Identity-Crisis in Adrienne Kennedy's *Funnyhouse of a Negro*: A Celebration of Sarah's Loss and Fragmentation

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Abstract

Sarah’s ‘identity-crisis’ lies in her complete loss of her self-control generated mainly by her inability to acquire a unified identity. Sarah’s fragmentation into four selves is significant for it shows that her self-division is meant to display the war she is going through as a brown-skinned character. She is deeply torn between an abhorred reality of having affinities with blacks and adored illusion of possessing similarity with whites. ‘Negro’ Sarah is living a crisis manifested in a state of chaos that replicates her feelings of uncertainty and disorder. The division of Sarah into four Sarahs, each representing another facet of the same character is experienced as nightmarish dreams which left traces of total loss and fear in her deepest psyche.

Keywords: identity-crisis, fragmentation, chaos, loss, psychoanalysis, selves, disorder, black, white.
During the 1960s, there was a great concern in the African-American Literature about issues of “the consciousness and identity of black Americans” (Cuddon 88). As far as the theater is concerned, black playwrights became more radical and tended to separate themselves from the white American theater and were mainly interested in establishing links with the African ancestor to construct the black identity. Being a female black playwright, to undermine and to work outside the reality of the male-dominated black theater, Adrienne Kennedy with her one-act play, “ventured into the uncharted territory of the theater as well as the mind” (Sollar 2). Her experimental play Funnyhouse of a Negro hovers over the experience of being a mulatto, provoking the perplexity of having bi-racial affinities with both blacks and whites, Kennedy delves into the innermost depth of her protagonist’s psyche and voices the inmost turmoil and disorder stemming from the “identity-crisis” that Sarah undergoes. Indeed, this play is a highly regarded piece of drama owing to its myriad readings. It can lend itself to postcolonial, feminist, postmodernist, or even psychoanalytical interpretations. In fact, approaching the play from the latter perspective, the first aim of this paper is, therefore, to scrutinize Sarah’s loss and fragmentation and then to exhibit the different representations of the self while questioning their motivations in the play.

Before handling the issue of Sarah’s disorder as the main theme in Funnyhouse, it is of a paramount importance to define this very expression. Identity-crisis was first used during the Second World War for a specific clinical purpose in the Mt. Zion Veteran’s Rehabilitation clinic, to describe “a loss of a sense of personal sameness and historical continuity” amidst the attestants of the war (Erikson 17). Identifying an analogous disturbance among the adolescents, psychologists used the same term to describe “a normative identity crisis to the age of adolescence and young adulthood” (Erikson 17). Accordingly, ‘Identity-crisis’ can be defined as a sense of bewilderment due to a war within the psyche that diminishes the central control over the self. Erikson considers it the most crucial conflict human beings experience.

In the light of this, Sarah’s identity-crisis lies in her complete loss of her self-control generated mainly by her inability to acquire a unified identity. Thus, by contrast to D. W. Winnicott who argues that “the other people provide the stability of our self-identity […]”, Lacan suggests that “we are never going to get a stable image” (qtd. in Sarup 14-15). In this very context, Sarah’s splitting up into four selves is significant for it shows that her self-division is meant to display the conflict she is going through as a brown-skinned character. She is deeply torn between an abhorred reality of having affinities with blacks and adored illusion of possessing similarity with whites. Negro Sarah is living a crisis manifested in a state of loss that replicates her feelings of uncertainty and confusion. Yet, these feelings are quickly transformed into dreams, which have a crucial function as far as the crisis is concerned. This fragmentary process is usually connected with dreams in which Freud

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1 During the 1960s, the black theater movement became progressively more radical and there was an interesting tendency among black playwrights to dissociate themselves from the white American theater and put on performance for black audiences only. (Cuddon 88)
2 Adrienne Kennedy was born Adrienne Lita Hawkins in Pittsburgh on September 13, 1931. She graduated from Ohio State University with a degree in education. She started writing during the 1960s. Among her famous works Funnyhouse of a Negro (1964), The Owl Answers (1965) and many other plays and novels.
3 Hereafter will be referred to as Funnyhouse.
4 Each sense of identity involves sameness. For instance, “[a]n individual’s psychological identity is the same as certain personality traits”. (Heslep 1)
remarks “[t]he personality may be split-when for instance, the dreamer’s own knowledge is divided between two [or more] persons” (qtd. in Cuddon 335). The division of Sarah into four Sarahs, each representing another facet of the same character is experienced as nightmarish dreams which left traces of total loss and fear in the deepest psyche of Sarah.

