



Self-hating Blacks in Afro-American Literature: A Psycho-social Investigation into the Phenomenon of Black Self-hatred

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Abstract:

Starting with a discussion of the death of Blackness in the postblack age, the present paper explores the psychological explanation of the social malady of African Americans which has been named as Black Self-hatred by the psychologists. It starts with the depiction of self-hating Blacks in African American literature and goes on to examine the psychological and social theories about the phenomenon of self-hatred. This paper provides an analysis of the postblack expression of the self-hating trait of the African Americans with an aim to understand the possible socio-political and psychological reasons behind it. Researcher uses the psychological and social research studies conducted by some eminent social scientists and psychologists regarding Black Self-hatred to bring home the fact that the socio-political conditions and severities against the Blacks have, in the course of time, affected the psychological well-being of Africans in the diaspora and made them look at their own color through the eyes of their perpetrators. At the same time, the paper also discusses the differences between the double consciousness of the older generations and the postblack generation of cultural mulattos, though their reasons for self-hatred resemble one another. At the end, the analysis comes to the conclusion that the Blacks have now begun to see blackness as a disadvantageous flaw that is attached to them from the very birth, something they now want to get rid of at any cost. However, the Caucasian psychological theories have been equally unjust regarding the malady of self-hatred among the Blacks, as they seem to be the expression of the same age-old prejudices against Blacks.

Keywords: Social Looking Glass, Psychoanalytic conflict and Defence mechanism theory, Identification with the oppressor, Achievement Motivation, Social Comparison Theory.

To understand the African Americans sentiment about their own color, we must take into consideration what Rolland Murray states in his article 'Black Crisis Shuffle: Fiction, Race, and Simulation.' He says that "blackness as we have known it is at once in its death throes" (215). If the Blackness is counting its last days, can we then assume that the American and European white society is now turning into an all-inclusive, liberal and 'colorless' (or colorblind) society? The answer to this question lies in the recently published news reports which make the racist picture of this part of the world crystal clear. The answer is negative! What are then the connotations of the words of Rolland Murray? Actually, the term blackness implies attachment to and steadfast implementation of the codes of culturally orthodox black ghettos. These codes of black culture were formulated by the proponents of Black Aesthetics in the first half of the twentieth century and were later forcefully levied on all walks of life including arts and literature. However, these codes of adherence to the black culture and ghetto life began to be felt by the future Afro-American generation of mulattos as stringent limitations for their art and identity, and so they protested against this conventionality. This break from traditional racial identity became, in Murray's words, "a death sentence for blackness," undermining adherence to an authentic Black experience and transforming the Black community into one that increasingly rejected its own color while aspiring to whiteness. This sentiment was given air and fuel especially by the mulatto generation (Blacks who were born and brought up in white areas and could navigate easily with whites). The period of 1980s saw an upsurge of these mulatto artists and writers who came to be known as New Black Aesthetes (Ellis, 1989). The resistance of these NBA aesthetes to racial stereotypes and rigid color identity continues to shape the arts and literature of the contemporary postblack era. Through their literary characters, they vividly portray the complex emotions and conflicts that the present generation experiences regarding race and skin color. The anti-black sentiment has now become the most interesting and talked

about social change in the African American community. The literature only gave voice and face to this sentiment. This stemmed not from a lack of self-respect, but from a desire to detach themselves from racial identity and protect themselves from the effects of reverse racism. This phenomenon came to be called in the parlance of psychology as Black Self-hatred. In this paper, I aim to examine this phenomenon in depth by analysing case studies portrayed in contemporary African American literature and shedding light on the cultural, socio-political, and psychological factors underlying it.

It was W.E.B. Du Bois who first coined the concept of double consciousness in his celebrated book *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) to explain in a single phrase the dilemma of double identity that the black folks must assume in a white society. The concept of double consciousness doesn't talk only about the problem of one's identity divided into several parts. It also explains why Blacks develop negative feelings toward their own skin color, African features, and culture. Du Bois states that the reason behind this condition of 'twoness' is the trend of constantly seeing yourself through the eyes of others/society that has historically framed blackness as inferior/ugly/unwanted. The constant habit of seeing yourself through others' eyes becomes a malady which creates confusion for the person about his own idea of self, because of which the black person generally behaves differently with the whites and with the folks of his own race. Trapped into the mesh of this doubleness, most of the African Americans either try to escape from the reality, or stoop down to the self-disparagement of their own African features. Abundant cases of Blacks running away from their black identity can be cited from the African American literature of the present postblack era, despite the cultural racism Afro-Americans continue to face even today in the white society. The anti-blackness of the black community has grown exponentially in the past few years. Since the advent of the New Black Aesthetic movement, literature by the African Americans has, unabashedly and without any feeling of guilt, expressed this malady through their characters

