



IDENTITY SHIFT IN PAUL BEATTY'S *THE WHITE BOY SHUFFLE*

D. ABINAYA

Research Scholar
Research Department of English
The American College
Madurai – 625 002
(TN) INDIA.

ABSTRACT

Paul Beatty is an African American novelist and who is the first American to get the Man Booker prize 2016. His works are highly satirical. The White Boy Shuffle is his debut novel. As an African American, he portraits images of slavery, loss of identity, race and racial barriers in his novel. His protagonist Gunnar, who is a poet, is in a dilemma throughout the novel. There are many controversies in his life. He appears to be a man of mixed identity and he is often transforms between his identities. The objective of the paper is to project the exhaustion of a pure identity and the emergence of a new corrupted identity. The research tool employed is the concept of 'hybridity'.

Keywords: Culture, identity, hybridity, imitation, and race.

INTRODUCTION

The literature of every society is marked by its own problems which are unique and peculiar and so cannot be ignored. African American literature is dominated by African's encounter with the west and its consequences. The African American social, political and economic history has contributed a lot to the making of African American literature. With its peculiar history of racial segregation and its impact on the culture, political and psychological situation, African American Literature mostly presents to the reader, the hostility that existed between the world of Whites and Blacks.

In the post colonial context, the novel ceases to be the literary artifact. Post colonial literature addresses the problems and consequences of the decolonization of the country and of a nation, especially the political independence of formerly subjugated colonial people. Literature and politics converge on the point of constructing a new identity. Post colonialism also plays its part with globalization through its hybridity, alterity and notions of Empire

D. ABINAYA

1P a g e



and imperialism. Post colonialism is a significant link between traditional or historical globalization and modern globalization. The Post colonial literature as a world literature is ‘a structure of connection, of modular repetition, that manifests itself as endless difference rooted in locale particularity’ (Moretti 32). The postcolonial postmodern and post structural approaches to English literature interpret the world as the decolonized entity. The post colonial cultures and societies are depicted in the postcolonial literature.

Writers played a very important role during postcolonial period. Many classic postcolonial texts were published between 1950’s and 2000’s. While drama and poetry are important in post colonial literature, it’s really the novels that define this movement. What the postcolonial writers did was as important as what the anti colonial freedom fighters and activists did. Post colonial writers tell their own stories, from their own perspectives.

Paul Beatty was born in Los Angeles, California on 1962. He went to El Camino Real High School in his teenage years. He got MFA in creative writing from Brooklyn College and MA in psychology from Boston University. After college, he started writing poetry. He got Poetry Slam Champion of the Nuyorican Poets Cafe for his first volume of poetry, *Big Bank Take Little Bank* (1991). He has written another book of poetry called, *Joker, Joker, Deuce* (1994). He was awarded the Foundation for Contemporary Arts Grants to Artists Award in 1993. He has written four powerful satirical novels, *The White Boy Shuffle* (1996), *Tuff* (2000), *Slumberland* (2008) and *The Sellout* (2015).

Paul Beatty has also edited a volume of short stories called *Hokum: An Anthology of African-American Humor* (2006). His recent book *The Sellout* has won the 2016 Man Booker Prize for Fiction. *The Sellout* is the blistering satire on race in contemporary America. It is described by The New York Times as a ‘metaphorical multicultural pot almost too hot to touch’, whilst the Wall Street Journal called it a ‘Swiftian Satire of the highest order. Like someone shouting fire in a crowded theatre, Mr. Beatty has whispered “Racism” in a postracial world’.

Paul Beatty strikes here a way that a Black is treated in a highly sophisticated society of America. Though Black people living in white society are not suppressed by White, they themselves get inferior with their own mind. Black people living in a society having majority of Whites themselves feel uncomfortable with their own Black community people. While they have the color conscious in their mind they like to live in White society. They readily change their culture to adapt with a new society.

The total apathy of the African American society regarding their responsibilities and duties towards the system leads them towards death and destruction socially, ethically, morally and emotionally. These issues of self-centeredness and indifference towards other by the impotent and toothless White people have been highlighted in *The White Boy Shuffle*. This

novel is a scathing attack on the double standards of the Black people who enjoy the fruit of liberty and abundance in the prevailing system.

In *The White Boy Shuffle*, Paul Beatty waves stories of violation and adversity to examine the cruelty that racism and identity produces. The opposition between the narrow traditional path and the broad, pathless present is embodied in the contrast between the opening scene of the novel and its broad band present. The childhood images of Gunnar are negative representations instrumental in producing racism and hybridity. For a Black boy in a racist, white culture, these images are never innocent. Though he is a Black lives in a White society, he frequently befriends with White students rather than Black students. He enjoys the life living with White. But he has his racial inferiority in his mind when his White friends talk ill of Black community.

Gunnar's friends are all Whites in Santa Monica. During his free time he spends making enough trouble to gain him mild bewilderments from Santa Monica Shore Patrol. He has with his white friend while doing atrocities but each and every police grabs him alone and warns him. They never act against White students.

