

UPWARD MOBILITY AND DOWNWARD MORALITY: A STUDY OF SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION OF ZACHARY REID IN *IBIS TRILOGY*

D.L. Arha¹ and A. Kothari²

^{1,2}Manipal University Jaipur, Rajasthan, India

¹mangal.deepti@gmail.com, ²arpit.kothari@jaipur.manipal.edu

ABSTRACT

Amitav Ghosh's Ibis Trilogy has presented myriad opportunities to researchers with the backdrop of colonialism and opium wars. It also emerges as a grand narrative for a number of varied characters to come together. Among such characters, Zachary Reid is an African American who joins Ibis in capacity of a carpenter; however, he manages to rise to the position of second mate. Zachary, throughout the trilogy manifests attempts to escape the burden of his birth to an African freed woman and a White (American) father. His desire for social transformation meets with various opportunities which he grabs without inhibitions on moral grounds. Zachary Reid's character in Ibis Trilogy provides an opportunity to explore the contemporary consciousness of an Afro-American (Black) to transcend and being identified and pass as a White. While taking into account Reid's character, the paper attempts the exploration of meaning and opportunities of social progress or transformation that people of African descent had during 19th century. This has been done while trying to understand the different aspects of social and moral values. Taking into consideration the arguments in favour of moral and ethical values, the researchers try to explore the nuances of compromising morality for upward mobility.

Keywords: Afro-American; Moral and Ethical Values; Social Transformation; Upward Mobility

Introduction

“There is a sense in which none of us has ever chosen to be born into this world and possibly any possible world. Yet, in our decision to live on, we live a choice that requires our having been born-in a word, our existence. In the context of blacks, the implication is obvious. No one chooses to have been born under racial designations. But the choice to go on living, and especially choices that involve recognizing one's racial situation, has implications on the meaning of one's birth.” (Gordon, 2013, p. 14)

The above words echo the painful experience of Black Atlantic. In the context of Ibis Trilogy, Black Atlantic experience and narrative is found through Zachary Reid who is an Afro-American son of a freedwoman and an American man (owner of Zachary's mother). Zachary's presence on Ibis, a former blackbirder provides much scope for introspection about Zachary's identity as a former slave, a current second-mate of a former slave vessel. In one sense, he has been assigned the position within the colonial space. However, his experience as a slave has not been in extremes, rather, he is conscious about

certain factors regarding his circumstances that have been able to provide him a better status than other people of his race. He has been endowed with lighter coloured skin and dark eyes that “flecked with sparks of hazel” (Ghosh, 2008, p. 10) which make him undoubtedly pass as a White man. Apart from this, his knowledge about his exact date of birth is a matter of much pride. Irrespective of all these circumstances which somewhat mitigate his experience as a ‘Black’, they also ignite the desire of a better social status. He is conscious of the truth of his identity and that possibly is the reason for which he always tries to keep it guarded within his heart. The issue of identity and status are the ominous problem of ‘Black’ experience whether it is historical or contemporary. Zachary is reminded of his racial identity as well as the past by frequent references of slaves and slavery. The most ironic about his appointment as a carpenter on Ibis is that his job requires him to refit the ship for its new job to carry ‘coolies’. However, the terms slaves and coolies though are denotatively different implies similar connotations. During the course of his journey, Zachary manages by sheer chance to move to the position of the second-mate of the ship. The change in his dressing and manners also are the metaphorical reflection of his desires of upward mobility. The desire itself cannot be

held wrong in any sense. Nevertheless, how Zachary understands his surrounding space that is staunchly racial and how he approaches and grabs the opportunities to improve his social status within the constraints of that space might entail explanation on moral grounds. For developing an insight on Afro-American experience Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin White Mask* (1967) and Gordon's *Existential Africana: Understanding Africana Existential Thought* (2000) have been taken while for understanding the implications of Zachary's upward mobility in contrast to his simultaneous moral degradation in the end, philosophical discourses on Aristotelian Virtue Ethics have been considered.

