

Ethnic and Personal Passing in the Autobiography of an Ex-colored Man

Jie Min^{1,a,*}

¹Department of English, Xi'an International Studies University, Xi'an, 710128, China

a. 2016122123@jou.edu.cn

*corresponding author

Abstract: Passing has multiple meanings in African American literature, especially in the area of personal identity in distinct races. In *The Autobiography of an Ex-colored Man*, James Weldon Johnson describes many aspects of passing, which mainly focus on suspicious of their individual identity and inquisitiveness between two races. Among the series of “passing,” James Weldon Johnson lay emphasis on the ethnic passing, which refers to the particular way that both black and white people used to cross the border of racial segregation, which could help them overcome the difficulties or comprehend the other races. It could be physical, emotional, or even cognitive. On the other hand, Johnson also depicts the characters’ identities passing both from black to white and white to black. This paper analyzed *The autobiography of an Ex-colored Man*, trying to find out the series of “passing” and their indicated meanings, which may have repercussions for how future scholars interpret this literature.

Keywords: James Weldon Johnson, Passing, African American, Races, Cultural Recognition, Double Consciousness

1. Introduction

James Weldon Johnson was an African American novelist, poet, and songwriter in the early 20th century, which is considered as one of the pioneers of the Harlem Renaissance by American academic circles [1]. His masterpiece, *The autobiography of an Ex-colored Man* had arisen widespread concern about racial issues in American’ society, including local customs, ethnic relations and psychology. The novel mainly tells the story of a mulatto “ex-colored man.” Fair-skinned but of black ancestry, he experiences poverty and wealth, sometimes identifying with black heritage, sometimes rejecting black culture, and finally crossing the racial line to become a white man [2]. Additionally, as one of the most vital contents of this novel, “passing” has often been associated with discourses of racial difference in American history, particularly with the acquisition of a person who is culturally and legally defined as black or identified as black by reason of partial black ancestry to acquire a deceptive “white” identity. According to Gayle Wald, Passing refers to the ability or action of a person to be regarded as a member of social groups other than his/her own, such as a different race, ethnicity, social class, gender, and disability status, with the purpose of gaining social acceptance [3]. And Fabi also presents that “passing” focuses on the exact movement that chose (i.e., black) racial invisibility for the sake of social rise [4]. The term “passing” may also be used more broadly to describe the

hiding of other aspects of a person's "natural" or "fundamental" identity, such as class, ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation. [3]. James Weldon Johnson describes different kinds of passing in *The Autobiography of an Ex-colored Man*. Most of them are kinds of adaptive behavior adopted by people in the face of existential crises and development obstacles. He depicts several circumstances that protagonist experienced passing, mainly focusing on the ethnic passing that both black and white people used to accomplish purposes or simply understand different races, and the second passing the characters' changes on personal identification, arguing the passive "passing" which used to compromise the social background or even livelihood [5].

2. The Black's Ethnic Passing

Ethnic passing is one of the most complex issues in American society. The epistemology of the concept of "race" and its specificity in American history demonstrates its vital role in the construction of categories of identity. In colonial America, as the British trafficked increasing numbers of black Africans into slavery, the concept of race became particularly important. It was not only used to highlight the differences in physical appearance between the British and Africans, but also incorporated religious, ethnic, and moral differences[6]. As the gap between black and white becomes larger and larger, the "passing" occurs [7]. In addition, ethnic passing is a remarkably crucial phenomenon in *The Autobiography of an Ex-colored Man*. To be specific, it can also be discussed in two respects. On the one hand, the passing describes the black people's method of overcoming racial discrimination. According to Johnson's description, we can infer from the book that there were two distinct, unequal small societies within American society [8]. Moreover, racism functioned by barring black people from white institutions that offered them employment opportunities, social standing and political influence. The low bars, the cheap dry-goods and the eating-house has made a strong comparison with the circumstances in white people's community. Furthermore, on the ship toward Boston, the protagonist acquaints a black person who is a "tall, broad-shouldered, almost gigantic, colored man. His dark-brown face was clean-shaven; he was well-dressed and bore a decidedly distinguished air. In fact, if he was not handsome, he at least compelled admiration for his fine physical proportions." [8] Although this black person was gentle and charming, the white people refused to sit next to him. It can be easily concluded that racism has changed white people's minds comprehensively.

