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Reconstruction of Black Identity in *All Aunt Hagar's Children*

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Abstract

All Aunt Hagar's Children, the latest work of Edward P. Jones, profoundly reflects the ordinary lives of the African Americans in Washington D.C. during the 20th century. It comprises 14 short stories which are the minified versions of long novels with a legion of characters. This paper attempts to examine the self-identity crises of these characters in the perspective of the identity theory of Erik H. Erikson and Anthony Giddens. All black characters in this novel collection encounter the predicament about their self-identity. They are discriminated and marginalized by the dominated white society in Washington in which they make great efforts to assimilate into only to find disappointment. They are faced with the racial identity crises when abandoning their traditional black values and refusing to track their own history. Furthermore, Black women are in the lower position with much more oppression, deprived of the rights from the patriarchy. Through detailed interpretation, this thesis reveals three essential resolutions to save these lost black from identity crisis.

Key words: *All Aunt Hagar's Children*; Self-identity crisis; African Americans; Gender

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1. INTRODUCTION

Edward Paul Jones, a novelist and short-story writer, plays an indispensable role in the contemporary African American literary circle in the 20th century. Living in great poverty, Jones's family has moved 18 times in 18 years, offering opportunities for him to be acquainted with every detail of the capital.

Jones just published three works including two short story collections and one novel, but his several works established his fame and unassailable position as a new milestone of contemporary African American literature. His latest work *All Aunt Hagar's Children* in 2006 was the winner of PEN/Malamud Award, received nationwide responses. It also comprises 14 fictions vividly representing the lives of African Americans from southern villages chasing American dream in Washington D.C.. All black men regarded Hagar as their mother. In this novel, we can see a great deal of African Americans who came from the South of American with great expectation because they were told that in Washington "people threw away their dishes after every meal because it was cheaper to buy new ones"(Jones, 2006, p.34) and people there "treat colored people like kings and queens"(Jones, 2006, p.379). Such luxurious lives with the respect from the white men attracted numerous blacks to the prosperous capital crowded with high buildings and traffic jams. However, African Americans soon found their helplessness and identity crises for that the city still marginalized the black and they could hardly find a well-paid work as they have expected. They were packed in the dilapidated neighborhood. Although some black men succeeded in career with efforts, they were gradually assimilated into the White Culture and forgot their roots. These people always found themselves plunging into the dilemma because the white men still discriminated them to some extent while they have already lose their own self-identity as African Americans. This paper focuses on the black characters of this fiction who encountered with

the identity uncertainty from the perspective of the theory of identity.

Identity studies have received increasing attention with the process of globalization and post-colonialism. It is always integrated with other theories as feminism, racism, post-colonialism and post-modernism. The word “identity” is often applied to refer to the qualities and attitudes that one person or one group possess to make them different from other people.

German psychoanalyst Erik H. Erikson gave a definition to identity that it is a sense of continuity, sameness and integrity in his personality development through time and space. He held the view that the formation of identity is bound by both ego and society. Ego is “an ‘inner institution’ evolved to safeguard that order within individuals on which all outer order depends.” (Erikson, 1963, p175) Erik firstly regarded ego as the basis of forming identity. Later, he noticed the impact from the society and put forward the term “self-identity”. According to Erikson, people progress through eight interrelated stages as they grow and change throughout life. Erikson believed that the formation of self-identity was a psychological process, during which the self and utter environment interact with each other.

Anthony Giddens, the British sociologist, revealed the relationship between modernity and self-identity. self-identity is a sense of continuity and sameness reflectively formed and sustained in the process of self-social interactions. He believes that it is ontological security which empower people to stick to their self-identity. Modern society is immersed with a multiplicity of choices, and accordingly, people are more likely to encounter with uncertainty. Although bringing people unprecedented comfort and convenience, the modern life also risks and endangers their sense of ontological security. People are forced to redefine their self-identifies and positions frequently with the rapidly changing society. “‘Living in the world’, where the world is that of late modernity, involves various distinctive tensions and difficulties on the level of self.”(Giddens, 1991, p188) Accordingly, people are confronted with self-identity crisis in modern society.