Label of 'Black': The Burden of an Afro-American's Birth

"We black folk, our history and our present being, are a mirror of all the manifold experiences of America. What we want, what we represent, what we endure is what America is.... The differences between black folk and white folk are not blood or color, and the ties that bind us are deeper than those that separate us. The common road of hope which we all traveled has brought us into a stronger kinship than any words, laws, or legal claims." ("Overview of the Afro-American Experience," n.d.)

The above statement by the eminent Afro-American author Richard Wright, though was written in 1941 (as quoted in the online article "An Overview of the African-American Experience." n.d.) has its relevance unbound by time. It acknowledges the awareness of all the people of Afro-American community of their shared tragic experience of slavery. Afro-Americans are the people born in America with partial or the complete black ancestry. The statement also seems to reflect upon the shared ambition of Afro-Americans to pass as Americans or to be recognized as one of them. The history of Afro-Americans can be traced back to mid 16th century during which Africans were started to be brought to America to work as slaves. This type of migration was enforced

upon Africans to fulfill the need for cheap labour of wealthy American merchants. Although, this was done for the first time in America, it wasn't entirely new for either Europeans or Africans. Africans had been suffering with forced migration since eighth century when many Moorish merchants dealt in human trade for fulfilling the demands of slaves and in the process many West Africans were kept as slaves. ("An Overview of the Afro-American Experience," n.d.)

Human trade is an activity that cannot be morally approved of. The trauma that the Afro-American slave went through was even worse as the way it used to be done was extremely barbaric. The entire process of capturing slaves and then buying and selling of them in the slave markets like a commodity was not only inhumane but highly lethal. The barbarism and toxicities that Afro-Americans had to bear would not stop till their trading; it reaches its zenith while they served as slaves for White people. In the light of this traumatic history and experience of Afro-Americans, this paper tries to understand how does the omnipresence of the White superiority affects an Afro-American in the 19th century? How does he see himself while being conscious of his own Black inferiority? Such questions demand a better insight on the African Existentialism. The African philosophy of existence questions the legitimacy of existence of the people of African descent. The question, "why go on?" (Gordon, 2013, p. 15) is asked, for seeking significance of their existence as well as a reason to live on, to seek self-value. "[...] self-value also emerges from valuing one's desire to bring meaning to one's existence." (Gordon, 2013, p. 15)

The aim behind exploring the above mentioned aspect is to understand the complexities of compromising the moral and ethical values for achieving upward mobility specifically in the context of Afro-American consciousness in the 19th century. For the purpose the Afro-American character named Zachary Reid from Amitav Ghosh's *Ibis Trilogy* have been taken to assess the moral implications of Reid's actions (under the circumstances of his identity as a Black) in the direction of improving his social status. The books like *Black Skin, White Masks* by Frantz Fanon and Lewis R. Gordon's

Existential Africana: Understanding Africana Existential Thought have provided the methodological/analytical framework for the present paper. Zachary Reid suffers from existential anxieties regarding the burden of his past of slavery (in general for his entire race as well as for him as an individual), his birth, his identity etc. Fanon's discussion regarding the psychological problems a Black man may feel stands extremely relevant in the context of Zachary Reid who being a 'Black' man shows similar signs of sufferings, and intentions and desire for upward mobility. The dynamics of his desire, the unconscious choices that he makes, and his actions over the course of time for realization of his dream, problematize the entire situation. Readers are forced to ponder on the moral and ethical questions that Zachary Reid Presents. The paper primarily deals with a few of such questions like, should Zachary's behaviour or character at the end be held as his ethical failure in terms of virtue ethics? The nuances of moral implications of Zachary's actions have been explored under the view of Virtue Ethics, specifically Aristotelian Virtue Ethics.

