



Reconstructing the Identity of African-Americans in Countee Cullen’s “Heritage”: Why Race Matters in America

Bishnu Prasad Pokharel, PhD 

Department of English, Saraswati Multiple Campus, Kathmandu, Nepal

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Corresponding Author: Bishnu Prasad Pokharel, Email: bishnupokharel12345@gmail.com

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Abstract

The present paper argues that it is the color of the Africans that is an object of mockery and humiliation hurled at them by the whites. To escape from this color-induced discrimination and identity crisis, yearning for the ancestor’s native heritage is the sole sanctuary for the American people of color. This paper examines the subtle use of the symbols of dark images to show how Countee Cullen, in his poem “Heritage,” shows black people’s identity crisis based on color. The dark color symbolizes a constraint on civilization and creates a distinct bifurcation between synchronization and harmony in the nation. Hence, the recurring dark color in the poem leads the minority group to quest for identity through social strengthening. The poet calls for African Americans’ personal, social, and geographical identity based on hereditary identity. In the context of America, the question of true identity in the new nation leads black people to feel a deep anguish of estrangement and alienation. Drawing on Cullen’s poem as the primary source for analysis, this paper applies Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancis, Winthrop D. Jordan, Michael Banton, and Lois Tyson’s racial theory and search for identity for textual analysis. Racial discrimination creates gloom and generates inferiority among individuals. The minority group seeks identity establishment for social inclusion. Therefore, this study concludes that national coherence in American society invariably rests upon minimizing gloom, distancing, and uneasiness.

Keywords: Skin color, genealogical identity, image, social relegation

Introduction

Countee Cullen’s poem “Heritage” develops creative awareness among the Afro-Americans in America to reconstruct their identity through the longing for their ancestral roots. The massive migration from underprivileged areas to financially advanced areas has created the issue of an identity crisis. The feeling of social relegation mutilates the unity among the people. The issues of searching for personal and social identity pervade African Americans in their lifetime. The metaphoric term, "black" in the verse, embodies

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the craving for harmony in the foreign land. The poet articulates the voice of the unrepresented African people in America. He uses black color as a metaphor to shape the personal and social identity of the Afro-American people. Outwardly visible color, which became the bedrock for identity, should not be the judging parameter of human civilization. However, for about three centuries, it remained the same. Dark symbolizes the unhappiness and unpleasantness of the masses. Thus, he longs to revive African culture and the identity where dark is not an indicator of being dull, less intelligent, and imperfect. The longing is against social relegation and thirst for judgment through intelligence and wisdom.

Identity formation is the basic process that creates the demarcation line between those, who are in power, and those who are outside the power center. The political orientation applies political, cultural, financial, and other means for pushing the masses to the sideline. In the words of Peter J. Katzenstein and Checkel Jeffrey T., identity is linked with the evil political motto: "Process and project involve public and elites...and they serve both worthy and nefarious political objectives" (213). Conferred political mission touches social composition and circuitously affects identity politics. One of the dogmatic missions is the downgrading of the African-American identity. Racial binary existed in pre-civil rights and post-civil rights age. However, it worked to harm through predisposition eternally.

Social relegation dismantles the harmony of society because it generates outsiders within the social structure. Julian Wolfreys et al. assert that the social understanding of black and white color revolves around binary oppositions. She mentions that "the terms refer to the racial binaries...regarding existing ethnic biases and prejudice" (18). The priority and preeminence of one and relegation to another dismantle the social structure. Creating racial supremacy through the criteria-based parameters deteriorates social value, as Savannah Shange reasons, "Racial rule recede in the post-civil rights era" (32). This type of rule does not guarantee fraternity and wisdom, but it only promotes prejudice. Johnella E. Butler generalizes the black literature that works on re-memory for psychological consolation and social awareness. According to her, "Re-memory pervades African American fiction in which either the reader, the characters, or both struggle for resolution" (174). 'Re-memory' denotes the process of remembering struggle, and color pervades back and again to the African people.

