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MISRECOGNITION AND STRUGGLE FOR IDENTITY OF BLACKS: A STUDY OF
PAUL BEATTY'S THE WHITE BOY SHUFFLE AND THE SELLOUT

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Abstract

Paul Beatty, a Booker Prize-winning novelist, has delineated the problems and issues of Afro-Americans in his novels. Beatty is the first American author who has won the Booker Prize in 2016 for The Sellout. The central aspect of Paul Beatty's novels is to explore how being black affects the personality of Afro-Americans. He has discussed how whites belittle, subjugate, discriminate, and demoralize blacks in American society. Beatty's characters struggle for their identity and home in America. These characters suffer from loss of identity, demonization, alienation, and racism. As a result, they feel void and identity crisis in their lives. In The White Boy Shuffle, Gunnar Kaufman confronts adjustment and settlement problems in his new cultural environment. He feels estranged and search for identity among whites in Santa Monica and later among blacks in West Los Angeles. Due to this, he has felt traumatized and dehumanized in American society. In The Sellout, the characters are oppressed and misrecognized. They are struggling on the basis of their race and ethnicity. Moreover, a community helps a person shape himself based on shared ideas, beliefs, values, and culture. A person's identity is recognized from his roots and cultural values. The narrator 'Me' in the novel struggles for identity and justice when Dickens, a city in the ghetto community, is removed from the map. To bring Dickens back on the map, the narrator revives slavery and segregation. The focus of the research paper is to expose deprivation of social status, misrecognition, discrimination, dehumanization,

demonization and struggle for identity of characters in Paul Beatty's novels, especially The White Boy Shuffle and The Sellout.

Keywords: *Identity, slavery, racism, demonization and white community*

Introduction

Paul Beatty, an Afro-American novelist, has highlighted the discrimination and marginalization of blacks in America. Though slavery is physically over from the world, despite this, blacks suffer from institutionalized racism and social segregation in American society. Through his novels, the author has discussed how these people are treated even today on American soil.

Identity is a vital part of a person's development. A person has to go through many challenges to get identity and realization. They have to balance being black on the one hand and an American; on the other hand. African-Americans have to suffer from loss of identity and misrecognition in the USA. Recognition is the essence of one's life for survival in the multicultural world, so Taylor writes that identity means who we are, where we're coming from. African-American literature is full of African encounter with the West and the antagonism between the Whites and the Blacks. These challenges have been talked about in Beatty's novels.

The White Boy Shuffle is Paul Beatty's first novel. It is a memoir of Gunnar Kaufman, who lives in Santa Monica with his mother and two sisters. Ralf Kaufman, a sketch artist in the Los Angeles Police Department, is Gunnar's father. The LAPD is sometimes accused of being responsible for racism. His parents are divorced. He mentions the life history of his ancestors and reveals that they would not have the power to stand up against their oppressors and would lack the imagination. Gunnar does not want to be like others in his family. Beatty, in the prologue, has delineated that African-Americans or blacks have done everything in the quest for identity and equality. They try to assimilate the white culture but never get success. Gunnar thinks, "our suicide will be the ultimate sit-in" (2), and he demands suicide from blacks to gain freedom from the clutches of whites.

In Santa Monica, Gunnar lives among white children and tries to adopt their culture, but he suffers from humility due to his race. He is identified among whites as a 'funny cool black guy.' Gunnar suffers from an identity crisis when he describes himself as White Gunnar and Black Gunnar after a discussion about race in the school. "White Gunnar was a broken stringed kite leaning into the sea breeze.... Black was an unwanted dog abandoned in the forest" (43). Beatty sets up while defining different Gunnars, nature of dual identity. The White Gunnar is "a broken stringed kite leaning into sea breeze" while being black is the 'unwanted dog.' This shows the difference in the area where Gunnar lives and he has to change to adapt to the environment.

This novel is a bildungsroman in which Gunnar tells his life story. According to *The Guardian*, the novel is "a relentlessly funny debut novel about coming of age of 'street stupid' Gunnar Kaufman, who is forced to wise up when he moves with his mother from suburban Santa Monica to 'the hood'" (1). Gunnar's mother notices that the children forgot their culture when Gunnar and his sister denied attending a summer camp, a camp for black children. She realizes that her children hate their black heritage. So, she decided to save the heritage and move to Los Angeles with her children. Gunnar Kaufman shifts to the West Los Angeles ghetto called Hillside with his family. His mother asks him to bring something for breakfast. Gunnar dares to go outside and asks someone for directions to a store but receives comments on his speech and clothes. Gunnar's reaction to his experience is,

I walked to the store, not believing that some guy who ironed the sleeves on his T-shirt and belted his pants somewhere near his testicles had the nerve to insult me over how I dressed. I

returned to the house, dropped the bag of groceries on the table and shouted, "Ma you done fucked up and moved to the hood. (51)

In these lines, Beatty describes that Gunnar is bewildered by the comment of a boy from the neighborhood and again suffers from an identity crisis due to his moving to Hillside. Gunnar further feels misrecognized and suffers from identity issues when his scrimmage coach divides the team as per their look into two squads during practice.