Both Erik and Anthony emphasis on the social influence towards the formation of self-identity. The Emancipation of Proclamation promulgated in 1862 permanently abolish slavery throughout the nation. However, African Americans were still in the marginal and invisible position after so many years. The characters in the short story collection exhibit the state of frustration for being far away from their southern hometown and cultural roots. Washington D.C. represents the clamorous and fast-paced modern life in which black men coming from the simple rural countryside are incapable to be accustomed to. The hostile circumstances towards them hampered their forming identity. Thus it is suitable to examine the identity crisis of black men in Washington in

All Aunt Hagar’s Children.

2. UNSETTLED IDENTITY OF THE AFRICAN AMERICA IN WASHINGTON

America is a melting pot of different nationalities, people with different color and cultural identity mixing with each other. After striving for equal rights for many years, the black improved their living standard and got more opportunities in every social fields such as education and career. However, the idea of discrimination, exclusion and disapproval of the black has been deeply entrenched in the society, especially in urban areas. Consequently, the black were still seized by the feeling of being excluded from the mainstream which was dominated by white-supremacy Anglo-Saxon centralism. Modernity forced more and more black men being far apart from their homelands and streamed into cities with the hope of a better life. The characters in *All Aunt Hagar’s Children* tended to have a suspicion about their self-identity when being away from the southern society they used to live in and being treated like nothing in the cool-blooded capital.

2.1 Racial Identity Crisis

The cruel slavery left psychological trauma to the whole black community. Their ancestors were treated like animals, being sold and tortured as white men pleased. They were forced to give up their distinctive culture, language and families, living as tools for the accumulation of wealth for their masters. They were constantly infused with the idea that the black were born to be inferior to the white. The white men in the centre of the society were the criterion of everything while blacks were deprived of the dignity of human being, occupying the periphery. Even in that miserable condition, African Americans formed their unique culture by inheriting traditional African civilization and absorbing new culture in America, which was conducive to helping them get through the physical and spiritual agony.

In modern life, African American gradually merged into the mainstream at the sacrifice of losing their unique cultural identities. The black culture has seemingly been diluted with the exclusion from dominated culture represented by the white. The younger generation of African American, attached with stronger capability of learning new things, were prone to emulate the values and lifestyles of the white when abandoning the cultural traditions of their own race.

Some black men achieved success in career and found their places in the middle class of America. Dr. Glyniss Holloway in the fiction of *Root Worker* was one of those who obtained material satisfaction. Her father worked as a respected chauffeur who enabled to secure her comfortable life and good education. She was well educated and trained as a doctor. She grew up in Washington, indulging

herself into the meaningless modern urban life. She never returned to the South, the root for all the American Black people. "Sometimes, balck people from the South need to go back home." (Jones, 2006, p177) Despite her unwillingness, Glynnis had to give up her vacation and came back the South for her ill mother who could not be cured by the modern medicine for decades of years. They determined to turn to root doctors for help by following the advice of the day companion of her mother. A root doctor is a person who inherits the tradition of African Hoodoo performing all kinds of spells and rituals. Glynnis deeply doubted the effectiveness of the mysterious witches due to her scientific educational background. She was also dissatisfied with the tedious environment of North Carolina where all the chaos of Washington was absent. In the past, she always slept with her nervous mother to comfort her, which was a sweet memory between them. In her childhood, she would fight bravely with the mean girl who talked something bad about her mother for her mental breakdowns. She believed that "no one knew what she and her father had gone through. No one knew her mother's pain." (Jones, 2006, p177) However, Imogene, the the old root doctor, abruptly interrupted the indestructible relationship between them as a third person. With no experience of living in the rural places, she found it pretty difficult to understand the conversation about the traditional agricultural things between Imogene and her mother. Imogene successfully relieved the affliction of her mother who ceased to scream at the midnight and they always took a stroll arm in arm every morning in the garden. All of intimacy between them conveyed a message to Glynnis that Alberta was stolen by the odd witch and did not need her anymore. Her spiritual emptiness inevitably invoked her memory about the hustle and bustle of Washington where the greasy food could be seen everywhere and a man could "pull her close and put his hands over her behind and talk nasty to her." (Jones, 2006, p183) Glynnis has been assimilated into the modernity which worships materialism and consumerism, losing the tradition of black culture.

