



# Politics of Identity and Symbolism: A Study of Kennedy's Play *Funnyhouse of a Negro*

Md Nasir Hossain<sup>1</sup>, Dr. Kunnathil Muhammed Aslam<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Research Scholar, Department of English, Maulana Azad National Urdu University, Hyderabad, India

[mdnasir0097@gmail.com](mailto:mdnasir0097@gmail.com)

<sup>2</sup>Assistant Professor of English, Maulana Azad National Urdu University, Hyderabad, India

[kmaslu@gmail.com](mailto:kmaslu@gmail.com)

Received: 22 Aug 2024; Received in revised form: 23 Sep 2024; Accepted: 30 Sep 2024; Available online: 05 Oct 2024

©2024 The Author(s). Published by Infogain Publication. This is an open-access article under the CC BY license

(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

**Abstract**— *Kennedy's Funnyhouse of a Negro* offers a poignant exploration of the devastating impact of racism on Black individuals and communities. Through the lens of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), this study examines the play's depiction of social binaries, such as race, gender, and education, to illuminate the struggles faced by the marginalised characters. The central focus is on the character of Sarah, whose obsession with whiteness and control leads to tragic consequences for her Black father. The play's symbolic language effectively conveys the oppressive nature of white culture and the psychological toll it takes on Black individuals. By highlighting the racial tensions and power dynamics within the play, this analysis presents the enduring legacy of racism and its impact on marginalised communities.



**Keywords**— Racism, Identity, Politics, Symbolism, CDA.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Identity is a complex concept encompassing an individual's unique characteristics, emotional behaviours, and social positioning. It is not solely a personal construct but is deeply intertwined with the political, economic, and cultural structures of society. As Norton asserts, "a person's identity must always be understood in relational terms: one is either subject of a set of relationships (i.e. in a position of power) or subject to a set of relationships (i.e. in a position of reduced power)" (Norton 2). This relational understanding of identity highlights the power dynamics that shape individuals' experiences and opportunities. In discussing identity, political factors such as class, race, gender, and nationality play a crucial role in shaping one's social position. These elements significantly influence access to resources, opportunities, and recognition, creating either advantages or disadvantages for individuals. According to Young, "social positions are determined by structures of privilege and oppression, wherein class, race, and gender intersect to determine individuals' experiences" (Young 23). In essence, identity is not merely a personal

expression but a reflection of the broader political and social context in which individuals are situated (Crenshaw 140).

Further, individual identities are not only 'contextual' and 'situationally adaptive', but also dynamic. Erik Erikson is one of the critical theorists in the field of psychological development who talked about the theory of psychological evolution, where he mentioned the ego identity. The ego identity describes an individual's identity with the 'sense of continuity' (Erikson 82, 128). Erikson's ego identity theory suggests that individuals pass through eight stages of psychosocial development, each defined by a conflict between their personal inner world and the external social environment. He particularly emphasised that identity conflicts predominantly occur during adolescence. According to Erikson, resolving these conflicts has significant consequences for one's development, potentially shaping the individual's sense of self and ability to interact with society (Erikson 94). Therefore, identity includes the specific behaviour of a person in society.

Weinreich uses the identity variant in a framework that allows for the transition from one state to another through biographical experiences and the resolution of conflicting identifications in various contexts. For example, an adolescent experiencing a family breakup may be in one condition, while later in a stable marriage with a secure professional role may be in another. As a result, society has continuity, growth, and change (Weinreich 124-139).

Moreover, it includes several aspects of existence in a big image that signifies the position of an individual, treatment of people, class system, cultural beauty, events of a particular area, gender roles, etc. When we talk about the individual identity of gender, what comes to our mind? We think that the personal identity of gender means the existence of a unique human being, whether masculine or feminine. There is another essence of the gender role, like 'who controls' and how the controlling takes place in real situations. Most of the time, it is found that the masculine gender controls the feminine gender. But in this study, the female character Sarah abuses her father because of his colour and social status, as traced in the chosen play. The black identity of the man forces him to detach from the family and society. Therefore, the researchers want to show the black identity and its crisis in the *Funnyhouse of a Negro* drama.

The play *Funnyhouse of a Negro* highlights significant social issues in American society, particularly addressing the politics of identity and symbolism. The central character, Sarah, is emblematic of the internal conflict experienced by individuals marginalised due to race and class. Her fascination with white identity, manifested in her obsession with their colour, lifestyle, and societal status, reflects the broader socio-political pressure on minorities to conform to dominant cultural norms. This pressure leads Sarah to reject her own Black identity, a rejection so deep that it results in her symbolic torture of her father, a figure representing her connection to blackness. As Erikson suggests, identity conflict often arises from the tension between the inner world and the external social environment (Erikson 94), and Sarah's struggle embodies this conflict, demonstrating the consequences of internalised racism and societal oppression.

