

## SEGREGATION IN POSTRACIAL AMERICA: A FANONIAN CRITIQUE OF THE SELLOUT

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### Abstract

This qualitative and analytical study aims to explore segregation through the analysis of Paul Beatty's *The Sellout* (2015) in the backdrop of 13<sup>th</sup>, 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> amendments to the US constitution, civil rights movement and the election of Barak Obama to the presidency. These changes made scholars to consider American society as postracial. However, social and economic fetters still chain the blacks. Contemporary African American novels reverberate with this enigma. To explore this paradox, *The Sellout* is investigated in the light of Frantz Fanon's postcolonial theorization, in particular his idea of the negro myth. The study finds that internalization of negro myth is the cause of continuation of segregation. It instills superiority complex in the whites and inferiority complex in the blacks. The study adds to the existing stock of knowledge because this novel has not been thoroughly explored. Also, it contributes to the cause of the wretched of the earth; the marginalized, and the oppressed.

### Introduction

A prominent feature of 21<sup>st</sup> century African American literature is the portrayal of the great American paradox: fundamental principal of the nation was "all Men are created equal" (Jefferson, 1776/2019), but segregation has continued to the present day. This perfidy of American democratic ideal has always invigorated the imagination of African-American fiction writers (Spaulding, 2005). This study explores segregation in Paul Beatty's *The Sellout* (2015) under the vision of Frantz Fanon's postcolonial theorization.

### The Sellout (2015) by Paul Beatty

The narrator of *The Sellout* is unnamed—throughout the novel he calls himself "Me". He is born in a rural agricultural subsection of Black minority Los Angeles's suburb which is called Dickens. He submits himself to the fate of Californian wretched of the earth: "I'd die in the

same bedroom I'd grown up in, looking up at the cracks in the stucco ceiling that 've been there since '68 quake" (Beatty, 2016, p. 40). The narrator is exacerbated by the irony of circumstances and the poor condition of his hometown. Furthermore, he intends to correct another wrong done to the black community: their ghetto has been effaced from the map of the United States to save the white community. He recruits Hominy Jenkins who is the most famous resident of the town. With the help of Hominy Jenkins, he introduces segregation by segregating the school in Dickens. These acts land him in the Supreme Court of the United States of America. The whole story is narrated through the flashback of the narrator when he is sitting in the court room of the Supreme Court.

### **Theoretical Framework of the study--Fanon's Postcolonial Discourse**

Franz Fanon's postcolonial discourse can be dissected into five categories: Antiracist, Decolonialist, Marxist, Feminist, and New Humanist Fanonism. Antiracist Fanonism refers to Fanon's psycho-sociopolitical phenomenology of race and his critique of Manichaeism of blackness and whiteness in the light of *Black Skins, White Masks*. In Decolonialist Fanonism, there is an exposition to show that Fanon's ideas both converge and diverge with Aime Cesaire's and the combination of racism and colonization gives birth to a new kind of colonialism; racial colonialism. Marxist Fanonism argues that wretched of the earth; the marginalized, the oppressed, are not only exploited by capitalism, they are also subject to violence by race and ethnicity. Socio-economic status of a community is not the result of race question, but racism is the product of the former. In Feminist Fanonism, Fanon's critique of racism is traversed with feminism to explore the plight of the black women. Lastly, Fanonian criticism culminates with New Humanism. Here, the previously discussed categories are brought together to form a whole conception of Fanonian humanism which is different from the conventional concept of humanism. According to Fanon, internalization of negro myth and negrophobia on part of whites lead to their concocted vision of white superiority. On the other hand, lactification and affective erethism due to prevailing negro myth on part of blacks lead to their inferiority complex. It is argued that racism, from Fanon's point of view, is not the product of race, but vice versa; racism is not a natural and given phenomenon but a constructed discourse, like Said's Orientalism, which is aimed at the exploitation of the weaker. Fanon's project is to dismantle this racial complex which he calls disalienation of races; to disalienate whites of their superiority complex, and blacks of their inferiority complex.

