

**Disenfranchisement and Interlocking Concerns of Self-Identity in
Kennedy's *Movie Star*
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Abstract

Adrienne Kennedy's *A Movie Star Has to Star in Black and White* is a reflective commentary on disenfranchisement in relation to the prominence of achieving one's self-identity, and the process of gaining the required intellectual equipment needed in the journey of self-discovery. As a postcolonial drama, the ontological aspects of intersectional concerns related to race, gender and class. The main objective of the study is to show the ways in which Kennedy's *A Movie Star* presents disenfranchisement through the intersectional perspectives and to study the interconnectedness between relegation and intersectionality in this play. To achieve this objective, the article will reveal images that simultaneously shape the African-American life at the onset of the twentieth century, particularly images of social segregation which left negative impact on the coming generations. Accordingly, the paper will be constructed on four pillars: historical, theoretical, discussion and analytical. In the first pillar, I briefly explore the historical background of the African American woman and her experience of suffering. I shift the focus in the second pillar to the theoretical side of the study where I present the conceptual framework. In the third pillar, I probe how the protagonist's solitudes are revealed through the narratives of the movie stars in their films; her own life is overlapping with specific events of these films. Then in the fourth pillar, I go through a critical appreciation of the play by applying the braiding aspects of the both theories; alienation and intersectionality to find out the results of the discussion which will be stated in the conclusion.

Keywords

Kennedy, interlocking concerns, disenfranchisement, self-identity, *Movie Star Has to Star*.

Introduction

The first time Adrienne Kennedy's *A Movie Star Has to Star in Black and White* had been produced at theatre was "as a work in progress at the New York Shakespeare Festival in New York on November 5, 1976" (Kennedy 62). This

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play primarily concerns Clara's quest of self-discovery and identity. Clara is a "Negro woman of thirty-three" (Kennedy 64) searching for identity in a world of white male-domination; a world which imposes social barriers upon woman. According to the social roles of this world, a woman is designed for self-denial. Therefore Clara is disenfranchised and alienated to her society because she failed to accomplish what has been designed for her. Simultaneously, she is self-estranged as well, because she couldn't achieve her dream to be a famous dramatist.

Kennedy's *A Movie Star* has been a controversial play since 1976; the play is praised by Werner Sollors (527) for its unique dramatic technique, Edward Albee in 1976 expressed his concern about the play by saying "the only thing I don't know about the play is how it will seem to someone who doesn't know . . . [Kennedy's] other work - who doesn't have the references, for this new play fits so tightly in with the other plays" (qtd. in Barnett 161). In *A Movie Star* the examination of Clara's character is performed through the white movie stars. Each selected scene from the Hollywood movies depicts a specific event or situation in Clara's life which reflects a state of her mind as well. These scenes are linked to images of disenfranchisement via intersectionality. The first scene of the play presents a state of fear and loneliness, the second scene shows a state of depression and separation, and the third scene displays a state of sinking and exhausted mind.

A Movie Star starts with a scene imitating the construction of Hollywood movies in features and characteristics; in a glittering light the Columbia Pictures Lady comes to inform the audience about the stars and setting (Kennedy 63). In the play "a bit role is played by Clara" (Kennedy 63) in spite the fact that the whole story there is her life's story. The plot of the play is knitted according to what these stars act of Clara's life; they provide the voice and action for Clara's character. In the manuscript of the play, Kennedy arranges the characters according to the following order: Clara is mentioned first, then the "Leading Roles" are performed by "actors who look exactly like Bette Davis, Paul Henreid, Jean Peters, Marlon Brando, Montgomery Clift and Shelly Winters" (Kennedy 63), these movie stars "are romantic and moving, never camp or farcical, and the attitudes of the supporting players to the movie stars is deadly serious" (Kennedy 62), then Kennedy mentioned that the "Supporting roles" are played by "The Mother, The Father, [and] The Husband" (Kennedy 63). The three scenes of the play are knitted in a very sophisticated style in which we see one couple stars of a movie in each scene blending with Clara's life event.