in the literature. The 'cultural mulattos' rebelled against the attachment to one's own color and race, and now, they are desperately averse to identifying themselves along color lines. These NBA writers became more outspoken about their unwillingness to bear the weight of the obligation of representing the black race ('cultural baggage' in Trey Ellis' words), though the society (both Black and White) expected them to play the same racial roles. This created for them the crisis of double identity- one which is imposed and the other which is wished. However, the dilemma faced by the NBA and postblack writers differs from that of older generations. While Du Bois's double consciousness negotiates the tension between racial and American identities, contemporary writers struggle with the pressure to authentically express their Blackness while simultaneously desiring to adopt a post-racial, or raceless, identity. Percival Everett is one of the most relevant contemporary writers who has depicted this dilemma of Afro-American cultural mulattoes in his novels. He believed that the freedom from racial identity allows him "a much wider imaginative latitude in his artistic expression of black experiences." (Mitchell and Vander, Introduction) He aspired to be known simply as a writer; yet, regardless of his novels' themes, the label of 'African American' or 'Black writer' indelibly marked his work. Ultimately, he realized that the shadow of racial identity would follow him always, inescapable despite his mixed-race heritage. He has depicted and talked about this predicament in *Erasure* (2001) and *I'm Not Sidney Poitier* (2009). Everett's hatred for his own color and racial identity was actually a cry for freedom in the hearts of the cultural mulattos like him, which has become vocal through Thelonius Monk Ellison in *Erasure* (2001). Ellison is a replica of Everett himself who expresses his concern about the disadvantageous black color and the racial identity that have restricted his artistic freedom and narrowed the scope of his literary output. Ellison is representative voice of the mulatto writers of the postblack age. Besides, Not Sidney, the protagonist of *I Am Not Sidney Poitier* "resists a mimetic mapping of [their] literary text onto an extra-textual social world (Schmidt

114).” He negates the community expectation of walking into the footprints of the predecessors and, though he is a look-alike of the great black actor Sidney Poitier, refuses to be a Black symbol like him. Overall, both the characters reject the stereotyped identity imposed on them which, even if they wanted to free themselves from, remained with them no matter how hard they attempted to hide it.

The second case of this racial alienation and negation of one’s own identity has been presented by Paul Beatty in his novels *Slumberland* (2009) and *The Sellout* (2015). In *Slumberland*, Beatty illustrates how some African Americans grapple with a deep-seated aversion to their own identity through the black character Fatima, who gets so fed up with the constant teasing and humiliation from the whites that she immolates herself in the middle of the square of Berlin. To give vent to his angst and his suppressed injured emotions, the protagonist of the novel Ferguson Sowell, makes mocking remarks about self-immolation, that “she always desired to be skinless and hairless and there she was in the middle of the square of Bernanerstrasse charred away to the effect that her skin and hair had become ashes flying in the air” (185). This description reflects the frustrations and emotional trauma caused by the constant racial ‘otherness.’ But on the other hand, it also brings into light the feeling of being disadvantaged, hated and humiliated because of blackness, due to which the young men and women are now trying to get rid of this ‘fatal flaw’ in their personality at all costs. In *The Sellout* too, Beatty has portrayed the disadvantaging flaw of blackness and self-hatred through the character Hominy. He was a veteran actor in the film industry, but due to his blackness, all the movies he acted in were scrapped or forgotten, and he is, with all prejudice, relegated to obscurity. This transforms him into a black man of deranged psyche, who demands enslavement and to be whipped every day like a slave of the Jim Crow era. Beatty presents the whole case in a satiric manner to make the readers feel intensely about

their condition. Hominy begins to hate himself and his black features so much that he willingly starts living like a slave and thinks that he deserves to be so.

Moreover, the disadvantaging blackness has been well portrayed and exemplified by Morris Carlos Ruffin too in his debut novel *We Cast a Shadow* (2019), in which Ruffin has presented the case of an obsessive father who wants to remove all signs of blackness from his son's body with a medical procedure. In justification of his decision, he recounts all the possible dangers that blackness brings with it. Having endured all the disadvantages and humiliations in his life due to blackness, he wants now to save his son from the drawbacks black color. This is a quintessential example of Africans now running away, hiding or hating blackness because of the drawbacks attached with it.