The poet works for the solution of the social conflict through philanthropic behavior and fraternity that in turn establishes national integrity. The quest for genealogical identity pervades the poem "Heritage" since it hints at the dissatisfaction of the persona with the current social, political, and financial position allotted to the black minority group. Furthermore, when they settled in America, the new land did not accept them as hosts, but it always entitled them as guests. It directed them to feel social relegation. Consequently, the persona craves a beauty-drenched African land that provides him with personal and social security. The study uses identity theory to analyze and interpret the verse for the justification of the argument that the quest for genealogical identity is for the establishment of individuality.

Cullen's "Heritage" has been reviewed from different perspectives by critics since its publication. The poem mainly deals with the submerged familial identity of African-American people. For instance, Steven A. Nardi asserts that Cullen uses his imagination to generate a sense of self in his poem and finds it "impossible to create meaning without an overflow of imagination" (263). Imagination, according to him, generates novelty in meaning. The theme has been pitched through the made-up story. Nardi further points out that "the cultural memories that structure the black poet's consciousness" (265) support social unification. He analyzes the verse as cultural

memories. But Bertram L. Woodruff argues that the underlying theme of Cullen's poems is the anguish of the people, as he claims, "By far the greatest number of Countee Cullen's poems have to do with the acting and suffering from human beings" (217). For him, poetry digs the heart of the public. Woodruff, like Shelley, confirms that the "sweetest songs are those that tell the saddest thought" (221). The sad thoughts of the marginalized people generated the verse in the words of Woodruff.

The fundamental anguish draws Cullen's attention because he speaks the voice of the disregarded people of America. In this case, David K. Kirby claims that Cullen's "Heritage" as the black wasteland is compared to Eliot's "Waste Land" because "it deals with the same basic dilemma as Eliot's poem" (14). The current underprivileged position of the blacks led him to believe the dilemma of the African-Americans. Kirby hints at the psychological situation that is "trapped between the waters of pride and the fires of frustration" (19). It indicates that black is in between pride and frustration. Arthur P. Davis strongly supports Cullen's spiritual position as he views, "For Cullen, the Negro is both a geographical and a spiritual exile" (390). He glorifies Cullen as an artist who can connect geographical and spiritual exile simultaneously. Davis further argues that "the Negro in America is a perpetual alien, an exile from a beautiful Sun-drenched Africa, his last homeland" (390). The feeling of being an expatriate is generated due to the color-bound category and the absence of social acceptance.

Many critics value Cullen's poem for political mottos, racial demarcation, reshaping reminiscence, imagination as the meaning-making agent, sorrow of human beings, a black wasteland due to the mental dilemma, and physical and spiritual exile. However, physically distanced life did not create alienation for African Americans rather constant hammering to blemish their true identity and pushed them towards despair, estrangement, and disappointment. Their physical house in America did not provide hospitality, and homeliness but injected an inferiority complex and alienation. That in turn led them to feel it was the home for white people. They were physically well but psychologically dismantled because their skin color and physical structure did not match the natives. They do not have a feeling of belongingness in the land of foreigners because of color discrimination and social demarcation. In addition to that, it raises prevailing questions: Why does the social alliance downgrade African-American people? Why do African Americans search for genealogical origin? And what are the probable resolutions for political and social rift? These are the issues to discuss for the minimization of the social and political rift among people.

The yearning for a genealogical identity, due to the marginalization based on color parameters, is the crux of Cullen's poem. The poem derives the ancestral identity and civilization that in turn shapes the human identity. The one, who is removed from the land, does not have the homely feeling in the drifted land. The separation due to color damages the immensity of the nation. Human beings have the desire to be one with the beauty-drenched ancestral land. When a new location does not accept people, they feel social relegation and crave power accretion. Consequently, the search for a genealogical identity emerges among the homogeneous social groups. The quest for personal and social identity is one form of power accumulation. Therefore, Cullen's poem advocates for the formation of the identity of the African-American people through political, social, and financial rights. Racial segregation due to color matrix is the untitled area of study. The poem raises the issues of identity formation to promote national integrity.

