

Fragmentation of Identities: Adrienne Kennedy's *Funnyhouse of a Negro*

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Abstract

Funnyhouse of a Negro (1964) is an Obie winning play penned by a prolific writer, Adrienne Kennedy. Premiered at the 4th Street Theatre in New York City, the play has earned significant recognition for its innovative approach and poignant exploration of racial and psychological themes. The play was awarded with an Obie for Best New American Play in 1965, marking a significant milestone in Kennedy's career and in the landscape of American Drama. Set against the backdrop of the 1960s Civil Rights Movement, the play reflects the era's racial tensions and societal pressures. The play follows Sarah, a young black woman struggling with a fractured identity. Through a series of disjointed scenes and dialogues, Sarah adopts multiple personas that represent different facets of her racial, cultural, and psychological self. This paper aims to analyze Sarah's identity by exploring the symbolism of each persona and the impact of her parents. This paper argues that Sarah's personas are not arbitrary but represent her profound psychological conflict and the impossibility of reconciling disparate aspects of her identity.

Keywords: Kennedy, Identity Fragmentation, Racial conflict, internalized racism, Symbolism.

Adrienne Kennedy is a much acclaimed figure in American drama, notoriously known for her avant-garde approach to playwriting and her profound exploration of identity. Emerging during the 1960s, Kennedy's work is characterized by its non-linear narrative structures, surreal imagery, and fragmented characters challenging the traditional theatrical forms. Her plays, including *Funnyhouse of a Negro* (1964), often delve into the complexities of African American identity, racial and cultural alienation, and the psychological turmoil associated with these experiences. Kennedy's exploration of identity is deeply intertwined with themes of fragmentation, where her characters frequently grapple with divided selves, reflecting the broader struggles of individuals caught between conflicting cultural, racial, and historical forces.

Funnyhouse of a Negro by Adrienne Kennedy is a powerful exploration of the fragmentation of identities, where the protagonist, Sarah, embodies the psychological and cultural disintegration resulting from internalized racism, familial trauma, and the oppressive societal expectations of racial and gender identity. The play takes place in different levels of consciousness. By employing surreal and disjointed narrative techniques, Kennedy illustrates how Sarah's multiple personas represent different facets of her fractured identity, ultimately portraying the devastating impact of identity conflict on the psyche. This paper will analyze how these identities symbolize different aspects of Sarah's psyche and how their coexistence represents her inability to reconcile her racial identity.

The period of 1960s was marked by intense racial tensions, a burgeoning Civil Rights Movement, and widespread identity crises, particularly within the African American community. The era was marked by the rise of Black Nationalism. Leaders like Martin Luther Jr., Malcolm X, and organizations such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) played pivotal roles in advocating for racial equality. The Black Arts Movement of the 1960s sought to promote Black culture, challenge dominant white narratives and provide a platform for Black artists and writers. Adrienne Kennedy was a key figure in the movement and was deeply influenced by prominent Black writers such as the American novelist, essayist and playwright James Baldwin, Martinican philosopher, psychiatrist, and writer Frantz Fanon, American Poet, novelist and playwright Langston Hughes, French philosopher and writer Jean-Paul Sartre and German philosopher Martin Heidegger. Her engagement with these influencers demonstrates her commitment to exploring the complexities of human experience and the importance of self-exploration. Kennedy in her play *Funnyhouse of a Negro*, captures the psychological toll of living in a society divided by race and offers a powerful critique of the impact of such divisions on the human psyche.

The concept of identity fragmentation has been explored in various fields, including psychology and sociology. Identity fragmentation refers to the experience of having multiple, conflicting identities or self-concepts that are difficult to integrate or reconcile. This can lead to feelings of disconnectedness, alienation, confusion and tension in one's identity. Frantz Fanon in his seminal work *Black Skin, White Masks*, rightly discusses the ways in which the Black individual is fragmented by the white gaze (Fanon, 1952). White gaze typically refers to the way in which white people have historically dominated and defined the representation of people of color. Bell Hooks in *Black Looks: Race and Representation*, examines the ways in which the black body is represented and commodified in society, leading to a fragmentation of identity (Hooks, 1992).