Virtue Ethics

A Virtue can be described as a trait, a disposition of character that is not only an excellent but also an intricate part of a person's personality. Virtue Ethics presents one major approach under Normative Ethics which grants more importance to the moral character or virtues than duties or rules (deontology) or the consequences or results of actions (consequentialism) (Hursthouse & Pettigrove, 2018). For instance, Zachary, in Flood of Fire needs money to buy him an outfit suitable for attending the tiffin at Doughtys. He checks upon the funds available to him only to find that they are miserably less. The situation distresses him due to his penniless condition. Suddenly, he realises that the precious stones and gems that are fitted in the budgerow, if sold, could solve his problem of money for a long time. Although he is positive about stealing, he finally decides against it. This incident, if viewed through the lenses of deontology, it would check whether it is Zachary's sense of realization of moral rule regarding stealing that stops him from acting in

a particular way. A consequentialist would consider whether Zachary decides against stealing due to his sense of understanding of the consequences of his actions. Although the central ideas in both the theories are virtues, the difference lies in the way of interpreting or defining the term Virtues. Consequentialism sees Virtue as the qualities or actions that yield good results or actions, while deontologists see them as traits or qualities that are possessed by those who are bound to fulfill the responsibilities or duties towards a prescribed moral rule or norm. Virtue Ethics, contrary to the above mentioned approaches, views that to codify human actions and intentions by universal principles or norms is not practical. In fact, the most common prevalent criticism of Virtue Ethics is that it does not result into any principles that can be presented as norms and codes for guiding human actions. During its initial phase, virtue theory was criticized mainly due to the misunderstanding of the whole idea that it presented. (Hursthouse & Pettigrove, 2018)

"[...] the objection was based on a misunderstanding. Blinkered by slogans that described virtue ethics as "concerned with Being rather than Doing", as addressing "What sort of person should I be?" but not "What should I do?" as being "agent-centered rather than act-centered", its critics maintained that it was unable to provide action-guidance." (Hursthouse & Pettigrove, 2018)

Elizabeth Anscombe, a British analytic philosopher pointed to the ways in which virtue theory provided enough and appropriate action guidance. According to Anscombe that "... specific action guidance could be found in rules employing the virtue and vice terms ("v-rules") such as "Do what is honest/charitable; do not do what is dishonest/uncharitable" (Hursthouse & Pettigrove, 2018) So, according to this a person can find action guidance by focusing on the negative terms referring to vices like hypocritical, materialistic, calculating, grudging etc. and stop himself from involving in such actions. At the same time, a person can consider the positive terms

referring to virtues like charitable, honest, merciful, grateful etc. and get himself employing them into his acts. Thus, this discussion moves towards the question of right/wrong actions. However, virtue ethics is able to address the questions like, “how one should live, what kind of person one should become, and even what one should do without committing it to providing an account of ‘right action’.” (Hursthouse & Pettigrove, 2018)

Aristotelian Virtue Ethics

Aristotle’s variety of virtue ethics is grounded upon and around the broad character traits human beings possess. Therefore, it does not assess any human action in isolation as contrast to Utilitarian as well as Kantian Ethics. According to Aristotle, “... for all things that have a function or activity, the good and the ‘well’ is thought to reside in the function.” (Aristotle, n.d.) Aristotle states that every object is good till the time it is keeping up with its inherent function or *telos*. This argument states *telos* of humans as *reason*. Thus, according to Aristotle “The good for a human being is, acting in accordance with reason.” (Dimmock & Fisher, 2017, p. 50) On the matter of goodness, Aristotle picks up from where he leaves on the function of human beings. He states that a human being can achieve a good life only when he achieves his *telos*. Aristotle’s Virtue Ethical Moral view is paramount to understand what Aristotle’s perspective on Virtue Ethics and Morality is. Aristotle states, “Virtues are character dispositions or personality traits.” (Dimmock & Fisher, 2017, p. 52) Thus, evidently Aristotle gives importance to a person’s character and disposition instead of actions alone (i.e. actions in isolation). Due to this disregard for action and focus on character and disposition Aristotle’s Virtue Ethics is labeled as ‘Agent-Centred Moral’ theory. Opposition to Aristotle’s Virtue Ethics, stand two act-centred theories, namely, Kantian Ethics and Utilitarianism. All these theories at their core, share a common view which states that it is action and not the agent that can be attributed to be the bearer of morality or immorality, i.e. it is the act and not the person which can be rendered as morally right or wrong.