Furthermore, symbolism is a crucial aspect of the play, reinforcing the themes of identity politics. The playwright uses various symbols to represent Sarah's psychological turmoil and the broader racial tensions in American society. For example, Sarah's fascination with whiteness symbolises the societal elevation of white identity over black identity. Through these symbols, the playwright Kennedy critiques the racial hierarchy that governs social relations, echoing the ideas of identity

politics where race and social status define one's experience. The use of symbols to represent racial tensions aligns with the concept that identity is not merely personal but shaped by external political factors, including race and class (Young 23). Thus, the researchers highlight the dominance of white identity over black identity through symbolism in the play *Funnyhouse of a Negro*.

## II. THEORIES AND TOOLS FOR ANALYSIS

This study seeks to address a central question: How is black identity victimised in the presence of white individuals and represented through symbolism in Adrienne Kennedy's *Funnyhouse of a Negro*? To explore this, the researchers have adopted Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as the theoretical framework for examining the text. CDA offers multiple approaches, such as Norman Fairclough's CDA approach, James Paul Gee's discourse tools, Teun A. Van Dijk's CDA tools, and Ruth Wodak's sociocultural approach. Among these, Fairclough's CDA tools have been selected for their flexibility and critical depth in analysing the chosen drama. His model includes eight analytical tools, and the researchers have focused specifically on the "vocabulary" tool to investigate the essence of racism, identity, and symbolism within the play.

Vocabulary is crucial in shaping meaning, expressing emotions, and conveying ideologies in any language. This prompts key questions for analysis: What specific vocabulary is employed, and what does it signify? What word clusters or collocations are present? How do these linguistic choices reflect the broader culture and context of the text? By analysing the vocabulary, the researchers aim to uncover the geographical, social, cultural, and ideological representations embedded in the language used by the writer. As Fairclough emphasises, using specific wording often signals an ideological struggle. Hence, through the vocabulary tool, the study will examine the various linguistic choices Kennedy makes to highlight the core issues in *Funnyhouse of a Negro*. Symbolism, particularly, emerges throughout the play to accentuate the essence of racism.

## III. ANALYSIS

The play starts with the background of the stage, which is considered an 'unnatural black'; through the middle of the stage is white light. The central character, Sarah, is fed up with her father's identity. Sarah does not like her father because of his black colour. She tries to ignore him repeatedly throughout the play and makes many racial comments about him. It is found that the black signifies the beast in the play. Even she says he should not

enter the castle because he is black. At the same time, she feels happy because of her mother, who is in yellow. Two colours significantly play essential roles, like yellow and black, as yellow symbolises the light of hope. In contrast, the colour black signifies hopelessness and clueless desperation for Sarah. By making the racist comments, Sarah wanted to keep her distance from her father, as found in the text,

How dare he enter the castle, he who is the darkest of them all, the darkest one? My mother looked like a white woman, hair as straight as any white woman's. And at least I am yellow, but he is black, the blackest one of them all. I hoped he was dead. Yet he still comes through the jungle to find me. (Kennedy 12)

The binary of black and white is very prominent due to the direct racial attacks by the white lady on the black man. The white man has a superior position in society as they have straight hair compared to other white people, while the black man does not have such qualities. Sarah's mindset depends upon the colour of people; she judges people based on their colour and makes racial comments. After all, individual beauty is not given importance, as per the writer's experience in society. Further, Sarah makes her father responsible for her mother's death as the man touches her with his hand, as found in the text, "It is because of him that my mother died. The wild black beast put his hands on her. She died" (Kennedy 12). The black man compared with the 'beast' and also considered him as 'wild'. Therefore, blackness becomes a 'curse' for the man (Sarah's father).

Sarah is unhappy with herself due to her Negro identity and affiliation in her blood. The black man tries to keep contact, but she repeatedly avoids him by saying that her father is a Negro. The Negro identity is represented as a haunting and diseased birth. After all, her life becomes a curse due to the Negro connection with her life. As earlier pointed out, her mother is a white lady and a brighter woman, but her father is a black man. And here, the black man signifies the 'conceptions' and 'diseases birth'.

