

البحث الهادي في ما لا يخفى من الأثر الأدبي للبحث في الخبز والله

*The Quest For Identity In Adrienne Kennedy's
"Funnyhouse of a Negro"*

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إنَّ للهوية أهمية كبيرة في مجرى التاريخ، فالأفراد والأمم على حد سواء يبذلون جهوداً حثيثة للتشبيث بمفهوم خاص للهوية. ولا ريب إنَّ الهوية تنطوي على معنى الانتماء إلى طبقة أو عرق و فضلاً عن ذلك الانتماء لأمة برمتها. و في عالم ما بعد الحداثة وأدبها، أصبحت مسألة الهوية ظاهرة شائعة بمعنى أنَّها لفتت أنظار المفكرين والأدباء.

لذا، تلقي هذه الدراسة الضوء على فكرة البحث عن الهوية في مسرحية ادريان كندي بيت الزنجية المضحك (١٩٦٤) والتي تظهر ولعاً شديداً بتناول قضية الهوية. وتقدم كندي الهوية السوداء من خلال تصوير شخصية نسائية مثقلة بمشاكلها الشخصية والعائلية، والمشكلة الأساسية التي تعترض هذه الشخصية تتعلق بما يطلق عليه بالوعي المزدوج، أي الإدراك بوجود هويتين إحداهما سوداء والأخرى بيضاء.

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Abstract□

Identity is of much significance in the course of history. Individuals and nations exert concerted efforts to adhere to a self- created concept of identity. Identity undoubtedly implies a sense of belonging to a class, a race, and by extension, a whole nation. In the post-modern world and literature, the issue of identity became an all- inclusive phenomenon in that it is riveting the attention of both thinkers and men of letters.

The present study is concerned with the quest for identity in Adrienne Kennedy's *Funnyhouse of a Negro* (1964) which shows a keen interest in tackling the issue of identity. Kennedy reflects upon the black identity through the presentation of a female character that is unavoidably entangled in personal and family problems, problems that have much bearing on the female identity. The main problem of this female character persistently confronts is what is termed 'double consciousness,' which underscores the awareness of the existence of two identities, black and white.

1.1 Introduction

The word 'identity' was originally taken from the Latin root *idem*, meaning "the same." The term is double faced in that it indicates similarity and difference. On the one hand, identity is something unique for all human beings. It is the identity that makes people different from each other. On the other hand, identity means one's belonging to a social group. Hence, there are types of identity: national identity, cultural identity, or gender identity, a matter which refers to things people share (Buckingham, 1). The concept of identity is usually associated with the studies of ethnicity, gender, and race. Before the 1950s, it was not widely circulated, and it became very popular with the emergence of the German psychoanalyst Erik H. Erikson (1902-1994) who is acclaimed to be the father of the concept (qtd. in Paterson, et al, 57).

Psychologically viewed, identity refers to personal and group identifications. It is concerned with self-definition, and the self is conceptualized as a fairly stable, internal entity that is rarely modified to fit the context. In fact, "the self is a core sense of who one is. That is, you are who you are; shifting is indicative of a problematic, deficient or disengaged identity" (Hecht. Et al, 48). In the contemporary sense of the word, identity has become a key concept in different fields, especially with the rise of globalization and its subsequent effects on life. Suman Gupta mentions that the term 'identity' is broadly used in academic, media, and other

debates with a gamut of implications which have never been dealt with before. There are certain groupings that show a concern over the issue of identity (Gupta, 142). More important is that “talking about identity in this contemporary fashion implies considering the relations between such groups: in terms of minorities and majorities, power relations, rights and prerogatives, tensions and conflicts” (ibid). This statement betrays the fact that identity has a special status in contemporary affairs, and literature is a broad area that tackles this essential yet problematic issue of identity.

The individuals of a specific society often show their identity through parading over their ancestral heritage and traditions. In much the same way, African -Americans have been struggling to achieve self- definition and to defend their legal pursuit after a specific black identity. The placement of history and tradition to the concept of identity is a powerful mechanism to assimilate and accept other cultures:

[H]istory and tradition have another role to play: the interpellation of subjects and the inducing of a sense of identity and belonging. Individual constructions of identity are affirmed by seeing something of oneself and one’s forebears in representations of the history of the nation. Inclusion is important since having a history and a set of traditions with which one can identify and within which one can position oneself other than as victim, gives the interpellated individual a position of dignity from which to speak.

