



Navigating Racial Identity: Double Consciousness and Self-Discovery in "The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man"

التنقل في الهوية العرقية: الوعي المزدوج واكتشاف الذات في رواية "السيرة الذاتية لرجل ملون سابق"

Ohood Saleh Al-Aqeel

عهود صالح العقيل

Assistant professor at the Department of English, Al-Jouf University, Al-Jouf, Saudi Arabia.

أستاذ مساعد، قسم اللغة الإنجليزية، جامعة الجوف، الجوف، المملكة العربية السعودية

Received:14/09/2023 Revised:01/01/2024 Accepted: 22/01/2024

تاريخ التقديم:2023/09/14 تاريخ ارسال التعديلات: 2024/01/01 تاريخ القبول:2024/01/22

الملخص:

رواية "سيرة ذاتية لرجل سابق ملون" لجيمس ويلدون جونسون، المنشورة عام 1912، تتبع رحلة بطل ثنائي الأصل غير المسمى الذي يتنقل في تعقيدات الهوية العرقية، والمرور، واكتشاف الذات في أمريكا في بداية القرن العشرين. تستعرض هذه المقالة موضوع إزاحة الستار، باستخدام النظرية التداخلية والتحليل الأدبي. تجسد تجارب البطل مفهوم الوعي المزدوج لدى دو بوا، حيث يتجاذب ما بين كونه أسودًا وأمريكياً بينما يسعى لقبول الذات. تسلط المقالة الضوء على التوتر بين التقدير النظري للبطل للثقافة السوداء والابتعاد العملي عنها، واطهار تعقيدات الهوية ثنائية الأصل في مجتمع مقسوم عنصريًا. مع نضج البطل، تظهر العلاقة المتطورة مع تراثه. رحلة بحث عن اكتشاف الذات والقبول. تؤكد استكشافات السرد للوعي المزدوج تواصل الكفاح من أجل المساواة العرقية والهوية الذاتية في السياقين التاريخي والمعاصر. من خلال تحليل معقد، تسهم هذه المقالة في فهم أعمق للتفاعل المعقد بين العرق والهوية وتوقعات المجتمع، كما تُظهرها أعمال جونسون الرائدة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الثقافة الأمريكية الأفريقية، العبور، الهوية العرقية، الوعي المزدوج، التداخلية .

Abstract:

James Weldon Johnson's novel, "The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man," was published in 1912. The protagonist, a biracial man, goes through a journey of racial identity, self-discovery, and passing, during the early 20th century in America. This article explores the theme of shedding the veil, using intersectionality theory and literary analysis. The protagonist's experiences reflect W.E.B. Du Bois' concept of double consciousness, where he struggles with being both black and American while trying to accept himself. The article highlights the tension between the protagonist's theoretical appreciation for black culture and his practical distancing from it, as well as revealing the complexities of biracial identity in a racially divided society. As the protagonist ages, his relationship with his heritage evolves, and he seeks self-discovery and acceptance. The narrative's exploration of double consciousness emphasizes the ongoing struggles for racial equality and self-identity in historical and contemporary contexts. Through nuanced analysis, this article contributes to a deeper understanding of the intricate interplay between race, identity, and societal expectations, as portrayed in Johnson's groundbreaking work.

Keywords: African-American Culture, Passing, Biracial Identity, Double Consciousness, Intersectionality.

Introduction

The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man is a novel by James Weldon Johnson, published in (1912). It follows the story of an unnamed biracial (mixed-race) protagonist's experiences navigating race, identity, and culture in early 20th-century America. The protagonist's journey involves embracing and rejecting various aspects of his racial and cultural background.

The novel is a powerful piece of literature that delves deep into a young biracial man's struggles as he navigates his identity in America. The book is significant not only for its honest portrayal of race but also for the challenges faced by mixed-race individuals in a world that often seeks to categorize and label people based on superficial characteristics.