Not only the protagonist holds her father responsible, but her mother does the same by making a statement, "Black man, black man, I never should have let a black man put his hands on me. The wild black beast raped and now my skull is shinning" (Kennedy 13). The black man must be punished because of his behaviour and attitude toward the woman, while at the same time, he should not be racially attacked by the woman in society. Therefore, the treatment of whiteness towards blackness is unfair and unexpected, which signifies that black people are discriminated against in society.

The black man is associated with the other elements of blackness in society as he used to wear 'dark clothes' and 'dark stocking'. At the same time, Sarah is obsessed with the idea of whiteness, is fascinated with the luxurious life, and considers white people as fortunate and black people as unfortunate. She said that black is an 'evil' and 'wild beast' because of their behaviour and colour, as found in the play,

Victoria always wants me to tell her of whiteness. She wants me to tell her of a royal world where everything and everyone is white and there are no unfortunate black ones. For as we of royal blood know, black is evil and has been from the beginning. Even before my mother's hair started to fall out. Before she was raped by a wild black beast. Black was evil. (Kennedy 14)

On the other hand, the black Negro was a man of 'soulless', 'educated' and 'irreligious' as inferred in the text. The toxicity of whiteness is much obsessed with the life of Sarah. Sarah wanted to follow the white colour because of the white people's status in society, which looks like she is completely infatuated with the whiteness that can be found in the text,

I write poetry filling white page after page with imitations of Edith Sitwell. It is my dream to live in rooms with European antiques and my Queen Victoria, photographs of Roman ruins, walls of books, a piano, oriental carpets and to eat my meals on a white glass table. I will visit my friends' apartments which will contain books, photographs of Roman ruins, pianos and oriental carpets. My friends will be white. (Kennedy 14)

The description of white people using various elements makes life different from that of black people. Even the life of white people signifies a superior position in society and enjoying a luxurious life. Further, white people use musical instruments like 'the piano', 'full of books', 'excellent carpets', 'walls', etc. Sarah is dreaming a beautiful life full of love with a white identity and hates the Negro identity she poses in her life; she says about herself,

In appearance I am good-looking in a boring way; no glaring Negroid features, medium nose, medium mouth and pale yellow skin. My one defect is that I have a head of frizzy hair, unmistakably Negro kinky hair; and it is indistinguishable. I would like to lie and say I love Raymond. But I do not. He is a poet and is Jewish. He is very interested in Negroes. (Kennedy 14-15)

Although she possesses the idea of 'Negro', she does not like herself, which might be because of her inspiration and influence by white people in society. She

constantly criticises the Negro people because of their black identity in society. Even she does not like her boyfriend because he likes the Negro people. She wants to keep her distance from him and wants to live a life of white people in society. The way she finds herself makes her distinct. She faces an identity crisis in society due to her dilemma with her existence. She is unhappy with her life; everything is false, and lying to her. After all, her dissatisfaction with the expected-white life makes her incomplete. Even though she did not find happiness in her house, she considered it a 'funny house'. She further said she is not finding peace anywhere but trying to find it. The protagonist also tries to build the connection between hope and place, as traced in the text,

These are the places myself exist in. I know no places. That is, I cannot believe in places. To believe in places is to know hope and to know the emotion of hope is to know beauty. It links us across a horizon and connects us to the world. I find there are no places only my funnyhouse. Streets are rooms, cities are rooms, eternal rooms. I try to create a space for myself in cities, New York, the midwest, a southern town, but it becomes a lie. I try to give myself a logical relationship but that too is a lie. (Kennedy 15)

It is imperative to note that the protagonist is unable to find peace in the city or the artificial life as she expected, which signifies the crisis of her identity and unable to find the meaning of life and faces several problems in reality. Further, she pointed out that because of her Negro identity, she is getting hair losses that symbolise whatever happens in her life; she makes responsible the Negro for everything. Further, the phrase 'black man' is repeatedly used in the text to signify the position of black people in society. Another character, Funnyman, makes fun of the black identity and frequently uses the term in the text because of its presence. Most importantly, the black man is associated with the African people as they were black. Even in one scene, Sarah tries to hide herself from her father by saying,

Yes, my father is a black man who went to Africa years ago as a missionary teacher, got mixed up in politics, was revealed and is now devoting his foolish life to the erection of a Christian mission in the middle of the jungle in one of those newly freed countries. Hide me. (Clinging to his knees.) Hide me here so the nigger will not find me. (Kennedy 16-17)

After all, it is apparent that Sarah not only keeps her distance from her father's black identity but also hides from the Negro people. Further, the symbolism of the hair

is another significant part of the play as it is falling like the identity is in crisis and its fall. Sarah wishes to present herself as a white lady though she is Negro which signifies that she is not happy with her existence in society. The playwright repeatedly uses the word 'dark' for its presence in her father's life. Therefore, the character Sarah feels allergic due to her Niger identity.

