

**IMMIGRANT SOULS IN AN OTHERED BODY: A SEARCH FOR
IDENTITY IN ADRIENNE KENNEDY'S
FUNNYHOUSE OF A NEGRO**

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to examine Adrienne Kennedy's one act play Funnyhouse of a Negro with a view to highlight the continuous migration of the black soul, symbolically through her multiple identities, in relation to the immobile resistance of the black body while dealing with irreconcilable memories.

Keywords: *Race, female body, multiple identity*

**ÖTEKİ BEDENDE GÖÇMEN RUHLAR: ADRIENNE KENNEDY'NİN
FUNNYHOUSE OF A NEGRO ADLI OYUNUNDA
KİMLİK ARAYIŞI**

ÖZ

Bu çalışmanın amacı Amerikalı siyah kadın yazar Adrienne Kennedy'nin tek perdelik oyunu Funnyhouse of a Negro'daki kimlik arayışını ve onunla ilişkilendirerek, siyah kadın bedeninin, ruhunun uzlaşmadığı anılardan sembolik kaçışını incelemektir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *İrk, kadın vücudu, çoklu kimlik*

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1. INTRODUCTION

Colonial experience implies an internalization of collective memory by an individual in a chaotic process. Because memories of repression cannot be alternated within the context of a new historical reality, many efforts for self-reconciliation are seen to fail. The old dialectic of soul and body is situated upon a new layer of historical experience where such notions collaborate to deploy a unified identity. The black theorist Du Bois considers this irreconcilable experience of the black body also as an invaluable tool for the black soul: “Negro is ...[b]orn with a veil and gifted with second sight” (2). What Du Bois calls the “second sight” is reflected in black vernacular tradition of story-telling “signifying” as well.

“Signifying” is a term Henry Louis Gates, Jr relates to whole black canon of writing, with references to the signifying monkey in African vernacular tradition, for its continuous “revis[ion]” of itself and its Other. (56) What Du Bois calls “second sight” or “double consciousness” (2, 3) and Gates calls “signifying/(on)” may be related to the black traditions of blues and blackface minstrelsy for their dual faces.

Adrienne Kennedy’s one-act play *Funnyhouse of a Negro* (written in 1960; staged in 1964, first published in 1969) deals with the continuous migration of the black soul by the play’s structural adherence to the black oral traditions of story-telling, signifying and blues, which together signify the stationary resistance of the black body to its irreconcilable memories. This analysis foregrounds a psychological disorder in the play which is suggested by the word *funnyhouse* in the title. *Funnyhouse*, a ‘pejorative term for an insane asylum,’ implies not only the presence of a psychotic state but also the scornful public perspective often directed at the insane. In this respect the play treats the dilemma between ‘self and other’ as it is depicted through multiple layers of meaning and as it involves not only the reductive binaries ‘black versus white’ and ‘female versus male’ but also ‘abnormal versus normal.’

The play takes place in the room of a black girl, Sarah, which she shares with her four split selves, namely the Duchess, the Queen, Jesus and Patrice. Outside the room, there are two other inhabitants of the funnyhouse: Sarah’s landlady (funnyhouse woman) and Raymond (funnyhouse man). While the two outsiders try to understand what is going on inside the room, the four split selves gradually enslave the central character, Sarah. The play thus centralizes a symbolic scene—Sarah’s room—as its territorial setting, and even the objects in the room display the major obsessions of the central character. As the stage directions indicate, Sarah’s room contains a bed, a writing table, a mirror, the statue of Queen Victoria, a few photographs and books (6,7). While the mirror and photographs signify the reflection of the self, the writing table and books imply alternative realities and the escape afforded by fiction. The bed and the statue may be seen to stand for the two problematic conditions the play deals with: stability and nobility. Since a bed functions when the body does not move during sleep and a statue is immobile, they both imply stability. The bed, which is situated in a Queen’s chamber, indicates nobility through its textually prescribed pure whiteness. Similarly, the statue of Queen Victoria may be associated with aristocracy.

The setting is further described through the stage directions which note that the negro self Sarah should be centralized on the stage while the other selves move around her (6). As the curtain opens, the first image the audience encounters is a black girl in a white dress carrying before her a bald head that contrasts with her wild, “kinky” hair. Two women are sitting in a Queen’s chamber, and they are situated in the middle of the stage in a strong white light, while the rest of the stage is thoroughly black. The two women are both dressed in white—whiteness again signifying nobility. On the white pillow of the Queen’s bed, there is “a dark, indistinguishable object.” (12) In this respect, even the stage directions announce that the notion of race is centralized. The binary oppositions black and white accompany each other on a problematic level because white is here associated with positive connotations (i.e. nobility and value), whereas black is identified with the negative ones throughout the play.

