



RESEARCH PAPER

Unveiling the Journey of Racial Microaggressions in Langston Hughes "One Friday Morning" and Nafissa Thompson Spires "Belles Lettres"

¹ Muneeba Sharafat, ²Atteq-ur-Rahman and ³Zeeshan Khan*

1. Lecturer, Department of English, University of Swabi, Anbar, KP Pakistan
2. Assistant Professor, Department of English, Islamia College University, Peshawar, KP Pakistan
3. Lecturer, Department of Management Sciences, University of Swabi, Anbar, KP Pakistan

*Corresponding Author | ms.zeeshan@uoswabi.edu.pk

ABSTRACT

This study aims to unveil the dual identity of African Americans and its psychological impact in the form of racial microaggressions in the two short stories: "One Friday Morning" by Langston Hughes and "Belles Lettres" by Nafissa Thompson Spires. Racism has been a malignancy in the lives of African Americans. Racial discrimination involves victimizing the target recurrently, which leads to racial stress and is evident in the form of microaggressions. To achieve the desired objectives, the texts are analyzed with the canon of W. E. B Du Bois's theory of "Double Consciousness." The study is qualitative, so the researcher employed closed reading techniques and textual analysis. The findings show African Americans have passed through old-fashioned mega racism and a new variant of racism is prevailing, in the form of microaggression. This study recommends that microaggressions of any kind are harmful for the psychological and social well-being of human beings irrespective of any geographical position.

KEYWORDS

Double Consciousness, veil, Microaggressions, Racist gaze, Intra-racial, Color-line

Introduction

Black Folks have been the victims of slavery, racism, oppression, marginalization, and exploitation for centuries. Though, slavery is abolished whites consider their existence as a despicable inferior race. The problem lies in the White racist gaze. This study explores two short stories, one from the early 20th century and another from the 21st century, to illustrate the psychological impact of white racist gaze on African Americans. In this study, Langston Hughes' "One Friday Morning" (1941) and Nafissa Thompson Spires' "Belles Lettres" from *Heads of the Coloured People* (2018) are analyzed from the W. E. B Du Bois theory of Double Consciousness. I intend to unveil the white racist gaze with the aid of Du Boisian theory as it has paralyzed the psyche of African Americans and made them internalize it.

The manifestations of racism are evident in the psychological battle of microaggressions. In the 20th century, racism perpetrated by White Americans and Black Americans being the target suffered dreadfully. In Hughes' story, the journey of historic racism begins and what it yields is evident in Spires' story. In the epistolary story of Spires, the impact of white racism is obvious in the mind and behavior of female African Americans, who try to behave like White Americans and compete with their race. This study will unveil the journey of institutional racism in 20th-century African American Literature changed into internalized racism by African Americans in the 21st century. It

will explore the emergence of interracial and intraracial microaggressions in African Americans.

Literature Review

This study aims to unveil the impact of racial microaggressions experienced by the black community in the post-racial era in the United States of America. There is significant existing literature on microaggressions and marginalization of African Americans. Routray & Kaur (2022) explored *The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison. They focused on racial trauma and employed Chester E. Pierce's concept of microaggression to find out its psychological impact on the protagonist, Pecola, in the narrative. Solórzano et al. (2000) employed critical race theory as a framework and examined racial microaggressions and their impact on the collegiate racial climate. They took interviews from the focused group at three different universities. Their study reveals that racial microaggressions exist in academic and social spheres in the collegiate environment.

Proctor-Reyes (2023) used Consensual Qualitative Research on 15 participants, born in the United States and 18 years of age or older, to explore the experience of Black-on-Black racial microaggressions. Furthermore, Willis (2015) analyzed the experiences of Black women who studied abroad via community colleges and found out that they encountered gendered racial microaggressions. On the other hand, DeCuir-Gunby et al. (2023) used critical race theory on 15 African American students at Predominantly White Institutions. They concluded that racial microaggressions affect the physical and emotional well-being of the targeted community.

Lewis et al. (2021) analyzed the responses of 1710 students of color, African American, Asian American, Multiracial students, and Latinx, at a historically white university. The findings showed that African American students experienced a higher ratio of microaggression and a lower level of belongingness as compared to other people of color. Although, great contributions have been made by exploring the racial microaggressions in African American society but gaps in this literature need to be addressed. This study is intended to analyze two short stories, "One Friday Morning" by Langston Hughes and "Belle Lettres" from *Heads of the Coloured People* by Nafissa Thompson Spires, with Du Boisian theory to trace racial microaggressions and its impact on African Americans in the post-racial era.