Throughout the story, the theme of racism's damaging effects on African Americans' mental health, behavior, and cultural heritage is central. The protagonist's journey toward self-acceptance is a poignant reminder of the importance of embracing one's identity in a world that often seeks to categorize and label people based on superficial characteristics. It is a thought-provoking exploration of what it means to be an individual in a society that often seeks to define us by our race, gender, or other external characteristics.

James Weldon Johnson's "The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man" features a narrator with an ambiguous personality. While he struggles to accept his identity, he also profoundly appreciates black culture in theory but often rejects it in practice. This paradox is one that many mixed-race individuals face as they struggle to reconcile their dual heritage in a world that constantly seeks to force them to choose one identity over the other.

Despite the protagonist's challenges, the novel ultimately offers a message of hope and resilience. Through his journey towards self-acceptance, he can embrace both sides of his identity and find a sense of belonging in a world that often seeks to exclude those who do not fit neatly into predefined categories. It is a powerful reminder that we are all complex individuals with unique experiences and identities and that our differences should be celebrated rather than used to divide us. Intersectionality is a framework that acknowledges how a person's identity, including race, gender, class, and sexuality, intersect and interact to shape their experiences and oppressions.

In the case of the novel, intersectionality theory shows that the protagonist of "*The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man*" experiences and struggles are shaped by his biracial identity and the intersecting systems of racism and discrimination he encounters. Intersectionality reveals how one's race and ability to pass as white intersect with other identity factors, including gender, socioeconomic status, and cultural background.

For example, the protagonist's ability to pass as white grants him certain privileges and opportunities not available to those visibly identified as black. This privilege intersects with his gender as he navigates societal expectations and norms associated with masculinity

while grappling with his racial identity. Additionally, his socioeconomic background and access to education further shape his experiences and choices.

However, as he navigates both the black and white worlds, he experiences a sense of double consciousness—a term coined by W.E.B. Du Bois (2) to describe the psychological conflict experienced by African Americans who had to view themselves both through their own eyes and the eyes of a racially prejudiced society. The protagonist is constantly aware of how others perceive him based on his skin color and how that perception shapes his interactions and opportunities. By applying an intersectional lens, this research can delve deeper into the complexities of the characters' identities and experiences, acknowledging how multiple forms of oppression and privilege intersect to shape their lives. It enables a more nuanced analysis of the novel's themes and underscores the interconnected nature of social identities and systems of power.

Methodology

This article examines the theme of shedding the veil in *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, drawing from a range of literary and cultural studies scholarship. In particular, the article examines how Johnson's novel engages with the concept of double consciousness, a term coined by W.E.B. Du Bois to describe the experience of being both black and American. The article also draws on the theory of intersectionality. This theory acknowledges that various social categories, including race, gender, class, and sexuality, influence people's identities. These intersecting identities can result in distinct experiences of privilege or oppression. The article's analysis focuses on the protagonist's navigation of his racial identity through close reading of the novel. Additionally, the article draws on secondary sources such as literary criticism and historical scholarship to contextualize Johnson's novel within broader discussions of race and identity in America.

Shedding the Veil: Double Consciousness and Racial Identity in *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*

The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man is structured around the protagonist's attempts to understand his identity. The novel opens with the ex-colored man, who is never named, reflecting on his past and how he has navigated the complexities of his racial identity. From an early age, he becomes aware of how he is different from other children. His father, who is white, is absent from his life, and his mother is black. The novel's protagonist decides to "pass" as white, concealing his African American heritage. This choice reflects a rejection of his black identity to access the privileges of whiteness.

For instance, in one part of the novel, the protagonist recounts an incident where he witnesses a lynching while passing as a white man. He is emotionally affected by the event and realizes that he could easily have been a victim had he not been passing as white. This experience deepens his understanding of the racial

injustices black people face and forces him to confront the moral implications of his choice to pass.

