

**The American City and the African Americans in Paul Laurence Dunbar's
'The Sport of the Gods'**

Sabyasachi Gayen, M.Phil Scholar
African American Literature
Department of English
University of Delhi
sabyasachigayen@gmail.com

Abstract

African American novelist Paul Laurence Dunbar's classic 'The Sport of the God' has been scrutinized in the context of the American cities in this paper. It explores the relation between the African American community and the American city. The paper examines the typical African American life and the American city culture. Although this novel is a part of plantation literature but this paper specially focuses on the city life of the African Americans of the then period which is itself a different initiative. Here it is focused that the African American life is not much different to that of plantation life in the city but American city has taken its own course in the typical African American life.

Keywords: City, Plantation, Ghettos, Labourer, Civilization etc.

American cities are the cynosure of the civilization and prosperity of the country of the United States of America where such ethnic group like African Americans have largely contributed to its formation but the condition of these people are not up to the mark as they have been living in the ghettos of the cities. The African American city life is ironically and strictly restricted within some non-rigid social codes.

The American cities are built according to the hardcore desire of the nation and such nation like the United States of America where the immigrants from all over of the world come to fulfil their dream would like to depend too much upon the cities. The cities may be recognized as the heart or the centre of prosperity in such hardcore capitalist country like America where business, trade, commerce have strongly influenced the society and its norms. The cities are built in America in

course of time. The plantations and the colonies are responsible for the society which is completely based on the city culture. First of all the Europeans came here to build their colonies. Almost all the leading colonizer European countries who were looking for the prosperity and wealth arrived here in America and constructed colonies. When Christopher Colombus arrived here he arrived first of all there where we call today Bahamas Island. So the European countries became interested and they started to send their various commercial companies here in this part of the world. There was certainly a race among the colonizers of building and establishing the respective colonies. The soil of America had been proved to be such a place where none of the colonizer European countries could establish a single and invincible colonies and dominate other colonies. All of them got equal soil to make their fortune besides the colonies were made not only to build empire but also set up the new habitation for the Europeans. The various European countries were looking for a different habitation because of the unstable life in their own country. Irish people for example came here for their new habitation because their potato crops were badly spoilt. So the Europeans came and established the colonies for their habitation. They required to build the places from where they could avail the facility of transport for the purpose of their commercial activities. So they selected the coastal area and most of the American cities were built in the coastal area for that reason. As soon as the colonies were getting prosperity they smacked a sign of new civilization in this newly discovered country. So they started to build the cities. They brought a large number of African people through the 'Middle Passage' of the Atlantic ocean in order to use them as the labourer to build the cities. These African people were also previously brought from various parts of the African countries in those European colonies and the plantations to use them as slaves. The American cities required more labour for its complete formation. These African black people had been struggling as the slaves. Harriet Beecher Stowe in her novel 'Uncle Tom's Cabin' has exhibited this cruel picture of American slavery. These slaves had not been proved to be enough for these European settlers to form or construct the cities in the nation of the United States of America. So they brought more African people. The fate of those African people had been transformed from slavery to the labourer of the cities. On the other hand, the Europeans were building the cities following the port of the American coast in course of time throughout the entire era. The construction of the city of New York for example has had a similar history to that more or less other American cities. In fact, the idea of building this city came in the mind of the officers of a Dutch trade company called 'Dutch West Indies Company'. They imported Africans through the 'Middle Passage' in the 17th century to build a new city called New York besides a large number of the African slaves migrated here from the southern part of the

country during the period of 'Great Migration'. They took a great participation in building this city specially through their hard labour. The emancipation of this community has been carried on in course of the time. They become the most suppressed ethnic groups in this country and some of them have migrated much later than the African Americans. One of the leading characteristics of the American cities is the habitation for the ethnic group which is so called 'Ghetto' and the leading ethnic groups who accept this habitation are African Americans and the Jewish Americans. The most pathetic condition among these ghetto dwellers are of the African Americans who started their journey as the citizen of the nation of America through the identity of poor and labourer. The African American ghettos look like the slums according to the condition of their rooms of their homes in those ghettos. The novel 'Native Son' of Richard Wright has given a vivid picture of that ghetto in its initial chapter in which the protagonist Bigger Thomas lives with his family. It is the setting of the city of New York where these African American community have contributed their all hard labour and toil. Besides this novel has explored the hidden and harsh reality of the city of New York and the pathetic condition of the African American citizens of the city concerned. The condition of these African American community in such city like New York remains the same in catastrophic position until the Harlem Renaissance occurs in the city of New York. Harlem Renaissance is a hallmark movement in the history of African American society and its culture. It is a sort of explosion of the expression of African Americans emotion, intellectuality and invincible talent of the black people. This movement has certainly given a different status and dimension to the African American community as it is a revolution of black culture and art which influences the American society in that modern age. It is certainly a terrible blow to the bulwark of the conventional thoughts or ideas about the African American community but this glorious movement and its effect seem to be restricted somehow within the single segment of the African American society and that society is of course bourgeois or higher class elite African American community because the emancipation of the middle and lower class African American still goes on even in post modern African American era. The two texts for example 'Native Son' of Richard Wright and 'A Raisin in the Sun' a play of Lorraine Hansberry explore the condition of the African American community. Walter Lee Younger of 'A Raisin in the Sun' is a middle class African Americans who is looking for a standard and prosperous life. The African American look for a standard life according to their class. The American society has not been able to give all and fulfil the requirements at this juncture of modern and post-modern era of the American society. The aspirations of the African Americans are upgraded in course of the time and that is what has influenced the entire life of the African American community specially

