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FROM DOUBLE- CONSCIOUSNESS TO ME-NESS: AN EVERLASTING JOURNEY IN AFRICAN-AMERICAN HISTORY?

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ABSTRACT

For centuries, Africans had had a devastating and traumatizing history as soon as they had been brought from their countries to America. They suffered under tremendous circumstances during this great, perilous and long voyage and had been confronted with new multifaceted realities. Before that voyage, the African had his/her own identity, his/her own history, his/her own culture; but once on the American soil, his/her identity had been divided into diverse facets. Subsequently, an African remains a struggle self, caring about the survival of his/her self in the New World. Being an American and a Negro - two souls, two thoughts, two identities - is what is termed by William Edward Burghardt Du Bois 'Double consciousness'.

Used as theoretical tool, this double consciousness referring to an innermost "twoness" putatively experienced by African Americans, will help in getting a better understanding of this complexity which reveals a psycho-social division in a white-dominated society. Our objective is to show that the hardest fight is the inner fight to psychological freedom for identity. It is discovered, however, that there is progress. As a matter of fact, the African had recorded material, financial and intellectual successes in his/her struggle for freedom. Nevertheless, beneath all these struggles and fights of the African American in history, lies the deep and strong will to reconquer his/her missing self, his/her affirmation of Me-ness. So, despite the material, financial and intellectual successes, the African American remains fundamentally non satisfied and still feels on the way of being him/herself. After all, is this quest of Me-ness not everlasting?

Key words: Double consciousness- Me-ness- Self- African American - Identity.

Introduction

African-Americans' history had been a hurting and a traumatizing one since centuries. Before undertaking that great, perilous and long voyage to America, Africans had their own identity, their own history, their own culture. Once on American soil, this identity or this culture had been divided into multiples facets. Subsequently, an African remains a struggle self, caring about the survival of his/her self in the New World. Being an American and a Negro, two souls, two thoughts, two identities, is what William Edward Burghardt Du Bois termed 'Double Consciousness'. The theoretical framework that informed this study is multi-disciplinary incorporating the historical approach and the cultural psychology which reveals a psycho-social division in a white-dominated society.

Our objective is to show that the hardest fight is the inner fight to psychological freedom for identity. There is a progress throughout these struggles; nevertheless, beneath all these struggles and fights of African Americans, lies the quest of their true self, the affirmation of Me-ness. Despite the material, financial and intellectual successes, the African American remains fundamentally non satisfied and still feels on the way of being himself. On balance, is

this quest of Me-ness not everlasting? This Double Consciousness, referring to an innermost “twoness” putatively experienced by African Americans, as theoretical tools will be used for a better understanding of this complexity which reveals a psycho-social division in a white-dominated society.

In the course on this paper, after the conceptual approach, the methodological approach will follow and finally, the historical approach showing the process from Double Consciousness to Me-ness will be dealt with.

1. Conceptual and Methodological Approach

The first concept to be defined is the term African American. “Black” refers to Americans from African descent. It has replaced the former terms “Negro” and “African American” or “Afro-American.” Most Africans transported to the New World as slaves came from sub-Saharan Africa. These enslaved Africans worked in mines and on plantations providing exploited labor between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries. It is recognized that no group in American history has been treated as savagely and exploited as Afro-Americans (Liebman, 1982). In fact, the use of the term “Black” is already a problem. Africans in America are called Black Americans. The implication of this term is already a big problem from a linguistic point of view because it says African Americans are only Americans if the word “American” is attached to the adjective “African”; otherwise, they are not Americans. So, Blacks are called from the starting point “African Americans”. The history of discrimination and segregation attests to this understanding. African Americans are not treated as Americans but as Africans who are living on the American soil. This is traumatic because it is in itself a lonely stigma, and an upsetting name. It depicts the fact that African Americans are homeless and are strangers and not *de facto* full citizens in America even in the present day realities (Aguessy, 2017). As Stephan says, the history of Black people in America was unique- uniquely painful (Liebman, 1982). This is a dark history that haunts African American communities. When Abolition came after almost three hundred years of this oppression, African Americans hoped to be recognized as full members of the American society. They hoped to have equal rights with White Americans. However, these expectations vanished with institutionalized racism and segregation. They were unable to vote due to discriminatory laws and violence perpetrated by groups like the Ku Klux Klan (KKK) (Aguessy, 2017).