To make a complete pass, the protagonist begins rejecting aspects of black culture, such as music, which is a sign of his identity. He became a skilled pianist, leaving black musical forms like ragtime, which were associated with African-American culture at the time. He prefers classical music and European musical styles, believing them more sophisticated and cultured. He also avoids racial struggles as another sign of his attempt to pass. The protagonist intentionally avoids getting involved in the racial efforts and activism of the time. He distances himself from the Civil Rights Movement and the fight for racial equality, suggesting a rejection of his black heritage. However, at the novel's end, the protagonist fully embraces his black identity and immerses himself in the world of African-American music. He performs in a jazz band and experiences a strong sense of belonging and cultural connection. This biracial identity is further complicated because the ex-colored man can pass as white. He also grapples with the limitations and challenges black musicians face due to racism and societal prejudices. Evidently, the protagonist's ability to pass as white is influenced by various factors, such as gender, class, and education, which shape his experiences.

Throughout the novel, the protagonist's experiences highlight the complexities of racial identity and the internal conflicts biracial individuals face. His journey highlights how society's perceptions and prejudices influence one's sense of self, necessitating a constant negotiation between one's identity and how others perceive them. This internal struggle and the concept of double consciousness are central themes in "The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man."

In *The Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois 2 (p 861) defined double consciousness as a "sense of always looking at oneself through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity". Johnson's protagonist loses his sense of self, surrendering to his fears of the dominant prejudices held by people in the United States. His weakness lies in his preoccupation with others and his double consciousness, in which he constantly evaluates his self-worth according to his anxieties about being involved in a world where there is no place for him and no hope for multifaceted individuality.

Throughout the novel, the ex-colored man is haunted by the concept of double consciousness, the idea that he is both black and American and that these identities conflict. According to Du Bois 2 (p3), "One ever feels his twoness - an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body". The ex-colored man's journey can be seen as an attempt to reconcile these two identities and find a sense of belonging.

At the outset of the narrative, the storyteller confesses to experiencing a sense of culpability and seeking solace. According to the novel he feels like an "unfound-out criminal" while is "seeking relief" from his self-reproach. But as the story nears its conclusion, it becomes apparent that the only "offense" he committed was concealing his African-American background. The irony of

this circumstance lies in the realization that his "passing" fails to provide him with the mental calm he sought despite the affluence it bestowed upon him. The ex-colored man tries to escape his blackness and pass as white. He attends a prestigious school for white children and is even invited to join a white fraternity. However, he ultimately rejects this identity and decides to embrace his blackness. This decision is precipitated by his encounter with a group of black musicians who introduce him to the world of jazz and blues. As a result, the ex-colored man can connect with his blackness through music and find a sense of community.

The narrator's experience of double consciousness in *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* echoes the concept explored by W. E. B—Du Bois in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903). Du Bois 2 (p8) describes double consciousness as the "the African American's sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others", and the protagonist of Johnson's novel embodies this dual awareness. The narrator constantly operates on two levels of consciousness, navigating the complexities of his black-and-white identities. Unlike many African Americans confined to their racial identity, the narrator can move between the black and white worlds at will, intensifying the burden of his double consciousness 5 (p .76).

However, the ex-colored man's journey is far from easy. He must navigate the intricate web of racial hierarchies that pervade American society, where whiteness is privileged over blackness. The limitations of his racial identity become apparent as he attempts to find his place in a culture that categorizes individuals based on race. Although he can pass as white, he is neither entirely accepted by the white community nor fully embraced by the black community. This liminal existence between two worlds forces the protagonist to confront the complexities of his identity and grapple with his place in a society that perpetuates the black-and-white binary. In the novel, the narrator realizes that shedding the veil of double consciousness requires him to reject the restrictive confines of the black-and-white binary and embrace his unique identity.

Furthermore, he begins to understand that the path to self-acceptance lies in transcending the societal expectations imposed upon him. This transformative realization is encapsulated when the narrator reflects, "I had ceased to think of my race as a disadvantage; I had ceased to think of it as a disadvantage only. I had come to think of it as an advantage" 5(p134). This quotation highlights the narrator's journey towards embracing his identity and recognizing the value and strength of his racial heritage.