Theories of Race and Identity: A Theoretical Perspective

Racial theory deals with the deep-rooted practice in a certain period in the West, particularly in America, where main streaming to whites and marginalizing to blacks

simultaneously stirred. Tzvetan Todorov indicated the extended period of racialism in the Western world "racialism" as the thought "extends from the mid-eighteenth century to the mid-twentieth century" (64). However, George M. Fredrickson specifies the period in the USA that "Racism as an ideology...emerged into the clear light of day in reaction to the rise of northern abolitionism in the 1830s" (79). Manning Marable contextualizes the situation of black people in America for a long period, "Between 1882 and 1903, 2060 blacks were lynched in the United States" (8). He further presents the statistical description of African American people in the United States, "In 1890, 63 percent of all black males were agricultural workers, 22 percent were domestic servants, and 14 percent worked in transportation, communications, and or manufactures" (9). Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancis link race with nation, "Race means quintessentially, African American" and further point out the hierarchic disorder due to racial binary, "Racial hierarchies determine who gets tangible benefits, including the best jobs, the best schools" (21). They contend that "Black people constitute the prototypical minority group" (77). Therefore, racism is particularly exercised in America to introduce racial hierarchy. The underlying motive for creating a majority and minority is to deprive minority groups of social and political benefits.

Negatively encumbered color awareness functioned to exclude African people from the exercise of fundamental rights in America. Winthrop D. Jordan elaborates on the color consciousness among American Whites that "Blackness became so generally associated with Africa that every African seemed a black" (34) and he further elaborates color dichotomy "Embedded in the concept of blackness was its direct opposite-whiteness" (35). Color as the measuring yardstick devalued intellect and education. The power structure deployed color to separate them from the significant civil rights.

Michael Banton admits that color as the judging parameter marginalizes the blacks, "The only properties that count are the immediately visible ones: skin color, body hair, facial configuration" (65). The priority of perceptible bodily features as mediating parameters undervalues human beings and humanity. These parameters do not prioritize knowledge, intellectual evolution, and wisdom, but rather certain pre-determined features. However, according to George M. Fredrickson, the color parameter "was not invented until the Eighteenth century" (53). He further reasons that once it was developed, white people used "to demote Africans from human to ape or half ape status" (54) to deteriorate human status. Lois Tyson highlights the spoiled condition of black people "White racism is fueled by the myths that people of color are less intelligent, less civilized, less moral, and even less attractive than white people" (211). Weakening the status of human beings through color consciousness is the worst exercise for society. Therefore, socially and critically aware people voiced for the eradication of racial dejection and enlistment of human identity.

African American people's deep-seated aspiration to establish social and political identity is the dictum of identity theory. Identity formation in such a critical stage was a challenge for the inventive and critical writers. Robert Miles and Malcolm Brown critically argue that racism does not find societal and political harmony, "Racism distorts human beings and social relations" (10). They assert that exclusion is malpractice because "oppressed people have a birthright of freedom" (13). They have to get equal opportunities for exercising their fundamental rights. Otherwise, the distancing among the members of the community twists social inclusion and synchronization. Fredrickson specifies the problem in the USA, "In the United States racism as an ideology of inherent black inferiority emerged into the clear light" (79). Fredrickson further points out the efforts for equality that "The meaning of emancipation to include black civil and political equality awakened" (81). African American people in America pursuit for identity and

social inclusion. Forceful physical labor engendered their social life. Consequently, critics and creative writers voiced identity through diverse means.

