

Passing Before ‘Passing’: The Ambivalent Identity of the Narrator in Johnson’s *The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man*

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Abstract

James Weldon Johnson’s *The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man* is considered by many as an early seminal censure and commentary on the contested racial issue of African American in the United States of America. This paper argues that the ‘invisible’ protagonist of the Novel has passed for white as early as his childhood years. The narrator relinquishes his black identity for the conveniences and supremacy that the white identity entails. This paper brings to question the credibility of narrative in the novel; also, it proves that the narrator contradicts himself. The invisible narrator appears not to have a firm stance regarding the atrocities suffered by his own people—African Americans. People of color in the United States were caught between two cultures, identities, and lives. The un-named narrator has taken the least troubled road. He announces his passing for white at the end of the novel. This study contends that he has done so long time ago before he literally announces his passing.

Keywords: Passing, white supremacy, invisible, color-blind, ambivalent identity, African Americans, western metaphysics

The narrator in Johnson’s *The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man* appears to unconsciously, or consciously, have passed for white before he declared it at the end of the novel. His ambivalent character can be detected through Johnson’s seminal novel that tackles the controversial racial nuances in the American society. The ambiguity of his character may have been a product of his being raised as a white child and to have an indirect influence of the dominant white culture. The hazy identity of the narrator that permeates throughout the narrative could be interpreted as a proof of the narrator’s frail or even lack of confidence in his identity as a man of color.

The choices he made in his life authenticated his inability to settle for a definite side of culture—white or African American—while negotiating his identity.

Right from the beginning of the narrative, we are faced with a reluctant protagonist who seems to justify his acts rather than endorses them: “... I suffer a vague feeling of dissatisfaction, of regret, of almost remorse, from which I am seeking relief ...” (Johnson, 1). The unclear position of the narrator poses the issue of the credibility of his narratives. Consequently, this opens the door for more inquiry into his motives and justifications. Robert Fleming explains the fact that we have credible grounds to question the reliability of the narrator:

The narrator’s first paragraph gives the reader the impression of a self-assured man with a rather objective, analytical approach to what promises to be searching the honest account of his life. However, the second and last paragraphs alert the reader to the fact that the narrator-protagonist is in reality disturbed, torn by doubts; therefore, his statements should be examined carefully to determine the psychological facts concealed by superficial meanings. (31)

Our whole reading of the text hinges upon how credible the unnamed narrator is. Throughout the narrative permeate a host of inconsistencies in attitudes and discrepancies in motives that this paper aims to point out. Due to all this coupled with identity crisis, the narrator suffers calls for a new reading of *The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man*. The new reading aims to divulge the vulnerability of the narrator’s character; notwithstanding, it is justifiable, or not. The matter here is to deconstruct the psychological, schizophrenic, and split character of Johnson’s narrator. Consequently, he poses himself as a man passing. In the crux of the matter, he has never been a solid black character as this paper tries to show.

The traumatized black consciousness is channeled into a tight spot where people of color find themselves between the hammer and the anvil. Here, we are to question the mechanisms by which white supremacy asserts itself as the mainstream culture. This is against which all things should be measured and looked at. White privilege and prerogatives were the main tools by which whiteness desirability was promoted. African Americans were denied basic rights granted by the constitution due to their biological pigmentation. The normativity is yet another way by which whiteness assumed invisibility. Whiteness has always been thought of as the rule. Also, other social structures and categorizations were exception. White scholars and philosophers enhance this invisibility by claiming that they are color blind when dealing with the issue of race. Suffice it to say that the whole Western colonial discourse was based on a host of texts, self-appointed

generalizations and stereotype, studies, prejudices, and statements deeming all non-whites as the Other.