In the story of *Bad Neighbors*, black people living in the 1400 block of 8th street were well-off blacks with the exception of the Benningtons, the newcomers of the neighborhood. The Bennington were despised by neighbors on their first day because of their decrepit furnishings and a bunch of family members. Other "good neighbors" avoided to have any contact with the poor family. Derek Bennington, the oldest male child about twenty years old, always drove a old and shabby Ford to some job. Every time when people had their place burgled or got something lost, they maintained in secret that it was Derek who did such sneaky things. The judgement was based on no evidence but on their sheer institution. The standard of one's personality is completely determined by his wealth and social status. The separation of classes

within the black group in Washington brought double discrimination from the rich black men and the white against the underprivileged African American. Lane Stagg in this neighborhood was raised in a poor family, but he married the daughter of a couple of lawyers, thus regarding himself as a successful black model different from those descendants of slaves. He deemed that he has already integrated into the white society and gained the right to criticize other African Americans. Immersed in the urban society for a long time, he forgot the painful history of his race and the tradition of advocating solidarity and fraternity in the neighborhood. His son Terence was as conceited as him because of his identity as one of the students in Howard University on which people like Derek would never have the chance to have a glimpse. Derek was involved in a punch-up with Terence even though he did not want to get in any trouble at first. Derek was not arrested because no white person had been hurt. Whether black people got hurt or not was never a big deal for policemen who enforced the law based on the interest of the white. On the contrary, when the white landlord was just reviled and pushed by Derek, he was immediately protected by the law which sent Derek to the prison. Terence was wandering between two culture, failing in finding a secure and permanent identity for himself. He was devoid of strong sense of confidence and pride in the profound tradition of the black men, thus inclining to losing his own identity.

Horace, the protagonist in the story of *A Rich Man*, was a retired civilian employee at the Pentagon, as the head of veteran records. He was a faithless husband with countless lovers, obsessed with physical pleasure in spite of his old age. He was extremely cold to his wife who spent almost a whole life with him. When hospitalized for two years, she was heartbroken because he still led a dissolute life surrounded by different women, never dropping a visit to her. After the death of his wife, Horace felt relieved and even rejuvenated, empowering him more energy to embrace much younger women. Without restraint of his wife, he gradually turned his apartment into a public place where some depraved young people hung out at their will and stole the treasured records that Horace has collected during his entire life. Horace did not notice his degeneration and flattered himself that these young men treated him with sincere respect and love. It never occurred to him that he would be abandoned by the women he loved and was jailed for what the young did in his house. He was accused of "selling drugs and corruption young people". (Jones, 2006, p341) A decent old man like him was never confronted with such filthy environment as prisons in which he was tortured physically and psychologically. On the verge of breakdown, he was bailed and returned to home where he found destruction everywhere and all his delicate furniture and collections were ruined. He burst into tears in utter

despair and regretted all his sins. He violated the norms of being a husband and an elder, revealing an indisputable fact that losing identity will inevitably lead to the tragedy.

All the characters mentioned above were confused about their identity as black men. "The modes of life brought into being by modernity have swept us away from all traditional types of social order, in quite unprecedented fashion." (Giddens, 1990, p4). The modern life in Washington dealt a heavy blow to the African American who fell into the dilemma of whether or not to completely accept the modern white values and cast away their self-identity.