Usually, he divided us using some arbitrary criterion. White sneakers vs. black sneakers, kids who'd never been to the dentist vs. those who had. That day it was dark and the bottom one is cranberry red, so I was bit confused and asked Coach which team I should play for. Coach Shimimoto said that it was a blessing to be able to play for both sides and made me substitute for whoever was tired. It was strange playing for both teams, scoring for one squad, then reversing my jersey and doing the same thing with the other. (144)

In these lines, Gunnar's coach divides the team using different criteria, but now he divides based on their black vs. red lips. Gunnar's upper lip is dark, and his bottom lip is cranberry red. It creates a problem for Gunnar and he asks his coach which team he will play for. Beatty here explores the identity crisis in Gunnar's life.

Paul Beatty's fourth novel, *The Sellout*, attacks race and racism; it was believed that America is a post-racial country. At the time of its publication, Barack Obama, a black person, was the President of America, and critics would say that it was a real example of post-racial America. At the beginning of the story, the narrator is in the Supreme Court because he is accused of slaveholding and segregation. The narrator is unnamed; sometimes, 'Me' is used for him. It also indicates that he has no identity. It can be understood as an exercise of the renaming of slaves. During slavery, slaves were not permitted to use their African names. They were given the surnames of their owners, and their purpose was to wipe out the identity of the slaves.

'Me' suffers from an identity crisis and feels misrecognized in the novel. He is taught by his father to answer two basic questions "Who am I? And how may I become myself" (39). These questions asked by the narrator's father talk about a person's identity and who that person intends to become. The narrator can answer these questions when he encounters them. In his childhood, he loses his father and home, after the deletion of 'Dickens' from the map; the narrator becomes identity-less. His quest for identity begins at the individual level, but in the end, it broadens to the community. Community is an integral part of identity. It tells where one comes from and the roots of a person's identity and place. In the novel, Dickens is withdrawn from the map to promote the property value in the area.

After 'Dickens' removal Hominy Jenkins, a slave in the novel, is so frustrated that he tries to commit suicide. Hominy here represents the feeling of African-American's disappointment over how they live in the USA. They prefer death to life. Eventually, Hominy is saved by the narrator, and Hominy expresses his wish to become a slave of the narrator. Hominy tells the narrator,

Sometimes we just have to accept who we are and we have to act accordingly. I'm a slave. That is who I am. It's the role I was born to play. A slave who just also happens to be an actor. (77)

These lines express African-Americans' condition of how they choose their freedom to be a slave when they feel helpless in the USA. The narrator tries to free Hominy many times, but it is of no effect. The narrator decides to bring Dickens back on the map. He buys a line making machine and paint: and starts making boundaries around the city. He supposes segregating the city is the way to reinstitute the city. The other citizens of the city also helped the narrator. "Sometimes, after retiring for the day, I'd return the next morning, only to find that someone else had taken up where I'd left off. Extended my line with a line of their own, often in a different color" (107). The problem of recognition and identity is not the problem of 'Me'; it

is the problem of the entire citizen of Dickens. Their fight for their community is further described in the poster prepared by Mendez, an officer, who starts: "MISSING: HOMETOWN. Have you seen my city? Description: Mostly Black and Brown" (108). The poster reveals the pathetic condition of African Americans how they grapple for their homes and identity.

Finally, the narrator achieves his goal of bringing Dickens back on the map. He supposes that he has done his best to bring Dickens back, but racism still exists in America. The narrator attends a comedy night where a white couple is in attendance. A black comedian kicks out the white couple and says, "Get out. This is our thing" (289). The narrator is so much confused and wants to ask the simple question "What exactly is our thing?" (289). This question reflects his uncertainty and jealousy of those who have more certainty. The narrator is confused and ambivalent after getting home and racial identity, what it means to be black. Beatty ends the novel with even more lost question about certainty.

Conclusion

To sum up, Beatty shows loss of identity, race, racism and slavery in his novels. Characters in Beatty's novels remain in a dilemma throughout their lives. Gunnar Kaufman in *The White Boy Shuffle* seems to be a man of dual identity. In the beginning, he tries to assimilate with the white culture and later on, he shifts to Hillside and tries to assimilate his culture. Assimilation always leads to a loss of identity. He has to face many challenges due to his race. Gunnar spends much of his time discovering himself and learning how he can fit within his racial group. 'Me', the narrator, in *The Sellout*, also suffers from the same misrecognition and identity problems. Throughout the story, he tries to bring back his home and identity. Beatty portrays how race, identity, class and color affect the lives of Afro-Americans. Afro-Americans are deeply wounded by the tortures, oppression, racism, defaming, barbarity, and demeaning by white people.

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