1. Intersectional Issues: Historical Background

As the issues of intersectionality represent the essential circle in this paper, it is significant to make a brief historical reference to both racism and black feminism. Though the abolition of the slavery system had granted the African Americans a new era of emancipation and freedom, African-Americans were almost considered "as members of a 'degraded class'" (Huebner 34) prevented

from "the rights of citizenship" (Huebner 17). The Civil War of 1865 granted the African-Americans a new era of emancipation; yet, under the racial legal series of Jim Crow laws they suffered oppression and discrimination more than hundred years (Hopps 4). Jim Crow laws affected every part of American life; blacks and whites were separated everywhere; buses, schools, movie theatres, drinking fountains, shops, restaurants etc. (Sandoval-Strausz 53-54). Kennedy's *A Movie Star* refers to these issues through a very long monologue in the play. In the third pillar of the present article we will analyse these issues in details to show the role of intersectionality in conveying the faces of disenfranchisement and to discuss the dynamic interconnectedness of alienation and intersectionality in Kennedy's *A Movie Star*.

As we discuss the image of superiority and inferiority of white and black the discussion leads to another image of persecution in the play; between man and woman. Social patriarchy looks at man as the fundamental self and woman as a subsidiary, a matter which pushes woman to feel distress toward the self. Hence, black woman is even doubly oppressed and her distress toward the self is worst. Amy C. Wilkins (174) sees that researchers have studied race and gender as social structures performed at both levels the macro and micro. Academics and theorists of black feminism such as Kimberle Crenshaw and Patricia Hill Collins confirm the necessity of investigating the overlapping relations of the various categories of oppression in any discussion of empowerment.

Collins asserts that in the American society the white supremacy and male superiority has shaped the reality of the African American women's struggle. "A struggle to survive in two contradictory worlds simultaneously, one white, privileged, and oppressive, the other black, exploited, and oppressed" (quoted in Collins 26). African American women's vulnerability "to assaults in the workplace, on the street, at home, and in media representations has been one factor fostering this legacy of struggle" (Collins 26).

2. Methodology: Alienation via Intersectionality

The theoretical pillar in this paper relies on the discussion of alienation in combination with the intersectionality of oppression. Various scholars have applied the theory of intersectionality in the arguments of identity and power. Sumi Cho, Crenshaw and Leslie McCall (795) point out that intersectionality means the "adoption of an intersectional way of thinking about the problem of sameness and difference and its relation to power. This framing . . . emphasizes what intersectionality does rather than what intersectionality is". McCall (1772) explicates how diverse measurements are interlocked to form a social level; she points that intersectionality is an instrument to examine suffering and oppression; studying the complications of the various measurements of the conception.

increased to summarize the racial roles given to black actors and incorporated the confusion of a female who cannot achieve what she dreams to be. Barnett (161) suggests that the play "relies upon an almost esoteric familiarity with film icons of the 1940s and '50s . . . it also stands strongly on its own . . . [the play] seems to evolve from the duelling impulses of refusal and revelation". Clara is suffering the inner confusion and alienation; the major source of alienation in the play is the perpetual accumulation of Clara's painful sense of disenfranchisement via intersectionality.

Oppression in the play is revealed through the narrative which is segregated Clara by the intersectionality of race, gender and class. Intersectionality in the play is the outcome of a conflict between the inner feelings of Clara's desire to be a writer, and the outer circumstances which prevent the achieving of her desire: "Everyone says it's unrealistic for a Negro to want to write" (Kennedy 75). The inheritance of slavery and degradation, and their consequences upon ontological equation lead to draw such disenfranchised character as Clara in *Movie Star*. Moreover, the gender oppression increases Clara's disenfranchisement; as a writer, she wishes to improve her career as much as she can. Yet, her desire to become a famous writer contrasts with her husband's longing to enlarge the family by getting children. Actually, she is pregnant now and her husband keeps asking to forget about her dream.

Clara's solitudes are revealed through the narratives of the movie stars Bette Davis, Jean Peters, and Shelly Winters in the films *Now Voyager*, *Viva Zapata*, and *A Place in the Sun*; her own life is overlapping with specific events of these films. Al-Atawani (116-17) points that Clara monopolises the internal monologues and dialogues; these monologues are driven by the near fatal accident of her brother Wally. Wally's accident has a real significance in the play as it becomes the reason to reunite Clara with her divorced parents.

In the first scene of the play we see the Hospital lobby through the reflections of the movie of *Now, Voyager* performed by Bette Davis and Paul Henreid in 1942. In the second scene of the play we see the Brother's room through the reflections of the movie of *Viva Zapata* performed by Jean Peters and Marlon Brando in 1952. In the third scene of the play we see Clara's old room conjugated with the movie of *A Place in the Sun* performed by Montgomery Clift and Shelley Winters in 1951. In his essay "Beyond Movie Star Fantasies: The Manipulation of the Hollywood Movies in Adrienne Kennedy's *A Movie Star Has to Star in Black and White*", Gozde Kilic (1) comments

Kennedy brilliantly manipulates these Hollywood movies to serve the play's cause to intensify Clara's alienation from herself, and then ironically to criticize Hollywood's visionary promises and dreamlike fantasy images together with its exclusion of African American.

