

Beyond Movie Star Fantasies: The Manipulation of the Hollywood Movies in Adrienne Kennedy's *A Movie Star Has To Star In Black And White*

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Adrienne Kennedy's renowned play *A Movie Star Has to Star in Black and White* is primarily preoccupied with the personal quest of a 'Negro woman' for identity. Clara is a thirty-three years old lady who struggles within a male-dominated world that puts social barriers upon her in nearly every area of her life. In both public and domestic spheres, Clara is imposed on some proscribed roles and is expected to adopt the model of submissive, domestic, and selfless woman. Unable to fulfill the society's expectations, Clara is gradually alienated both from her surrounding and herself, trying to explore different aspects of her identity "that have not been allowed to reconcile themselves into a cohesive whole" and failing at the same time in her attempt to create a "harmonic, dynamic" union (Stephen 841). This inner exploration of Clara takes the form of a film performed by white actors within recreated scenes from the Hollywood movies –*Now, Voyager* (1942), *Viva Zapata* (1952), and *A Place in the Sun* (1951). 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 Americans.

The leading roles are played by Hollywood actors "who look exactly like ... Bette Davis, Paul Henreid, Jean Peters, Marlon Brando, Montgomery Clift and Shelley Winters" in their movie roles (844). The supporting roles are played by the 'real' characters, the mother, the father, and the husband. Clara herself, on the other hand, plays only 'a bit role'. Instead of playing episodes from her life, she prefers to watch them performed by alien actors. This technique is consciously employed by Kennedy to illustrate Clara's turning away from herself when she is not able to settle her internal war caused by her inner struggle to conform the society's expectations. In the beginning of the play, Bette Davis speaking in the name of Clara, expresses her anguish over her failure to become "an angel with glowing wings and cover them with peace ... The only reality I wanted never came true ... to be their angel of mercy to unite them [her parents]" (845). She fiercely blames herself for the divorce of her parents even if she has nothing to do with it. This feeling originates from what Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar claims, "mythic masks" created by patriarchal texts that all woman must stick to the images of 'angel' and "must kill the angel's necessary opposite ... the 'monster'" within themselves (596). This duality is a crucial part of woman identity. During her life, every woman lives this hesitation to remain angelic, enjoying submissiveness, modesty, or selflessness and to engage in some

monstrous action at the expense of exclusion since it is unfeminine and therefore “unsuited to a gentle life of ‘contemplative purity’” (604). Throughout the play, Clara and also her mother constantly criticize themselves for failing to become an ‘angel.’ Clara once says, “Eddie, do you think I have a floating anxiety? You said everyone in Korea had floating anxiety. I think I might have it. (Pause) Do you think I’m catatonic?” (847) She thinks the source of her trouble is an anxiety disorder characterized by excessive and often irrational worry about everyday things. She cannot attribute the cause of her trouble to anyone else but herself because it is the way women are disciplined that if they have a problem with their lives, it is because of their incompatibility with angelic definitions. For this reason, Clara repeatedly refuses the fact that she is not happy when her mother seeks the reason for her children’s unhappiness in herself: “I don’t know what I did to make my children so unhappy” (848).

While both Clara and her mother suffer from incapability to come to terms with the patriarchal definitions of angelic woman, Kennedy points to Hollywood movies as both the cause and result of their misery since they simultaneously perpetuate the old mythic patriarchal definitions of women and produce new ones to serve the ideologies. As Clara stresses her failure to achieve a united identity, “each day I wonder with what or with whom can I co-exist in a true union?” (845), it becomes clear that she is in the “position of the ‘alienated subject,’ which seeks to re-inscribe itself as the ego ideal, but which can only do so at the imperfect level of identification with an object” (Geis 173-174). In search of this object to identify herself with, Clara turns to the symbolic realm of the movies. She inserts herself into the context of Hollywood movies because of “the seamlessness and coherence promised” (Geis 175) by the way they depict the standards of beauty and romance. Failed to find the coherence on her own, Clara readily translates her experience into “the experience of the Idealized Subject” (Geis 175) with the hope of reaching a true union. By the same token, Kennedy reveals in her scrapbook, *People who Led to My Play*, the powerful fascination Hollywood held for her since her childhood. The autobiographical dimension in her play is so forceful that it may serve as an explanation for her distinguished use of Hollywood movies. About Bette Davis in *Now, Voyager*, she writes:

In this avid dream of transformation I still also daydreamed of myself as this character. She was plain. She was troubled. She was controlled by her mother and then one day she took a trip on an ocean liner and total fulfillment came to her because of this trip on the ocean. She became beautiful and loved. One day I’m going to take a trip on an ocean liner, I thought, and all of my dark thoughts and feelings, all my feelings that I don’t belong anywhere, will go away. (qtd in Geis 172)

Kennedy illustrates the Hollywood’s great influence on her since it offers an escape from the problems and hardships of her real life by granting refuge in the fantasy realm. Clara is in the same situation searching for an ‘ego ideal’ in the cinema, where the roles for women are limited either as a supporter of men to further his success or as a “sexual plaything readily cast

aside in favor of a purer woman” (Stephen 843). Again the idea of ‘angel’ and ‘monster’ is highlighted since there is no third alternative offered to identify women with. When Clara cannot adjust herself to any of these ‘correct’ roles for women determined by movies, she becomes more and more alienated and as she is more alienated, she still turns to movies longing for a true union. Therefore, it becomes like a vicious circle in which Clara’s efforts to break off her alienation by turning to the symbolic world of movies results in aggravation of her alienation as she cannot live up to their idealizations.

Hollywood movies not only complicate women’s struggle to become reconciled, but also discriminate black people in America by allowing no recognition of them. Clara as a black woman lives this double exclusion. In a long monologue, her mother reveals the segregation they are confronted daily in the form of separate but equal doctrine:

In our Georgiana 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 center of Main Street was a fountain and white people drank on one side and Negroes drank on the other side. (845)

“[I]n a culture saturated by representations of happy brides and contented moms,” (Douglas 8) the miserable life of a black family would evoke nothing but repulsion and disturbance. Kennedy criticizes this situation by positioning a black family within the context of the Hollywood narrative and by making famous white actors perform their lives. Kennedy does not avoid from explicitly depicting the tragic life of Clara’s family: “the brother has an almost lethal accident; there are flashbacks to a suicide attempt by the father, the separation of father and mother, mental depression, and the mother’s detailed account of racial segregation” (Sollors 528-9). As Sollors also argues, father’s suicide attempt is actually “an expression of a yearning for an escape to freedom, a return to Africa, or spiritual transcendence in death” (517). Each character carries the painful results of being black in a society that remains blind to them. However, Kennedy uncovers the racism by bitterly displaying the tough life of a black family as opposed to the romanticized, problem-free and artificially happy life of the white families illustrated by Hollywood movies.

As a way of escape from sexism and racism abound in the Hollywood movies, Kennedy offers the alternative of writing as a means of “engaging in self-discovery” (Stephen 841). Clara struggles to finish her play even if she can not find support neither from her parents nor from her husband, Eddie, who regards her occupation with writing only as an ‘obsession.’ He expresses his discontent saying: “I have enough money for us to live well with my teachings. We could all be so happy” (851). Even if Eddie demands her to behave according to the patriarchal constructs of family, Clara nevertheless, retains her writing and frequently talks about it: “It is going to be called a *Lesson in Dead Language*. The main image is a girl in a white organdy dress

covered with menstrual blood” (849). *Lesson in Dead Language* is a reference to Kennedy’s another play with the same name.

This play frighteningly shows what the onset of menstruation means to young female students in a classroom surrounded by Roman figures and taught by a White Dog, or, significantly, a white bitch. Their white organdy dresses are suddenly stained with big splotches of blood. The lesson they must learn is limitation, restriction, being left behind while husbands advance their careers, as was Kennedy. These girls reveal a growing numbed catatonia at the recognition that they are what is to be sacrificed in this sacrificial logic, as menstrual blood becomes the marker of the guilt and shame assigned to young girls the moment their bodies are capable, not of beauty or ironic masquerade, but of reproduction. (Kintz 76)

Kennedy uses menstrual blood establishing a link with artistic creation. As menstrual blood has long been associated with uncleanliness and impurity, she makes this female taboo come out of closet by foregrounding it as a representation of female creativity. Besides, as Geis argues, “the ink, like the blood, is black –a source of pain in the sense that Clara ... is ‘writing her wounds,’ but a source of power in the sense that she is creating, in black, something that comes from inside of her” (177). Finally finding something that exclusively belongs to her, Clara is able to escape from the conventional narrative of Hollywood in her unconventional writing.

Conclusively, in *A Movie Star has to Star in Black and White*, the ostensible heroin, Clara, engages in a self-discovery, where she tries to reach a united identity by reconciling its fragmented elements into a whole. However, she wrongfully searches for the true union in the Hollywood movies. The Hollywood fantasies are unlikely to “satisfy the needs Clara calls upon them to fulfill” (Geis 175) since for the first thing, they 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.

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