(Weedon, 26)

This quotation reveals much about the significance of history in the construction and reconstruction of one’s identity. African -Americans always deem it necessary to look on their glorious past to understand the present in that their prospective identity is profoundly rooted in tradition and history.

1.2 The Quest for Identity in *Funnyhouse of a Negro* □

Adrienne Kennedy is one of the contemporary African -American women playwrights, whose plays address the issues of race, gender, and history, focusing on the politics of the black woman’s search for identity. *Funnyhouse of a Negro* is a case in point, for at its nucleus Kennedy persistently tries to unfold the atrocious reality experienced by black women in the hope of evoking and creating in them a sense of self-pride and integration. The question that the play poses is whether the black woman can assimilate herself to or resist the lived reality. Kennedy once remarked that “My plays are meant to be states of mind” (Barnett, 141).

Writing, for Kennedy, is a cathartic process through which she is able to express what concerns her to the utmost. Family matters come to the forefront of her priorities, "I feel overwhelmed by family problems and family realities. I see my writing as being an outlet for inner, psychological confusion and questions stemming from childhood" (Kennedy, and Lisa Leham, 42).

In a postmodern age, Kennedy's texts seem quintessential: fragmented, decentered, nonlinear, marked by marginality and alterity, begging for comprehension and simultaneously defying it, haunting a search for meaning and identity in a world where all such categories have been rendered mobile, elusive. Rather than providing a realistic scenario, the work moves via images and associations, registering as an experience of consciousness affected by representations in literature, pop culture and film, as well as well by the movement of history (Forte, 159).

The style used in *Funnyhouse of a Negro* is typical of Kennedy, for her plays share distinctive characteristics. The plays are both surrealist and expressionist. In this connection, Ruby Cohn indicates:

Kennedy's plays are expressionist in their subjectivity, with inner conflicts externalized as different characters; they are surrealist in their close dependence on dreams with strong visual images. They are original in the particular images and in their incantatory repetitions that extend the subjective into the mythic.

(Cohn, 117)

This Kennedyan surrealism and expressionism help explain the psychological deterioration of her feminine protagonists in the first place. Dreams and images are efficiently occasioned to depict such psychological conflict. Surrealism is a springboard for expressing the inner reality.

The setting of the play, *Funnyhouse of a Negro*, and its structure are illustrative of Kennedy's treatment of the question of identity being in the throes of dissociation. Sarah's room, the funnyhouse, indicates the imaginary world in which she lives. It consists of "rows or walls of mirrors that distort the images they reflect, making some parts bigger while shrinking others, especially heads, or even making some parts vanish altogether" (Kolin, 35). Philip C. Kolin gives an interesting reading of the significance of the setting:

In such a setting, the self is virtually torn apart, parceled into fragments. In a funny house, one's identity and self-image are never stable, reliable, truthful, or comforting. Representation in Kennedy's funnyhouse leads to self-repression and revulsion. Tormented by racist views of herself, Sarah

cannot avoid the delusions of her funnyhouse breakdown when she looks at herself or at others. In this funnyhouse of her mind, Sarah's fear and guilt become magnified, distorted, dismembered. She has no perspective. Time, place, and hope dissolve. The shocking world of the funnyhouse also symbolizes her mad fantasies and the impossibility of escape.

(Kolin, 36)

Conceived of as the most significant symbol used by Kennedy, "the funnyhouse, then, becomes the perfect surrealistic setting for Sarah's dreams" (Kolin, 35).

Funnyhouse of a Negro deals with the story of Sarah, "a plain, pallid NEGRO WOMAN," (Funnyhouse, 29) who becomes fragmented through her disturbing ancestry. Her conception happens when her dark-colored father has sexually assaulted her white mother. Before Sarah's birth, her parents marry and upon the advice of her father's mother, a woman who believes that her son can save the black race from all forms of marginalization, travel to Africa to initiate a Christian mission. In Africa, Sarah's mother seems to separate herself emotionally from her father, and accordingly, he rapes her while he is drunk. Her mother becomes mad and lives in a mental asylum. Her father, therefore, returns to New York, entreating Sarah to condone him. Sarah refuses to forgive him, a matter that makes him commit suicide. Feeling that she is unable to live away from white society, Sarah kills herself as a way to save herself from the dangers and challenges of life (Gavin, 165).