The racial memory of the African-Americans in combination with the gender issues presented through Clara's diary and in alliance with the fact that she relates to a lower class family, *A Movie Star* shows the interconnectedness of

intersectionality issues within the three components of alienation stated by Dean.

4. Analysis

a. Searching Power in a World of Powerlessness

In his argumentation of alienation, Dean (754) puts "powerlessness" as the first component asserting that "the feeling of helplessness may have other sources besides the economic order of which Hegel, Marx, and Weber wrote". The ontological aspects of Clara's character lead to conflicting external forces; the conflict between an ideal self and a real self-pushed Clara to detach and alienate from her real self by replacing herself with the white movie stars. In his discussion "Kennedy's Travelers in the American and African Continuum", Paul K. Bryant-Jackson (54) confirms external factors which shape the individual are able to destroy the inner self. Clara is a daughter of a poor African-American family of black father and yellow mother; she finds herself shackled with the restrictions of race, class and gender, her disenfranchisement is a product of these intersectional aspects.

Clara used to record her life's events and perceptions in a diary. Actually, her diary is very significant in the construction of a conjugate narrative of her voice which has been interspersed among the female movie stars. Through the mouth of Bette Davis in the play Clara declares that she was always thinking herself to be an "angel of mercy" (Kennedy 64) in her parents' marriage. She was longing to achieve her self-identity through the power of "co-exist[ing] in a true union" (Kennedy 64) with other selves. The movie stars who represent speakers for Clara in the play provide a good proof of her shattered identity and a reflection of her deep alienation.

In *A Movie Star Has to Star in Black and White*, the theme of alienation is also revealed through the images of the racial discrimination. Since 1890 the American Court put laws in which public facilities for blacks and whites should be separated; the rules of separation were built under the Jim Crow laws which obviously established segregation for the blacks (Fox & Guglielmo 336). Accordingly, blacks and whites were separated everywhere; a matter which left its negative impact on the both blacks and whites till the present day.

These images are reflected through Clara's diary and through the long monologues the movie stars said on her behalf. With the reference to "Savannah, Georgia in 1929", (Kennedy 65) Kennedy establishes a real connection between alienation and disenfranchisement in the play. Blacks and whites were separated everywhere and there were notices hung over everywhere telling this is for black and this is for white. The roads where the blacks living were "dirt and had no sidewalk" (Kennedy 65), also blacks should go to the post office to pick up their mails. The Jim Crow segregation "varies from place to place, [and] deeply shaped social interactions in public and sometimes even private life from cradle to grave . . . it was in the South, of course, where this

world of separation and subordination found fullest expression" (Fox & Guglielmo 336). In Kennedy's *A Movie Star Has to Star in Black And White*, the long monologue said by the Mother in which "she speaks bitterly in a voice with a strong Georgia accent" (Kennedy 65) needs no interpretation to explain the social separation practiced through the Jim Crow Laws and which we find it a good document to confirm the theme of disenfranchisement and alienation Clara suffers.

In our Georgia town the white people lived on one side. It had pavement on the streets and sidewalks and mail was delivered. The Negroes lived on the other side and the roads were dirt and had no sidewalk and you had to go to the post office to pick up your mail. In the centre of Main Street was a fountain and white people drank on one side and Negroes drank on the other.

When a Negro bought something in a store he couldn't try it on. A Negro couldn't sit down at the soda fountain in the drug store but had to take his drink out. In the movies at Montefore you had to go in the side and up the stairs and sit in the last four rows.

When you arrived on the train from Cincinnati the first thing you saw was the WHITE and COLORED signs at the depot. White people had one waiting room and we Negroes had another. We sat in only two cars and white people had the rest of the Train (Kennedy 65).

Being a black woman, the above image of racial discrimination had increased the sense of disenfranchisement Clara suffers. In "Blackness and Blood: Interpreting African American Identity", Lionel K. McPherson and Tommie Shelby (185) argue that "African American solidarity collective struggle for racial equality". As for Clara, identity is not only about "African American"; Clara confronts the predicament of being a woman as well; this woman is a pregnant wife aspires to be a writer. Here "identity is a complex and malleable construct as a result of its interaction and intersection with multiple factors pertaining to subjectivity" (Jerome et al 35). Clara is restricted by social values which evince in looking at her identity within various perspectives particularly as a black woman. In her comment on Kennedy's work bell hooks views Kennedy "problematizes the question of identity [and] black subjectivity, in ways that do not allow for a simplistic understanding of "blackness," of race, of what it means to be a black woman in the United States and abroad" (179). The way Kennedy tackles the theme of race in the play reflects a unique "construction of a female's identity" (hooks 182).

