

THE PURSUIT OF BLACKS' SELF-IDENTITY THROUGH CULTURAL ASSIMILATION IN LEROI JONES'S *DUCTHMAN*

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Abstrak. Artikel ini melaporkan hasil penelitian tentang jati diri melalui asimilasi budaya yang tergambar dalam novel LeRoi Jones yang berjudul *Dutchman*. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis asimilasi budaya orang kulit hitam dalam rangka pencarian jati diri. Rancangan penelitian adalah deskriptif kualitatif dengan objek penelitian adalah tokoh utama dalam karya sastra tersebut. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa Clay sebagai tokoh utama sangat berambisi untuk berhasil dikalangan orang kulit putih. Dia mencari validasi agar dapat diterima di kalangan orang Amerika berkulit putih. Dia mengadopsi budaya orang kulit putih seperti cara berpakaian, pendidikan dan nilai-nilai yang dimiliki oleh orang kulit putih dengan menanggalkan jati diri yang telah dia miliki.

Kata kunci: self-identity, cultural assimilation

INTRODUCTION

The conception of self-identity is essential to the individual's understanding in the environment and relation to the society. With a comprehension of self-identity, one can behave as a social being to anticipate what others expect of him and evaluate his own actions accordingly as he interacts with others. An individual who is aware of himself is capable of "influencing his own development as a person" (May, 1993: 73). The man's consciousness of self-identity is the source of the highest qualities for it underlies his ability for example to make decision, to fulfill his own potentiality, to see the truth. To become aware of self-identity is to pursue the source of inner strength and security of "what I am" and "what I can do". On the other hand, without it, one would be probably an individual whose mental are deteriorated and even are not aware of his existence as he questions which self he is. It presumably brings discomfort as it characterizes "I" or "me".

A conception of self-identity does not exist at birth. It derives from social interaction with others. The individual learns to comprehend his self-identity through interactions with others to evaluate his own actions accordingly. It leads an individual to perception of his self-identity that undergoes continuous change. Interacting with others might bring to alter the self-identity. Seeking approval and receiving disapproval might change the behavior in certain ways. Consequently, self-identity always adjusts to the expectation of others. It is "a process learned through association with other people" (Dressler, 1996: 228) based on culture and values within society.

God created this world in colors. Everything has any kind of color or multiple colors, the lands, vegetations, animals and also human beings. However, many people can be so narrow-minded about the skin color. Although law has declared that people as human being are equal, discrimination is still alive in human relationship. It appears in the way people treat on each other. Skin colors become sensitive factor in society because it is an obvious factor in human appearance. Martin Luther King, Jr., an American's most outstanding black spokesman, in his speech "I have a dream" delivered in Washington 1963, described the problem actually faced by the blacks who

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are not free in America that becomes their own land. They have been segregated and discriminated because of the skin color. They are as aliens in the society they live.

The Blacks' opportunities that have been taken to develop their own capabilities are that of literature. It provides a medium to articulate their problems. It was in the first place to voice the problem they have rather than to create art. Consequently, Black writer are the spokesmen of their people who have achieved fame for their works. They focus on themes of particular interest to Blacks in the United States such as the role of Afro-Americans within the larger American society, the issue of democratic freedom and equality which were long denied to Afro-Americans in the United States.

Through the power of literature, then LeRoi Jones, a contemporary African-American playwright, has explored it extensively. He wants to use his work, *Dutchman*, as a means to convey his ideas dealing with self. He tries to search for self-identity. He asks his own people to see themselves, to look at what in their own background is worth preserving and abandoning. This problem arises because of the Black's color.

This drama is sharply focused on indictment of those African and Americans who desire to assimilate into mainstream of American society. In doing so, Clay, a young black man who searches for self-identity due to his skin color denies all vestiges of racial past and makes every effort to distance himself from reality of black existence in America. It results in an eradication of cultural identity through the adoption of white manners and values to be completely accepted into the white society. Clay, the main character in this play, represents the aspects of the Blacks' life. He feels practices of discrimination and prejudice. He thinks of himself as nobody who has no self-identity. Due to this, he is aware in searching for his self-identity as Afro-American citizen. In pursuing his self-identity, he tries out some ways through culture assimilation: adopting the values and norms of the white culture by becoming fully participating members of the American mainstream.

The research question in this paper is: How is self-identity of the main character in LeRoi's *Dutchman* is found through cultural assimilation? The purpose of the study is to investigate the pursuit of self-identity through cultural assimilation in Afro-American literature, *Dutchman*. The study is expected to give insights on how human being's search of life meaning through being a human is portrayed in a piece of literary work.