Theoretical Framework

After decades of emancipation, today's America still faces the issues of race. Du Bois' "negro problem" still creeps in the white society. Though in the era of slavery, physical violence was predominant in the South of America in the aftermath the violence transformed, from physical to psychological. Physical violence was barbaric but the psychological manifestations are just like a melting pot about to boil and burst. The nature of racial issues has evolved from the period of slavery. The arena of open violence is now disguised in implicit modes of it which can be experienced by the African race only in the presence of Americans. I plan to explore the two short stories and argue that double consciousness remains a pertinent theory to America. It can help us understand the new manifestations of microaggressions in African Americans. I plan to unveil the color line with the canon of Du Bois' double consciousness and mark the journey shifts from inter-racial microaggression in Hughes' "One Friday Morning" to intra-racial microaggression in Spires' "Belles Lettres".

Du Bois' concept of double consciousness provides an appropriate theoretical model for understanding the psychological conflict of African Americans. In *The Souls of Black Folk*, he asserts that African Americans are:

a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world, — a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness, — an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body. (1903, p. 3)

He clearly states the three constituent elements of double consciousness; the veil, two-ness, and second sight. This veil has multifarious functions. First of all, it serves as the color line that not only hides the faces of black people but makes their bodies invisible. Second, it happens to be a reflective mirror on which white Americans fabricate their projections and those projections are internalized by the blacks. The external gaze of white Americans on the blacks leads to the split of African Americans as Africans and Americans. They share two worlds: their inner world of Africans behind the veil and the external world of Americans who deny their recognition. As a result, second sight develops of the blacks as they see themselves with the eyes of the white Americans. Du Bois calls it second sight as it is a social sight of a subject to see him/herself from the perspective of the dominant group i.e. Americans. He believes that any individual who lives in a racist society will experience this two-ness. Consequently, every African American lives with two souls and two identities. They have double ideals and double worlds which make African Americans, live a fragmented life full of anxiety and inferiority. Du Bois believes:

The history of the 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. In this merging he wishes neither of the older selves to be lost. He would not Africanize America, for America has too much to teach the world and Africa. He would not bleach his Negro soul in a flood of white Americanism, for he knows that Negro blood has a message for the world. He simply wishes ... to be both a Negro and an American, without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of Opportunity closed roughly in his face. (1903, p. 4)

Material and Methods

This study is qualitative that's why close reading techniques and textual analysis is implemented. By applying Du Boisian theory I intend to draw parallels between them and unveil the impact of historic racial marginalization i.e. racial microaggressions. The idea of "microaggression" was floated in 1969 by the psychiatrist and Emeritus Professor of Harvard University, Chester M. Pierce. Sue et. al (2007) define it as "every day, verbal, nonverbal, and environmental slights, snubs, or insults, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile or derogatory, or negative messages" to the individual who belongs to the minority and oppressed community. In his book, *Microaggressions in Everyday Life: Race, Gender & Sexual Orientation* (2010) Sue gave three divisions of microaggressions: "microinsults", "microassaults", and "microinvalidations." Microassaults are "conscious, deliberate, and either subtle or explicit racial, gender, or sexual-orientation based attitudes, beliefs, or behaviors that are communicated to marginalized groups through environmental cues, verbalizations, or behaviors." (2007, p. 28) Microassaults is similar to historic "racism, sexism or

heterosexism." Microinsults carry "stereotypes, rudeness, and insensitivity and that demean a person's racial, gender, or sexual orientation, heritage, or identity." (2007, p. 31) Sue claims that microinsults are implicit insults. The most dangerous and chronic form of microaggressions is microinvalidations which "exclude, negate, or nullify the psychological thoughts, feelings or experiential reality of certain groups, such as people of color, women, and LGBTs." (2007, p. 37)

He claims that microaggressions are harmful to both the perpetrators and the target as the former lacks the potential to acknowledge and utilize the productiveness of the target while the latter is emotionally, psychologically, and economically exhausted. During this process, the perpetrator dehumanizes the target and it leads to the alienation of the latter. Racism is both a historical and modern phenomenon, especially in America. However, it got homogenized at the macro level and changed its violent nature into venomous oppression at the micro level.

