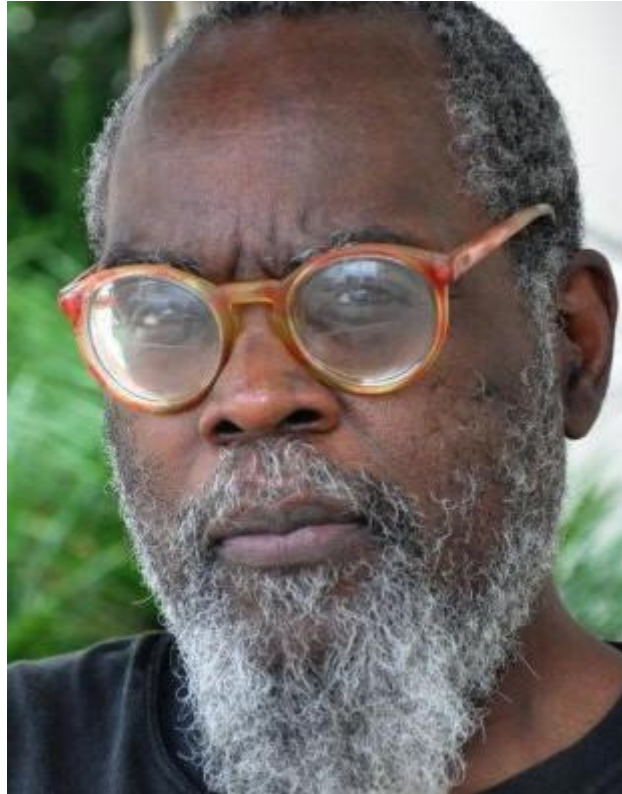


**Self-Abomination and Personal Failure:
A Reading of Kalamu Ya Salaam's Play, *The Quest***

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Kalamu Ya Salaam

Courtesy: <http://www2.tulane.edu/calendar/event-details.cfm?uid=FE4695BB-A64E-1233-92F82D818EEC874F>

Abstract

African Americans consider their skin colour and kinky hair as impediments to succeed in the American society. The mainstream playwrights have projected negative stereotype images of the African Americans; consequently, they have developed a sense of self-abhorrence which results in their personal failure. The present paper analyses how self-abomination causes disasters in the lives of African Americans. Kalamu Ya Salaam, through the play, *The Quest*, states that African Americans cannot succeed in life unless they uphold their African heritage and find pride in their racial background.

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Key words: self-hatred, psychically colonized, resilience, discrimination, negative images.

Racial Discrimination: Physical and Emotional Barrier

Racial discrimination is a burning issue in the lives of the African Americans in the American society. Since the days of slavery, African Americans have been marginalized and victimized by the white supremacists because of their skin colour. Their marginal status acts as an impediment for them to improve their life situations in the American society. The white created a myth that the African Americans are subhuman because of their skin colour and physical appearance. The words “black” and “racism” act as a physical and emotional barrier between whites and blacks. White American supremacists propagated that whiteness equals goodness and purity, and blackness refers to evil. In reality, whites are hypocrites who demean the African Americans to the core, and it results in self-abomination among the black.

***The Quest*, by Kalamu Ya Salaam**

This paper focuses on the play, *The Quest*, by Kalamu Ya Salaam with special reference to self-abomination among blacks. Kalamu Ya Salaam is a playwright, poet, filmmaker, and teacher. He is a well-known activist and social critic, who has spoken out on a number of racial and human rights issues. As a committed writer, he has always taken steps to protest against the discrimination that African Americans confront in the American society.

Psychically Traumatized: Woody

Salaam’s play, *The Quest*, delineates how blacks are psychically traumatized by the dominant white society. The entire play revolves around the character, Woody, who expresses his anger and anguish for being born as a member of the African American community which is shunned by the white. For instance, at the beginning of the play, the conversation between Woody and his mother Mrs. Williams, shows his irresponsibility towards his family in particular and black community in general. Woody seduces a girl named Ann, and she gets pregnant. His mother and his elder brother, Mr. Clarence, plead him to marry her. Eventually, Ann files a case against Woody because he insists her to abort the

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foetus and says: “They got enough niggers in the world already...” (289). He asks his mother why she permitted him to be born as a black on this earth. “You bring me to this world, and your lord make me Black, and you ask me to lead a good life. Mamma, why did you have me? Why didn’t you kill my ass when I was born, if you wanted me to lead a good life?” (294).