Right from the outset of *Funnyhouse of a Negro*, the protagonist of the play, Sarah, appears to have an excruciating sense of crisis and fragmentation of the self. Such a personal fragmentation is quite conspicuously reflected in the fact that she has been born out of a white mother and a black father, a hybrid marriage that weighs heavily on her psyche. The surrealistic atmosphere of the play has much to do with Sarah's disorientated identity and her racial consciousness. She oscillates between two different poles: her blackness and whiteness. Homi Bhabha calls such a baffling situation 'in-betweenness' (Tyson, 421). Georgie Boucher argues that "Kennedy's protagonists are de-essentialized fractured beings who fail to embody either White superiority or Black nationalist pride, as they oscillate between two polarities" (Boucher, 840). Sarah herself reveals her double consciousness when she describes her father: "He is the darkest, my father is the darkest, my mother is the lightest. I am in between. But my father is the darkest" (Funnyhouse, 17). Such a statement underscores Sarah's personal and cultural displacement,

which creates in her a sense of an unspeakable bitterness and fragmentation. As Wilkerson argues, Sarah's personal identity crisis is "at once a crisis with political and social resonance- a legacy of the historical confrontation between white Europeans and black Africans" (Wilkerson, 73).

Undoubtedly, Sarah is in a position which generates in her entity a sensation of un-belonging. Her feeling of having no strong ties to the self and the other underlines the fact that she is placed between two divergent cultures, a situation that causes her personal imbalance and fragmentation. She suffers from the complexity of being culturally and socially displaced. Tyson mentions that this cultural displacement is termed 'unhomedness' by some critics (Tyson, 421). She goes on to add that being "unhomed" is not the same as being homeless. "To be unhomed is to feel not at home even in your own home because you are not at home in yourself: your cultural identity crisis has made you a psychological refugee, so to speak" (Ibid).

Like other plays by Kennedy, *Funnyhouse* presents the idea of a "light-skinned Negro woman's mental anguish and search for a sense of identity" (Overbeck, 27). "An 'identity' sometimes becomes an 'object' that a person has or feels he has lost, and starts to search for" (Laing, 65). Sarah finds herself faced with a host of difficulties that leave her psychologically disintegrated. This psychological disintegration is clearly reflected in the landlady's words:

She's suffering so till her hair has fallen out. But then she did always hide herself in that room with the walls of books and her statute. I always did know she thought she was somebody else, a Queen or something, somebody else. (16)

The room in this play is symbolically related to Sarah's self-imprisonment and displacement. The play has "the center of the stage works well as Sarah's room, allowing the rest of the stage as the place for herself" (11). Sarah's room is "a symbol for the subconscious existence of Sarah. It is an attempt to project the protagonist's interior reality which remains tormented on account of her past" (Sarada, 101). Each self has her/his room, which expresses a peculiar sense of identity. According to E. Barnsley Brown, "Sarah occupies a liminal space between blackness and whiteness, and thus can find neither a place to belong in either race nor a unified conception of self" (Brown, 281).

Sarah's father represents the painful and soul-wrenching past which Sarah does not want to remember. He is associated with the unforgettable experience of her white mother's rape. She cannot imagine the same thing happening to her. Sarah's patriphobia is profoundly rooted in her thinking, "He haunted my very conception. He was a wild black beast who raped my mother" (17). She cannot resist imagining that her black father is the prime mover of her long-suffering life. Kennedy is Sarah herself. Speaking about Sarah's divided personality, the critic Maratha Gilman Bower rightly argues that "Adrienne Kennedy is projecting her own fears, anger, confusion, nightmares through this character" (Bower, 12).

Unlike her father, Sarah's mother is the title of love and artistic inspiration to her. Kennedy admits how her mother had a contributory factor in creating the singularity of her fictional world:

When my mother was making oatmeal on winter mornings as I sat waiting with my bowl at the kitchen table, I secretly yearned that my mother would talk more about people she had dreamed about. There is no doubt that a person talking about the people in his or her dreams became an archetype for people in my monologue, plays and stories.