Currently, the term is understood in a broader sense including Africans who are not enslaved but who came into the USA due to immigration. Dr. Stephen J. Brewer rightly asserted in *The Origins of Self* that many horrors against humanity have been committed when individuals are indoctrinated into believing that another person is not a ‘real’ person (Preface). Moreover, African Americans in general do not live under better conditions. They survive and struggle to find a decent place on the American soil. Most of them have to face poverty, racial discrimination, violence, lower income, injustice etc. Though this situation is historical, it still pervades the American society albeit in a subtler way.

Coming to the definition of self, Jung, like his mentor, Freud “understood that the ego functioned as a mediator between the unconscious elements of the psyche and the demands of the external world” (Platania, 1997, p.122-123). But the self is linked to personal identity. One cannot define self without referring to identity and ‘theories of personal identity try to explain what the identity of a person necessarily consists in, but frequently leave open what kind of necessity is at issue.’ (Riebe, 1998, pp. 581-594). One cannot define the personal identity without the description of who one is. Adam Cash logically thinks that the personal identity is the sense of yourself as a unique individual and added that it is characterized by the following:

- Likes and dislikes

- Relationships and experiences with family and friends,
- Maturity,
- Values and Beliefs meaning ideas, beliefs, and attitudes about what is important, that helps you guide the way you live.

The Africans in America were deprived of whatever makes them a unique individual. They were deprived of relationship, families and friends because separated from them while working in plantations or in their masters' houses. They could no longer talk about values and beliefs because they are forced to face new realities.

Furthermore, according to the psychologist Buss, the personal identity is comprised of a public self and a private self, each made of its own components. For him, three important aspects make up the public self: Appearance, style and personality.

Being aware of one's appearance is very much a part of one's identity. Cultures, all over the world, engage in elaborate and sophisticated attempts to improve appearances and enhance personal beauty, as defined by each particular culture. Some philosophers state that a sense of aesthetics is essential for the good life — central to a person's self-concept. Coming to the style, the well-known Ivorian artist, Gohou has his style: the way he talks, his body language, and his facial expressions are undeniably "him". Everyone has a peculiar way of speaking and moving. These things make up a person's style. Style is not about being "cool"; your style is unique to you, whether it's cool or not. Finally, a personality is enduring, and it does not change easily

As for the African, we can talk about appearance, styles and personalities, while the African-American has to internalize the idealization of White beauty standard. Toni Morrison, an African-American novelist, in her novel *The Bluest Eye*, challenges the western standards of beauty and demonstrates that the concept of beauty is 'socially constructed'. By idealizing whiteness, the value of blackness is decreased and Toni Morrison works to demolish that trend. African-Americans with their personalities and styles have to face the aggression of the White culture and to reinvent themselves so that they would not be crumpled by the powerful influence of White supremacy. With the powerful influence of White mass media, school education and the community culture, the Black of every level in the American society have long held the standard of value that White color and blue eyes are beautiful, the color of black is ugly (Minhazul, p.188-205).

Coming to the private self, it consists of characteristics that are difficult for others to see and observe— one's thoughts, feelings, and daydreams and fantasies. African Americans' thoughts, feelings and daydreams are theirs and are unique for them and define them on the American soil. No one can figure out what someone else is thinking or exactly feeling. Certainly, there is an observable or guessing aspect but it is meaningless.

African- Americans have problem with their social identity because being deprived of their name, location, religion etc., that help to identify oneself as a particular societal category. One's social identity is made of certain identity factors that, when taken all together, equal the social "you." These factors include kinship, race and ethnicity, and religious beliefs.

