

Fragmented Identity and the Search for Self: An Exploration of Adrienne Kennedy's "Funnyhouse of a Negro"

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<p>Received on: 02 Nov 2024 Revised on: 03 Dec 2024 Accepted on: 10 Dec 2024</p> <p>©2024 The Author(s). Published by International Journal of English Language, Education and Literature Studies (IJEEL). This is an open access article under the CC BY license (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).</p> <p>Keywords – <i>Fragmented identity, Internalized racism, Surrealism, Postcolonialism, Feminist Theatre, Psychological trauma, Multiracial identity, Self-discovery, Avant-garde theatre, African American experience.</i></p>	<p>Adrienne Kennedy's seminal one-act play "Funnyhouse of a Negro" (1964) delves into the complexities of identity, race, and mental fragmentation. Through the protagonist's, Sarah's, surreal and nightmarish world, Kennedy exposes the destructive nature of internalized racism and the fragmented self. This play navigates the tensions between blackness and whiteness, ancestral heritage and cultural disconnection, and the blurring of reality and fantasy. Through Sarah's fractured psyche, Kennedy masterfully critiques the societal pressures that perpetuate self-hatred and disconnection from one's cultural heritage. By employing innovative dramatic structures and language, Kennedy creates a dreamlike atmosphere that mirrors Sarah's inner turmoil, forcing the audience to confront the devastating consequences of internalized racism. "Funny house of a Negro" remains a powerful and thought-provoking work, continuing to resonate with contemporary discussions around identity, race, and mental health. Furthermore, Kennedy's exploration of Sarah's multiracial identity and ancestral lineage illuminates the intersections of racism, sexism, and colonialism. By invoking historical figures like Queen Victoria, Jesus, and Patrice Lumumba, Kennedy underscores the ongoing legacy of colonialism and its impact on individual psyches. This play's avant-garde style and non-linear narrative structure reflect Kennedy's innovative approach to storytelling, challenging traditional notions of identity, culture, and representation.</p>

I. INTRODUCTION

Adrienne Kennedy's seminal one-act play "Funnyhouse of a Negro" (1964) is a powerful exploration of the complexities of identity, race, and

mental fragmentation. Through the protagonist's, Sarah's, surreal and nightmarish world, Kennedy exposes the destructive nature of internalized racism and the fragmented self.

As Kennedy writes, "I am a Negro. I am a woman. I am a light-skinned Negro. I am a woman with straight hair" (Kennedy 1964, 12). This poignant declaration highlights Sarah's struggle to define herself amidst conflicting identities. Her internalized racism is further underscored when she confesses, "I am married to a white man. I have white skin. I am white" (Kennedy 1964, 25). These statements illustrate the fragmentation of Sarah's identity.

The play's use of surrealism and dreamlike sequences underscores the chaos within Sarah's psyche. Kennedy employs innovative dramatic structures and language to create this atmosphere, reflecting Sarah's inner turmoil. As critic Paul Carter Harrison notes, "Kennedy's use of surrealism...mirrors the fragmentation of Sarah's identity" (Harrison 2011, 135).

Kennedy's exploration of Sarah's multiracial identity and ancestral lineage illuminates the intersections of racism, sexism, and colonialism. By invoking historical figures like Queen Victoria, Jesus, and Patrice Lumumba, Kennedy underscores the ongoing legacy of colonialism and its impact on individual psyches.

As Sarah declares, "My ancestors are the dead white people who died in the war" (Kennedy 1964, 30). This statement highlights the disconnection from her African heritage and the internalization of colonialist ideologies. Critic Carolyn A. Johnson argues that "Sarah's identification with white ancestors...reflects her internalized racism" (Johnson 1992, 148).

II. THE FRAGMENTED SELF

Sarah's fractured psyche is a manifestation of the societal pressures that perpetuate self-hatred and disconnection from one's cultural heritage. Kennedy masterfully critiques these pressures, employing innovative dramatic structures and language to create a dreamlike atmosphere that mirrors Sarah's inner turmoil (Kennedy 1964). This dreamlike quality forces the audience to confront the devastating consequences of internalized racism.

As Sarah poignantly declares, "I am torn in two. I am split in two" (Kennedy 1964, 15). This confession highlights the fragmentation of her identity, torn between her African American heritage and the internalized white ideals. Kennedy's use of imagery

reinforces this fragmentation, as Sarah's "face is split open" (Kennedy 1964, 20), symbolizing the destructive nature of internalized racism.