Zachary Reid

Ibis Trilogy is set in the 19th century colonial India, a few years before opium war and the last book in the Trilogy *Flood of Fire* (2015) ends with the first opium war. Though, it primarily focuses on Opium and the other related happenings during the 19th century, Zachary Reid poses certain questions regarding the role and place of moral and ethical values in human life. Zachary represents an Afro-American young man who strives for prosperity and good living standards. This ambition in him makes him bow down when it comes to choosing between upward mobility and downward moral values. He compromises and ignores the moral implications of his actions.

Zachary Reid is a son of a Maryland freedwoman. Reid’s experience onboard Ibis begins when he first joins the crew in the capacity of a carpenter. For him the ““push” factors that propelled Zachary away from USA [...] into an unknown abyss” (Augustine, 2015, p. 125) has been the staunch racist environment of the 19th century USA. Ironically, Ibis, a former blackbird which has been used to transport slaves as a commodity becomes the harbinger of Zachary’s desire to improve his social status. He joins Ibis as a carpenter, however, during the course of the journey rises to the position of second mate. Ghosh’s narration of Zachary’s initial change in his status from a mere carpenter to the second mate of the ship seems to be the depiction of his highly unachievable dreams coming to reality by sheer luck. His appearance (his white skin) makes him pass as a white when he is properly dressed in the clothes appropriate for a gentleman.

Zachary Reid: An Afro-American with ‘White Skin, Black Identity’

The upward mobility that Zachary wishes for himself has been provoked not only by his present circumstances but they are the result of much older and deeper feelings and emotions. He wants to improve his social status for which the white colour of his skin proves helpful. He needs a little refinement of his manners and can easily pass as a white man. The realization of this comes to him when Serang Ali (a lascar

onboard Ibis) helps him find an attire suitable for a gentleman. Zachary cannot deny that he definitely looks like a white man. This type of behaviour reflects upon a deeply buried desire to correct a worn out self-image which is one of the primary issues that faces an Afro-American due to his past, tarnished by tyranny of slavery. The problem of self-image poses questions like defining oneself within the societal structure which one is undoubtedly a part of. However, the respectable position that an Afro-American wishes for himself is far from his reach, making the desire more painful than ever. The various reasons and barriers that stops him include his black skin, which itself makes an Afro-American unworthy of any reputable position or amiable social relations. In case of Reid, in fact, the colour of his skin and eyes becomes rather helpful by giving him the appearance of an English man. The circumstances of his birth though were quite burdensome they have been able to provide certain solace by giving him the more coveted opportunities due to his father's treatment of his mother and him. He has also been blessed by white skin and blue eyes due to his half white parentage.

Defining Upward Mobility

In order to understand Zachary Reid and his actions towards the fulfillment of his desire for a better social and financial status, it is highly important to understand the concept of upward mobility. A simple definition of social mobility can be as, "improvement or an upward movement in an individual's or a group of individual's circumstances and position in terms of money, status etc. which makes them lead a better social life." (Samiksha S., 2013)

Upward mobility for an Afro-American is not as simple as it may seem considering the history of race relations in America. The co-existence of Blacks and Whites is in-fact, has a history of troubled relations between the two races or communities. Whites, with their so called white supremacy have always considered people with darker skin, especially people of African origin inferior to them. This discrimination has always prompted a rather inhumane attitude and behaviour towards Afro-Americans in America. This is important as it

reflects on the troubled social position and opportunities in America.

"Zachary's memory of his last day at Gardiner's Shipyard in Baltimore: He remembers how his fellow Black man Freddy Doughlas was beaten up to death by four White carpenters. The words of Freddy echoed in his memories: "It's about jobs, the Whites won't work with you, freeman or slave. Keeping you out in their way of saving their bread." That was when Zachary had decided to quit the shipyard and seek a berth on a ship crew." (Ghosh, 2008, p. 51)

Young and ambitious Zachary takes up the job onboard Ibis in the capacity of a carpenter but with an inclination to learn the sailor's job. This undoubtedly shows his ambition of improving his social status. The realization of such dreams and ambitions is not easy for an Afro-American who has to fight with not only the oppressive forces in the outer world but also with his inner self, burdened with the black suffering. Zachary struggles with his conscious dreams and ambitions of upward mobility and the unconscious burden of his black history. While trying to fulfill his desires of being recognized as a White man along with a better social and living status, the problem of choosing between upward mobility on one hand and abiding by the moral and ethical values on the other faces him more than once. This situation makes the whole idea of upward mobility difficult for Reid as an Afro-American irrespective of place. By the end of the third book in the trilogy *Flood of Fire*, he has changed from a simple young man to a greedy and treacherous opium merchant.

