PROTEST AND ACCOMODATION UNDER THE CASTE SYSTEM

Hisao KISHIMOTO

In the years between 1876 and 1900, the foundations of the American caste system were laid. The new system rested ultimately on the plantation economy of the rural South; it was sustained in custom and in law by segregation, an elaborate pattern of caste relations which partly separates the races, permitting them to mingle only under circumstances humiliating to the subordinate caste.... No sooner did the embryonic Negro middle class emerge from slavery than it ran head-on into these caste barriers. This was the stuff of protest literature. For the most part the novelists of the Talented Tenth responded militantly to the post-Reconstruction repression, bringing every aspect of the caste system under attack. They wrote as participants in a desperate social struggle, defending themselves as best they could against peonage, lynching, disfranchisement, and segregation. Unfortunately, the imperative nature of their struggle caused them to regard the novel primarily as an instrument of propaganda.\(^{(1)}\)

by Robert A. Bone

In the 1890's the caste system was firmly established. It was quite different from the system of slavery in which plantation owners possessed slaves as their properties. Of course, the beginnings the caste system can be traced back to the existence of free blacks before the Civil War period; however, at that time it was not yet established as a system. After the Civil War, Reconstruction in the South gradually developed a tendency toward the caste system, and by the 1890's the disenfranchisement of blacks virtually ensured its establishment. For example, in 1883 the Supreme Court declared the Civil Rights Act unconstitutional, and in 1890, the Mississippi Constitutional Convention began the systematic exclusion of blacks from the political arena in the South by adopting literacy and other complex "understanding" tests as prerequisites for voting. Seven other states in the South adopted this policy as well. Moreover, in 1896 the Supreme Court in the Plessy vs. Ferguson decision upheld the doctrine of "separate but equal" — paving the way for the segregation of blacks in all walks of life. In 1989 "the grandfather clause" qualified poor whites to vote while it effectively curtailed black registration in Louisiana. In this way, the caste systems was established.

Under these circumstances black writers from the middle class naturally protested the system. The first novelist to do so was Francis E.W. Harper. It can be said that she belonged to the transitional school of novelists writing from the period of slavery through the post-war, although she wrote her novel *Iola Leroy* in 1893. Strictly speaking, in the 1890's the novels which most effectively attacked the caste system were *Appointed* (1894) by "Sanda" (Walter H. Stowers and William H. Anderson) and J. McHenry Jones *Hearts of Gold* which became a model of the protest novel. The trend continued with Sutton E. Griggs whose work, *Imperium in Imperio*, is the most militant in tone.
“Protest” which took the form of the abolitionist or propaganda novel was the inspiration for black fiction from an early period. Robert A. Bone points out that:

When the early novelist took pen in hand to oppose the post-Reconstruction repression, he wrote not only as a participant in a desperate social struggle, but as a belligerent in a long series of literary wars over the status of the Negro in the United States. The historical sequence of these wars runs roughly as follows: an attack on slavery by the Abolitionists; a counterattack by writers of the so-called plantation tradition, reinforced by other less general advocates of white supremacy then a spirited defense by Negro writers themselves, which began on a large scale during the 1890's and has continued to the present day.\(^{(2)}\)

Naturally, writers who lacked established literary precedents and traditions and whose concerns were urgent, could not afford the time to search for the appropriate style for their expressions. Therefore, it is inevitable that their novels contained numerous shortcomings. J. McHenry Jones borrowed his style from the genteel tradition so there is an inconsistency between his style and themes as there are in the works of all black writers in the 1890's. Because of this genteel style, the theme of protest lost its impact — it waivered between protest and accommodation, much like the debates of Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. DuBois. Even Sutton E. Griggs was influenced by this tendency and Paul Laurence Dunbar and Charles Waddel Chesnutt in depicting the plantation tradition were no exceptions.