2. THE PROBLEM OF COLOR

At first sight, the faces of these two characters are not visible to the audience, and when their faces become visible, they are seen to wear whitish yellow masks. Their lack of any facial expression makes them identical. The act of whites wearing masks is reminiscent of the blackface of minstrel shows, in which blacks wore masks which were darker than they were. Doing this, blacks represented themselves through the eyes of the white hegemony. In this respect, the blackface minstrelsy not only represented the "Othered" race but was also a means of directing all the pre-conditionings and prejudices toward this race. In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Frantz Fanon argues that colonized blacks must not only be black but must also be black in relation to whites (110). He further suggests that the racialized colonial subject is fixed in relation to white eyes, which purport to be "the only real eyes" and adds that they cut away slices of identity simply by "[h]aving adjusted their microtomes[...]" (116). Since the central character in the play is black and the minor ones are white/mixed-race characters, the blacks wearing whitish yellow masks announces a reference to minstrelsy.

In other words that the Negro self, Sarah, develops white and hybrid selves, implies her "internalized Otherness". Since these split selves project all negative connotations and associations of race onto her black self (which is the real self), Sarah views herself critically from their perspectives. This situation employed in the play reminds of the blackface minstrelsy. However dealing with the "Other" races as different selves or aspects of Sarah, the play both dethrones the white hegemony and reconciles the irreconcilable binary opposites of race. In this respect the play challenges both versions of minstrelsy. Deborah Thompson suggests that the play actually reverses minstrel shows by "unhing[ing]" the distinction between black and white racial identities (14).

The play heightens with a knock at the door as it breaks the silence unexpectedly. The Queen and The Duchess view this knock as a call from their father, who has come through the jungle to the castle:

Victoria: (Listening to the knocking) It is my father. He is arriving again for the night. (The Duchess makes no reply). He comes through the jungle to find me. He never tires of his journey.

Duchess: How dare he enter the castle, he who is the darkest of them all, the darkest one? My mother looked like a white woman, hair as straight as any white woman's. And at least I'm yellow, but he is black, the blackest one of them all. I hoped he was dead. Yet he still comes through the jungle to find me. (12)

The association of the father with evil is reinforced through the play's replication of Western aesthetics: he comes there by the night. He is soon also described as coming from Africa (16), playing upon the stereotypical association of African with the jungle. His arrival may thus be seen to symbolize their African roots not only because he is dark but also because he is coming through the jungle in a passage from the heart of nature to the place of (Western) culture. Even though the Queen and the Duchess are now in the castle, they are never safe. He can always come there to find them because even if they look white, they are hybrid.

Reminiscent of the Greek chorus, the lines by Victoria and Duchess are very similar, and at times they even speak in unison. Even though they have a white mother, the memory of a black father haunts them. Hence the knocking gets louder and louder:

Victoria: He never tires of the journey, does he, Duchess? (looking at herself in the mirror).

Duchess: How dare he enter the castle of Queen Victoria Regina, Monarch of England? It is because of him that my mother died. The vile black beast put his hands on her. She died. (12)



These characters repeat themselves and each other; in fact, they repeat the same lines over and over again, at times adding a single variation: “He is an African who lives in the jungle. . . . He is an African who has always lived in the jungle.” (16) Such lines adhere to the structure of the classic blues, which consist of repetitions with an additional variation. The father, signaling the African past, has come through African jungles and elicits a blues response. He continues knocking through broken hymns and produces signifying on the white voice by initiating black rhythms. As Henry Louis Gates Jr. suggests, the black tradition is a signifying tradition in adherence to the African oral myth of the trickster—the signifying monkey (56). The monkey in the oral folk story plays an intricate game on the lion through their mutual friend the elephant. Using the elephant as an instrument for signification, the monkey continuously signifies on the simplest things. Unable to decode the monkey’s figurative speech and taking its words literally, the lion is duped. As Gates suggests, pretending to speak literally but speaking figuratively, the signifying monkey breaks the authority of the king through mimicry (56). Gates traces the whole Black literary tradition to this early myth of the trickster, which epitomizes the manner in which the tradition undertakes continuous signification.

As a messenger of their African ancestry, the black father destabilized their identification with white hegemony by signifying on their identification with this hegemony through their black roots. As he comes through the (African) jungle to the noble, white castle, the Duchess and the Queen are condemned to the trickster’s trickery. Pretending to be dead physically, the father continues knocking. While the jungle which represents nature—as opposed to the castle, which stands for culture—the father has no specific location. As the Queen notes, “He never tires of his journey” (12); therefore, he has an immigrant soul. His movements are repetitive like blues—he keeps moving and ever coming back. He travels at the heart of nature, where different cultural identities can coexist. Diseasing their birth and killing their mother, who was the light, the dark father keeps returning even though he is purported to be dead, as the Duchess and Victoria suggest (13). His knocking also symbolizes the notion of rememory in the black cultural tradition: a continuous recollection of collective experiences as one’s own memories.