Because Clara is not able to enjoy life, she suffers for giving up her specified roles as a mother and as a wife. The only roles obtainable to Clara are those patterned by the whites in Hollywood; therefore she accepts to take Jean Peter's role of self-sacrificing wife at the beginning, yet later, her consciousness is restricted and she reproves herself for not wearing its mask properly. When she is aware of its "darkness" (Kennedy 78), which leads to her "floating anxiety" (Kennedy 68), Clara cannot justify playing the role that gives her a little

satisfaction. Eddie, her husband, supposed that Clara will play her proper role as a woman and wife, he is skeptical of her "obsession to be a writer" (Kennedy 75), he also thinks it is unnecessary for her to get any job at all since he has "enough money for ... [both of them] to live well" (Kennedy 75). But Clara was dreaming to be a writer since she was a young girl:

Ever since I was twelve I have secretly dreamed of being a writer. Everyone says it's unrealistic for a Negro to want to write.

Eddie says I've become shy and secretive and I can't accept the passage of time, and that my diaries consume me and that my diaries make me a spectator watching my life He thinks my life is one of my black and white movies that I love so ... with me playing a bit part (Kennedy 75).

Clara's hopeless struggle to find a way out of reservation encourages her search for self-identity which reflects Kennedy's search for identity as well. Kennedy once comments "As long as I can remember I've wanted to be Bette Davis I still want to be Bette Davis" (qtd. in Diamond 131). However, Clara finds the mask of the movie star insufficient to provide her the power she needs, as she still plays "a bit part" in the play. So, she employs the power of another mask when she exchanges her mask of being a wife with that of a writer. Because the social community compels her to choose between the two, Clara chooses to be a writer in order to get the power she lacks in her real life. Moreover, through writing Clara was trying to resist the internalized "oppression imposed" on her by social and biological forces, and she was trying to integrate her shattered self as well.

As she realizes her powerlessness, Clara starts to write her diary; her desire to be a dramatist and write the script of her own life reflects her hunger to catch the self-identity and to get the power she lacks in reality through playing the main starring role in her play. Clara enhances the power she needs for her text by making the white movie stars play out her own role. In "A Spectator Watching My Life", Deborah R. Geis (172) points out that

For Kennedy and for her alter ego Clara, the Hollywood films of the 1940s contain the promises of fulfillment and female power (as embodied in, for example the persona of Bette Davis) that permits the potential artist and dreamer/moviegoer to be a sort of visionary.

Geis discusses that Clara's longing for meeting with cultural models "embodies the ambivalent spectatorial status of the African-American woman whose subjectivity risks being undermined by her identification with an exclusionary cultural apparatus" (171). Clara's powerlessness to fit with the white movie heroines is shown through "the subversiveness of Kennedy's narrative strategy" (Geis 171).

In a patriarchal and colonial marginalized culture it is difficult for a woman to speak with power; it is the white male's voice which gives him the privilege to be a speaker and female should be a good listener who supposed to be silent. In *A Movie Star Has to Star in Black and White* Clara was searching her identity through a tool which is supposed to be masculine. In her discourse about

empowerment and social justice, Collins states "the struggle for a self-defined Black feminism occurs through an ongoing dialogue whereby action and thought inform one another" (30). In *A Movie Star* Kennedy presents the image of a black intellectual woman in a white world to show the image of powerlessness through the intersectionality oppression the African American woman suffers. Moreover, Clara's searching for identity has been symbolized by the "white" stars she selects to perform her role.

b. **"Alleged Freedom of the Individual versus the Factual Limitations"**

The second component in Dean's discussion of alienation is "normlessness" where he views that "the alleged freedom of the individual versus the factual limitations on his behavior" (755) may result in a failure to satisfy the essential significance of the individual, which leads to the loss of norms and create a sense of alienation. In *A Movie Star Has to Star in Black and White* the narrative construction of the "self" enables Kennedy to convert social vision into this self. We notice how Clara has been constructed in a way that makes the mission to be very complicated, due to the fact that she is a black woman. Both race and gender merged against her in a culture dominated by white man. As a female protagonist Clara is powerless to change this rule; it is her fate to be isolated from a culture she desires to embrace but prevented from claiming. In his article, "The Fission of Tennessee Williams's Plays into Adrienne Kennedy's", Philip C. Kolin points out that "in her theatre of (out)rage, Kennedy may have found in Williams' monologues potential for dramatizing the tormented selves and terrorizing cries of her talented, young black women" (50). In *A Movie Star*

young, creative black woman, Clara turns her life over to a series of movie stars . . . to express her traumas and hopes. Mirroring events and sets from three movies . . . Desperate for literary fame and Hollywood attention, both out of reach for a young black woman in the 1940's and 1950's, Clara transfers the ordinary details of her life into the voices of these glamorous, white movie stars (Kolin 68).