2.2 Gender Identity Crisis

Black American women fell prey to both racial discrimination and sexual exploitation. They ranked in the lowest position in the social class, suffering from the multiple oppression. They were deprived of the rights to have their own thoughts. Their formation of self-identity was interrupted by a great variety of external factors.

The first fiction *In the Blink of God's Eyes* depicts a new married couple coming far away from Virginia to Washington for a new life. Unlike the husband, his wife Ruth did not hold much expectation for the capital because she had families and precious memory in Virginia. However, she was not the one who was able to determine where the family headed for. "She was a married woman and had pledged to cling to her husband." (Jones, 2006, p9) She cannot be attracted by the city where she found a baby in the night tree. Such cold-blooded behaviors as deserting babies would never happen in her hometown. The couple had quarrels a lot about the abandoned baby. The husband Aubrey vented his indignation and dissatisfaction to Ruth when having sex. He employed the priority in sex as a tool to make Ruth succumb to his brutality. The last story *Tapestry* also portrays a new-married couple leaving the South for better life in Washington. The husband Lucas Turner also reinforced his superiority over his wife Anne Perry to leave the small town she has lived since born. When visiting Lucas in work, she found him being scolded harshly and loudly by his conductor who was subservient to the white. Lucas was shamed in front of the white people and his wife. Consequently, he "took her painfully by the shoulder and practically pulled her along back to the front car". (Jones, 2006, p392) Lucas humiliated his wife who was regarded as his belonging to release anger.

In the title fiction *All Aunt Hagar's Children*, author used the first person narratives to tell a detective story. The narrator's mother and his aunt Penny had beaten a white man who wanted to rape Penny in their hometown Choctaw, Alabama. The colored didn't do bad things to white people, whom the law has built to protect. The law was set to protect the white and would punish harshly the colored who dared to do harm to white man even out of appropriate reasons. The black women were required to

conform to all demands from white man, and were not supposed to resist even at the risk of being raped.

The heroine Georgia in *Common Law* used to be a nice lady enjoying great reputation in her neighborhood before meeting the hypocrite, Kenyon. Kenyon pretended to be patient and gentle, hiding the violent personality under his handsome appearance. When moving to Georgia's apartment, he exposed his nature and waved his fists on his girlfriend with no mercy. Anytime when Georgia did anything against his will, he would abuse her with the help of men's innate strength. Eventually, she resigned herself to his violence and became mean to her neighbors. When her neighbors knew something about the family abuse happening on her and came to offer some help, she was blind to their kindness and blamed their being nosy that "I don't go to your house and tell you what to do." (Jones, 2006, p227) After being beaten many times even in the public, she still chose to become reconciled with him as nothing had ever happened. She lost her own thoughts and placed the words of Kenyon in the paramount position. Being mean and indifferent to the surroundings, she was deprived of the independent spirit of a woman.

Women and men held various standpoints towards family violence. Women in the neighborhood such as Judy, Lois and even the little girl Amy showed solicitude for Georgia. Judy, the "grandma" of the street, was the first one who asked Georgia about her condition. It also was her who knocked Kenyon in the head with her stick when seeing Kenyon slapped Georgia on the street. The little girl Amy witnessed the scene of Georgia being beaten by her husband. Even scared of Kenyon, she insisted in reaching her hands to Miss Georgia who was badly injured, lying in the ground with blood in her mouth. She wanted to save Georgia from the horrible man who threatened her to get away from Georgia by tapping her. She was ill after this incident, but the second time and the third time when she saw the violent behaviors, she still chose to protect Georgia without any hesitation. The couple Lois and Moses was the the owner of the house Georgia lives. When hearing about the fight of Kenyon and Georgia, the wife Lois demanded her husband Moses to stop Kenyon from striking the poor woman anymore while Moses was reluctant to "get mixed up in another man's business" and "went into the living room and turned on the radio" (Jones, 2006, p224)

Women are prone to have empathy for the pains and sufferings other females are going through. Black women as a group crawling at the bottom of the social hierarchy should fight together against all kind of prejudice and oppression. Women are supposed to fight together against the oppression, regaining their identity as women.