Perhaps, the dreamlike atmosphere dominates all the spaces of the play from the very beginning till the end. The first didascalia introduces Sarah’s room as “[t]he center of the stage, allowing the rest of [it] as the places of her selves” (Funnyhouse 1). It makes the reader / audience feel that he / she is inside the character’s mind, which seems to be the center that acts as a progenitor of Sarah’s fantasies – the four antithetical selves. Indeed, as the somnambulist is introduced, the play proves to be “a Freudian dream” (Scanlan 96). The play unfolds with “A WOMAN dressed in a white nightgown walks across the stage carrying before her a bald head […] [and a]s she moves, she gives the effect of one in a dream” (Funnyhouse 2). The same woman is depicted as an outlandish figure coming from a gothic romance, and displaying “all the paraphernalia of fear” (Hennessy 325). This shocking shape, walking on the stage, appears to insinuate that the dream is, rather, a nightmare. Therefore, when this figure is allowed to talk, the reader / audience is informed that she is Sarah’s mother. This shows the fact that the mother is the source of the protagonist’s crisis and disorder since she (the mother) is the first figure presented in the play. She represents, according to Freud, the realm of “unfulfilled infantile wishes displaced onto [a] figure” (qtd. in Chassegut-Smirgel 77) in Sarah’s nightmare. The mother, as a source of confidence in oneself and in the world, has not offered her daughter the love and affection that any child needs to grow self-confident because “this forms the very basis in the child for a component of the sense of identity which will later combine a sense of being ‘all right’, of being oneself” (Erikson 103).

Sarah is, however, in a ceaseless search for the mother-figure whom she misses all the time, “dream[ing] of a day when her mother smile[s] at her” (Funnyhouse 14). She is in need to a maternal love that her mother has never given her and that she tries to compensate for through the other four selves. Seeing her as an idol, Sarah has not been given the opportunity to appreciate the father, therefore the ‘Electra’ stage, as part of the identity construction of little girls, has been absent during the protagonist’s childhood. In fact, as Robert Scanlan puts it, “the opening scene, which is set out of the sexual history of Western women awaiting the arrival of the male who […] is entitled to conjugal rights” (97). The one who is expected, however, is Sarah’s father, neither the husband nor the lover.

Actually, Kennedy makes use of the Freudian idea of the ‘Oedipus Complex’ to construct one’s selfhood. In other words, the playwright links Sarah’s sense of bewilderment and fear about her identity to the ‘Oedipus Complex’. During the construction of the self, the child meets “the father’s law” that separates him / her from the mother. In the context of identity formation, Jacques Lacan figures out that the child has to go through three stages before shaping his / her character:

At first, the child […] wishes, perhaps unconsciously, to be the complement of what is lacking in [the mother]: the phallus. In the second stage, the father intervenes; he deprives the child of the object of desire and deprives the mother of the phallic object. The child encounters the law of the father. The third stage is that of identification with the father. The father reinstates the phallus as the object of the mother’s desire and no
longer as the child-complement to what is lacking in her. There is, then, a symbolic castration: the father castrates the child by separating it from its mother [and consequently], this is the debt of which must be paid if one is to become completely one’s self. (qtd. in Sarup 10)

In other words, the father affects Sarah’s very conception of her being and estranges her from herself, the people and the world. He intervenes before she was “born”. Here Kennedy means by “born” not the physical birth but the confrontation of Sarah with the other; that’s to say, it means the separation of Sarah from her mother. Before being aware of herself and the world around her, Sarah lives in tune with her mother; then the father intervenes and prevents the little Sarah from the object of desire. This separation is what Lacan calls castration which is “the uncanny separation or division of self from nature or of subject from signifier, or of part from whole” (Wilbern 168). In short, castration highlights an interior division of the self that reflects another division between self and Other, self and world. It is exactly this splitting that causes Sarah’s loss and fragmentation.

