

Book Review / Ranita Chakraborty Dasgupta.

White Over Black: American Attitudes Toward the Negro, 1550, Second Edition.

Winthrop D. Jordan. With new forewords by Christopher Leslie Brown and Peter H. Wood. The University of North Carolina Press, North Carolina, 2012. Pp. 696 : ISBN: 978-0-8078-7141-6. USD 35.

Winthrop D. Jordan published his seminal work *White Over Black: American Attitudes Toward the Negro, 1550-1812* in 1968. This was an exhaustive study focusing on the evolution of the racial attitudes and perception of white Americans and the English towards the blacks. This evolution was studied from the context of differential parameters incorporated to justify slavery based on race and how the ideas of justice and liberty were reserved for the whites only. In this book Jordan tries to answer certain pertinent questions about the origin and development of racism and discrimination against the blacks. Divided into five distinct sections the book tries to explain the early attitude of the English settlers towards the Africans and the evolution of the beliefs that subsequently led to chattel slavery in Africa. This book came at a very worthy moment when America was witnessing one of the most tumultuous social upheavals in history, the racial attitudes of the white Americans were under question and the racial approach of an entire nation was under scrutiny. This lengthy text charts the alteration of black and Anglo-American relations from the initial kindly ambivalence to the imposition of laws to ensure a permanent state of inferiority for the black in the American society. The paradox of such laws lay in the rejection of moral ambitions for which both the whites and blacks had fought shoulder to shoulder in the Revolutionary War. To quote Jordan, it was during the “Revolutionary era [that] Americans ... realized for the first time that they had a racial problem on their hands [and] that the institution which their ideology condemned was founded on perceptions of physiological differences which they could do little or nothing about” (p.xi).

The influential book ran into its second edition in 2012 and had its foreword written by historians Peter H. Wood and Christopher Leslie Brown. Jordan's work is still the most authoritative works one can refer to while studying the history of racial discrimination and slavery in colonial America.

During the 1960s the question of race and race relations deeply consumed the American society. Jordan embarks on a journey comprising close analysis and careful interpretation of the first impressions that the 'black' or the 'negro' had on the English imperialist settlers. The comprehensive use of the primary sources reveals attitudes that were based on/influenced by the markers of skin colour, physique and religion. Numerous travel journals written by 16th century voyagers to West Africa reveal how the Englishman was utterly startled with the "differentness" of the African's skin colour. In addition to the "black" skin colour, the apparel and the religious practices of the natives also were elements of added research and discussion. Jordan sensitively unravels the various ideas and beliefs held by the European settlers about the evolution of the skin colour, facial features and the curious curly hair of the Africans.

One of the most popular beliefs was that the blackness of the Africans' skin had its roots in the biblical story where Ham is cursed for seeing his father Noah naked. Ham's son Canaan was cursed to be "a servant of servants unto his brothers." Rightly pointed out by Jordan this story was relevant in supporting the future prospects of slavery; however it states nothing about the skin colour. Hence, the reason behind this account retaining its significance to justify the skin colour of the Africans is still a perplexing idea. Some believed that it was the close proximity with the Sun that resulted in the blackness of the Africans. Hence, if moved to colder climates there were chances that the native Africans will become fairer. However, the baseless hypothesis was soon proved wrong as the English realized that the African's complexion was innate.

The next parameter of difference that Jordan discusses is the variant religious beliefs and rituals of the two races. An ontological question that Jordan asks here is why the English didn't find the Africans suitable for conversion to Christianity in the initial stages. He says "to eradicate the point of distinction which Englishmen found most familiar and most readily comprehensible" could lead to a psychological imbalance. The

English could not distinguish between the African's lasciviousness and savagery from his heathen religion. Hence he consciously chose to overlook the question of conversion which did only happen in the 18th century.

In the second part of *White Over Black: American Attitudes Toward the Negro, 1550-1812*, Jordan talks about the 'provincial decades' primarily on the foundations of the development and the logical justification of oppression associated with slavery. The New World had its own set of necessities and the newly discovered expanses of land resources required (re)structuring of the social and economic systems. There existed a fine distinction between English servitude from slavery. Jordan didn't just identify this distinction but he also asserted that with time the limited nature of servitude in the New World ceased to exist substituted with an unnecessary/undesirable role. A close examination of the actions and the ideologies of the Spanish and Portuguese in initiating slavery unravels the deep influence they had in the establishment of English slavery as well. Jordan evidently points how the Spanish and Portuguese traders enslaved native Americans and Negroes for a lifetime and in this opportunity the English recognized chances of an extremely lucrative business. They started supplying slaves to the Spanish and Portuguese. Another remarkable aspect of Jordan's work is his analysis of chattel slavery and its gradual development in the New World. He particularly focuses on the geographical locations of New England and the colonies of Maryland and Virginia. It was the peculiar geographic conditions that ensured a variant trajectory of development of slavery in the southern colonies that was distinct from the northern parts. The settlers did not take much time in realizing that to develop the fertile lands of the south into strong agricultural reserves the number of workers needed to be increased. Hence there was a huge increase in the amount of slave importation from Africa. As a result by 1705 it became necessary for Virginia to create a body of codified laws in order to regulate the slaves.

