Men We Reaped: A Call For A Revolutionary Social System

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Jesmy Ward’s captivating memoir, Men We Reaped, expresses the trauma of being African American in the south. Published in 2013, Ward tells the stories of five young Black men whom she lost in her life, over the span of four years, due to extreme social conditions in Delisle, Mississippi. She explores the consequences of being African American in a racist social system, a system that deprives them of education, economic prosperity, and a will to live. The purpose of the memoir is to show the reader the socio-economic environments that African Americans are forced to live in that cause death, poverty, mental health issues, and despair.

The memoir serves as a continuous result of the social norms that were created by society. White supremacists established a state of social normality in African American communities during enslavement. Consequently, after 250 years of chattel slavery and 400 of Black life in America, these malicious social norms of poor housing, poor jobs, poor education, broken families, and others are still pertinent to the social conditions of African Americans today. However, with the collective effort of all African Americans, acquiring knowledge can eradicate the white supremacy social system. Knowledge acquisition affords individuals the ability to master their social environment. Social systems create social norms that determine realities; in the
case of African Americans, those norms have claimed the lives of many as we have seen in Ward's memoir. An act of rebellion against the social norms is required to revolutionize the racist social system. Humanity can benefit from an all-inclusive revolutionary social system that achieves justice, peace, harmony, and equality.

The despair that encapsulates Ward's hometown is a microcosm of African American communities everywhere. The walls of oppression appeared to be too high to climb for her friends and family. Ward said, “I knew I lived in a place where hope and a sense of possibility were as ephemeral as morning fog, but I did not see the despair at the heart of our drug use” (Ward 34). That place, and many other places in African American neighborhoods, are socially constructed to be hopeless. Those tragic socio-economic environments are built and maintained by white supremacists, suppressing any hope of a better tomorrow. The powerful people who established the social system in America laid out predestined social roles for African Americans. The role is that of an “institutional inferior.” That role has no self-respect and no respect for others and the world. That role is associated with the amount of power one has in society. African Americans, especially if they are poor, have no power in a racist society.

There are two roles in a racist social system that determine your identity. Your identity is either that of the oppressor or that of the oppressed. During enslavement their identity was stripped from them; they were given the names of their slave masters and were separated from their families. This was the initial step in the social construction of the African American identity. It was documented in the U.S. Constitution that African Americans were three-fifths of a human being. To be fully recognized as a human you must know who you are. African Americans do not know who they are in terms of their history and culture. Their perception of themselves is seen through the eyes of their oppressor. Du Bois explained it perfectly when saying, "It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity" (Du Bois 7).

Jesmyn Ward felt this sensation when her father left. She was getting older, and all her father’s facial features disappeared in the mirror. She felt like her father's abandonment was an augury of social rejection. "I looked at myself and saw a walking embodiment of everything the world around me seemed to despise: an unattractive,
poor, Black woman” (Ward 135). Ward’s immediate family structure was destroyed before its inception. As mentioned before, slave owners destroyed the African American family unit, they separated husbands from wives, mothers from children, and minds from bodies. That pain and logic framework of being separate was perpetuated from generation to generation. With the addition of economic disparity, African American males are not permitted to take care of their families. This has a trickle-down effect of despair, especially in the home. Ward’s family dynamic and social environment is a perfect representation of the social system for African Americans. One of the effects is gender-specific roles in the family. Her mother inherited the role of mother and father, the provider and caregiver. The weight of responsibility on the oldest child (Ward) forces a maturity level on that child beyond their years which causes depression. Ward has a family history of growing up fatherless on both sides of her family. This social construct leaves to the mother the burden of raising children all by herself. Ward imagined her mother had dreams, but they were sacrificed to raise her and her siblings while her father got to act upon his own dreams. Her father suffered from a lack of self-love caused by poverty and as Ward puts it, an endemic of joblessness. Her father deliberately refused to commit to her mother because he did not love himself. Patricia Hill Collins said, “But recognize: Any man who doesn’t truly love himself is incapable of loving us in the healthy way we need to be loved” (Joan Morgan cited in Collins 258). How can a man love himself living within those social conditions of poverty, lack of education, and joblessness? Collins states, “Racism continues to operate in gender and class-specific ways and seeing how this happens might revitalize Black male-female love relationships” (Collins 253). The veil that Du Bois discusses does not allow African American people the ability to see. If her father had recognized the injustice, he would have committed a rebellious act against society, marrying a Black woman as Collins so eloquently explained. But that recognition has yet to come to the forefront. This is the goal of the white supremacy social system. To establish an inferiority complex within the minds of African Americans in their community.