While explaining the socio-cultural reasons for this disadvantageous status of blackness which drive the black people to hate their own color, Evi Taylor et al. opine that the blackness of African people has been a victim of some stereotypes, and these stereotypes "are a major factor influencing educational outcomes, employment opportunities, disproportional incarceration rates, and brutal treatment. Many African-Americans, particularly males, have been stereotyped as dumb, violent, dangerous criminals" (213). Further, the systemic racism in schools, the workforce, and the justice system perpetuates the negative stereotypes of African-American males, which result in fewer opportunities, lower educational and employment outcomes, and higher incarceration rates (213). The social standing of the black color makes it so vulnerable that no matter where or in which country they go to, they face the same stereotypes which belittle, incarcerate and fracture their sense of being human and identity. Another important factor about these racial stereotypes is that it has created a very uncanny sort of image of the African American males, as if every black person is "more hyper, immature, impulsive, and aggressive," and that they have "more behavioral problems and have fewer interpersonal skills than Whites" (217). Hence, sight of

a black man at a strange or lonely place is always dreaded in white society and he is instantly framed as a criminal, a burglar or a psychopathic killer. As a result, when a black man like Ferguson Sowell in *Slumberland* or a nameless father in *We Cast a Shadow* faces these types of stereotypes in society, he detests his own color more than the society, thinking that his bad experiences were caused by the inevitable thing attached with him, i.e. blackness.

Apart from these socio-cultural reasons of why the black people have begun to hate their blackness, the field of psychology has also given a vital contribution in explaining the concept of self-hatred among Blacks. Psychologists have dealt with this issue from the very beginning of twentieth century and a lot of commendable research has been conducted in the field of psychology to understand the various reasons causing black self-hatred. Researchers from various disciplines have brought several theories and formulations in favor and also against the concept of self-hatred. But the most prominent theories that have greatly helped in explaining the psychological reasons of black self-hatred have come from the psychologists and social scientists like Charles Horton Cooley, Pettigrew, Proshansky and Newton, and Anderson & Cromwell, etc., to name only the few. Their theories are critical in understanding the concept of black self-hatred, its reasons and the repercussions of this malady.

It was Charles Horton Cooley who proposed the theoretical model of Social Looking-Glass, which proposed that one's self-conception is primarily determined by the way in which it is reflected through the eyes of significant others. Some of the European social scientists believe that this social looking-glass theory is applicable to the nature of the interaction between the Black and White communities comprising American society (Pettigrew, 1964, 1967; Proshansky & Newton, 1968; Rainwater, 1966; Rose, 1948). In short, it is argued that the racist attitude of the larger White community represents the social looking-glass through which the Black community gazes. This looking-glass thereby reflects that Blacks are inferior, bad, and generally detestable. This phenomenon, it is assumed,

influences the self-regard of the black people and drives them to look at themselves in similar fashion through their internalization of the generalized racist attitude toward themselves. Proshansky and Newton (1968) and others (Banks, J. A. & Gramb, 1972; Clark, 1965) have added to this point of view by suggesting that beyond the interpersonal context, objective disparities between Blacks and Whites in social-economic conditions are also used as self-evaluation criteria by black people (quoted from Joseph Baldwin, 1979). Thus, on the one hand, the above theory of social looking-glass explains how the racist lens of the whites becomes the self-judging criteria for the Blacks, on the other, the objective disparities in socio-economic conditions of the two races have also been considered as a criterion to misjudge themselves and to create a detestable image of their own identity.

The researchers discovered a number of variations in the behaviors manifested in the Black community that are not readily explained by the original theory and so many variations of this basic thesis have developed over time. An important influence in this regard has been psychoanalytic conflict and defence mechanism theory (Dollard, 1937; Maliver, 1965; Myers & Yochelson, 1948; Pettigrew, 1964). Here, it is generally proposed that because of the conflict generated by the internalization of the generalized negative attitude toward himself, the Black individual may be forced to repress this self-directed negativism and subsequently displace it in an outward direction, thus evidencing a negative and hostile attitude toward others. This proposition then argues that one's attitude toward others is positively related to one's attitude toward oneself (Baldwin, 1979). This makes it even clearer why, in some cases, the behaviour of the Blacks becomes defensive and self-criticising. The repression of the hatred or negative attitude toward others comes on the surface on a particular occasion and the black man begins to see himself through the same hatred as he sees the others. This is a very interesting and more or less plausible proposition that can explain the problem of self-hatred.

Another formulation of the same sort is that of identification with the oppressor (Pettigrew, 1964). This formulation essentially provides an alternative explanation for the social looking-glass phenomenon. It proposes, in short, that Black self-hatred stems from the Black individual's attraction for the high status and privileges associated with the White community. The Black person therefore symbolically shares in these attributes by identifying with and incorporating the attitudes and characteristics of the White community (Baldwin, 1979). This proposition resembles main argument of the social comparison theory. The attraction of Black individuals toward the higher social status associated with whiteness, and their tendency to internalize white cultural attributes, is a condition commonly observed in American society. However, the concerns raised by James Baldwin cannot be ignored. He says that it is of questionable validity to conclude that Blacks harbor feelings of rejection and hatred toward themselves as individuals simply from the fact that they may show agreement with what are presumed to represent negative statements about Blacks in general (53).