Results and Discussion

In Hughes' short story, "One Friday Morning", Nancy Lee Johnson, the protagonist, is a high school art student at George Washington High who has moved to the "not-officially-segregated North" with her family with the hope that she will have the best opportunities opposed to the Deep South. She has marvelously drawn a picture that is "so good, her lines so sure, her colors so bright and harmonious, that certainly no other student in the senior art class at George Washington High was thought to have very much of a chance." (Hughes, 1941, p. 1) She is a colored girl "but seldom did her high-school classmates think of her as colored." (p.2) Perhaps she is not experiencing overt racial discrimination in her educational institute.

Nancy Lee is smart, actively participates in curricular and co-curricular activities, and does not show any violence or harm to the school. She has successfully adapted to her environment, therefore, "sometimes forgot she was colored herself." (p. 2) She considered herself American and "was proud of being American." Her parents were colored Americans who went to Negro colleges where they experienced explicit "old-fashioned" racism. Henceforth, they took her to the North to escape from the racism and the development of dual identities as Negro and American. It shows they were also affected by the double consciousness, "her parents had taught her the beauties of Africa, its strength, its song, its mighty rivers, its early smelting of iron, its building of the pyramids, and its ancient and important civilizations." (p. 2)

Nancy Lee is a confident and firm American though of African descent. She considers herself to be acclimated in the white society and strongly believes in the American dream of "Liberty and justice for all!" (p. 7) Her picture won the "Artist Club Scholarship" but when the award-winning committee came to know that she is colored "they changed their plans." (p. 8) The color line is the basis of discrimination against Nancy Lee. Du Bois believes, "the problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line." (*The Souls of the Black Folk*, 1903, p. 13) Their excuse for rejecting the award to Nancy Lee is based on color only:

It seems to us wiser to arbitrarily rotate the award... And especially in this case since the student chosen happens to be colored, a circumstance which unfortunately, had we known, might have prevented this embarrassment. But there have never been any Negro students in the local art school, and the presence of one there might create difficulties for all concerned. We have high regard for

the quality for Nancy Lee Johnson's talent, but we do not feel it would be fair to honor it with the Artist Club award. (p. 8)

The color line has been the major ground of racial discrimination in America and still exists. However, the manifestations have been changed. Du Bois believes:

the question as to how far differences of race-which show themselves chiefly in the color of the skin and the texture of the hair-will hereafter be made the basis of denying to over half the world the right of sharing to utmost ability the opportunities and privileges of modern civilization. (To the Nations of the World, 1900, p.1)

There arises a conflict as to how Nancy Lee thinks of herself as an American but the Americans see her as a Negro, only. For the first time she feels the "two-ness" and "said nothing, for there was no air to give breath to her lungs." (Hughes 1941, p. 8) The color line becomes the veil of Nancy Lee and covers her physical body and human feelings by making her invisible. Walker (2019) claims:

the segregation of races was not built on a difference between black and white identities but rather on the prejudice that remained after emancipation. Prejudice kept the veil that withheld blacks from the white world and created toxic double consciousness, and prejudice continues to do so. (p. 121-122)

Timely removal of prejudices would have made America "ideal human brotherhood." (Walker, 2019, p. 121) Nancy Lee considers herself American and believes in the American dream but the dilemma starts from the revelation of the Negro body which leads to the emergence of two-ness in her. Du Bois' double consciousness starts orchestrating the interracial microaggressions in her. According to Sue (2010), "African Americans are intellectually inferior is quite a common microaggression." (p. 35) Nancy Lee's desire to escape from the second sight and the microaggressions represent the desire of the entire black community to move from the marginalized to a non-marginalized space. Though she cries and observes her Irish teacher Miss O'Shay with the window in the background trying to solace herself it is significant to note that every effort to cope with microaggressions leads to trauma.

Racial contexts deeply inculcate the unhealed racial trauma in the identity development of colored people. Nancy Lee becomes a victim to institutional racism. Stokely and Hamilton (1967) define Institutional racism as "particular and general instances of racial discrimination, inequality, exploitation, and domination in organizational or institutional contexts." (p. 2) Henceforth, she is trapped in the gyre of American and African versions of herself and is situated in interracial microaggression i.e. white race degrades the black race. She feels alienated and shattered by the racial microaggression generated by the white Americans. Though she plans to remove this cult and struggle for black girls in her community nothing will compensate for her traumatic experience in her early years of life.