Sarah's father is not allowed to touch his wife because of his black identity. The man has black skin, dark eyes, and a square brow. Because of his drinking, he seduced her mother, and their reunion resulted in Sarah's birth in the family, as found in the text, "She would not let him touch her in their wedding bed and called him black. He is black of skin with dark eyes and a great dark square brow. Then in Africa, he started to drink and came home drunk one night and raped my mother. The child from the union is me" (Kennedy 20). Thus, Sarah reveals why she dislikes her father in the play.

The writer describes how Sarah's mother was trapped in a black family due to her connection with the family members. She also said that no white dove is flying in the sky because of the blackness. It is also found that he is compared with unpure essence because of the dark black. Sarah tries to make the connections between the dove and the black man due to their exact opposite features. Whenever Sarah's father is missing in America, the white dove is there, while at the same time, whenever he is in New York, no white dove is there. Here, the black people take the position of lousy omen while the white people become part of goodness, as found in the text,

The race was no damn good, my mother appeared in her nightgown screaming she had trapped herself in blackness. No white doves flew. He had left Africa and was again in New York. He lived in Harlem and no white doves flew. Sarah, Sarah, he would say to me, the soldiers are coming and a cross they are placing high on a tree and are dragging me through the grass and nailing me upon the cross. (Kennedy 20-21)

Even Sarah talks about how she is over possessive of the white colour, as she talks about how she lays on a 'white pillow' and 'white scalp' as found in the text, "When I awakened I found it fallen out, not all of it, but a mass that lay on my white pillow. I could see, although my hair hung down at the sides, clearly on my white scalp it was missing" (Kennedy 21). Further, she is frustrated due to her father's colour or facial appearance. She again compared her parents and said that her mother is a fair lady while her father is the darkest man in the world. She comes in between them. He repeatedly talks about her father's appearance and considers him a man of black. The identity of a black man is



questioned again and again in the play due to their colour. Her frustration appears through the following statement as found in the text,

My father isn't going to let us alone. (KNOCKING.) Our father isn't going to let us alone, our father is the darkest of us all, my mother was the fairest, I am in between, but my father is the darkest of them all. He is a black man. Our father is the darkest of them all. He is a black man. My father is a dead man. (Kennedy 22)

Another exciting thing in the play is that the man is considered dead in society due to his black identity and is repeatedly ignored. Sarah's father asks for forgiveness from her daughter because of his blackness. He constantly cries and asks for forgiveness, but Sarah ignores him repeatedly. He also confessed that she is the daughter of the torment, which directly connects with him in the play,

He sat on a bench in the dark hallway, put out his hand to her, trying to take her in his arms, crying out-forgiveness, Sarah, forgiveness for my being black, Sarah. I know you are a child of torment. I know on dark winter afternoons you sit alone weaving stories of your mother's beauty. But Sarah, answer me, don't turn away, Sarah. Forgive my blackness. She would not answer. He put out his hand to her. She ran past him on the stairs, left him there with his hand out to me, repeating his past, saying his mother hoped he would be Christ. (Kennedy 23)

Sarah's level of frustration is out of control. She constantly held her father, as found in the text. She wishes that her father would die and leave this world. Sarah will release herself from all kinds of connections if her father dies. There is a repetition of exact phrases or statements to refer to her father's blackness in the text constantly. Sarah said that her mother's hair is straight like the white woman's, but because of the blackness's connection to the lady, she is irritated and frustrated. Her frustration level forces her to leave her father. The dramatist beautifully presented the crisis of the black identity in a white society. The treatment of white people over black people is tremendously expressed through the character of Sarah and her father. The writer's symbolic attitude makes the surface more reflective and dynamic towards the other character. Even it is found that the black man tries to infatuate himself with people but cannot do so as the white character is superiorly presented while the black character is viewed as ugly in the play.