I. Appointed by “Sanda”

According to Robert A. Bone “Sanda” was a pen name used by Walter H. Stowers and William H. Anderson. There are no detailed documents about them and until now, most scholars of black literature, outside of Robert A. Bone and Vernon Loggins, have overlooked them. Robert A. Bone insists that *Appointed* was written by Walter H. Stowers and William H. Anderson, on the other hand, Vernon Loggins claims that “for the identification of ‘Sanda’ as Walter H. Stowers I am indebted to Mr. Arthur A. Schomburg”.\(^{(3)}\) In any case, although the question of who is right remains unsolved, the book is cataloged as a black novel by “Sanda” at Schomburg Library.

*Appointed* is a story about the friendship between Seth Stanley, a white employer's son and John Saunders, an intelligent and reliable black. In Book I, Seth Stanley is the center of attention. After graduation from college, he leads a wild life backed by his father's wealth. One evening he attends a church entertainment where he is attracted to Miss Majorie Stone who performs a vocal solo. He drastically changes his way of life and makes an effort to be more serious. As Majorie Stone also loves him, he confesses, after long, sincere efforts to reform his life style, that he wants to marry her. However, she hesitates to accept his proposal considering his reputation. In order to make sure whether his attitude has really changed or not, she asks him to wait a year. Her suggestion shocks Seth so much that he decides not to see her. Soon after, he is seriously wounded by the crushing weight of freight elevator and then is stricken with malaria. Seth's father sends John Saunders to him as nurse and companion. Although Majorie has been informed of his condition via newspaper account, she is unable anything to help him as she is struggling with her own confusion. However, one day while shopping she happens to meet Seth's sister Imogene and takes this
opportunity to go see Seth. Their reunion makes her happier than she had been in a long time.

In Book II, the friendship between Seth and John increasingly deepens as John nurses Seth back to health and Seth comes to appreciate the situation of blacks. He decides to take a trip to a farm in Michigan with John where they enjoy long discussions, reading, sketching, and swimming. One day they are invited to a high-society party, at which John has a chance to talk with Mr. Andrews, an old abolitionist who, at present, is the Justice of the Peace in his township. However, when Mr. Andrews discovers that John’s real position is that of bookkeeper, he visibly shows his disgust, and moreover, criticizes Seth for treating John equally as he would a white person. The day following the party, Seth plans to visit the South to observe the situation of the blacks firsthand.

In spite of his father’s opposition, Seth dares to go to the South where he and Seth meet many difficulties. To begin with John is refused entry to hotel in New Orleans and Seth is criticized for his northern notions about blacks in a bank. Then on the way to Birmingham, Alabama, their steamboat catches fire. In Birmingham, one of the worst places for blacks in the state of Mississippi, they attend a church, where, as they start down one of the aisles, John’s entry is blocked because he is black. A few days later they go to a beautiful suburban park where John accidentally bumps into a middle-aged man. John apologizes, but the man strikes him with his cane until he falls to the ground. When the cane falls from the man’s hand, John picks it up and tries to attack the man, but Seth takes it away from him.

A policeman comes and handcuffs John. By that time the crowd who has been watching the scene exclaims: “Kill him! Lynch him!” Then some members of the crowd spit on him, strike him and throw stones at him. Seth tries to help, but his efforts are in vain. A person who happens to know that John comes from the North screams “He is a Northern nigger, been petted by Yankees, down with him.” The situation becomes more and more horrible. Some men run up with a rope to lynch John. As they pass the rope around his neck and begin to pull it, Seth springs to John’s side, pulls out his knife and cuts the rope in two. John’s neck is deeply cut by the rope and he is in serious condition. They are rescued from this terrible situation by the mayor who is attracted by the noise. The mob flees and peace is temporarily restored. However, when the mob gathers near the jail situation becomes serious again. With the aid of the mayor, Seth tries to help John escape, but a short distance from the jail they are caught and the mob hangs John from a tree. Before his death John whispers to Seth that “in naming you Seth, Hebrew for appointed, your parents must have been inspired, for you are appointed by God, through me — the dying — to aid in clearing our country from its false idea. You accept the trust?” Seth accepts and promises to work earnestly to help blacks. John also asks him to meet Majorie again. Seth goes back to the North with great grief, meets Majorie, and gets married. After a year passes they are established in a happy home, but not have forgotten the promise Seth made to John.

