



RACIAL INJUSTICE ON JOHN OLIVER KILLENS

Dr R T Bedre

Principal,

Shri Panditguru Pardikar Mahavidyalaya, Sirsala,

Dist. Beed, (MS),India

Abstract:

John Oliver Killens (1916 - 1987) dominated the Afro-American literary and political world as a novelist, short story writer, playwright, screen playwright and a revolutionary also. Jr. Addison Gayle has rightly labeled Killens as 'the Spiritual Father of the Black-American novel'. A reading of the record of Pulitzer awards proves how the white racial mainstream literary and governmental agencies treated Killens with prejudice. Killens' works were not acknowledged by the mainstream white academic world, neither by the scholars nor by the critics. John Oliver Killens is practically, almost totally a forgotten phenomenon. There is no African Studies or English literature class teaches his work. The mainstream American literary world refused even to acknowledge the contributions of Killens to the African American novel, not to talk of American novel. The Cambridge Companion to the African American novel edited by Maryemma Graham misses (or drops) Killens' name or novels. He does not find room in the index of the world famous companion devoted to African American novel.

Keywords:*Spiritual Father, Black American Novel, Pulitzer Awards, Cambridge Companion, etc.*

John Oliver Killens (1916-1987) led a versatile and multidimensional life, being active in all the walks of life. He dominated the Afro-American literary and political world as a novelist, short story writer, playwright, screen playwright and a revolutionary also. His contribution to 'Harlem Writers' Guild' and his interest in the 'Writers' Workshop' encouraged a wide range of the Afro-American authors to protest through writing. Killens has fashioned his career in the protest mold of Richard Wright. Jr. Addison Gayle has rightly labeled Killens as 'the Spiritual Father of the Black-American novel' (145).

Writing under the influence of Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X, W.E. Du Bois, Langston Hughes, Richard Wright and Margaret Walker, John Oliver Killens has left a wide influence on the Afro-American writing as he wrote abundantly from short stories to philosophical essays and political articles. In addition to being a fiction writer, he contributed widely to periodicals like *Saturday Evening Post*, *The New York Times*, *The Black Scholar* and the *Black World*. He took to writing to comment on the quality of Black life in America, with an eye towards changing for better. He writes, "Every time I sit down to the typewriter with every line I put on the paper, I am out to change the world, to capture reality, to melt it down and forge it into something entirely different" (Killens, 152).

John Oliver Killens was born on January 14, 1916 and died on October 27, 1987, in Macon, Georgia to Charles Myles Killens Sr., a restaurant manager, and Willie Lee Coleman, an insurance company clerk. He was the second of the three sons. His parents were well read and kept abreast of trends and events important to African Americans. Killens' parents nurtured his pride in his Black cultural heritage, and aroused his interest in African-American history, folklore, and literature and a belief in the power of the arts to effect social change His paternal great-grandmother told him stories

of African–American endurance during the dark days of slavery. His maternal great-grand mother was raped at the age of twelve by her Master's son, with the result that she gave birth to his maternal grandfather.

Killens was the founder and chairperson of the celebrated Harlem Writers Guild, the oldest organization of African-American writers in the United States and perhaps in the world. Killens became a spiritual father of the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s. Killens strongly believed that there is no such thing as art for art's sake. All art is propaganda, although there is much propaganda that is not art. A mentor to generations of black writers and inspired young black writers like poet Maya Angelou and Ossie Davis, Sarah E, Wright, Lonne Elder and Paule Marshall.

Killens' impact on the black activists is as significant as on the circles of writers and workshoppers. Throughout his literary career, the home of John Oliver and Grace Killens remained refuge and meeting ground for the young and old, established and promising, among and between writers, musicians, actors, producers, dancers, painters, businessmen, politicians, students and activists, historians, journalists, statesmen, and exiled guerilla fighters of most persuasions, entering his home and sharing their moments with each other and with John O (Louis Reyes Rivera, John Oliver Killens: Lest We Forget, 14).

When Killens was not writing, he worked for social causes and racial equality. A man whose low-key manner belied his hard-edged activist beliefs, Killens worked under influence of Malcolm X—and knew Martin Luther King Jr. Killens was clear about his role as a writer with cause. He said, “My fight is not to be a white man in a black skin, but to inject some black blood, some black intelligence into the pallid mainstream of American life.” He worked as a writer-in-residence at Howard University; Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee; and Medgar Evers College in New York. Killens was instrumental in establishing black writers' conferences at each of the schools.