Zachary's Journey as an Afro-American Carpenter to Opium Dealer

One's position in society, attitude of others towards oneself, certain moral and ethical environment, etc. are certain constraints that make people fling from trying for improvement in their social and living standards. However, these constraints do not stop anyone from desiring the upward mobility. Same has been

the case with Zachary Reid who in spite of his marginalised social position not only aspires to pass as a white but also eventually realises his desire to grow as opium merchant. He becomes the Business partner of Mr. Burnham who is a Calcutta based British opium merchant. In the beginning, Burnham is Zachary's employer when he joins Ibis as a mere carpenter. Mr. Burnham amazes Reid at their first meeting on Ibis. Reid also realises that Burnham takes him as a White due to Reid's white skin and his manners which seem more refined than a Black. This unconsciously proves to be an impetus for his desire for refinement of manners as well as social status. He does not hesitate in getting hold of every opportunity that seems to have come to him by chance of circumstances. Slowly, without any realisation he falls into the trap of immorality. He does not think before acting upon his desire to achieve any benefit of whatever the situation is. Zachary's attitude for improving his life is the manifestation of what that Frantz Fanon attributes as a Black man's anxiety regarding his identity in his book *Black Skin White Masks*. (Fanon, 2008) Fanon reflects upon the anxiety pertaining to the identity of colonial subject focusing on how "consequently [he] need[s] to escape from these neuroses, which colonialism had produced" (Appiah, 2008). The book along with other things is definitely reminds of the inferiority complex that the colonized or the people of colour (especially the Blacks) suffer from. Fanon highlights upon the need of these people to mute the voices of their ancestors to free themselves of the burden of their past. According to Fanon there is a vicious circle of the thoughts like 'white superiority and black inferiority' which makes "Blacks want to prove at all costs to the whites the wealth of the black man's intellect and equal intelligence. (Fanon, 2008) Fanon, in *Black Skin, White Masks*, "Attempts to discover the various mental attitudes the black man adopts in the face of white civilization" (Fanon, 2008). When Zachary sees Mr. Burnham bidding for Opium, in *Flood of Fire*, excites "Zachary's envy as well as his awe. He would have given anything to be himself, bidding like Mr. Burnham, snatching away the lots he most desired from the noses of his competitors." (Ghosh, 2015, p. 274) This is the

final moment that triggered his desire for "lavishing his unspent energies upon the pursuit of wealth." (Ghosh, 2015, p. 275) Zachary's transformation begins with him moving from the position of a carpenter to the second mate of the ship. Then, it becomes prominent and starts to be overwhelming for Zachary when the change in his way of dressing makes him recognised as a gentleman. Appiah writes in the Foreward of *Black Skin White Mask* that Fanon asserted, "What is called the black soul is a construction by white folk," claiming that, in effect, that the purportedly essential qualities of the Negro spirit that were celebrated by the writers of Negritude were in fact a European fantasy." (Appiah, 2008) On close reading of Ghosh's *Ibis Trilogy*, Zachary's character reveals more about his consciousness about his race, which given to his looks he manages to hide while presenting himself as a White man. The burden on his soul seems more of fear, shame, and guilt. More he gets exposed to Mr Burnham and his wealth, more he finds himself drifting towards his own desire of being taken as a White man. He looks like a White man but he is NOT one, he has his own secrets. His clandestine affair with Mrs. Burnham is not just physical affair but the depiction of his desire to be accepted truly as a White man. It is highly unlikely that a White lady of Mrs. Burnham's stature could get involved in such frivolities with a Black man. Zachary knows that it is his appearance that has made it possible. Mrs. Burnham, though might have used him for the satisfaction of her own carnal desires, is a different concern altogether, but for Zachary it is only the 'White' identity that matters more than anything else. Zachary tries his best to be accepted as a gentleman which itself is no less than an emotional trauma. Clothes, in Zachary's case are the metaphorical cover for his Black conscious self to pass as a White man. Zachary's discussion with Serang Ali regarding the way Zachary should dress up wherein Serang Ali asks him to dress up because that's the only way Zachary can look like a gentleman. Here, the idea is to create a superficial identity for Zachary. To make him something that he is not essentially. Although the benefits attached to the resultant identity are the most coveted for Zachary. He,