Through the protagonist's experiences, Johnson illuminates the challenges faced by individuals caught between racial boundaries, shedding light on the importance of self-discovery and self-acceptance. The ex-colored man's story serves as a powerful exploration of the complexities of identity and the transformative journey toward embracing one's unique self beyond the limitations of societal expectations and binaries. Many people's perceptions of race require clarification, which can lead to misinterpretations of historical and

contemporary events. As a result, the color line was not only a problem of the twentieth century, as Du Bois stated, but also of the twenty-first. This is why the novel *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* by James Weldon Johnson is still relevant today. The novel effectively portrays the profound significance of Du Bois' concept of double consciousness, showcasing its true meaning as well as the reactions blacks may have to their current state "within the Veil"; additionally, Johnson appears to support Du Bois' reasoning that the ultimate goal should be a society in which double consciousness cannot exist because the discourse becomes one of absolute equality.

As the narrator of *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* grapples with his identity and existence within a racially divided society, he reflects on the complexities of double consciousness. He experiences the duality of being black and passing as white, which aligns with Du Bois' concept. As the narrator contemplates his position, he observes, "I had been made to feel my race. I had been made to feel that there was some objection to the blood of my father and mother flowing in my veins and to the blood of my sister and brother staining my skin" 5(p23). These words highlight the external pressures and societal limitations imposed upon individuals with mixed-race heritage.

The concept must be investigated before *The Autobiography* can be interpreted as a representation of double consciousness. As a result, observing the narrator's behavior throughout the work leads to the conclusion that the narrator of *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* accepts black culture in theory but rejects it in practice. The narrator's character is defined by ambiguities that allow him to identify with and remove himself from the black culture simultaneously. This internal conflict is captured when the narrator confesses, "I had been away from my people so long that whatever race prejudice I had in my heart had been, in a measure at least, eradicated" 5(p51). This quotation underscores the narrator's struggle to reconcile his connection to black culture while being influenced by his assimilation into white society. One explanation is the narrator's complicated relationship with his racial identity. As a biracial person, the narrator can pass for white and thus has access to certain privileges and possibilities that black people do not have. However, he is conscious of the limitations of this privilege and the ambiguity and uncertainty of his identity.

In principle, the narrator's embrace of black culture can be seen as a way of affirming his identity and finding a sense of belonging. He pays tribute to black heroes, writers, and artists as a way of recognizing the contributions of black people to American culture and history. However, the narrator's rejection of black culture in practice can be seen as a way of distancing himself from the negative stereotypes and prejudices of blackness. This rejection of blackness in practice is most evident in the narrator's decision to pass as white and join a white fraternity. While he can embrace black culture in principle, he is unwilling to fully embrace his blackness in practice, fearing the social and economic repercussions.

Intersectionality can shed light on the experiences of other characters, such as the black musicians who

introduce the protagonist to the world of jazz and blues. Their experiences as black individuals in a racially segregated society intersect with their passion for music and cultural heritage.

In *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, as a narrator-agent, the protagonist's formal, Victorian style emphasizes his high degree of self-consciousness. First-person narration personalizes and internally focalizes the narrated situations, allowing readers to delve into the protagonist's thoughts and experiences. Furthermore, scholar William J. Maxwell 6(p231) explores the theme of passing and its implications in the novel. Maxwell asserts that "passing functions as a powerful metaphor for the complexity of racial identity, illustrating the protagonist's constant negotiation of his dual consciousness". This analysis highlights the protagonist's ability to pass as white, adding another layer of tension and internal conflict to his journey. However, despite this personal perspective, the protagonist often distances himself from other characters and situations, revealing his sense of being an outsider.

The theme of double consciousness is recurrent throughout the novel, illustrating the protagonist's complex self-awareness. He constantly grapples with the duality of his racial identity, as exemplified by his encounters and interactions with various individuals. As he reflects on his experiences, the narrator confesses, "I had been made to feel my race. I had been made to feel that there was some objection to the blood of my father and mother flowing in my veins and to the blood of my sister and brother staining my skin" 5(p23). This quotation underscores the external pressures and societal limitations imposed upon him due to his mixed-race heritage.