3. DISLOCATED IDENTITIES

When the knocking is louder than ever and the stage is darker, the Negro self, Sarah, with a hangman’s rope around her neck, starts telling her version of the story. She talks about her room, which “is also Victoria’s chamber” (13). Then she focuses on two of her different selves, The Duchess of Hapsburg and Queen Victoria, sitting together (14). She calls Victoria “a sitting figure” (14), and then she adds that as the Duchess, she sits next to the Queen. Sitting, which implies locality or immobility, may be seen to signal their association with and desire for whiteness, which is the source of Sarah’s obsession: “Victoria always wants me to tell her of whiteness. She wants me to tell her of a noble world where everything and everyone is white and there are no unfortunate black ones. For as we of noble blood know, black is evil and has been from the beginning. Even before my mother’s hair started to fall out. Before she was raped by a black beast. Black is evil” (14). The dream-like images in such dialogue contribute to the continuous sense of migration in the play. For instance, the falling out of the mother’s hair, which signifies her fall from nobility, is a parable here, as it would be in a dream.

Likewise, the sound and auditory imagery such as the masks and the knocking embody dream qualities. As the Negro Sarah continues talking about her experience as an educated black woman, her dream to be white and have white friends is centralized. The fact that she reads a lot and writes poetry—consuming and producing creative texts—is parallel to her own production of fictional lives through her split selves. She notes that she needs to develop them “as an embankment to keep [her] from reflecting too much upon the fact that [she is] a Negro” (14). In this respect, her soul is projected from one body to a projected corporeality because she desires an escape. Fiction and schizoid her personalities are the rooms in which her soul can travel freely: “The rooms are my rooms; a Hapsburgh chamber, a chamber

in a Victorian Castle, the hotel where I killed my father, the jungle. These are the places myself exist in.” (15) As Carole Boyle Davies argues, “

‘[m]igratory subjects’ suggests that Black women’s writing can not be located and framed in terms of one specific place but exists in myriad places and times, constantly eluding the terms of the discussion. It is not so much formulated as a ‘nomadic subject’ although shares an affinity, but as a migratory subject moving to specific places and for definite reasons.” (36-37)

Yet her body is stationary as it is always situated in the funnyhouse. She further remarks: “I find there are no places[,] only my funnyhouse” (15). The play thereby suggests that her body, which is hybrid, cannot exist outside the funnyhouse; it belongs neither to the white crowd nor to the black circle and therefore remains in one place. Moreover, in her article Kimberly Benston suggests that this play exhibits a quest (undertaken through a tracing of provocative spirits) while spontaneously challenging any means of self-location (235). In other words, Sarah’s souls are in an in-between stage which implies a continuous dislocation and, finally, migration.

Sarah’s conception of her own body is rather problematic because she evidences the tendency of the Black subject identified by Du Bois—a tendency to look at “oneself through other’s eyes” (2). The manner in which she describes herself supports this idea: “In appearance I am good-looking in a boring way; no glaring Negroid features, medium nose, medium mouth and pale yellow skin. My one defect is that I have a head of frizzy hair, unmistakably Negro kinky hair; and it is indistinguishable” (15). These lines involve an internalized otherness: Sarah views herself critically through the white hegemonic gaze. She can never reconcile with her black body, reinforcing Du Bois’s lines: “One ever feels his twoness,—an American, a Negro; two warring souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.” (2,3) because she believes that she killed her father. Even though the Landlady claims that Sarah’s father hung himself, Sarah insists that she bludgeoned his head with an ebony skull (16). The Landlady further notes that Sarah hid herself in her room because of this belief (16), which also indicates her irreconcilable conception of her body. The ambiguity over which self committed the action is created by Sarah’s split self-conception. Because the father is already internalized as one of her selves, his body and her body may be claimed as united.

During the conversation between the Duchess and Raymond, the funnyhouse man, the Duchess expresses her desire to have her body hidden: “Hide me here so the jungle will not find me. Hide me.” (17) While Raymond accuses her of cruelty against her father, she again begs him to hide her, “Hide me from the jungle.” (17), the jungle already being verbally associated with Africa and the African past. The body is held captive in the house because its subject wishes to hide from her past. The call of the past is made audible to the audience through repetitive lines in the play: “He is an African who lives in the jungle. He is an African who has always lived in the jungle. Yes, he is a nigger who is an African who is a missionary teacher and is now dedicating his life to the erection of a Christian mission in the middle of the jungle. He is a black man.” (16) The lines, signifying on each other, again, exhibit the patterns of blues and here echo the sound of footsteps in a jungle. While the blues voice narrates the histories of the immigrant souls, it also makes a call to remember. The Negro Sarah’s enslaved body cannot respond to this call; however, her soul adheres to her ties, migrating from one identity projection to another.