To sum up, the discussion on race theory deals with the origin, causes, and significance of racial ideology. Racism is an ideology for Robert Miles and Malcolm Brown, "Racism is a form of ideology" (10) that studies "A set of exclusionary practices" (9). Exclusion of the smaller group even from the fundamental rights is the elementary practice of racism. That in turn leads to social rift among citizens. In the name of race, a certain group gets tangible benefits and the other group is deprived of them in America. The quest for identity comes out of the feeling of exile and black inferiority in America. Therefore, African Americans demanded social and political inclusion. Critics and creative writers work out from multiple points to exercise natural rights and emancipate from exclusion. The quest for identity is the process of the longing for their birthright freedom, priority to intellectualism and wisdom, and emancipation from the gulf of color-based judgment.

Race, Identity, and Cullen's "Heritage": Critical Analysis *The Politics of Color for Identity*

The poem is the result of the identity-based verse for liberation. When people experience disadvantaged and prejudiced treatment, they long for identity in assorted ways. African Americans neither felt equal treatment nor felt homely in America despite their physical, intellectual, and social contribution to the new land. The aloofness in the land made them feel personal, political, and social relegation. Consequently, they voice for identity through an illustration of art, music, and literature.

Color is the major image perception predominant in Cullen's "Heritage" to voice for social integration in a democratic society like America. The verse commences and puts the question: "What is Africa to me?" To answer this question, one has to use images such as "Copper sun" and "scarlet sea," referring to the red images that connote white but "strong bronzed men, or regal black" (Cullen 1443) to denote the black. When the host nation does not accept the blacks as native civilians, the longing for the ancestral land commences. The longing for Africa emerges right from the beginning of the verse due to the craving for color-free judgment. The logic behind this lies in the color-bound evaluation. Wolfreys et al. point out that "Non-white people are all too frequently reduced in cultural representations" (83). The social out casting develops a sense of frustration as well as anger. The control of the specific images marks the speaker's consciousness in America.

The formation of identity is a principal aspect for cognizant individuals because they like to stand as self-governing and worthy individuals. Jonathan Cullen claims that identity formation is a major facet of literary texts as he further argues, "Poems and novels address us in many ways that demand identification and identification works to create identity" (113). Identity formation through creative writing is one aspect of the revolution. He presumes that he leaped from bronzed and black to recall the origin and the ultimate identity. The forced migration led them to America "three centuries" before and "removed from scenes his fathers loved" (1443). His forefathers were forced to leave Africa "three centuries" earlier. The settlement in America in the initial phase was chaotic. The new settlement lacked equality and equal opportunity, due to which there was no coziness and self-satisfaction. Their ancestors were bound to forsake the homeland and forced to be involved in unpaid labor in the new land. But now the realization of the ancestral identity leads to the memory of the "Copper sun," "the scarlet sea" spicy grove, and the "cinnamon tree" (Cullen 1443). These are the symbols that are the clue to the collective family identity. The images hunt not because of their beauty but

because of their familial lineage. The ancestry advanced due to the unintended social treatment of the new land.

The unequal handling of people of African upbringing developed a split among the blacks and whites. Linda Thomas and Shan Wareing indicate that "People often have to work to establish their identity categories, to name their particular social group, and stake their claim in owning their representations of themselves" (142). The craving for the heritage of Africa is the yearning for the association. The oxymoron in the verse "distress" and "joy" simultaneously highlights two experiences together. Distress emerges due to the unhappy present and the feeling of the outsider. At the same time, joy indicates his bond with the African origin. But the major concern of the poet is the identity of the homogeneous "flesh and skin" but for the whites it had "dark blood damned within" (1443). The adjudicating parameters are skin and color. Therefore, they have to quest for their social and personal affiliation. The frequent use of black color images with negative connotations refers to the predetermined one-sided white perception. The superior and inferior treatment blemishes the integrities of the democratic system. In the words of Patricia Hills Collins, "The dismantling of social apartheid within the United States and South Africa signaled possibilities for anti-racial, democratic societies in which Blackness would no longer serve as a badge of inferiority" (53). The feeling of otherness due to skin harms the democratic civilization.