Adrienne Kennedy addresses racial issues through a surrealistic approach that challenges the conventional aesthetics of her time, as she delves into the psychological depths of her characters. By asserting that her plays are “meant to be states of mind,” (Barnett 141) Kennedy transforms the stage into a manifestation of Sarah's inner psyche, utilizing exaggerated symbols, unconventional character portrayals and distorted settings. Unlike other playwrights, Kennedy's exploration of racial issues is distinct as she portrays internalized racism through a surrealistic lens, presenting it from a perspective that transcends traditional racial binaries. Negro Sarah, as a mixed-race “mulatto,” occupies a liminal space, neither fully aligning with black nor white racial categories. Through this, Kennedy challenges the binary thinking embedded in Western ideology, prompting a reevaluation of what constitutes blackness and whiteness.

Funnyhouse of a Negro is unique for its innovative depiction of characters that presents a picture of fragmentation. The play focuses on a young girl named Negro Sarah, who is biracial with a White mother and a Black father, views her father as the embodiment of evil because of his Blackness, while she idolizes her white mother. The protagonist, Sarah, embodies the profound fragmentation of identity, as she oscillates between multiple fractured personas- Queen Victoria, the Duchess, Jesus, and Patricia Lumumba. Each of these identities represents a distinct facet of Sarah's racial, cultural, and psychological self, reflecting her inner turmoil and the conflicting forces that shape her sense of identity. Throughout the play, Sarah undergoes an ontological crisis due to her mixed-race and she is perpetually haunted by her black father's silhouette as if his blackness is intimidating her existence and she

perceives her father as, ‘the darkest one’ who allegedly raped her mother while her mother is, ‘the lightest one’ (Funnyhouse, 20).

The play opens with Negro Sarah, a young African American woman, “a plain, pallid NEGRO WOMAN,” (Funnyhouse, 16) who becomes fragmented through her disturbing ancestry. Sarah’s obsession with whiteness and her rejection of her own racial identity is evident when she learns that her dark-colored father has sexually assaulted her white mother. She lives in a nightmarish psychological landscape, a “funnyhouse,” which is a distorted and claustrophobic space reflecting her fractured sense of self. Her room indicates the imaginary world in which she lives. It consists of “rows or walls of mirrors that distort the images they reflect making some parts bigger while shrinking others, especially heads, or even making some parts vanish altogether” (Kolin, 35). Philip C. Kolin gives an interesting reading of the significance of the setting, which is worth quoting here:

In such a setting, the self is virtually torn apart, parceled into fragments. In a funnyhouse, one’s identity and self-image are never stable, reliable, truthful, or comforting.... Sarah cannot avoid the delusions of her funnyhouse breakdown when she looks at herself or at others.... Sarah’s fear and guilt become magnified, distorted, dismembered.... impossibility of escape

Her room in this play is symbolically related to Sarah’s self-imprisonment and displacement. Sarah’s room is, writes Sarada, “a symbol for the subconscious existence of Sarah. It is an attempt to project the protagonist’s interior reality which remains tormented on account of her past” (Sarada, 101).

Her identification with and admiration for England’s literary and historical traditions lead her to adopt figures like Queen Victoria and the Duchess as a means of escaping the feelings of powerlessness and the negative stereotypes associated with being an African American girl. As Sarah says, “Victoria always wants me to tell her of whiteness. She wants me to tell her of a royal world where everything and everyone is white, and there are no unfortunate black ones” (Funnyhouse, 25). Sarah’s identification with Queen Victoria is a symbol of British colonial power and whiteness. It reveals her deep-seated desire to escape her blackness and align herself with a figure that epitomizes imperial dominance and racial superiority. By embodying Queen Victoria, Sarah expresses her internalized racism and her longing to distance herself from her African heritage. This identity illustrates the cultural alienation she feels as a black woman in a society that values whiteness and European history.

The Duchess is another aristocratic European figure exemplifying Sarah’s attempt to associate herself with whiteness and aristocracy. She is the wife of Austrian Archduke Maxmilian. She is the most ambivalent historical self. Her identification with the Duchess is a profound representation of her internal conflict and self-hatred. She longs to be something she is not – white, aristocratic, and free from the identity that she perceives as a curse. Her inner turmoil is evident when Sarah as the Duchess of Hapsburg expresses, “I look in the mirror and see a nigger... It is obscene. There is a black, a black Negro in the mirror. And I hate him” (Funnyhouse, 13).