Even though the American civil war has changed the identity of most blacks physically, discrimination still exists in American society, particularly in the Southern area. Therefore, the black affirmative movements are steadily advanced and do gain some positive results. However, the black civil rights movements at that time still had many problems or even conflicts. African-American politics concentrated on the debate over whether blacks should seek political equality as human beings or attempt to elevate their status within a racist society and gain respect from whites. [9][10] Therefore, black people are unable to find the right path to protest for their rights. Inwardly, a massive amount of white people still refuse to accept the changes in blacks' identity. In that scenario, quantities of black people sought to get rid of their poor living conditions by ethnic passing. As the protagonist mentioned in the novel: "It is evidenced most plainly in marriage selection; thus the black men generally marry women fairer than themselves; while...the effect is a tendency toward lighter complexions, especially among the more active elements in the race." [8] They tried their best to cross the border of races and enter white society. Even the protagonist himself is one of the colored men who accomplished his passing.

In conclusion, the "passing" among African Americans is purposeful. But whatever their aims are, the "passing" behavior itself reflects their lack of confidence in their culture, which gradually creates a paucity of recognition of their own culture.[7]

3. White people's passing

On the other hand, the “passing” also indicates the white people’s passing. Differ from the black people’s passing, white people’s passing is subtler. Their “passing” can be analyzed in three aspects. The first aspect is curiosity.[10]

The white race now perceives itself as the dominant race in American as a result of white supremacy. In terms of prestige, accomplishments, education, riches and power. Under that circumstances, racial segregation has developed as time passes. The African-Americans cannot share the same society with white anymore. However, black people have created their own culture and customs, which are extremely attractive to white people who have lived in white neighborhoods for a long time. Their actions are driven by a sense of curiosity about black culture. In that case, some of the white people chose to pass the segregation border to satisfy their curiosity. In *The Autobiography of an Ex-colored Man*, Johnson used first-person perspective to depict that there were one or two groups of white men and women who were out sight-seeing or slumming practically in the black’s neighborhood every night. They typically arrived in cabs; some stayed only briefly while others occasionally stayed until morning. Another group of white folks who frequented the location included variety actors and others who played “darky characters”, and they came to learn firsthand from the Negeo entertainers they saw there.[8]

Another aspect of white people’s passing is out of rebellion. This kind of passing mainly focuses on those white people who cross the race border, ignore white supremacy, and get married to black people. Their behaviors violate the social ethics and moral norms of a racist society.[10] The protagonist’s father, for instance, is one of the white people who cross the border by marrying a black woman. Also, there are many familiar examples in the novel, like the white girl protagonist married at the end [8]. It has to be emphasized that during slavery and for 50 or 60 years after the abolition of slavery, white women were a "sexual taboo" for blacks in the South of the United States. If a black man dared to have sex with a white woman, with or without her consent, it would be considered rape. They were often lynched, tarred, and burned alive. All of these white people pass the border and totally overturn the white supremacy tradition that has been built upon since the end of the 19th century.

White people’s passing also can be gentle and reasonable. In *The Autobiography of an Ex-colored Man*, Johnson tells the story of a white gentleman who willingly sponsors black artists. The gentleman supports the ex-colored man to start touring Europe, and his support is neither curiosity nor rebellion [8]. He treats the ex-colored man who works for him as his equal. The reason for the white gentleman’s passing is cultural cognition. He chooses to be a companion of black people and is fully involved in their culture, trying to comprehend the whole African-American ethnicity.[11]

Although these three kinds of “passing” are implemented for different reasons, almost all these white people show their cultural confidence and identity, which differ from the blacks’. And such a phenomenon indicates the isolation among different races in American society. Nevertheless, the white people’s passing, whether in a gentle or a drastic way, is good for cultural communication to some extent. It helps different races to broaden their way of comprehending each other, which may have a positive effect on the isolated issue.