Sarah’s dividedness goes even further when we see her experiencing a state of self-loathing and negation as it is assumed by Lacan “negativity is the negation of identity” (qtd. in Sarup 23). Her state of being is “characterized by a situational neurosis [...] a constant effort to run away from [her] own individuality, to annihilate [her] own person” (Fanon 40). Sarah is really suffering from what Fanon calls a “psycho-existential complex” (40). This negativity results in a sense of disorder, confusion and loss about her identity. In Funnyhouse, Negro Sarah shows her self-loathing when she cries out: “I want to possess no moral value, particularly value as to my being. I want not to be” (5). That is, she reified herself into ‘self-objectification’ which is as Fanon puts it “the source of the alleged black ‘inferiority complex’” (110), a complex that has to do with what Fanon so aptly calls the “epidermalization” of social inferiority (110). Sarah’s repetition deeply mirrors moments of hallucination in which she is fallen apart. The latter are the result of the act of castration the protagonist undergoes. This repetition results in fragmentation and loss. Instances of this repetition can be perceived in the Duchess’s utterance as in the statements: “He is an African who lives in the jungle. He is an African who has always lived in the jungle” (Funnyhouse 9).

In this very perspective, using the Lacanian “mirror stage” is crucially functional in shaping Sarah’s disorder. In fact, the recurrent application of the mirror is not accidental, but it is made emblematic to further symbolize Sarah’s crisis of being. A sentence such as “In the mirror I saw that, although my hair remained on both sides, clearly on the crown and at my temples my scalp was bare” (Funnyhouse 10) does no more than to inculcate in the reader’s / audience’s mind that “stage” through which the protagonist goes and also keeps another suffering inside the psyche that would cause a kind of total loss and schizophrenic bewilderment. The “mirror stage”, Lacan maintains, “is a moment of alienation, since to know oneself – through an external image is to be defined through self alienation” (qtd. in Sarup 27). Thus, self-alienation is also another outcome of Sarah’s fragmentation and confusion. This moment of estrangement occurring during the “mirror stage” is followed by an “ambivalent relationship to that reflection. The subject loves the coherent identity, which the mirror provides. However, because the image remains external to it, it also hates that image” (27). In this context, we find that Sarah keeps ambivalent feelings every time she looks into the mirror; this ambivalence represents her state of confusion, turmoil and crisis.
Yet, what we have in the play is a feeling of self-loathing, a hatred for all black people and heritage. Sarah, therefore, has internalized the compact majority’s abhorrence towards her group identity. She tries not to be associated with the black community in order not to be linked with the negative identity. Her constant fear of being associated with blacks urges her to deny any connection with the father. She never even allows him to embrace her for fear of rape, since she has internalized, as Curb maintains, “the distortion fabricated by phobic white racists to imagine that the darker the man, the more likely he is to rape, and the lighter the woman, the more likely to be victim” (“(Hetero)Sexual Terrors” 145). That she does not want to get close to her father demonstrates that Sarah does not hanker after embracing “the race she inherited from him” because she fears being “infected’ and ‘diseased’ by [her] racial heritage” (Scanlan 102).

However, despite her attempts to get rid of her blackness, Sarah is aware that she is bound to her father since she confesses that she is “tied to the black Negro” (Funnyhouse 4). She inherited from him her “one defect [:] a head of frizzy hair unmistakably Negro kinky hair” (6). This consciousness, together with a feeling of guilt towards the father for not accepting his emotions, and for looking his racial ancestor down, drives Sarah to identify with other selves: Patrice Emery Lumumba, a revolutionary African nationalist leader, who is known for his “positive neutralism’ which he defined as a return to African values and a rejection of any important ideology” (Encyclopedia Britannica 13). Lumumba epitomizes, therefore, Black Nationalism in America which advocates a revert to African roots. He is depicted in Funnyhouse of a Negro as the zeal of Sarah’s father to “heal the misery of the black man” (19). Thus he “takes on the responsibility for the blackness in her blood, […] standing as the progenitor of the racial strain (deformity) that made her […] black” (Scanlan 101). He is a revolutionary figure who “want[s] the black man to rise from colonialism” (Funnyhouse 15). However, he is also the source of her torments and disorder for he has “diseased [her] birth” (4), obliging her to inherit his blackness and his “negative identity” as part of a minority group. Sarah’s identification with this figure comes to highlight her ambivalent feeling towards her black heritage. In him, “Sarah combines [both] her aggressions and her affections toward her African heritage” (Barnett 378).

