



## An Exploration of Sexuality in Chester Himes's *A Rage In Harlem*

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Received 15 September, 2016; Accepted 06 October, 2016 © The author(s) 2016. Published with open access at [www.questjournals.org](http://www.questjournals.org)

**Abstract:** *Despite the rising status of African American literature, black authors have shared a common burden over time that of representing not only themselves but the African American race as well. Maintaining the position of what it means to be black in America allowed authors to establish an African American identity that transcended the individual. Chester Himes' role as a hard-boiled fiction writer has its roots far removed from the typical pulp and dime novel origins. Himes while searching for the meaning of life through the realities of human experience and dreams let out artistically the social relegate of American society for the black slaves. Chester Himes's A Rage in Harlem, the protagonist Jackson is the "square" who works for the local undertaker. This novel A Rage in Harlem expresses the sexual conflicts in different context. Himes novel contains uncritical portrayals of sexism. Himes excludes and distains comparable female experience of community.*

### I. INTRODUCTION

Definition of Sex as an animal function, which was unfortunately necessary for the male to maintain his health and power, the black woman's animalism fit well into the scheme of the division between mind and body, spirit and matter. Rooted in this particular image is the sense of sex as base, event of violent, and an act of domination rather than sharing. "The English word sex itself derived from terms indicating cutting, separation, division."(14)

Sex discrimination involves treating someone unfavorably because of that person's sex. It also can involve treating someone less favourably because of his or her connection with a organization or group that is generally associated with people of a certain sex. Discrimination against an individual because that person is transgender is discrimination because of sex in violation. According to the Gay Lesbian Almanac, The term "sexuality" is a Victorian invention "referring to the quality of being sexual or having a sex, possessing sexual powers or feelings, or being conscious of our preoccupation with sex".(4)

Black women novelist viewed the sexual abuse of black women by white men's attack on the integrity of the African American family and therefore, to the race's future. The horror of Hopkins convoluted and rambling twelve part tale *Of the Blood* is the brother sister incest that takes place because the young people involved are aware they have a parent in common a white man.

On the other hand, black women novelists protested against antimiscegenation laws in the novels. They charged that laws against interracial marriage had the effect of legal protection to thousands of women and their children. Because antimiscegenation statutes ruled such marriages illegal, the children born of such unions were illegitimate, thus increasing by the thousands those with in the African American group who were designated social outcasts and misfit.

Clearly Himes, in this brilliant, experimental novel, wants to distill the history of civilization into a struggle between sexual liberation of the principals in this allegorical drama is fated to collide not only with their own limitations but with social repressions and inhibitions. *A Case of Rape*, its characters are fated to have flimsy, self-conscious egos. They are 'exiles and aliens strangers' strange land and are mordantly self-conscious about race and sex. Himes uses his characters allegorically to discourse on these twin constituents of sex. Homosexuality appears as a troubling subtext at a few moments in the novel. "Negroes are never so beautiful and magical as when they do that gorgeous sublimation of the primitive African sex feeling." Claude Mc Kay, Banjo (41)

Chester Himes used sex in his most of the novels likes *If He Hollers Let Him*

*Go, Lonely Crusade, Blind Man With a Pistol, A Rage in Harlem, A Case of Rape, End of Primitive, Cast the First Stone, The Quality of Hurt and The Third Generation.* In Himes main purpose of exposing the violence and sex arising out of the discriminations imposed by the dominant white society had been well expounded in these novels through this novel gives the sex of African Americans and their sufferings.

Chester Himes's *A Rage in Harlem* was initially titled *La Reine des Pommes* (The Queen of Fools) and was the opening entry in what would become known as his Harlem Cycle. When it was first published in the United States in 1957, the book was called *For the Love of Imabelle*. Himes actually wanted to call it *The Five Cornered Square*. He went on to win the French Crime fiction prize, the Grand Prix de Literature Policiene in 1958 in the international category.

The novel begins with a guy named Jackson, who works for a local undertaker. He is borrowing money from his boss and then promptly losing it in a confidence trick set up by his beautiful but disloyal girlfriend Imabelle, and her common law husband, gang leader Slim, along with Slim's cronies. Annoyed and upset by this turn of events, Jackson approaches his money back. Together, the police partners try to track down the swindlers and save Jackson.

The level of violence portrayed in *A Rage in Harlem* is of varying degrees most of it in a dark way. For example, at one point Coffin Ed has acid thrown in his face... an act that changes his behavior from then on out. Grave Digger's response, when he realizes that he has one of Ed's attackers at the police station, is to commit an act both brutal and savage.