### **Problem Statement**

Fanon analyzes psyches of both blacks and whites in racial/colonial context. The word "Nigger" or "Negro" is invested with all negative connotations regarding one's personality. "The archetype of inferior values is represented by the black man" (Fanon, 1952/2008, p. 166). This type of thinking initially started with skin color but now it transcends the skin color. When a child makes noise, his mother scolds him or her with these words, "Stop acting like a nigger" (p. 168). White children are taught to shun savagery of the character. The savagery is symbolized by the idea of nigger. This process is not confined to whites only. Black children, oblivious to their own skin color, also internalize this idea due to cultural imposition. The most interesting dimension of Fanon's criticism is that he declares that it is a myth which is internalized by both whites and blacks. There is no innate or biological infirmity in blacks which render them savages. Here, Fanon's scholarship is like Edward Said's who asserts that orientalism is a myth. The negro myth is, therefore, neither natural, nor ahistorical, nor universal.

### **Research Question**

How does Paul Beatty in *The Sellout* project segregation in post-racial America?

### **Review of Literature on *The Sellout* (2015)**

Review of the novel was published by Leland Cheuk in *Prairie Schooner's* Volume 90, Number 2, in Summer 2016, (pp. 174-176). Leland Cheuk explores the versatile nature of Beatty's characters. Another review of the novel was published in *Callaloo's* Volume 39, Number 4, in Fall 2016 (pp. 954-957) by Derek C. Maus. Derek Maus, like Leland Cheuk, compares the character of the protagonist of *The Sellout* to Kaufman of *The White Boy Shuffle*. Derek C. Maus argues that in the span of twenty years "Beatty has consistently created characters and scenarios that steamroll the safe (uncritical) limits within which ostensibly post-racial America has confined its "national conversation about race"" (p. 955). "Home and Dwelling: Re-Examining Race and Identity Through Octavia Butler's *Kindred* and Paul Beatty's *The Sellout*" by Scott Astrada (2017) examines the proposition of how one lives. The objective of the study is not a search for any theoretical answer to the question, but the exploration of how this proposition is constructed. Heidegger's theorization of being as dwelling and Michel Foucault's insight of history inform the theoretical framework of the essay. "Conceptualizing Identity Culture through Racial discrimination Portrayed in Paul Beatty's *The Sellout*" by Anchu Rani Joseph (2017) reviews the novel. The author contends that we are living in a world where we are being encountered with a sort of Darwinian Theory of the fittest. Those who sang songs of liberty now sleep in the racist culture and many proclamations and declarations are merely words with no power. Paul Beatty exposes this sort of contradictions in the American society. "Racial Consciousness and Racial Solidarity in *The Sellout*" by Jonathan Donabo (2017) is deficient in exploration of universal brotherhood or new-humanism which is hinted out by Beatty in the last chapters of *The Sellout*. Donabo argues that the narrator is trying to materialize racial consciousness and racial solidarity, and he sees *The Sellout* as a wild critique on racial discrimination in contemporary society. "The *Sellout* by Paul Beatty: "Unmitigated Blackness" in Obama's America" by John E. Davies (2018) examines echoes of *Invisible Man* by Ralph Ellison's and Beatty's earlier work *The White Boy Shuffle* in this novel. The author argues that Beatty's novel exposes a bitter reality that despite the fact that Americans have elected their first black president and now they claim to be living in "post-racial" age, the spectral reproduction and the commodification of blackness still persist. "Super Deluxe Whiteness: Privilege Critique in Paul Beatty's *The Sellout*" was published by Steven Delmagori in *Symploke's* Volume 26, Numbers 1-2, in 2018, (pp. 417-425). In this article, Steven Delmagori cites Dean's (2016) review in *The Guardian* who accolades the novel for its wrestling with the dialectic of racism in neoliberal environment. The narrator of *The Sellout* "whisper[s] 'racism' in a post-racial word" (Beatty, 2015, p. 262). Delmagori (2018) contends that Paul Beatty flaunts the idea of "post-racial" anything through these words. "Demolishing Stereotypes in Paul Beatty's Novel *The Sellout* (2015)" by Ridho Yosfika, Desvalini Anwar and Fauzia Rozani Syafei, published in *JELL*, Vol. 7, No. 2, in June 2018 (pp. 304-12), situates the novel's character, plot and situation in the context of postcolonial discourse theorized by Edward Said in *Orientalism* (1979). The writers of the essay contend that the narrator of the novel demolishes negative stereotypes carved by American racism. "Dickens Disappeared: Black Los Angeles and the Borderlands of Racial Memory" by Emily Lutenski, published in *American Studies' Volume 58*, Number 3, in 2019, (pp. 15-35) creates a historical account of the various events and factors which led to the publication of the novel, *The Sellout*, and emergence of other cultural manifestations in music and theater by black Angelenos. Lutenski (2019) argues that Beatty's novel, *The Sellout* "offers—and rejects—two prevalent renditions of race." The novel "interrogates and discards a cohesive, essentialist, and apparitional notion of black community. "White Supremacy and Socio-