Furthermore, there is a conversation between Sarah and her father regarding the forgiveness and comparison of God and Sarah's father in the text. Here

Sarah stands her father as a man of nigger and torment. While her father tries to protect and defend himself by taking God's name, as found in the text,

I see him. The black ugly thing is sitting in his hallway, surrounded by his ebony masks, surrounded by the blackness of himself. My mother comes into the room. He is there with his hand out to me, groveling, saying-Forgiveness, Sarah, is it that you will never forgive me for being black. Forgiveness, Sarah, I know you are a nigger of torment. Why? Christ would not rape anyone. You will never forgive me for being black. Wild beast. Why did you rape my mother? Black beast, Christ would not rape anyone. (Kennedy 24-25)

Sarah's continuous humiliation of her father forces him to leave this world in the form of death. He felt the pain of life and did not recognise himself in society. It's his daughter's humiliation again and again due to his colour. Because of his colour, he is constantly questioned by her daughter. He tries to find peace but is unable to get it. The black man also asks for forgiveness, but her daughter ignores him as he is responsible for killing his wife. Even he felt responsible for his colour and said he could not change the scenario instead of asking his daughter for forgiveness repeatedly. Therefore, Sarah's hatred for the black man resulted in her father's death in society.

#### IV. FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

The treatment of white people over black people is prominent in the play. The attitude of the white people brings serious concern; based on their colour, the black people are judged in the play. The black is presented as a torment, niger, helpless, homeless, clueless, and not finding any better way to live in society. The presence of racism positioned black people as inferior, classless, destitute, ignored, tormented, etc. All these essences of blackness are presented through the symbolism in the play.

Further, Sarah's continuous humiliation forces her father to kill himself by hanging his life. It also asks several questions to society and its people regarding the existence of the black community. Moreover, the writer presented the facts, especially the behaviour of white people over black people and how they are treated in society. The repeated racial attack of the white lady, Sarah, engulfs a life with so much pain in the community. Although the man asks for forgiveness, he is disallowed to do so repeatedly. The expectation and love for white people of Sarah de-socialised from the black community. Because of her connection with the black father, she holds him responsible for everything, though her father asks for forgiveness but fails to do so.

Further, it is found that Sarah isolates her boyfriend because of his likeness to the black community. Therefore, the playwright Kennedy presents the torment experience of black people and reflects white people's attitude toward black people.

## V. CONCLUSION

In sum, *Kennedy's Funnyhouse of a Negro* explores the devastating impact of racism and the complex interplay of identity and symbolism. The play's central idea of racial discrimination is accentuated by the relentless targeting of the black man by Sarah. This overt racism, coupled with Sarah's willful ignorance, highlights the pervasive nature of prejudice within the white community. Symbolism is a powerful tool in *Funnyhouse*, indirectly yet effectively conveying the experiences of Black individuals. Sarah's obsession with whiteness, manifested in her fixation on colour, function, communication, and social status, reveals the oppressive power dynamics at play. Her toxic behaviour, fueled by over-possessiveness and isolation, ultimately undermines her own identity. Through these interwoven elements, Kennedy brilliantly presents the societal ills of racial discrimination, the dominance of white culture, and the enduring resilience of the Black community. The play's exploration of identity, both individual and collective, offers a poignant commentary on the enduring challenges faced by marginalised groups.

## REFERENCES

- [1] Crenshaw, Kimberlé. *Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color*. Stanford Law Review, 1991.
- [2] Erikson, Erik Homburger. *Identity: youth and crisis*. 2nd ed. Norton & Co., 1968.
- [3] Gee, James Paul. *How to Do Discourse Analysis: A Toolkit*. Routledge, 2010.
- [4] Harper Collins Publishers Ltd. (n.d.). "Identity." *Collins English Dictionary*. Retrieved December 3, 2022, from <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/identity>.
- [5] Kennedy, Adrienne, and Werner Sollors, editors. *The Adrienne Kennedy Reader*. University of Minnesota Press, 2008.
- [6] Marcia, James E. "Development and Validation of Ego-Identity Status." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, vol. 3, no. 5, 1966, pp. 551-558. doi:10.1037/h0023281.
- [7] Norton, Bonny. "Language and Identity." *Sociolinguistics and Language Education*, edited by Neil Hornberger and Susan McKay, Multilingual Matters, 2010, pp. 349-369. doi:10.21832/9781847692849-015
- [8] Van Dijk, Teun A. "Principles of Critical Discourse Analysis." *Discourse & Society*, vol. 4, no. 2, 1993, pp. 249-283.
- [9] Weinreich, Peter. "'Enculturation,' Not 'Acculturation': Conceptualising and Assessing Identity Processes in Migrant Communities." *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, vol. 33, no. 1, 2009, pp. 124-139.
- [10] Wodak, Ruth. *Critical Discourse Analysis, Discourse-Historical Approach*. Sage Publications Ltd., 2015. doi:10.4135/9780857028020.d6
- [11] Young, Iris Marion. *Justice and the Politics of Difference*. Princeton University Press, 1990.