(Kennedy, *People*, 96)

The image of the mother in Sarah's mind can explain her own dislodged identity. Sarah is clearly possessed by the idea of rape, for she does not want history to repeat itself. Her mother has conceived her through the raping of the "black beast," a term which carries the cultural implication of bestiality (Sarada, 195). Rape involves the exercise of power and use of force. Power is a reference to all forms of domination like imperialism, colonialism, capitalism and the patriarchal domination which destroy African -American people. Force, on the other hand, is viewed as one of the factors that have a tremendous impact on the African -American women ever since they were transferred to the land of the whites. (Sarada, 192-3). The problem of rape has a long history in African -American life and literature. In her book, *Women, Race, and Class*, Angela Y. Davis, talking about the issue of slavery, argues that "Rape was a weapon of domination, a weapon of repression, whose covert goal was to extinguish slave women's will to resist, and in the process, to demoralize their men" (Davis, 23-4). In African -American women's drama, the theme of rape has been extensively dealt with, and it is associated with the tragedy of the black women. Hence, Tanya Emma Walker has recently coined the term "the Black Rape Tragedy".

Sarah's profession as a poet causes her much agony, because she is a very sensitive writer. In fact, she has a heavily moral and social responsibility to defend the rights of her community. Initially, this female character is introduced as Negro whose missing name indicates the unidentified figure, a figure who has a problem of the loss of identity. The character of Negro whom Sarah incarnates says:

I am graduated from a city college and have occasional work in libraries, but mostly spend my days preoccupied with the placement and geometric position of words on paper. I write poetry filling white page after white page with imitations of Edith Sitwell. It is my dream to live in rooms with European antiques and my Queen Victoria, photographs of Roman ruins, walls of books, a piano, oriental carpets and to eat my meals on a white glass table

(14)

In her physical and psychological isolation, Sarah finds an outlet in the solitary and fruitless task of filling white pages with poetry in imitation of Edith Sitwell. Sarah's great efforts to achieve wholeness and identity, and her concurrent contest with paranoia, self-hatred, and the will to self-destruction, lead to the disintegration of her personality (Brown, 86). She has a firm desire to establish good relationships with her friends. She "need [s] them as an embankment to keep me from reflecting too much upon the fact that I am a Negro"(14). "All 'identities' require another: some other in and through a relationship with whom self- identity is actualized. The other by his or her actions may impose on self an unwanted identity" (Laing, 65). Nevertheless, Sarah moves away from the other to create a world special for her.

R. D. Laing in his book, *The Divided Self: An Existential Study in Sanity and Madness*, puts forward his theory of the self, which he proposes, is basically concerned with the primary ontological insecurity which is seen in the anxieties and dangers faced by the self (Laing, The Divided, 65). The subjects Laing used in his psychoanalytical study suffering from schizophrenia, which suggests the split of the self, because of particular pressing conditions. The self is viewed by Laing as having two kinds: the embodied self and the un-embodied self. The embodied self is that person who

... has a sense of being flesh and blood and bones, of being biologically alive and real: he knows himself to be substantial. To the extent that he is thoroughly 'in' his body, he is likely to have a sense of personal continuity in time. He will experience himself as subject to the dangers that threaten

his body, the dangers of attack, mutilation, disease, decay, and death. He is implicated in bodily desire, and the gratifications and frustrations of the body. The individual thus has as his starting-point an experience of his body as a base from which he can be a person with other human beings.

(Laing, *The Divided*, 67)

Certainly, this kind of the self can be applied to the individual who is normal, mostly interested in his substantiality. The embodied self is totally different from the un-embodied self.

The un-embodied self has much in common with the individual's experience of identity crisis. With this un-embodiment of the self in mind, the individual becomes quite unable to feel that there is a clearly close attachment between the self and the body. Laing states that "The body is felt more as one object among other objects in the world than as the core of the individual's own being" (Laing, *The Divided*, 69). Such a detachment of the body from the self has a degenerating effect on the individual's personality, because

Such a divorce of self from body deprives the un-embodied self from direct participation in any aspect of the life of the world, which is mediated through exclusively the body's perceptions, feelings and movements (expressions, gestures, words, actions, etc.). The un-embodied self, as onlooker at all the body does, engages in nothing directly.