People of color were to be considered as colonized subjects because of the oppression they underwent by the same Eurocentric mentality that colonized huge parts of Africa, Asia, and South America. People of color were used and abused for the welfare of the white race. So does the peoples of the colonies and their raw materials and fortunes that built what is dubbed as the civilized Europe, or the West that was built upon the pains and traumas of non-whites. “In *The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man*,” both the narrator (by his millionaire patron) and his mother (by her aristocratic lover) were treated as pawns to relieve the ennui or further the designs of the white world ...,” asserts Houston Baker. Then we see that the narrator’s ambivalent identity is like the hybrid identity of the colonized people who are torn between two worlds, theirs and the world of their colonizers. This bifurcation in identity and psychology is grave enough to compel people to choose one identity over another—to escape the bitter reality. However, this flight only lands them in illusionary realm where they live in pain and trauma for the white world and its allure will never wipe out their genuine identity.

The narrator was raised white till one day he was faced with the reality of his being a descendant of a white father and a colored mother. Early in his childhood, it was difficult for him to negotiate the meaning of being colored. However, as he grew up, he has mainly behaved as white. Valerie Smith explains his reaction when the narrator was told that he is not white. He went home to look at himself in the mirror, but he fails to detect blackness. However, she asserts, “This failure to see his color in the mirror symbolizes his characteristic inability to accept his racial identity.” Valerie adds, “The young boy’s subsequent response to this discovery [that he is not white] further reveals his ambivalence and discomfort” (96). This identity instability foreshadows the narrator’s ultimate assimilation into the white dominant culture early in the text. Therefore, the mainstream culture forms a web of complex concepts of privilege, superiority, and normativity. This fabric of values work latently so that it has become the touchstone against which everything else is measured, approached, and compared. The underlying operation of the white culture creates unconscious identification of colored people with it subtle enough not to be transparently noticed. For some colored people, this unconscious identification intensifies to the degree that creates a split of personality between the non-white identity and the white one. People of color in America find themselves trapped between the anvil and the rock. On one hand, they feel proud of their culture, heritage, and race, while on the other hand, they are drawn into the allure and

potentials of whiteness. This was explained by Rottenberg in her article “Passing: race, identification, and desire”:

...attributes associated with whiteness are always privileged. While such a regime would not necessarily discourage marginal black-identified subjects from striving to embody blackness, the splitting of identification and desire-to-be serves as one of the most efficacious mechanisms of control. This delinking ensures that the desirability of whiteness is reinforced, while black-identified subjects are simultaneously prevented from accessing many of the privileges that “true” whiteness grants. (446)

Contemplating the possibilities and accessibilities passing provide, many light colored African-Americans venture into the other side. The very process of passing carries within itself the danger of being caught, adding up to the torment that those people endured for prolonged periods. Also, it may last for their entire lives. Those who decide to pass usually calculate the gains and losses of such an act prior to their passing. The white supremacy worked in two parallel ways; it manifests the tantalizing privileges of white people, and at the same time, it increases the torture of black people by a prevalent discourse of alienation and depravity. Therefore, this creates a deep wedge between people of the same country. The psychological impact of such practices is beyond imagination. The torment is both psychological and physical as in the heinous crimes of lynching and whipping which being bodily, correlate and increase the already psychological torture.

Both Johnson and his narrator were seeking financial rewards from their “passing.” Consequently, Johnson passed in two ways; first, his text passed as an autobiography while it is in fact narrative [fiction], and second, his work was first published anonymously apparently for financial security. This is because his work would not sell well at the advent of the twentieth century if it were known to be written by an author of color. Therefore, his text passed as a genre and he veiled his identity as an author of the passing text. The narrator passed by adopting the white gaze of the dominant for financial reasons. Thus, he clearly declares at the very end of the book. Heather Russell Andrade contends that “Johnson's narrative representations must be re-examined precisely because his narrator opts for personal and financial gratification rather than the existential rewards of racial responsibility and the public avowal of black self-determination” (260). Therefore, never had the narrator been seen to be in dire need for financial security. He is merely justifying his fragility and determination by veiling his motives in a way they seem warranted crossing over to the other side of identity.