The figure of Jesus, intertwined with themes of suffering, sacrifice, and salvation, represents Sarah’s complex relationship with her blackness, her sense of victimization, and her desire for redemption from her internalized racism and fragmented identity. Sarah identifies with Jesus as a martyr, someone who bears the weight of immense suffering and sacrifice. Like Jesus, she is suffering under the weight of her racial identity, which she perceives as a curse. It is important to quote Sarah when she says, “I am tied to my father’s black soul, tied to my father’s black, evil, and violent bones, and tied to his long, dark, irredeemable, blasphemous face... I am bound to his black void.” (Funnyhouse, 14)

The figure of Jesus also represents Sarah’s yearning for redemption from the “sin” of being black. The

tragedy of Sarah's identity crisis is that her desire to escape the torment of her fragmented identity and the internal conflict between her black and white heritage seems to be unattainable. Her yearning to be white can be quoted here, "I long to be white. I long to be what I am not. I hate myself because I am not" (Funnyhouse, 15). Her blackness is an intricate part of her identity that cannot be erased or sacrificed despite her attempts to do so through the persona of Jesus. Here, Jesus is not portrayed in the traditional sense but as a racially ambiguous figure. On one hand, Jesus is a figure of divine purity and salvation, but in Sarah's world, he is also a black man, struggling with racism and identity. As she quotes: "The black man who calls himself Jesus" (Funnyhouse, 18). The play critiques Christianity that has almost suppressed and replaced the African myths.

Patrice Lumumba, the Congolese Independence leader, is one of her other selves that reflects Sarah's fragmented identity. Unlike the other three, Lumumba represents Sarah's connection to her African heritage and the revolutionary potential of black identity. He was a significant figure in African history, known for his role in leading the Congo to independence from Belgian colonial rule. In the play, Lumumba symbolizes black pride, resistance, and the power of African identity. Sarah conflates the faces of Christ and Lumumba, "My father wears the face of Christ. It is a black face. Lumumba's face." (Funnyhouse, 19) However, this connection also leads to source of anxiety, tension and fear. Her internalized racism drives her to distance herself from this identity, even as it remains an inescapable part of who she is. She feels as if she is a "black corpse" (Funnyhouse, 20) suggesting that she views her black identity as dead or lifeless, something she wishes to escape from. For Sarah, embracing Lumumba's identity would mean accepting a part of herself that she has been conditions to despise, leading to a profound sense of self-loathing, alienation and despair.

The play itself eschews a linear narrative and conventional temporal structure, instead immersing the audience in a world filled with haunting imagery, fragmented dialogue, and potent symbols, most of which are centered in Sarah's room- a symbolic representation of her subconscious mind. This surreal milieu reflects Sarah's racial identity crisis and the dissonance between her physical form and her sense of self. Kennedy further disrupts traditional racial perceptions by manipulating lighting and subverting familiar white imagery, not to denigrate whiteness, but to expose the absurdity of any racial superiority. By placing blackness in direct contrast to whiteness, Kennedy critiques both, using distorted portrayals of historical white figures to represent Sarah's fractured identity. The white masks worn by the Duchess and the Queen suggest the artificiality of their whiteness, while the depiction of Jesus as an abused slave rather than a revered religious figure underscores the absurdity of Sarah's obsession with whiteness.

At the core of her struggle are her parents whose action results in excruciating sense of identity crisis and fragmentation of self. Her feeling of having no strong ties to the self and the other underlines the fact that she is placed between two divergent cultures, a situation that causes her personal imbalance and fragmentation. Negro Sarah's relation with her father is complex and troubled one. Her relation with her father is marked by distance and disconnection. Sarah does not want to have any ties with her father. She rather thinks of cleansing away with the past because it reminds her with the unforgettable, painful and soul-wrenching experience of her white mother's rape. Sarah's patriphobia is deeply rooted in her thinking as she says "He haunted my very conception. He was a wild black beast who raped my mother." (Funnyhouse, 22)