Clara's anger comes from a strong desire to separate herself from her other self for the sake of achieving her own identity. The presentation of Clara as a marginalized black woman is significant to function as a speaker for all African American women who suffer interlocking powerlessness. In his article "Adrienne Kennedy and the First Avant-Garde" Elinor Fuchs (83) views that "Kennedy emerges . . . as one who asks not, "How can I change the social order?" but "Where do I stand in the universe? What is my destiny? Is there redemption for me?" *A Movie Star* conveys "the transformational dream setting and the technique of corresponding levels" and here these exact questions can be asked by Clara.

In seeking the self-identity, Clara has employed writing as a tool to relief the troubles and hardships surrounded her. She also has chosen to present her life's

story through the journey in the fantasy realm of the Hollywood's movies; since this provides the riddance of her real life suffering. However, her fail in achieving the dream to be a famous dramatist turns her to be a confused alienated character. *A Movie Star Has to Star in Black and White* presents a unique critical vision on the disenfranchisement and intersectionality of the African-American woman. In the play, Kennedy placed each of the white actors into one of Clara's family's characters to depict the tragic life of the African Americans through Clara's family which represents a summary of agony and suffering; continual quarrels of the parents, attempt of suicide by the father, separation of the parents, racial discrimination, psychological depression, and a fatal accident of the brother (Sollors 528-529). Sollors finds the events in *A Movie Star*, actually, "complements a shorter passage in Kennedy's memoir" and he asserts the "autobiographical elements" reflected in the play by commenting:

Georgia and Cleveland are mentioned (where Kennedy's socialization took place), the father wears a Morehouse sweater (Kennedy's father C. W. Hawkins went to Morehouse College), the husband is sent to Korea (as was Kennedy's husband Joseph), and "Bette Davis" even mentions going to such movies as *A Place in the Sun*. (Sollors 529)

Each of Clara's family conveys the aching consequences of being black in a society of white dominance. Kennedy tackles the theme of racism in a very unique style by reflecting the hard life of a black family through the images of white families' happy life in the Hollywood films. Both Kennedy and her protagonist, Clara, have picked up writing as a means of escaping disenfranchisement. In writing they both have found the outlet to reach the self-identity. Yet, Clara's desire to be a dramatist has been rejected by the white society and by her husband, Eddie, who looked at it as "obsession" and advised her to conduct according to the patriarchal structure of family. Spite the rejections of her husband and society, Clara has kept on writing her play and in her monologues she always talks about how she has strived to finish it even when she had not been supported.

In the journey of self-discovery, Clara established two ways to probe her inner world; first she has written her own diary and second she has inserted Hollywood films in her writing. In doing so, she has established two worlds, the first world really belongs to her, and the second is a world where she escapes to. The second world of movies to which Clara escapes to search her identity is not a fit world for her, as these movies create false images of happy and contented housewives and fake dreams that if you become truly angelic, you will be like those movie-stars, as happy and contented as they are; secondly they exclude the representation of African-Americans making it impossible for Clara to identify herself with any white actor but instead making her see the reminder of her Otherness (Kilic 4).

Moreover, Clara's diaries exhaust her and make her "a spectator" who was "watching" her life but "playing a bit part" in it (Kennedy 75), because starring parts have been appointed to the whites.

Conclusion

With the intersectional axes of marginalization represented by race, gender and class, Clara was bewildered and confused. Unable to stand the circle of oppression and alienation, she picks up to escape through her skill of writing. In *A Movie Star Has to Star in Black and White*, the complicated images of alienation are drawn through inserting movie stars to play Clara's role. In the play the issues of disenfranchisement are well revealed through the images of racial discrimination and segregation in the period of Jim Crow laws. These images are reflected through Clara's long monologues. Referring to racial discrimination and "Savannah, Georgia in 1929" (Kennedy 65) and discussing gender issues in the play, Kennedy provides observations of the interlocking concerns of self-identity of the African American woman.

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