

**“America is an engine of racial oppression”:
Dramatization of White Feminism Misconception
in Eleanor Burgess’ *The Niceties***

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Abstract

Eleanor Burgess questions in *The Niceties* (2018) the credibility of American history in the form of the debate between a faculty white professor and her African American student. The playwright uses the exchanges between the two different ethnic characters to show the influence of their race on their perception of identity, equality, education and history. The play depicts the bias of the white in identifying culture and history presented by the white professor. The paper examines the role of white feminism in forming the misconception related to American history by denying the role of slavery in the American revolution. The study aims at exploring the impact of implicit bias of white feminism on women of color represented by the African American student whose active participations in various calls of rights are opposed by the professor. Moreover, the paper examines the duty of truth towards the past and how to reveal it. *The Niceties* is a contemporary American play which reveals that racism and gender do exist in the supposed democratic American culture.

Keywords: history, race, slavery, white feminism.

المستخلص

تنسأل الكاتبة اليانور برجيس في مسرحية "المجاملات" (2018) عن مصداقية التاريخ الأمريكي على شكل نقاش بين استاذة من اصول عرقية بيضاء و طالبتها الأمريكية من اصل افريقي. تستخدم الكاتب التبادل الحوارى بين الشخصيتين ذوات العرقيات المختلفة لاطهار تأثير العرق في تكوين مفهومهم للشخصية و المساواة و الثقافة و التاريخ. تصور المسرحية انحياز البيض في تعريف الثقافة و التاريخ المتمثلة بالاستاذة ذات العرق الابيض. يتناول البحث دور النسوية البيضاء في تشكيل المفهوم الخاطيء المتعلق بالتاريخ الأمريكي من خلال انكار دور العبودية في الثورة الأمريكية. تهدف الدراسة إلى استكشاف تأثير التحيز الضمني للنسوية البيضاء على النساء ذوات البشرة الملونة ممثلة بالطالبة الأمريكية الأفريقية التي تعارض الأستاذة مشاركتها النشطة في هي. مختلف دعوات الحقوق. كما تبحث الورقة في واجب الحقيقة تجاه الماضي وكيفية كشفه. مسرحية تكشف مسرحية " المجاملات " أن العنصرية والنسوية البيضاء موجودان في الثقافة الأمريكية الديمقراطية المفترضة.

الكلمات المفتاحية:

التاريخ، العرق، العبودية، النسوية البيضاء

Introduction

Since the beginning of establishing the United States of America the two notions, whiteness and blackness exist together. The reference to them is to mention a system of inequality based on race. The white elites created the white supremacy to maintain their position in the society. At the same time the existence of black slavery reinforces the white supremacy (Iseminger, 2021). Most of the early movements started with political intentions. Feminism is a political movement that has later expanded into research project in women studies (Richter, 2007). In her book, *White Women's Rights: The Racial Origins of Feminism in the United States* (1999), Louise Michele Newman reveals that women's movement in the United States which started in the late nineteenth century is racial-based movement because it has two aims of civilizing mission and serving imperial projects whether at home or abroad. Thus, the foundation of early American feminism was associated with racial motives. Moreover, early American feminism, which was led by white women, was an attempt to assimilate the other ethnic groups whom white elites regard as their inferiors. Newman says, “racism was not just an unfortunate sideshow in the performances of feminist theory. Rather it was center stage” (p. 183). In her book *Against White Feminism* Rafia Zakaria (2021) presents how white feminism groups women of color as the other and exclude them.

In *The Niceties* (2018) Eleanor Burgess explores the role of race in knowing the truth. The play is about debate between an old white woman professor and her young African American woman student. The debate starts in delicate and polite tone in which both try to prove the correctness of their perspective of American history. However, it develops to be heated and violent when the racial notion unveils its influence on judgment. Janine Bosko, the professor, holds white feminism perspective in comparison to her student, Zoe Reed, who is African American.

White Feminism Misconception in *The Niceties*

Feminism is defined as a movement that calls for the rights of marginalized people economically, socially, and culturally speaking. However, feminism, which is supposed to be universal, has been divided by excluding women of color. Thus, white feminism adopts a white racial frame which makes it difficult to examine racial inequalities (Moon & Holling, 2020). Burgess in *The Niceties* explores white feminism perspective formed by the Professor of history, Janine Bosko, who is challenged by her African American student Zoe Reed. The play is divided into two acts with the same setting place which is the office of Professor's Jonine's. Act one is set in March 2016. Zoe studies poly science and she has a course of history with Professor Janine. Zoe is waiting for her professor to finish correcting her assignment which she has recently submitted. Most of the corrections are a matter of proofreading.