The narrator tries to resolve the case of his hybrid or dual identity by assuming the white identity. His resort to the oneness is a solution that carries its own destruction because he will live in fear of being discovered and destroyed all his life. This alleged oneness is a mere mask to the schizophrenic identity he embodies. Therefore, we do find some justification for people of color passing to white. Nevertheless, at the same time, he is a man of talent that could contribute to the welfare of his own people in their long struggle for freedom and equality. It should be stressed that the whole issue of passing is due to social, economic, and individual reasons. In his book, *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon strongly contends that the problem of and the solution to the race issue lie in the social structures:

... the black man should no longer be confronted by the dilemma, turn white or disappear; but he should be able to take cognizance of the possibility of existence. In still another word, if society makes life difficult for him because of his color; if in his dreams, I establish the expression of an unconscious desire to change color, my objective, once his motivations have been brought into consciousness, will be to put him in a position to choose action (passivity) with respect to the real source of the conflict—that is, toward the social structures. (100)

The social structure of the American society is based on the white supremacy and black inferiority leaving the people of color victims to this distorted structure. My argument is that the narrator is by no means an ordinary black person; he is fully aware that race is socially constructed and so his deeds should conform with such understanding. Our reading of the narrator should be changed based on the previous statement. He is a man of talent and experience that might cataclysmically enable him to contribute to the advancement of the black people. Strangely enough, he acted opposite to what he breached. Now, one must not rule out other readings, but I assume that this new reading lends itself to the contradictory nature of the narrator's character.

W. E. Burghardt Du Bois in 1903 was fully aware of the split and mixed feelings of people of color. He finds it both painful and enriching. Thus, he explains the duality of the consciousness that the black people are destined to have. He asserts that the unenviable strangeness of consciousness people of color find themselves to be endowed.

It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his 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. (3)*

Du Bois exquisitely as well as painfully, explains what it means to live as a colored person in the United States of America. The warring world that a black person must live in simultaneously means constant torment unless people of color re-conciliate with their situation and find a way to go about their lives. No matter how difficult this might be, there is always a way to harness the “Double Consciousness” to enrich one’s heritage and strengthen identity which the narrator in *The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man* not only failed to achieve, but also did not meditate seriously enough in bringing about.

The latent as well as the manifest ways whiteness impose in asserting its supremacy makes it hard, if not farfetched, to separate whiteness from Americanness. Therefore, the two concepts have become inseparable and interchangeable. It is hard to assimilate into the American society unless you let loose your cultural values, traditions, and sometimes your own color. The matter is yet intricate for African-American people as the pigment of their skin always flamboyantly recognizes them. African-Americans were forced to question their whole sense of self in relation to the white society. Unlike white immigrants to the United States of America, whose assimilation into American society depends upon their embrace of Americanness and facilitated by the virtue of their white color, African-Americans are never practically incorporated to the texture of “white America”. They have always been dubbed differently. Notwithstanding, they are American born and are native citizens by constitution. This testifies to Du Bois concept of the hybridity of the African-American identity in this country.

The dilemma the un-named protagonist is faced with made him devise ways into dealing with his complex situation. The fact that he has a light color made it quite possible for him to take the easiest path and maneuver around the anxieties of life in a deeply segregated society at the time the story is set. Contrary to what he tells us, he did not use his musical talent to enhance the situation of his colored folks. He even used them to deeply indulge in the privilege the white people endowed upon him to entertain them in exchange for his livelihood. Justifiable enough, as it might seem, he claims the opposite; he claims that he decided to pass late after his terrible experience in the South since he felt ashamed of his color after watching the horrible lynching of a black man.

The narrator has adopted the white gaze since the reader first encountered him. The white gaze perpetuates the white stereotype about black people. They are viewed as lazy, uneducated, not clean, lascivious-even sexually beast behaving- and inferior to whites. When white people

circulate these stereotypical images, one can find a reason for that, though unwarranted. On the other hand, if adopted by an individual of the same group that is being the object of this severe stereotype, the harm that is being done is excruciating and undermining. Our reading of Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man* should deal with the deteriorating effect of the narrator's schizophrenic identity. This is because he is a man of talent that might have done something to his own people instead of wasting his talent endorsing the white people's gaze that deemed people of color. Therefore, it is not only inferior, but is also sub-humans. He meditates on the fact that people of great talent and potentials can do and really perform sizable services to their black fellow. Hence, "Frederick Douglass was enshrined in the place of honour" (46). The narrator's escapism and lack of enthusiasm makes us question the motives of Johnson behind the characterization of such a persona. Then the questions that begs answer is, if he thinks he is talented in Ragtime music, why is he not even bothered to try to enshrine his name like Douglas?