somewhere deep, is unconvinced about acting as someone other than who he is. Zachary's question to Serang Ali seems self-questioning. Zachary, confused about dressing up like a white man (when he is not one) tells Serang Ali. "Enough's enough, Serang Ali, [...] I'm done playing biggity". (Ghosh, 2008, p. 50) Few lines later, Zachary asks Serang Ali again, "Why in the living hell, is this so important to you?" (Ghosh, 2008, p. 50) This reflects upon the conflict between Zachary's inner self and external reality. Fanon takes on a psychological analysis to estimate this conflict as the burden on a Black man's soul. In his book, he explains the aspects of inferiority complex in an African or Black man. The alienation and desalination of him wherein the latter becomes evident with the "brutal awareness of social and economic realities" (Fanon, 2008).

Serang Ali, in *Sea of Poppies*, convinces him to wear gentlemanly clothes by insisting upon the fact that as one of the ship's officer he is now one of the White men as no one other than a White man could reach to that position. Serang Ali says, "Malum Zikri one big piece pukka sahib now. Mus wear propa clothes." (Ghosh, 2008, p. 50) When, Serang Ali gives him a watch to keep,

"Zachary was touched. Thank you, Serang Ali, Ain nobody never gave me nothing like this before. He stood in front of the mirror, watch in hand, hat on head, and burst into laughter. 'Hey! they'll make me Mayor, for sure.'" (Ghosh, 2008, p. 20)

These words are the echo of a Black man's inferiority complex addressed in *Black Skin, White Mask*. Zachary leaves the house of Plantation owner with a sense of pride for being recognised as a gentleman or a white man. This convinces him that it's only his outer appearance as a gentleman that can help him get whatsoever he wishes for. Zachary's outer transformation triggers his desires of improving his social and economic status. During his first meeting with Mr. Burnham, his 'White' employer, Zachary shows best of his gentlemanly manners. He understands the benefits attached with the label 'White man' while the 'other' label i.e. 'Black man' is a

restriction between him and his ambition of achieving social recognition and appreciations which undoubtedly comes with economic prosperity. Again, the economic prosperity can be achieved only with social recognition. Hence, it is nothing but a vicious cycle that Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* talks about. Mr. Burnham unconsciously becomes Zachary's role model (an ideal for Zachary). Mr. Burnham rose from a stature of insignificance to immense significance and influence as an unannounced king of opium trade. However, Zachary is aware of the strength that Mr Burnham has as compared to Zachary and that is Mr. Burnham's identity as White.

Sea of Poppies shows Zachary moving upward taking up the opportunities as they present themselves to him. He is also exposed to the complications of a sailor's job. The trials of times jeopardise his future not only as a sailor but also as a carpenter. Still, by the end of *Sea of Poppies*, Zachary manages to remain as clean as possible. He seems to keep up on the path of progress honestly. He tells Serang Ali,

"[...] Sometimes I just wish you'd'a left me alone and never come anigh. May be things would'a been different then. But it was you as showed me that what I do counts for more than, where I was born. And, if I'm to care bout my work, then I need to live by its rules. Else it wouldn't be worth doing. You see the sense of that?" (Ghosh, 2008, p. 446)

Zachary's inner transformation begins after the episodes of *River of smoke* which only informs readers that he has been convicted for the mishappenings on Ibis. *Flood of Fire* begins with his acquittal from these charges. However, he is a penniless man and his sailor's license has also been taken away. He is in dire need of money. Mr. Doughty helps him get a job at Burnhams as a mystrie for refurbishing the budgerow that once belonged to Raja Neel Ratan Haldar. The story from here takes turn for Zachary and his sense of inferiority complex begins to appear on surface. His poverty starts pinching him more with his acquaintance with Mrs. Burnham which

eventually turns into an intense physical affair. He happens to look into the luxurious life of Burnhams. The whole situation starts drifting him towards more precarious moral position.