In 1947, he organized workers for the Congress of Industrial Organization. He was known to visit with the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and became close friends with Malcolm X, with whom he co-founded the organization for Afro-American Unity in 1964. (Erica Taylor, The Tom Joyner Morning Show Little-Known Black History Fact: John Oliver Killens).

Killens held a strong belief in the revolutionary power of writing and the need for people of color to bring their stories to light. That revolutionary power did not cease with the passing of the sixties, or the achievements of Dr. Martin Luther King and the Civil Rights Movement. Killens is quoted as saying:

It is an interesting phenomenon that we black folks, as a people, have produced some of the most magnificent athletes the world has ever known, but have produced very few long distance runners. We've raised a whole lot of hell in the hundred yard dashes. You watch the Olympics and you see nothing but black brothers up there at the finish tape in the sprints. We have the fastest get-away known to man or womankind. At the same time, we have produced very few long distance runners. Long distance running requires planning, pacing, discipline, stamina and a belief in the ability to win everything over the long haul. Lasting power is the name of the game... We must evolve a generation of long distance runners, men and women, prepared to pay some dues for their children's children. Our people have paid some terrible dues for us to come to this (Dr. John Oliver Killens: Long Distance Runner).

Killens was a novelist, literary biographer, an essayist. Killens also wrote plays, screenplays, and numerous articles and short stories that appeared in publications ranging from *Black Scholar* and the *New York Times* to *Ebony* and *Redbook*. Killens' fame rests on his masterpieces in fiction like *Youngblood* (1954), *And Then We Heard the Thunder* (1962) *Sippi* (1967) and *The Cotillion: or one good bull is half the herd* (1971) and *The Minister Primarily* which still remains unpublished

Killens' non-fiction works include *Black Man's Burden* (1965), essays on race in America; *Great Black Russian* (1989), a biographical work on the poet Alexander Pushkin; and two books for

young readers, *Great Gittin up Morning* (1972), a biography of Denmark Vesey, and *A Man Ain't Nothin' but a Man* (1975), which describes the adventures of John Henry.

In addition to these works, Killens wrote for both cinema and stage. He wrote a play *Lower than the Angels* in 1965 and screenplay for the film *Slaves* in 1969. He also had co-written a screenplay for the film *Odds against Tomorrow* in 1960 and a play *Ballad of the Winter Soldier* in 1964.

Many works of Killens have been translated into other languages like Italian, Spanish, French, Chinese, Russian, Hungarian, German, etc. His work are taught and studied in more than fourteen different languages in the world universities. But he's ignored in America.

Killens' organizational and literary contributions earned him some notable awards, which earned him vice presidency of the Black Academy of Arts and Letters, a National Endowment for the Arts fellowship (1980), and a Distinguished Writer Award from the Middle Atlantic Writers Association (1984). The Before Columbus Foundation, which sponsors the American Book Awards, cited Killens for lifetime achievement in 1985. He was honored with the membership of the Georgia Writers' Hall of Fame.

During the 1970's, Killens served as the writer-in-residence at Howard University's Institute for the Arts and Humanities. He also taught at Fisk University, Columbia University, Bronx Community College and the New School for Social Research. He spent the final years of his life as the writer-in-residence at Medgar Evers College of the City University of New York. Killens died of cancer on October 27, 1987 at Brooklyn; he is recognized as the Spiritual Father of the Black Arts Movement. Horst Ihde writes in the Ph. D. thesis:

Killens' name will forever ring simultaneously with the bells of freedom. Most of his works, including his nonfiction pieces, are commentaries on social protest and blacks embracing their blackness. His significance to the literary tradition remains two fold, to provide a silenced community with a voice and to produce a history from which a definition of self can evolve" (Oxford Companion to African American Literature, 244-45).

Racial injustice on Killens:

A reading of the record of Pulitzer awards proves how the white racial mainstream literary and governmental agencies treated Killens with prejudice. The mainstream white media and white literary award agencies refused to acknowledge merit and potentials of Killens' writing. Whenever Killens' novel was nominated for the Pulitzer Award for Fiction, the Award Committee decided not to award any book in those respective years. In the words of his own son in law Louis Reyes Rivera:

John Oliver Killens was and was not the only writer ever to receive and not receive the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction three consecutive times, all in a row, and yet never receiving it once, even when critics were announcing that he was the only one who could get it. Each time he was nominated, his book would be the frontrunner all the way, yet by the end of the running there'd be no winner that year (John Oliver Killens: Lest We Forget, 14).