"What is worse, the anonymous narrator in the text proper, in aiming for a "detached" or "objective" stance on the "race question" - the position the social scientist conventionally pretends to - not only distances himself from the black America he depicts, but he frequently chooses to adopt the gaze of white society" (20), declares Donald Goellnicht in his 1996 article titled "Passing as Autobiography: James Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man*." The self-appointed defender of the right of people of color lives in contradiction within him. However, he professes the same color-blind strategies of Hegel and the troupe of Western metaphysics and philosophies. The Western Eurocentric white metaphysics and its proponents were the first to declare the inferiority of all non-whites. Then, how can we believe or identify with Johnson's narrator who flagrantly embraces the same attitude of the very white enslaving people of America. Subsequently, our reading of the text is to take other directions, not necessarily neglecting other readings of the text.

The narrator totally embraced the scrutinizing gaze of the dominant white culture.

He even lacks the sense of sympathy with his own race. "Only once in Paris did I have cause to blush for my American citizenship," he reflects upon the instant of meeting a young man from Luxemburg in Paris. Therefore, the man asked him: "Did they really burn a man alive in the United States?" I never knew what I stammered out to him as an answer. I should have felt relieved if I could even have said to him: "Well, only one." (Johnson, 136) He felt ashamed as a white American, not as a victimized black American. This is a clear-cut example of the duality of his personality. If he does not want to feel with his people, at least, he should have not

shown any sign of whiteness. He felt disgrace and shame regarding white savagery as a white man rather than explain the various injustice people of color experience in the United States. The young man was a great admirer of America and he owes explanations or clarifications from a man who will later give up a tour to Japan and Egypt for the sake of his black people as he claims.

The whole issue of Johnson's narrator should be scrutinized. In addition, there is a deep divergence between the ex-colored narrator's decreed ideals and his behavior, and between his claims of rescuing the black race and his steadfast allegiance to the white supremacy and normative values. This should prompt the reader as well as the critic to launch a strict critical campaign into the protagonist's and Johnson's real motives to come up with a new reading of the text. It seems that they both lack a clear vision of what their whole expedition is all about. What supports this theory is Johnson's un-naming of the narrator, his withholding of his authorial name at the beginning, and the vagueness of the book's genre which can be referred to as a novel, a social study, or an autobiography. This haziness triggers many questions as to the credibility of the narrative itself as well as to the moral responsibility of the narrator. It does not suffice just to presuppose that he is passing for economic and social reasons. However, we see him at the time of harangue based on the already destitute and tortured people of color.

The narrator has been suffering from the dual identity, a fragmented persona, and liminality in the American society the same way as millions of colored people who conceptualize whiteness as normal and "blackness" as abnormal. They, somehow, internalize the superiority of whiteness, or at least some aspects of it. Catherine Rottenberg in her article 'Passing: Race, Desire, and Identification', asserts that, "...race norms operate by compelling subjects to assume or identify with certain identity categories" (7). Nevertheless, people of color in white America are taught that whiteness equals to the American identity itself. Some of them in return must adopt the white identity to make their lives easy.

However; the narrator was never in a situation that compels him to adopt the white people's perspectives. He embraced the white gaze almost voluntary. This is how he reflects on black people's situation in the South; "I am in grave doubt as to whether the greater part of the friction in the South is caused by the whites having a natural antipathy to Negroes as a race, or an acquired antipathy to Negroes in certain relations to themselves" (Johnson, 80).