In general, several theories of Black self-hatred converge on the basic assumption that Black people suffer debilitating pathological effects in self-concept from the psychological stresses imposed upon them by Euro-American racism and racist practices. Where self-concept is concerned, it is believed that the image Black people receive of themselves from the White community is one of the major determinants of Black self-hatred. (Davis & Dollard, 1940; Kardiner & Ovesey, 1951, and Pettigrew, 1964). Beyond these general categories of data, it might be noted that even achievement motivation has, on occasion, been construed as an index of Black self-hatred (Banks, J. A. & Gramb, 1972; Pettigrew, 1964; Poussaint & Atkinson, 1972).

There is another formulation of social comparison theory in the field of psychology that is seemingly designed to account for those contemporary instances, where, despite a hypothetical increase in social status, Blacks may favour white objects. Within this

formulation of social comparison theory (Asher & Allen, 1969; Pettigrew, 1967; Proshansky & Newton, 1968), it is assumed that the higher the social status of Black individuals, the greater their tendency to compare themselves socially with white individuals. In this comparison, Blacks find that Whites are still generally more advantaged. This contrast results in the feelings of self-rejection among Blacks. It is argued that this effect occurs particularly among socially mobile and integrated middle-class Blacks, whose contacts with Whites are presumed to be more frequent (Asher & Allen, 1969). This conclusion appears somewhat far-fetched and unconvincing, as it scarcely addresses the core issue. However, it does help explain the case of mulatto individuals, who have historically resisted identification as Black and often sought to assert a closer association with whiteness within the Black community. This mindset seems to be the outcome of their constant comparison of their personality with whites. But here also, their dislike for their own color is quite evident from their outcry against the racial identity.

To understand why Blacks harbour self-hatred, it is essential to take into consideration some research studies. The study conducted by Anderson & Cromwell (1977) is significant to prove how even the small school going children attribute good qualities to the fair colors and bad qualities to the black or dark brown colors. The researchers administered a skin color preference survey to 350 Black high school students in Michigan. Their findings revealed that more than 80% of the respondents felt that "Black is Beautiful" and 73% included light skin color in their conception of Blackness. In fact, positive characteristics were generally attributed to persons of dark brown and light brown skin colors, and more negative characteristics to Black and light skin colors.

Similarly, Goodman conducted another study in 1952 to understand the children's racial attitudes, in which he tested 103 four-year-olds. In that study, children from both racial groups (57 Black and 46 White) made up the subject sample. The children were exposed to a

variety of quasi-projective procedures, like dolls test, picture test, a jigsaw puzzle-pictures test, a dolls house test, etc. Goodman reported that 74% of the Black children showed a tendency toward White preference across the various measures used. At the same time, 72% revealed an in-group affinity. He concluded that the responses of the Black children indicated the existence of a preference for White and a rejection of Black. This is another proof of the inherent dislike for the blackness in the minds of the black people from their very childhood, and the reason may be their habit of looking at themselves through the “social looking glass.”

However, the major limitation in all the above research studies is that, none of them takes into consideration the cultural influences behind this malady and try to find its roots in the oppressive slavery of two hundred years. What Joseph Baldwin says regarding these researches about black self-hatred is also worth noting. He says that “in a society where only Caucasian-like characteristics are rewarded (Ransford, 1970), it might be expected that some members of the non-White community would compromise with some of the dominant cultural expectations in order to achieve greater access to those social rewards controlled by the larger community (58).” Having said this, it can be argued that the number of those who sacrificed their social expectations just to get access to the larger social benefit is much smaller than the number of race believers.

Conclusion

Some scholars like Joseph A. Baldwin and Wade W. Nobles have identified several loopholes in the theory of self-hatred. But if we go deep into the psychological reasons of this issue, we find that it is beyond self-hatred. The term self-hatred refers to a negative attitude toward one's self-esteem and identity, whereas hatred toward one's own skin color can be understood as a direct consequence of prolonged victimization and discrimination on the basis of one's skin color. This also reflects the profound psychological attempt of the

victimized individual to free himself or herself from the perceived source of that victimization—namely, blackness. As blackness begets all social and political drawbacks, and it is only a part of the identity of Africa-origin people, it is natural that they want to get rid of their disadvantaging African features to be able to get, enjoy and achieve the general social prerogatives, advantages and opportunities. Self-hatred entails a complete rejection of one's identity and may even lead to extreme forms of self-punishment, such as suicide; however, hating one's skin color does not necessarily mean that a Black individual hates himself as a person. He only wants to do what the nameless father in *We Cast a Shadow* tries to do with his son's color, i.e. get rid of his blackness with the help of a medical procedure. This is what we find in African diaspora living in the white dominant areas like Europe and America. We can cite here the famous example of Michael Jackson who underwent several plastic surgeries to change his looks to be able to achieve high status in the Caucasian society which judges everything from the perspective of color.

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