3. RECONSTRUCTION OF BLACK IDENTITY

3.1 Quest for Peace in the South

The southern part of America is where almost all black ancestors toiled in the plantations. The south was where the humiliated history happened but also where their industrious forefathers left innumerable spiritual inheritances for them. It has witnessed the unity of black men against the inhumane slavery. Blacks grew up in the land of the South where was regarded as the hometown for all African American.

The female protagonist Ruth in the first story *In the Blink of God's Eye* escaped from Washington to Virginia three times. In her mind, Washington was a cold city where a mother could give up her child. As the people said, "what could anyone expect of a city with a president who was so mean to colored people." (Jones, 2006, p15) In Washington, black people regardless of wealth, were forbidden in many public places such as hotels, department stores and residential areas. There was an atmosphere of great hostility and tension in this city. The baby she saved from the tree awakened her maternal instinct which imparted her courage to revolt against her husband's authority. Back to Virginia against her husband's will, she regained peace and stepped out of the unsettled way Washington had insinuated itself in her nerves. The case was same as Anne Perry in the last story *Tapestry* who came to Washington with her husband only to find frustration and thus thirsted for returning her hometown Mississippi. Once returning, she took off her shoes to touch the land of the town where the people there enjoyed a harmonious relationship, white or black. She was welcomed and treated sincerely in her old place, bringing her spiritual rest. The familiar rural idyll away from the rustling city life and the endless quarrels with their husband renewed their identity as southern black women.

Someone like Joan who forsook the South and claimed himself as a Washingtonian descended to facing a broken family. Eventually, "his heart was pained, and it was pain enough to overwhelm a city of men." (Jones, 2006, p30) Drifting away from the native land was bound to doom. The younger generation who was born in Washington was enveloped with the white culture lost the identification with the black tradition. The South is "the worst mama in the world and it's the best mama in the world." (Jones, 2006, p177) The journey to the south of Dr. Holloway in *Root Worker* symbolizes the spiritual restoration to the black culture, retrieving her identity as a black.

3.2. Charm of African Tradition

The black slaves were exploited as animals, but attempted to gain some relief by creating a great variety of culture with distinct characteristics. They kept the African tradition as best as they could. The African tradition reminded them of the freedom in their own continent, supporting them to endure all the sufferings.

The supernatural originated from Africa was the

precious cultural property accompanying the black through their hardships. It was attached with vital importance for the blacks and must be inherited by the black descendants who could get more information about their ancestors from it. In *Root Worker*, Dr. Holloway as the representative of modern white medical science, was convinced by the healing effectiveness of voodoo. The power of root workers revolted her firm belief in white culture, and consequently, she became respectful for the old root doctor and aspired to inherit the traditional medicine. The magic of voodoo broadened her comprehension about the African tradition, and when returning to Washington, she "wondered if the world seemed smaller because she was bigger or because she knew more about the world." (Jones, 2006, p197) Jones also depicted many other supernatural things, for example, a black woman shopped in a supermarket followed by the devil of death, which recalled her memory about her grandmother.

Deeply rooted in the identity, the traditional culture can help the lost African Americans identify with black culture and obtain spiritual peace.

3.3 Warmth From the Family and Community

Confronted with the individualism advocated by the dominated white society, the black stick to their tradition of collectivism accentuating the value of family and community. Nurtured in the spirit of unity, black people care for each other and support each other to get through any upsetting time.

Many characters got their unsettled lives back on track with the company of their family members. A grandfather of a little girl used to be an alcoholic who was indifferent to his family. After being discarded by his wife, he was off drinking and returned home as an amiable elder who treated his grandchildren as jewels of the greatest value. Likewise, an American black soldier was away from his family in Japan and unfaithful to his wife by having sex with prostitutes. He lost his identity as a husband and father, being beset with identity crisis. After being informed of his breast cancer, he started to realize the importance of family and cherish every moment he spent with her daughter. Even a brutal murderer would be softened with pity when seeing the picture of his hostile roommate's children.