Nuances of moral implications of Zachary's immoral actions

Under the light of Aristotle's Virtue Ethics, Zachary's actions cannot be judged as morally right or wrong. However, keeping the focus on his character and disposition of his person, Zachary can be judged as right or wrong as for Aristotle what is important for a person is that he should be able to answer, "how should I *be*" rather than "What should I *do*". (Dominic & Fisher, 2017, p. 52) According to Aristotle an ideally virtuous person will not find himself in much conflict between rationality and irrationality. On the contrary, if a person is non-virtuous, he will also be in conflicting situation between rationality and irrationality. Furthermore, Aristotle's virtue ethics does not hold that being virtuous is the guarantee to happiness as there are various other external forces like poverty that can be responsible for human miseries. (Dominic & Fisher, 2017, p. 61).

Zachary's actions have been made in the direction of achieving happiness for himself which he viewed as the result of material gains. Initially, it is natural that his Black identity is what pushes him towards desiring for upward mobility. It seems simply an action driven by existential issues along the lines of Black Existential Philosophy which is "philosophical questions premised upon concerns of freedom, sociality, and liberation." (Gordon, 2013, p. 3) Thus, his individualist approach makes his actions a subject of moral scrutiny.

He wishes to achieve upward mobility i.e. he wishes a better rather luxurious life. Here, it should be noted that it is his wish that he is focused at instead of 'what he should be'. The argument may entail that shouldn't people strive for improving their situations or living conditions especially when they are considerably miserable. Nevertheless, According to Aristotle's Virtue Ethics a person's essential character trait or psychological disposition is more important than specificity of morality of his actions.

Dominic and Fisher defines Virtues in Aristotelian sense as, "Virtues are those particular dispositions that are appropriately related to the situation and to [...] encourage actions that are in accordance with reason." (Dominic & Fisher, 2017, p. 52) It can thus be interpreted that virtue according to Aristotle is not taken as a feeling, instead according to him, the response to a person's feeling, if is an appropriate psychological disposition is only when it can be termed as "Virtue". He describes that a response to feelings can be judged as correct if it is the result of acting according to the "*Golden Mean*". Golden Mean, in Aristotelian Virtue Ethics is a moderate response (action) to a feeling against two extremes which are *Vice of Deficiency* on one hand and *Vice of Excess* on the other. *Vice of Deficiency* and *Vice of Excess* can be explained with an example of virtuous disposition of righteousness; the *Vice of Deficiency* can be spitefulness while *Vice of Excess* can be Envy. (Dominic & Fisher, 2017, p. 61).

In case of Zachary's feeling of indignation when he finds out that Captain Mee is the same man whom Mrs. Burnham has been in love for years. He goes through an emotional tumult. His emotions range from anger to envy. At the same time, driven by his greed for proving his worth to Mr. Burnham as a potential business partner, he traps on the opportunity of using Mrs. Burnham as a tool for getting his work done. Not only this, he also tries to blackmail both Captain Mee and Mrs. Burnham. So, driven by indignation and envy, he chooses to exploit Mrs. Burnham's and Captain's situation and blackmails them rather than acting in an appropriate righteous manner, which means choosing between two extremes i.e. Vice of Deficiency and Vice of Excess is finding a mid way out in the midst of two negatives. Zachary's action, here makes him an accused of behaving rashly on negative extremes while ignoring the 'Golden Mean'.