Another self Sarah identifies with is Jesus, a “hunchback, yellow-skinned dwarf” figure (Funnyhouse 7). The latter admits that he “[has] tried to escape being black” and that he “now […] know[s] that [his] father is a black man,” not God (19). Nevertheless, that Jesus is hunchback dwarf shows that Sarah considers blackness as the cause of that deformity although she chooses to identify with a black Jesus not a white one. For this reason, Jesus hates Lumumba, the father figure, and wants to kill him: “I am going to Africa and kill this black man named Patrice Lumumba. Why? Because all my life I believe my holly father to be God, but now I know that my father is a black man” (19).

As a matter of fact, Sarah’s selves seem to be emblematic figures who symbolize the opposition of the two conflicting cultures in the protagonist’s identity, bringing about her inability to reconcile the fantasies that her neurotic mind has created; hence her identity-crisis. But if Lumumba remains a symbol of resistance to the Eurocentric view, Queen Victoria and Duchess of Hapsburg are the token of white imperialist design towards the blacks. As such, these latter figures are other discrepant representations within Sarah’s fanciful realm. They are, indeed, the emblematic incarnation of the empire whose hegemony is “erected upon the
foundation of racism” (Wintson 246). These royal figures resent blacks and allow only whites in their “royal world where everything and everyone is white and there are no unfortunate black ones. For […] black is evil and has been from the beginning” (Funnyhouse 5).

Accordingly, the reality that Sarah identifies with these antagonistic figures anticipates her failure and disappointment to end the war within her. Patrice Lumumba, Jesus, Queen Victoria and Duchess of Hapsburg will never be reconciled – for they represent that relationship between the oppressor and the oppressed – that Sarah, therefore, will never build a unified identity. So none of Sarah’s selves offers us an essential black or white identity. They are all mere masks aimed at “producing a partial vision of the colonizer’s presence” (Bhabha 129). Later, these masquerades are fallen to show nothing except the lie and allusion the protagonist is clinging to. In her second monologue, Sarah utters, “I clung loyally to the lie of relationships, again and again seeking to establish a connection between my characters. Jesus is Victoria’s son […] A loving relationship exists between myself and Queen Victoria, a love between myself and Jesus but they are lies” (Funnyhouse 7).

In fact, Kennedy is best known for the recurrent use of fragmentation in most of her works. As argued by Kolin, Kennedy’s characters are fragmented geographically, genetically and racially (60). This is made obvious when we read that Clara, in The Owl Answers, has an unusual long name. Thus, she is “Clara Passmore who is the VIRGIN MARY who is the BASTARD who is the OWL” (25). The playwright even epitomizes her name to a merely third personal pronoun “SHE” (25). Furthermore, Clara lives in different places. The opening of the didascalia tells us that “The scene is a New York subway is the Tower of London is a Harlem hotel room is St. Peter’s the scene is shaped like a subway car” (26). Clara’s crisis of location and psychological fragmentation echo Sarah’s disconnectedness with her inner self. In Funnyhouse, Sarah suffers from dismemberment and identity bewilderment.

To crown all, we can conclude that the protagonist of Funnyhouse experiences a war within herself between the mighty forces which imbue her with feelings of guilt and despair. The playwright, hence, creates psychic images in which Sarah experiences a crisis of identity as she is caught between conflicting discourses – manifested mainly by a multiplicity of selves – all of which reflect the aggressive struggle between whiteness and blackness within and outside Sarah’s self. In the end, Sarah’s existential quest to acquire a unified identity seems impossible and all the various actions of her selves – to save her from her black father – have failed and led her to self-destruction and suicide. She reckons that a tormented life without a distinct identity is not worth living.
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