After another knock, a new figure is introduced: a large faceless man carrying a mask, appears. The stage directions identify him as Patrice Lumumba, the first president of Congo after its independence from Belgium, who was later assassinated. Standing for an African patriarchal figure, he is one of Sarah’s selves. His inclusion subordinates gender—Sarah’s alternate personalities being both male and female—so that the reality of race is the central problem: “I am a nigger of two generations. I am



Patrice Lumumba. I am a nigger of two generations. I am the black shadow that haunted my mother's conception" (19). A bald head is dropped before him on a wire, eliciting a scream. While the Negro Sarah speaks, the rest of the characters go back and forth, moving freely. Sarah continues telling the story about her parents, including how their families disapproved their marriage, how they went to Africa, and how the mother was taken to an asylum (20). In the middle of her story, she focuses on her father's religious mission, siding him with Jesus. The father was given a mission to save the race and he started travelling like Jesus. When he failed in his attempts, he tried to hang himself in a Harlem hotel, signifying the rebirth of the black soul.

4. THE BLACK SOUL CHALLENGING THE BLACK BODY

Gradually the issue of a black body is situated on a more problematic layer. While the background is snow which is already white parallel to the black and white marble floor, there are white flowers around, reinforcing pure whiteness. The representation of Duchess in her ballroom accompanies this white atmosphere. In contrast to her white dress, the Duchess's hair is kinky. Jesus who brings light to the dark atmosphere, shows her his hair falling. The Duchess shows him her bald head too. They look identical as they are both bald. This situation possibly implies that the reality of race (drawing on the memories concerning the black father) does not change even if you are a duchess or a saint:

Duchess and Jesus (Their hair falling more now, they are both hideous): My father isn't going to let us alone. (KNOCKING) Our father isn't going to let us alone, our father is the darkest of us all, my mother was the fairest, I am in between, but my father is the darkest of them all. He is a black man. Our father is the darkest of them all. He is a black man. My father is a dead man. (22)

When they look at each other, they face their mirror images and they scream. They can not ever confront with their body images.

The Landlady appears on the stage and continues telling her own version of Sarah's story. Her interference breaks the dramatic monologues through a narrative voice. Doing this, she accomplishes the task of the beat in blues. Repeating Sarah's story with some crucial differences, the landlady "signifies on" her story. She suggests that the father tried to save them and the whole race adding that he asked forgiveness both from the mother and Sarah (22). The Landlady adds that Sarah went to see her father in Harlem Hotel, but could not. On the narrative level she goes to the Harlem Room to see her father while on the allegorical level her soul travels to her African roots, transcending her black heritage. Her body fails in its attempts to function as the encounter does not ever take place. Yet her soul succeeds in terms of a spiritual journey. The following lines by Jesus supports the idea that the black soul is represented through a continuous migration from the black body, in turn through these split selves: "Through my apocalypses and my raging sermons I have tried to escape him, through God Almighty I have tried to escape being black." (23)

The depiction of the last scene in the jungle with "red sun" and "flying things" implies a final liberation of the souls. They can coexist there as the four split selves speak in unison:

But he is dead.
And he keeps returning. Then he is not dead.
Then he is not dead.
Yet, he is dead, but dead he comes knocking at my door. (24)

These lines, both repeating and defuting each other, suggest that literal level of language at times fails to account for the "signifying" black experience. The figurative level of language which "signifies on" each and every predicate everlastingly, is also assigned a continuous migration.

5. CONCLUSION

The role of trickster is allocated to all inhabitants of the funnyhouse, including the Landlady and Raymond, as they construct and deconstruct their own stories as well as each others`:

Landlady: The poor bitch has hung herself... The poor bitch has hung herself.

Raymond(Observing her hanging figure): She was a funny little liar.

Landlady (informing him): Her father hung herself in a Harlem Hotel when Patrice Lumumba died.

Raymond: Her father never hung herself when Patrice Lumumba died. I know the man. He is a doctor, married to a white whore. He lives in the city in rooms with European antiques, photographs of Roman ruins, walls of books and oriental carpets. Her father is a nigger who eats his meals on a white glass table (26).

While Sarah`s souls continue their travel even after the body is thoroughly stationary (as she is dead), the Landlady and Raymond continue the myth of the funnyhouse. Raymond being a Jew and the landlady being a lower class citizen, belong only to the funnyhouse which is a possible place for the `Other` to survive. While Sarah`s colonized body is also enslaved in the house, her `black` funnyhouse souls remain immigrant, forever, through story-telling, signifying and blues.

END NOTES

1: All references to the play *Funnyhouse of a Negro* refer to Kennedy, Adrienne. 'Funnyhouse of a Negro' in Sollors, Werner. *The Adrienne Kennedy Reader*. Minneapolis&London: U of Minnesota P, 2001.

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