The protagonist's inability to fully connect with the world around him further accentuates his sense of otherness and contributes to his tendency to maintain a distance from his own identity. As a result, he becomes fascinated by and increasingly detached from the people he encounters, often observing them from a distant, detached perspective. This detachment is evident when he states, "I studied them curiously, but felt myself apart from them" 5(p37). These words highlight his struggle to fully engage with others and his perpetual feeling of being an outsider. Another critic, Claudia Tate, examines the protagonist's navigation of racial boundaries and the limitations imposed on him by society. Tate 9(p213) argues that "Johnson's novel reveals the extent to which society circumscribes the protagonist's life, limiting his options and forcing him into positions where he must confront his own identity". This viewpoint emphasizes the impact of societal structures on the ex-colored man's journey and highlights the profound challenges he faces in reconciling his racial identity.

The tension within the narrator's personality stems from his conflicting desires to embrace his identity and his fear of the consequences that come with it. The social and historical context of the novel, marked by racial segregation and discrimination, amplifies this tension. The protagonist navigates a complex terrain where he must carefully navigate the expectations and prejudices of society. This delicate balancing act is expressed when he admits, "I had been away from my people so long that

whatever race prejudice I had in my heart had been, in a measure at least, eradicated" 5(p51). This quotation illuminates his internal struggle as he reconciles his connection to black culture with the influence of his assimilation into white society.

In the final chapter of *The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man*, (5) the protagonist details his successful life as a white man in New York, securing a well-paying job, excelling in real estate investment, and gaining access to high society. He becomes renowned for his musical talent and falls in love with a white singer. However, his attempt to propose reveals his true racial identity after encountering a respected professor from his past, despite marrying a beautiful white singer and having children. Reflecting on his conflicted emotions, he acknowledges a sense of desertion from his Black heritage. Witnessing a speech by Booker T. Washington, he regrets not contributing to the fight for racial equality, realizing he traded his principles for personal gain, symbolized by the phrase "I have sold my birth right for a mess of pottage" 5(p103).

From another perspective, the novel explores the main character's decision to pass as white, which was driven by a need to survive in a society that was hostile towards Black people. Passing provided opportunities that were otherwise unavailable to Black individuals during that time. However, some argue that the protagonist's rejection of their Black identity stemmed from a genuine appreciation for certain aspects of white culture that resonated with them on a personal level. This complex depiction of individual identity formation reveals that it's not always easy to understand one's motivations. Additionally, the main character's love for music and pursuit of a career in classical music was fuelled by a deep passion rather than fear, suggesting that art and culture have the power to transcend racial boundaries.

The novel is replete with subtle hints and uncertainty, and the protagonist's actions may be driven by fear, genuine preference, and complex emotions. Literary analysis often involves exploring different layers of meaning and considering the historical and social context in which the work was written. Scholars and readers may lean towards one interpretation or another, or even consider combining both to be the most accurate representation of the protagonist's mindset.

Ultimately, the protagonist's journey reflects the ambiguities and contradictions inherent in his personality, as well as the broader challenges individuals face when navigating a racially divided society. Critic Elizabeth J. West 11(p142) underscores the transformative nature of the narrator's realization in support of the analysis of the protagonist's quest for self-acceptance. West suggests that "throughout the novel, the ex-colored man's identity evolves from self-rejection to self-acceptance, representing a journey of empowerment and liberation". This perspective highlights the novel's exploration of personal growth and the narrator's ultimate embrace of his unique identity.

Thus, the novel serves as a poignant exploration of the complexities of identity, self-awareness, and the impact of social constructs on personal experiences. According to scholar Robert B. Stepto 7 (p125), *The Autobiography*

of an Ex-Colored Man offers insights into racial identity's complexities and the protagonist's internal conflicts. Stepto asserts that "Johnson's novel skillfully explores the conventions of racial representation in literature and questions the fixed notions of race and identity". This perspective aligns with the idea that the novel explores the nuanced experiences of the ex-coloured man as he grapples with the fluidity and constructed nature of racial identity.