The problem of self and identity is a complex one. Dafina Lazarus Stewart, an Assistant Professor of Higher Education and Student Affairs at Bowling Green State University, pointed out that choosing to embrace or abandon identity has been discussed in the literature as a common struggle for people with multiple oppressed identities. Working on the Black student population of Rosse College, Dafina Lazarus Stewart asserted:

The emotional toll of identity negotiation was apparent. Frustration, anger, resignation, passivity, confusion, and hope were all emotions that the students expressed as they discussed situations in which they had to pick and choose certain aspects of their identities to showcase to others. These comments demonstrate the ways in which these students had to negotiate their identities for certain audiences and in certain situations. However, Poke's response to the issue was to avoid contact with anyone and any situation that would require such negotiation on his part. The other students all seemed to decide that negotiation was necessary, even though the painfulness and often the confusion of it were readily apparent to them. (Stewart, 2008)

The reality of African Americans is their dual identity: two selves in one body. Meditating on identity, William Edward Burghardt Du Bois, thinks that African Americans possess the gift of second sight or double consciousness (Du Bois, 1903/1994, p. 5), looking at themselves "through the eyes of others ... measuring [their] souls by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels [one's] twoness, —an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder" (Du Bois, 1903/1994, p. 5). W.E.B. Du Bois wrote:

The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife- this longing to attain self-conscious manhood to merge his double self into a better and truer self. In this merging, he wishes neither of the older selves to be lost. He would not Africanize America, for America has too much to teach the world and Africa. He would not bleach his Negro soul in a flood of white Americanism, for he knows that Negro blood has a message for the world. He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both Negro and an American, without having the doors of opportunity closed roughly in his face. (Du Bois 1903/1994, pp. 2–3).

Commenting on Du Bois's observation above, Chickering & Reisser (1993) argued that the path toward it is often fraught with the tensions and pulls of identity struggles. And Dafina Lazarus Stewart, an Assistant Professor of Higher Education, thought that 'the college journey mirrors this same strife for many students'. Howard Bowen (1968) contended that one of the goals of college should be the development of individuals. Accordingly, Alexander Astin (1993) pointed out that students enter college with a commitment and expectation that they will develop "a meaningful philosophy of life," which includes reflection on the meaning of life, the construction of a meaningful existence, and existential ponderings about the self and identity.

The African-American journey could be understood in this paper as a voyage characterized as a process with a series of breaks. The quest for the truer self has been progressive through historical fights and gains.

Me-ness is the consciousness of one's identity as a unique individual, the state of quality to be one's self in the African and European worlds. We dare to say that this me-ness could be the synthesis, double consciousness could achieve.

Double Consciousness, historicism and psychoanalytic criticism as theoretical tools are used in this paper. Historicism is hereof used since our reflection is based on the process, throughout American history, from Double Consciousness to Me-ness.

2. Historical Outlooks of Double Consciousness

The history of the United States of America is one of domination; domination of White Americans over minority groups, especially African Americans and domination of moneyed

over the poor. The notion of domination puts in question the statement that America is a Nation of opportunity, a Nation of all dreams. Achieving one's dreams is much more difficult when everything is settled and you should have had to be there at the right time, the time when laws, which favored Whites and granted them advantages were passed. Whites proclaim themselves to be Whites and refer to non-Whites as "Other". The other, through that process of racialization, is dominated and exploited (Aguessy, 2017)

It is important to place the origins of double consciousness in historical context. When the term was first used by W.E.B. Du Bois, African Americans had been experiencing a series of traumatizing events. These events happened rapidly, and sometimes simultaneously. The American Civil War, also termed War Between the States, had been fought for four years from 1861 to 1865 between the United States and eleven Southern states that seceded from the Union and formed the Confederate States of America; then came the national debate over Reconstruction which began during the Civil War. This Reconstruction, in U.S. history, lasted from 1865- 1877 and during this reconstruction, some attempts were made to restore the injustices of slavery and its political, social, and economic legacy had failed; the Ku klux Klan and other terrorist groups had emerged; millions of African Americans had been freed moneyless from slavery. It is after all these events that W.E. B. Du Bois coined the term 'Double Consciousness'.

