

# GENDER AND RACIAL CONCERNS IN ADRIENNE KENNEDY'S *FUNNY HOUSE OF A NEGRO AND THE OWL* ANSWERS

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Adrienne Kennedy, who wrote during the black protest movements of the seventies, deals with the Afro-Americans characters whose multiple or fragile identities reflect their struggle for their privileges and self knowledge in a world dominated by white people. She portrays the social and cultural fragmentation of black Americans, as their efforts to build a black identity in the white social structures are thwarted. She credits her mother as an early literary influence and says that "I really owe writing to her in a sense, because my mother is a terrific story teller... She used to tell funny stories, but they always had this terror in them, a blackness". (Matuz 201). Later on Kennedy travelled to West Africa which induced a turning point in her writing. She asserts that, "I think the main thing was that I discovered a strength in being a black person and a connection to West Africa" (201). During this time she also travelled to Rome and the contrast between African and European experiences provided the background for her play *Funny House of a Negro*.

In Kennedy's plays, where women are protagonists, she employs this fragmented social identity as a symptom of fragmentation of the psyche or the psychological breakdown black women suffer. She interrogates the marginalization of black women, who have to face the double oppression of race as well as gender, The white and the black communities threaten to silence them and erase their identities, social formations and pattern of living. Kennedy focuses on the aspects of black women's lives that have been effaced, ignored and demeaned. Unlike, works of male playwrights and many white feminists, Kennedy expressed her concerns with racism as well as sexism. In an interview Kennedy herself says, that her "plays elaborated and commented upon that reality in multitudinous ways that are different from the ways in which men wrote about it" (Betsko, 346).

In *Funny House of a Negro*, the cast of characters demonstrates Kennedy's comprehension of history and culture, and the role oppression plays in the shaping of subjectivity and experience. The play is based partly on Kennedy's own experience in White America, it is also, as Wilkerson contends, "metaphorical and symptomatic of the ambiguous state of a people who were created out of the clash of African and European cultures" (73). Enacted in six short scenes, the drama leads to the protagonist, Sarah's tragic end as she tries to work out the cultural definitions of white and black and her relationship to them. Without linear development or narrative progression Sarah narrates and renarrates the saga of her conception, born of rape, her dark-skinned father forcing himself of her reluctant mother who was white. She says "He is the darkest, my father is the darkest, my mother is the lightest. I am in between. But my father is darkest. My father is a nigger who drives me to the misery. Any time spent with him evolves itself into suffering" (Kennedy FH, 11).

As the play proceeds, Sarah encounters 'the implications of her mixed heritage and violence that produced her, trying to discover which parts of her identity have been moulded by European culture and which by American history. The strain to balance the contradictions in her character shatters her totally. Her hair falls out, she is agonized by the vision of her father as a dead man, an axe through his head, her mother's whiteness seems a constant reproach. She pleads to Jesus, hoping to drive power from his example of pain and suffering. Nothing consoles the agony of her memories, she cannot find place in history which is her own, no experience clarifies her identity or wipes out her past.

The play is eulogized for its innovative portrayal of characters with multiple personalities. Sarah's selves comes in the shape of four historical figures who share her voice — Queen Victoria and the Duchess of Hapsburg, Jesus and Patrice Lumumba. Kennedy in an interview points out "I struggled for a long time to write plays-as typified by *Funny House* in which the person is in the conflict with their personality, greatest conflict. I finally came up with this one character, Sarah, who, rather than talk to her father or mother, talked with these people she created, about her problems" (Kennedy, 47). Although Sarah resides in Brownstone with her Jewish boyfriend, she mentally inhabits the expressionistic setting suggested by these figures. After her mad mother introduces the play's action, Sarah and her selves confront her fear that her father will find and rape her as he did her mulatto mother. She imagines his various fates, including one in which she bludgeons him with an ebony mask. Sarah's conflicting racial histories are depicted but never resolved by the figures which act as her masks. These character masks do not empower her, rather they ensnare Sarah in a trap of terror and self-hatred and she becomes an imbalanced personality.

Sarah's alter egos, Queen Victoria and the Duchess of Hapsburg are the two historical figures who symbolize Sarah's white lineage and take on her psychological narrative. They come to the stage wearing white expressionless masks and are cast in strong white light that contrasts with the stage's unnatural darkness. These others selves give an insight into the psyche of Sarah while the implications of their historical identities comment on them. Sarah, who is a mulatto, is unable to capture the sense of authority and power represented by the two European rulers. Meigs points out that "their imperialistic implications comment on the extent of Sarah's psychological oppression, one history a victim of the other" (174). She has graduated from a city college and has occasional work in libraries but she spends her time writing poetry which is similar to that of Edith Sitwell and fantasizing of living in a white European culture. Her room on her upper West Side is cluttered with her dreams European antiques, photographs of Roman ruins, Oriental carpets and a piano. She imagines visiting her friends who are all white. She tries to wipe out her black lineage not only by her act of patricide, but by imposing herself into a white society. She contends that she needs these white figures, "as an embankment to keep me from reflecting too much upon the fact that I am a Negro. For, like all educated Negroes I find it necessary to maintain a stark fortress against recognition of myself" (6).

