

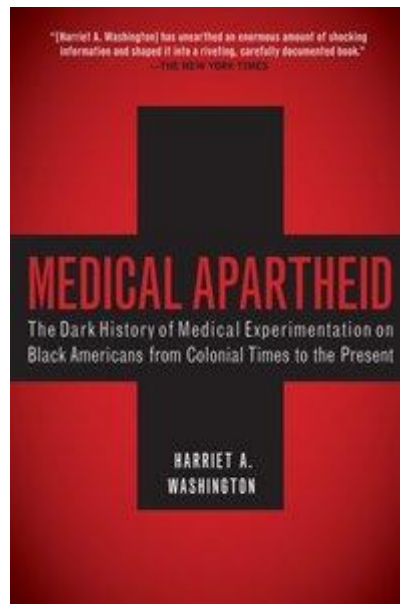
CMDR Journal of Social Research

(A Biannual Journal of Centre for Multi-disciplinary Development Research, Dharwad)

ISSN: 3049-1797 (Print) (Vol.2, No.1, Jan-Jun 2025, pp.94-95)

Book Review

Medical Apartheid: The Dark History of Medical Experimentation on Black Americans from Colonial Times to the Present



Author: Harriet A. Washington

Publisher: Doubleday, New York. 2007. 512 pages. Price: Rs 1399

ISBN: 978-0385509930

Harriet A. Washington's *Medical Apartheid* is an incisive, deeply researched exploration of systemic medical abuse and exploitation experienced by Black Americans from colonial America to the present. Washington's work combines exhaustive archival research with vivid narrative to expose how racialised biomedical practices have produced enduring health inequities and fostered profound mistrust in medical institutions.

Washington structures her work chronologically, beginning with the coerced experimental surgeries performed by J. Marion Sims on enslaved Black women without anaesthesia- an act justified by prevailing racist theories of Black physiology and sensitivity. She documents how Sims's so-called surgical "breakthroughs" entrenched dehumanising ideologies that rationalised further abuses. In her examination of the Tuskegee syphilis study (1932–1972), Washington reveals the deliberate withholding of penicillin from hundreds of Black men to observe untreated syphilis's natural progression. This atrocity, she argues, epitomises structural violence, whereby institutional racism is enacted through medical policy and practice, leaving a legacy of intergenerational trauma and distrust. Washington further delves into the case of Henrietta Lacks, whose cervical cancer cells were taken without her consent in 1951 and propagated as the immortal HeLa cell line, fueling countless medical breakthroughs while her family remained uninformed and uncompensated- an emblematic

instance of how Black bodies were commodified within biomedical research. Moreover, she uncovers the widespread coerced sterilisation of African American women under eugenics programs in the mid-20th century. Often conducted in publicly funded hospitals without informed consent, these forced procedures reflected a racist ideology aimed at controlling reproduction among marginalised populations, exacerbating structural violence and reproductive injustice.

Washington's analysis is enriched by critical medical anthropology theories. She employs Paul Farmer's concept of *structural violence* to explain how social inequalities- rooted in racism and economic marginalisation- manifest as embodied suffering in Black bodies. Michel Foucault's notion of *biopower* further illuminates how governing authorities used medical experimentation to regulate, commodify, and control racialised populations. Kimberlé Crenshaw's *intersectionality* sharpens this critique by revealing how race, gender, and class coalesce to amplify vulnerabilities- particularly for enslaved or incarcerated women subject to unconsented procedures.

Washington's greatest strength lies in her unflinching reconstruction of primary sources- medical journals, court transcripts, and personal testimonies- rendering a narrative of medical atrocities that demands accountability. Her anthropological lens transforms historical data into lessons on the social dynamics that enable abuse. However, while *Medical Apartheid* excels in diagnosis, it offers fewer prescriptions.

To conclude, Harriet A. Washington's *Medical Apartheid* is an essential read for anyone committed to understanding how the legacies of medical exploitation continue to shape health outcomes and public trust. By weaving together historical atrocities, anthropological theory, and global parallels, Washington compels us to reckon with the moral imperatives of equitable healthcare. This seminal work is indispensable for scholars, practitioners, and policymakers striving to dismantle systemic biases and forge a more just medical landscape.

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