The plot of the story itself is not very complicated. Sanda’s descriptions of the injustice, cruelty, and brutality in the South were based on the experiences of both Saunders and Stanley and they are superbly written, especially the lynching scene which vividly conveys tension and terror:

When Saunders was secured threats began to be uttered in a low voice that increased in volume as the crowd grew larger, and as others catching them up repeated them, “Kill him!” “Lynch him!” was repeated louder and oftener.
And then the mob came nearer and nearer to him:

The mob itself was a motley one. It seemed as if the riff-raff of the town had suddenly blown together to whirl and twist around a moving center and vent its fury in loud curses and threatening as it surged along, with each individual part of it endeavoring to get nearer to the center. Here and there was a respectable appearing person who was urging on the others, and who was the most industrious in keeping up the passions of the mob by their loud and persistent crying of “Hang him! String him up to the nearest lamp post! Where’s a rope? D—the nigger!”(8)

The problem of the novel is in the theme. Despite the author’s intention to focus on injustice and brutality under the caste system, the result is very ambiguous because the main character is a white person. As a result, in Book I, especially, the novel seems more like the love story of Seth Stanley and Majorie. John is like a stand-by without an important role. In the last scene in Book II, Seth says “I have been so APPOINTED by the death, and I am but an instrument”(9) but he never shows actual proof of this after John’s death. The appointed should be the central symbol; however, here the symbol has no concrete manifestation, and consequently, it causes disruption of the symbolic unity of the novel, in another words, ideological confusion.

It is not clear why Seth should be the main character. Moreover, the character who plays the most important role and enhances the dramatic effect in John. In this respect, the theme and the main character are at odds. If Sanda had wanted to base the novel on the theme of injustice and brutality, he probably should have written it around John. Could it be that Sanda was overly conscious of his white readers? This seems quite plausible considering the condition of black writers of the day. Perhaps it is in the attempt to appease white readers that the novel falls into a quagmire of protest and accommodation. Fortunately, Sanda escapes though narrowly, from one of the most conventional stereotypic patterns, the depiction of the white villain, a man of bottomless perfidy like Alfred Lorrain in Iola Leroy or Mr. Stevens in The Garies and Their Friends; however, he makes a mistake in endowing his black hero with exaggerated virtues. Sanda describes John as follows:

Saunders was an Afro-American, but his complexion was fair and his features regular. He was slender of form and a medium height; his hair, slightly curling, was raven black, and his eyes were of the same hue. He had been a class-mate of Stanley in the High School at Detroit, and entered college at the same time at Ann Arbor taking the course of engineer.... Stanley not only found him reliable, but an agreeable and instructive companion.(10)

The young men at once hastened to Stanley’s side and seeing the sketch had to recognize the ability of artist.

“What sort of a colored man is that, Seth?” asked Parker, “a prodigy? I was surprised this morning at his manner of speech, he seemed so intelligent.”

“And he is intelligent,” replied Stanley, “and I confess that he is far better informed than I am. I often think it’s a pity he isn’t white.”(11)
Obviously, in these descriptions of John Saunders there is a propagandic element. Furthermore, to empathize the excellence of blacks, Majorie takes the role of spokeswoman:

"Why papa," said Majorie, "You must remember that our public schools are making many intelligent and refined colored boys and girls. I suppose it was different when you were a school boy. One of my classmates, a colored, girl, once loaned me a volume of poems written by a black girl named Phillis Wheatley, who lived in the time of Washington. It contained a translation of Homer's Odyssey, with a personal note from the Father of his country, congratulating her on its merits." (12)  

Many early black novelists relied on such exaggerated description and Sanda was no exception, though his description is than that of many of his predecessors. Moreover, other problems of black fiction remain unsolved.

II. Hearts of Gold

J. McHenry Jones published his novel *Hearts of Gold* in 1896. This novel provides the only clues we have about the author as other personal documents have been buried in the past. Like Jones' past, his novel is also doomed to obscurity because, according to the International Library Service in Japan, only three institutions have copies, and Howard University cannot locate its volume, California University's is not available, and the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture (New York) has the only available microfilm, but unfortunately, it is missing pp. 161 - 162.

