

RACIAL FLUIDITY AND IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION IN THE PERSONAL LIBRARIAN

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Abstract

A person's identity is an integral part of their life that helps them understand who they are and also gives the onlooker an idea about them. The change in their identity makes them conscious whenever they are with someone, causing them to adopt a performance that is best suited for the crowd. This paper delves into the complexities associated with one's change in their racial identity, focusing on the biographical historical fiction *The Personal Librarian* about the life of Belle da Costa Greene, co-authored by Marie Benedict and Victoria Christopher Murray. Through Erik Erikson's Psychosocial development theory, the paper explores the identity development of the character and how the society around them plays an important role in the decision. The paper states that the black identity stays intact even after the character resort to racial passing and portrays the inner turmoil and struggles the character have to trudge while maintaining the white identity.

Keyword: Identity, African American, Racial passing.

INTRODUCTION

Allyson Hobbs in his book *A Chosen Exile: A History of Racial Passing in American Life* describes the practice of racial passing as “an exile, sometimes chosen, sometimes not” (4). Racial passing denotes the enactment of relinquishing one's identity to embrace another. It was common in America during the late 1880s and early 1990s. African American identities were often reduced and relegated to a space where they have no righteous access to anything remotely theirs. The establishment of the “one-drop rule”—the idea that anyone with any African “blood” is legally black” (Sharfstein 593) along with the legalisation of the segregation laws gave momentum to the inception of white racial purity. It also displayed the burden of race carried by the minority. The laws undermined the rights of the African American community which, therefore, prompted them to resort to other methods to abandon restrictions attached with their race. Someone of them who belonged to the minority race escaped the injustice of racial discrimination through racial passing. It is to note that they turned to this means only because becoming white or belonging to a white community was considered a step to being part of the elite society.

Racial passing constitutes the loss of everything that characterizes a person's life. It was a normalized practice during the time of racial discrimination to rape coloured women and girls who were subjected to slavery. This, in turn, resulted in them bearing the children of their molesters. Even though the children born were mixed, they were not considered as mixed-race as the one-drop rule existed. At first, passing was done to ensure their escape from slavery. They realized that through the practice of passing they can enjoy the freedom that they will never be able to have as long as racial discrimination existed. Later, it became a means to attain things such as access to education, a place in society, and everything that they were deprived of. Within this passing, another group existed, those who keep their personal and professional life separate. They kept

the white identity to ensure that they can create a livelihood for themselves and their family. In their house, or among their loved ones, they sustained their black identity.

Walter White Francis was a prominent figure of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) who often passed as white to investigate the horrific reality of racial injustices. In his autobiography *A Man Called White* he has given a detailed account of the findings of his investigation, as he has mentioned in his book “I am a Negro. My skin is white, my eyes are blue, my hair is blond. The traits of my race are nowhere visible upon me” (3). He was aware of the consequences that would befall him if he was found out to be passing. He has given an account of the lynching that his people have undergone. His only reason to pass was to continue with his investigation as he didn't live with the white identity as he believed it to be a treachery to his race,

- There is no mistake. I am a Negro. There can be no doubt. I know the night when, in terror and bitterness of soul, I discovered that I was set apart by the pigmentation of my skin (invisible though it was in my case) and the moment at which I decided that I would infinitely rather be what I was than, through taking advantage of the way of escape that was open to me, be one of the race which had forced the decision upon me. (White 5)

Passing also comes with great aftermath of the choices they've made. They are always haunted by the realization that they can be found out any minute. It also adds to their fear in socializing with others. A lot of women who passes has an underlying fear that it could hinder their chances of starting a family as the chances of them giving birth to a coloured child is possible.

An identity of a person is interpreted as “the set of meanings that define who one is when one is an occupant of a particular role in society, a member of a particular group, or claims particular characteristics that identify him or her as a unique person” (Burke and Stets 3). When one accepts a new identity, it can

hinder their chances of belongings to one group alone. Most of the people belonging to the minority communities, during the late 1800s, turned to racial passing to escape the unprivileged life to save themselves, and also the added incentives that came with ‘turning’ white. To pass as another poses the challenge that one should turn their back on the identity they were born to, in order to be a part of the group that they were not legally assigned. The practice of passing give insight into the discrimination faced because of a particular complexion- one as superior and the other inferior. It also reveals the losses they have faced; not only their real identity but also the relationships they have built. In each of these circumstances, the experiences of those who pass vary differently. Some of them, passes to escape from blackness, to be a part of the white community, and others, to escape from slavery. They feel compelled to assume a different identity, in order to access opportunities or avoid the limitations associated with their race, which made their life much easier. When someone passes as a different race, it brings up questions about being true to oneself, fitting in, and feeling good about who they are. If someone is found out to be passing, they are not only punished and shunned by the white community, but their original people, too, considers them as a traitor.