Political Issues: An Analysis of Paul Beatty's *The Sellout*" by Dr. Gowher Ahmad Naik & Kaneez Fatima published in *Our Heritage's* Vol-67, Issue. 4, (pp. 95-99) in 2019. This research paper explores three characters of the novel and their psychic mayhem when they face racial discrimination. These three characters are; the narrator of the novel, his father and Hominy Jenkins. *Defining Racism for a White Liberal Audience: Americanah and The Sellout* by Mark Beeuwkes (2019) investigates Paul Beatty's *The Sellout* and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* in the context of racism in American society. The objective of Mark Beeuwkes' study is to sensitize white liberal readers of the novel to recognize institutional racism in post-racial America. Review of these works shows that segregation in *The Sellout* has not been explored from Fanonian perspective.

### **Research Methodology**

The nature of this study is qualitative and analytical, and the technique used for data analysis is textual analysis. Broader framework of the study is postcolonialism. Within postcolonialism, Frantz Fanon's exploration of race, in the context of American anti-black racism, is applied to the study. Through textual analysis of the first part of *The Sellout*, negro myth, postulated by Fanon in *The Black Skin, White Masks* and *The Wretched of the Earth*, is explored.

### **Data Analysis and Discussion**

In this part, the text of *The Sellout* is analyzed in the light of Fanonian theory of black experience to explore segregation by Paul Beatty in *The Sellout*. *The Sellout* is a searing satire on racism in the United States. The novel is narrated by an unnamed narrator. The first name of the narrator is never given out in the novel. The narrator is called "Me" in the course of the narrative from the case filed in the Supreme Court of the United States, "Me vs the United States of America". He is also called "Bonbon" by Marpessa Delissa Dawson who is the ex-girlfriend of the narrator. Likewise, he is called "Sellout" by Foy Cheshire. Foy Cheshire is his father's friend and, after the death of his father, Foy assumes the leadership of the black community in Dickens. Dickens is a rural black community in Los Angeles. The narrator unfolds the events from his retrospection while sitting in the court room.

The first part of the novel, Prologue, focuses on the narrator's impressions in the court room at the present. Fanonian overtones are apparent in the very start of the novel. The narrator starts his narrative in the court room of the Supreme Court of the United States. He starts his narrative by asserting;

This may be hard to believe, coming from a black man, but I've never stolen anything. Never cheated on my taxes or at cards. Never snuck into the movies or failed to give back the extra change to a drugstore cashier indifferent to the ways of mercantilism and minimum-wage expectation. I've never burgled a house. ... But here I am, in the cavernous chambers of the Supreme Courts of the United States of America ... my hands cuffed and crossed behind my back, my right to remain silent long since waived and said goodbye to as I sit in a thickly padded chair that, much like this country, isn't quite as comfortable as it looks. (Beatty, 2015, p. 3)

There are three important points which can be inferred, in the light of Fanon's insight, from this opening paragraph of the novel. First, a black person is fixated. He is viewed as an epitome of evil. It is supposed that a black person is a missing link in the evolution of human race. All the negative attributes are ascribed to him or her. A black person is regarded habitual killer, savage killer, senseless killer and robber. In this way, criminality is associated with a black person. But these are assumptions about blacks by whites. There is no

ontological reality in saying that a black person is habitual criminal. The negative assertion of the protagonist is challenging the dominant discourse of whites about blacks in America.

The second point to be deduced from the opening paragraph of the novel is that a black person is robbed of the opportunity to be invisible. Here is a case which is opposite to Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*. The difference is explored by John E. Davies (2018) in "The Sellout by Paul Beatty: "Unmitigated Blackness" in Obama's America. The protagonist of Ellison's novel faces the tragedy of being invisible in a society of visible racism. The protagonist of Beatty's novel faces the tragedy of highly conspicuous black individuals, i.e., Barack Obama, in a society infested with invisible racism. The dominant white discourse claims that racism is the thing of the past. Argument for this claim is that they allowed a black person to a high echelon of political administration. But the lived experience of a black proves that it is another clandestine maneuvering of racism. The narrator's reaction against this contraption by being invisible, i.e., silent, is denied to him.

