



‘Thus spake an actor; the socio-cultural study of ‘The Measure of a man’, a spiritual autobiography of Sidney Poitier’

"I have no wish to play the pontificating fool, pretending that I've suddenly come up with the answers to all life's questions. Quite that contrary, I began this book as an exploration, an exercise in self-questing. In other words, I wanted to find out, as I looked back at a long and complicated life, with many twists and turns, how well I've done at measuring up to the values I myself have set."

Abstract:

This research paper focuses on the need of some basic human values adhering to which a lost citizen in present materialistic world can save his soul. Like Poitier, the central figure in this classical work, one can show unusual courage and determination defeating hostile circumstances. What matters most in life, as the readers learn here, is unselfish love and sacrifice for the family, readiness to stand by it and understand the true meaning of life.

Keywords: Autobiography, racial discrimination, struggle.

Sidney Poitier is a Bahamian-American actor, film director, author and diplomat. In 1964, he was the first black person to win an Academy Award for Best Actor for his role in *‘Lilies of the Field.’* He has dealt with the issues of racial discrimination in all three movies in which he worked i.e. *To Sir, with Love; In the Heat of the Night;* and *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner.* In 1999, the American Film Institute considered Poitier among the Greatest Male Stars of All Time, ranking 22nd on the list of 25.

Poitier has directed a number of captivating movies, such as *‘A Piece of the Action,’ ‘Uptown Saturday Night,’ ‘Let's Do It Again,’ ‘Stir Crazy’* and *‘Ghost Dad’*. In 2002, ‘Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences’ felicitated him by designating an honorary award. On August 12, 2009, Sidney Poitier was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the United States of America's highest civilian honor, by President Barack Obama.

Very few actors can look beyond stardom or are found making sincere attempts to understand true meaning of life. They care little for basic human values and lie in their ivory towers. And that is why Sidney Poitier's life and career sets him apart from the rest of his fellow actors. The reading of his spiritual autobiography *‘The Measure of a Man’* leaves the reader spell bound, both for its content and poetic style. By giving a vivid

account of main events of his life, turning points in his career, his struggles and harsh realities of life, he has enriched literary world.

Poitier spent major part of his life in three different places-Cat Island, Nassau and Miami-each playing a vital role in shaping his personality. Experiences-good and bad-helped bring out the best hidden within. His being a Black caused many problems. In his own words, 'Society had created laws to keep me at a distance, or out of sight altogether.' (81)But he did not give in and went on removing racial barriers one after another. As Kailana says,

"Poitier was uncompromising as he pursued a personal and public life that would honour his upbringing and the invaluable legacy of his parents. Just a few years after his introduction to indoor plumbing and the automobile, Poitier broke racial barrier after racial barrier to launch a pioneering acting career. Committed to the notion that what one does for a living articulates to who one is, Poitier played only forceful and affecting characters who said something positive, useful, and lasting about the human condition"

He remembers fondly the years he spent as a child at Cat Island. There was an unpolluted atmosphere, quite life and community of innocent people. How nice it was to live in the vicinity of Mother Nature where trees, birds, flowers, stars filled one's heart with bliss and joy. Poitier recalls,

" In the kind of place where I grew up what's coming at you is the sound of the sea and the smell of the wind and momma's voice and the voice of your dad and the craziness of your brothers and sisters... and that's it" (07)

The Poitiers were not affluent and yet they did not grudge. Mark the words of the writer, 'the special beauty of Cat Island wasn't just what we had, it was also what we didn't have'.(05) What a sharp observation! The message Poitier wants to send is that in spite of having so many means of entertainment, a modern man is not happy. Serene beauty of sky studded with stars cannot be replaced by any programme on TV channel. But it was a short lived experience for him because he was forced to leave for Nassau in search of green pastures. Nassau disappointed him beyond imagination. He lost his childhood and circumstances compelled him to act like a grown up man. His parents decided to send him to Miami which crushed his dreams. As Ann Carlin remarks,

"Yet by the time he was ten, Mr. Poitier had left the idyllic Cat Island, bound for neighboring Nassau. The US State Department had banned the importation of tomatoes grown in the Bahamas, thus cutting off the livelihood of Sidney Poitier's father. Surely life in Nassau would be better. Yet, life in Nassau proved to be anything but better. It was urban, there were gangs, there was racism; young Sidney was soon getting into trouble. Mr. Poitier writes of the impact the move to Nassau had on him in poignant terms,"

None can predict the course of life-more so in the case of the poor. Many things awaited to bring tears in his eyes and only a few to cheer him up. He started as a dish washer, got humiliated and finally won international fame bagging several awards.

Any other human being sailing in the same boat might have been a victim of depression, but not Sidney Poitier. The values he imbibed from his parents sustained him in all adversities. He showed unusual moral courage, forgiveness, love, compassion and wisdom to meet any challenge howsoever great. As Ann Carlin says,

“Mr. Poitier writes of the special relationship he had with both his mother and father, and their profound values which permeated his life. He believes that in the core of his being lies the continuance of his mother’s soul, spirit, and gift.”

While reading this much acclaimed book, the readers get a fair and balanced picture of Poitier as an actor, a son, a loving husband and above all a noble human being.

Poitier chose the title ‘The Measure of a Man’ remembering golden advice he received from his father who used to say ‘The measure of a man is how well he provides for his children’.(181) As Mr. Poitier says, *“The greatest part of that legacy from my father is the knowledge that in discipline and commitment lies hope.”* (189)Reggi, the father of Sidney Poitier himself was a man of sterling character, a man of few needs and took utmost care of his family. Poitier feels his presence by him throughout his life and lives up to his ideals. He acknowledges humbly contribution of his parents under whose loving and careful upbringing he felt secure. After his break up, he too tried to maintain close relationship with his own children.

We, as a reader, cannot help admire the writer for whom simple life with a definite goal was more important than anything else. Here he tells us what type of human life ought to be and what type of life a modern man is living. It is his desire, ‘I would like people to see me as a person who has some value unto himself’.

The ultimate aim of a common man is to have better life, to make upward movement. But Poitier asks us rather an inconvenient question, ‘Do we have any idea of what better life is?’ We just drag on without bothering to get true meaning of life. Poitier satirizes attitudes saying that we have forgotten the fact that we have something ‘resembling’ the soul. In this excellent book, written with utmost integrity, the readers find themselves face to face with a man seeking truth, passion and balance in the face of limits- his own and the worlds’.

As Donald Haene says,

“If the true measure of a man is how he provides for his children, what a legacy Sidney Poitier has left all of us: Self-respect. Thoughtful use of (and the importance of) language. Patience and humility. And dignity and grace above all else.”

Works Cited

Primary source

1. Poitier, Sidney. *The Measure of A Man:a spiritual autobiography*. New York: Harper Collins, 2000. Print.

Secondary Sources

1. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sidney_Poitier. 20th March,2015
2. [//www.bookbrowse.com/reviews/index.cfm/book_number/472/the-measure-of-a-man](http://www.bookbrowse.com/reviews/index.cfm/book_number/472/the-measure-of-a-man). 20th march,2015
3. Carlin, Ann. http://www.seedsofunfolding.org/issues/9_07/resources.htm. 20th March,2015.

Nisarg Kothari

Assistant Professor

Department of English

Arts, Science and Commerce College

Surat

Copyright © 2012- 2016 KCG. All Rights Reserved. | Powered By: Knowledge Consortium of Gujarat