Belle da Costa Greene aka Belle Marion Greener was the personal librarian of American elitist banker and investor, J.P. Morgan. Her exuberance and daring nature played an important role in establishing the Pierpont Morgan Library as one of most successful museums in America. She was one of the most successful women who established herself in the American society despite questions of race and gender. Belle’s story is a poignant tale of her hard work, resilience, and bravery. Belle is torn between the privileges available to her and the injustice faced by her people. By passing as white, Belle has access to the places and opportunities that are denied to others for the sole reason of being coloured. She is able to enjoy the luxury of pursuing her passion by exploring art and literature. She feels guilty when she witnesses her people being relegated to the periphery while she enjoys the grandeur of being in the centre. Randall Kennedy maintains his view on passing as “a deception that enables a person to adopt certain roles or identifies from which he would be barred by prevailing social standards in the absence of his misleading conduct” (1145). In the biographical novel *The Personal Librarian*, Marie Benedict and Victoria Christopher Murray has tried to portray the life of Belle de Costa Greene in a way that it will resonate with the readers idea of the practice of passing. Belle was successful in all the aspects of her life except suppressing the guilt that followed her like a shadow. She knew her whole “white” life was built over a lie and a non-existent Portuguese grandmother. They had to create ancestors to ensure that that they can preserve the roles they are enacting.

- Like Russell, I had to add the Portuguese da Costa to my last name—after dropping Marion—because the ties that bind us to Africa are plainer in the shade of our olive complexions. So Mama invented a Portuguese grandmother for us in order to deflect suspicion and obviate any need for further examination. (Benedict and Murray 37)

Belle was conditioned to embrace a “white” identity by her mother. James Marcia’s concept of ‘identity foreclosure’ views this dilemma as “they have simply accepted whatever identity their parents or parent surrogates had planned for them” (Orlofsky et al. 211). She felt small before her mother because she always made Belle self conscious about her identity. “Although I’ve never questioned my mother outright about her decision, she can see my doubts and uncertainty about the world

we’ve chosen to live in” (Benedict and Murray 37). Belle’s father, Richard, was a lawyer and an advocate for equality. He was proud of his heritage and was aware of the horrific reality that resulted in their “whiteness”. She became the witness of the fight that ensued between her father and mother on the question of their heritage. Her father questions her mother “You think our pale skin is a gift from God? Don’t you ever think about the reason we are light-coloured? Does the violence that white men perpetrated upon our ancestors never cross your mind?” (Benedict and Murray 19). Her mother makes all her children thinks that being white or rather passing as white makes their life a bed of roses as compared to being true to their heritage. Her sister, Teddy, who was a baby when their father left them, grew up in a world where being white was normalized. Belle believes that “She has inhabited Mama’s white world for nearly her entire life” (Benedict and Murray 65). Her mother teaches her not to make eye contact nor start a conversation with the blacks “If you see any colored people, stand tall, don’t make eye contact. If eye contact is made, only acknowledge with a nod and then turn away. And never, ever enter into a conversation” (Benedict and Murray 57). Belle feels uneasy when she comes across a coloured server woman during a ball. Against her mother’s doctrines, she conducts a conversation with their eyes through the ephemeral connection they’ve made. Even though, not explicitly, she starts to abandon the advices her mother gave her which Juliet Mitchell alludes to in her book *Psychoanalysis and Feminism: A Radical Reassessment of Freudian Psychoanalysis* as “it is only with the necessity for her mother-detachment that the girl gets going on the path to femininity” (58). She wonders why would she have to enjoy the pleasures of belonging to the higher strata of the society, while her contemporaries have to serve her just because she has lighter skin. Belle always prefers her life at DC more than the one at New York. The class division between the blacks and the whites, and the prevailing discrimination causes her to be wary of even the people she considers as close friends. Her mother’s upbringing of her also owes to this fact. This mistrust stays with her throughout her life. Belle mourns the loss of the second name “Greener”. She feels that she has been stripped of her own identity. As Erik Erikson demonstrates the “role confusion” experienced by a person “To keep themselves together they temporarily overidentify, to the point of apparent complete loss of identity, with the heroes of cliques and crowds” (235). Her mother’s charade of keeping up with the white identity caused them to lose the ‘r’ and thus turning the name into Greene. The change of the name not only takes away her borne identity but also the tie that binds her to the memories involving her father. She feels a sense of shame when thinking about the reason which caused her father to leave his family of six. He couldn’t live with the idea of leaving everything he had strived to achieve to take up a role which has caused him and his people much trauma,