This novel with a happy-ending treats injustice through convict-labor, lynching and segregation in the South. The story begins with the reunion of Knight Templars of the Red Cross at Mt. Clare during the summer of 188_. Lotus Stone and Clement St. John have been friends since boyhood; however, they have no chance to meet for two years until they both happen to attend the reunion of Knight Templars at Mt. Clare. They are both Afro-Americans, Lotus Stone is a medical school student and Clement St. John is reporter in a newspaper office. They attend a parade at the reunion and then drop into the "Elms", Mrs. Underwood's house, where they meet Miss Regenia Underwood a woman with Afro-American blood whom Lotus loves at first sight. Regenia loves Lotus, too. During the convocation, Lotus, Clement, Regenia, and Lucile, who is Clement's sweetheart and Regenia's friend, become friends and have a good time together. On the last day of the convocation they go on an excursion on a lake steamer with Dr. Leighton, Regenia's white cousin, who wants to marry her. Two steamers are connected with a gangway where passengers can enjoy talking and dancing. While Lotus and Clement go to buy lemon ices, all of a sudden, a dark cloud gathers toward the northeast and the boats are dashed by a wave. There is a great commotion among the passengers. Regenia and many other people are in danger of falling into the water. Lotus rescues Regenia and many other people while Dr. Leighton watches the scene without offering any help. On this occasion, Dr. Leighton's cold-heartedness sets the stage for his role in future incidents.

After the excursion the group returns to their homes and everyday lives. Lotus writes many letters to Regenia and Regenia writes to him; however, they do not receive each other's replies. Although they believe in each other, after non-communication, a subtle distrust hovers like a
cloud over them. When Regenia attends the wedding of Clement and Lucile, Mrs. Underwood be-
comes ill and dies from Dr. Leighton’s treatment. Dr. Leighton wants to inherit Mrs. Under-
wood’s property. When Regenia returns to the “Elms”, Dr. Leighton tries to force her to marry
him; however, she refuses because she still cannot forget Lotus. In order to inherit Mrs. Under-
wood’s property, Dr. Leighton kidnaps Mrs. Levitt, the foster mother of Regenia who knows
Mrs. Underwood’s will. Regenia who lost her grandmother, foster mother, and the “Elms” does
not suspect Leightons clever forgery but she suspects his intentions towards her and decides to
leave soon and go to Minton where Lucile is living.

Fortunately, with the help of Clement Regenia gets a job as a teacher in the South. However,
she still cannot escape the evil influence of Dr. Leighton. About a month after her arrival in
Grandville, she finds Dr. Leighton there and he tries to approach her, again in vain. One evening,
when one of her pupils becomes ill she calls on the child and to her surprise meets Lotus who be-
came a doctor and came to Grandville to begin his medical practice on the recommendation of
his friend, Clement. Their mutual misunderstandings are gradually resolved but Dr. Leighton, who
dislikes their association, tries every possible way to see Regenia and make trouble for Lotus.

One evening in November, Regenia meets Lotus and he confesses his love to her. Soon after,
Lotus falls into Dr. Leighton’s hands and is arrested. Regenia is attacked by Dr. Leighton who
early strangles her. She falls unconscious and then develops brain fever. Lotus is sent to jail under
charge of malpractice because he has no money for bail and no witnesses to testify to his inno-
cence. He seeks Regenia’s help but she is in serious condition and doesn’t even know of the incident.
Weeks later he is sent to a convict camp where he has to work hard without much food or rest
from morning till night. Consequently, about five months later he is unable to work or even to
move. His friend, No. “47”, tries to help him but in vain. The guard cries “You lazy devil, get out
there in your place or I’ll brain you”. And at last he undergoes the most cruel of all punish-
ments practiced by the Spanish Inquisition. He then comes down with a fever and he is sent to
a hospital. While in the hospital, the convict camp is attacked by Welshtown miners who free the
convict labors.