The goal of this social system is to dominate African Americans in every endeavor (education, entertainment, economics, labor, law, sex, and war) causing unbearable social conditions. It is a wretched environment, the reactionary social system, that African Americans live in that causes psychological and physical
death. Ward researched the fact, “Recently, researchers at Columbia University’s Mailman School of Public Health found that poverty, lack of education, and poor social support contribute to as many deaths as heart attack, stroke, and lung cancer in the United States. These are the numbers that bear fruit in reality” (Ward 237).

A reactionary social system is a reaction from a person that is driven by self-destructive behavior due to their social conditions that deem them worthless. This system is a crime against humanity. America has inferiorized African Americans and suppressed the functioning of their brains. The function of the brain is to detect and solve problems both in their physical and social aspects. This process of inferiorization causes negative experiences in their environment which forms their negative self-image and self-concept. The continuation of any people is through children. African American children are under attack. This reactionary social system can turn a child who has potential greatness into a drug dealer. Ward’s cousin, CJ, was exuberant and athletic. Like most kids in Delisle, Mississippi he grew up poor, fatherless and dropped out of high school. After being neglected by school administrators CJ succumbed to the social norm of becoming a drug dealer. The economic climate in Delisle was gloomy, minimum wage jobs consumed the town. Ward said it felt like walking into a storm surge: a cycle of futility (Ward 121). Futility is how the social system feels about African American lives. The social system killed CJ psychologically because its representatives did not care enough to provide him the positive social environment he needed. The social system physically killed CJ because they did not care enough to put up a reflective gate arm and flashing lights at a railroad crossing in a mainly Black area. How can African Americans escape this nightmare of a reality?

Do they conform to the social norms and escape through infidelity? Do they conform to the social norms and escape through drug and alcohol abuse? Do they conform to the social norms and escape through suicide? The only way to escape that nightmare of reality is through proper identity-based education. Du Bois said that “book-learning” can help African Americans analyze the burden carried upon their backs, that deadweight of social degradation (10). Ward realized this as she read books and went on to graduate from prestigious institutions. It allowed her to analyze the problems that engulfed her community. We live in an Age of Information where knowledge is readily available. There is a phenomenon that if you want to hide
something from Black people, put it in a book. We must pick up those books. Du Bois
has written, “A people thus handicapped ought not to be asked to race with the world,
but rather allowed to give all its time and thought to its own social problems” (11).
Education has the power to solve social problems. Education has the power to
provoking self and group respect for oneself and others. Education has the power to
revolutionize the white supremacy social system into a revolutionary one that has
possibilities. Possibilities of: economic prosperity, two-parent households, proper
education, hope, and of being recognized as human beings. African Americans must
dive into the sea of Black History and explore hidden knowledge about themselves
and bring it back to the top so that they can exhale. They need to know that they were
once powerful people who worked in “UNITY”. African Americans can solve their
problems with their analyses and without the help of their white counterparts. Dr.
Jawanza Kunjufu, an education consultant, once said, “White supremacy can be
conquered with Afrocentricity. African people must immerse themselves in their
history and culture.” This allows them to come together in solidarity and, with the
combination of a strong economic foundation, end systemic oppression. Then and
only then can African American souls thrive.
Works Cited