Thirdly, the narrator criticizes the notion that America is a "post-racial" country. There is a contradiction between appearance and reality. The narrator presents an analogy between the chair he sits in and the United States. They are looking comfortable but there is a lot of discomfort beneath the surface. This last point is further elaborated by the narrator in the narration that the letter he receives is not signed by any particular person. Instead, it ends with these words, "Sincerely yours, ... The people of the United States of American" (p. 4). This shows systematic and institutional racism.

The narrator accounts his impressions when he was coming to the Supreme Court. He says that Washington D.C. looked like ancient Rome "if the streets of ancient Rome were lined with homeless black people". He looks at Lincoln Memorial with awe and wonders if Abraham Lincoln were alive what he would say of the country he saved in 1860. He would see it as "a dysfunctional plutocracy" (p. 4). This shows narrator's criticism of the present-day America. During his narration, the narrator remembers an event at a zoo where he happened to listen a conversation between a woman and a man. The woman expressed wonder when she saw a gorilla. She termed it "presidential". The man reminded her that "'presidential" silver-back's name coincidentally was Baraka". The woman burst with laughter. Seeing the narrator, the woman stopped laughing and apologized "for having spoken her mind and my having been born". She told the narrator, "Some of my best friends are monkeys". These words came from the mouth of that woman accidentally. The narrator laughs but he thinks that "This whole city's a Freudian slip of the tongue" (p. 5). This episode needs to be analyzed in detail. Fanon (1952/2008) speaks of this stalemate. The impasse is that a black person is regarded a missing link in the evolution process. Fanon says, "I cast an objective gaze over myself, discovered my blackness, my ethnic features; deafened by cannibalism, backwardness, fetishism, racial stigmas, slave traders, and above all, yes, above all, the grinning Y a bon Banania" (p. 92, emphasis in original). Y a bon Banania (meaning: It's good Banania) refers to a smiling apelike Senegalese infantry man, speaking French pidgin during World War I. The grinning Senegalese soldier's cartoon was later used for advertising campaign of Banania, a chocolate drink made from banana flour, honey, sugar, cereals and cocoa. However, this cartoon was criticized as racist and colonial. Fanon points out the whole mentality behind this cartoon. A black man is regarded ape-like. Bonbon, the narrator of Beatty's novel, also refers to the unconscious of the whites. They compare a gorilla to their black president, Barak Obama. Additionally, the narrator speaks of a Manichean world which is like the world delineated by Frantz Fanon in *The Wretched of the Earth*. The narrator says, "Be it ancient Rome or modern-day American, you are either citizen

or slave. Lion or Jew. Guilty or innocent. Comfortable or uncomfortable” (Beatty, 2015, p. 6). Such a rigid compartmentalization is described by Fanon (1961/2004).

The court officer wants the narrator to sit up straight. But the narrator tilts himself back. He does so because he says that it was a minimum nonviolent resistance to the system (Beatty, 2015, p. 6). Fanon says that when an Algerian Muslim woman wears a veil it is a resistance to colonialism (*A Dying Colonialism*, 1965, pp. 61-63). In this way, these small gestures are symbolic of resistance by blacks. They do not conform to the discourse prescribed for them by whites. Next, he speaks of his physical appearance which echoes Fanon’s epidermal racial schema in *Black Skin White Masks* (p. 92) and associated with black skin the nature of criminality which Fanon recounts in *The Wretched of the Earth* (p. 222).

The narrator criticizes the ironic nature of the phrase “EQUAL JUSTICE UNDER LAW”, written in bold inside the Supreme Court building, vis-à-vis Dred Scott decision and Plessy v. Ferguson case. These landmark decisions by the Supreme Court of the United States denied black people their human worth rather blacks were relegated to the state of being property. Fanon speaks of slave/master dialectic of Hegel in a footnote in *Black Skin, White Masks* (p. 195). In this dialectic, what the master wants of a black slave is not recognition but work. In this regard the African Americans are considered as property due to the legacy of slavery. Commodification of blacks are due to the fact, as argued earlier, that a black person is considered less than human. The narrator says, “I’m the Scopes monkey, the missing link in the evolution of African-American jurisprudence come to life” (Beatty, 2015, p. 7). From the other side, a black person does not find recognition from the white master. Therefore, he turns towards his own race. Narrator of the novel says, “[E]very black person thinks they’re better than every other black person” (p. 12). This denial of humanity reminds the narrator an earlier event in the court in the same case. He is charged, in his own words, of “desecration of the Homeland” and “conspiracy to upset the apple cart just when things were going so well”. He is asked whether he pleads “guilty” or “innocent”. He said, “Your Honor, I plead human” (p. 15, emphasis added). This event further sheds light on the narrator’s resistance to be defined by any absolute value prescribed by the dominant white discourse. The dominant discourse in this case is the law defined and promulgated by the white. In law, a person is either guilty or innocent. The narrator is dissatisfied to be either guilty or innocent. Therefore, he pleads to be human.