Clement happens to meet Lotus at the hospital, and the governor grants a petition that gives
Clement permission to remove Lotus from the hospital. Regenia goes Milton to recuperate while
Lotus returns to Grandville and then goes to Milton with Clement. Before his arrival, Regenia goes
to Breeze Nook to regain her health with Lucile. Clement and Lotus start out to on a journey to
rescue Mrs. Levitt who has been kidnapped by Dr. Leighton, and on the way Clement reveals
Regenia’s attitude toward Lotus and her present situation.

Clement and Lotus succeed in rescuing Mrs. Levitt and go with her to Breeze Nook. There they
all have a reunion and Regenia and Lotus are again closely united. Dr. Leighton then attempts to
murder Lotus with his revolver, but at the critical moment, Clement wrenches the revolver from
his hand. When Dr. Leighton is fleeing on the railroad tracks a engine runs over him. The last scene
occurs in the same place as the first scene which occured four years before. Lotus and Regenia live
at the “Elms” where Clement and Lucille visit them. They are watching the marching men of the
convocation happily with their children.

What is the theme or the meaning of “Hearts of Gold”? Needless to say, the title signifies the
subject. J. McHenry Jones even includes a chapter entitled “Hearts of Gold” — Chapter XXXI.
The first heart of gold is that of Regenia who devoted herself to Lotus in spite of many difficulties
and the second is the heart of Mrs. Levitt who devoted herself to Regenia notwithstanding her considerable long-term confinement in the lighthouse by Dr. Leighton. Regenia, especially, symbolizes “gold”. This is particularly clear in the following passage concerning Lotus’s thought while in jail:

One thought alone beat in upon the discouraged condition of Lotus with the certainty of fate: “Whatever the accusation against him, Regenia would never believe it true”. His faith in her love was an impregnable barrier against the dashing waves of despair. Let all the world be false, Regenia, at least, would be as true as gold. It remains to be seen whether the faith, which he believed on that morning to be as fixed as the eternal certitudes, will be shaken by the trials awaiting him. (16)

This is the only explicit reference to Regenia as “gold”. Consequently, the novel is nothing more than a melancholy love story. In addition, the main characters remain unreformed from the old tradition of black novel, that is, they are all intelligentsia from the black middle class. J. McHenry Jones describes the three major characters as follows:

In complexion, Clement St. John was fair, in truth, too fair for an Afro-American, or any other American to the manor born. His skin, save here and there marked by an ugly freckle, was as free from pigment as an Albino’s. His white face, with undoubted African features, was crowned with a shock of reddish-brown hair, stiff and bristly. A sickly mustache, of faded red, which the wearer, fearing it would lose its curl, twisted nervously, gave to his angular features a decidedly unique expression. From beneath a scanty row of disarranged eyebrows, peeped a steel gray eye, which, under certain surroundings, shaded into faded blue. His eyes possessed a daring twinkle at utter variance with the insipid color of his face. Large hands, which in reality were not mates; tall, narrow-shouldered and awkward, Clement St. John was a young man with a clear head, stout heart and upright disposition. (17)

Lotus Stone had that peculiar complexion seen in no land but our own, and among no other people but Afro-Americans. His complexion was a transparent brown, without the sarthiness which is noticeable in the dark races of the world.

His color was the product of a century of miscegenation of the best blood of the Caucasian, Negro and Indian races. His features were regular. Black eyes, black mustache, heavy eyebrows within a line of meeting, made a face that one might dwell upon restfully, after contemplating for a time upon the singular looks of his companion.

His hair, which was closely cut, and had a wiry tendency which proved that through a century of infiltration the negro was still on top. He wore a pair of gold-rimmed glasses, made secure by a black silk cord. The latter appendage was indeed necessary, as the glasses, for want of sufficient bridge, sat awkwardly upon the saddle which nature had designed for spectacles of a different make. (18)

Regenia Underwood, for this was the young girl’s name, was the very embodiment of vivacious, budding womanhood.
Dressed in some kind of soft white goods, draped loosely and clasped at the waist with a rosette of cream ribbon, she made a picture seldom seen among the women of our country.