The poet feels that African heritages are the source of power for ultimate consolation. Africa was a book with layers of knowledge and wisdom for identity, homeliness, and natural resources. The poet argues that Africa is a book with multiple chapters having diverse themes, "Africa? A book one thumbs" that "a mortal eye should see" (1443). But America for him became a barren land from cultural and anthropological points of view. The birds, trees, and animals haunt him because the dark colors distanced him from America. The poignant feeling emerges because he felt alienated in the foreign land and premeditated for social integration. This is the reason that motivated him to "doff this new exuberance" (1445) and adopt the ancestors' culture and distinctiveness.

The poet is far away from Africa, but he rejoices in the objects from Africa because he envisions his underlying identity in the objects. In the words of Linda Martin Alloff and Satya P. Mohanty, "Identity-based movements of political liberation have been vibrant in the West since, at least, the nineteenth century" (8). The location, jungle, animals, and birds drive him to Africa, but he is in America. Africa for him is a book of historical myth and reality, having multiple chapters without discrimination.

The poet's major issue is the argument against social relegation. As a result of this, he feels restless and uses creative potentiality to out pour the yearning for togetherness. Otherness at home is the consequence of color discernment that in turn damages his identity. The ongoing society forms human identity in the community as Alloff and Mohanty claim, "Identities are social constructions rather than natural kinds" (3). The process of out casting is the byproduct of society. However, discrimination does not guarantee the rights of whites. Collins articulates the idea that it is not the point of victory and defeat because "Victory over one form of racism has not ensured triumph over others" (54). It harms the loser and causes him to be violent. The refrain "So I lie who all day long./ So, I lie, who find no peace" (Cullen 1444). *He* hints at the social downgrading that articulates the voice of the community. His impatience is due to the lack of constructive judgment. The song of "wild barbaric birds" gave joy to him, not white songs and the sounds. Humiliated feeling goes beyond the borderline and damages the harmonious social bond. The strong voices against social relegation are the epitome of the poem, which in turn demands.

Resisting Social Relegation, Forming Identity

Social and emotional distancing from the host country of America leads people to feel social relegation. They feel away from America, even if they are in America. The poet wishes to be in Africa because of his societal and emotive detachment from America. He realized that even god was to be in the form of black color to feel attached: "He I served were black" and "Lord I fashion dark gods" (Cullen 1445). Ultimately, he wishes to strip off the dress and worship the god of his color. The dark color for his generation was "dark despairing features" that in turn made them "dark rebellious hair" (1446). However, they had patience despite the blood-stirring anger due to racial segregation. Cullen asserts, "Literature has played a significant role in the construction of the identity of the readers" (112). The poet intends to form an identity through verse, generating awareness among the people. In the poem, color is the dominant image to highlight ancestral identity. Wolfreys et al. indicate that "color thus becomes a visible sign of apparent ... identity" (83). Therefore, he confessed to "quench my pride and cool my blood" (83) to vibrate underlying social structure. This awareness hints at the point that the discrimination developed an inferiority complex and felt marginalized in the land, which in turn led him to seek an identity. The establishment of social and political identity confers togetherness.

His ancestors are substantially demised, but they exist in him through blood. Ultimately, he has a diaspora identity, which is the in-betweenness. Consequently, there was agitation and grief as the lines go in this way: "So I lie, who find no peace" due to the "unremitted beat" and never pretty "So I lie, who never quite" and "rest at all" (Cullen 1444). Collins expresses the point that people of color residing in America had social complications and societal unrest. Similarly, Dominick Lalapra states the way people's "experience often remains a black box" (228). The feeling one receives during the day-to-day happenings leaves an impact on the minds of the people. The problem emerged due to the demonic behavior that black people experienced during their lives. The ultimate point for the solution of the social problem is possible as Lalapra states, "Identity should be neither idealized as always beneficent nor demonized as seen as a source of the political ills of the modern world" (228). Thus, the festivity of African origin residing in America makes him a diaspora. The culture, traditions, and knowledge of Africa haunt him due to his familial lineage. The religious conversion led him to be restless. He converted him from African Paganism to Christianity, but he deals with color imagery. He says, "Lord I fashion dark god" (Cullen 1445). God symbolizes unity and equality, but the speaker feels that it cannot, and he has to seek black Christ. In the words of Collins, "People of African descent are routinely disadvantaged" in every sphere of life, including social and financial opportunities. Katzenstein and Checkel assert that identity politics have multiple layers of cultural outsiders and market expansion when they state, "The proliferation of regional institutions in America is primarily focused on market integration" (221). The spiritual predicament has been generated due to a biased mindset.

