



# Unheard Voice of African-American Girl, Tamika Douglas in Umm Zakiyyah's Novel, If I Should Speak.

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## Abstract

Umm Zakiyyah's novel *If I Should Speak*, depicts the nature of social system of humankind. There is inequality and biased social justice system which deprive Tamika, the protagonist, to get her justice in the society. Tamika was African-American Christian girl who shared her room with her friend Jennifer in the residential of college. She had fight with her friend which gone to extent of leading to physical assault. In that physical assault Jennifer got little injured and it went into another extent by the extravagant of Jennifer's friend Mandy's speech. She blamed everything on Tamika Douglas. The Residential Advisory Board also favored the side of Jennifer. It didn't hear the story of other side. It just keeps on going to blame Tamika for whatever happened in that particular fight. Tamika learns to shed some of the xenophobic attitudes she has adopted growing up in the hearing room of Advisory Board. She lost her faith in system of justice which was biased and in favour of Jennifer who belongs to white race. Hence the voice of Tamika Douglas was unheard and the hope, she had on justice was lost because of biased and prejudiced perception.

Keywords: Social Justice, Racism, Majoritarianism, and Minority.

## Introduction

"The ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in moments of comfort and convenience, but where he stands at times of challenge and controversy."

--*Strength to Love*, 1963.

The above statement by Martin Luther King is highly applicable for those who feel secure by hiding in comfort zone. Here, it also tells us to stand against the injustice and be a messiah for the oppressed people. Now a days, most of the people stay back and didn't show much courage raise their vice against injustice done to oppressed people. Instead of making courage to stop it, they keep far away from such things. It's a sign of approval from the comfort zone people who accept that kind of oppression without raising their voice for oppressed people. It carries the message they are also the part of injustice. This issue is problematised in Umm Zakiyyah's internationally acclaimed first novel *If I Should Speak* (2017).

Umm Zakiyyah's novel *If I Should Speak*, shows us how the injustice has been done to African-American school Christian girl named Tamika. She enrolled herself in Streamdale University for her graduation where she faced with many problems in the initial days of college. Tamika had fight with her friend Jennifer for not being kept her room clean. Tamika was very angry on Jennifer that she pushed her away in her defense, as a result of she got little injured. Mandy, friend of Jennifer was the witness where the fight has taken place. In that physical assault Jennifer got little injured and it went into another extent by the extravagant of Jennifer's friend Mandy's speech.

The incident takes this matter at Streamdale University Center at 6:45 in the evening. The Residential Advisory Board conducted a hearing where Tamika has to put her point of view as well as Jennifer's point of view. Tamika was without an advisor who could tell her side of the story. Jennifer had the support of her friend who was the main witness when the fight was taken place. Mandy told in an extravagant way about that fight so that board members can feel that the root for everything is Tamika alone. As board asked Tamika to tell her side of the story, she said in her reply not guilty of that incident. Tamika explained about this incident to Dr. Sanders that she was defending herself to be safe.

As the only African-American on the board, he knew he was standing alone on this one. The others were filled with stereotypes and prejudices, which he felt drove them to imagine an exaggeration of what had actually occurred. He knew them to be biased, because other accused students had been found guilty of crimes... yet none of them had suggested expulsion. (*If I Should Speak* 24)

Dr. Sander was the professor of philosophy was the only African- American in the Advisory Board who stands with Tamika in her bad times. He stood as voice of oppressed Tamika in the Conduct Board of second session. As prejudice and stereotype mind of other board members were on the edge to decide Tamika to be expelled from the college but Dr. Sanders came as messiah and made board to reconsider their decision by his intellectual arguments and moreover, he made them not to expel Tamika from the college.

I would like quote the sayings of W.B. Yeats in one of his poems *The Second Coming*:

The best lack all conviction, while the worst

Are full of passionate intensity. (*Echoes of the Ancestors: Literary Reverberations in Yeats's 'The Second Coming'*)

This quote implies that the best of people, perhaps the good or moral, seem to have no determination and no ability to stand up for themselves—while the evillest are the most dedicated and loud about their beliefs. It mourns the failure of people who believe in goodness, kindness and compassion to triumph over chaos and violence. One should show guts to oppose the wrong things happening the society.