RESEARCH METHOD

The research method is qualitative method in which the objective of the research is descriptive, the concepts and attitudes towards the issue are described in the research. It includes a collection of books and valuable information related to the subject from electronic search. The main data are taken from LeRoi Jones's *Dutchman*, and the supporting data from various references that help to acquire proper theoretical knowledge to investigate the issue. Meanwhile, the approach adopted in this study is cultural approach, since "cultural analysis has much to learn from scrupulous formal analysis of literary texts" (Greenblatt, 1992:67). The study then interprets the assimilation of culture to gain self-identity in a literary work.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Clay, a young black man living in the big city, lives among the white people community. He always interacts with white people. He cares his community and wants everyone recognizes him as a human being. He does not want to be humiliated and discriminated. Living as a minor citizen surrounded by the white people, he always gains segregation. He feels a stranger in the land in which he regards it as his own land. It confuses him. It means that he does not become the real Americans. To pursue his self-identity, he enters the white man's world. He compromises his own identity in order to maintain a peaceful relationship with his white oppressors. What he does at first is trying to grow his beard in which it indicates an adolescence, "a period of transition from childhood to adulthood" (Hilgard, 1997: 88). As a twenty-year-old black man, he is a young boy trying desperately to become a man and having a tendency to establish his own identity, "about my manhood" (241). He tries to find and define who and what he is. Moreover, growing beard is regarded as the custom of the adolescent white people.

Lula: You look like you been trying to grow a beard. That's exactly what you look like. You look like you live in New Jersey with your parent and trying to grow a beard. That's what...(Barnet, 1977: 237)

He thinks that by growing beard, he will be considered having the same level. He wants to be regarded as the white man. He wants to enter the white man's world in order to have the same status and to be respected as the white man. This is the way he assimilates the white culture.

Another effort to pursue his self-identity is by assimilating the white traditions such as drinking tea etiquette and the codes of attending the party. Drinking lukewarm tea is regarded as the culture of the white people. He begins to drink tea that he never does it before. He also learns how to drink tea, for example he must sip the tea instead of slurping and swallow it. He also learns how to handle tea cup, how to use and place tea spoon. He thinks that assimilating drinking tea will make him to be accepted in making relationship with the white people. It will create to have self-confident to enter the white community. As a result, he supposedly finds his self-identity. But for Lula, Clay is an "escaped nigger" (239) whose proper place is the plantations. But Clay reminds her that the Afro-American plantations have given the fine tradition of the Blues. Starting singing a song and dancing in a hysterical manner, she invites Clay to dance with her. Clay desperately clings to his dignity. His conservative side wins, however, and refuses her invitation to dance. She responds with aninsult:

LULA. You middle-class black bastard. Forget your social-working mother for a few seconds and let's knock stomachs. Clay, you liver-lipped white man. You would-be Christian. You ain'tno nigger, you're just a dirty white man. Get up, Clay, Dance with me, Clay. (240)

Lula then gives her erotic needs and tries to convert Clay to the other role, possible for the black man in her scheme. She mocks at Clay and accuses him of being an Uncle Tom, an "Old Thomas Woolly Head". Clay would like to see himself as a black man. The truth, however, is that he feels a real lack of identity. Confronted with Lula's harsher insults, with her Uncle Tom invective, and with her dozens against his mother, Clay

finally does get up. He grabs and slaps her as hard as he can, across the mouth. It is an attempt to put forward a new, powerful identity. Clay faces for the very first time the essential facts of his existence. He vents his aggression and pent-up violence. He speaks as though the whole generation of black suffering has occurred in him. He gains the upper hand. He threatens to kill them all:

CLAY. . . . I could murder you now. Such a tiny ugly throat. I could squeeze it flat, and watch you turn blue, on a humble for dull kicks. And all these weak faced of days squatting around here, staring over their papers at me. Murder them too. . . . It takes no great effort. For What? To kill you soft idiots? You don't understand anything but luxury." (242)

It seems that the power relationship has been totally reversed. Clay controls the language and the action to show his identity.

In pursuing his self-identity, he also adopts man-dressing code. Even at the cost of remembering that his grandfather, a night watchman, did not go to Harvard, he tries desperately to distance himself from his slave heritage. In assuming a bourgeois role, he assumes it with culture and dress that is not his. He changes his dressing style from narrow-shoulder clothes to a three button suit and striped tie that are regarded as the tradition of the white people.

Lula: What've you got that jacket and tie on in all this heat for? And why're you wearing a jacket and tie like that? Boy, those narrow-shoulder clothes come from a tradition you ought to feel oppressed. A three-button suit. What right do you have to be wearing a three-button suit and striped tie? Your grandfather was a slave, he didn't go to Harvard.

Clay: My grandfather was a night watchman (239)

His manners of dress suggest that he is of middle class and has adopted the dreams of his white counterparts. He will become the real Americans who can interact and be accepted in the white community. It can increase his existence and self-identity. He realizes that the way he wears, the tradition of the white men, will make him confident to pursue his identity.