Sarah links her father to Patrice Lumumba, who, unlike the first two persons, is black and carries his ebony mask. Lumumba symbolizes both the black man's endeavours to save his race and also her black skin. He was murdered by African radicals who smashed his head, appears in the play with a split and bleeding head, as Sarah narrates how she killed her father she mistook him for Lumumba. "No Mrs. Conrad, he did not hang himself, that is the only way they understood it, they do, but the truth is that they bludgeoned his head with an ebony skull that he carries about him. Wherever he goes, he carries out black masks and heads" (8). Sarah's earlier remarks about her wish to merge into white society are repudiated by an unidentified black man who recalls Lumumba....I am the black shadow that haunted my mother's conception...

It is my vile dream to live in rooms with European antiques and my statue of Queen Victoria" (12-13).

Sarah is a symbol of black woman's alienation from her gender and race.

She tries to reconcile her identity by saying that she has murdered her black father. She abhors him intensely for literally blackening her family. She recollects that her grandmother wanted her father to become a black Messiah but he shattered her wish by marrying a white woman with "hair as straight as any white woman's" (8). His mother hoped that he would be Christ but he failed. He had married (Sarah's) mother because he could not resist the light. Yet, his mother constantly said, "I want you to be Jesus, to walk in Genesis and save the race, return to Africa, find revelation in the black" (14). So, he goes, along with his white wife, who gradually turns insane, symbolized by her gradual hair loss. The father passes on a heritage of insanity, violence and failure for her daughter, Sarah. He says, "Forgive me for my being black, Sarah. I know you are a child of torment... Forgive my blackness" (18). However, in spite of all her efforts, Sarah can neither accept, not escape her own blackness. She says, "before I was born, he haunted my conception, diseased my birth" (10). Sarah believes that her father was supposed to be god to her mother, but turned 'only' to be a black man, "Christ would not rape anyone" she says to him, refusing to forgive him.

Sarah, in order to become oblivious of her black skin, lives with her white boyfriend, Raymond Mann, whom she wishes she could love but does not, in an apartment run by a white lady, Mrs. Conrad. Raymond and Mrs. Conrad are involved in bizarre conversation in a room in which there is a backdrop of mirrors, which can be seen only as Raymond alternately opens and closes the blinds that hide them. The flashing mirrors bring to one's mind the disorienting nightmare quality of what is ironically called a funny house. Raymond and Ms Conrad ridicule Sarah's efforts to attain self-knowledge and control over conflicting elements in her persona. When she is not able to do so, she hangs herself. After discovering her body Mrs. Conrad and Raymond suggest that Sarah's father is not dead but he lives in a white suburb with a white prostitute.

He and the prostitute join the other white characters in the funny house who do not comprehend the internal struggle of Sarah and take ironical pleasure from her desperate suicide. Raymond says that "She was a funny little liar" and Mrs. Symonds says. "The poor bitch has hung herself" (22). Sarah ultimately powerless to reconcile and integrate her conflicting selves and incongruent historical narratives, decides to forsake the white funny house. Commenting on the play Meigs says, "Sarah recognizes no escape other than suicide, testifies to the insidiousness of her tragedy. Unable to move beyond, feebly articulating her oppression, Sarah can neither appropriate the power of her masks...nor can create white free spaces for blacks" (176). Ensnared in the maze of personal, public and political identification Sarah gropes her way to a redefinition of her subjectivity and sense of self. Her suicide seems to be a result of violence and terror produced by the culture in which Sarah lived.

Kennedy's play *The Owl Answers* explores political colonialism and the issue of mixed racial heritage. Hence, the protagonist, a young woman is faced by a conflict of her strong desire to be accepted in a white world and her mixed racial heritage and the play depicts a black woman's quest for self-identity and self-knowledge in a world dominated by white people. The main character, named She, is the illegitimate daughter of a wealthy white man and his black cook, who is also the town whore. Rejected by both her parents, she is overcome by the feelings of estrangement and her psyche is divided into myriad identities that manifest themselves as Clara, the Virgin Mary, the Bastard and Owl. Throughout, the play, her black, white and mythical personalities transform and merge in a dream-like manner until she finally appears as a lonely teacher who threatens her lover with a butcher knife and then changes into an Owl. By extending the metaphoric value of Owl, one can comprehend the profound meaning and significance of the play. On one hand, the Owl symbolizes evil omens and darkness, in association with the fig tree it is the controlling metaphor in the play connecting the protagonist's problem of identity with the worlds of her white and black parents and her many self-images.

*The Owl Answers* like the previous play, takes place in New York Harlem subway which transforms at times into the Tower of London, St. Peter's Chapel or Harlem Hotel Room and the action oscillates, between the present time on the sub-way to the past time of memories and dreams. There are three main actions overlapping with one another so that setting and the identity become shattered and move through time and memory as in a dream. Characters change from one role to another with the removal of an item of clothing or a change of hair.