On careful introspection one cannot deny the fact that Jordan strategically absolves the English from the responsibility of establishing a harsh labour system that pronounced perpetual bondage for not just the Negro but also his offsprings; and that too for generations. In the chapter titled "Unthinking Decision" he states how without any purposeful intention the English designed a system which stripped the entire Negro race

from any natural/human rights. Jordan suggests that the American slave system that grew in and around the early tobacco colonies was the result of a conglomeration of factors. To mention a few would be superficial information gathered from under-researched books, imitation of the foreigners and obviously the English reaction to the 'negro'. Though all these factors played significant roles in the establishment of the system however the foundational reason behind it still remained to be the skin colour of the black and how it was considered to be a marker of his inferior status as a human being.

In the third part of the book which is titled *The Revolutionary Era 1755-1783* Jordan discusses the influence and impact of the American Revolution on slavery as a system. Once the Indian and French War was over it became clear that the New World had evolved a society whose political, social and cultural ideologies were an amalgamation of English mores and immigrant folkways. Hence, the people that emerged of this fusion were not English anymore, but they were American. Jordan focuses on the implications of these new perceptions which resulted in an obvious political upheaval. This was also the time when the colonists were asserting to the fact that "all men were created equal" forcing an assessment of the treatment meted out to the blacks. Both the whites and the slaves hoped for a better future and consciously supported a struggle for independence against England. In addition, the affirmation of religious equality and natural rights theories pronounced a process of self-scrutiny leading to secularization of the 'ideology of equality' in colonies like Virginia. The growing system of slave labour, chances of impending slave retaliation and the loss of social and economic stability created an atmosphere of deep fear amongst the slave holders.

In the final two parts of the book, Jordan studies the society and the prevalent thoughts from 1793 to 1812. The primary element of study in these two sections is the germination and development of a national identity and its effects on the slaves. Jordan points out how the three-fifths compromise "was a practical resolution of political interests, but it embodied more logic than has commonly been supposed. For the slave was, by social definition, both property and man, simultaneously partaking of the qualities of both". Such an argument creates the chances of an ideological imbalance. The slave was considered a 'man' as long as he suited the socio-political and economic

needs of the political players and the slaveholders. He was in no way deemed worthy of the pursuit of happiness or the freedoms invoked in the Declaration of Independence by Thomas Jefferson. The 'manhood' of the slave was only determined by his natural physical attributes embodied by the two arms and legs, his fingers and his soul.

In spite of its vivid and descriptive approach, it is more than undeniable that the second half of *White Over Black: American Attitudes Toward the Negro, 1550-1812* lacks the concise analysis evident in the first half. In addition, the typical use of dated terminology and exclusion of any historical analysis within the significant contexts of gender or capitalism are some of the questionable drawbacks. Furthermore, one can't help but notice the fact that Jordan doesn't include any "black voice" in the entire discussion of race and race relations. This might not be a prejudiced decision however it does mark the erasure of a very significant historical period. Often the information and the arguments in the second half appear repetitive and tiring. Nonetheless, one cannot help but accept that Jordan's seminal omnibus throws light on significant themes, attitudes and developments concerning the rise of slavery and racism in America. Jordan, through a process of logical analysis unravels the racial prejudices that were elementary in the development of the white man's world. A fitting product of its times, *White Over Black: American Attitudes Toward the Negro, 1550-1812* is undoubtedly an erudite source for understanding the development of racial prejudice and discrimination in the early days of the United States of America.

About the Author:

Winthrop D. Jordan (1931-2007) was a Professor of History at the University of Mississippi. Some of his other significant works include *Tumult and Silence at Second Creek: An Inquiry into a Civil War Slave Conspiracy* and *White Man's Burden: Historical Origins of Racism in the United States*. This particular work won numerous accolades including the 1968 Francis Parkman Prize, Society of American Historians, the 1968 Ralph Waldo Emerson Award, Phi Beta Kappa, the 1969 National Book Award and the 1969 Bancroft Prize, Columbia University.

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Ranita Chakraborty Dasgupta is presently teaching as an Assistant Professor in English at the Amity Institute of English Studies and Research, Amity University Kolkata. Her Ph.D is on Latin American Literatures and Reception Studies, *Reception of Latin Literatures in Bangla: From 1980 to 2010* to be the precise topic. Her interests are in the field of Latin American Literatures, Post Colonial Studies, Reception Studies, Feminist Theory and Comparative Literature. She was a doctoral fellow in the Department of Comparative Literature, Jadavpur University and a member at the Centre for Studies in Latin American Literatures and Cultures, Jadavpur University.