The last way to pursue his self-identity is through education. He studies at college in order to be an educated man like the white people. He has sought education in discourse of the white society. His interests are clearly intellectual and associated with an academic degree. His pretension is not about becoming an educated black. He actually seems to aspire to be white or at least to step himself in white intellectualism that his color will not matter. He carries a stack of books and he wears the grab of the well-educated. He displays his new skill when he banters politely with Lula since polite banter is one of the earmarks of the fully sophisticated member of the intellectual American society. He tries to ignore her hostile remarks that are not acceptable in sophisticated society. He wants to impress her because she is attractive to him. It can be said that he has learned to find her attractive and to think that winning someone like her will increase his social status to be white as he wishes. He is the one student at Color College. His role model is not Averell Harriman, a white American statesman, but

Charles-Pierre Baudelaire, a white (French) poet. So he is not interested in politics but he wants to be a writer. He is very anxious to prove himself worthy to white cultural values. He wants to distinguish himself, but he limits himself to a superficial shift choosing art over politics. He spends his time learning literature especially poem. In literature he finds that his feeling and thought are stimulated as it gives him a satisfaction. Therefore, he is preparing himself to be a writer by increasing his education. He believes that writing has the power to find self-identity. This is what he wants. Education will encourage him to reach it. He wants to be a successful writer like Charles Baudelaire, a famous French poet. He does not want to be Averell Harriman, a successful politician. What he wants is not to become rich but to gain respect and honor. He makes himself to be familiar with the culture of nobility like Baudelaire, the man he admires so much. It is in relation with his dream to be a black Baudelaire. Learning poems or becoming a poet is not black culture. It is the white one. Becoming a poet will make him have a sense of beauty and nobility as the white people are fond of reading poetry. He can change the way of his speaking and his manner like the white people. When Lula reminds him that he is black, and when she calls him a murderer, it is apparent that it is his black identity that he murders. It is a part of his assimilation of white culture to pursue his self-identity.

Clay himself lacks, in his opinion, the ethnic integrity of black. His writings are a "kind of bastard literature," (242) and his poetry is an escape from direct rebellious actions. He says that violence alone would constitute sanity for the Negro:

Clay: A whole people of neurotics, struggling to keep from being sane. And the only thing that would cure the neurosis would be your murder."(243).

Clay recognizes the compromises he has made. He yet shirks from committing the murder of whites. It is significant that Clay rejects the murders and violence that would make him and all blacks sane. His refusal to accept his racial identity is reflected in his bitterness:

Clay: "I'd rather be a fool. Insane. Safe with my words, and no deaths, and clean, hard thoughts, urging me to new conquests. My people's madness. Hah! That's a laugh. My people. They don't need me to claim them. They got legs and arms of their own."(243)

He says that whites need to leave blacks alone and especially to stop preaching the advantages of the great white intellectual achievements. He adds a warning that on the day when all the black masses understand exactly what the whites have been saying, they will stand up and murder the whites. He affirms his belief in the strength of the blues people and challenges the whites to understand the message transmitted through the music. He ends his speech with a warning to Lula that the cultural conditioning of blacks could backfire, since they soon may be able to rationalize their murders as whites do. Clay discovers his spirited self. But he remains painfully distant from his people. He trapped in an old self. He backs away from this vision, and tries to climb back into his buttoned-up suit, collect his books, and get off the train in which he has journeyed in. His participation in the white society denies his identity. But once having shown himself to the white world, he learns that there is no retreat. He becomes just another dead

nigger. In the fact that he is brought to the realization that no matter how many nigger characteristics he drops, no matter how assimilated he becomes, he is still Black. He is still one of the subject people.

CONCLUSION

In his assimilation of the values and norms of the white culture, Clay is caught up in cultural conflict which paralyzes him. On the one hand, he is drawn to ethnocentric white culture, but on the other hand, he responds to the black ethnicity. He is continually but wittingly moving toward recognition of his own self-identity. His death, therefore, represents the self-destructive consequences of this kind of moral and intellectual paralysis.

Getting no self-identity and not accepted in the society make him confused and try to pursue his self-identity in order to be accepted in the white community. To gain his goal, he does assimilation to get what the whites get in life. He fits himself like the whites to get recognition and honor in society, to get the white values. He grows his beard like the way the whites do. He also wears his clothes like the way the whites wear, three button suit and striped tie. He goes to the college. He brings and reads books to make people notice that he is an educated man. He adopts the etiquette of drinking tea. All these ways aim to achieve his self-identity by trying to surrender his black identity. He tries to hide his identity as a black. He thinks he can find self-identity in the white man's world but he finds only the loss of identity. In short, it can be assumed that in pursuing an alternative way to develop value system and self-identity, we will not deny or hide our own identity.

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