The central action created both by fantasy and memory takes place in London. According to She's fantasy, she and her white father, go to London on a literary pilgrimage. She tries to claim her father's British heritage. There she confronts three representatives of that heritage Shakespeare, Chaucer and William the Conqueror, who deny her access to it. She attempts to take on the white English patrimony of the dead father by visiting his bier. Her claim is to the ancestry of her forefathers, this claim is highlighted by the juxtaposition of her English culture and her callous rejection by Chorus of Anglo-Saxon great personalities.

She :Myfather lovedyou William.....

They :(Interrupting) Ifyou are his ancestor why are you a Negro?..  
She :Let me into the Chapel. He is my bloodfather. I am almost white, am I not?... lam his daughter. (28)

Her guards are Chaucer and Shakespeare, their names suggesting their white literary heritage. Another historical character appears, Anne Boleyn, who apparently reflects attitudes towards love as expected in Western literature and

political history. She turns to Anne and asks for her help. She's vision of a white history imprisoning and dismantling her black identity in the form of her father, shatters her dreams of love and freedom from the internal conflict this domination creates. For She the search for the father and the search for identity become one. Bentson says that, "She's roles are fragments of a single personality, either designating imperialistically by others or personally embraced in her desperate pursuit of selfhood. They are cold, abstract, isolated she moves among their apparitions desiring love in a lifeless world" (239).

Mixing with the events in London and in the Tower, the second main action takes place in the past and depicts the social and the religious attitudes. In his home town and Georgia, the white father, who has relations with a black cook, conceived 'She' and calls his daughter a bastard and rejects her. She is adopted and brought up by the Reverend Passmore and his Wife, both of whom are black and who call her Clara. At times, they call her an Owl and lock her in a fig tree. In the past she had been married once and has become a school teacher in Georgia. Her adopted parents, the Passmores, like She signify certain attitudes. Perceiving herself as God's bride, the Virgin Mary, the wife does not allow her husband to touch her. She transforms her bed into an altar by means of Owl feathers and there she commits suicide with a butcher knife. As for her husband, Reverend Passmore believes in the white man's Christian religion and has as his symbol the white bird of the Church which flies into a canary cage.

The blending together of both actions develops when the Reverend Passmore's wife becomes successively. She's real black mother and then Anne Boleyn. The depiction of She's white father is also very ambiguous. In the events located in London and in the Tower, he is apparently emotionally close to his daughter; in those placed in the real past, he has obviously ignored her.

As for her daughter, she appears at times as Clara; sometimes she is the Bastard or the Virgin Mary or the Owl. The subsequent blending of the two actions signifies She's feelings of love and estrangement.

The third main action takes place in the present time on a sub-way in New York, where, Clara, a 34-years old lonely school teacher craves for love and spends her summer searching for men to take to her hotel room. As Clara recalls the actions and events of the God and asks him to take her so that she can go to St. Paul's Chapel. He tries to supplant her vision of love with the sordid sexuality of a Harlem Hotel.

*ro man .. it is it? What is wrong? (She tries to undress her. Underne  
 .. body in black He throws off the crown SHE has placea  
 )..Are you sick? (Smiles) No, god (SHE is in a trance) No, I  
 sick, I only have a dream of love. A dream (42).*

Her dream-world shatters as she and the Negro man grapple in a space that is suddenly changed from hotel room to High Altar. Now she wants him to call her Mary and shows him her letters daily to her dead father on her trip to Europe. Then she takes a butcher knife from the letters and attacks him. He is so terrified that he runs away. Now left alone, she kneels at the bed altar which catches on fire and in its light gradually she begins to appear more and more like an Owl. He quest for the complex legacy of her blood ancestors leads to the final hysteria in which she passes through multiple identities, until enflamed and dripping in her suicidal mother's blood, she finally transforms into an Owl and the play concludes with a tragic, enigmatic moan: "Ow...0w".

*The Owl Answers* is a complex play with layers of meanings. It would appear that she is confused by her multiple identities or their sources, none of which seem to be really her, yet all of which appear to determine her inner relationships. Some of them, like Bastard and daughter, come from the black world; others like Virgin Mary come from the white man's religious world; but only the Owl comes from the world of myths and legends. She is in search of her identity and her identity cannot be dissociated from love for which she also searches. The problem of identity is experienced by She's mind on varied levels of complexity. Seen from a perspective, her least complicated roles are that she is a woman, she is a black and she is a bastard. Her other roles are, however, culturally more complex. She has received education in college in the white

man's Christian religion; none of whose symbols have the mythic power of uniting man with the sacred for the black person, and she has been forced to live in two worlds one black and white because she is a mulatto (Tener, 3). In the final scene, she is transformed almost magically into an owl-like figure. Quite obviously the owl is intended by Adrienne Kennedy to be a Black woman lost intellectually and emotionally in a white world, confused about her black identity and its related basic values of love, father and religion. She, at times, becomes a harlot. As the owl who answers, she is the non-believer, the harlot, the woman anguished by the lack of love, the spirit of the dead, but being black she identifies herself to the night and tries to struggle with her tragic plight.

Thus, both these plays of Adrienne Kennedy portray the agony and disorientation of these women as they clamour for more space and power within the racial and hegemonic structures and the problems they encounter in their struggle to deconstruct the age old structures of ethnic and gender discrimination and to make their voice audible.

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