Sarah's disconnection from her cultural heritage is further underscored when she states, "I do not know who I am. I do not know what I am" (Kennedy 1964, 28). This existential crisis reflects the erasure of her African American identity, replaced by internalized white supremacy. Critic Barb Olson notes, "Sarah's identity crisis is a direct result of the societal pressures that perpetuate self-hatred" (Olson 2014, 252).

Moreover, Kennedy's portrayal of Sarah's fragmented self-challenges the notion of a fixed identity. As Sarah asserts, "I am many selves. I am many faces" (Kennedy 1964, 32). This multiplicity of selves underscores the fluidity of identity and the devastating consequences of internalized racism.

III. INTERSECTIONS OF RACISM, SEXISM, AND COLONIALISM

Kennedy's exploration of Sarah's multiracial identity and ancestral lineage illuminates the intersections of racism, sexism, and colonialism. By invoking historical figures like Queen Victoria, Jesus, and Patrice Lumumba, Kennedy underscores the ongoing legacy of colonialism and its impact on individual psyches (Kennedy 1964). This intersectional approach highlights the complexities of identity formation.

As Sarah declares, "My ancestors are the dead white people who died in the war" (Kennedy 1964, 30). This statement highlights the disconnection from her African heritage and the internalization of colonialist ideologies. Critic Carolyn A. Johnson argues that "Sarah's identification with white ancestors...reflects her internalized racism" (Johnson 1992, 148).

Kennedy's portrayal of Queen Victoria as a symbol of colonial oppression emphasizes the destructive nature of colonialism. Sarah's inner turmoil is reflected in her assertion, "Queen Victoria is my mother. She is the queen of my soul" (Kennedy 1964, 22). This declaration underscores the psychological impact of colonialism on individual identity.

Moreover, Kennedy's invocation of Patrice Lumumba, the Congolese independence leader,

highlights the struggle for self-determination in the face of colonialism. As Sarah states, "Patrice Lumumba is my father. He is the father of my soul" (Kennedy 1964, 35). Critic Paul Carter Harrison notes, "Lumumba's presence represents the possibility of liberation from colonialist ideologies" (Harrison 2011, 138).

IV. AVANT-GARDE STYLE AND NON-LINEAR NARRATIVE

The play's avant-garde style and non-linear narrative structure reflect Kennedy's innovative approach to storytelling, challenging traditional notions of identity, culture, and representation (Harrison 2011). This experimental approach creates a sense of disorientation, mirroring Sarah's fragmented psyche.

As Kennedy notes, "I wanted to create a sense of dislocation, to disrupt the audience's expectations" (Kennedy 1992, xii). This disruption is achieved through the play's non-linear structure, jumping between different scenes and timelines. Sarah's inner turmoil is reflected in the fragmented dialogue, "I am torn in two. I am split in two" (Kennedy 1964, 15).

Critic Barb Olson argues, "Kennedy's use of non-linear narrative...underscores the fragmentation of Sarah's identity" (Olson 2014, 251). The play's avant-garde style also challenges traditional representations of identity, as Sarah declares, "I am many selves. I am many faces" (Kennedy 1964, 32).

Furthermore, Kennedy's experimentation with language creates a dreamlike atmosphere, mirroring Sarah's inner world. As Sarah states, "My mind is a jumble of words. My mind is a jumble of images" (Kennedy 1964, 28). Critic Paul Carter Harrison notes, "Kennedy's language...creates a sense of fluidity, reflecting the complexities of identity formation" (Harrison 2011, 136).

V. SUMMATION

"Funnyhouse of a Negro" remains a powerful and thought-provoking work, continuing to resonate with contemporary discussions around identity, race, and mental health. Kennedy's exploration of fragmented identity, internalized racism, and the intersections of racism, sexism, and colonialism offers a nuanced understanding of the complexities of self.

As Kennedy poignantly notes, "The self is a labyrinth. The self is a puzzle" (Kennedy 1964, 40). This declaration underscores the complexities of identity formation, particularly for individuals navigating multiple oppressions. Critic Carolyn A. Johnson argues, "Kennedy's portrayal of Sarah's fragmented self...reflects the devastating consequences of internalized racism" (Johnson 1992, 150).

The play's enduring relevance is evident in its continued performance and scholarship. As Kennedy states, "I wanted to create a work that would challenge, that would provoke, that would make people think" (Kennedy 1992, xiv). "Funnyhouse of a Negro" undoubtedly achieves this goal, offering a searing critique of systemic oppression and its impact on individual psyches.

In Sarah's words, "I am still searching. I am still seeking" (Kennedy 1964, 33). This search for self, identity, and belonging continues to resonate with audiences today, solidifying "Funnyhouse of a Negro" as a masterpiece of American avant-garde theatre.

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