

Warring Against the Black Double Consciousness: A Longing to Merge the Double Self into a Better and Truer Self

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Abstract

Racism is the discrimination on an ethnic or cultural basis. It is defined as actions, practices, or beliefs that consider the human species to be divided into races with shared traits, abilities, or qualities such as personality, intellect, morality, or other cultural behavioral characteristics. It is the belief that races can be ranked as inherently superior or inferior to others, and different races should be treated differently. The Blacks and the marginalized “Other” have never been allowed to explore or express their real self. A prescribed set of principles are dictated and each is expected to fit into it. They are forced to comply with a culture and a language which is alien to them in order to gain acceptance in the alien land. They are pushed to the margins as an inferior race, which makes them double their efforts to overcome the Double Consciousness and develop into a better and truer self. A constant internal struggle persists to reconcile between the racist white acceptance and unification with the black culture of the homeland. The present paper tries to analyse the issues which are the causes of the conflict in the minds of the marginalized and the feasibility of attaining a better self as portrayed by African American writers.

Keywords: African American, ethnicity, discrimination, culture, race, colour

‘Race’ is an ambiguous word produced by culture and is usually misunderstood for physical appearance or color. It is actually a socio-cultural construction and as Hettie V. Williams observes in “Race and Ethnicity in Global Societies” in *Color Struck: Essays on Race and Ethnicity in Global Perspective* that race evolved with the rise of enslavement of Black Africans during the Islamic and Atlantic Slave trade, who drew distinction between the light complexion and dark complexion slaves. But Williams argues that neither color nor geography is enough to classify the human community into fixed biological units called races. The rise of European expansion and the Atlantic Slave Trade during the fifteenth century justified the

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 20:2 February 2020

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*Human Praxis and Modern Configuration through Literature***

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servitude of blacks. Race emerged as a result of a historical process determined by both the macro forces of politico-economic structures and the micro social experiences of human groups, shaped by perceptions about physical differences between human populations. As Hettie V. Williams reiterates in his article “Black No More: African America and the ‘New’ Race Science” in *Color Struck* that the dominant social racial group often manipulates concepts of social race to justify the subjugation of the racialized ‘Other’ (353) whereas the marginalized embrace ‘race’ (353) based on common history and social experience. African-Americans like other ethnic groups acknowledged the concepts of race as color to gain redress in a society dominated by a color-struck belief system.

Human species are classified under different races by some characteristics such as skin color, stature and other physical features which become identification tools for race classification. Kevin C. Young in his article “Race as an Instrument of Control and Exploitation in the Caribbean Region, From the Colonial to the Modern Era” points out that

The term race is used in various contexts to denote human political, social, ethnic, biological, or cultural traits, or a combination of them. Sociologists, anthropologists, and politicians offer widely divergent definitions. Regardless of context, however, race is a classification tool to distinguish among categories of people where there is perceived need to establish a difference, or otherness. It is a label by which a group (or groups) of people strive to affirm or validate its difference for a purpose. (125)

Race thus denotes varieties of things. But to conclude, it merely is a social construct rather than a biological or historical fact.

The U.S. census survey conducted in 2000 illustrates race as being associated with place of national origin or self-ascribed them to the data item with which they identified. The census described five categories of race as per the country of origin thus proving race as socio-political construction. The five basic races are Mongoloid, Negroid, Australoid, Caucasoid and Capoid. Naomi Zack, a mixed race studies philosopher argues that race is conceptually driven while the American Anthropological Association acknowledges race as largely a social construction.

Scientists in the 19th century justified differential treatment of the blacks’ because the driving force to slavery in America led to the subjugation of the Africans. Slavery and decades of legal segregation came to an end with the civil rights revolution of the 1950s and the 1960s. White prejudice in the period of legal segregation was overt and the impact of discrimination on African-Americans was severe. “White domination is often rationalized by the belief that the inferiority or superiority of a group’s abilities, values, and culture are linked to physical

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characteristics such as skin color.” (Feagin and Sikes 4) The terms of oppression are not only dictated by history, culture and sexual and social division of labor but are also profoundly shaped at the site of the oppression. It is expressed by the way in which oppressors and the oppressed continuously have to renegotiate, reconstruct and reestablish their relative positions for benefits and power.

A successful black entrepreneur in an interview in *Living with Racism: The Black Middle-Class Experience* by Joe R. Feagin and Melvin P. Sikes speaks about the personal and family losses that have resulted from dealing with the prejudiced whites. They go through tension conforming to white standards and maintaining personal integrity and black identity. The racial social system forces these African-Americans to question whether to be accepted as truly American or not. Du Bois in *The Souls of Black Folk* describes a troubled Black consciousness:

It is a peculiar sensation, this double consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others...One feels his two - ness - an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two un-reconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. The history of American Negro is the history of this strife – this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self. (3)

Thus, history casts a dark shadow on the entire issue of black assimilation in the United States oppressing and exploiting people of African descent purely on the basis of the blackness of their skin. They were considered less than human beings and faced discrimination in every aspect of their lives.