the middle and lower class of that community concerned. This aspiration have come out of the unconscious demand of the remuneration for whatever they have done in the city. In the age of mid fifties decade , this community looks for prosperity and better life along with the all American citizens and imagines the cities as the centre of fulfilling their dream.

The condition of the African Americans in American city and their contribution of a new American civilization in the fresco of city through its landscape are initially portrayed in the early African American novels of the decades between 18th and 19th century. One of the leading novelists of this genre is Paul Laurence Dunbar for his epoch-making African American urban novel ‘The Sport of the Gods’ published in the year 1902. It has its partial setting in the city of New York. What may be generally expected from the early and initial urban novel which deal with African American issues are very artistically and skilfully used as the vital elements by the novelist Paul Laurence Dunbar. He maintains a wonderful balance between the two lives in the plantation of his master Maurice Oakley and in the city of New York of the protagonist Berry Hamilton. His excellent artistic skill to deal with the historical perspectives of the formation of American city of New York and its relation with the African American community may be recognized here in this novel. A dense observation of this novel reveals that the colonies and the plantations indicate a stark new American civilization by its transformation into the city through the journey of Berry Hamilton from that Oakley house to the city of New York. Lucinda L. Mackethan says in her essay called “Plantation Fiction, 1865-1900 that Paul Laurence Dunbar is successful to adapt conventional demands of plantation literature. This novel has successfully exposed the pathetic and real caricature of that new American civilization besides the novelist Paul Laurence Dunbar has successfully sketched the initial and early condition of the African American community in the fertile soil of the new dawn of American civilization and its vast prosperity through the beginning of a new era. The condition of the African American community remains same as the nation of America seems to trail back along with its so called civilization. This unusual retreat of the new American civilization seems to have been unconsciously initiated in course of the time by raising a serious threat for the American society and its growth and prosperity. The character of Berry Hamilton has undergone the conventional and terrible experience of emancipation and humiliation in both of his plantation and city life. In the house of Maurice Oakley , he works as a butler. It is certainly a successful attempt of Paul Laurence Dunbar to portray a poor and hardworking African American man and it is a very conventional sketch of an African Americans. The accusation of Maurice Oakley to Berry Hamilton of stealing the money is a part of the common action of a white American for an African

Americans. A glorious portrait of the fate and destiny by the novelist Paul Laurence Dunbar is certainly a skilful art of narrative technique in which the incidents and episodes are constructed in such a way that may inaugurate the threshold of another plot which relates the life of Berry Hamilton in the city of New York. The novelist has successfully sketched the true historical fact of the condition of the African American people in the soil of America. The novel has given a vivid picture of the transformation of the society and the birth of a new American civilization through the character of Berry Hamilton. His sentence of hard labour in the city of New York where he has been deployed has started his city life as an African American. It is obviously a grand success of the novelist who has drawn the realistic picture of the role of the African American people in the construction of the American city. The hard labour of Berry Hamilton as the penalty of such a crime which he has not done is a part of the plot of this novel which highlights the social norms or we may call a code of law and order particularly for the African American people. The novelist has here indicated a serious question which seems to be raised in front of the united and secular American society and its dream which is yet to be fulfilled. The art of the narrative technique of novelist Paul Laurence Dunbar to show the exploitation of Berry Hamilton suggests the two settings in the novel, the house of Maurice Oakley and the city of New York. This art of narrative technique has employed an ironical role of the society and the destiny which lead the extreme suffering of Berry Hamilton. His conviction as a thief in the house of Maurice Oakley in his plantation, the adversity and pathetic condition in his personal life as well as his entire family in the city of New York have set an excellent social tragedy in modern America by glorifying the reality of American society. The repulsive attitude of two social discourses, the growth of American civilization through the existence of American cities and the condition of the African Americans in course of that growth of that civilization has been very artistically and skilfully explored in this novel through the character of Berry Hamilton. He has been victimized by the unconscious and non-rigid social norms by which the fate and the destiny play role in the entire life of Berry Hamilton. Here the tragedy of Berry Hamilton is not naturally brought by the natural circumstances which are created by his fate and destiny but this is absolutely conscious or unconscious phallacy of human social norms which determine the dangerous prejudice about the community of African Americans. So the catharsis here is or seems to be more than Greek by its flavour. The character of Mr. Skaggs is one of the most vital character who supposes to be the embodiment of an ideal American citizen as he takes the initiative to exonerate Berry Hamilton. The novelist seems to have delineated the bitterness of harsh reality of the African American life in the city. Sharon L. Stone says "Writing both within and against the sentimental