Janine objects on that Zoe's argument in her assignment is unsound as Janine reads: "The American Revolution was only possible because of the it has been existence of slavery " (Burgess, 2019, p.73). Zoe argues that it has been Janine who inspired her to have this argument because she has mentioned in her lectures that most revolutions have two phases. The moderate revolution by the upper middle-class people who make constitutional changes. The second phase is the radical one usually led by new popular leaders who revolt against the first phase for having real injustices. Consequently, civil wars usually take place. Accordingly, Zoe has formed a theory that the slaves were the real ones who suffered in the time of American Revolution, they were supposed to be the leaders of the second phase of revolution. However, because they were slaves, they could not take a role. Thus, the American Revolution has only one moderate

phase without the second radical one. Zoe’s theory is totally rejected by her white professor who believes that there are “a lot prevalent theories about why the American revolution was so moderate” (Burgess, 2019, p.74). Professor Janine insists it is one of highly interesting imaginative arguments which anyone who has studied the American Revolution would prove its incorrectness.

Janine makes fun of the footnotes in Zoe's assignment, which state that " Wealthy and poor white were unified by their interest in preserving slavery " (Burgess, 2019, p.76) as she claims that citing from online sources is not credible enough. However, she admires the section on the white standard of living. Janine advises Zoe to go and search the library for books in which she finds the truth. Zoe objects telling her such books do not exist as slaves were not given the chance to tell the truth and document it historically. Zoe tries to prove her point by saying "because I know how race affects people I mean we don’t have a bunch of letter by a bunch of slave women saying ‘hey, I hate being raped’” (Burgess, 2019, p.80). Janine thinks writing about history must depend on facts rather than “feelings that were there” (Burgess, 2019, p.80). Janine’s insistence on facts is her justification for her deliberate ignorance of slavery. The irony lies in Janine’s admitting it is harder to write “a really excellent paper about black history than about white history” (Burgess, 2019, p.83). Yet, she insists if Zoe wants to have high mark, she has to prove it by documents from books. Janine acts as a white feminist driven by her racial prejudice. Paula Taylor (2004) defines racism as an “unethical disregard for people who belong to particular race” (p.33).

Zoe is an activist in the Campus Activism as she is involved in preparing a protest against the first female supreme court justice, Sandra O'Connor. O'Connor seems to be racist because she has voted 39 out of 41

against decisions involving racial minorities. Janine is shocked to know that a woman like Zoe dares to protest the first female supreme court justice. Janine tries to justify O'Connor's decision and sides by her. Janine offers to give Zoe a week to reform her paper. Zoe is busy with many activists' commitments which Janine does not approve of thinking that Zoe wastes a great chance of doing her homework by organizing protests.

Janine thinks it is a flawed assignment which does not deserve a high mark. Zoe is upset about Janine's way of belittling her students because she mispronounces some students' names who are from minority groups. Zoe confronts Janine about her racist attitude which makes her unfit to be a teacher. Janine makes jokes about her students' mistakes and mocks them. Her racist attitude is clear when she describes those who depend on online sources, as 'digital natives' which is called by another professor "technological savages" (Burgess, 2019, p.77). It is ironic to be said by a professor of history who knows the difference between using native and savages. To use these two words as synonyms confirms the racial attitude. However, she justifies this confusion by saying she means, "technologically advanced / people " (Burgess, 2019, p.90). Zoe accused her of imposing her own ideas without listening to others' ideas, especially when they are a woman of color's ideas: " You like white ideas, you get white ideas, so you are not qualified to critique my thinking " (Burgess, 2019, p.91).

It seems that Zoe has written all the racial comments said by her professor. Zoe reads a quote by Janine: "America was beyond lucky to have Washington and Jefferson as two of its first three leaders" (Burgess, 2019, p.92). The two are known of their racist's views and their support of slavery. Zoe tells her:

a land of equality and opportunity for white Americans because they stole their land. And then they didn't pay their workers. When 20 percent of the population has literally nothing, the other 80 percent gets more. That’s your land of opportunity. And that’s why that 80 percent was so unified and happy with their moderate democratic government and so able to have the most successful prosperous un-radical revolution of all time. Teach that. Spend your last 101 lectures on that (Burgess, 2019, p.94).

