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# Dionne Brand and Dialectical Materialism: A Marxian Reading of her Fiction

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## ABSTRACT

Dionne Brand deals with the issues confronted by men and women and children of the Black community being not only as members of the proletarian class, but also because of belonging to the Black race. Right from the sufferings of the Blacks during slavery down through the periods of feudalism, early capitalism, the colonial period, the neo-colonial period and also globalization-ruling currency are subject matter in her works. As a member of the Black community, she is committed to the task of unravelling the exploitative past and present of her people. She does it with panache and power.

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## Introduction

As a progressive and studied writer, Dionne Brand takes into her hand the responsibility of dealing with all the issues confronted by men and women and children of the Black community being not only the members of the proletarian class, but also because of belonging to the Black race. Right from the sufferings of the Blacks during slavery down through the periods of feudalism, early capitalism, the colonial period, the neo-colonial period and also globalization-ruling currency are subject matter in her works. As a member of the Black community, she is committed to the task of unravelling the exploitative past and present of her people. She does it with panache and power.

Dionne Brand more than succeeds in her characteristic way in sensitising about multitudes of problems faced by her beloved people. She is not only race-conscious, but also very class-conscious about her role as an educated representative of her people. She has taken a definite Marxian stand to view the whole scenario of the Black subjugation for being coloured and the underprivileged. The Marxian dialectical methodology has given the clearest view possible over the whole state of things. This dialectical materialist approach can be seen pervading although her minor and major works. It not only does give her works the authenticity they exhibit, but also it does impart the optimism and strength of will for her community to stand as a single man, chests drawn and heads held high in their struggle for a better future when they shall be sounded as normal men and women. Dionne Brand is exposing a progressive and futuristic soul in her works. Her characters inspire respectability and compassion. They do not seem to be perturbed at the end of the day. They are confident that they have the will power of their ancestry inside them to enable them to fight their enemy once they shove away all the negativities and difference. Brand's books declare that the fight is on for the Black for their emancipation. The characters

of Dionne Brand exude different type and levels of spiritual powers. Once all these powers are concentrated in the phalanx of the whole Black race, their emancipation of becoming proud members of the postmodern times is not far away. Dionne Brand is projecting such a message to her readers.

Dionne Brand portrays her characters as always struggling against the inequalities and disparities they face in the society. There is always a dialectics active in every life situations of her characters and that is presented by the author overtly or covertly. At times it is between the haves and the have-nots, and another time between the ruled and the rulers, and some other time, between the colonized and the colonizers. The dialectics is visible in her works in myriads of ways. During the period of slavery, it was between the slaves and slave masters. There are many characters who are portrayed to belong to this period of persecution. The woman folk of the Blacks is depicted to be suffering the most here. When it comes to colonization and indenture labour also, these Black people were at the receiving ends of sufferings. Now, during the postcolonial days, again the same people are being exploited by one or another of capitalist devices in order to mint money for them. Thus, all through the history that Dionne Brand tries to drive into the heads of the readers, the history that has always been ignored, and if presented, only in intrigued ways, we can see mainly two groups of people: the ruled and the ruler, or the colonized and the colonizers.

The dialectics between the Whites and the Blacks does not cease to be within the boundaries of colour issues. It primarily stems from the dichotomy between the classes. The Black people have been invaded by the Whites not to establish any colour superiority, but for the purpose of establishing European colonies over the Blacks to ply trades. The Europeans usurped and colonized the territories of the less powerful countries all over the world not for their culture to be expanded, but it was only for creating sources of varied

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resources including man power. Thus, in a close examination of things that factored into the racial issues, the class dichotomy is what always arrived at finally.

Dionne Brand also does not fail to see this dichotomy. She also concludes that it is not their colour or race that creates problems for the Blacks, but it is the capital. She declares capitalist system as the finally targeted enemy and reason for all the issues of the Black people. In her conversation with Christian Olbey, she admits that she is a Marxist, and says, “guess that all my protagonists in the novels and the short stories at least, have been working class people because, first, that’s who I know, and, second, that’s who I’m interested in” (95). Thus, whenever Dionne Brand gives pictures of the Black people suffering, be it on account of slavery, racial discrimination or globalization, she means to register the sufferings of the people under the domineering capitalism which has been assuming various forms according to the respective social matrix. The history of struggles of the Black people against imperialism that has been given birth to by the exported capital is the subject matter of Dionne Brand’s novels and stories. The capital has assumed various roles in order to invade the territory of the less powerful. When the homeland of the Blacks is invaded, they normally react in an aggressive way. Whites call it antinational rebellions. Rosa always curses such insurgencies as all other Whites do. She represents the view point of majority of people which need not be factual always. Dionne Brand describes the situation as follows:

It is that face that Rosa used cursing those “Sons of bitches in the bush,” when the trouble started. “When the trouble started.” Indeed. These European sons of bitches always say “when the trouble started when their life in the colonies begins to get miserable. (101)

The novel “In Another Place, Not Here” also presents the class struggle. Whereas Elizete stands as a symbol of oppression and slavery served upon the working class by the slave masters, Isaiah represents the whole of persecutors and exploiters. Isaiah takes advantages of Elizete in every way possible. She is compelled to work regularly in the cane plantation during day hours and in night she is sexually exploited. Elizete says, “I born to clean Isaiah’ house and work cane since I was a child and say what you want Isaiah feed me and all I have to do is lay down under him in the night and work the cane in the day” (4). The conditions of the slaves in the sugar cane plantations are narrated in the novel. Isaiah the slave master meted out the worst of punitive measures to the ones who tried to run away from the plantations. Elizete always dreams to steal herself away to Aurba or Maracaibo where, people said, life is freer.

Brand’s leftist views are manifested through the character Verila of the novel. Verila’s association with Elizete and the workers of the plantation is meant to bring about a change in the course of the slavish life of the workers. She exhorts the workers to protest against the ongoing system of slavery and of exploitation. To start with, Elizete considers the ideologies of Verila an utter bunkum as she feels a revolution is impossible, “They tell me she is for the revo, that she is for taking all the land and giving it to people who work it all their life. Revolution, my ass. Let foolish old people believe she” (13).

Dionne Brand’s revolutionary concepts are well-delivered through the words and deeds of Verila and Elizete. Brand’s ability to see through the camouflage of divisions of colour the division of class has to be appreciated.

Verila is out and out a revolutionary. She wants to bring about changes in the life situations of the working class. The author seems to want the revolutionary moments of 1980s and 1990s recorded historically through Verila. The influence of Marxism during the period has been sustaining such moments of revolutionary uprisings against the exploitative system. In the interview Brand clarifies on the intentions behind her depiction of Verila as inclined to Marxian concepts, “I thought I needed to preserve that moment in Verila, because that is a kind of forgetfulness that capitalism produces once it’s scooped up all these things and thrown them off, even though it leeches from those movements” (92).

The working class consciousness of Dionne Brand is again manifested through the words of speaker of the meeting that Verila attends. The long passage of his speech clarifies the doubts of the members assembled there. His words help the listeners unveil in the Black-White dichotomy the underlying proletariat-bourgeois dichotomy. The speaker elaborates on how both the racial and class based discrimination are interwoven and thus make people unable to see them as two separate entities. Describing the purposes and targets of the revolution they all stand for, he forewarns the members of the movement not to mistake with the root cause of their problems:

Don’t be mistaken – we are not fighting for White folks to like us, we are not fighting to sit beside them in restaurants and buses, we are not fighting for mere equality with white people – we are fighting for liberation and liberation is none of these things. (169)

Brand’s egalitarian principles are vehemently presented in the words of the speaker. He points out the basic reasons for the sufferings of the Black people. According to him it is not their colour that opens the Pandora’s Box for the Blacks, but it is the “backward capitalism”. The speaker is more accurate in his analysis of affairs. Very touchingly he reveals the most truthful fact to the members. He says:

Are you tired of getting up in the morning with that ache in your back like you’re lifting a load but you don’t know what that load is? Are you tired of walking out in the streets every morning feeling as if your life, your Black life and your Black self are just worthless? Are you tired of trying to do the best you can, following all their rules just like they told you and getting nowhere? That’s not you brothers and sisters, that is the brutal ongoing system on your back. This backward capitalist system wasn’t made for the benefit of the Black people, it was made to exploit us, wring the life blood out us and eventually kill us. (169)

These words can be taken as the most inspiring words the Black people can ever listen to. Dionne Brand has succeeded in imbibing her own politics begotten from her knowledge of the long cline of misery and history of the Black people she delved into with the most realistic and truistic philosophy regarding the proletariat. During the conversation with Christian Olbey, Brand seems to be very proud to associate herself with the Marxian point of view that she has adopted to see into history of the Black people. She says:

I certainly know that Marxism has had an influence on my writing in the sense that it influenced my thinking. Marxism was the only way I could find to describe the layered condition that I lived, or that Black folks in the West lived, and it was the most interesting way of coming at these experiences for me. (96)

Dionne Brand’s class consciousness is seen to have laced all through her novels and short stories.

Her leftist perspective is what helps her unearth the intricacies of the issues of gender, race and class. By bringing the dialectical approach to such mistakable situations, she has succeeded in bring forth the class dichotomy as the origin and cause of all inequalities and discriminations. Analysis of her novels and short stories with this perspective prove that her viewpoints to be right and only the appropriation of such dichotomies only shall bring betterment in the socio-political and economical well being of the Blacks in particular and all human beings in general.

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