tradition of nineteenth century African American writers such as Charles Chessnut and Paul Laurence Dunbar sought to challenge and transform earlier stereotypical portrait of African American life.”. This character holds a very powerful position as a vital characteristic of American city as he is a writer of a magazine called ‘The Universe’ in New York. His social activity to take interest in the case of Berry Hamilton may be evaluated as a positive social and socio-cultural portrait which is sketched in hope of the existence of that new born American civilization. Here the novelist Paul Laurence Dunbar has carefully dealt with the racial issue as he shows that a white American exposes another one to help a black American earn justice which the American citizen Berry Hamilton deserves. Mr. Skaggs is such a character who has given a strong blow to that prejudice which is inhabited into the unconscious state of the gentle and elite class of white American citizen. Maurice Oakley has hidden the letter of his brother Francis Oakley which may prove Berry Hamilton innocent. The novelist seems to have successfully highlighted the deep social problem through the psyche of the character of Maurice Oakley who supposes to save his ego and prestige. Mr. Skaggs has successfully given a blow exactly in this psyche of Maurice Oakley. The role of Mr. Skaggs has been carefully executed by the novelist Paul Laurence Dunbar who has successfully juxtaposed the social prestige and ego as a white American through the character of Maurice Oakley and the justice for the black American Berry Hamilton. So the role of Mr. Skaggs is not just applied to give a touch of the comedy from tragedy but to deal with a very serious issue relating to the prosperity of American society. So the conflict between Maurice Oakley and Mr. Skaggs has indicated the tension of the novelist to invite a grand social revolution in which the justice and rights will be available to each and every American citizen irrespective of their race and of course the colour of skin. The self realization of Maurice Oakley of his faults and mistakes and the repentance for that has proved that tension of the novelist. On the other hand, Mr. Skaggs has also successfully proved that as a representative of the American city of New York where Berry Hamilton has lost and gained everything of his life.

In the meantime, the novelist seems to have somehow demeaned the role of the protagonist Berry Hamilton in the life of New York which has influenced the life of his wife Fanny more. She has to move to this city after being expelled from their own house near the house of Maurice Oakley. The novelist has enlarged the life of Fanny in the landscape of American city, New York as an African American poor and helpless woman with her children. He has put her in front of the city of New York. The hard toil of Fanny Hamilton begins exactly from this point. The novelist has successfully started to explore the condition of an African American woman in the city of New York. The continuous struggle of Fanny in New York exhibits the

condition of the African American women in the initial stage of new era and civilization. Their fortune turns out to be worse in course of time. The utter frustration seems to cover or we should rather say engulf Fanny because of the condition of her children in the new habitation. The city of New York seems to provide all those unwanted circumstances through their human made destiny and fate which they are unable to cope up. The pathetic experiences of life of Fanny Hamilton have made her realize the ephemeral life which Fanny cannot simply handle. Her son seems to have been lost in the whirlwind of the city of New York and in its variety which entice her son Joe in disguise of Banner Club. The city of New York has certainly provided the opportunity for Fanny as her daughter Kitty has got a job of singer and dancer. In the meantime, the city of New York is exposed in front of Fanny with its characteristics. The life seems to be slipping away of her clutch as she has become frustrated by watching the condition of her son. Her realization of the truth that her son has become a killer or a hardcore criminal has completely broken her down. The conviction or the imprisonment of her only hope her only son has left her in utter destitute and frustration as their condition starts to degenerate. The novelist Paul Laurence Dunbar has been able to imagine the future of the African American community and specially the women in their city life and in such city like New York. Ann Petry in her novel 'The Street' written in the year 1940 exhibits the life of its protagonist Lutie Johnson. Both 'The Street' and 'The Sport of the Gods' have successfully evaluated that the life of the African American community in the landscape of city is badly subjected and suffocated in a specific and particular so called habitations like ghetto, slums, underworld, brothel and congested and low incomes which are not sufficient to lead at least a normal life. The creative nature of the city for the opportunity seems to be a type of social irony which city has offered in course of time to such people or the African American women like Fanny Hamilton and Lutie Johnson. The role of the African American in the socio-political events like civil war is very much notable. Both the novelists Paul Laurence Dunbar and Ann Petry have highlighted the life of different black women who have had a gap of at least four decades but possessed the same fortune. The city of New York of Paul Laurence Dunbar and 116th street at Harlem in New York remain in the same position instead of its wide gap and experiences of various African American social movements like Harlem Renaissance. The brutal domination of New York as an American city to Fanny has made her life more miserable as she is subjected to marry a wealthy person Mr. Gibson who supposes to be another change in the life of Fanny. It is certainly a great psychological pressure for a woman who has to accept an unknown man though she is not divorced from her previous husband who is also not dead. It is a sort of natural mental torture by her