The other aspect of Aristotelian Virtue Ethics is that it focuses on the agent. Thus, it states that one action by an agent which does not fit the criteria of virtue does not make a person necessarily immoral. According to Aristotle,

“Our psychological dispositions, virtuous or not, are only to be assessed by judgment of a person’s general character and observation over more than a single-act situations. If we act in accordance with reason and fulfill our function as human beings, our behaviour will generally reflect our virtuous personality traits and disposition”. (Dominic & Fisher, 2017, p. 54)

Aristotelian Virtue Ethics also suggests two categories of actions while discussing moral responsibility. Although Aristotle does not emphasise upon the action, the term moral responsibility being directly related to actions make Aristotle divide actions into two categories, Voluntary Actions, Involuntary Actions. As the names suggest involuntary actions are the one’s which are the result of certain external force (which is beyond human control) or ignorance, rest all actions are rendered as voluntary. The point to note here is it is action and not feeling can be moral or immoral i.e. desire is an emotion but to act in a particular way for the fulfilment of that desire is an action. So, Zachary’s desire for upward mobility according to Aristotelian tradition of virtue ethics is not immoral or wrong. However, his actions can be questioned.

Virtue ethics as discussed earlier does not provide direct guidance on moral action but leaves on people to decide for example, “What is just” or “Don’t do what is unjust.” However, under the influence of deeply buried emotions of hatred and disgust against White race as well as the conscious knowledge of the ‘White’ supremacy, Zachary seems to be under extreme emotional pressure of fulfilling his desire for upward mobility. The question in such situation as Zachary’s is that how a person can get himself steady on the path of right act. Aristotle’s discrimination between moral goodness and individual goodness can be sought after for the answer to the problem of deciding between external factors like, racial discrimination, poverty etc. Aristotle gives more importance to being virtuous for the achievement of *eudaimonia* (happiness).

“Aristotle uses the term *eudaimonia* to capture the state that we experience if we fully achieve a good life. According to Aristotle it is the state that all humans should aim for as it is the aim and end of human existence. To reach this state, we must ourselves act in accordance with reason.” (Dominic & Fisher, 2017, p. 51).

A person cannot flourish in any circumstances even if they are able to eliminate or avoid the external factors like racial discrimination, poverty etc. This reflects in Zachary’s answer to Mrs. Burnham in *Flood of Fire* where he appropriates his actions (can be referred to as immoral):

“‘I have become what you wanted, Mrs. Burnham,’ he said. ‘You wanted me to be a man of the times, did you not? And that is what I am now; I am a man who wants more and more and more; a man who does not know the meaning of ‘enough.’ Anyone who tries to thwart my desires is the enemy of my liberty and must expect to be treated as such.” (Ghosh, 2015, p. 582)

The critique for Zachary’s actions and behaviour when judged under Aristotle’s Virtue Ethics hold’s against him for not sticking to the ‘Golden Mean’ and acting on extremes on more than one occasion.

Conclusion

Zachary’s identity as a Mulatto is source of the emotions such as shame, fear, and anger. To an extent guilt also accompanies in cases like Zachary’s where the person deliberately lies and presents himself to the world as someone else to hide his original racial identity. These emotions, altogether, can result in severe emotional and psychological burden for an individual. But, close reading and analysis of the text reveals that Zachary’s acts have not actually been driven simply by a zest of attaining liberation and identity from oppression. Although initially it seems natural for him to make certain choices leading to a better life, by the end of *Flood of Fire* his character reveals more of the greed for money as well as power.

In spite of Zachary's troubled past as well as present, his transformation at the end forces readers to wonder 'whether or not an individual can be granted freedom to ignore moral and ethical path for social upward mobility and material benefits'. They are forced to think about the importance of moral and ethical values in deciding the course of human actions? Aristotelian Virtue Ethics remains under speculation for not being able to provide a book of fixed and codified moral rules. However, it provides a picture of moral rules

which are based on reason. Thus, according to this view Zachary's actions in the end as being provoked by rashness and not reason can be appropriated as the ethical failure of his character. Zachary's journey which begins as a wish for freedom and liberation from oppression ends up with him falling prey to moral deficiency or Vices of Deficiency in Aristotelian term. His rash decisions immerse him in greed, lust, and treachery and transform him as a treacherous character at the end.

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