The white gaze is more transparent in the narrator's reaction of seeing a beautiful white woman in the company of a man of his supposed race. He learned that she pays for the black man's expensive jewelry and

clothes. His disgust and surprise was not out of jealousy as he expresses overt surprise that shows the prejudice and dismay of white people when confronting the fear of the black male sexuality. Thus, the un-named narrator remarks:

This woman was known at the “Club” as the rich widow. She -went by a very aristocratic sounding name, which corresponded to her appearance. I shall never forget how hard it was for me to get over my feelings of surprise, perhaps more than surprise, at seeing her with her black companion; somehow, I never exactly enjoyed the sight. (Johnson, 109)

He could not get passed his feeling as a white man seeing that the terrain of the white woman encroached upon by a man of color that has always been dubbed as a “beast” when it comes to sex. He assumed the white gaze in the very issue that whites most hated black males for at that time-that is sexual stereotypes of black men as “beasts”. White people regard white woman as a potential target for the boastful sexual behavior of the black man.

At the time when Johnson wrote this book, lynching was a social event for all white people to attend and participate in the lynching rituals. White people of all social classes usually attend lynching. The narrator, who claims that the lynching triggered his passing for white, attended the lynching as a white person, not as a black. He says that he securely attended the lynching as his light color allowed him to mingle with white people without being discovered as a man of color coming too close to watch the heinous ritual of lynching as he contends, “My nerves would not have stood it. Perhaps what bravery I exercised in going out was due to the fact that I felt sure my identity as a coloured man had *not* yet become *known* in the town.” Why then does he renounce his black identity when he has already passed? He continues his false sentimentality describing the victim, “Tow horsemen rode abreast; between them, half dragged, the *poor wretch* made his way through the dust” (Johnson, 185-186). He described in almost boring detailed manner the humiliation and degradation of the black man being lynched while it is expected of him as a black man, at least as he alleges, to describe with the same degree, if not more, the savagery of the white people.

He stunningly sided with the victimizer against the victim. This contradiction in Johnson’s narrative is a great defect that might undermine his whole treatise. He has participated as a spectator of the tyranny of the very identity that he voluntarily assumed. This, however, is the white supremacy that wreaked havoc among people of color whose only “fault” is God’s endowed pigmentation. Joseph Skerrett Jr. states, “... the narrator exhibits behavior typical of the psychological sellout he expresses

admiration for traits of the oppressor which are directly related to their mystery and his subjugation.” He also adds commenting on the discussion in the smoking car on the train during the narrator’s trip to Atlanta, “the narrator rendered himself impotent to the conversation. He has numbed himself to the pain of such discussions” (83). This impotency paints the narrator’s worldview throughout Johnson’s *The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man*.

Furthermore, the whole reading of the text is on the brink of being totally reversed. Johnson’s characterization of the ex-coloured man [narrator] lends itself to a new meaning of the book. A man who assumes a severer white gaze towards black people is in no position whatsoever to be read as an authority on the question of race in America. The narrator’s alleged color-blindness contradicts itself in a way that it is impossible to be objective enough for the reader to accept, or even to consider in the first place.

The narrator romanticizes white people and admires them to such a degree that a reader, who reads this paragraph without knowing that the narrator is a colored man, would with no slightest doubt assume him to be white. He reflects, “The Southern whites are in many respects a great people. Looked at from a certain point of view, they are picturesque. If one will put himself in a romantic frame of mind, he can admire their notions of chivalry and bravery and justice” (Johnson, 189). Subsequently, it is apparent now that the narrator in Johnson’s *The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man* is tinkering with the idea of being an “ex-coloured man,” while he never seems to be a coloured man in the first place, or at least experience the real torment that people of color underwent. He delves more profoundly in detaching himself from the people who thinks they are to “be treated worse than animals” (Johnson, 191). He justifies his detachments:

... I understood that it was not discouragement, or fear, or search for a larger field of action and opportunity that was driving me out of the Negro race. I knew that it was shame, unbearable shame. Shame at being identified with a people that could with impunity be treated worse than animals. For certainly the law would restrain and punish the malicious burning alive of animals. (191)

He claims that his passing was not motivated by seeking “opportunity”. Then why is he passing? The reader was told that it was “shame” that compelled the protagonist to pass. Then is shame a grave reason for him to forsake his identity and live in fear of being discovered all his life? The moral choices of the narrator lack substantial bases; however, the reading of the text should be rendered more than a story of a man who is driven to pass because he is endangered. Instead of finding thin justifications

shrouded with romantic sentimentalities for the narrator's deeds, the critic and the reader might find new venues for explaining the narrator's motives.