Janine thinks that slavery is not the most important thing in the history of America. She believes she has to spend her lectures on the achievement of democracy because “We changed the world. All men are created equal” (Burgess, 2019, p.94). She supports her argument by quoting Jefferson though she knows he excluded women, slaves and white men without property. She admires him and follows his attitude in valuing the white elites. Zoe replies to her; "America is an engine of racial oppression" (Burgess, 2019, p.95). Zoe’s replay presents the fault source of pride in America’s achievements. Zoe continues reading from her notes to refer to the things she should not have to hear, “In an embarrassment of riches, America was blessed with not only Washington and Hamilton, but James Madison as well” (Burgess, 2019, p.95). Janine defends herself saying: “justice is not obvious, history is carried out by flawed, imperfect human beings” (Burgess, 2019, p.95).

Some feminists believe that women’s oppression is understood within class oppression in which race could play a role (Selden, 1988). Zoe gets angry as she confronts Janine with her intended carelessness about the perspectives of the students of color. Zoe questions her professor’s choice of the curriculum which does not include lectures about slavery in

American history, the suffering of African Americans and their oppression by the white Americans. Zoe believes that Janine's view of African Americans confirms the white notion of superiority by excluding other ethnic groups. Janine has marginalized the African Americans, just like her white ancestors, by excluding their role and contributions. White feminism is criticized because it centers on white women disregarding other marginalized groups of women of color. It results in having white feminist perspective (Barah, 2023). Zoe tries to give a voice to them in the history of America because they are part of it. She tells her professor: "I need you to say that whatever else it stands for, America has systematically persecuted one part of its populations, in a way that has benefited you" (Burgess, 2019, p. 97). It serves Janine's attitude as white woman. Janine assures her that "No one wants to hear more about racism" (Burgess, 2019, p. 97) which is ironic because she believes in it. Janine has made a curriculum that prefers white race at the expense of another race. For Zoe it is a racist intention and action. Zoe has recorded their meeting as Janine tries to grab the mobile, however, Zoe is able to send the recording to the public. White feminism has discursive violence by disregarding women of color's perspectives (Moon & Holling, 2020). The violent moment at the end of act one is a consequence of Janine's white concepts.

Act two is set after a month when Zoe comes to see her professor who wants to apologize to Zoe and thanks her because she realizes certain points. Janine is going to add a chapter in her new book about the role of minority populations in revolutions. Janine suggests making a joint statement in which she expresses her thanks for future concerns she will have in her teaching. She lets Zoe free to choose what she likes to mention as Zoe suggests making the campus a positive place for students of color. Zoe is concerned about the necessity to have certain changes including

subjects for students of color. However, their agreement is not settled because Zoe asks to dismiss Janine from teaching. Zoe believes that America needs a radical revolution which will be led by people of color. The playwright ends the play with a look of fear on Zoe's face as "we hear something that sounds like Trump's inaugural address. Maybe we hear something that sounds like gunshots" (Burgess, 2019, p.125). Zakaria (2021) refers to the reality that racial differences make mutual understanding impossible. Zoe's fear of the future at the end of the play confirms the assumption that racial divisions are enforced in Trump's era.

Burgess in her play explores the superficial relationship between Janine and Zoe. The play begins with what seems to be mutual respect, however, the events reveal the fragility of this respect which is shattered eventually. Both women treat each other in a superficial nice way, yet violence starts the moment Zoe feels the deliberate exclusion of her theory as a woman of color. Zakaria (2021) describes the kinship with middle-class women as superficial. Thus, many institutions involved in feminist policy and making refuse to regard the perspective and the experience of women of color because they consider them as “a strike against applicants, claiming they will be ‘less objective’ because of it” (p.6). Upon this, Zakaria criticizes their lie that there is one neutral perspective.

Conclusion

The Niceties dramatizes the misconception of white feminism through the debate upon historical issue between a white professor and her African American student. The professor believes and acts according to her racial privilege race assuming the correctness of her views in telling the truth concerning history. The African American student confronts the racial inequality and its role in the marginalization of the role of slaves in the history of American revolution. The role of marginalization is played by

the white professor who tries to impose her conceptions as she believes in the universality of white feminist concerns and agendas. The question about the credibility of history and truth is raised by the playwright, who intends not to reach reconciliation at the end of the play. The mutual disagreement at the end depicts the deep roots of racial inequality.

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