Sarah's relationship with her mother is marked by rejection and a lack of affection. Her mother, a white woman, dressed in a white nightgown carrying a bald head is projected as cold and distant figure. She is ashamed of Sarah's mixed heritage and African roots. She continuously mutters, "Black man, black

man, I never should have let a black man put his hands on me. The wild black beast raped me and now my skull is shining,” (Funnyhouse, 23) reflecting the societal norms and expectations of the time that frowned upon inter-racial relationships and mixed-heritage children. As Sarah notes, “My mother was a white woman, and she was ashamed of me because I was a Negro” (Funnyhouse, 24). This rejection is a result of her mother’s internalized racism and prejudice, as well as her own trauma and pain rooted in the historical and cultural context of racism and colonialism.

When Sarah aligns herself with her mother’s world, she becomes isolated, retreating to her room where she fantasizes about a life surrounded by European antiques, photographs of Roman ruins, and oriental carpets. Her days are consumed by a desire to immerse herself in a white, European culture. She dreams like Pecola Breedlove having blue eyes in Toni Morrison’s novel *The Bluest Eye*. Both Sarah and Pecola reject their African American heritage and see whiteness as a way to escape the excruciating pain and rejection associated with their Blackness. In her attempt to erase her African American heritage, Sarah tries to insert herself into white society.

Kennedy skillfully politicizes the personal experiences of her protagonists to uncover the fractured consciousness that emerges from navigating life as a minority in a society dominated by whiteness and White standards of aesthetics and value. Her writing exposes the destructive impact of her characters’ attempts to conform to White ideals. In her longing to assimilate with White, Sarah does everything to manifest herself as a White. She resides in a brownstone apartment with her Jewish boyfriend. She inhabits the expressionistic worlds created by her various personas in her psyche. She is disconnected from the reality around her and struggles to find a place where she truly belongs. In order to integrate herself into the dominant culture, Sarah imitated the White by having a major in English, she wrote poetry in the style of the famous white poet Edith Sitwell, and longs for the material comforts of the middle class. Moving further, she distanced herself from her African American heritage by living with her white boyfriend, whom she wishes she could love, in an apartment managed by a white landlady. Despite these efforts, her African American identity continues to haunt her.

In a patriarchal society, a father’s identity plays a crucial role in determining the social identity of his child. Sarah’s inability to connect with her father, where her social identification should naturally occur, leaves her feeling lost and unanchored. Within her turbulent inner world, she is tormented by the various personas she has created, each representing archetypes from her collective unconscious. These deeply ingrained figures reject Sarah’s sense of self, even as she fully identifies with them.

Kennedy depicts the African American struggle against both external and internal oppression through her plays. By exploring the states of mind, she illustrates the self in dialogue not only with society but also with the fragmentary remnants of otherness that have either vanished or no longer exist within the self. Through symbols, composite characters, and a multiplicity of voices, Kennedy constructs a landscape of her own psyche, manifesting the ongoing conflict between competing discourses and mythologies. This portrayal reveals the intense struggle between whiteness and blackness both within and beyond the individual.

Kennedy crafted protagonist who strive to pass as White, though she does not portray this as a permanent solution. Instead, she reveals that these characters ultimately renounce their blackness- a fundamental aspect of their identities, in favor of a muting and deathlike whiteness. Her plays thus depict the conflict between blackness and whiteness, illustrating a violent racial struggle that takes place within the psyches of her characters and symbolizes the broader struggles of African Americans against oppression.

Adrienne Kennedy masterfully explores the theme of fragmentation of identities through the complex and deeply troubled character of Sarah. The personas of Queen Victoria, the Duchess of Hapsburg, Jesus, and Patrice Lumumba embody the multifaceted and conflicting aspects of Sarah's identity, reflecting her inner struggle with race, heritage, and self-worth. These personas are not just arbitrary choices but each represents a different facet of Sarah's psyche- her longing for whiteness and aristocracy, her sense of martyrdom and suffering, and the inescapable connection to her African heritage. Sarah's tragic descent into madness reveals the devastating consequences of a fragmented identity. Kennedy's work remains a significant and enduring commentary on the complexities of identity in a racially divided society, resonating deeply with the ongoing struggles for racial equality and self-acceptance.

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