- While I’d hidden that truth about my father deep inside, I hadn’t been able to do the same with my feelings for him. I yearn for a day when I can see him, thank him, and maybe even have the chance to forgive him for leaving. Or ask him to forgive me for following this road that Mama has forged for us. But given that he lives in Russia now with a new family, I suppose that meeting will never be. (Benedict and Murray 97)

She is saddened by the fact that her little sister, Teddy will not have memories about her father as he left them while teddy was still a toddler. She always wonders about the moment which destroyed the balance of their happy family. It prompts her to think, will their life be completely different if they had chosen

not to follow the schemes of their mother? When she learns that her father has remarried she couldn't contain the anger and guilt that courses through her. She believes that their choice to live apart from their black identity drove away her father. It emphasizes the idea that "a childhood event, dormant for many years, could unleash its pathogenic effect in the adult" (Gilmore 120). This too, leaves a very lasting impact on the mind of Belle da Costa Greene.

Belle's fear of exposure made her analyse each and every movement of the white women around her so that she can become one of them by incorporating their mannerisms into her life. Every time a person's gaze lingers on her for too long, panic and shame fills her thinking that they have found out the secret that is one of the reason of her position in this society. Erik Erikson in his book *Childhood and Society* documents that:

- Shame is early expressed in an impulse to bury one's face, or to sink, right then and there, into the ground. But this, I think, is essentially rage turned against the self. He who is ashamed would like to force the world not to look at him, not to notice his exposure. He would like to destroy the eyes of the world. Instead he must wish for his own invisibility. (227)

J.P. Morgan's daughter, Anne, doesn't let any moment pass without letting Belle know about the mystery that surrounds her. She enquires about the Portuguese descent of Belle in every chance she gets. Even though she trusts her employer in every other matter concerning to her professional life, when it comes to her racial background rather the black identity, she does not trust anyone.

Throughout the novel, Belle faces an uncertainty in keeping the identity they have forged. This also leads to clear confusion on her part while she converses with someone. She unknowingly mentions the past memories without inventing any place or person. It is evident when she says "A little. I used to love watching my grandmother and her friends play bridge when I was younger in—" (Benedict and Murray 92). She didn't think through while continuing such a conversation, her instinct led to her recollect the things that she has considered to be different to her present life. When her family visits DC after learning of their grandmother's death, they automatically change to coloured people. Her mother is the one who takes the big task in her hands and initiated the path to be their authentic self in DC. Belle is bewildered by the difference in the transport facilities shared by the coloured and those of the whites. She wonders "How strange is the power of geography and law that we could leave New York City as white people but arrive in Washington, DC, as colored" (Benedict and Murray 98). As they reach DC, they pick up where they left off- being coloured. Belle's mother chides Teddy when she expresses her displeasure even walking through the streets assigned for the coloured people. It is important to note Erik H. Erikson's statement in his book *Identity: Youth and Crisis* "Parents must not only have certain ways of guiding by prohibition and permission, they must also be able to represent to the child a deep, almost somatic conviction that there is a meaning in what they are doing" (103). Her mother reminds them of the ramifications that could befall them if someone finds out they've been passing as white. Belle reminds herself of the incidents that she has read at the Pierpont Morgan Library. Kimberly S. Johnson in her book *Reforming Jim Crow: Southern Politics and State in the Age before Brown* cites that "In the case of lynching, all whites—those attached to the state or those acting at their own behest—had the power to use force against African Americans" (43). Belle thinks about the lynching and

attacks that is perpetrated against those who had been caught passing.