4. Personal Passing

The second passing is closely related to the protagonist’s identity passing. Through the process of exploring the south, the protagonist also experiences a struggle with his true identity. In the beginning, he is not aware of his black. The protagonist observed how the other black and brown students were treated, and he felt little about them but did not want to be grouped with them [8]. In other words, his outward ambiguity and relatively privileged Northern upbringing made him refuse to identify with other black people and even maintained an inner sense of prejudice against them. Later in the novel,

he acquaints a black man in the South and gets affirmation for the first time that he could “pass” as white. However, the protagonist, led by the porter, also found a place and comforted in the segregated black society. It was at this time that the protagonist began to thought about his identity; he experienced both the black and white world and witnessed quantities of differences. In Jacksonville, the protagonist spends lots of time in the cigar factory. He soon found out that employees from all races worked together in a harmonious way, which really intrigued him. During his work, he picked up Spanish so quickly at work that he was hired to read newspaper and books to the entire factory staff. He became more like a Cuban in this situation, which also led him to rethink his identity [8]. The protagonist kept passing his identity throughout the novel. He had a cigar in the whites-only smoking car of his train to Atlanta, but he also played ragtime at the “Club.” His passing reflected his unsure about his identity.

Du Bois summarized the embarrassing identity of African Americans as both American and not accepted by American society as the duality of African American identity. He figuratively named this duality "double consciousness. Du Bois depicts that:

“This double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity.....who dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.”[10]

In *The Autobiography of an Ex-colored Man*, the protagonist always struggles with his double identity. He is fully aware that he has a unique gift for creating and performing black music, but presenting the talent means that he needs to expose his black identity, which may lose his white identity and force his two children to live in a social environment full of racial discrimination and prejudice.[12] In order to save himself and his children from discrimination by the white race, the protagonist is determined to be a white person. Although he still misses his black life, he is forced by the pressure of reality to discriminate against black people just like normal white people.[13] The double consciousness of the ex-colored man traps them in unbearable mental anguish.

The final chapter depicted his remarkably successful life as a white man in New York. Due to his passing as a white man, he had a happy family and a decent salary. However, he finally comes to realize his true identity as a black person and feels deserted by his race. In the penultimate paragraph at the end of the novel, the ex-colored man states that he is confused about his real position in society. Also, he uses coward and deserter to describe himself, which reveals his racial weightlessness [8]. The feeling of weightlessness of losing one’s self refers to the psychological imbalance caused by the abandonment of one's black roots after the passing.[14] The ex-colored man claims the secrecy was to protect his children, who had been passed as white, but it was also to protect his own identity in white middle-class society. Thus, he continues to pass himself as white, living in a closed white world, with disdain, nostalgia, and regret the black American life he has spurned.

Both double consciousness and racial weightlessness have the same features which are the lack of recognition of cultural identity.[11] Although the abolition of slavery has changed the living condition of black people, the residual problem of slavery has caused serious discrimination against African Americans. And such discrimination can’t be eliminated overnight because the idea of white supremacy has been sinking deep into the hearts of the American people. In the face of pressure from the majority race, African Americans is easy to lose their recognition of their own culture, which leads to the ethnic passing. Although the abandonment of their root culture is helpful to their life after crossing the racial boundary, it makes them lose the cultural connotation of their spiritual world and become the cultural rootless people in the white world.[15] The ex-colored man lost his ideals, his talents, and his black friends for passing the racial line. He laments in the last sentence of the novel: “I have chosen the lesser part, that I have sold my birthright for a mess of pottage.”[8] Johnson uses the tone of an ex-colored man to express the common feeling and insight of all the black people who