Tamika was very much shocked to know about decisions made by the conduct board in her physical assault case. She was reminded by her mother's words that justice system in U.S.A is not so much morally true when it comes to subject of African-American people. Tamika's mother always told her to get education so that she can achieve her dreams and will raise her voice to stand for the oppressed people as leader. While she was travelling to her native, she turned on the radio and listen to that poem which was suitable to her situation and made her emotional too. The poem is like:

*They say be strong,*

*But what if I'm weak?*

*They say stand up, speak out*

*But what if I'm meek?*

*They say fight hard But*

*what if I've no hands?*

*They say it make sense*

*But what if I don't understand?*

*They say be like this*

*But what if I'm like that?*

*They say hit hard*

*But what if I've no bat*

*They say chose this*

*But what if I've no choice?*

*They say tell 'em this*

*But if I've no voice? (If I Should Speak 20)*

The above poem speaks lot about the nature of African-American people's voice which is raised less. There is belief that black people should be strong enough to raise their voice to get their fundamental rights whereas the white people are getting all rights without much struggle. Blacks should speak out get their certain facilities. Here the poem says how the life of black people have been constructed un a negative manner. So here the white race is privileged by its colour of skin where as the black race has to struggle to get that privilege.

Majoritarian racism in United States of America is gone to such an extent that it has become a source to get black people get hamulated in many ways. Majoritarian communalism always threat to democratic counties all over the world. It demolishes very concept of unity in diversity. As I mentioned above that Dr. Sander was the only African-American in Streadmsdale University who fought for the rights of Tamika who was black. In USA, white race and Christian are the majoritarian groups where Black and Muslims groups are minorities. In Tamika's mind Muslims picturised as media portrayed them as angry black nationalist, religious, fundamentalist men, and oppressed woman.

Tamika was supposed to share her room with two different girls named Aminah and Dee. She saw a different kind of atmosphere where Aminah was religious and Dee was not practicing Islam up to the mark. By looking at living style of Aminah, she learnt some new thing which she was not aware of truth about Islam. It's the European imperialism which portrayed Islam in a bad way. Tamika who was not having good views about Islam. When she came across Aminah, she changed her mind set and started to know the exact truth about Islam.

We came across another unheard voice of minority group called Black race. Tamika was surprised to see the way white looked at black people. She was not aware that white men are discriminating them in terms equality, freedom, and justice. In Tamika's own life the physical assault case made her to believe that racism still exist in U.S.A. The members of advisory board who stand in the favour white skinned Jennifer. There was none to stand for the side of the oppressed people.

## Conclusion

This paper speaks about social justice system of the America where the minority of the people are deprived and oppressed by the majoritarian. The sense of othering that is foregrounded in the opening chapters, based on Tamika's experience of being treated as a threat by her white roommate, continues to colour the entire novel. As the analysis suggests, Tamika who was the central character, becomes aware of the internal conflicts that have undermined her sense of identity as a member of a minority community and, subsequently, shed the xenophobic attitudes she held of other minorities of differing religious faith. On one level, Tamika is used as the mouth piece of not just larger America, but also, ironically, as a member of minority America contesting the fellow minorities choice to practise a different faith. Tamika's development in the course of the narrative is best described in Aminah's mother's words that, "association [leads] to assimilation".

Unlike other African-American writings that pit the minority blacks against the majority whites or that problematises the intra-cultural conflict within the African-American community like Alice Walker's *The Colour Purple* or May Angelo's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, this novel by an African American Muslim writer, Umm Zakiyyah, puts in stark relief the religious cultural dichotomy within the African-American community. In creating a character of minority descent who speaks directly against a fellow minority, Umm Zakiyyah, as the paper asserts, showcases the xenophobia and politics of othering that exist within minority communities that are shaped by misunderstandings and misrecognition of the complexity of being a member of a multi-cultural, multi-religious society. It is in the way a member of a multicultural society "respond[s]" to the diversity prevailing in that society that the true "power relations" (Kincheloe and Steinberg 2) between the self and the other is made evident. Umm Zakiyyah's first novel, *If I Should Speak*, shows how this response could help bring better understanding and mutuality between the groups if one was prepared to take the risk of travelling the road less travelled in life.

## Works Cited

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