*A Rage in Harlem* is an urban police procedural like no other. It offers a high degree of violence. It delves into female sexuality in rather blatant fashion, which some readers might find unnerving. And gender roles are thrown into the plotting mix along with alcohol and drug abuse and varying ethnicities of some of the characters.

We're a wonderful goddamned race, I thought. Simpleminded, generous, sympathetic sons of bitches. We're sorry for everybody but ourselves, the worse the white folks treat us the more we love them. (*If He Hollers Let Him Go*, 1945).

It was followed by *Lonely Crusade* (1947) and *The Third Generation* (1954) are dealing with the themes of black bourgeois life or the American labor movement, interracial sex, and the psychological importance of the degree of blackness. *A Rage in Harlem* introduced two of Himes's most memorable characters, the hard-boiled black detective duo of Coffin Ed Johnson and Grave Digger Jones, who would appear in a series of novels. This duo presented a breed of policeman never before seen in fiction.

They embodied a new strain of survival instinct for the urban environment that allowed them to sidestep standard police procedure and use their guns and fists to cut through red tape. As Fred Pfeil wrote in the Nation, "Grave Digger and Coffin Ed are in fact not so much crime-solvers as priests of violence; the swirling, brutal action over which they preside and to which they contribute is a voodoo celebration of black America, a black mass indeed."

Frightening and intriguing at the same time, Grave Digger and Coffin Ed forage for criminals in a hostile environment of drug addicts, dealers, prostitutes, and pimps. They make their own "rules of law" as they go along, and are not averse to beating people senseless and making deals with known criminals for expediency's sake. This twosome reflected Himes's view of a racist society, by displaying the realistic sense to know that little of what they do will have much effect on anything.

As Grave Digger says in one novel, "We've got the highest crime rate on earth among the colored people in Harlem. And there ain't but three things to do about it: make the criminals pay for it. You don't want to do that; pay the people enough to live decently- You ain't going to do that; so all that's left is let them eat one another up." (45)

The viewpoint of this protagonist reverberates through Himes's many depictions of violence inflicted on blacks by blacks. As Sallis wrote, "And just as Himes had discovered in his mythical Harlem a correlative for the absurdity of the urban black's life, so he found a metaphor for the mindless ubiquity of violence against and within those same people." (54)

Despite his popularity with the French, Himes found no such acceptance from American critics. They regarded the Harlem novels as "potboilers" and thought that Himes had sold out his talent by writing them. Because they were a mixed breed of writing, these novels also had a difficult time finding an audience. They failed to attract the interest of standard readers of detective fiction who demanded carefully constructed plots and resolutions.

A black and a white woman are thrown together on a grotesque modern stage, uniting them through alcohol and destructive sexuality in a macabre dance of death. There is both a pathetic and a pathetic and a ludicrous rhythm of emptiness to their marginal lives and relationship. Muller remarks:

Within the normally finite structures of classical tragedy and psychological realism, Himes locates those very irrational and absurdist phenomena sexism and racism that map so much of the processed American idiocy. (67)

Itagaki discusses the depiction of racism and community alienation in the novel *A Rage in Harlem* by Chester Himes. Himes leading character in the novel is a depiction of himself who struggles against racial discrimination in Los Angeles. In the novel, he projects a self that is unable to reconcile the cruel contradiction of Californian dreams, the state's racism, and the economic promise that masks deeply rooted racial violence and hatred.

Imabelle was a brown-skinned woman in her middle forties, with a compact husky a red gabardine dress. With a man's haircut and a smooth, thick, silky mustache her face resembled that of a handsome man. But her body was a cross. The top two buttons of the dress were open, and between her two immense uplifted breasts was a thick growth of satiny black hair. (142)

This woman is a prosperous madam in a prosperous Harlem whorehouse. The members of community not only accept her, She is considered a successful business person who is known for having "disciplined" her cheating lover by tossing him out of a window and shooting him through the heart as he is falling toward the ground.

In *Rage in Harlem* fully proves his points of Negroes fight for their rights. It is a tale set in Harlem that is largely imaginary and yet it is artistic visualization of the sufferings of the pitiable Negroes in the United States of America. He has let out the established themes of the inherent violence and racial capitalism and also the absurdity of racism and interracial sexuality in this novel. It portrays the unconscious domination of white aesthetic, social religious, racial identity among the characters. The novel is the cruel in depicting the third generation of slaves as there has been already decided for the worse. Even providence seems to be partial to them as the novel no assertive factor for their existence.

Himes lets the readers have a firsthand experience of the prison life with all its racial abuse, violence and sex illegal activities going on either with the connivance of the warders or with their ignorance. More than racism, violence and sex took the upper hand in the convict. His main focus has been on revealing the oppressive forms of experience that remain within the prison system of America.

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