Woody is completely disillusioned by the discrimination that he has been experiencing every single day in his life, and she believes that the birth of a black child is not going to make any difference in the black community. He does not display any affection either to his mother or to the girl who whole heartedly loved him. He hates other blacks and thinks that the intensity of discrimination increases with the increase in black population. He is fed up with the negative terminologies that whites use to refer to the black. Woody believes that neither his brother nor his mother can share the problem that he faces in the American society. He pessimistically says that there are no solutions to the problems that the black experience:

WOODY. There ain’t no solution. We all problems. All us. All of us ain’t nothing but problems. I’m a problem, you a problem, and mamma.. mamma, she one big fucking problem. The whole world is a problem. In fact, a solution wouldn’t be nothing but a problem. Just another problem. Solutions don’t exist for niggers. Solutions are a myth. Everything that breathes is a problem. Problem!(290)

A Burden and a Problem

Woody considers himself and his fellow African Americans a burden and a problem to whites. He is still psychically colonized by the white who label the black community uncouth. Woody’s ill feeling towards his community makes him a rebel who hates himself. His anger is directed not towards his oppressors but towards other blacks who have come up in life.

Clarence and Woody

Ya Salaam juxtaposes the characters Clarence and Woody to make the African American audience understand the fact that self-hatred leads to self-destruction. Clarence and Woody are brought up by their mother after their father deserts them. Instead of being resilient like his mother, Woody finds resort in conforming to the stereotype black characters

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presented by the mainstream playwrights. Mrs. Williams explicitly says that Woody is heading towards his own destruction, if he is not going to get rid of his self-hatred and the hatred towards his community. His mother finds fault with the young black men who consider their skin colour as an obstruction to come up in life. “That’s my cross. I didn’t raise you. The streets raised you. Them mannish boys what you stayed out with all night long, they raised you. No, Woody, Mamma Williams didn’t raise you” (291).

Woody wants the mainstream society to accept him and respect him the way they do to his white counterparts. He remarks: “I wants to be me. I wants to be respected for what I am, but I don’t wants to be here, in this shape. I don’t wants to live with all this. Roaches in the room, rats in the walls, niggers in the halls, cops in the streets. Naw. I don’t want this!”(291).He wants to get all the comforts and privileges that whites enjoy, but he finds fault with others who become successful and he decries that they do not enjoy their African American entity. He comments: “I said you worse than a goddamn white boy! Nigger, you believe in that white shit harder than they do. You just trying to be white. [...] Nigger trying to be white” (301).

Woody feels inferior and believes that the history of trans-Atlantic slave trade and the oppression that his forefathers faced are something that he should forget. On the other hand, Clarence and his wife Odessa make the best of the situations. They never blame their skin colour nor do they try to ape the white. They help their children to develop self-confidence and pride in their culture and history. Odessa who has bi-racial parentage believes that it is the white society that instils self-hatred among the black by colonizing their minds. She insulates her children from any societal interference that makes them like the stereotypes that the mainstream media perpetuate.

ODESSA. It’s the system, ya’ know. It’s not your fault. It’s not my fault.

We’ve got to recognize that we don’t make niggers. They system make niggers. Our children, Amina and Adimu, our girls aren’t niggers. I didn’t give birth to niggers. Our job is to teach them stronger than the system tries to teach them. Our job is to make them strong enough to deal with all the bullshit that you got to deal with, that Woody got to deal with, that I got to deal with, that every Black person in America got to deal with.(309)

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Exhortation of the Black Community

Ya Salaam through the character of Clarence exhorts his black counterparts that they should find happiness in being an African American. He wants his play to be an eye-opener to those African Americans who blame their race and colour for their marginal status. Blacks have the tendency to blame the white and remain idle at home without going for any job. Salaam wants to make his fellow African Americans to understand the fact that, it is their negative attitude that holds them down and blocks their progress in life. Ya Salaam reiterates that African Americans cannot succeed in life unless and until they uphold their African heritage and find pride in their racial background.

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