(Ibid)

Seen in the light of Laing's theory of the un-embodied self, Sarah has such a schizophrenic character of being unable to set forth a sort of harmony between the self and the body, a matter which cuts off all her relationships with the social surroundings, and, by extension, she is not adept at meeting the other in the midway.

Elsewhere, Laing argues that the relationship to the Other "threatens the individual with the loss of identity" (Laing, 44). Laing further remarks that "A firm sense of one's own autonomous identity is required in order that one may be related as one human being to another" (Ibid). Still, with the prevalence of uncertainty, one is going to lose the sense of autonomy and identity. Sarah appears quite obsessed with her own self, being threatened by sweeping personal and racial challenges. Because of the external forces caused by such challenges, "a battle is waged in Sarah between projected image(s) of self/selves and a real self" (Bryant-Jackson, 54).

Kennedy's division of *Funnyhouse* into five scenes is dramatically poised to show Sarah's fragmented and disconnected identity. Her story is

told through her perspective which is embodied in four historical figures: Queen Victoria(1819-1901), The Duchess of Hapsburg, Patrice Lumumba(1926-1961), and Jesus(6–4 BC to 30–33 AD). Kennedy's historication of Sarah's phantasmagorical (fantastic and deceptive or created by imagination) memories shows the importance of history in African -American culture and literature. In actual fact, Sarah's view of history "is shaped and selected by her personal ideology which itself has been shaped by the historically precarious position of a mulatto poised between two cultures- white and black" (McDonough, 175). Sarah is the pivot around which the whole play revolves, and her other selves are no more than a creation of her troubled and morbid imagination.

The Duchess of Hapsburg represents Sarah's maddening obsession with the fact of her blackness. The exchange between Sarah and the imagined Duchess is redolent with the ever- existing identity loss and fragmentation.

Lumumba is another man whose character shows one important aspect of Sarah's contradictory selves. Historically, he is an outstanding figure in Africa for the achievements he made during his short term of office. Kennedy herself expressed her admiration for this man, because he was extremely loved by his people. She knew little about this man; however, she was profoundly astounded by his terrible death:

Just when I had discovered the place of my ancestors, just when I had discovered a hero, he had been mourned. Even though I had known of him so briefly, I felt I had been struck a blow. He became a character in my play... a man with a shattered head. (Kennedy, *People*, 119)

Kolin maintains that Lumumba "symbolizes her martyrdom, too, by white enemies, and thus prefigures her gruesome death by hanging at the end of the play. His split head visually represents the psychic/racial strife that tears Sarah apart and shows that black women are not the only victims of violence in Kennedy's canon" (Kolin, 44). He typically embodies the central role taken by Sarah in the African struggle for an independent identity. What complicates the matter is the masculinity of Sarah's role. Her identification with Lumumba is illustrative of her attempt to escape her powerlessness as a woman living in the man-ruled society (Sahoo, 45). Also, this historical figure has another symbolic meaning for Kennedy. He was a very famous leader, who strongly defended African nationalism, and he was the first Prime Minister of the Democratic Republic of Congo. His assassination came shortly after his dismissal from the office. He affected

Kennedy's sense of identity, and she reveals her own experience concerning this character (Ibid).

The problem with Sarah is that she lacks significant relationships, and she also lacks places to live in. For to believe in places is to know hope and to know beauty, and beauty, she reasons, links one to the world and life. Disowning such connection, she prefers isolation (Brown, 124). The difficulty of establishing good relationships with the Self and the Other shows Sarah's great deficiency in connecting the lost connections of the different facets of her life in a world that necessitates the construction of boundaries in order to live safely and soundly.

In a manner analogous to the Duchess of Hapsburg, Queen Victoria had a profound impact on Kennedy's construction of Sarah's identity. Kennedy attests to the fact that she was enchanted by Victoria when she saw the gigantic statue of the Queen overlooking the facade of the Buckingham Palace. Hence, she narrates the story of this statue and its significance to portray Sarah's psychological conflict: "In my play I would soon have the heroine, Sarah, talk to a replica of this statue. Finally the dialogue with a statue /the statue would inform my character of her inner thoughts. The statue would reveal my character's secrets to herself" (Kennedy, *People*, 118). Sarah affirms that both the Duchess of Hapsburg and Queen Victoria represent the ideal image of white female power which means much to Sarah's quest for identity.