Too fair for a brunette, she was a shade too dark for a blonde. Her complexion was a cream into which some fairy's hand had deftly mixed the first rays of the morning's sun, throwing into her color a soft, rich, radiance, indescribably elusive. Of medium height, her form was the perfection of symmetry. Her face, of classic mold, was almost severe in its hauteur, yet about the well curved red lips and large brown eyes, swimming in their liquid depths, played constantly the faint suspicion of a smile. A wealth of dark brown hair hung in natural ringlets above her oval forehead. (19)

A common feature of these long descriptions is that each person has caucasian blood for one reason or another. This miscegenation is a symbol of the black middle class and the conventional hero or heroine in the black novel. Robert A. Bone pointed out that "through the figure of the tragic mulatto they could stress the 'irrational' nature of caste, with the implication that the colour bar should be lowered, at least for descendants of the dominant race". (20) Although in a sense portraying heroes as mulatto is convenient for protest, the end result is that the protest becomes subtle and weak because, although it enlists the white reader's sympathy, the mulatto doesn't belong to either the white or black race. To compensate for this deficiency, this kind of novel must adopt a moral stance. The unfavorable role is played by Dr. Leighton, who is depicted as "a white villain with bottomless perfidy".

Another weak point is the preoccupation with black middle class consciousness. The author states that Regenia was "reared in an atmosphere of ease and refinement, she was illly prepared for the uncouth side of life she was so soon to enter". (21) This description removes Regenia far from the black masses. A further denial of blacks and blackness tendency is apparent in the description of Clement and Lotus who seems like whites. For instance, Clement is described as a man with "stout heart and upright disposition" and Lotus is one of the lawabiding people, who never escape from jail in spite of having the chance. Such description though well intentioned, actually express contempt for the black masses. A more obvious example found in the following depictions of Abe Johnsing and Regenia in a waiting room:

Abe Johnsing was one of those traitorous Afro-Americans who for a few paltry dollars and the deceptive smiles of such as Dr. Leighton, would sell the fee simple of their soul's salvations. (22)

The waiting room for Negroes was the smoking room for everybody else. Amid a cloud of smoke, and the insulting stare of coarse white men and rude Negroes, the two young ladies hid away in a corner of the room. Here they sat, too scared to be indignant; smarting under the insult, but too much cowed by their surroundings to protest. (23)

Color consciousness surfaces here and there, and consequently undermines the significance
of the injustice, and the convict camp, and the symbol of the nocturnal escapade of white therefore become ambiguous, subtle and, at last, weak. The novels of black authors of the time as well as those of previous authors have shortcomings, many of which are similar to those found in *Hearts of Gold*. Under the caste system, these are the burdens which “Sanda” and J. McHenry Jones had to bear.

NOTES

2) Ibid., p. 21.
5) Ibid., p. 331.
6) Ibid., p. 330.
7) Ibid., p. 330.
8) Ibid., p. 332.
9) Ibid., p. 371.
10) Ibid., p. 10.
11) Ibid., p. 41.
12) Ibid., p. 82.
13) I received a letter from Howard University with the remark that “we were not able to locate the volume you requested”. (2 Nov., 1977) I could not get the microfilm reproduction from California University in spite of sending money. (23 June, 1978) My university librarian and I sent letters three times in vain.
15) Ibid., p. 242. J. McHenry Jones describes the Spanish Inquisition:
   “He then began that most cruel of all the punishments practiced by the Spanish Inquisition, pouring water down a victim’s throat through a funnel until the stomach distends, and pushing up against the heart and other vital organ, produces a pain not less severe than death itself.”
16) Ibid., p. 229.
17) Ibid., pp. 2–3.
18) Ibid., p. 3.
20) Bone, op. cit., p. 23.
21) Jones, op. cit., p. 163.
22) Ibid., p. 230. “Sell the free simple of their soul’s salvation” may be “simply sell his soul salvation for a small fee”.
23) Ibid., p. 201.