Fanon’s concept of guilt in black people and his concept of violence find its place in Bonbon’s narration. “I understand now that the only time black people don’t feel guilty is when we’ve actually done something wrong, because that relieves us of the cognitive dissonance of being black and innocent, and in a way the prospect of going to jail becomes a relief” (Beatty, 2015, p. 18). Fanon (1952/2008) says that guilt is impossible in the blacks. Instead, he feels a morbid sensation. For a normal person, *Erlebnis* (traumatic experience or pathogenic memories) is suppressed in the unconscious. Its *Ersatz* (surrogate) comes back to the consciousness which makes a subject neurotic. However, a black person does not find time to “unconsciousnessize” the *Erlebnis*. Fanon says, “[a black person] lives his drama. There is in him none of the affective amnesia characteristics of the typical neurotic” (p. 129). It can be argued that the guilt the narrator is speaking of is not the psychoanalytic guilt of the typical neurotic but a morbid feeling of the contradictory nature of the society. A black person cannot account for such a feeling. But when he does something wrong and he feels truly guilty of some concrete wrongdoing, he is relieved of the morbid feeling that he is presumed guilty in spite of being innocent. This can also be explained from the perspective of Fanonian notion of violence in *The Wretched of the Earth*. A black person is presumed guilty

but he or she does not accept his or her guilt. A black person “is dominated but not domesticated” (p. 16). A black person is constantly waiting for some opportunity to retaliate. Such a violence gives some relief although it is a temporary relief. The narrator says that a black person finds another temporary relief in marrying a white person (Beatty, 2015, p. 18). This again speaks of Fanon’s analysis of Mayotte’s lactification and Veneuse’s inferiority complex in *Black Skin, White Masks* (pp. 29, 49). The narrator criticizes the notion that blacks have been granted their rights in America. He says, “the only tangible benefit to come out of the civil rights movement is that black people aren’t as afraid of dogs as they used to be” (Beatty, 2015, p. 19). He criticizes all those television hosts and common public who believe in the system and constitution of the United States of America and sing the songs of post-raciality despite the fact that they “can see the gap between reality and rhetoric” (Beatty, 2015, p. 22). What he wants the public to do, and Beatty to convey his readers, is to sensitize them regarding contradiction in words and deeds.

The first part of the novel, it can be argued, elucidates two points: the negro myth is concocted, having no natural foundation, and post-racial America is an illusion. First paragraph of the novel is subversive version of the negro myth. The narrator negates all the traits stereotypically attributed to a black person. Similarly, the narrator hints out that it is a farce to think of America as “post-racial”. Reminding America of the past wrongs and the present-day injustices, he ironically asks “when did a little slavery and segregation ever hurt anybody, and if so, so ... be it” (Beatty, 2015, p. 23). Actually, it does hurt. It hurts today and it hurt a long time ago. In the reminder of the novel the narrator accounts his past experiences and events which shaped him to come to this situation.

### **Conclusion**

Analysis of part first of *The Sellout* shows that Beatty portrays segregation unlike postmodernist. He asserts the selfhood of the subject. He makes use of postmodern techniques, but, thematically, the novel is not an ontological flicker. Bonbon is not altogether swept by the winds of racial profiling. He resists even the contradiction of the US constitution. For this purpose, Beatty makes use of satire to criticize American racial setup in his novel. As mentioned by Fanon and evident from the analysis of the novel, the root cause of the racial problem in America is two-pronged: economic disparity among the races which is intertwined with the psychological make up of blacks and whites. Whites are alienated due to their superiority complex while black are alienated due to their inferiority complex. Blacks have internalized the inferiority complex. On the other hand, whites do not want to part with their age long privileges they have enjoyed due to their Caucasian lineage. In this scenario, African-American novelists choose segregation in the so-called post-racial America to highlight the contradictions of the system. Challenging the white dominant discourse, black writers give the impression that segregation in black history is not a shame for blacks. Rather, it is a shame for white perpetrators who relegated humans to the status of animals and property. A viable solution to the problem is to move forward from the inhuman practices of the past.

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