Of greater interest to grasp Kennedy's representation of the much troubled experience of identity search is the figure of Jesus Christ. Sarah hopes to find in Jesus what she has not found in other selves: the never-breaking sense of identity. She says, quoting her mother, "I want you to be Jesus, to walk in Genesis and save the race" (19). "In Sarah's nightmare, the figure of Jesus is thus heinously incorporated into the character of Man/Lumumba/father, whose mother [believes] him to be a "a savior of the race" and hoped "he would be Christ but he failed"(22). In the last scene, Sarah as the embodiment of Christ, confesses that she tries to escape being black, and she is determined to go back to Africa to kill Lumumba, because she realizes that her father was a black man.

The vivid symbol of the jungle covers the fifth and final scene of the play. Her description of this symbolic landscape comes with a blackout of the scene:

SCENE: In the jungle, RED SUN, FLYING THINGS, wild black grass. The effect of the jungle is that it, unlike the other scenes, is over the entire stage. In time this is the longest scene and is played the slowest, as the

slow, almost standstill stages of a dream. By lightening the desired effect would be- suddenly the jungle has overgrown the chambers and all the other places with a violence and a dark brightness, a grim yellowness. (23-24)

This passage raises a salient point about Sarah's different identities. Her identity is mirrored in the image of other historical figures who all are brought to the scene of the jungle.

These characters are witnesses to what happens to Sarah. "Positioned within the play as powerful spectators, capable of erasing Sarah's "truths" with their own privileged interpretation of events, they are neither ethically compelling nor especially helpful. Rather, Raymond and his landlady provide cautionary models for anyone who may recognize that she, like these characters, must have "missed something" (Spencer, 27). What Sarah has really "missed" is her own identity. She seems totally paralyzed by a plethora of social and psychological obstructions that make her life devoid of any meaning. "By writing *Funnyhouse*, Kennedy cleansed herself as well. Through Sarah, she faced her own ambivalent feelings about her race, sorting through the attractions and curses of European culture and African history" (Robinson, 132).

In Kennedy's *Funnyhouse of a Negro*, the female character appears experiencing a cursive sense of personal crisis, which is caused by the racial discrimination she strongly feels. This identity crisis shows itself in the title, because the protagonist is clearly possessed by the idea of finding a "space" for the contradictory selves she has. Kennedy presents her protagonist's pursuit of identity in a psychological context in which Sarah is thoroughly pressed out of her normal life.

Conclusion

This study is an attempt to investigate the way Sonia Sanchez, Adrienne Kennedy dramatized her own concept of identity, which is relevant to the black existence. The debatable point raised in this play is concerned with the discrepancy between men and women. The play holds divergent views about a definable frame of identity for black women and men.

Adrienne Kennedy believes that black women already have their own feeling of identity so as not to be restricted by others. She herself suffered a lot from the loss of identity and disorientation. In *Funnyhouse of a Negro*, Sarah faces the dilemma of being situated between two different cultures, which makes her unable to find her own. She is secluded from everything

around her, because she has a formidable sense of identity loss and disintegration. The presence of historical figures in this play is indicative of Sarah's clash of hybrid and irreconcilable identities.

In *Funnyhouse of a Negro*, Sarah exemplifies black woman's psychological disassociation due to the ever-growing problem of racial and social marginalization and negligence. This female character is psychologically dislodged in a white world where they oscillate between entirely different cultures. In presenting her female character as socially and racially shattered, Kennedy hopes to instill in black woman a sense of change for the better. She exposes and diagnoses the problems facing the black race to get the voice of the blacks strongly heard.

Kennedy focuses on the spiritual aspects of the protagonist as she seeks justice, collaboration, and above all, mutual love. Spirituality can be a good shelter for the black people who are beset with the entrapments of racial identity. Spirituality is persistently interlocked with the search for identity.

The examination of the quest for identity in this play stresses the inarguable fact that the playwright exerted great efforts to express in clear terms her own concerns about the fate of the black nation in general and the black woman in specific. She focuses on the integration and independence of black women even within the black community. She also endeavors to raise national consciousness and to foster a sense of belonging.

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