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St. George and the Parisian Society

This essay revolves around the documentary, *Le Mozart Noir: The Life & Music of Joseph Boulogne, Chevalier de Saint-Georges.* In this documentary life events of the great composer of the 18th century, St. George is described. His musical compositions are also played and critically analyzed by various violinists, whereas his life choices and circumstances are explained by various historians. This essay revolves around the themes of slavery, racial prejudice, art and age of enlightenment because these things dominated his life circumstances and at the same time influenced his compositions.

Slavery prevailed in the 17th century France and Black Africans were pushed into slavery by the French influential and aristocratic class. They used to ridicule them by referring them as dirty and heathens. The skin color also served as a bone of contention under the regime of French colonization, however, the aristocracies would keep Black women as mistresses because of their exotic persona. St. George's father brought him and his mother to France because they both had a good relationship with one another. His father adored him and he was affectionate towards him. However, his father wanted him to introduce in the French aristocratic class because he had high plans for St. George's future in France. I quite disagree with this thinking and I believe that George Bologne was highly obsessed with the class system as a part of the French aristocracy himself. Moreover, he could never accept a mulatto as his son so he wanted to change his personality by removing the true ethnic identity of St. George. Besides, this can be the sole reason that he introduced St. George to an alien culture by removing the latter’s sense of his native cultural values. George Bologne still placed his own cultural values at a high pedestal as compared to the African culture. The Parisian society was ill at odds with St. George because of their class system and discriminatory practices.

St. George had to face racial prejudices in the Parisian society where his art was admired nonetheless but he always remained an outsider of them. French women used to lust after him because of his exotic looks and this also reflects at the colonial practice of viewing the Other from a distance. He would court French women but he never received love and true acceptance from them because he was an outsider. In history, he is written as a ladies man because of his inferior position. In my opinion, this treatment of St. George points to the hypocritical behavior of the Parisian society because of their pretentious attitude, at the same time they would use him as a prop. St. George failed to assimilate in the host country because of his ethnic differences and people would ask him for a duel in fencer, not because they admired his skills. Instead, it showed their obsession with their hierarchical position and they could never tolerate a talented Black man because of his inferior social standing.

St. George took refuge in art and became an excellent composer. I believe that his talent was better expressed through art because it provided him with an opportunity to express himself. This can also suggest that he could never take hold of the narrative power so he resorted to compositions and his tunes enamored the Parisian society to some extent. Besides, it also refutes the French colonizers’ claims that the culture he lived in was the culture of heathens or illiterate people. African culture in every age has prioritized its cultural and mythological values as a reminder to their people that they have a sense of culture and morals. His art was targeted because of his race and ethnic background. He could never be viewed as a gentleman. He always remained a “mulatto” in the eyes of the French aristocracies and the artist in him also became a victim to racial prejudices. He got distanced from art and took up the role of a soldier, this points at the reaffirmation of racial prejudices that Black men are violent. On the other hand, these social stigmas made it even harder for them to develop their own sense of identity and in order to assimilate with the home culture, they suffer through the fragmentation of their identities.

The Age of Enlightenment influenced St. George and he became a revolutionary, fighting for the rights of people of color alongside his French countrymen. However, he failed to safeguard the rights of his people because he was imprisoned by the newly formed French government. People of France saw better days but slavery could not be fully abolished because the revolution only benefitted the French public. This affected his art too and he got further distanced from his art because the Parisian society decided roles for him and he could never really be treated as a gentleman. I view his role as a revolutionary because he fought for both his home country and his country of origin but he suffered from double consciousness. He was a part of both societies yet one society ridiculed him publically whereas the other thought of him as assimilated in an alien culture.

St. George's life events are very much similar to every African American or the Caribbean who were once colonized. The Parisian society treated him as a prop and they decided roles for him and rejected his artistic matter because of his skin color and ethnicity. He was never really welcomed in the French aristocratic class despite his status as a skilled fencer or a great composer. He was always viewed as an “outsider” and “unmarriageable” because of his low social status. Besides, he was publically humiliated and his “Christian” name also never earned him respect because he was addressed as a mulatto and not a French gentleman. He never got the authority to hold his narrative power and his music became his avenue for expressing his freedom of voice and freedom of expression. He was never treated well in a Parisian society because of racial prejudices and even when he was free, he lived a life worse than any slave.