

Vol 3 Issue 12 Jan 2014

Impact Factor : 1.7604(UIF)

ISSN No : 2230-7850

International Multidisciplinary
Research Journal

*Indian Streams
Research Journal*

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RNI MAHMUL/2011/38595

ISSN No.2230-7850

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OBAMA, THE JEREMIAD AND THE AMERICAN DREAM

Ritika Singh

Abstract:—"The jeremiad was filled with underlying optimism about America's fate and mission...[I]ts dark portrayal of current society never questioned America's promise and destiny" (Pitney 6-7).

Keywords: American Dream , society , subtle structural , generosity .

INTRODUCTION

Underneath the brief account of the problems that gripped America, Obama does hint at his 'audacity of hope' towards the realization of the American Dream. There can be seen elements of the tradition of jeremiad that lend a subtle structural unity to his speech and also urges for this hope. While reverend Wright uses the jeremiad to negate this sense of hopefulness by concluding that "God [will] Damn America", Obama on the other hand re-establishes the faith "in the decency and generosity of the American people" (Obama 1)

The Jeremiad's tripartite structure: the evocation of America as the promised just land; an account of the failures that hold America from becoming an ideal of justice and equality and lastly; a prophetic declaration that the promise can still be fulfilled; is evoked in his speech and Obama borrows delicately from this structure but also diverts from it and presents a kind of a remix of the tradition. He does this particularly when he injects it with a personal ethos connected with the pathos and logos. H. S. Alim and Geneva Smitherman in *Articulate while Black* suggest that:

Obama connects America's prophetic promise to his life journey and his family history, establishing his identity and authenticity- again an element not in the typical Black Jeremiad, where the speaker generally eschews any presentation of his personal biography (84).

The black jeremiad, can be seen as an adaption of the 'white jeremiad' of the Puritans but using it for the purpose of the emancipation from slavery, segregation and racial discrimination. Fredrick Douglass' "What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?" King's "I Have a Dream", David Walker's pamphlet "Appeal to The Colored People of the United States", Du Bois' works in "The Crisis" all can be seen as an example of the form of a black jeremiad with strong undercurrents of the same hope in the American dream that Obama draws on. He, then, despite playing with the structure of the traditional jeremiad, fits aptly into this lineage of speakers and writers.

However, Obama does not use the caustic emotive language of his predecessors, neither does he use a hypnotic cadence or the anaphora used by speakers like King. By altering the form, Obama then moves towards a more contemporary and global understanding of the Dream. Drawing on a common humanity that not only helps make a 'black' brotherhood or a 'white-black' brotherhood but a universal one, which cuts across all lines, and here the American Dream is given a global dimension and his perspicuous understanding of the prevalent multiculturalism and its narrative:

It requires all Americans to realize that your dreams do not have to come at the expense of my dreams; that investing in the health, welfare, and education of black and brown and white children will ultimately help all of America prosper (Obama 7).

The larger question is whether Obama was successful at realizing the American Dream. The statistical enquiry into the conditions of the coloured, highlights that the black unemployment rate has increased and hate crimes did see a rise. However the answer needs to take into account that the Dream is not one which can be achieved in a single president's four year term or perhaps even in his second term. While the Jeremiad insinuates the prophetic hope, to assume and demand that Obama could achieve it perfectly is then to give him almost the role of the prophetic messiah. The very global multicultural unity that he calls on, as Dorothy Rabinowitz asserts in her article in the Wall Street Journal, has made Obama an 'alien in the white house' as he belongs to all yet to none at all:

Those qualities to be expected in a president were never about rhetoric; ...A great part of America now understands that this president's sense of identification lies elsewhere, and is in profound ways unlike theirs. He is hard put to sound convincingly like the leader of the nation, because he is, at heart and by instinct, the voice mainly of his ideological class. He is the alien in the White House, a matter having nothing to do with delusions about his birthplace cherished by the demented fringe.

While the tradition of the jeremiad, the black jeremiad, rhetoric and persuasion might all be proved in his speech, there are doubts whether Obama can be successful at the his attempts and rounds of criticism have been and might continue to be levied against him but Obama's belief that the Dream in the end "can never be perfect, but generation after generation has shown that it can always be perfected" (Obama 8) is in line with the hope that the Black Jeremiad raises.

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