fate and destiny led by the city of New York. 116th Harlem street has behaved with Lutie Johnson according to its conventional policy. The psychological pressure due to constant mental torture has been thrashed upon Fanny for which she breaks down she has been epitomized as an icon of African American female world. She is certainly a notable creation of the beginning of African American feministic discourse which seems to be a successful epistemology of American society. The utter emancipation and suffering of this character indicate a certain serious threat for the American society which celebrates its new birth or we should rather say rejuvenation under the canopy of modern civilization within the rapid growth of American cities. The novel 'The Sport of the Gods' explores the culture and society of the African Americans. The sufferings of the entire Hamilton family in this city has raised the serious questions for the existence of the city concerned through the society of those African Americans. These questions seem to have unfortunately focussed on a sharp distance between the city of New York which is or exists and which should have been or the nation of America dreams of. The African Americans and their future in the American cities specially in New York have been forecasted in this novel. The concern for them seems to engirdle in all around the construction of situations which circumnavigate around all the characters portrayed by Paul Laurence Dunbar. What he has foreseen through his novel is also expressed by Sister Souljah in her novel 'The Coldest Winter Ever' published in the year 1999. The protagonist Winter Santiago experiences a series of adversity from the very beginning of the novel. It is a kind of bildungsroman which undergoes a vivid picture of a black woman and her life in the city of New York where the children of Hamilton have also experienced the tough times of their life. Joe and Kitty are the example of the future of African Americans in the American city where there is hardly any healthy atmosphere for their survival and they are malnourished by the condition of their community there which is built up with the concept of new civilization to encapsulate the equal right for the basic fundamental requirements. The instability of those requirements in a consecutive process may be observed in the circumstances which both Joe and Kitty Hamilton are to encounter. The basic characteristics of the city of New York have led them a hallow future which seems to engulf the life of Winter Santiago as she is the victim of a caricature of African American society which is built upon the corpse of some dreams of that community in their new address in the city of New York where they arrive in hope of at least a minimum standard of living after tolerating and undergoing a series of adversity of their life. A devastated and torn African American social structure has been explored in this novel of Sister Souljah. An unhealthy standard of living Winter Santiago is forced to live as she arrives in her new home Bureau of Child Welfare in the city just as the work place of Joe and Kitty in 'The

Sport of the Gods'. On the other hand Sister Souljah explores the exploitation among the American African Americans in themselves in her novel in which the relation between Winter and Simone is the example of that. The ultimate consequence of Winter Santiago exhibits the death of certain dreams and life in the city of New York where Fanny experiences the same as she sees the condition of her children in the novel of Paul Laurence Dunbar. Really the city of New York has been proved to be a mere city by its physical development through the financial growth with the help of trade and commerce. It may be expected from an American city that it will certainly maintain a fair balance between commercial and social lives. The success of the commercial life may be recognized as it is one of the leading American cities in trade and commerce but it has somehow lacked its social life for its performance in dealing with the African American issues. The social life of the American city of New York needs to be improved here to maintain that balance for the great cause of the nation of America.

Works Cited:

- Dunbar , Paul Lawrence. *The Sport of the Gods*. Signet Classic, 2011.
- Fischer , Claude S. *Made In America : A Social History of America*. Chicago : University of Chicago Press , 2010.
- Mackethan , Lucinda H. "Plantation Fiction, 1865-1900". *The History of Southern Literature*, edited by Louis D. Rubin Jr. et al. Louisiana : Louisiana State University Press, 1985.
- Petry , Ann . *The Street* . Boston : Houghton Mifflin Company, 1946.
- Wright , Richard . *Native Son* . New York : HarperCollins, 1940.
- Souljah , Sister. *The Coldest Winter Ever*. New York : Simon and Schuster, 1999.
- Stone , Sharon L. *Rereading the Harlem Renaissance*. California : Greenwood Press , 2002.