successfully passed their races.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, James Weldon Johnson discusses the racial passing of both white and black races in *The Autobiography of an Ex-colored Man*. He indicates that “passing” is a kind of flexible behavior that people adopt when they encounter a survival crisis or a way for different races to fully comprehend each other. He first talks about the ethnic passing, in which African Americans are separated from mainstream society due to racism and white supremacy. Thus, the black people used passing to enter the upper world to change their social position and get rid of their ethnic identity, which could help them to maximize the protection of self-development and self-realization. On the other hand, the white people’s passing is based on the racial superiority of their races, passing for curiosity, the perception of other cultures, and personal desires. The cost of black people’s passing is gradually losing confidence in their own culture, which may evolve into losing recognition of their own race. The white people’s passing is usually superior, but it somehow benefits the interaction between two races. Johnson uses his marvelous technique to describe both black and white people’s struggling, perplexing, and anxiety when they face the passing. Additionally, Johnson also depicts characters’ passing to fully express his idea of passing. He focuses on the issues which are double consciousness and racial weightlessness, presenting that the essential problem of personal passing is losing their recognition of cultural identity, which transfers them into rootless people in white culture’s world.

References

- [1] Andrews, William L. Introduction. *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*. By James Weldon Johnson. New York: Penguin, 1990. vii– xvii.
- [2] Sugimori, Masami. “Narrative Order, Racial Hierarchy, and “White” Discourse in James Weldon Johnson’s the Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man and along This Way.” MELUS: Multi-Ethnic Literature of the U.S., vol. 36, no. 3, 2011, pp. 37–62, 10.1353/mel.2011.0041. Accessed 10 Nov. 2020.
- [3] Wald, Gayle. *Crossing the Line: Racial Passing in Twentieth-Century U.S. Literature and Culture*. Durham: Duke UP, 2000
- [4] TALLY, JUSTINE. “M. Gulia Fabi, *Passing and the Rise of the African American Novel* (University of Illinois Press, 2001, \$32.50). Pp. 187. ISBN 025 2026675.” *Journal of American Studies*, vol. 37, no. 1, Apr. 2003, pp. 135–177, 10.1017/s0021875803317049.
- [5] Babu, D. . "The Theme of "Passing" in the Novels of James Weldon Johnson and Nella Larsen. " (2014).
- [6] Goellnicht, Donald C. “Passing as Autobiography: James Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man*.” *African American Review* (1996); 30:17-33
- [7] Kuenz, Jane. “American Racial Discourse, 1900-1930: Schuyler’s *Black No More*.” *Novel* 30.2 (Winter 1997)
- [8] James Weldon Johnson. *The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man*. New York, Hill And Wang, 1997.
- [9] Emma Lou Thornbrough. *Booker T. Washington*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J., Prentice-Hall, 1969.
- [10] Du Bois, W.E.B. *The Souls of Black Folk*. New York, Barnes & Noble Classics, 2005.11.
- [11] Rottenberg, Catherine. “Race and Ethnicity in *The autobiography of an Ex-colored Man* and *The Rise of David Levinsky*.” *Melus*, 29 (Fall/ Winter 2004) : 315-316
- [12] Tate, Ernest Carter. *The Social Implications of the Writings and the Career of James Weldon Johnson*. Ann Arbor, Mich. :UMI, 1959.
- [13] Lin, Ken-Hou;Lundquist, Jennifer.Mate Selection in Cyberspace: The Intersection of Race, Gender, and Education.[J].*American Journal of Sociology*,2013,Vol.119,No.1
- [14] Martin, Charles D. “*The White African American Body: A Cultural and Literary Exploration*.” . New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers Univ. Press. 2002. xi, 221. Cloth, \$59.00;paper,
- [15] Leah, M. . "Race and the Literary Encounter: Black Literature from James Weldon Johnson to Percival Everett. Lesley Larkin." MELUS 4(2019):4.