The protagonist of Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man* has passed long before declaring that, and he almost lived all his life as a white man scraping whatever he could get from the white privileges. This coupled with the severe white gaze he assumes, shakes the premises of his claim that he passed out of "shame". He plays on the sentimentalities of the readers to veil his weak personality and lack of stamina. Therefore, I think that he will live in shame all his life trying to mask himself and experiencing the dire fear of being exposed to the world outside his self-constructed world of counterfeit and deceit.

Forsaking his identity, or at least his biological one, renders him accomplice in the atrocities and injustices which black people suffered. This is based on the fact that this man [the narrator] is talented and could have used his name and work in the service of the liberation of people of color. The narrator instead chooses the least troubled course of action, which is escape. His escape is shameful, not belonging to the people who were burnt by whites who he affiliates with out of his own free will. In addition, he has decided to join the white troupe that looked upon his own race [colored] as inferior and unworthy of being treated as human beings.

The unnamed narrator suffers paralyzation of a genuine black consciousness. He has buried almost all signs of his colored origin intentionally, though his light skin biologically helped further to mask them. He had told the reader that he is forsaking his travels with the white millionaire to go back to the South to help support his race. During his trip to the South, he described an interesting dialogue among four white in the smoking car on the train. Rottenberg in her article "Race and ethnicity in *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* and *The Rise of David Levinsky: The Performative Difference*" contends that, "What the narrator does not reveal is that the smoking-compartment is, undoubtedly, for whites only ... The narrator is clearly "passing." As a "black" man, he would be denied access to such a space, a (purportedly) all-white and all-male hegemonic site. Therefore, it is only by virtue of his "light skin" and the assumption of whiteness that he is privy to the discussion at all" (309). He refrained from investing the moment using his light color "privilege" to support his people's cause even under the white mask as we know the danger he faces if he opted to speak as a black man. His silence divulges his frail commitment to the cause of people of color.

In his book, *James Weldon Johnson*, Robert Fleming points out the weakness of the narrator's stamina and his inability to face up to the cause of the advancement of the black race, especially if he had used his talent for that noble cause. He asserts:

At the end of the novel, the protagonist reflects that in a sense, he has been “a coward, a deserter” and he longs to be able to rejoin his mother’s race. While he observes the strides being made by Booker T. Washington and other pioneers of his race, he feels “small and selfish” realizing that he has chosen the easy way out and has settled for becoming ‘an ordinary successful white man who has made a little money’ when he might have been one of the architects of a new role for black Americans. (21)

Just like the narrator started his narration with indeterminacy and reluctance, he ended up with the same hazy and murky position regarding his identity. He laments his forsaking the cause of his race. The last pages of the novel attest to the fact that he lacks resolute and he is plagued with identity schizophrenia. Thomas Morgan points out that, “The final two pages of the text again re-emphasize the narrator's indeterminate position.” He also asserts that, “This duality situates what is arguably the narrator's most important misreading in the novel ... the narrator's assertion that “I have sold my birthright for a mess of pottage.” Taken literally, the narrator has lost his public connection to his racial heritage, in that he is not planning on undoing his current situation in the world as white” (236).

The narrator in Johnson’s *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* may have embraced the gaze of the dominant white culture all his life and his declaration of passing for white at the end of the book is ironic. This is based on the fact that he has already lived within the white culture. This study suggests that our reading of the texts may be given this new dimension of the narrator’s ironic passing. The narrator’s lamentation at the end of the book should not be used to sympathize with him, but rather to scourge his frailty and to censure his indeterminacy. In a way, he has betrayed his own people while he could have used his talent and knowledge to further his people’s just cause. Thus, he appears to be a deserter who opted for the least troubled way of life. However, he relinquished his race in favor for conveniences and luxury, “I would avail myself of every possible opportunity to make a white man’s success; and that, if it can be summed up in any one word known as 'money’” (Johnson, 193).

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