Conclusion

James Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* presents a narrator whose complex personality is marked by ambiguities that allow him to simultaneously embrace and reject black culture. The narrator's struggle with his racial identity is a central theme of the novel and highlights the challenges that biracial individuals faced during segregation and discrimination in the United States. Furthermore, the narrator's inability to fully embrace his blackness underscores the psychological and social pressures exerted on individuals who chose to pass as white during this period. Incorporating these critical opinions into the analysis, we can gain a deeper understanding of the complexities of *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* and its portrayal of racial identity, societal limitations, passing, and self-acceptance. The perspectives of various scholars enrich our understanding of the novel and shed light on its significance in examining the complexities of race and identity in American literature.

Through its analysis of the narrator's personality and his relationship with black culture, this paper sheds light on the complexities of racial identity and how individuals navigate their place within a society marked by racial hierarchies. The report also contextualizes the narrator's personality within the broader social and historical context of the novel, highlighting the pervasive effects of racism on both individuals and communities. This paper offers insights into the challenges of racial identity and the on-going struggles for social justice and equality in contemporary society.

Funding

This research did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Conflict of Interest

The author has no financial, personal, or professional affiliations that could be perceived as a conflict of interest in relation to this research.

Data Availability Statement

The data supporting this study's findings are available on request from the corresponding author.

Open Access and Copyright

The *Journal of Umm Al-Qura University for Language Sciences and Literature (JUQULSL)* is proudly owned and published by Umm Al-Qura University. We hold firm to the belief that research serves as a valuable asset to society, embodying a collective investment by our community. The Journal operates as an open-access platform, making all published articles freely accessible to the public, thereby permitting unrestricted reading, downloading, copying, and distribution. To endorse this open-access commitment, Umm Al-Qura University assumes full responsibility for covering the publication expenses associated with the Journal, including any article-processing charges (APC) that authors would typically bear. Our unwavering dedication to immediate open access is grounded in the conviction that the voluntary sharing of research with the public fosters a more extensive and inclusive global knowledge exchange. *JUQULSL* is licensed under <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

References

- (1) Brooks N. On becoming an ex-man: postmodern irony and the extinguishing of certainties in *the autobiography of an ex-colored man*. *Coll Lit.* 1995;22(3):17-29.
- (2) Du Bois WE, Edwards BH. *The souls of black folk*. Oxford: Oxford University Press; 2007.
- (3) Garrett MP. Early recollections and structural irony in *the autobiography of an ex-colored man*. *Crit - Stud Contemp Fict.* 1971;13(2):5-14.
- (4) Goellnicht D. Passing as autobiography: James Weldon Johnson's *The autobiography of an ex-colored man*. *Afr Am Rev.* 1996;30(1):17-33.
- (5) Johnson JW. *The autobiography of an ex-colored man*. New York: Vintage Books; 1989.
- (6) Maxwell WJ. The fraternity of passing: secret histories of race and sexuality in American literature. *Am Lit.* 2002;74(2):227-58.
- (7) Stepto RB. *From behind the veil: a study of Afro-American narrative*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press; 1988.
- (8) Pfeiffer K. Individualism, success, and American identity in *the autobiography of an ex-colored man*. *Afr Am Rev.* 1996;30(3):403-19.
- (9) Tate C. On the threshold of memory: James Weldon Johnson's *The autobiography of an ex-colored man*. *Am Lit Hist.* 1991;3(2):207-21.
- (10) Wandler S. A negro's chance: ontological luck in *the autobiography of an ex-colored man*. *Afr Am Rev.* 2008;42(3-4):579-94.
- (11) West EJ. *The autobiography of an ex-colored man* and the rhetoric of racial uplift. *Afr Am Rev.* 2005;39(1):137-50.