The African Americans also highly valued the significance of community. In *Common Law*, Georgia was saved from the violence of her husband twice with the assistance of the community. The last time when Kenyon came to the neighborhood for Georgia, the little boy Carlos spotted him first and shouted "boo boo boo" to warn other people of the arrival of the tyrant who bullied the weak and flinched in front of the strong. More and more people including many adults were involved in the group filling the street to compel Kenyon to leave their place and stop hurting their neighbors. Kenyon "found

himself having to maneuver through a growing crowd.” (Jones, 2006, p234) Georgia stepped out of the obsession with the hypocrite and was grateful that in spite of her unkindness, the whole community stood before her to defend her. She cut her hair to start a new life even though she clearly knew how much Kenyon hated the short hair. The unity of the community drove the bad man away and helped Georgia to be an independent woman again keeping a firm hold on her own destiny.

The headmistress, Dr. Hines, in *A Poor Guatemalan Dreams of a Downtown in Peru* was a typical competent woman in career who established a school for Negro women. Her first husband, a teacher and writer with focus on the lives of black middle class, failed in understanding her determination of saving poor black girls through education. Devoting herself entirely into her great career, she went out of the constraint of family, free from the domestic burdens. She got rid of the stereotype imposed on women to gain her self-identity through bringing light on the female group of her race. Her selfless devotion to the development of the whole black community facilitated her independence of the dominance of her husband, building her identity as a black woman.

Inharmonious phenomena existing in family and community would cause the sense of being unsettled. Anxiety about identity could be eased when black men were surrounded by the comfort from people they loved and the traditional culture in which they can find root.

CONCLUSION

As one of the representatives of the contemporary American black writers, Edward P. Jones focuses on the ordinary blacks in America with his personal life experiences. His latest short story collection *All Aunt Hagar's Children* gives a panorama of the lives of the black in Washington D.C. full of changes and uncertainties. They are in agony with the loss of their self-identity, suffering from the aggression from the white as well as the disunity within their group. White men rarely change their aggressive attitudes towards them and the isolation originated from the class division within the black community gradually breaks their tradition of being cohesive under any circumstance.

In this paper, a tentative interpretation of this work has been given from the perspective of the analysis of the identity theory of Erik. H. Erikson and Anthony Giddens. The characters in this work are confronted with the puzzle about their own identities. Some of them migrated from the South, leaving their secure hometown to the prosperous cities filled with dramatic turbulence. They are easily trapped in the material comforts and assimilation

of the white culture. Living in the society dominated by the white for long time, Dr. Glynnis, Horace, Terence and his father lose their identity as an African American. Black women otherwise are in a more terrible condition, confused not only about their race identity, but also about gender identity. Characters like Ruth, Anne and Georgia are forced to be obedient to their husband without their own thoughts. Female characters in the title story are compelled to leave hometown to escape from the law which is established for the white. They are deprived the identity as an independent individual.

To reconstruct self-identity, this paper put forward three methods. First, A journey back to the South can be seen as a quest for peace. Ruth and Anne all regain the spiritual rest when back to their southern hometowns. Furthermore, the irresistible charm of the African tradition brings those without firm belief in their identities closer to their own culture. Finally, the unceasing love from the family and community is one of the basic necessities of rebuilding their self-identity.

All characters in Edward P. Jones's latest fiction collection *All Aunt Hagar's Children* lived in American capital Washington D.C. where black men came with anxious expectation for better lives only to find frustration. Faced with modern chaos and cultural confusion, they kept seeking the answer to the question about their self-identity.

All in all, although some black men are lost in the chaos of the metropolis, they still can find the path of righteousness by closely clinging to their families and traditions. The traditional values left by their ancestors should be inherited generations by generations. Even in the urban modernity, all black men are supposed to stick together to keep their roots.

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