Paul Gilroy in his book *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* used Bois theory and suggested that there exists, an internal struggle within the Black diaspora to reconcile being both European and Black. He says that “occupying the space between the two subjectivities is viewed as a proactive and even oppositional act of political insubordination.” (Gilroy) It is understood that the duality of their identity is one of the most paradoxical and conceptualizing and actualizing which is more symbolic resistance to modernity.

Frantz Fanon in his book *Black Skin, White Masks* touches on the term Double Consciousness expressing his hopelessness at being neither White nor Black. He mentions the cultural and social confusions of the African Americans, who either confirm to being white or completely reject the white standards of living. Mostly they adopt culture strange to them and return speaking a language alien to them. Some try to overcome the insecurities by adopting the living style of the natives.

Discrimination based on race is deeply ingrained in American society because black people are considered genetically inferior to whites thus justifying the efforts to educate and Christianize them. They have been misunderstood by white America for hundreds of years and the distorted image of Africans as uncivilized continued to pervade the consciousness of white Americans. As Ellis Cose has commented in “Color-Coordinated Truths”:

‘Theories of blacks’ innate intellectual inadequacy provided much of the rationale for slavery and for Jim Crow [legal discrimination based on race]. They also accomplished something equally pernicious, and continue to do so today: they caused many blacks (if only subconsciously) to doubt their own abilities – and to conform to the stereotype, thereby confirming it. (62)

In this regard, Kubitschek uses Butler’s *Kindred* to show how the past can have both positive and negative influences on the present. Likewise the internalization of oppression is often linked to a denial of one’s roots, a refusal on one’s heritage. It is clearly revealed in the main characters of Nella Larsen’s *Passing* (1929), Marshall’s *Praisesong for the Widow* (1983), and Gloria Naylor’s *Linden Hills* (1986). This emotional and spiritual starvation results in the isolation of individuals who are intent on assimilating into the dominant culture (Lionnet 157).

The Black Americans face discrimination on all sides. “Nigger” to a white may be an epithet to be ignored but to most blacks the term brings all kinds of racial atrocities and discriminations such as murder, rape, torture, denial of constitutional rights, insults, limited opportunity structure, economic problems, unequal justice under the law and a myriad of other racist and discriminatory acts that occur daily in the lives of most Americans of African descent, which makes it impossible for an African-American to achieve the full realization of the American Dream.

In addition to assault, threats of violence, and racist epithets, they are exposed to racial harassment in public places one of which is the discourteous white ‘hate stare’ (Feagin and Sikes 64) a problem that dates back to the eighteenth century. The whites consider it as a minor slight and do not realize the historical implication of this action. Racial coding of places is another major problem faced by the African-Americans for some places are still more or less off limits to black Americans. They are constantly intimidated by the ‘White Only’ or ‘Colored Only’ signboards. Though these boards are no longer in display, there is a constant reminder of these imaginary sign boards. A Black person moving into these places often learns immediately that his or her presence is not wanted. This is very beautifully presented by Alice Childress in her one act play *Florence*. The railing which divides the space for the whites and coloreds in Childress’ *Florence* makes a deep impression on the minds of Marge’s mother about her place in the white

dominated society. It also brings about a change in her attitude to support her daughter to establish her identity.

African-Americans believe in education as the 'great leveler' to bring them first-class citizenship. Hence they attach great importance to education for themselves and their children. Black parents mostly live in a predominantly Black or Black middle-class community in order to provide their children social support in the form of Black friends and Black organizations. But the public schools available are not as well equipped or staffed as those in white suburban areas. The Black middle class parents know that schools in predominantly white areas are provided with better resources for education. They are also aware of the racial obstacles faced by their children. Ntozake Shange a black women dramatist who came to the limelight with her *for colored girls* in Broadway, brings out her own childhood days when she had to suffer discrimination and alienation at an integration school which is portrayed in her novel *Betsey Brown*. Discrimination is imbedded in the values, rules, and other institutional patterns of a college or other traditional white setting. Black students are forced to give up their identities to adapt to the surrounding white culture, and become Afro-Saxon.

Another aspect of being black is seen, when a student is made to feel inferior by a white teacher, who typecasts his or her writing as 'Black English'. The teacher's harsh evaluation of the black students work hurts and embarrasses but also makes him determined to become an expert in the English language to prove himself. One of the most serious reactions to white insensitivity and misunderstanding is the rejection of one's group, and thus of one's self. This is a situation which had been faced by many writers and Shange herself was rebuffed by her teacher for her black dominated literature.

Race-related factors have also blocked the entry of African-Americans into almost every category of workplace. Blacks are barred from professional and other white-collar positions due to subtle forms of exclusion in the work place. A black woman applying for a job as a manager or a higher-skilled job is asked to take up the job of a waitress or a maid. She or he is expected to take on stereotype jobs and not consider themselves as capable of doing any other job.