"Young man, try to imagine a future behind bars."

"What you in for, young buck? (The White Boy Shuffle, 35)

Gunnar could not give up the relationship with White students even though he is treated mediocre. But he himself narrates the story of his forefathers to his White friends. He accepts the childhood icons of White culture, at the same time he makes fun of White kids of their opinion about the color. He says, "I learned earlier that White kids will believe anything anybody a shade darker than chocolate milk says." He tries to claim superiority among the innocent White kids. He amuses with Whites in classrooms where multiculturalism is in practice whenever teacher about the equality of Blacks.

Paul Beatty emphasis that there in a preconceived notions about Blacks in the minds of Whites. The belief that Black was not valuable or beautiful is a conviction ever in the minds of Blacks itself. He addresses an issue that is the degree to which Blacks have been subjugated not only by Whites but also by their fellow Blacks. They are not only treated substandard for color but they have the thought that Blacks are born scandalous and criminals.

"They are talking about human color."

"So?"

"So just pretend that you don't see color. Don't say things like 'Black people are lecherous, violent, natural born criminals.'"

"But I'm black."

"Oh, I hadn't noticed." (WBS, 42)



The above conversation between a Black nurse and Gunnar clearly reveals the color ideologies remains in their minds. Though they are Black in a way, they are pretending that they are quite different from fellow Blacks having a unique Black identity. The hatred of Black people even by the Black people living in the White society and having the status of African American is the self-hatred induced by the color consciousness.

Meanwhile, Beatty highlighting the image of White people in the minds of Black. Usually they think that Whites are highly civilized, moral and humanized. At the same time Whites thinks that people with darks color are non human, illiterate, uncivilized, barbaric and a mark of evils. But the fact is that they are only their perceptions are imaginations. Reality is that no man born with such genetic qualities. In the novels Gunnar argues that the people are thinking that the Whites are born Hip Hoppers. Gunnars mom tells Gunnar, “What’s with all the homoeroticism? People talk about the White man’s penis envy. The white ain’t got nothing on these genital -obsessed hip-hoppers” (*WBS*, 91). Gunnar’s mother knows few more stuff about Whites because she has been living in White society for long years.

Gunnar suffers on the basis of not only racial discrimination but also with dual identity. In the beginning he wants to live with White society by following the values fashioned by Whites. At the time also he is suppressed by his own fellow friends. The lethargic attitude of the police towards the Whites during crime is also revealed in this novel. Gunnar is arrested by a police man when he attempts steal in a shop along with his White friends. The police man excuses his fellow friends to escape from the case. But he is not allowed to get away from the case. He is trampled by his father who is a sketch artist in Los Angeles Police Department. Even his father cannot do anything against the atrocities committed to his son.

Gunnar that he is a Black feels inferior even in his class in Boston University. He joins as a professor in Boston University. He is driven away from the class even by his own students. He is made to feel lower and stupid besides the Whites. He has already experienced the various traits of racial oppression. His poems about the Blacks are the outcome of his overwhelming detestation. He is aware of the turning wheels of racial oppressions in his life, but he makes no effort to stop the turnings except the poetry he has written for no reason. Instead he feels proud to be with White society as a part of them. But at last he is alienated from the society he wants to be with a part.

The isolation of Gunnar develops gradually. Meanwhile many Black people committed suicide inspired by his poem. He is forced to run into the society to save people. As a Black poet he wants some meaningfulness in his life. He feels very stressed and dilemmatic in his life. He tries to escape her guiltiness by fulfilling the expectations of his own Blacks. Totally alienated in a racist society, as a Black poet he starts to create awareness among



Black people about their identity as a Black living in a White society. He is in a dilemma towards the end of the novel. He is expected by the Blacks to lead them in freedom fighting. The life of Gunnar is also a study of frustration. Throughout the novel he is not satisfied either in his life, or in his career. He is rejected by his father who is more interested in White society than in his own son's welfare. Driven by his own miserable situation in his life he could afford neither security nor love nor affection to his family. But at the end he reveals his anger against White dominance through his poetry.

Beatty shows how these dominating aspects of race, identity, class, and color affects the lives of black people. And this novel probes deeper into the Black man's dilemmas, oppressions and tribulations. It exposes the devastating effect of racism, where the Blacks try to live by the values created by the Whites. It also shows racial oppression induces being a revolutionist in the Black society as troublesome issue. Gunnar's is a reflection if one such disappointment and it makes him a typical rationalist. He has experienced racism and nuisances of having dual identity in a very paralyzed manner.

REFERENCES

Beatty, Paul. *The White Boy Shuffle*. New York: Houghton Mifflin. 1996. Print.

Bhabha, K. Homi. *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge. 1994. Print.

Smith, Andrew, "Migrancy, hybridity, and postcolonial literary studies". *The Cambridge Companion to Postcolonial Literary Studies*. Ed. Neil Lazarus. Warwick: Cambridge University Press. 2004. Print.