Belle's visit to DC causes them to understand the reality of the decision they've taken. Her relatives, at first, are reluctant to socialize with them as they consider the decision to pass as white as utmost betrayal. Her aunts make scathing remarks reminding them of their choice to turn their back on their loved ones. "Sit. If that brown sofa over there isn't too dark for you" (Benedict and Murray 100). The tensions subsides eventually but Belle is faced with the truth that they would never be able to enjoy the happiness and peace that surrounds a family. She is horrified to learn that the reason her uncle doesn't visit him is because her mother forbade him from coming to New York. She is left to think about the complications that is looming over them in order to fit into the white identity. The warnings of her uncle regarding the safety of them in a place where racism still prevailed causes Belle to be concerned. She acknowledges the consequences that comes along with the charade they are playing. The only place she felt seen after DC was in Britain as segregation laws were illegal there. She felt comfortable in her own skin and felt relieved that she can walk and talk without being conscious about her identity. "But I could not have guessed London's greatest gift. Here, as I walk the streets, I don't feel the same assessment of my color that I routinely experience, and constantly anticipate, in America. Perhaps London's citizens don't have the same need to categorize us by race as they do in America" (Benedict and Murray 121). This gives an insight into the racism that existed in America then, where "whiteness" was normalized. Lawrence Parker in her book *Race Is... Race Isn't: Critical Race Theory and Qualitative Studies in Education* describes the concept as "Thus, whiteness re-mains the normative standard and blackness remains different, other, and marginal" (184).

Stephen Knadler gives his view on the passing as "the only admissible conclusion is that passing is a ridiculous concept, a way simply of denoting a change in identity performance in which a "first" or "original" identity is posited as the true self, a self that places one authentically in a historically defined demographic population" (70). To Belle, the black identity is a memory, and the white identity is the reality. Deep down she acknowledges that the white identity is just a shield and the inherent one is the reality. Besides, passing do not make a person fully incorporate oneself into another race. It is apparent only in the perception of the onlooker that the passer attains another identity. In reality, to their people and themselves, inevitably, they sustain their "original" identity. It amounts to "race is about identity more than about conflict and a struggle over power" (Knadler 71). It is the belief in "whiteness" being superior to one's own race that is holding up one from reverting to their former identity. Belle's father, Richard Greener, is complacent with his identity. He dreamed of a peaceful life for the next generation where one can be comfortable in their own skin, and fought for equal rights when his own family choose to turn their back on their people. After rekindling the relationship with her father, after seventeen years, she reminisces about the year that they lived apart- the cost for her new life. Her father's question left her to think about the risk that they took to accommodate themselves with the white crowd, "But that's the price, isn't it? Pretending to be someone that you're not. When I saw your picture in the New York Times, I was so proud of you. But I was also profoundly sad. I realized that to achieve one dream, you had to forsake your core identity. Changing your name is easy. Changing your soul is impossible" (Benedict and Murray 271).

Belle lives a life of performance, which she learned from the white people around her. Her adult life is comprised of the characteristics that she has embodied to authenticate herself as a white woman in a way that “By performing their desired identity, they may be accepted as possessing it and, thereby, come to be viewed by others in a manner consistent with their own self-view” (Klein et al. 5). As Judith Butler has described in her book *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*:

- Significantly, if gender is instituted through acts which are internally discontinuous, then the *appearance of substance* is precisely that, a constructed identity, a performative accomplishment which the mundane social audience, including the actors themselves, come to believe and to perform in the mode of belief. (179)

Eventually, this performance turns into a life of deception to herself and her people. The association between the conscious of a person and their identity is self-explanatory in the sense that “The intimate link between identity and agency explains why subjects who are the bearers of marginalized identities have often fought hardest to preserve notion of “identity” in the face of attempts to declare it moot or obsolete” (Wald 187). By accepting the white identity they try to fully renounce their black heritage. Belle’s desire to known as the coloured librarian of the Pierpont Morgan library indicate that she wanted to be identified as her true self rather than the one she lived all along. Subsequently, passing do not mean that they have inherited the identity they adopted; one who passes may consider themselves as white, however, they will always be known by their original identity- black.

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