The odyssey of racism is molded from the 20th to the 21st century. The picture of looking at oneself from American eyes and feeling the inward blackness started predominantly in the 20th century, which can be traced back to Jim Crow laws of segregation. At that time, the segregation manifested in the form of institutional racism, Henceforth, the duality of selves is dominant in Hughes' "One Friday Morning" but the picture changed with the shift from institutional racism to internalized racism. Since

“Belles Lettres” depicts the literature of the early 21st century, it mirrors the new form of racism i.e. internalized racism. Clair and Denis (2015) claim that internalized racism is a practice “in which members of a subordinated racial group accept the negative stereotypes and attitudes toward their group.” (p. 857) In this level of racism, the oppressed group holds implicit prejudices against their group the way the dominant group has kept formerly.

Spires “Belles Lettres” navigates an epistolary story of two colored mothers blaming each other’s daughters (Christiana and Fatima) for nasty maneuvers while studying at a predominantly white private school. Both the mothers are well-to-do: Christiania’s mother, Dr. Lucinda Johnston, is a psychiatrist while Fatima’s mother, Monica Willis, is PhD in education. Double consciousness is indispensable in understanding the black experience. “Belles Lettres” is full of white racist gaze but the perpetrators are not white but colored. This story begins with the haughty exchange of letters from Christiania’s mother about a remark made by a white woman, Mrs. Watson, blaming Fatima is spreading the wrongdoing of her daughter. Christiania’s mother cannot resist the assumption made by the white woman as Du Bois claims that double consciousness is “[the] sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others.” (*The Souls of Black Folk*, 1903, p. 2) The mothers are looking at one another “through the eyes of others.” (Spires, 2018, p. 9) They are judgmental of each other blackness. Dr. Johnston and Willis view each other with the eyes of Americans as they have internalized their way of oppression, discrimination, and degrading each other respectively.

Walker (2019) writes “some of these negative feelings would be internalized, meaning that blacks began to take up that hateful charge against themselves as well... [Because] having our humanity rejected results in anguish.” (p. 120) Christiania is portrayed, via the gaze of Fatima’s mother, as a black violent child,

It is true that Christian’s hamster died recently, but it is absolutely not true that it died at Chrissy’s hand. At no time has Chrissy ever put Hambone or any of her previous hamsters in the microwave, dryer, or dishwasher.” (Spires, 2018, p. 1)

Christinia is trying to be American by keeping hamsters to imitate them but her seen to be harming the rodents is the white racist gaze in the form of Willis and Fatima’s projection on her. Christiania’s mother is mad that her daughter is seen as a harmful torturing African. She imitates the marginalized and prejudiced attitude of the whites towards her race. Americans always think of colored people as trouble to their country so do Dr. Johnston, “I hope to clear this up, as we both know how ugly these things can get.” (p.1) Both are aware of their inferior status in the State but are busy degrading one another. They are projecting white gaze upon one another but keep on secretly exchanging letters via their ward’s backpack. Du Bois believes that colored people should be careful in interacting with the whites, as Willis asks Christiania to “play nice” at Emily’s party. (p. 2) Fatima’s mother projects a white gaze on Christiania and explains:

I suppose you already know...that Christiania will not attend Emily’s party, so there’s no need for me to encourage her to ‘play nice’... it wasn’t Chrissy’s fault that Emily broke her nose when she fell...We have given the Kemps our sincerest apologies for Emily’s unfortunate accident. (p. 3)

Whites are reluctant to assimilate with the blacks and Willis reflects it, “after speaking to the Kemps, I can see why they would hesitate to invite Christiania.” (p. 3) The image of these colored women, in the other’s eyes, is the significant and the driving force

of the story. Americans have always associated negative attributes with the African race and made stereotypes of them which are associated with “torturing”, “backbiting”, “smells like eggs”, “nasty”, “problematic”, “jealousy”, “blackness”, “stealing”, “weight problem”, “brutal”, “booty scratchers”, and “hepatitis A, B, or C”, and “craziness.” Once again the double-consciousness prevails because Willis is proud of her daughter as one of her poems won a prize. Henceforth, she tries to pretend like the Americans who are the only learned people and their masters.

