent.

African culture is rich in folklore and Hamilton combines this with the historical background of the revolt and escape from slavery. This is amply seen in Her Stories: African American Folk Tales, Fairy tales and True Tales (1995). Her Many Thousand Gone: African Americans from slavery to freedom (1993) poignantly recounts the trials and travails of the slave community. This book narrates the true life stories of the slave trade, the runaway slaves, and their freedom from bondage. It mentioned several of the people who really helped the slaves escape through the Underground Railroad. Some of them are stark and harsh in their portrayal especially Exodus to Freedom, which tells the tragic attempt of a woman to escape with her family and her subsequent capture. The woman kills her daughter rather than let her be enslaved in a life worse than death. Such and many other stories tell of a history of bondage, untold suffering and innumerable deaths which like the unsung hero has to be commemorated and so that such atrocities against fellow human s does not recur in any future period in history. Her grandfather Levi used to say" Listen children and I will tell you how I ran away from slavery, so you'll know never to let bondage happen to you". Hamilton felt compelled to write, not to influence but to inform. She did not mean to criticize or voice an opinion- she only told her stories as it was related to her and added to it her rich imagination. Writing was her way of "exploring the known, the remembered, and the imagined, the literary triad of which all stories are made" (Hamilton).

Zeely (1967) was first published as a short story and later made into a novel. It tells the story of an imaginative girl who believed herself to be a queen. Her duality teaches her a great deal about herself. This book was a frontrunner in that it broke away from the usual fiction written about blacks. The usual custom was to portray blacks as impoverished or problem children. Her book helped to launch the modern era of African-American children's literature. In Zeely, we see the pride, self-knowledge and dignity of Ham it on herself. We can also see the search for identity within every black - a search for moorings. Hamilton considers her Magical Adventures of Pretty Pearl as her magnum opus, as it truly reflected the African American literary tradition and folklore. She can be likened to Toni Morrison and Alice Walker in elevating her folk roots to meet the high imagination of young children.

In M.C.Higgins, Hamilton reveals the hopelessness and the hope that are paradoxically juxtaposed in a generation - a generation that wanted to hold on to their

glorious past though tainted with tragedy and a hope for a glorious future. The People Could Fly: Black American Folktales (1985) contain real life accounts of slaves who rowed across the Ohio river to escape from slavery. A deep rooted love for family and commitment to familial tie runs through her works. This is seen in the abundance of characters that crowd her stories- we have uncles and aunts, grandparents and grandchildren. Hamilton's parents passed on their culture, heritage and pride in their history through their stories - a culture that she was proud to pass on to future generations through her own narratives. Woven into her books is a deep concern for memory, with tradition and with generational legacy.

Hamilton has diverged from the conventional in her approach and language. She has innovatively explored characters and a narrative style which has been both appreciated and faulted. A personal strength and pride marks her creations - a throwback to her parents who instilled in her a feel for family and history.

Virginia Hamilton's novels explore the problems of mixed blood and the presence of different races and cultures in the US. She had anticipated themes and subject matter that have continued to be treated by later authors. In the literature of her times we see "an emphasis on local colour and landscape, social realism which was felt to be more nationalistic, a protest tradition, the exploration of a divided cultural heritage, the discovery of how to treat regional subject matter more poetically and artistically, and a contemporary literature which is both local in its particularities and in tune with modern writing elsewhere (King, 1979). The growth and prominence of ethnic literature is one of the remarkable features of post-war American writing. These literatures unite the historical and the mythic. New names have been given to these literatures- 'post-ethnicity', and 'cosmopolitanism'. Reflecting the growth and vision of a group of scholars and writers committed to more inclusive and flexible ethnic discourse, a new sense of universalism based on shared experiences has emerged. It is a society in transformation maintaining its stability in spite of the multi-ethnic society that America has become.

Virginia Hamilton who has been called the Toni Morrison of children's literature, has been conferred several awards which include the Newbury Honor awards, the Newbery Medal, Three Globe-Horn Book Awards, The Regina Medal, the Edgar Allen Poe Award, The Laura Ingalls Wilder Award for Lifetime Achievement, The National Book Award, The Coretta Scott King Award, The Hans Christian Anderson Award, The Lewis Carroll Shelf Award, and honorary doctorates. She was the first children's author to receive the prestigious MacArthur Prize Fellowship. The Virginia Hamilton Conference focuses on multicultural literature for children and young adults. The conference true to the spirit of Hamilton promotes cultural awareness, and cultural pride. Virginia Hamilton died in 2002, yet her legacy lives on through her stories of triumph over tragedy.

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