There was no Pulitzer given for fiction in 1954, the year *Youngblood* was published. In fact the book had been the first book produced by Harlem Writers' Workshop. It marked the rise of a new and contending voice in American letters. The critics and the public commended it but the committees refused oblige it.

Again, there was no Pulitzer given for fiction in 1964+1989+87, the year when *And Then We Heard the Thunder* was published and there were no other books even being nominated. Killens' was the only one written with WWII as backdrop, but again the committee remained adamant on saying that no work deserved the award.

The same happened in 1971; the year that *The Cotillion* was published. But the committee once again recorded it as incapable and unwilling to acknowledge good African American fiction.

Since 1918, according to record, the Pulitzer committee has continuously made awards in fiction. In addition to the three times that Killens should have received the prize. These three mentioned books are each considered classics in American fiction. No other American novelists except Booth Tarkington and William 'racialist' Faulkner were the only novelists up through 1976 to receive the Pulitzer twice. Had not the Committee been unfair, and if the society were not racist, John Oliver Killens would have been the first novelist to win that prize three consecutive times. But the racially prejudiced committee preferred to ignore the work. He was pushed into obscurity by the racial indifference.

Killens' works were not acknowledged by the mainstream white academic world, neither by the scholars nor by the critics. He was termed as a black racist novelist who writes realistically of the black experiences in America in fictions structured with fabric of black folks and the blues. His first two novels, *Young Blood* & *And then We Heard the Thunder* were treated as two, long detailed, humorless, artless, almost documentary race, novels. A scholar named David Littlejohn observes *Youngblood* as a sort of Negro family epic, the expected tale of two generations of long-suffering black and their sadistic white masters in a Georgia town and the second novel, *And Then We Heard the Thunder* tells the interminable story of Negroes and (the whites) in wartime, where the ordeal of World War II seems less harrowing, in the long run, than the race war inside it. Both books are sincerely well intended and packed to bursting with details of Negro life, episode after episode, as detailed by a careful, intelligent, unimaginative Negro with absolutely no sense of the art of fiction. They represent the kind of novel most Americans with great stocks of experiences would probably write, if they had the will and were Negroes. (143-44)

Such a multi-dimensional writer, John Oliver Killens is practically, almost totally a forgotten phenomenon. There is no African Studies or English literature class teaches his work. Even a black professor or critic does not think about his contributions to literature and black psyche, not to think of any white American academician. In the words of Louis Reyes Rivera, "the overwhelming majority of our own African American writers and lecturers who had read his books have obviously chosen to offer neither article nor analysis of the man, his work and his times. In fact, from 1954 to 1987 Killens was one of the most influential living African American writers around. Yet, he's become as obscure, as unknown to the present generation" (Louis Reyes Rivera, 5). A talk during a lecture of Keith Gilyard speaks of negligence to the life and works of Killens in America. Yasmine Taylor-Hart, a 4th grade science and math teacher at EL Haynes Public Charter School spoke:

John Oliver Killens was a name that rang a faint bell way in the back of my mind. Why so faint a sound considering Killens' life of service, dedication to activism and contribution to Black Arts Movement? He ran in the circles with Maya, Malcolm, Martin, and Paul (those we know on first name basis), but I knew almost nothing about him and certainly knew little about his choice 'to teach at Howard over Harvard...' Why was this scholar left out of all of the major anthologies? Why is he virtually unknown? Where are all of the other biographies of this man? (Keith Gilyard's Book Talk about John Oliver Killens at Busboys and Poets. Tuesday, July 6, 2010)

To conclude, the mainstream American literary world refused even to acknowledge the contributions of Killens to the African American novel, not to talk of American novel. The Cambridge Companion to the African American novel edited by Maryemma Graham misses (or drops) Killens' name or novels. He does not find room in the index of the world famous companion devoted to African American novel.

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To Cite the Article: Bedre R T, "Racial Injustice on *John Oliver Killens*". Literary Cognizance, I-2 (Sept., 2015): 17-21. Web.