

Research Article

Fragmented Self and Negotiation of Identity in “The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man”

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ABSTARCT

Slavery was abolished after the Civil War, but the Negro race still was not accepted as equals into American society. To attain a better understanding of the events and struggles faced during this period, one must take a look at its literature. James Weldon Johnson does an excellent job of vividly depicting an accurate portrait of the adversities faced before the Civil Rights Movement by the black community in his novel “The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man.” The concerned paper is an inspection and an analysis of the novel “The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man”. Johnson, in the novel, tries to bring to fore the predicament of a colored man who can pass as a white. The narrator remains unnamed and unidentified throughout the novel. Through the anonymous narrator the paper attempts to assess the idea of dual self and fragmentation of identity that the narrator experiences as a mulatto in the American white society. The narrator’s incapability to completely accept the white culture and to fully reject the black heritage is the focal point that the paper will venture to outline.

Keywords—Passing, invisible, African American self, Fragmented self, Race, Identity, identity crisis, ambivalent identity

The Autobiography of an Ex Colored Man, written by James Weldon Johnson was published anonymously in 1912. It was considered an authentic biography when it was published for the first time. Later it was realized by its readers to be a fictional account of a light skinned black man who had successfully passed into the white society.

It was taken as the first fictional text written by Afro-American who disguised its genre. Johnson consciously tried to mix the two categories of fiction and non-fiction as an essential part of his narrative strategy. This literary style can be associated with its central theme of “passing”.

An unnamed mulatto features as the narrator of the novel who demonstrates racial discrimination and violence and how it forms the subjectivity and worldview of the protagonist. The outcome is the fluctuation of his conflicting identifications with the black and white cultures and his ultimate decision to pass for white. Set in the early twentieth century, The Autobiography of An Ex-Colored Man depicts the situation of a mulatto

character who exists in America under circumstances of white male supremacy in an increasingly modern, mobile, innovative, and fast-paced world. During this time, the preservation of the social status quo, i.e., white male dominance was based upon the ideology of racism and different forms of racial discrimination manifested in the realities of segregation, racial inequality, injustice and racially motivated violence such as lynching. The Ex-Colored man is shown to survive within this binary system of race where being white signifies 'normalcy' and 'superiority' and blackness signifies deviation from the norm, otherness and inferiority. (cf. Wiegman 91, 96-97).

Born to a white father, a Southern blue-blood, and a black mother, a former servant, the central character of *The Autobiography* is visibly white yet legally black (Johnson, 3). In the outlined racist scheme, the protagonist would be legally classified as 'colored' and thus socially and economically deemed unfit for the positions of wealth and power. However, the Ex-Colored man assumes the "role of the white man" (Johnson, 145) in order to become monetarily successful in real estate and also to attain social and cultural acknowledgment and recognition.

However, the protagonist resists the racist ascriptions and literally 'cashes in' on his white skin color. W. E. B. Du Bois conceptualized this as "double consciousness" in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903):

[...] the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with a second-sight [...] 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 (DuBois, 3).

In the novel, the Ex-Colored man explains, "From that time I looked out through other eyes, my thoughts were colored, my words dictated, my actions limited". (Johnson, 14).

Being interposed into the race regime, the narrator claims "And this is the dwarfing, warping, distorting influence which operates upon each and every colored man in the United States. He is forced to outlook on all things, not from the viewpoint of a citizen, or a man, or even a human being, but from the viewpoint of a colored man. It is wonderful to me that the race has progressed so broadly as it has, since most of its thought and all of its activity must run through the narrow neck of this one funnel" (Johnson, 14).

The protagonist succeeds in employing his mixed-race heritage to his own benefit and in blurring the white black binary. Though he is able to achieve "white man's success", what he is not able to do is to finally reunite his incongruous relations to black and white cultures. Having passed for white, the Ex-colored man has not yet come to terms with his fragmented and disjointed self.

On the one hand, he cynically enjoys his social status as a visibly white yet legally black man. The figure of the Ex-Colored Man is shown as a component of the social system he lives in. He is educated, well informed, holds a job, attends meetings, has two children. He very cynically enjoys having made money in real estate and thus having played a trick on society through the transgression of borders. He says:

The anomaly of my social position often appealed strongly to my sense of humor. I frequently smiled inwardly at some remark not altogether complimentary to people of color; and more than once I felt like declaiming: 'I am a colored man. Do I not disprove the theory that one drop of Negro blood renders a man unfit?' (Johnson, 144)

On the other hand, he is ideologically and virtually at odds with the binaries sustained by the prevailing dominant discourse on race. He neither completely abandons blackness nor whole heartedly embraces whiteness. So as a 'neither-black-nor-white' man he not only lacks a positioning in a social system that operates prominently with the racial binary of black and white.

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The narrator passes as a white man on several occasions. In Europe he lives with a millionaire and passes as a white man. When he has the desire to return to the South and live as a black man again, the millionaire shuns the black culture. He says:

“This idea of you making a Negro out of yourself is nothing more than a sentiment: and you do not realize the fearful import of what you intend to do. What kind of Negro would you make now, especially in the South?” (Johnson, 67)

It is very important to note that at one particular point in the novel, the ex-colored man decides to engross himself again into the southern black culture. He decides to contribute to the upliftment of his race by being a black composer, through his new American music. It is a blending of European classical compositions and old slave songs.

The ex-colored man is situated in an in-between location because of his differing identifications with both the cultures. This “in-between” spot also depicts his internal tumult and identity negotiation. It shows his contradictory approach to black and white cultures, his embrace and rejection both of African American and White ways of life and his ambivalence towards the racial categories about whiteness and blackness. It reflects very slim chance of his ever being able to acquire a coherent racial identity and individuality. A social dislocation is created due to this lack of construction of a coherent self which Marjorie Garber has called a “category crisis, which refers to a breakdown of definitional distinctions, a borderline that becomes porous wherein the figure who ‘passes’ becomes a mechanism of displacement from one blurred boundary to another”. The Ex-Colored man as a passing figure personifies this “category crisis”. His moral predicament and clashing attitudes towards himself and the society result from being at once an insider and beneficiary as well as an outsider and a critical observer of the very social system he lives in. The Ex-Colored man does not perceive as the denial of his African American inheritance but rather another type of disguise. The Ex-Colored man claims to be playing the role of a white man rather than identifying himself as a white. For the Ex-Colored man passing or rather masking as a white man represents a means of gaining independence, wealth and prestige but at the same it also intensifies his inner turmoil and the ambivalence towards the concept of race.

The ‘Ex’ in front of ‘colored man’ shows his colorlessness. It shows his perception about himself as neither a black nor a white man. His act of pretending to be what he is not, known as passing, is influenced not only by color but also by class and his desire to exercise power. Passing is basically becoming white. As he is a colored man, it is his skin color that saves him and also that curses him at the same time. As he passes and denies his heritage and black culture, he is therefore unable to find his identity. He struggles with the inner battle and the identity crisis. Passing, although it is helpful in some ways is overall destructive. It creates a man without an identity. Passing is definitely a detrimental intermediary preventing the narrator’s ability to find his identity. It is not rational or productive for a black man to pass as a white person.

Thus, the narrator’s description of what he sees as his position at the end of the novel is important, he outlines:

“It is difficult for me to analyze my feelings concerning my present position in the world. Sometimes it seems to me that I have never really been a Negro that I have only been a privileged spectator of their inner life; at other times I feel that I have been a coward, a deserter and I am possessed by a strange longing for my mother’s people” (Johnson, 210)

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