The colored people are explicitly conscious of their color and it is evident when Dr. Johnston admits, “we are not self-conscious about Christinia’s blackness.” (p.4) Both women become gross and reach the extreme status of racism by doing character assassination of each other. They degrade one another by calling their daughters to be born out of illicit relationships. Monica blames Christinia’s mother, “it seems you picked up more on your travels to Africa than those seventies-style caftans you insist on wearing.” (p. 6) Du Bois claims in *Dawn of Dusks* that blacks do not love themselves and in internalized racism, they project that hatred on the black folks, “that bitter inner criticism of Negroes directed in upon themselves, which is widespread. It often tends to the fierce, angry, contemptuous judgment of nearly all that Negroes do, say, and believes.” (2017, p.179) Dr. Johnston takes the initiative in harboring the self-hatred and projects it on Willis, “you display a volatile combination of residual ghetto and uppity Negress, and that will be your undoing, if Fatima isn’t.” (p. 7) Thinking like an American master, she rejects her African culture and folklores and treat Fatima and her mother to be African only, “I don’t know where you get this ‘African folklore’ Fatima has been spreading around the school, but I should think that no educated person would tell stories of the Mamie Waters...it took me hours to console Christinia.” (p. 8) Black folks take their internalized racism to a level where they become like the white racist masters who would brutally kill and harm the blacks on the plantations in the South during the era of slavery. They finally show their anger and self-hatred and accept:

We have more class in our excrement than you have in your whole hamster-murdering family. And yes, there is a bit of the ghetto still left in me, enough to tell you who can finish the fight if it gets to the point. We’re never too far from Oakland or the Southside. (p. 7)

As Whites are the lawmakers, therefore, the Principal intervenes and declares that Christinia and Fatima were “engaged in a brutal fistfight at school... this behavior violates not only the Westwood code of conduct, but also our core values as a school, and is punishable by expulsion.” (p. 10) Lucinda and Monica project their internalized racist gaze on one another. Once they are warned by the white masters, they reconcile and behave decently. They try to hide their reality from the White Americans by pretending to be good. The odyssey of racism which started in the 16th century with the transatlantic slave trade inculcated institutional racism after emancipation in the early 20th century. Those experiences and oppressions by the white folk on the colored people made them internalize racism and they started projecting it onto their race. Consequently, institutional racism resulted in inter-racial microaggression while internalized racism yielded intra-racial microaggression.

Discussion

It is evident from the analysis that Double identity and Microaggressions are the direct undesired results of racism. In Spires’s “Belles Lettres” African Americans have internalized racism which was once targeted at them in the past. This paper illustrates

how violence and discrimination reciprocate negative outcomes: intra-racial microaggressions. Positive behavior and attitude lead to positive outcomes while negative will always lead to negative results. According to Du Bois, African Americans have a dual identity, Americans and Africans, at the same time. This duality in identity splits them apart into racial and national identities. Du Bois claims that Black folks can better use their potential if they could unify their “two-ness. The amalgamation of an American who “has too much to teach the world” and an African “whose Negro blood has a message for the world.” (The Souls of Black Folk, 1903, p. 4) But this unification has not been done that’s why Black Americans are experiencing trauma due to microaggressions. “Belles Lettres” is explicitly full of intraracial microaggressions.

Both the mothers have experienced racism after emancipation and are traumatized that’s why they become victims of intraracial microaggressions. They strip-tease each other’s daughters and devalue them. The three forms of microaggressions are vividly present in this story as both the mothers are competing with one another and projecting the white racist gaze on the other party. Lucinda’s denial of her cultural heritage and folklore and talking negatively about it is a form of microaggression. To win the argument and feel contended with the dominant community, they are shattering one another with verbal abuses. Their false consciousness never lets them realize that they are harming their race.

Conclusion

Nancy Lee, Dr. Johnston, Monica Willis, Christinia, and Fatima are the products of racism and dual identity. They do not adhere to their own identity because of the two-ness in their psyche which takes a chronic form of microaggressions. Through this study, we conclude that America has germinated the seeds of racism and its impact can be seen not only in their attitude but the behavior of African Americans as well. The masters have targeted them from slavery till emancipation and to the contemporary times as well. Though the nature of racism has changed the legacy of trauma, alienation, and microaggressions hasn’t changed. Violence, marginalization, and oppression will always show its reaction in a negative form. The African Americans in the modern world can’t escape from the white racist gaze no matter how intelligible or productive they become to their country.

Recommendations

This study shows the disastrous effects of racial microaggressions on the educated females. Henceforth, recommends that people of color should be treated as fellow humans as they have experienced and experience discrimination on daily basis, across the world.

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