A house is a visible manifestation of accomplishment and it is also a sign of equity, of wealth that can be passed on to subsequent generations. But racial discrimination keeps them from amassing such wealth. To black families, home represents an anchor in a hostile white-dominated world. It is the place where one can get support to deal with problems and a place where one need not be on guard. Denial of access to housing in all-white areas is a constraint faced by the black families. Lorraine Hansberry describes this situation effectively in her play *A Raisin in the Sun* where Lena wants to buy a house in a white dominated community. Lena has

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to suffer discrimination and isolation at all quarters while taking the decision to provide her family a relief from the life in the ghetto.

Such discrimination creates a psychological dilemma for the Blacks. A standard psychological recommendation for dealing with life problems is to face them head-on and say internally about mistreatment, “Yes, this is racism,” (Feagin and Melvin 276). Once a problem is named, it becomes easier to solve it. If racial discrimination is named differently or is attributed to economic causes and not to physical characteristics, the blacks can think of conditions to get rid of the negative behavior. Black middle-class parents face the difficult task of preparing their children for discrimination such as racial slights and obstacles. In an important research study “Race Identity” in *Life in Black America* James Jackson and his associates found that,

...black parents took several different approaches to teaching children about racial issues. Some avoided the issue and gave no information; some imparted messages stressing the equality of blacks and whites; and some taught their children to distrust whites and stand up for their own rights. (246)

This is because the survival of blacks depended on their knowledge of the whites and the white culture.

The blacks were gradually enlightened on their plight which led to the advent of black writers to relate the life of the blacks. Thus early African-American dramatists wrote for the black community, for a black audience which needed a theatre to teach them to live better. As Elizabeth Guillory says in *Their Place on Stage*, the black playwrights wrote:

... for the sheer joy of capturing and preserving the essence of black life for future generations. They were able to turn theaters into nurseries where the black race is given roots, nurtured, tested, healed, and provided with the spirit to survive. They are, indeed, the missing pieces to a multifaceted puzzle of black life during those decades when blacks were becoming aware, and awakening to their own self-worth, and struggling for an identity robbed from them as a result of mutilated African roots. (4-5)

Elizabeth Brown-Guillory in *Their Place on the Stage: Black Women Playwrights in America (1988)* traces the development of Black American Theatre from William Wells Brown’s *The Escape; or a Leap for Freedom* (1858) to the works of Childress, Hansberry, and Shange. Margaret Wilkerson, in *9 Plays by Black Women*, and Mance Williams in *Black Theater of the 1960s and 1970s* showed black women protesting against racism, sexism, and capitalism. Eugene Kraft points out that the blacks portrayed on the American stage are not real characters

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but shadows and stereotypes. White playwrights created characters they wanted to believe, and black playwrights wanted to avoid negative portraits. But the black women writers projected the role of mammy as a woman with her own desires and needs, as thinkers, feelers, and conscious human beings and not just as uninteresting characters, which is the byproduct of racism.

Angelina Grimke's *Rachel* (1920) is the first work to be produced and performed by black actors. It protests against lynching and is about the suffocating fear of black mothers. Georgia Douglas Johnson's *A Sunday Morning in the South* (1925) levels an indictment against lynching in which a mother strangles her newborn baby to protect it from the atrocities of the whites. Dunbar-Nelson's *Mine Eyes Have Seen* (1918) mirrors universal concerns and is about Chris who has been drafted to fight in World War I. He is not willing to fight for a country which does not allow a black to bask in the glory of its victory, nor provides them with freedom which they fought for.

Ntozake Shange urges the blacks to march towards positive selfhood through the encouraging tone of Lou's final speech in the trilogy *spell #7*. The last speech in the minstrel prologue offers a final celebration of race-consciousness, self-satisfaction, and racial contentment. Similarly Eli's kingdom in the choreopoem becomes an ideal place, an Utopia for the blacks to give vent to their suppressed feelings and be free, where each black person works independently and responsibly to re-order a collective cultural and racial consciousness. But Shange feels that such a racial ideal does not always prove ideal for black women whose gender realities are as relevant and potentially limiting as their race realities. Shange portrays the black women as lacking in the luxury of political and social passivity. According to her life for a black woman is a struggle to remain physically and psychologically intact. Shange defines the passion for life and a necessity for survival as black spirituality, a spirituality of resilience and strength significantly different from whites' cultural realities.

African-American writers have highlighted the problems of the African-American psyche through its literature. Theirs is a different voice that makes a call for the blacks first to understand themselves, and this self-understanding is considered to be the first step to drive them towards independence. These writings are intended to boost the self-confidence of the black brethren rather than self-hatred bordering on inferiority complex. It reveals an all-inclusive outlook that is quintessentially humane, non-discriminatory and edifying.

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