In this Double Consciousness, one can see the emergence of two forces or powers that are opposed and in perpetual battle, the outcome of which cannot yet be known: One African and one European. There is a possibility of a synthesis of the opposing forces suggesting that unity and coherence may yet emerge from great disunity. It is exactly at this point of coherence risen from the fragmented reality, at this point of unity emerging from great disunity, that Me-ness can be experienced, that the African- American could be him/herself in the African and European worlds. In fact, this unthinkable coherence and unity could be the dreamed American socio-political harmony whereby, there will be no racial prejudice and discrimination, no bias in the judicial and legislative systems. This socio-political harmony is actually an external one. But the most important harmony is the internal one where the African American will be him/herself. Yet s/he will be only him/herself if s/he is really healed, reconciled with him/herself and his/her past, with his/her society/world and with God.

3. African-American's Journey from Double Consciousness to Me-ness

In the past, the African who came as a slave on the American Soil, hence becoming African American, had been struggling for his/ her identity throughout different fights: fight for the abolition of slavery, fight for not losing his/her self, fight for freedom, fight to vote, fight for civil rights etc. It is also the contemporary Black citizen, descending from slaves even far back who is still struggling to know and accept who s/he is. Furthermore, this African has to struggle also to keep his/her traditional values and almost unified, enriched of values of hospitality, solidarity, and fear of God through the obedience of cosmogony, of natural and ancestral laws, the beliefs in the supremacy of community over the individual. Through and beyond all the above, he has to be himself or herself in America.

In the present days, African- Americans have to fight against different plights linked to the day-to-day life in America. These plights are categorized in different categories:

Psycho affective plight: divorce, loneliness, depression, serious mental problems, family disintegration, insults, humiliation, cries, lowering, threats, threats of harm, intimidation, emotional distress, isolation, deprivation, verbal abuse, denying paternity of children, putting pressure on women to abort, early pregnancies;

Socio political plight: alcohol drug or substance abuse, prison, subtle racial discrimination and racial injustice;

Economic plight: unemployment, poverty;

Physical plight: physical dysfunction, destruction of property, physical violence expressed in various ways: pushing, pulling, hitting, punching, stabbing, burning, spitting, strangling, slapping, kicking, pulling hair, attacking with a knife, mutilating or killing.

All these fights and plights undermine African-American's happiness and the hardest fight is the inner fight to psychological freedom for identity. The journey from Double-Consciousness to me-ness is still a long way to go despite all the achievements of African-Americans in America.

Actually, there were many changes in America and in their standards of living. The 1960s were years of protest and reform. The seventies and eighties were periods of great changes in American society. People wanted a good life that they believed money could buy, that was why African Americans were focused on achievements such as good education, big cars, nice homes and professional careers etc. People started being concerned about their own happiness. All in all, the challenging peculiarities of Black history have been integral in shaping African Americans, their perception of self and the now changed and perhaps still changing depiction of the Black identity and self. This changing perception of African American selves is a great progress toward happiness and Me-ness.

Conclusion

To sum up, this history of fights and gains is a journey from Double Consciousness to Me-ness. Double Consciousness helped African- Americans to become aware of the presence of the two selves within them. But they realize in the course of time that this awareness is not enough. They realize that despite their fights and their gains, they were still unsatisfied; the hardest fight is still the quest for true self. But, after all, is this quest of me-ness not an elusive one?

African- American history is a journey; moreover, an ongoing challenging journey in the sense that the African-American moved step by step throughout different fights from Double Consciousness to Me-ness. This journey is a quite challenging one. This longing to attain self-conscious wo/manhood to merge his/her double self into a better and truer self - merging, where s/he simply wishes to make it possible for a wo/man to be both Negro and an American, fully him/herself without having the doors of opportunity closed roughly in his/her face. However, since this quest for me-ness is still an ongoing acquisition, is this quest of me-ness not an elusive one?

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