Here, color should merge and mingle two separate backgrounds, since the religious creed is transformed. The phrase "dark god" indicates his willingness for harmony and unity. This is the hanging between two religions not because he has regret for the conversion of the religion, but because he does not find his image with God. The poem celebrates the glory of the past, drawing the support of color images to establish a real identity. The heritage of Africa and the current location in America leads him to the position of in-betweenness. Once he gets the actual knowledge of Africa, he feels regret for the loss of the knowledge and ruins of the origin. This leads him neither African nor American only because of color. Hence, this is the split identity. This is to hybridize,

diaspora, and in-betweenness. He burns himself in the burning coal of memory and loss. He feels underprivileged by his actual individuality. According to Collins, brotherliness through law and practice develops a sense of togetherness, stating that "Laws and customs required that Blacks and Whites occupy separate and unequal spaces in housing, neighborhoods, job creation, schools ... other public institutions" (62). The feeling of the parting develops the rift, arising the social conflict. For social synchronization, inseparability pays more than conflict as Wolfreys et al. assert, "Color thus becomes a visible sign of apparent racial identity" (83). However, Bhatia strongly opposes "color-blind ideology" and "color-blind meritocracy" (3). Evaluation on the base of color blemishes quality and distorts social unity.

Therefore, the poem bonds with the black color metaphors: tanned men, regal black, dark blood, black men, black god, dark features, dark hair, and dark gods to highlight the poet's venture for a color metaphor to generate awareness for the significance of the identity formation through this verse. The failure of cultural and social assimilation in America due to White Americans appreciating skin as the judging parameter for civilization incessantly created a social rift that must be bridged by blurring the significance of color and uplifting the value of intellectualism and wisdom. The color metaphor stirs the sensation of the readers emotionally and intellectually. The persistent emphasis on black color images and metaphors is to erase political and social downgrading.

Conclusion

Psychological distancing generated the feeling of social relegation for African Americans in America. As color becomes the judging parameter, it mocks African-American people. To validate racial subjugation and identity formation, Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancis, Winthrop D. Jordon, Michael Banton, and Lois Tyson's racial theory have been applied to analyze Cullen's poem "Heritage." The poem epitomizes verbal, rational, and emotional expressions for the opposition of social relegation and establishment of identity. His quest for ancestral identity is to generate responsiveness to objective parameters like intellect, wisdom, and education. The poet's constant reinforcement of dark color metaphor to indicate the familial identity is due to his mission to blur the traditional mindset of Americans and develop the internal drive to judge people from an intellectual perspective. Social inclusion should work for the advancement of civilization.

The finding of the study is that the nation should function for merging the diverse identities in the heterogeneous culture-dominated country. People have to be away from the feeling of the outsiders within the homeland. The conflict in society results from the disparity between the social expectation of the person and the violation of the expectancy. Therefore, people should not feel bothered by the current scenario of the new land and develop social and cultural inadequacies. The eventual contentment is beyond their reach in the foreign land in the biased society. The parameter for civilization has to be intellect and wisdom. Strong opposition to social relegation and the quest for the genealogical identity pervades the poem. Hence, social promotion and cohesion through togetherness are the crux of this study. The social unit should function for coherence in the relations despite diverse upbringings. The harmonious relation supports the welfare of society, generating a sagacity of synchronization.

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